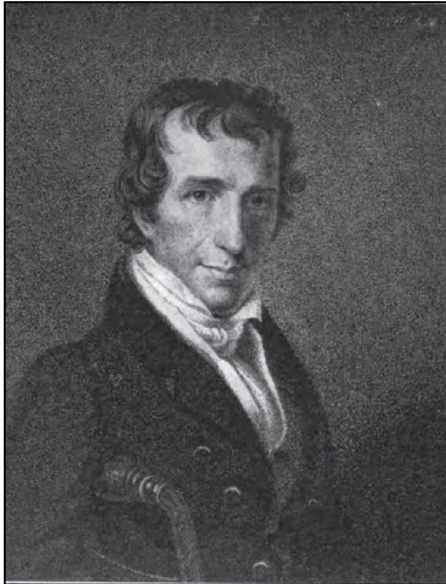


WILLIAM T. BARRY

Postmaster General

March 9, 1829 – April 10, 1835



William T. Barry (1784-1835)

Postmaster General from 1829 to 1835

William Taylor Barry was born on February 5, 1784, near Lunenburg, Virginia, the son of a Revolutionary War veteran.¹ He attended Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, and studied law at the College of William and Mary in Virginia. After passing the Kentucky bar in 1805, Barry opened a law practice in Lexington. He entered politics and served in both the House and Senate of the U.S. and Kentucky. He was also a judge, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and chief justice of the court of appeals. Barry unsuccessfully ran for governor in 1828.

During that campaign, Barry supported Andrew Jackson. He showed such fealty Jackson offered him the job of postmaster general. Jackson was the first U.S. president to elevate postmaster general to a cabinet position, and Barry was the first to serve at that level. His tenure, from 1829 to 1835, was rife with charges of corruption. Jackson and Barry used the Post Office Department, with its 8,000 postmaster jobs, to reward political supporters. While Barry asserted that he would “lay aside personal feelings unless duty comports with the gratification,” he worked quickly to fill the department with Jacksonian loyalists.² In 1829, some 423 postmasters were removed, most with extensive records of good service. “At first these removals were routinely justified with accusations of malfeasance,” wrote Daniel Walker Howe.³

While Barry claimed that all postmasters “who have acted well, are safe,” he warned that “offices are not private property; they belong to the public; those held at the will of the President ought to expect to go out when they lose his confidence.”⁴ Some postmasters were replaced by newspaper editors who had vigorously supported Jackson during the campaign. The administration claimed that replacing position holders was necessary, and that “rotation, which constitutes a leading principle in the republican creed,” would “give healthful action to the system.”⁵ But in the eyes of Jackson’s critics, this led to “heretofore unseen levels of partisanship, corruption, and incompetency.”⁶

Barry and Jackson were not fully successful in purging political opponents from the postmaster ranks. Solomon Van Rensselaer, a Federalist and postmaster of Albany, New York, traveled to the White House after learning that he was going to lose his position. After Jackson ignored his entreaties, Van Rensselaer began removing his clothing to show Jackson the wounds he had received fighting in the War of 1812. Jackson let his aides know that he felt he could not remove Van Rensselaer because “he carries more than a pound of British lead in his body.”⁷

Barry expected that once the Post Office had set up a centralized, nationwide network, it could increase revenue by adding more offices and routes. His plan was to extend a post road to every one of the nation's county seats.⁸ But his focus on expansion led to lax oversight of finances and contractors. Complaints increased about poor mail service and postmasters who were abusing the franking privilege. Barry feared making enemies for the Jackson administration but wanted to extend mail service to the nation. He rarely said "no" to mail contractors or to citizens demanding expanded mail service. Barry's tenure, Cullinan wrote, "illuminates the tightwire that postmasters general walked in trying to heed Congress's demands for more postal service and at the same time make the Post Office self-sustaining."⁹

Barry began service on routes Congress had established in 1828 that had not yet operated, which greatly increased the postal deficit. In 1830 Barry warned Congress that unless it was willing to pay for increased service, it was unlikely that any new post routes could be established in the next three years. Congress refused to allocate funds but tasked Barry with establishing service on hundreds of new far flung post roads.¹⁰

To remedy the financial problems of the Post Office Department, Barry tried increasing revenue through improved and more frequent service. He doubled or tripled the frequency of some routes and replaced post riders with stagecoaches. While postal revenue increased from \$1.7 million in 1829 to \$2.8 million in 1834, deficits during the same period rose from \$75,000 to more than \$313,000. Barry's desire to speed up mail transportation led to overpaying some dishonest contractors.¹¹

Recognizing the potential of railroads to improve postal operations, in 1832 Barry authorized mail to be transported by train on a limited basis. Rail transportation accelerated the westward growth of Post Offices, allowing establishment of service in more places.¹² Barry cautioned that railroads needed to serve the public at large as well as carrying the mail. If care were not taken he warned they "may become exorbitant in their demands and prove eventually to be dangerous monopolies."¹³

In his dealings with Congress, Barry was "extraordinarily tactless" and "had a positive genius for making powerful and implacable enemies on Capitol Hill."¹⁴ In 1834 a Senate committee reported numerous corrupt practices, excessive spending, and kickbacks. The report alleged that Barry and other postal officials awarded extravagant bonuses to contractors, then turned around and accepted funds from the same companies for their personal use.¹⁵ Many in Congress demanded his removal. Barry saw his authority slipping away: "Contractors, Post masters, and other agents cease to respect the man who is about to quit and look to the one who probably will succeed him in office."¹⁶

The continued allegations forced Jackson to ask for Barry's resignation, which he tendered on April 10, 1835. Jackson appointed Barry to a diplomatic post in Spain, but he suffered a heart attack and died enroute. He was originally interred at St. James's Cemetery, Liverpool, England, and in 1854, was reinterred in Kentucky.¹⁷

Time has not improved Barry's reputation. His friend Amos Kendall, who replaced him as postmaster general, diplomatically said that Barry was "too good a man" to be successful in the role.¹⁸ But Daniel Y. Meschter echoes other historians in concluding that "Barry contributed practically nothing constructive to the Post Office Department and is noted as one of the more corrupt postmasters general of all time."¹⁹

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- ¹ "William T. Barry," Military Wiki, Fandom, https://militaryhistory.fandom.com/wiki/William_T._Barry
- ² William T. Barry, "Letters of William T. Barry," *The William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine* 14, no. 4 (Apr. 1906): 230.
- ³ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 333.
- ⁴ "Letters of William T. Barry," 240.
- ⁵ Andrew Jackson, Message to Congress December 8, 1829, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/first-annual-message-3>.
- ⁶ Stephen W. Campbell, "A Vast Political Corporation: The Power of the Post Office in the Bank War," *We're History*, October, 27, 2018, <https://werehistory.org/a-vast-political-corporation-the-power-of-the-post-office-in-the-bank-war/>.
- ⁷ Devin Leonard, *Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service* (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 24-25.
- ⁸ Gerald Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 57.
- ⁹ Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service*, 55.
- ¹⁰ Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 55-56.
- ¹¹ Winifred Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 70.
- ¹² Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America*, 183.
- ¹³ Clyde Kelly, *United States Postal Policy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932), 126.
- ¹⁴ Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service*, 56.
- ¹⁵ Campbell, "A Vast Political Corporation."
- ¹⁶ Dorothy Ganfield Fowler, *Unmailable: Congress and the Post Office* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 24.
- ¹⁷ Fandom, "William T. Barry."
- ¹⁸ Fuller, *The American Mail*, 58.
- ¹⁹ Meschter, "The Postmasters General of the United States," 36.