

JAMES CAMPBELL

Postmaster General

March 7, 1853 – March 4, 1857



James Campbell (1812 – 1893)

Postmaster General from 1853 to 1857

Franklin Pierce chose his cabinet in the shadow of a private catastrophe. On January 6, 1853, two months after his election, a train derailed near Andover, Massachusetts, and the Pierces' eleven-year-old son, Benjamin, was killed before his parents' eyes. Yet the cabinet Pierce assembled that winter proved remarkably durable: it is the only one in American history to serve a full term without a single change.¹ One of its members was James Campbell, a Philadelphia lawyer and judge hardly known outside Pennsylvania, who took charge of a Post Office Department with offices in nearly every community in the country.

Campbell's selection owed as much to party arithmetic as to his own record. Pierce had won the nomination on the forty-ninth ballot as a compromise candidate, and he led a Democratic Party holding together a fragile coalition in the uneasy aftermath of the Compromise of 1850. In 1851, James Buchanan had worried that Campbell's Catholicism could damage the Pennsylvania Democrats' judicial ticket. "It would be a sad affair for the party, should Campbell fail & the remainder of the Judicial ticket be elected," he wrote. "He is the first Catholic, I believe, who has ever been upon a ticket for a State office & he is worthy & well qualified."² Campbell lost narrowly in 1851, the only one of the five Democratic candidates defeated, but his place in Pierce's cabinet rewarded a Buchanan loyalist who had come over to Pierce when Buchanan's bid failed. It acknowledged the weight of Irish Catholic voters in the party's coalition.

His career was built on party politics, but his reputation rests on administration. As postmaster general from 1853 to 1857, he pushed for financial accountability while presiding, as a loyal Democrat, over one of the federal government's largest patronage networks. Congress rejected many of his proposals, and the department never became self-supporting, but his reforms, including the registration system of 1855, anticipated later postal practice.

Early Life and Legal Career

James Campbell was born on September 1, 1812, in Southwark, then a district of Philadelphia. His Irish Catholic background shaped both his public identity and the political obstacles he later faced. After receiving a private education, he studied law and was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar in 1833. Campbell soon entered public service, serving as a commissioner for the Southwark district and later becoming active in what became Philadelphia's Board of Education. In 1840, he introduced the resolution that established Philadelphia's Girls' High School, an early example of his interest in civic and educational reform.³

Governor David R. Porter appointed Campbell as a judge of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas in 1841, where he served for nearly a decade. After Pennsylvania adopted judicial elections, Campbell unsuccessfully sought a seat on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1851. Anti-Catholic sentiment contributed to his narrow defeat.⁴

Governor William Bigler subsequently appointed Campbell Attorney General of Pennsylvania in January 1852, a position he held until President Franklin Pierce tapped him for postmaster general in 1853, making him the first Catholic confirmed to lead an executive department.⁵ His appointment reflected both Democratic factional politics and the growing importance of Catholic immigrant voters within the party coalition.⁶

Appointment as Postmaster General

Campbell took office at a moment when the nation's mail system was expanding quickly. His 1856 *Annual Report* stated that the number of Post Offices had reached 25,565 by 1856 — an increase of 4,664 in just four years.⁷ At the same time, contracts, political favoritism, and persistent deficits made reform increasingly urgent.⁸

Campbell's goal was to make the Post Office Department more efficient, accountable, and dependable for a rapidly growing country. The department controlled a large network of appointments and contracts, including more than 22,000 postmaster positions in 1853 and millions of dollars in contracts.⁹ Because these offices and contracts were valuable sources of local influence, reforming the department meant challenging one of the federal government's most powerful patronage systems.

One of Campbell's first priorities was to improve financial accountability. He believed in the importance of self-sustainability, writing that, "The principle adopted in the infancy of our republic, that the Post Office Department should sustain itself from its own revenues [is] in my opinion, most wise and salutary."¹⁰ He emphasized stricter financial oversight, improved reporting practices, and greater accountability among postal officials. He asked Congress for supervisory agents that could report ineffective postmasters.¹¹ He rewrote the sorting schemes for the country's fifty distributing offices, giving each an alphabetical list of counties and the proper distribution point for each, so that mail would take the most direct route.¹² He also imposed stricter standards on mail contractors, enforcing fines on those who failed to meet performance standards.¹³

Campbell also urged Congress to end costly subsidies and franking privileges, raise postal rates where necessary, and reduce practices that kept the department from becoming financially self-supporting.¹⁴ He warned that the frank "covers private correspondence of every description, and abstracts largely from the treasury."¹⁵ In January 1854 alone, members of Congress franked nearly 350 tons of letters and public documents through the Washington city post office. Congress rejected many of these proposals because they threatened free mailing privileges and other perquisites that politicians relied on to maintain regional party discipline.¹⁶

Postal Innovations

During Campbell's tenure, the Post Office developed procedures that helped lay the groundwork for the later Registered Mail® system. Before this innovation, letters containing money, legal papers, securities, or other valuables were vulnerable to theft with little accountability.

Campbell's annual reports noted that the mail was often used for valuable objects such as bank notes, negotiable documents, or other valuables for which the department accepted no responsibility for theft or loss. He recommended a system of registration in his 1854 report, and Congress authorized it in the Act of March 3, 1855, for a five-cent fee, as a voluntary service for which the department accepted no liability for loss. The system went into operation on July 1, 1855.¹⁷ This system improved the security of the mail and became the foundation of today's Registered Mail® service.

The first perforated U.S. postage stamps were also introduced during Campbell's final months in office, marking an important improvement in postage. The Act of March 3, 1855, required prepayment of postage on most letters and authorized the postmaster general, from January 1, 1856, to require postmasters to affix stamps to prepaid letters that lacked them. Before perforation began, stamps had to be cut with scissors or a blade. The addition of perforations greatly simplified stamp separation and improved customer convenience. Although experimentation had begun earlier, the department authorized perforation during his administration, and the perforated three-cent stamp was issued on February 28, 1857.¹⁸

Congress authorized stamped stationery in 1852, before Campbell took office, but he also oversaw the expanded use of pre-stamped envelopes, which simplified mailing by eliminating the need to buy and apply postage stamps separately. The first printed stamped envelopes were issued July 1, 1853. By June 1854, more than 25 million stamped envelopes had been issued.¹⁹

The 3-cent George Washington stamp (Scott #25) issued in 1857 was part of America's very first series of perforated postage stamps.

Printed by Toppan, Carpenter & Co., this stamp paid the mandatory single-rate domestic letter fee and eliminated the tedious chore of cutting sheets apart with scissors.



Expansion of Postal Service

Campbell's years in office coincided with a period of rapid national growth. Railroad expansion created new opportunities for faster mail transportation, as the postal network reached newly settled communities across the Midwest and West. By the 1850s, the Post Office Department began to increase spending on railway mail.²⁰ Campbell estimated that miles of routes increased from 217,743 in 1853 to 239,642 by 1856.²¹ Rail carried 28 percent of mail mileage in 1856, up from 21 percent in 1853.²² Under his leadership, the department continued extending service while working to make delivery more dependable and operations more consistent.

Campbell pressed carriers for more reliable and economical service, recognizing that mail contracts with railroads and steamship companies determined how effectively the postal system could serve a growing national market. His 1856 report calculated total annual mail transportation at 71,307,897 miles, costing \$6,035,474, which helps explain why contracts were so central to his reform agenda.²³ However, contract disputes were common. A lack of fixed

rates with the railway companies and set arrival and departure times meant that when disagreements occurred, services could be refused and services disrupted.²⁴

Postal services improved and expanded during his tenure, but the department did not become fully self-supporting, as he had hoped.²⁵ By his 1855 report he conceded that the rates set in 1851 “will not enable the department to sustain itself from its own revenues,” and that “large annual appropriations must continue to be drawn from the treasury.”²⁶

Later Years and Legacy

Following the Pierce administration, Campbell returned to Philadelphia and resumed his legal practice. He ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1863, then turned his attentions to pursuits away from politics. He remained active in civic and charitable organizations for decades, serving as president of the Board of Trustees of Jefferson Medical College and as vice president of Saint Joseph’s Orphan Asylum. He also served on Philadelphia’s Board of City Trusts, helping oversee institutions such as Girard College and Wills Eye Hospital. His later civic work reflected the same sense of public obligation that had shaped his government service.

James Campbell died in Philadelphia on January 27, 1893, at the age of 80.

Campbell served all four years of Pierce’s presidency alongside the same colleagues, and that steadiness was the setting for his work at the Post Office Department. He was a partisan appointee, chosen in part as a reward for his support at the 1852 convention and in the campaign, and for his standing with Irish Catholic voters, who tried to reform a patronage system that helped sustain his own party. Congress, which relied on that system, rejected many of his proposals, and the department never broke even, as he had hoped.

What lasted was narrower but real: a uniform system of registration that gave valuable letters added security, firmer standards for mail contractors, and a case, repeated in his annual reports, that the mails should be run for accountability rather than favor. His son, John M. Campbell, later described him as “unobtrusively able and honest in every capacity,” one of the men “who form the solid warp into which others, less modest and less capable, weave the glittering arabesques which the multitudes accept as history.”²⁷ Meschter offers a more measured assessment, describing Campbell as “a successful if somewhat lackluster Postmaster General,” whose innovations were not “truly monumental” but whose work on rail and steamship transportation and mail distribution “had long term impacts.”²⁸

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- ¹ "Franklin Pierce: Administration," Miller Center, University of Virginia, accessed October 8, 2026, <https://millercenter.org/president/pierce/franklin-pierce-administration>.
- ² James Buchanan, "James Buchanan to L. Harper regarding a recent trip to Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania, and the judicial election," August 6, 1851, *American History, 1493-1945*, <https://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/James-Buchanan-to-L--Harper-regarding-a-recent-trip-to-Bedford-Springs--Pennsylvania--and-the-judicial/GLC04508>
- ³ John M. Campbell, *Biographical Sketch of Hon. James Campbell, Postmaster General of the United States, 1853-1857* (Philadelphia: American Catholic Historical Society, 1894), 273-274.
- ⁴ "James Campbell (1853-1857)," *University of Virginia Miller Center*, <https://millercenter.org/president/pierce/essays/campbell-1853-postmaster-general>
- ⁵ Although Roger B. Taney served as Attorney General in 1831, the position was not an executive department head, and his later Treasury nomination was rejected. James Campbell was the first Catholic confirmed to lead an official executive department. See Jean H. Baker, "Franklin Pierce: The American Franchise," Miller Center, University of Virginia, accessed October 7, 2026, <https://millercenter.org/president/pierce/the-american-franchise>. On Campbell's appointment as attorney general, see C. W. Ernst, "Hon. James Campbell," *The Republic* (Boston), February 11, 1893. On Bigler's term (January 20, 1852–January 16, 1855), see Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, "William Bigler," <https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/governors/1790-1876/william-bigler.html>.
- ⁶ Daniel Y. Meschter, "The Postmasters General of the United States. XVI. James Campbell, 1853-1857," *La Posta*, (March 2005), 32.
- ⁷ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1856, 753.
- ⁸ John F. Coleman, "The Public Career of James Campbell," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 1962), 31-32; 35-36.
- ⁹ Coleman, "The Public Career of James Campbell," 31.
- ¹⁰ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1854, 14.
- ¹¹ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1853, 706.
- ¹² *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1854, 618-619. See also *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1855, 322; Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 34.
- ¹³ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1853, 336.
- ¹⁴ Coleman, "The Public Career of James Campbell," 36.
- ¹⁵ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1855, 327–328. See also Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 35.
- ¹⁶ "James Campbell (American National Biography)," *House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College*, <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/21382>
- ¹⁷ Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 34. See also Act of March 3, 1855, ch. 173, § 3, 10 Stat. 641–42. See also *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1855, 322–323.
- ¹⁸ Wilson Hulme, "Early Rotary Perforation Machine," *National Postal Museum*, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/collections/object-spotlight/early-rotary-perforation-machine>. See also Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 34; Act of March 3, 1855, ch. 173, § 1, 10 Stat. 641–42.
- ¹⁹ U.S. Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 2nd sess. Appendix (December 4, 1854), 23, Report of the Postmaster General, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc30790/m1/42/zoom/?q=%222010?%22&resolution=1.4862009198978514&lat=2470.2361265785976&lon=175.39392634226897>
- ²⁰ "The Railway Mail Service: The Creation, 1832-1864," *National Postal Museum*, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/research-article/the-railway-mail-service-history-of-the-service/the-creation-1832-1864>
- ²¹ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1853, 699.
- ²² *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1856, 753. See also Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 33.
- ²³ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1856, 753.
- ²⁴ Fred J. Romanski, "The Fast Mail: A History of the U.S. Railway Mail Service," *Prologue Magazine* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2005), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/fall/fast-mail-1.html>
- ²⁵ "James Campbell (American National Biography)," <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/21382>
- ²⁶ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1855, 327.
- ²⁷ Campbell, *Biographical Sketch of Hon. James Campbell*, 265–266.
- ²⁸ Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 35.