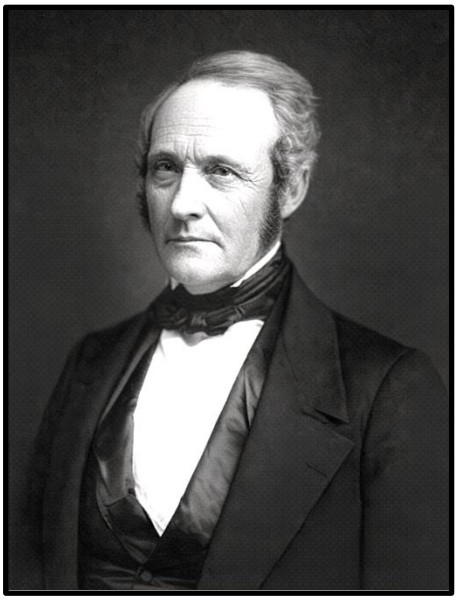
JACOB COLLAMER

Postmaster General
March 8, 1849 – July 22, 1850



Jacob Collamer *(1791 -1865)*
Postmaster General from 1849 to 1850

The Accidental Reformer

On March 3, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a postal reform bill that would reshape the American mail system for generations. The legislation established the country's first formal classification of mail — letters as first class, newspapers as second class, all other mailable matter as third — and imposed uniform postage rates for letters regardless of distance. It authorized branch post offices, collection boxes, and expanded delivery services at the postmaster general's discretion. The bill passed both chambers without debate, a rarity in a Congress consumed by war. One member more than any other had made that quiet passage possible: Jacob Collamer of Vermont, chairman of the Senate Committee on Post Office and Post Roads.

Collamer's mastery of the subject was earned. Fourteen years before he guided the reform bill through the Senate, he had served sixteen months as postmaster general under President Zachary Taylor, learning the machinery of the department from the inside. His annual report of 1849 — dense with statistics on mail contract costs, class imbalances, and the structural problems of extending service to California — reads in retrospect like a preliminary draft of the 1863 legislation. The experience of administration, brief as it was, gave him something few legislators possessed: practical knowledge of where the system actually broke down.

Collamer is today one of the more obscure figures in American postal history, a circumstance partly of his own making. Charles Sumner called him the “Green-Mountain Socrates,” and the nickname fit: he was deliberate, principled, and — fatally for gallery reputation — soft spoken.[1] His words had to be read in the *Congressional Globe* rather than heard in the chamber. Yet what he accomplished quietly over two decades of Senate service, and what he glimpsed and recorded during his brief tenure at the Post Office Department, marked him as one of the more consequential figures in nineteenth-century postal reform.

The Road to the Post Office

Jacob Collamer was born in Troy, New York on January 8, 1791. His family moved to Burlington, Vermont when he was four, and he grew up on the family farm before graduating from the University of Vermont in 1810. He read law, was admitted to the bar in 1813, served in the state militia during the War of 1812, and built a practice in Woodstock, Vermont. Four terms in the state assembly, a stint as Windsor County state's attorney from 1822 to 1824, and a decade as a judge of the Vermont Superior Court followed.[2]

None of this prepared him for the Post Office Department. What brought him to Washington was Whig loyalty. Elected to the Twenty-eighth, Twenty-ninth, and Thirtieth Congresses (1843–1849), Collamer

served reliably if quietly, chairing the Committee on Manufactures and sitting on the Committee on Public Lands.

When Zachary Taylor won the presidency in 1848 and assembled his cabinet, the arithmetic of geography created a problem. None of Taylor's other appointees came from north of Pennsylvania. New England — and specifically Vermont, the most reliably Whig state in the union — needed representation. Collamer was the solution. He acknowledged as much with unusual candor in an address to a Vermont delegation shortly after his appointment: his state was, he said, "the only Whig State in the Union which has never swerved from her political faith, and almost the only one which has never shared the patronage of the General Government."[3]

Taylor appointed Collamer postmaster general on March 8, 1849, days after taking office. The appointment was, in the frank language of the era, a reward. What neither Taylor nor his Whig allies fully reckoned with was that Collamer would bring to the post the same independent judgment he had exercised on the bench.

The Spoils System and Collamer's Refusal

In the mid-nineteenth century the postmaster general controlled more patronage positions than any other cabinet officer. The spoils system was not merely accepted practice — it was the mechanism by which party loyalty was maintained and rewarded across thousands of communities. When a new administration arrived, the expectation was simple: clear out the opposition's postmasters and install your own people.

Collamer refused to play by these rules. He declined to remove Democratic postmasters wholesale, insisting that political affiliation alone was insufficient grounds for dismissal. The decision drew criticism from Whig partisans who had waited years for their turn at the patronage trough. But Collamer was unmoved, objecting to purging postmasters “whose only sin was that they were Democrats.”[4]

His reasoning extended beyond simple fairness. Collamer observed that the politicization of postal appointments had corroded public trust in the department's inspection service, with citizens coming to believe that postal special agents, while “professionally employed in public service, are in fact busy as political emissaries, and in the propagation of party doctrines.”[5]

This was an early and largely unheralded statement of something that would become a persistent theme in postal reform: the argument that the department could not function as a public service while simultaneously serving as a party apparatus. Collamer did not resolve the tension — the spoils system would persist for decades — but his stance marked him as an administrator with a different conception of what the Post Office Department was for.

A Year in the Department: The Administrative Record

Collamer's tenure lasted sixteen months, and he produced only one annual report to the President. It was, in the judgment of his contemporaries, a notably competent document — though much of the statistical expertise behind it reflected the knowledge of Assistant Postmaster General Selah R. Hobbie, who had served in that role since 1835 and was the institutional memory of the department across multiple administrations. Collamer was a political appointee learning on the job; Hobbie was the professional underneath him.

What the annual report reveals is that Collamer absorbed those lessons quickly and drew his own conclusions. The 1845 Act, which had required mail contracts to be awarded to the lowest qualified

bidder, had substantially reduced the cost of carrying the mail — from 8.1 cents per mile in fiscal year 1845 to 5.6 cents per mile in fiscal year 1849, a reduction of roughly 30 percent. Collamer documented this achievement while noting that railroads continued to resist incorporating mail schedules into their contracts.[6]

He was also troubled by the internal economics of the mail. Of the department's 1849 gross revenues of $4,905,176, letters accounted for 82.5 percent, while newspapers and pamphlets — which weighed considerably more — generated only 17 percent. Letter mail was, in effect, subsidizing the press. Collamer found this inequitable and said so directly. The department was operating in the black — revenues exceeded expenditures by $426,000 in 1849 — but Collamer did not treat profitability as an end in itself.[7]

He proposed, in preliminary form, the idea of separating mail by class and charging according to actual costs. He was candid about the difficulty:

> *It must be quite obvious that there can be no practicable method of ascertaining the expense of mail service on each particular letter or paper, as it fluctuates with the cost in each different section of the country; but what is the proper proportion of each class of service may be settled with a good degree of justice, if, when ascertained, it is to bear its fair proportion and that only.*[8]

The passage reads like a first draft of the 1863 Act. More than two decades later, it was Collamer who would shepherd the classification scheme into law.

California and the Limits of the System

The most vivid sections of Collamer's annual report concern California — and they reveal a department straining against the limits of laws written for a continental nation that stopped at the Missouri River.

The immediate problem was geography. Postal regulations required the return of unclaimed letters at the end of the second quarter after their receipt. This rule made sense in the East. In California, where the Gold Rush had deposited tens of thousands of people in communities that barely existed six months earlier, it was absurd. As Collamer noted, letters addressed to miners and settlers would “be sent back before those persons would arrive there.” Returning California dead letters to Washington was, he concluded, “worse than useless.”[9]

The labor economics of California compounded the problem. Wages and rents in San Francisco far exceeded anything the commission-based salary system could accommodate. A postmaster assigned to that city resigned almost immediately upon discovering that his compensation would be effectively zero. The existing pay structure had been calibrated for eastern cities and small New England towns, not for a boomtown where a clerk's wages exceeded a congressman's salary.[10]

The transit route added another complication. Mail moving between the Atlantic states and California crossed the Isthmus of Panama under a contract with the government of New Granada — today's Colombia. Collamer found the arrangement “very tardy and carelessly performed,” a bottleneck that undermined whatever the Post Office Department managed to accomplish on either end of the route.[11]

These were not merely operational complaints. They pointed toward structural failures: a postal law that assumed a settled, proximate population; a compensation system that could not adapt to regional labor markets; and a dependence on foreign transit that placed American mail in foreign hands. Collamer did not have solutions to all of these problems — some would not be resolved for years — but he identified

them with precision. The California material in his annual report is, in retrospect, the most prescient section of the document.

Departure and the Senate Years

President Zachary Taylor died in office, on July 9, 1850. Millard Fillmore, his successor, had his own cabinet in mind, and Collamer resigned to give the new president a free hand. Nathan Kelsey Hall of New York received the appointment. Collamer's sixteen months at the Post Office Department were over.

Congressman John Wentworth of Illinois offered a summary judgment: "if the history of the Post Office Department is ever written, his administration will be noted as economical, cheap and honest." Reverdy Johnson, who had served alongside Collamer in Taylor's cabinet and would later serve with him in the Senate, was more generous: "Those who are acquainted with his administration of the Post Office Department during that time, know that in all respects it was admirable."[12]

Collamer returned to Vermont and the Superior Court bench, serving until 1854. He was elected to the United States Senate in 1855 as a Republican — the Whig Party having collapsed in the intervening years — and reelected in 1861. He chaired the Committee on Post Office and Post Roads during the Thirty-seventh through Thirty-ninth Congresses, among other assignments.

It was in that committee role that his brief, undistinguished-seeming tenure as postmaster general paid its most significant dividend.

The 1863 Reform Act: Experience as Legislative Capital

By 1862 the postal classification question had languished unresolved for years. Congress had made periodic attempts at improvement, but the results had been, in the assessment of the *New York Times*, "greatly deficient." The *Times* attributed the failure to a persistent structural problem: postal reform had been left "in the hands of men who had no practical or extended acquaintance with the workings of the postage system."[13]

Collamer was the exception. Crafted in cooperation with Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, the reform bill that Collamer shepherded through his committee drew directly on the classification framework he had outlined in his 1849 annual report. The Act signed by Lincoln on March 3, 1863, established letters as first-class mail; "all mailable matter exclusively in print and regularly issued at stated periods" as second class; and a third class embracing all other lawfully mailable matter. It set uniform postage rates regardless of distance — 3 cents for letters under half an ounce, 3 cents for each additional half ounce — and authorized the postmaster general to establish branch post offices, collection boxes, and delivery services wherever the public interest required.[14]

The bill passed without debate. In a body where virtually every significant measure generated hours of floor argument, this was itself a signal: Collamer had done the work in committee, where his expertise was unquestioned, and the bill arrived on the floor already finished.

His colleagues understood what had happened. The *Times*'s observation about the necessity of practical acquaintance was a direct compliment to Collamer — the one senator who had actually run the department he was now reforming by statute.

Regulating Mail Content: The 1865 Anti-Obscenity Act

Collamer's legislative impact extended beyond structural and logistical reform; he also fundamentally reshaped the moral boundaries of the U.S. Mail. During the Civil War, a massive domestic trade in erotic photographs and salacious literature flooded the camps of Union soldiers. In February 1865, leveraging his position as chairman of the Senate Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, Collamer took to the Senate floor to demand that the federal government intervene.

He described the issue as a "great evil" involving the transportation of "obscene books and pictures" through the mail. At his urging, Congress attached an amendment to the Post Office Act of 1865, making it a federal misdemeanor to knowingly mail obscene publications. This milestone legislation marked the first time the federal government regulated domestic mail content and served as the direct legal precursor to the stricter Comstock Act of 1873.[15]

Legacy and Obscurity

Collamer's loyalty to the Union was unmistakable. In 1862, during debate on a Treasury bill, he told the Senate: "I do not know how other members of the Senate look upon the obligation of their oath to support the Constitution of the United States. To me it is an oath registered in heaven as well as upon earth." New York Senator Ira Harris, eulogizing him after his death, said simply that "No purer patriot ever participated in the councils of the nation."[16]

Collamer died in Woodstock, Vermont on November 9, 1865. He had been married to Mary Stone since 1817; she survived him by five years. Six of their children lived to adulthood.[17]

Vermont placed his statue in the National Statuary Hall in 1881 — a Preston Powers sculpture that now stands on the first floor of the Senate Wing of the United States Capitol.[18] His Woodstock home is part of the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park's Civil War Home Front Walking Tour.[19] These are the memorials of a man whose reputation rested on principled, sustained service rather than dramatic incident.

Why is Collamer so little remembered in postal history? Partly temperament: the gallery problem was real, and history tends to favor the orator over the committeeman. Partly party: the Whig collapse erased the political identity of a whole generation of public men, and Collamer's Republican reinvention, while successful, left him without a continuous partisan narrative. And partly the nature of legislative achievement — it is easier to credit a postmaster general with what happens on his watch than to trace the long thread from a bureaucrat's 1849 annual report to a senator's 1863 floor victory.

But that thread is there. Collamer entered the Post Office Department as a political reward and left it with a working knowledge of where the system was broken. He spent the next thirteen years in the Senate waiting for the moment when that knowledge could be put to use. When it came, he was ready — and the bill passed without debate.

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[1] U.S. Congress, *Addresses on the Death of Hon. Jacob Collamer, Delivered in the Senate and House of Representatives, December 14, 1865* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1866), 22–24.

[2] Daniel Y. Meschter, "The Postmasters General of the United States XIII. Jacob Collamer, 1849–1850," *La Posta* 35, no. 4, whole no. 208 (August–September 2004): 14. Note: Meschter's article title spells the name "Collamar"—an apparent error not replicated elsewhere in the literature.

[3] Mary Louise Kelly, *Woodstock's U.S. Senator: Jacob Collamer*, Woodstock Series No. 1 (Woodstock, VT: Woodstock Historical Society, 1944), 24, https://libsysdigi.library.illinois.edu/oca/Books2009-06/jacobcollamer00kell/jacobcollamer00kell.pdf

[4] K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1993), 262.

[5] Jacob Collamer, *Special Agent Circular*, October 8, 1850, 1. Cited by Smithsonian National Postal Museum, "History of the Postal Inspection Service," Behind the Badge: Postal Inspection Service Duties and History, accessed May 15, 2026, https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/behind-the-badge-postal-inspection-service-duties-and-history/history

[6] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General, 1849* (Washington, DC: C. Alexander, Printer, 1849), 773. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hwcd6p&seq=521

[7] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General, 1849*, 776.

[8] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General, 1849*, 779.

[9] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General, 1849*, 785.

[10] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General, 1849*, 785.

[11] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General, 1849*, 784.

[12] James Barrett, *Memorial Address on the Life and Character of the Hon. Jacob Collamer* (Rutland: Tuttle, Gay & Company, 1866), 15, https://archive.org/details/memorialaddress01barrgoog/page/n22/mode/2up

[13] "News of the Day," *New York Times*, February 2, 1863, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1863/02/02/80272187.html?pageNumber=4

[14] James I. Campbell Jr., "Appendix C: Universal Service Obligation," in *Postal Rate Commission Report* (Washington, DC: Postal Rate Commission, 2008), 95-96, https://www.jcampbell.com/docs-campbell/reports/2008_PRC/App_C_Ver_1.00.pdf

[15] Congressional Globe, 38th Cong., 2nd Sess., 661 (1865). See also: Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Culture and Its Critics in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 136-138.

[16] Kelly, *Woodstock's U.S. Senator*, 23.

[17] Conrad Reno, *Memoirs of the Judiciary and the Bar of New England for the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (Boston: Century History Company, 1900), RA4-PA26, https://books.google.com/books?id=kGswAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA4-PA26

[18] U.S. Capitol Visitor Center, "National Statuary Hall Collection: Jacob Collamer," accessed May 15, 2026, https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/apps/nshc/statue/collamer/.

[19] National Park Service, "Civil War Home Front Walking Tour," Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, last modified April 10, 2026, https://www.nps.gov/mabi/planyourvisit/civil-war-home-front-walking-tour.htm