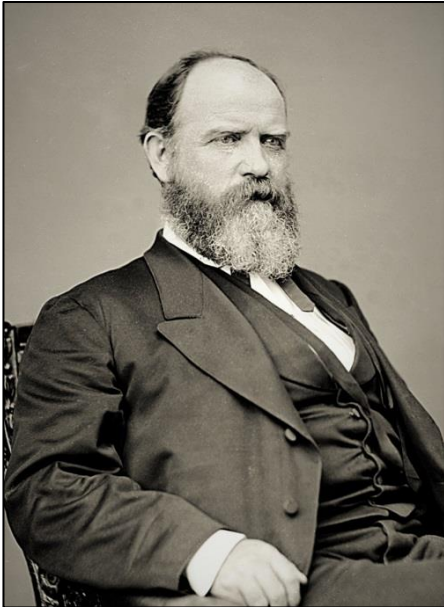


JOHN A. J. CRESWELL

Postmaster General

March 5, 1869 – June 22, 1874



John A. J. Creswell (1828–1891)
Postmaster General 1869–1874

John Andrew Jackson Creswell was born on November 18, 1828, in Port Deposit, Maryland, also known as Creswell's Ferry. His family was prominent in Cecil County; his father, John Creswell, was a member of the Maryland House of Delegates and his mother, Rebecca Webb, was a Pennsylvania Quaker.¹ When he was three-years old, Creswell's father died.² He later changed his middle names from "Andrew Jackson" to "Angel James", presumably to distance himself from President Jackson's policies.³

Creswell was educated at the nearby West Nottingham Academy. He attended Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, graduating at the top of his class in 1848.⁴ After passing the Maryland bar exam, Creswell practiced law in Elkton, Maryland. He unsuccessfully ran as a Whig candidate to the Maryland Constitutional Reform Convention.⁵ After the demise of the Whig party, Creswell became a Democrat and represented Cecil County at the 1856 Democratic convention in Cincinnati.⁶ As slavery became a more divisive issue, Creswell gravitated towards abolitionist Republicans.

Creswell served in the Maryland state legislature from 1860 to 1862 and as assistant adjutant-general for Maryland in 1862. He was elected to Congress, serving from December 7, 1863, until March 3, 1865.

During this time, Creswell caucused with abolitionist Republicans. After being defeated for reelection, he was appointed to fill the Senate seat of the late Thomas H. Hicks in March 1865. At the 1868 Republican Convention, Creswell declined the nomination as vice president.⁷

On March 5, 1869, he was appointed postmaster general by President Ulysses Grant. Creswell's appointment surprised many who expected Grant to reappoint Lincoln's postmaster general, William Dennison of Ohio. Grant likely appointed Creswell because of their close personal friendship and his service to the Republican party.⁸ Postmaster General Creswell rewarded loyal party members with postmaster appointments. While Creswell indulged in political patronage, he avoided accusations of corruption or graft. That could not be said for other members of Grant's cabinet.⁹ Creswell was the longest serving cabinet member during Grant's two terms and the longest serving postmaster general in more than two decades. His length of service was not surpassed until Jesse Donaldson was appointed by President Harry Truman in 1947.¹⁰

After Creswell became postmaster general, those seeking patronage jobs filled the lobby outside his office. Once the lobby was full, a clerk was sent to announce that their presence in Washington was proof that the jobseekers were neglecting their postmaster duties back home. The crowd quickly disbursed to the railway stations.¹¹

During an era of rampant political patronage, Creswell shamelessly dismissed moderate Republican postmasters and replaced them with more radical party members. Journalist Carl Schurz called for creation of a civil service system to combat Creswell's ruthless approach. The *New York Times* and other newspapers called for reform. In 1871, Congress created an advisory board to outline rules for appointments. The rules called for a board of examiners to test applicants and certify successful candidates. These regulations took effect in April 1872, but only applied to Post Office jobs in Washington and New York. Creswell took note and once his own appointees were in place, he cut back on postmaster removals. He opposed Philadelphia party bosses who wanted to replace the city's postmaster with a party loyalist.¹²

Creswell's top goals as postmaster general were to improve service and decrease postal deficits. In his first annual report, Creswell asked, "How can the Postal Service of the country be made most efficient?" and "How

can it be relieved from the heavy deficiencies annually charged against it?"¹³ Creswell took immediate steps to reduce the Department's expenses and reported that the annual postal deficit had been reduced by \$1,084,000 during the first year after his appointment.¹⁴

Creswell looked to the railroads to achieve his goals. Railroads sped mail delivery. Completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 dramatically cut mail transit time. Mail from New York—which previously took a month to reach San Francisco—arrived in one week.¹⁵ Creswell realized that improving mail service via the rails would not be cheap. The schedule used to pay railroads hadn't been updated since the 1840s. Railroad companies complained that an adjustment in pay was overdue. Creswell proposed readjusting pay, and in 1872 Congress authorized the postmaster general to increase compensation up to 50 percent.¹⁶

During Creswell's term, African Americans were first employed by the Post Office Department. In 1869 the postmaster of Richmond, Virginia, hired the first-known black letter carrier, James Christian. That same year, William Carney, recipient of the Medal of Honor for his service in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, was hired as a letter carrier in New Bedford, Massachusetts. In 1872, Creswell appointed Anna M. Dumas as the first known black woman postmaster in Covington, Louisiana.¹⁷

Another target for Creswell's reforms was the misuse of the franking privilege. Franking allowed Congress and other federal officers to mail without paying postage. Creswell thought the franking privilege was "an abuse so monstrous that it now threatens the very life of the service."¹⁸ In 1869, franking allowed 31,933 citizens to send and receive mail for free.¹⁹ In 1871, Creswell asked postmasters to track the amount of franked mail: more than 5 million franked letters and 2 million pounds of other mail matter. He calculated that if postage were paid on those items, it would contribute \$2.5 million towards the Post Office budget.²⁰ Despite strong resistance in Congress, franking was abolished in 1873. In its place, Congress appropriated \$1,865,900 for special stamps and stamped envelopes for use on "official mail."²¹

Creswell introduced the first post cards in the United States in 1873, modeled after similar cards used in Britain. He believed customers would use the cards because of their convenience. They didn't need folding or sealing, and they were "ready for use at any moment where ... paper and envelope were not accessible."²² The cards were an instant hit with the public. More than 31 million of the penny cards were sold the first year, adding \$310,000 in revenue.

The pictorial stamps issued in 1869 were very unpopular due to their small size and poor quality. Creswell used a provision in the printing contract to have a new stamp series printed by the National Bank Note Company without additional cost. The new stamps featured profiles of marble busts of distinguished Americans.²³ The stamps had better adhesive, were larger, and were designed to thwart counterfeiting.²⁴

Creswell strongly favored government ownership and Post Office control of the telegraph system. Many European posts had integrated the telegraph as a part of a federal communications system.²⁵ He proposed paying for the telegraph system with the establishment of a Post Office Savings Bank. But Congress declined to purchase the telegraph companies; the postal savings system was not established until 1911.²⁶

On June 24, 1874, Creswell unexpectedly resigned. "After more than five years of continuous service," he wrote, "I am constrained by a proper regard for my private interests to resign the office of Postmaster General, and to request that I may be relieved from duty as soon as it may be convenient for you to designate my successor." While Grant expressed regret at seeing the last of his original cabinet members depart, there is some evidence that Grant was behind Creswell's sudden departure.

Creswell was criticized for allegedly overpaying a mail contractor named Chorpenning. Creswell claimed that the overpayment was for the extra services Chorpenning performed when hauling the mail. Creswell's reputation was further eroded when unscrupulous contractors conspired to place ridiculously low straw bids on postal routes also called "star routes." Expecting the low bids to be disqualified, other contractors were ready to win the contract at a much higher price. The straw-bidders were supposedly "friends of Mr. Creswell...to be seen at all times in his offices."²⁷ Though he was never implicated in the star route scandal, Creswell's critics alleged that he turned a blind eye to the fraud. Rather than defend himself from the accusations, he simply resigned.

Creswell said the job left him “worn down and tired of it,” and that, “the officer who fills the place acceptably leads a dog’s life.”²⁸ In reporting Creswell’s resignation, the *New York Times* referred to him as a “hard-working, pains-taking, energetic officer.”²⁹ He remained friends with President Grant after resigning from his cabinet and supported an unsuccessful effort to nominate Grant for a third term.³⁰ Creswell and his wife Hannah were at Grant’s side when he died in 1884.³¹

Before resigning, Creswell was appointed as the American counsel for the Alabama Claims Commission.³² He served in that role until 1876 when he returned to his private practice in Elkton. On December 23, 1891, he died suddenly at his home near Elkton of a heart condition complicated by pneumonia.³³ He is buried in Elkton Presbyterian Cemetery.³⁴



Postmaster General and Assistants, June 1869 (photo by Matthew Brady & Co.) L to R: George B. Armstrong, George Earle, W.H.H. Terrell, J.A.J. Creswell, Giles A. Smith, Joseph H. Blackfan, and C.F. McDonald.

HISTORIAN
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE
OCTOBER 2024

-
- ¹ John Morton Osborne and Christine Bombaro, *Forgotten Abolitionist: John A.J. Creswell of Maryland* (Carlisle, PA: House Divided Project at Dickinson College, 2015), 11.
- ² Osborne and Bombaro, *Forgotten Abolitionist*, 11.
- ³ Daniel Y. Meschter, "John A. J. Creswell, 1869-1874," *La Posta*, 37, no. 5 (Nov. 2006): 34.
- ⁴ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 34.
- ⁵ Osborne and Bombaro, *Forgotten Abolitionist*, 3.
- ⁶ Osborne and Bombaro, *Forgotten Abolitionist*, 13.
- ⁷ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 34.
- ⁸ Robert V. Friedenberg, "John A. J. Creswell of Maryland: Reformer in the Post Office," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 64, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 134.
- ⁹ Friedenberg, "John A. J. Creswell of Maryland: Reformer in the Post Office," 141.
- ¹⁰ "John Andrew Jackson Creswell (1828-1891)," Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections, 2005, <https://archives.dickinson.edu/people/john-andrew-jackson-creswell-1828-1891>.
- ¹¹ Friedenberg, "John A. J. Creswell of Maryland: Reformer in the Post Office," 142.
- ¹² Gerald Cullinan, *The Post Office Department* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1968), 86-87.
- ¹³ United States Post Office Department, *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*. (Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1869), 30.
- ¹⁴ Friedenberg, "John A. J. Creswell of Maryland: Reformer in the Post Office," 135.
- ¹⁵ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 34.
- ¹⁶ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 36.
- ¹⁷ Osborne and Bombaro, *Forgotten Abolitionist*, 60-61.
- ¹⁸ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 37.
- ¹⁹ Friedenberg, "John A. J. Creswell of Maryland: Reformer in the Post Office," 138.
- ²⁰ Osborne and Bombaro, *Forgotten Abolitionist*, 59.
- ²¹ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 36.
- ²² Friedenberg, "John A. J. Creswell of Maryland: Reformer in the Post Office," 141.
- ²³ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 37.
- ²⁴ Friedenberg, "John A. J. Creswell of Maryland: Reformer in the Post Office," 141.
- ²⁵ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 86.
- ²⁶ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 37.
- ²⁷ Shawn Francis Peters, *When Bad Men Combine: The Star Route Scandal and the Twilight of Gilded Age Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023).
- ²⁸ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 88.
- ²⁹ *The New York Times*, June 25, 1874, 4, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-new-york-times-creswell-resigns/156932422/> (accessed October 11, 2024).
- ³⁰ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 88-89.
- ³¹ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 34.
- ³² The Alabama claims were a diplomatic dispute between the United States and Great Britain that arose out of the U.S. Civil War. The peaceful resolution of these claims seven years after the war ended set an important precedent for solving serious international disputes through arbitration and laid the foundation for greatly improved relations between Britain and the United States. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1861-1865/alabama>
- ³³ Meschter, "Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801," 37.
- ³⁴ George Shivers, "John Andrew Jackson Creswell, Maryland Abolitionist from Cecil County," Common Sense: Straight Talk for the Eastern Shore, April 26, 2022, <https://www.commonseasternshore.org/john-andrew-jackson-creswell-maryland-abolitionist-from-cecil-county>.