

JOSEPH HABERSHAM

Postmaster General

February 25, 1795 to November 28, 1801



Joseph Habersham (1751-1815)
Postmaster General from 1795 to 1801

Joseph Habersham was born in Savannah, Georgia, on July 28, 1751. His father, James Habersham, arrived in Georgia in 1738 and found success as a transatlantic merchant. He was also active in the colony's royal government where he served as senior councilor and acting governor. Joseph attended the College of New Jersey (today's Princeton University) from 1763-1767. Before graduating, he transferred to Woolwich Academy in England. He then apprenticed as a merchant in London.¹

Habersham returned to Savannah in 1771 and went into business with a cousin.² He and his two brothers were drawn to the revolutionary cause, unlike their father who was loyal to the Crown. They were able to overcome their political differences and maintained their devotion to the family.³ Habersham joined the Friends of Liberty committee in 1774, helped to establish the Georgia Committee of Safety in 1775, and gained a seat on the Georgia Provincial Council.⁴

He served with distinction during the Revolutionary War in the Georgia militia and in the Continental Army, where he rose to the rank of colonel. After the war Habersham again entered politics as a Georgia delegate in the Confederation Congress. Later, he was a member of the Georgia constitutional convention and served two terms as mayor of Savannah.⁵

In February 1795, President George Washington nominated Habersham to succeed Timothy Pickering as postmaster general.⁶ Habersham picked up where Pickering left off, implementing the provisions of the Postal Act of 1792, which authorized low newspaper rates and Congressional jurisdiction over post roads.⁷ Habersham focused on speeding up mail delivery. After an accident in Pennsylvania where a sulky overturned while transporting mail, Habersham reasoned that all citizens were obliged to expedite the mail:

*The safe and speedy transportation of the mail is an object of the highest importance, not only to the government but to the citizens of the United States, & he must be a bad member of society who would not where an opportunity offered render every assistance in his power to accelerate the passage of it, but no one could be so worthless as wantonly to obstruct it.*⁸

Habersham supported a law giving the postmaster general authority over stagecoaches that transported mail. In 1799, he called for mail coaches to be standardized with an easily recognizable color scheme:

*The body painted green, colors formed of Prussian blue and yellow ochre, carriage and wheels red, lead mixed to approach vermilion as near as may be; octagon panel in back, black; octagon blinds, green; elbow piece, or rail, front rail and back rail, red as above; on the doors, Roman capitals in patent yellow, "United States Mail Stage," and over those words a spread eagle of a size and color to suit.*⁹

Habersham knew that lower newspaper rates helped spread information across the country, but he also understood that inexpensive newspapers from large cities could put local papers out of business. In the 1800 edition of *The Post-Office Law*, Habersham directed local postmasters to encourage their patrons to subscribe to newspapers published within their state rather than those from distant cities. He thought the existence of small, local printers would help extend the “knowledge of letters” by publishing books as well as newspapers. Habersham worried that the highly partisan, big city newspapers would spread the “rage of party.”¹⁰

In 1801, Habersham received a complaint about a mail contractor “employing a slave as a Carrier of the Mail.” The contractor, Edmund Taylor, had an enslaved man carry mail on the route from Frankfort, Kentucky, to Cincinnati, Ohio. In a letter to Frankfort Postmaster Isaac Gano, Habersham noted that “some objections” had been made to slaves carrying the mail, even though previous postmasters general allowed it. Habersham allowed Taylor to continue the practice and noted “that slaves in general are more trustworthy than that class of white men who will perform such services.”¹¹ After Habersham left office, the 1802 act of Congress forbade Blacks —whether free or slave— from carrying the mail.¹²

Habersham was a proponent of the “penny posts” used to deliver mail from the Post Office to the home or business of the addressee. Private carriers charged a small fee (usually one or two cents) to deliver the letters.¹³ He discouraged the use of “pigeonholes” (precursors of Post Office boxes) for individuals picking up mail at the Post Office. In February 1800, Habersham wrote to the postmasters of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Salem:

*Receiving money for pigeonholes, is ... contrary to the spirit of the act for establishing the post office. It deprives the penny posts, who are very useful ... of a portion of that compensation which they ought to receive. You are therefore instructed not to keep any such pigeonholes for private individuals and not to receive any pay for keeping such as may be deemed useful to public bodies.*¹⁴

When the rapidly increasing volume of newspapers became more than the stagecoaches could accommodate, Habersham hired packet ships to transport newspapers between New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. While this increased the efficiency of newspaper transport, the service was discontinued after sixteen months as the ships needed to take on freight and passengers to defray costs, which caused schedules to become inconsistent.¹⁵

While Habersham was postmaster general, the number of Post Offices continued to grow — from 450 in 1794, to 1,025 in 1801. Nationwide, 2,243,000 letters were carried over 22,000 miles of post roads in 1801. To keep up with the growth, major changes were needed. Habersham hired mid-level managers to work between the postmaster general and local postmasters.¹⁶ By creating an intermediate level of management, Habersham no longer had to personally respond to every postmaster, contractor, and postal patron in the country. In a letter to the postmaster of Augusta, Georgia, Habersham wrote, “The former system of corresponding with so many Offices had grown too unwieldy to be continued any longer and the plan of having distributing Offices appeared the best calculated to correct the evil.”¹⁷

Habersham’s most significant contribution as postmaster general was in the way mail was sorted and distributed. He developed a hub and spoke system which reduced the handling each letter received and minimized the chances of theft. This system revamped the way postmasters prepared the mail before dispatching to other Post Offices.¹⁸ Previously, postmasters would sort through the incoming letters and remove those for their office, repack the others, and send the mailbag on to the next town. Habersham created distribution centers where letters would be sorted by town, then directed to a depot, and on to the delivery Post Office.¹⁹

By reducing how many times each letter was handled and the number of people with access to it, he hoped that cases of mail tampering would decrease.²⁰ Habersham’s successor, Gideon Granger,

admitted that he had initially opposed the distribution system when he took office. But he was “soon convinced that ... the System was absolutely necessary to the existence of the department.”²¹

Habersham’s term as Postmaster General spanned nearly seven years under Presidents Washington, Adams, and Jefferson.²² Jefferson offered Habersham the position of Secretary of the Treasury in 1801. He chose instead to resign and return to Savannah. In 1802 he was appointed president of the Georgia branch of the Bank of the United States.²³ He died in Savannah on November 17, 1815, and was buried in the city’s Colonial Park Cemetery.²⁴ Habersham County, Georgia, formed in 1818 was named for him.²⁵

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- ³ Lambert, “Father against Son, and Son against Father,” 18.
- ⁴ “Joseph Habersham (1797-1801), 2023, *U.S. Presidents*, University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/adams/habersham-1797-joseph-postmaster-general> (accessed May 6, 2024)
- ⁵ University of Virginia Miller Center.
- ⁶ “From Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, 26 January 1795,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-18-02-0103>.
- ⁷ Andrew Glass, “Washington signs the Postal Act: Feb. 20, 1792,” 2008, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/02/washington-signs-the-postal-act-feb-20-1792-008592> (accessed 5/6/2024)
- ⁸ “Joseph Habersham to C.R. Stanley and G.W. McElroy, 27 August 1795,” *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1965).
- ⁹ Wesley Everett Rich, *A History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 98.
- ¹⁰ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 40.
- ¹¹ “Joseph Habersham to Isaac Gano, 4 April 1801,” *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General*.
- ¹² John, *Spreading the News*, 140.
- ¹³ John, *Spreading the News*, 150.
- ¹⁴ John, *Spreading the News*, 150.
- ¹⁵ Richard B. Kielbowicz, “The Press, Post Office, and Flow of News in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, no. 3 (1983): 276, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3122616>, (accessed May 8, 2024).
- ¹⁶ Daniel Y. Meschter, “Joseph Habersham and the Mail Distributing System,” *La Posta*, The Postmasters General of the United States, 1775-1971, 34, no. 6 (December 2003): 31.
- ¹⁷ “Joseph Habersham to William J. Hobby, 25 August 1800,” *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General*.
- ¹⁸ Meschter, “Joseph Habersham and the Mail Distributing System,” 31.
- ¹⁹ John, *Spreading the News*, 74-75.
- ²⁰ Meschter, “Joseph Habersham and the Mail Distributing System,” 35.
- ²¹ Meschter, “Joseph Habersham and the Mail Distributing System,” 37.
- ²² Daniel Y. Meschter, “Joseph Habersham, 1795-1801,” *La Posta*, The Postmasters General of the United States, 1775-1971, 33, no. 4 (August 2002): 36.
- ²³ University of Virginia Miller Center.
- ²⁴ “Colonial Park,” *Georgia Historical Society*, https://www.georgiahistory.com/ghmi_marker_updated/colonial-park/ (accessed May 8, 2024).
- ²⁵ Elizabeth B. Cooksey, “Habersham County,” 2022, *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/counties-cities-neighborhoods/habersham-county/> (accessed May 8, 2024).
- Public domain image: “Joseph Habersham,” New York Public Library Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-321f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.