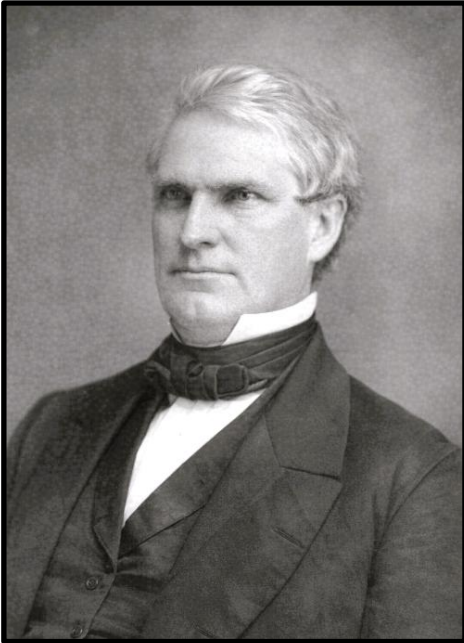


NATHAN KELSEY HALL

Postmaster General

July 23, 1850 – August 31, 1852



Nathan K. Hall (1810 -1874)
Postmaster General from 1850 to 1852

“On the first day of May 1826, I left the tan-yard and the shoe shop for the law office.”¹ Nathan Kelsey Hall gave up his father’s trade to study law under a twenty-six-year-old Buffalo attorney, whose practice was still too small to keep a clerk fully occupied. “When not employed in writing,” Hall said of those years, “I spent my time in reading very assiduously such law books as he directed.”² The attorney was Millard Fillmore.

Neither man was anyone yet. Twenty-four years later, that partnership would put Hall in a presidential cabinet.

Hall was born in 1810 in New York’s Finger Lakes region. Marcellus and Skaneateles both claim him as their native son.³ His parents named him after the farmer whose land they lived on, Nathan Kelsey. When Hall’s mother died, his father moved west and left the boy with the Kelseys. Hall attended the Onondaga Valley Academy before rejoining his father, by then a tanner and shoemaker outside Buffalo.⁴ Leatherwork held no appeal for young Hall. While studying law he supported himself as a schoolteacher.

From the Tannery to the Law Office

In the 1820s, Buffalo, the western terminus of the Erie Canal, was still an untamed frontier town. Burned by the British during the War of 1812, it was rapidly growing.⁵ Buffalo was in the middle of a shipping and building boom that drew ambitious young lawyers from across western New York. Fillmore was one of them. By 1833 Hall was admitted to the bar and they formed a partnership as Fillmore & Hall.⁶ Three years later a second protégé, Solomon G. Haven, finished training in the same office and made partner. Fillmore, Hall, & Haven grew as fast as the port around it.⁷ Eventually all three men left the firm for public life — Haven to the Buffalo mayoralty and Congress; Hall to Congress, the Cabinet, and the bench; and Fillmore to the presidency.⁸

Between 1831 and 1837, Hall worked through the county’s minor offices — clerk to the Board of Supervisors, city attorney, alderman.⁹ He served as Erie County judge for the Court of Common Pleas. In 1846 he was elected to the state assembly and, the same year, to the U.S. House.¹⁰ He served one term, 1841-1845. In 1848 the Whig Party nominated Fillmore as Zachary Taylor’s running mate. The pair won the general election. In July 1850, after barely sixteen months as president, Taylor died in office. His cabinet resigned shortly thereafter. Fillmore, now president, appointed his old friend postmaster general.

A Nation Divided

The country Fillmore and Hall inherited was coming apart and being stretched at the same time.

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, transferred more than a million square miles of Mexican territory to the United States. This land eventually became all or parts of ten states: California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. In one of the greatest coincidences in American history, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill days after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the war was signed. California's population soared from about 14,000 -to a quarter million by 1852 and kept growing.¹¹ San Francisco alone increased in size from a few hundred people in 1846 to more than 30,000 by 1852.¹²

Shortly after taking office, Hall reported, "The mail service to California and Oregon, and especially in the former, is still in an unsettled state and but partially reported, so that no satisfactory statement in regard to it can be submitted."¹³ Before the transcontinental railroad, the only routes to the Pacific coast were overland, around Cape Horn, or across Panama.

At the same time, the public was debating whether that new territory would allow slavery. Taylor's death placed Fillmore into the middle of the conflict. The Compromise of 1850 resolved some of the disputes. California was established as a free state. Utah and New Mexico could decide the issue for themselves. The slave trade was banned in the District of Columbia, and the Fugitive Slave Act won support in the South.¹⁴

Fillmore needed someone trustworthy to oversee a postal system that had just been asked to reach twice as far, while at the same time half of Congress questioned whether the country would hold together at all.

An Uncompromising Postmaster General

James O. Putnam said Hall's integrity "was almost of a romantic type," and in awarding contracts "he never knew any difference between friends and foes."¹⁵

Hall proposed cutting inland letter postage to three cents prepaid, five unpaid, with a further drop to two cents if revenue outpaced expenditure for two straight years.¹⁶ He knew what it would cost the department, and said so without dressing it up: "That the revenues of the Department have been perennially diminished by these reductions cannot be denied... but it is believed that this diminution has been slight in comparison with the public benefits which have followed."¹⁷ Congress passed the reduced rate in the Post Office Act of March 3, 1851 — which meant new stamps.

The printing company Rawdon, Wright, Hatch, & Edson had engraved the country's first stamps in 1847 and held the printing contract ever since. Hall opened the new contract for bids, and six firms submitted their own designs. Rawdon et al offered to submit a new design on the condition that they would be paid whether they won or not. Hall said no. Printing of the three-cent Washington stamp went to a Philadelphia company that simply did what was asked. Along with lowering the letter rate to three cents, Hall executed the first stamp demonetization in U.S. history, declaring all existing 1847 federal issues invalid for postage as of July 1, 1851.¹⁸

Hall pushed for a higher rate to the Pacific Coast of twenty cents — closer to the actual cost of getting mail there. Congress allowed six cents prepaid and ten unpaid, instead.¹⁹

He railed against misuse of the franking privilege: five people entitled to frank mail as senators and ex-senators from a single state in one summer, four from another, three from several more — an abuse he wanted closed, not managed.²⁰ The five-hundred-dollar penalty for counterfeiting a frank, he said, was not "sufficient to prevent" it.²¹

He pressed for tougher penalties for theft of mail equipment: “these locks and keys should be protected by provisions as stringent and as highly penal as treasury notes or any other public security. The stealing of mail locks should be punished as felony,” carrying, he argued, the same weight as stealing a soldier’s arms or uniform.²²

Hall called for a more rational pricing structure to correct the inexplicably different postage rates applied to newspapers versus periodicals: periodicals were “less ephemeral... and certainly not less beneficial,” and a single rate would spare postal clerks the “often invidious duty” of deciding which was which.²³

The Judgeship and a Widening Distance from Politics

Fillmore paid a steep political price for supporting the Compromise of 1850 — the Whig Party declined to nominate him for a full term in 1852. He lost the nomination on the 53rd ballot to Winfield Scott. Fillmore walked away in defeat, stating, “I Would Rather be Right Than President.”²⁴ He could not save Hall’s political career, so he offered him a lifetime appointment instead: United States judge for the Western District of New York. In August 1852, Hall transitioned directly from postmaster general to the federal bench. He held that seat until his death in 1874.²⁵

His judicial appointment marks a quiet divergence between Hall and his two former law partners. As the Whig coalition collapsed over the course of the 1850s, both Fillmore and Haven moved toward the nativist Know-Nothing Party — Haven in Congress, and Fillmore as the party’s presidential nominee.²⁶ Hall, by contrast, left electoral politics behind.

Hall had married Emily Paine in 1832. She predeceased him, as did four of their five children.²⁷

Forest Lawn

Hall was, by all accounts, well regarded if not widely remembered. “Judge Hall was a man of much ability, of a genial though retiring disposition, and much esteemed as a lawyer and judge,” his obituary in the *New York Times* observed.²⁸

A few days after Hall’s death, on March 8, 1874, his longtime friend Millard Fillmore died as well and was buried beside him in Buffalo’s Forest Lawn Cemetery. Solomon Haven, who had died in 1861, rests nearby — his obelisk standing near Fillmore’s and Hall’s, an echo in stone of the old firm’s letterhead: Fillmore, Hall & Haven.²⁹ A partnership that started above a shoe shop in West Aurora was reflected, half a century later, in three adjoining graves.

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- ¹ Jeremy Morlock, "Fillmore's Friend: Judge Nathan Kelsey Hall," *The Herald-Courier*, April 26, 2008, <https://www.herald-courier.com/articles/fillmores-friend-judge-nathan-kelsey-hall-2/>.
- ² Morlock, "Fillmore's Friend."
- ³ "Nathan Kelsey Hall," *Skaneateles* (blog), September 22, 2009, <https://kihm6.wordpress.com/2009/09/22/nathan-kelsey-hall/>.
- ⁴ "Nathan Kelsey Hall," *Skaneateles* (blog).
- ⁵ Robert J. Rayback, *Millard Fillmore: Biography of a President* (Buffalo, NY: Henry Stewart, Inc., 1959); see also *Buffalo Architecture and History*, accessed July 2026, <https://buffaloah.com/h/mf/grande/index.html>.
- ⁶ Daniel Y. Meschter, "The Postmasters General of the United States—XIV. Nathan Kelsey Hall, 1850–1852," *La Posta*, November 2004, 16.
- ⁷ Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 56–58; "Millard Fillmore Papers: Timeline," Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Eugene M. Fahey, *History of Erie County Bench and Bar* (New York State Unified Court System), accessed July 2026, https://history.nycourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/County-Legal-History_Erie-compressed.pdf.
- ⁸ "Millard Fillmore," *Buffalo Architecture and History*.
- ⁹ Morlock, "Fillmore's Friend."
- ¹⁰ "Hall, Nathan Kelsey," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, accessed July 2026, <https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/H000062>.
- ¹¹ Kevin Starr and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 25, 50; J. S. Holliday, *Rush for Riches: Gold Fever and the Making of California* (Oakland: Oakland Museum of California, 1999), 26, 51.
- ¹² James J. Rawls and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *A Golden State: Mining and Economic Development in Gold Rush California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 187; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1870* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office).
- ¹³ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1850, 407.
- ¹⁴ Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1964); or Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 224–250.
- ¹⁵ James O. Putnam, "Nathan Kelsey Hall" (paper read before the Buffalo Historical Society, March 30, 1874), quoted in "Nathan Kelsey Hall," *Skaneateles* (blog).
- ¹⁶ "Nathan Kelsey Hall," *Skaneateles* (blog).
- ¹⁷ "Nathan Kelsey Hall," *Skaneateles* (blog).
- ¹⁸ "The 1847 Issue," *National Postal Museum*, accessed July 2026, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/the-1847-issue>.
- ¹⁹ Meschter, "The Postmasters General of the United States—XIV," 16; "The Post-Office Department," *New York Times*, December 3, 1851.
- ²⁰ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1851, 3.
- ²¹ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1851, 12.
- ²² *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1851, 11.
- ²³ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1851, 6.
- ²⁴ Millard Fillmore to A. A. Mayer, July 23, 1852, autograph letter signed, SMC 1914, Millard Fillmore Papers, Shapell Manuscript Collection, <https://www.shapell.org/manuscript/millard-fillmore-would-rather-be-right-than-president/>.
- ²⁵ "Nathan Kelsey Hall," *Skaneateles* (blog).
- ²⁶ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); or Rayback, *Millard Fillmore*, 410–415.
- ²⁷ Morlock, "Fillmore's Friend."
- ²⁸ "Obituary—Judge Nathan K. Hall," *New York Times*, March 3, 1874, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1874/03/03/79061426.html?pageNumber=4>.
- ²⁹ "President Millard Fillmore," *Gravely Speaking* (blog), August 16, 2012, <https://gravelyspeaking.com/2012/08/16/president-millard-fillmore/>.