

SAMUEL DICKINSON HUBBARD

Postmaster General

August 31, 1852 – March 7, 1853



Samuel D. Hubbard (1799 – 1855)

Postmaster General from 1852 to 1853

“As Postmaster General he was distinguished for independence, firmness, and irreproachable integrity,” the *Alexandria Gazette* declared on Samuel Dickinson Hubbard's death in 1855.¹ This neat historical verdict overlooks a legacy that was, at its critical turning point, incredibly tense and high stakes. Firmness was the very trait that nearly cost the American West its mail service, before firmness of a different kind — his successor's — undid the damage.

Hubbard arrived in Washington as a manufacturer, not a career politician, and he ran the Post Office Department accordingly: by results, cost, and output. That instinct served him well at a drafty headquarters building but poorly on mail routes he could not see, could not visit, and could not hear from for months at a time.

A Connecticut Manufacturer

Hubbard was born in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1799, the only child of Elijah Hubbard and Abigail Dickinson. When he was only nine, his father died. He graduated from Yale in 1819, having concentrated on classical studies, and after reading law was admitted to the Connecticut bar in 1820.

He practiced law until 1837, but it was not law that defined his life's work.

Investing his inheritance, Hubbard left his law practice for manufacturing. He co-founded the Russell Manufacturing Company alongside Samuel Russell, a merchant who had made his fortune in the oriental silk and opium trades. Recognizing the need for a dedicated operator, Hubbard brought in his 21-year-old nephew, Henry G. Hubbard, to manage the mills. Under the younger Hubbard's direction, the company specialized in textiles—one of Connecticut's leading industries—and in 1841 became the first in the country to produce elastic webbing on power looms, a breakthrough that quickly made them the nation's premier producer of suspenders. With trusted management in place, Hubbard was free to enter public life. He was still a manufacturer at heart: someone accustomed to running an operation by measurable results.

A Whig, and a Path to Washington

In 1844, Hubbard was elected to the 29th Congress as a Whig, representing Connecticut's 2nd congressional district, where he served from 1845 to 1849. One of the party's leading figures was Millard Fillmore, who championed the “American System”—an economic philosophy favoring high protective tariffs to support northern manufacturing. Although the two men never served together in the House, Hubbard supported the business protections Fillmore had authored in the Tariff of 1842.

Fillmore was elected vice president as Zachary Taylor's running mate in 1848. He succeeded to the presidency upon Taylor's death and named his longtime friend and law partner [Nathan K. Hall](#) as postmaster general. Hall resigned from the cabinet in 1852 to take a federal judgeship, and Fillmore turned to Hubbard — whose party loyalty and executive experience as a northern industrialist helped balance the cabinet both geographically and, Fillmore hoped, administratively.

At the time of his appointment, the *Daily American Telegraph* described Hubbard as “one of the most clear-headed, energetic businessmen in the House. His industry was a proverb, and his judgement was implicitly relied on.”² It was the reputation of a man built for decisive management — and it was about to be tested by a part of the country that would not wait for a businessman's certainty.

Reception to Hubbard's appointment split along regional and factional lines. In his home state, the response was affirmative: the *Hartford Courant* pronounced Hubbard “well qualified for the duties of the office,” his “habits of business and qualifications of intellect and acquired knowledge all fit[ting] him for the station.” The *Washington Republic* read the appointment as a deliberate act of party repair: Hubbard had been one of only two Connecticut delegates who voted for Fillmore's opponent, General Winfield Scott, at the fractious Baltimore Convention. Hubbard's elevation to the cabinet was, the paper argued, Fillmore's way of signaling “his desire for the reunion and harmony of the Whig party” after a bruising nomination fight.³

Not every paper read the appointment so charitably. A Georgia paper looked on it with open hostility, calling Hubbard “a pet of the Free-soil party” and noting that his appointment was made at the same time when “the heroes of the great slave stampede, were pardoned by the Executive.”⁴ The paper's real target was Fillmore, not his postmaster general — but the coincidence was close enough that a hostile Southern press could use Hubbard's appointment as a proxy attack on the administration's handling of the era's defining sectional conflict.

The Businessman's Eye, Turned Inward

During his brief time as postmaster general, Hubbard managed the department the way he ran his textile mill, rather than a bureaucrat merely maintaining a system. He turned his keen eye to logistics, instructing contract bidders in 1852 to specify their mode of conveyance “if a higher mode than horseback be intended.”⁵

The postmaster compensation formula introduced in 1851 created immediate accounting chaos. Hubbard warned that the new system caused financial “reckonings” between local postmasters and the central department to “necessarily disagree.” As a result, some postmasters were paid too much, others not enough, while some used the confusion to “excuse themselves from any payment.”⁶ This accounting mess triggered a massive backlog of unresolved disputes. Because the department lacked the staff to handle the overwhelming volume of explanatory mail, postmasters were left complaining—with good reason—that their letters were simply ignored.

Even the department's physical plant at 700 F Street NW fell under Hubbard's scrutiny. Beyond warning that “important papers are accumulating in the unsafe rooms,” he targeted the building's flawed heating system. The “injudicious construction of the chimneys” meant the department wasted significant funds trying to warm rooms “without the diffusion of gas and smoke.”⁷ Hubbard's solution was a pragmatic infrastructure upgrade to steam pipes, calculating that the cost would be quickly “reimbursed by the consequent saving in fuel.” This was his signature approach. Transportation contracts, pay disputes, and drafty chimneys were all audited through a businessman's lens: measure the financial leak, eliminate the waste, and optimize the system.

The same instinct for correcting hidden operational costs played out publicly during the final months of Hubbard's tenure. The department's envelope contractor, George F. Nesbitt, had begun stamping his own name and business address onto the flaps of government-issued envelopes, turning the nation's official mail into a free advertisement for his New York firm. While Nesbitt claimed he voluntarily removed the mark due to “discontent among mercantile classes,” the *New York Daily Herald* revealed that Hubbard's department had actually forced his hand, notifying the contractor “that no more envelopes would be received from him bearing such a stamp.”⁸ The *Herald* dryly credited the outgoing postmaster general with “the existence of a most extraordinary talent for advertising”—a backhanded but fair compliment. It was the same lens Hubbard trained on

postmaster compensation, mail routes, and drafty chimneys: a manufacturer's instinct for spotting exactly where loose oversight allowed a contractor to exploit a system — and correcting it the moment it became visible.

That instinct had served him well close to home. It was about to meet a problem three thousand miles away, on a mail route he could not see, could not visit, and could not hear from in less than two months at a time.

A Promise to the West

Hubbard inherited from Hall an agency straining to keep pace with a country expanding faster than any postal system could follow. Nowhere was that strain sharper than the West Coast. Since 1848, gold had drawn tens of thousands of Americans to California — a population that swelled from roughly 14,000 non-Native residents to over 100,000 within four years — and every one of them wanted news from home faster than a six-month voyage around Cape Horn or a mule train across the pestilent Isthmus of Panama could deliver it. Hubbard understood the stakes well enough to put them in writing. In his 1852 annual report, he pledged that “the relative position of the western section of our Union, its present importance and prospective greatness, alike demand that its people should be provided with the best postal facilities that the department can supply.”⁹ What his report from Washington could not convey — because it took the better part of two months for the mail itself to travel the route in question — was what that promise actually cost the men trying to keep it.

The Chorpenning Affair

The Sacramento–Salt Lake City route ran nine hundred miles through territory that had barely been mapped. Its carriers faced Indian attack routinely enough that losses of stock and men were treated as a cost of doing business. Absalom Woodward, one of the two men who had won the mail contract the year before, was ambushed and killed in November 1851; his remains were not found until the following spring.⁷ That same winter, three eastbound carriers caught in the Sierra snow survived only by eating their mules, which had frozen to death in the blizzards around them.¹⁰

None of these facts reached Hubbard's desk. The surviving contractor, George W. Chorpenning, Jr., had been instructed to route all reports of trouble on the line through the department's Special Agent rather than directly to Washington — a chain of command meant to keep Washington from being buried in field detail. Instead, it buried the one detail Hubbard truly needed: “all the Postmaster General knew was his failure to perform according to the contract, without being aware of the circumstances.”¹¹ What Hubbard saw, in the fall of 1852, were simply reports of mail not arriving.

On November 18, 1852, reading failure without knowing its cause, Hubbard peremptorily annulled Chorpenning's contract for non-performance. The same day, without advertisement or competitive bidding, he awarded the route to a new contractor, William L. Blanchard, at more than triple the original pay — a decisive, businesslike correction, exactly the kind of clear-headed judgment the *Daily American Telegraph* had praised in him only months before.

It was also, within a matter of months, reversed. Post Office Special Agent James M. Goggin, who had documented the conditions Chorpenning's carriers had actually faced, carried the case to Hubbard's successor. James Campbell, who took office as postmaster general on March 7, 1853, agreed that the route had been “exceedingly difficult and hazardous,” annulled Blanchard's contract effective July 1, 1853, rescinded Hubbard's original order, and reinstated Chorpenning — with his pay raised to \$30,000 a year.¹²

Blanchard's contract, drawn up in Sacramento in late January 1853 and sent to Washington for signature, was signed by Hubbard on March 7 — apparently one of his very last official acts, since Campbell assumed the office that same day. The outgoing postmaster general's confident correction

of a failing contract had outlived his own tenure by mere hours before his successor began undoing it.

Indian Hill

Hubbard served until the end of Fillmore's term, resigning on March 7, 1853, to make way for the incoming Pierce administration's appointee — the same day Campbell would begin undoing his most consequential decision.

In 1853, Hubbard was elected a member of the American Antiquarian Society, reflecting his interest in the collection and preservation of early American historical materials. Known for his philanthropy, he served as president of the Middletown Bible Society and received an honorary LL.D. from Wesleyan University in 1854.

He died in Middletown on October 8, 1855, at the age of fifty-six. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that he “had been sick with a spinal complaint for some time.”¹³ He was buried at Indian Hill Cemetery in Middletown. His wife, Jane Miles Hubbard, died in 1885 and was buried beside him.

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¹ *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, VA), October 15, 1855, 2, Chronicling America, Library of Congress, loc.gov,

² *Daily American Telegraph* (Washington, DC), September 2, 1852, 2, Chronicling America, Library of Congress, loc.gov

³ *Bangor Weekly Courier* (Bangor, ME), September 7, 1852, 2, Newspapers.com.

⁴ “The Slave Stampede,” *Weekly Telegraph* (Macon, GA), August 2, 1853, 2. When President Millard Fillmore pardoned Daniel Drayton and Edward Sayres—the white abolitionists who famously orchestrated *The Pearl* escape attempt of 77 enslaved people—it outraged Southern slaveholders.

⁵ U.S. Post Office Department, *Proposals for Carrying the Mail in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut* (Washington, DC: C. Alexander, Printer, 1853), 164–166.

⁶ Samuel D. Hubbard, *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, December 4, 1852, 648.

⁷ Hubbard, *Annual Report*, 642.

⁸ *New York Daily Herald* (New York, NY), July 9, 1853, 4, Newspapers.com.

⁹ Hubbard, *Annual Report*, 642.

¹⁰ “Overland Mail to California in the 1850s,” United States Postal Service, accessed July 2026, <https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/overland-mail.htm>.

¹¹ Daniel Y. Meschter, “The First Transmountain Mail Route Contracts, 1850–1862, Part III: Route No. 5066, Sacramento, California, to Salt Lake City, Utah, May 10, 1851, to June 30, 1854,” *La Posta: A Journal of American Postal History*, January 1996, 25.

¹² Meschter, “First Transmountain Mail Route,” 25; see also “Mails of the Westward Expansion, 1803 to 1861, Chapter 7,” Western Cover Society, <https://www.westerncoversociety.org>.

¹³ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 9, 1855, 3, NYS Historic Newspapers, nyshistoricnewspapers.org.