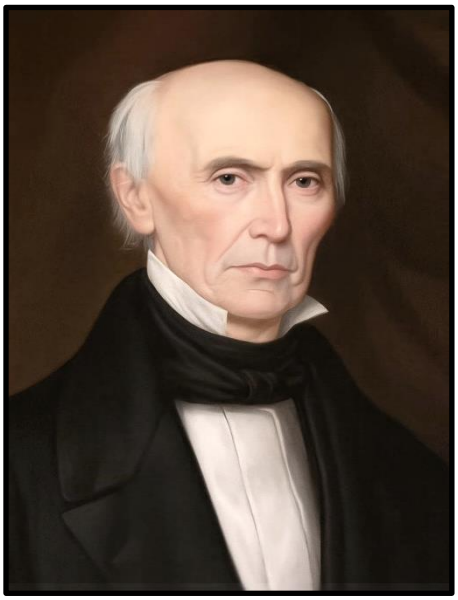
# CAVE JOHNSON

**Postmaster General**
**March 6, 1845 – March 4, 1849**



***Cave Johnson*** *(1793 -1866)*
*Postmaster General from 1845 to 1849*

Long before faxes, computers, and email cast shadows over the Postal Service, Cave Johnson confronted a new technology that could carry messages faster than any horse or steamship—the world's first electronic communications system—the telegraph. It was an unlikely challenge for a man born on the Tennessee frontier in 1793. He was named for a traveling Baptist minister and raised in a world where news moved no faster than a rider on horseback. His early schooling took him from small academies near Nashville to Cumberland College, where the War of 1812 stirred the ambitions of young men eager to prove themselves.

Johnson's classmates elected him captain of a volunteer company, but Andrew Jackson—already a commanding presence in Tennessee—declined their offer, telling them they would serve the country better by remaining in school. Johnson obeyed, though not for long. His impatience with the curriculum led to his expulsion, and he soon joined his father's militia unit, serving as deputy brigade quartermaster during the Creek War. Even in youth he showed the stubborn independence that would mark his public life.

After the war he completed his legal studies and was admitted to the bar in 1814. Three years later he opened a practice in Clarksville and became Montgomery County's prosecuting attorney. Politics followed naturally. In 1828 he entered Congress as a Democrat, serving intermittently for nearly two decades. In Washington he became a close friend of James K. Polk, the Speaker of the House, whose confidence he earned through a shared belief in economy, order, and the steady expansion of the nation. When Polk became president in 1845, he brought Johnson into his cabinet as postmaster general.[1]

Johnson took charge of the Post Office Department at a moment of upheaval. Congress had just slashed postage rates—a reform he had opposed on fiscal grounds—and now he was responsible for making the system solvent. The new law simplified postage to five and ten cents by weight, and legislators assumed lower rates would spur a flood of new correspondence. Instead, by 1847 mail volume had risen only modestly while revenue plunged.

Long known as a defender of the Treasury and "a terror to that class of claimants who sought to obtain public money by indirect means," Johnson now presided over a department facing a deficit approaching $600,000.[2] With Congress unwilling to revisit the rate structure, he turned to the only tool left to him: economy. Using the law's requirement that contracts go to the lowest responsible bidder, he renegotiated agreements with relentless focus. In New York and New England he saved $200,000 even as mileage increased; in the South he trimmed another $109,000. By 1848, thanks to these economies and a gradual rise in mail volume, the department returned to surplus.

The savings came at a cost. Postmasters in small towns, paid by commission, saw their incomes fall and some resigned rather than work longer hours for less pay. Johnson's staff predicted that volume would eventually restore their earnings, but Congress intervened first, raising commissions to keep the system functioning.

He also drew criticism for refusing to appoint women as postmasters, insisting that major offices required duties “of a character ladies could not be expected to perform.” He rejected appeals to appoint the widows of Jacob Medary in Columbus and Senator Lynn in St. Louis, saying he was “constrained from a sense of duty to the public” to advise against such appointments.[3]

Economy was only one front on which Johnson fought. Transportation—by rail, road, and sea—posed its own challenges. Railroads, increasingly dependent on mail revenue, demanded compensation above the rates Congress allowed. Johnson refused to yield. His 1848 annual report showed that he “managed to solve the railroad contract problem by steadfastly adhering to the law, tactful negotiations, and refusing to be coerced into abandoning his principles.”[4] When the Vanderbilt shipping interests sought higher rates for carrying mail between New York and New England, he turned instead to the cheaper but slower option of horse-drawn transportation.[5]

Even as he battled established carriers the department’s reach was expanding westward. After the annexation of Texas, Johnson appointed Daniel J. Toler—formerly postmaster general of the Texas Republic—to establish routes in a region where transportation was poor or nonexistent. In 1847 he named Cornelius Gilliam of Oregon as special agent and launched the first mail service to the West Coast, establishing the first Pacific post office at Astoria with John Shively as postmaster.

The discovery of gold in California soon shifted the center of gravity southward. Mail traveled by steamship to Panama, crossed the isthmus by canoe and pack animal, and continued north by another steamer—a grueling journey that revealed how far the nation still was from binding its coasts together.[6]

Across the Atlantic, Johnson worked to improve international service. British resistance required delicate diplomacy, prompting him to send First Assistant Selah Hobbie to negotiate in Europe. The treaty that followed helped lay the groundwork for the international postal agreements that would later become the Universal Postal Union.

If transportation strained the department, modernization strained it even more. Americans were slow to embrace postage stamps, preferring to send letters postage due. Johnson saw the waste firsthand: unclaimed letters that cost the department money to transport but generated no revenue. Congress resisted prepayment, and even after authorizing stamps in 1847, adoption lagged. Some postmasters doubted the stamps were genuine—Johnson had to assure them they were real. Only one letter in fifty bore a stamp.

The consequences could be absurd. In 1848, presidential candidate Zachary Taylor did not receive notification of his nomination because the letter was sent postage due and Taylor refused to pay for mail from unfamiliar senders.[7] Johnson wanted portraits of George Washington and Andrew Jackson on the first stamps; instead, Benjamin Franklin appeared on the 5-cent issue.

The telegraph posed the most profound challenge of all. Congress placed the Washington–Baltimore line under Johnson’s supervision, and in October 1844, the telegraph office moved to the second floor of the Washington Post Office. The system was unprofitable from the start. After six months it had cost more than $3,000 to operate and brought in only a few hundred dollars. Johnson concluded that no rate structure would make it self-sustaining.

Yet he came to see its value as something beyond profit. It was, he told President Polk, “vastly superior to any other… for the diffusion of intelligence,” and he warned that in private hands it might become a tool for speculation and abuse.[8] Congress withdrew funding, and leased the line to private operators.[9] Johnson had glimpsed the future—and understood its dangers—long before most Americans knew such a future was possible.

When the Polk administration ended, Johnson returned to Clarksville and resumed the quieter rhythms of public service—first as judge of Tennessee's seventh judicial circuit in 1850, then as president of the Bank of Tennessee from 1854 to 1860. During the Civil War he was a reluctant secessionist. Though he enslaved sixty-seven people and all three of his sons fought for the Confederacy, he surrendered Clarksville without resistance when Union gunboats appeared in February 1862.[10] Pardoned by President Andrew Johnson in 1865, he was elected to the Tennessee Senate the following year but barred from taking his seat because of his Confederate loyalty.

Johnson's private life had its own long arc. After being rejected by Elizabeth Dortch in 1815 and vowing never to love again, he bided his time. After she was widowed, he proposed again; the two married in 1838 and raised three sons together.[11] Johnson died in Clarksville in 1866, and was laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery—a man whose life traced the nation's uneasy passage from frontier republic to fractured union, and who, in office and out, held fast to the principles that had shaped him from the start.

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[2] William Titus, *Picturesque Clarksville, Past and Present: A History of the City of the Hills* (Clarksville, TN, 1887), 298, https://archive.org/details/picturesqueclark00titu/page/298/mode/2up

[3] Winifred Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 111.

[4] Daniel Y. Meschter, "The Postmasters General of the United States XII: Cave Johnson, 1845-1849," *La Posta* (May 2004): 22.

[5] Edward F. Williams III, "Cave Johnson, Philately's Forgotten Man", *The Congress Book 1967* (Los Angeles: The American Philatelic Congress, 1967), 71.

[6] "Overland Mail to California in the 1850s," United States Postal Service, August 2010, https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/overland-mail.htm

[7] "A Presidency (Almost) Lost in the Mail," American University Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, December 31, 2024, https://edspace.american.edu/taylorandfillmore/a-presidency-almost-lost-in-the-mail/

[8] *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1845): 861.

[9] "Telegraph: Early Postal Role," United States Postal Service, May 2015, https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/pdf/telegraph.pdf

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[11] Thomas H. Winn, "Cave Johnson," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, March 1, 2018, https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/cave-johnson/