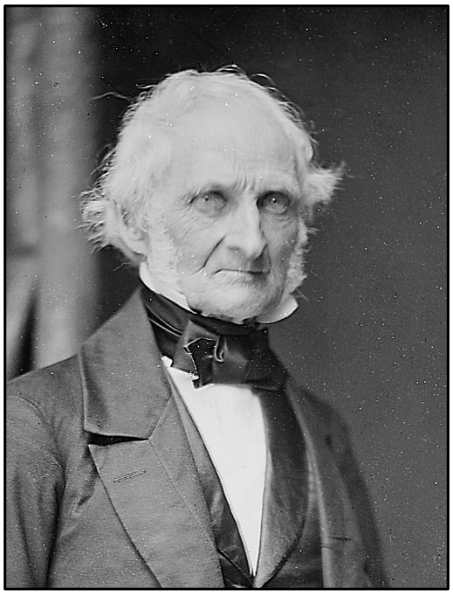
AMOS KENDALL

Postmaster General
May 1, 1835 – May 18, 1840



Amos Kendall *(1789-1869)*
Postmaster General from 1835 to 1840

In the early decades of the republic, when the capital itself had "more streets than houses," Amos Kendall emerged from obscurity to become one of the most influential men in Washington.[1] He was not a soldier or a statesman in the traditional mold, but a wiry New Englander with a sharp pen and a restless mind. From a Kentucky newspaper office to Andrew Jackson's inner circle, Kendall's rise was improbable, yet transformative. He would shape the Post Office Department (POD) into a national institution, help carry the telegraph from a novelty to monopoly, and leave behind a legacy as complex as the age he served.

Born in 1789 in Dunstable, Massachusetts, Amos Kendall graduated from Dartmouth College before studying law with New Hampshire Congressman William M. Richardson. In 1814, he moved to Kentucky to begin a career as an attorney and journalist. He tutored Henry Clay's children, edited the influential *Argus of Western America*, and quickly became a force in frontier politics. The *Argus* was influential, and Kendall "plunged into Kentucky journalism with celerity, quickly adapting himself to its rugged ways," according to historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.[2]

Though initially aligned with Clay, Kendall grew disillusioned and threw his support behind Andrew Jackson in the 1828 presidential race. In 1829 he took a job as an auditor in Jackson's Treasury Department and moved to Washington. His writing skills and political acumen made Kendall a trusted confidant and member of Jackson's "Kitchen Cabinet." He eventually became one of the most powerful behind-the-scenes figures in Jacksonian America.

The *National Intelligencer* described him as "the most influential man in the Cabinet," but his detractors had less flattering names for him like "wretched printer."[3] Representative Henry Wise of Virginia called Kendall "the President's thinking machine, and his writing machine – aye, and his lying machine."[4]

In 1835, when Jackson nominated Kendall for postmaster general, Kendall worried that he might not be confirmed by the Senate. Critics of the administration feared how the Post Office would fare under such overtly partisan leadership. Kendall's predecessor had been accused of overspending, blatant patronage, poor service, and for turning a $3 million surplus into a deficit. In response, Congress passed a postal reform bill in 1836.[5]

The new law directed all postal revenues to the U.S. Treasury with appropriations based on the postmaster general's budget estimates. To combat fraud, stricter contracting standards required financial guarantees from bidders and forbid postal employees from holding financial interests in

mail contracts. It required the postmaster general to submit an annual report to Congress on all contracts and other departmental finances.

The act imposed tighter rules on postmasters, a residency requirement, and limited franking privileges. Presidentially appointed postmasters were subject to fixed terms of four years. Kendall proved to be a capable administrator. He increased revenue by requiring postmasters to operate their offices efficiently and promptly remit the funds they collected. Some postmasters, wrote Gerald Cullinan, were “pocketing a sizable percentage of the revenues that passed through their hands.”[6]

The act also authorized new services, such as the use of letter carriers for local delivery and express mail service.[7] Kendall’s attempts to revive the express mail system were unsuccessful due to the lack of volume.[8] He pushed for improvements to international mail and a means of sending money through the mail, but Congress initially declined his proposals.[9] Despite this, years later, the Universal Postal Union and postal money orders became established services.[10]

Kendall saw great potential for railroads to speed the mail, but was frustrated by the “wholly unreasonable” rates charged by the railway operators.[11] Unregulated railroad companies colluded to keep rates high. Kendall said he would “sooner put post-coaches or mail-wagons on the old roads” than agree to their terms.[12] Despite the exorbitant rates charged by railroad operators, the POD’s use of trains increased efficiency and supported the growth of railways nationwide.[13] In just one year—1836 to 1837—the network of post roads increased by 22,978 miles.[14] To better manage this rapidly growing network, the new position of “topographer” was created to map and document the mail routes.

In 1836, the number of U.S. states reached 25 and as Americans pushed westward, the POD strained to keep pace with the nation’s expansion. But while mail routes stretched across the frontier, a far more immediate danger lurked—not in the wilderness, but in the heart of Washington itself. On December 5, Kendall warned Congress that the Post Office building was a tinderbox. “The building in which the General Post Office is kept is not fire-proof,” he wrote, “and its valuable books and papers are daily exposed to destruction.”[15]

Just ten days later, Kendall’s fears were realized when flames tore through the building, consuming records, correspondence, and the patent office next door. Postal employees rushed into the inferno in a desperate attempt to save what they could. Reporting grimly to President Jackson, Kendall wrote, “steps have been taken to secure all that is valuable in the ruins.” But the POD, he lamented, had “no fund at command” to rebuild, nor even to furnish the clerks with desks to resume their work.[16]

In the aftermath of the fire, the POD faced a daunting task. Postmasters across the country had to be contacted to provide new copies of bonds and oaths of office. The POD temporarily moved to Fuller's Hotel (now site of the Willard) on Pennsylvania Avenue.[17] A new fireproof building was completed in 1842—well after Kendall’s tenure ended.

Kendall became embroiled in a lawsuit with mail contractors Stockton and Stokes that tested the limits of executive power. Kendall refused to honor the politically tainted contract, claiming that he answered only to the President. The Supreme Court unanimously held that executive officers must obey laws passed by Congress—thereby reaffirming the separation of powers.[18]

A major stain on Kendall's record was his defense of slavery. When Alfred Huger, the postmaster of Charleston, South Carolina, refused to deliver pamphlets mailed by abolitionists, Kendall supported him. Kendall admitted that he had no legal authority to exclude such mailings but would not order Huger to deliver them. Kendall wrote, "we owe an obligation to the laws but a higher one to the communities in which we live… I cannot sanction, and will not condemn the steps you have taken."[19]

Kendall denounced the abolitionist pamphlets as "exaggerated… false accounts of the treatment of slaves."[20] President Jackson approved of Kendall's course and regretted that abolitionists would "attempt to stir up amongst the South the horrors of a servile war."[21] Kendall's policy drew fire from anti-slavery and free speech advocates, but it quelled the mobs in Charleston, at least temporarily.

Kendall's personal appearance gave him a reputation as an eccentric. He wore a heavy coat even during Washington's muggy summers and wrapped his skull in a bandage to stave off headaches. His crooked posture, prematurely white hair, and asthmatic cough prompted one observer to write, the "poor wretch; as he rode down Pennsylvania Avenue, he looked like Death on a pale horse."[22]

In May 1840 Kendall resigned as postmaster general to become editor of the *Extra Globe*, a periodical supporting the re-election of Martin Van Buren. Before leaving office, he used his official frank to encourage 13,000 postmasters to subscribe to his new publication.[23] Kendall returned to journalism and later partnered with Samuel F. B. Morse to launch the Magnetic Telegraph Company. Kendall's business acumen helped Morse's invention spread globally, revolutionizing communication and making both men wealthy.[24]

In 1856, he gifted his estate, Kendall Green, to the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind, which later became Gallaudet University.[25] Kendall was married twice and was the father of fifteen children. By the time of his death in 1869, Kendall had helped transform a scandal-ridden postal system into a model of efficiency, wired the nation for instant communication, and founded the world's first college for the deaf—yet his career was also marked by fierce partisanship, a Supreme Court clash over executive power, and a troubling defense of Southern censorship.

Kendall's life embodied the promise and the contradiction of Jacksonian America: a visionary organizer whose reforms and innovations reshaped government and society, even as his compromises revealed the limits of progress in a divided nation. His legacy endures in the networks he built and the debates he provoked over authority, free speech, and equality—questions that remain as urgent today as they were in his day.

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[1] Carl Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, *Travels Through North America, During the Years 1825 and 1826*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1828), p. 171.

[2] Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1945), 68.

[3] Gerald Cullinan, *The Post Office Department* (New York, F. A. Praeger, 1968), 53.

[4] "Speech of Mr. Wise, of Virginia, on the Subject of the Late Defalcations, delivered in the House of Representatives, Dec. 21, 1838," *The North American Review* 52, no. 110 (1841): 119, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25104282.

[5] U.S. Congress, *An Act to Change the Organization for the Post Office Department, and to Provide More Effectually for the Accounts Thereof*, 5 Stat. 80 (1836).

[6] Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 53.

[7] Not to be confused with the modern service also called Express Mail. "The Express Mail," *American Philatelist* 42, no. 11 (Aug. 1921): 721-724.

[8] Cullinan, *The Post Office Department,* 53.

[9] Amos Kendall, *Autobiography of Amos Kendall* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872), 364.

[10] Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 194-195.

[11] "Report of the Postmaster General," in *Message from the President of the United States to the Two Houses of Congress at the Commencement of the First Session of the Twenty-Fourth Congress* (Washington: Blair & Rives,1835), 396, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Message_from_the_President_of_the_United/uLoO6OFHfOMC?hl=en&gbpv=0&bsq=%E2%80%9Cpost-coaches%20or%20mail-wagons%20on%20the%20old%20roads%E2%80%9

[12] "Report of the Postmaster General," 1835, 396.

[13] Cullinan*, The Post Office Department*, 54.

[14] "Report of the Postmaster General," December 4, 1937, 857.

[15] U.S. Congress, *The Congressional Globe*, 24th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, "Report of the Postmaster General. Post Office Department," (Washington: Blair & Rives, 1837), 11, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Congressional_Globe/S5ei-g-sRpwC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22valuable+books+and+papers+are+daily+exposed+to+destruction%22&pg=RA1-PA11&printsec=frontcover

[16] Andrew Jackson, "Special Message," The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-4006

[17] "Post Office Headquarters Sites in Washington, DC," United States Postal Service, https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/post-offices-facilities.htm

[18] "U.S. Reports: Kendall v. The United States, 37 U.S. (12 Pet.) 524 (1838)," Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep037524.

[19] Dorothy Ganfield Fower, *Unmailable: Congress and the Post Office* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 28.

[20] U.S. Congress, *The Congressional Globe*, 24th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, "Report of the Postmaster General. Post Office Department," (Washington: Blair & Rives, 1837), 8–9, https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc30907/m1/18/.

[21] Donald B. Cole, *A Jackson Man: Amos Kendall and the Rise of American Democracy* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2010), 200.

[22] "Amos Kendall: Newspapering, the Post Office and the Telegraph," History on the Fox (blog), October 6, 2011, https://historyonthefox.wordpress.com/2021/10/06/amos-kendall-newspapering-the-post-office-and-the-telegraph/.

[23] Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 55.

[24] Steve Kochersperger, *The Postmaster's Desk* (Gaithersburg, MD: Kochersperger & Co., 2014), 248-253.

[25] "History," Gallaudet University, https://gallaudet.edu/museum/history/.