

# JOHN M. NILES

## Postmaster General

May 19, 1840 – March 4, 1841



**John Niles (1787-1856)**

Postmaster General from 1840 to 1841

John Milton Niles belonged to a generation that feared the fragility of the republic yet believed deeply in its institutions. Born in Poquonnock, Connecticut, in 1787, he was largely self-educated. By 1817 he had secured admission to the Hartford bar, but his ambitions reached beyond the courtroom.

That same year he founded the *Hartford Times*, a newspaper that quickly became a voice for political reform in New England. He furthered his publishing career with the *Gazetteer of Connecticut and Rhode Island*,<sup>1</sup> a two-volume history of Mexico and South America<sup>2</sup>, and a biography of War of 1812 naval hero Oliver Hazard Perry.<sup>3</sup>

Niles's civic engagements extended beyond the press. He served as a Hartford County judge from 1821 to 1829, though his political aspirations met with frustration in unsuccessful bids for the state legislature. In 1829 he was appointed postmaster of Hartford, a position he held for seven years.

At a time when the postal service was the lifeline of commerce and politics, the Hartford post office was a hub of communication for the region. Niles's tenure gave him practical experience in postal operations, contracts, and the daily rhythms of correspondence. He began to see the postal system not merely as a means of carrying letters, but as a democratic institution that connected citizens to their government and to each other.<sup>4</sup>

In 1835 Niles entered the U.S. Senate. When John C. Calhoun tried to ban antislavery materials in the mail, Niles rose in opposition: "The public mail should be free, free as the air we breathe."<sup>5</sup> He believed the postal service's role was "one of unmeasured good, and brings blessings to every man's door. It is one of those institutions we must be careful how we touch."<sup>6</sup> His words revealed a conviction that the mail was not simply a government service but a guarantor of free expression, a safeguard of democracy itself.

Appointed postmaster general by President Martin Van Buren in 1840, Niles brought both a businessman's pragmatism and a journalist's flair to his lone annual report.<sup>7</sup> He condemned certain mail contractors as "the most noisy and abusive partisans in the whole country."<sup>8</sup> He gave qualified support to reducing postage rates to encourage wider use of the mail and increase revenue, "a proposition that was to many a marvelous paradox."<sup>9</sup> Niles endorsed the recommendations of Post Office Special Agent George Plitt.

Most strikingly, he proposed issuing small cards "of an adhesive nature," worth 5 or 10 cents, that could be attached to letters as proof of prepaid postage.<sup>10</sup> While adhesive stamps would not appear until 1847, Niles's idea anticipated their use, placing him among the visionaries of postal reform. He also warned of deficits caused by abuse of the franking privilege, noting that nearly every congressional act

had expanded rather than restrained it “of the twelve Acts of Congress relating to the franking privilege, all but one have served to enlarge the right.”<sup>11</sup>

His tenure was brief. After William Henry Harrison won the 1840 presidential election, Niles resigned so that the new President could nominate a postmaster general of his own choosing.<sup>12</sup> He returned to the Senate in 1843, and although illness limited his participation, he served until 1849. In February 1856 he was appointed Connecticut’s delegate to the original Republican National Committee.

Beyond public office, Niles traveled extensively in Europe during 1851 and 1852 and developed an interest in horticulture. He was twice married but had no surviving children. He died on May 31, 1856, and bequeathed his library to the Connecticut Historical Society. He died in 1856, leaving his library to the Connecticut Historical Society and a \$70,000 trust for Hartford’s poor — a final act of civic generosity.<sup>13</sup> He was buried in Old North Cemetery in Hartford.<sup>14</sup>

From the press to the Senate to the Post Office, Niles carried a consistent conviction: institutions mattered, and they must serve the public good. His defense of free circulation, his anticipation of postage stamps, and his vision of the mail as a democratic trust reveal a man deeply engaged with the challenges of his age. His legacy endures as a reminder that communication, freely shared and widely accessible, is essential to the nation’s experiment in self-government.

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Pease and John M. Niles, *A Gazetteer of the States of Connecticut and Rhode-Island* (Hartford: W.S. Marsh, 1819).

<sup>2</sup> John M. Niles, *History of South America and Mexico: Comprising their Discovery, Geography, Politics, Commerce and Revolutions* (Hartford: H. Huntington, 1838).

<sup>3</sup> John M. Niles, *The Life of Oliver Hazard Perry, with an Appendix, Comprising a Biographical Memoir of the Late Captain James Lawrence; with Brief Sketches of the Most Prominent Events in the Lives of Commodores Bainbridge, Decatur, Porter and Macdonough* (Philadelphia: H.C. Carey & I. Lea, 1821).

<sup>4</sup> “John Milton Niles, Postmaster General (1840–1841),” Miller Center, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/president/vanburen/essays/niles-1840-postmaster-general>.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Ganfield Fowler, *Unmailable: Congress and the Post Office* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 31.

<sup>6</sup> Fowler, *Unmailable*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Y. Meschter, “The Postmasters General of the United States: John Milton Niles, 1840–1841,” *La Posta* (September 2003): 29.

<sup>8</sup> Meschter, “John Milton Niles,” 29.

<sup>9</sup> Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 244.

<sup>10</sup> Meschter, “John Milton Niles,” 3.

<sup>11</sup> Clyde Kelly, *United States Postal Policy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1931), 52.

<sup>12</sup> Meschter, “John Milton Niles,” 31.

<sup>13</sup> “Things Worth Knowing about Windsor, A Historical Sketch of Poquonock and Rainbow,” *Town Crier*, November 1916, <https://windsorhistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Town-Crier-November-1916.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> “John Milton Niles, U.S. Senator and Postmaster General,” Geni.com, <https://www.geni.com/people/John-Milton-Niles-U-S-Senator-and-Postmaster-General/6000000015060479791>.