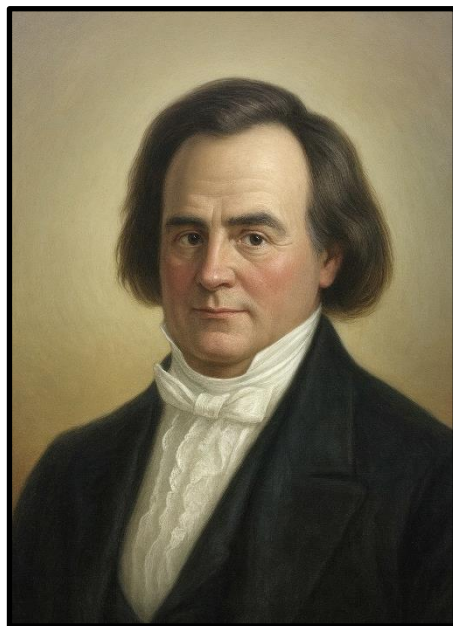


CHARLES WICKLIFFE

Postmaster General

September 13, 1841 – March 4, 1845



Charles Wickliffe (1788 -1869)
Postmaster General from 1841 to 1845

When Kentucky was still defining its political identity, Charles Anderson Wickliffe—who would later serve as the nation’s eleventh postmaster general—emerged as one of its most influential voices. Through decades of public service, he became a key figure in both state and national government, leaving a lasting mark on American political life.

Wickliffe was born in 1788, in a log cabin near Springfield, Kentucky. His family settled in Bardstown, where Wickliffe received his education. He studied law and was admitted to the state bar in 1809, afterwards practicing law in Bardstown. He entered politics when he was elected to the Kentucky House of Representatives in 1812. During the War of 1812, Wickliffe served in the army as an aide-de-camp. He married Margaret Cripps in 1813, and they raised eight children.

After the war, Wickliffe returned to practicing law and served two additional terms in the state house. In 1823, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and represented Kentucky’s Ninth congressional district for ten years. Upon his election to Congress, Wickliffe and his wife built a stately Georgian home they called Wickland. After a failed bid for the Senate in 1831, he returned to the Kentucky state house in 1833. Wickliffe was elected lieutenant governor of Kentucky in 1836; he became governor upon the death of Governor James Clark in 1839. Wickland became known as the "Home of the Three Governors" after his son Robert and grandson John followed his political lead. Robert C. Wickland served as governor of Louisiana in 1856, and grandson John Crepps Wickliffe Beckham became governor of Kentucky in 1900.¹

Wickliffe roomed with John Tyler while they were both serving in Congress; in 1840 he campaigned for the Harrison–Tyler presidential ticket.² When William Henry Harrison suddenly died, Tyler became president and tapped Wickliffe as his postmaster general.

He entered the position during a time of financial hardship for the Post Office Department, inheriting several challenges. One long-standing concern was mail sent by rail. Railroads often carried “letters of convenience” which contributed to a loss of revenue.³ The law required the postal service advertise for contracts, but when only one train ran between points there was no competitive bidding. Railroads also

refused to accommodate postal schedules.⁴ Other financial issues included: the abuse of the franking privilege, which allowed certain officials to send mail for free; express companies carrying letters over postal roads which competed with postal profits; and people intentionally avoiding paying postage. Wickliffe estimated that free letters reached 3 million per year by 1842, at a loss of \$450,000 in postage.⁵

Wickliffe believed in the financial self-sustainability of the postal service, that it should not be reliant on the Treasury. He held that any break with that policy would lead to “a degree of wasteful expenditures and extravagance...wholly inconsistent with our republican institutions.”⁶ He firmly maintained that, “It is to the fact that the Post Office Department has been compelled to rely upon its own energies and resources, that its great and rapid extension and usefulness are attributed.”⁷ To help relieve the financial strain, he cut postmaster commissions — a strategy that undermined his popularity.⁸

Despite its financial deficits, Wickliffe believed that the department had a duty to the public to expand its services. He advocated for the reduction of postage, noting, “If the department is to be left to lean on its own resources, I am prepared to recommend a reduction of letter postage to five and ten cents the single letter,” with the hope of making mail service more accessible.⁹

While postmaster general, he also directed the federal purchase of the United States City Dispatch Post in New York City. The operation had begun earlier that year as a private local delivery service and was notable for being among the first in the nation to use prepaid adhesive stamps. Once made part of the Post Office Department, the service expanded beyond Manhattan, with federally run city-delivery operations established in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston before Wickliffe left office.

Wickliffe’s term was nearly cut short in 1844 when he survived a stabbing aboard the steamer *Georgia*. He was attacked without warning by the mentally ill son of a former Post Office Department auditor.¹⁰ Because the knife struck his breastbone rather than his lungs, he recovered quickly and by August 12, *Niles National Register* reported he was “so far restored, as to be able to resume his public duties.”¹¹

Wickliffe had been less focused on day-to-day operations than he was with seeking legislative solutions to remedy the postal service’s concerns.¹² By the time Wickliffe left office, Congress had enacted much of his reform agenda. The Postal Act of March 3, 1845, reduced postage rates to 5 cents for letters traveling less than 300 miles, and 10 cents over that distance, and limited franking to top federal officials. It prohibited private mail carriers along postal routes—though with penalties too small to be effective. The law also created a standardized railroad-mail classification system with maximum

rates and empowered the Postmaster General to seek alternative transportation when railroads refused reasonable terms.

Wickliffe was called back into national service in 1861, when he served as a delegate to the Peace Convention at Washington's Willard Hotel—a last attempt to settle the growing conflict between North and South without war.¹³ Former President Tyler presided over 131 delegates from fourteen free states and seven slave states, while the Deep South, already committed to secession, refused to attend. The convention's proposed constitutional amendment satisfied neither party, failed in Congress, and made clear that war was unavoidable.

Throughout the Civil War, Wickliffe remained loyal to the Union, even as his home state of Kentucky—birthplace of both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis—struggled with deep internal division. Like other border states, Kentucky had not supported Lincoln in 1860 but also refused to secede, attempting an uneasy neutrality while its governor and legislature disagreed over how firmly to align with the Union.¹⁴ Wickliffe joined a small group of Unionists in a secret meeting with Joshua Fry Speed in April 1861 to help bring “Lincoln guns” into Kentucky and arm Union forces as the state's divided loyalties threatened to pull it toward Confederacy.¹⁵

Wickliffe's own family was split by the war, with sons and nephews fighting for or aiding the Confederacy, including two sons who served and a son-in-law who was imprisoned for helping Jefferson Davis escape.¹⁶ Wickliffe stayed active in politics during the war, serving in Congress from 1861-63 despite a disabling carriage accident.¹⁷ He ran an unsuccessful campaign for governor of Kentucky in 1863 as a “Peace Democrat,” and later traveled to the 1864 Democratic National Convention to support Union General George McClellan's presidential campaign

Wickliffe's long public life is best understood through the Post Office Department he once struggled to steady—a sprawling institution that reflected the nation's own growing pains. He pressed ahead as postmaster general, convinced that a rapidly expanding country needed a postal service capable of holding it together. Even as the Civil War fractured the country and his own family, he carried the instincts of a man who spent years trying to keep a vital institution functioning. When he died in 1869, returning at last to Bardstown, he left behind more than long record of service, but also the quieter legacy of someone who helped keep the nation connected at a moment when so much threatened to pull it apart.

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- ¹ "A Brief History," Wickland: Home of the Three Governors, <https://historicwickland.com/pages.php?id=2>
- ² Helen Bartter Crocker, "Charles Anderson Wickliffe," in *Kentucky's Governors*, ed. Lowell H. Harrison (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 53.
- ³ Daniel Y. Meschter, "The Postmasters General of the United States XI. Charles Wikliffe, 1841-1845," *La Posta* (March 2004), 31. Letters of convenience in the context of 19th-century railroads generally referred to non-official, often personal, mail carried by railroad employees or through Railway Post Offices (RPOs) without proper postage, taking advantage of the system, rather than legally mandated "postage free". While RPOs efficiently moved mail, this practice circumvented postal statutes.
- ⁴ Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 32.
- ⁵ Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 31.
- ⁶ Postmaster General, *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1843), 7-8.
- ⁷ Postmaster General, *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1844), 665.
- ⁸ Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 32.
- ⁹ Postmaster General, *Annual Report*, 667.
- ¹⁰ Jeremiah Hughes, "National Affairs," *Niles National Register* (Baltimore, MD), August 5, 1843.
- ¹¹ Hughes, "National Affairs," *Niles National Register* (Baltimore, MD), August 12, 1843.
- ¹² Meschter, "The Postmasters General," 34.
- ¹³ Jennie C. Morton, "Governor Charles A. Wickliffe, With a Portrait Taken by G.C.D., and Picture of Wickland," *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society* 2, vol. 6 (September 1904), 18.
- ¹⁴ Amy Murrell Taylor, "The Border States," The National Park Service, Revised August 14, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-border-states.htm>.
- ¹⁵ Robert L. Kincaid, "Joshua Fry Speed – 1814-1882 Abraham Lincoln's Most Intimate Friend," *The Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, 17 no. 2 (April 1943): 78.
- ¹⁶ William H. Adams, "Robert Charles Wickliffe," 64 Parishes, Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, <https://64parishes.org/entry/robert-charles-wickliffe>; "The Way of the Traitor is Hard," *The Richmond Daily Dispatch*, July 23, 1862, <https://dispatch.richmond.edu/1862/7/23/1/14>; Todd Hatton and Berry Craig, "Kentucky Civil War Dispatch – A Confederate Regiment," WKMS-FM, October 7, 2011, <https://www.wkms.org/2011-10-07/kentucky-civil-war-dispatch-a-confederate-regiment>; Sue Bjorkman, "Trials and Tribulations: The Many Lives of David Levy Yulee," *Jacksonian Magazine*, January 26, 2017, <https://www.jacksonvillemag.com/2017/01/26/trials-tribulations-many-lives-david-levy-yulee/>.
- ¹⁷ "Timeline of Kentucky Governors 1792-2021, PBS Learning Media, https://static.pbslearningmedia.org/media/media_files/0f6b3e06-11ea-427c-8304-c54f8039e66f/9900ee1c-a999-43fb-a271-bc045346b9d4.pdf.