

First U.S. Post Offices: Research Challenges and Sources of Information

The Post Offices listed in the table [First U.S. Post Offices by State](#) are the first Post Offices that operated under U.S. authority within the present-day boundaries of each of the 50 states.¹ Details on particular Post Offices are available in [Postmaster Finder](#), the Postal Service's online database of Postmasters by Post Office.² Changes in Post Office names, jurisdiction, and sovereignty, combined with limited sources of information, presented significant research challenges, discussed below.

Post Office name changes

While it's not unusual for Post Offices to have undergone name changes, some of their original names were quite different from how they are known today:

- Denver, Colorado, was originally Auraria;
- Portland, Maine, was originally Falmouth;
- Missoula, Montana, was originally Hell Gate;
- Olympia, Washington, was originally Nesqually.

Conversely, just because a modern Post Office and a historic one share the same name, that does not mean that they are one and the same. In Wisconsin for example, the first Post Office was called Green Bay, but is today known as Menominee. Today's Green Bay Post Office was not established until 12 years after the original.

Jurisdiction changes

Post Offices were established in each of the U.S. states before each state was formed. Once a Post Office was established, the boundaries and names of the counties, states, and territories where it was located sometimes changed. For example, Fort Laramie, the first Post Office in Wyoming, was established in 1850 in what was then Clackamas County, Oregon Territory. It underwent multiple changes of jurisdiction before reaching its present situation. The first Post Offices in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan were established in the Northwest Territory. Tennessee's first office was established in the Southwest Territory.

In some cases, the first Post Office was discontinued before the present-day state came into being. Fort Defiance, the first Post Office in present-day Arizona, operated in Bernalillo County, New Mexico Territory, before Arizona Territory was formed.

Sometimes the Post Office itself moved across a boundary — the Miller Court House Post Office is a case in point. It was the first U.S. Post Office established in present-day Oklahoma, and was also the first U.S. Post Office to operate in present-day Texas. The office was established in 1824 on the north bank of the Red River, as part of Arkansas Territory. Shortly thereafter, the land north of the Red River was ceded to the Choctaw Nation, now part of Oklahoma. Around 1832 the Miller Court House Post Office moved south of the river, into present-day Texas.³ After the independent Republic of Texas effectively annexed this area in 1838, the U.S. Post Office at Miller Court House was discontinued.⁴

¹ United States Postal Service, "First U.S. Post Offices by State," <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/first-post-offices.pdf>. *Note:* In at least one state — Texas — the first U.S. Post Office that operated within the present boundaries was not the first that was established within the present boundaries. The Miller Court House Post Office was established in Arkansas Territory in 1824, within present-day Oklahoma, before relocating across the Red River to present-day Texas circa 1832.

² United States Postal Service, Postmaster Finder, <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postmasterfinder/welcome.htm>.

³ "Old Miller County, Arkansas," Russell P. Baker, *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (winter 1983), 348.

⁴ *Weekly Arkansas Gazette*, December 5, 1838, page 2: "Texas has usurped full jurisdiction over the whole territory in Miller county."

Changes in sovereignty

At least 150 of the first U.S. Post Offices originally operated within or under the authority of another nation. The first U.S. Post Offices that operated in Vermont were established by the independent Republic of Vermont.⁵ Eighty Hawaiian Post Offices became U.S. Post Offices on June 14, 1900, when Hawaii became a U.S. territory.⁶

Before American independence, Post Offices operated under British rule in each of the 13 American colonies. For the original 13 states, July 26, 1775, is considered the establishment date of the first U.S. Post Offices. On that date, Benjamin Franklin was appointed the first American Postmaster General by the Continental Congress.⁷

Sources of information

Prior to Benjamin Franklin's appointment as Postmaster General of the United Colonies in 1775, William Goddard organized an American postal system independent of the British.⁸ In some cities, Goddard's Post Offices openly (and illegally) competed with the Crown's. By May 1775, Goddard had formed a network of dozens of Post Offices and Postmasters who were part of his "Constitutional Post." In many cases the same Postmasters were later reappointed by Franklin and served under the new American postal system.⁹

In October 1775, Franklin published a table of postage rates listing Post Offices in the northern district of North America. It was nearly identical to a table he printed in 1765 while he was Postmaster General under the British. Franklin listed 64 Post Offices on the 1775 table, but no more than 55 seem to have operated at that time. Another shortcoming of the 1775 table is that it listed none of the offices south of Virginia.

A more extensive list of Post Offices can be found in a financial ledger started by Franklin in 1775 and continued by his successors through 1778. Franklin's ledger of Post Office accounts is an important document for understanding the early American postal system. Its main advantage over the 1775 rate table is that it includes Post Offices in all 13 states, not just the north. Also, because it is a financial ledger, it documents which offices actually transacted business. As valuable as this ledger is, it too has a number of shortcomings:

- The ledger does not contain financial entries for individual Post Offices prior to 1776;
- The ledger does not always identify the Postmasters;
- It does not always identify where the Post Office was situated. Was it the Easton in Maryland, or the one in Pennsylvania?

Another limitation of Franklin's ledger is due, perhaps, to it being a wartime document. Because the nation was at war, cities were being occupied or burned; Post Offices were disrupted and Postmasters fled. There is no entry for Boston in Franklin's ledger; Boston was under siege when the ledger began. There is, however, an entry for New York, despite the fact that the Postmaster had fled Manhattan when the British invaded.¹⁰

After Franklin's ledger, the next postal ledger dates from 1782, leaving a four-year gap in postal records. There are few additional sources of information on Post Offices prior to 1789. Newspaper archives, letters of the Founding

⁵ Vermont was admitted as the 14th state on March 4, 1791.

⁶ The Kingdom of Hawaii was succeeded by the Republic of Hawaii in 1894, prior to annexation by the United States.

⁷ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2:208.

⁸ Goddard was a printer from Baltimore and the former Postmaster of Providence, Rhode Island. See Ward L. Miner, *William Goddard, Newspaperman* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1962), at [https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b663400](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b663400).

⁹ Elisha Whittlesey, "Post Office Facilities," *The American Pioneer* vol. 2, no. 1, (1843), 256-261.

¹⁰ Rev. Ashbel G. Vermilye, "The Early New York Post-Office. Ebenezer Hazard, Postmaster and Postmaster-General," *Magazine of American History*, Vol. XIII No. 2, February 1885, 122.

Fathers, the papers of the Continental Congress, and a journal kept by postal surveyor Ebenezer Hazard during 1777 and 1778 are rare exceptions.

Records of Postmaster appointments prior to 1814 were destroyed by a fire at Post Office Department headquarters in 1836. Records of financial returns submitted by Postmasters prior to 1814 have been used to reconstruct Post Office timelines, but these records are incomplete. Even when Postmaster records are complete, they aren't always conclusive. In some cases, it's unclear if appointees actually served. For example, two of the first Post Offices established in present-day Colorado apparently never operated.

A list of the main sources used while researching the first U.S. Post Offices in each state appears below. Much remains to be discovered.

Sources of Information on Early Post Offices	
1710	Act of Queen Anne (9 Anne, c. 11) "An Act for Establishing a General Post-Office for all Her Majesties Dominions" lists Post Offices in North America. See at https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000033905853?urlappend=%3Bseq=439 .
1720s–	Historical newspapers, various Articles and notices in early newspapers sometimes provide information on Postmasters, Post Offices, mail routes, and schedules. Several historical newspaper databases are available online; the main ones used to research the first Post Offices were https://www.newspapers.com and https://www.genealogybank.com .
1729	Map of "New England, New York, New Jersey and Pensilvania" "An Account of Ye Posts of Ye Continent of Nth. America," by cartographer Herman Moll, includes an inset that lists 14 Post Offices as well as the mail schedule. See at https://digitalcommons.salemstate.edu/maps_newengland/4 .
1735-1780s	The Papers of Benjamin Franklin Franklin's writings and correspondence include letters dealing with postal business. See at http://franklinpapers.org .
1753	Post Office Instructions and Directions, 1753 Instructions sent to Postmasters by Postmasters General Benjamin Franklin and William Hunter contain a list of Post Offices. A transcription is available online at https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-05-02-0048 .
1754	Broadside "Boston Post Office 1754" Beginning "Rates for the Port of single Letters," this handwritten document lists postage rates from Boston to 15 other Post Offices. A copy of the original, attributed to Benjamin Franklin, can be viewed online at http://njpostalhistory.org/media/pdf/ratechartdoc.pdf .
1763	1763 Tables of Rates of Postage The "Tables of the Port of all Single Letters, carried by Post in North-America," by Benjamin Franklin and John Foxcroft, list 48 Post Offices. See description at https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-10-02-0223 .
1764–1767	Outgoing Philadelphia Mail, 1764-1767 Benjamin Franklin's record of letters sent from Philadelphia lists the Post Offices to which they were destined. See transcription at https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-11-02-0110 .
1765	1765 Tables of Rates of Postage The "Tables of the Port of all Single Letters carried by Post in the Northern District of North America" list Post Offices. See at https://arago.si.edu/record_77743_img_1.html .
1773–1774	Journal Kept by Hugh Finlay , surveyor of post roads on the continent of North America, during his survey of the post offices between Falmouth and Casco Bay, in the province of Massachusetts and Savannah in Georgia, begun 13 Sept. 1773 and ended 26 June 1774. (Brooklyn, NY: Frank H. Norton, 1867) Digitized version is available at https://hdl.handle.net/2027/aeu.ark:/13960/t3hx1xq2h .
1775	List of Goddard's Post Offices A May 8, 1775, list of William Goddard's Constitutional Post Offices identifies 30 Post Offices, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Norfolk, Virginia — more offices were added to Goddard's network in the weeks that followed. The May 8 list is reprinted in <i>American Archives</i> , series 4, volume 2, 537–538; online at https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112089752023?urlappend=%3Bseq=347 .

1775	<p>1775 Tables of Rates of Postage “Tables of the Port of All Single Letters Carried by Post in the Northern District of North America as Established by Congress” The postage rate tables published by Benjamin Franklin in 1775 list Post Offices from Virginia northward. See page 5.</p>
1775-1778	<p>The Ledger of Doctor Benjamin Franklin, Postmaster General, 1776 Franklin’s ledger contains the quarterly accounts of the General Post Office from 1775 to 1778, including sums paid to and received from Post Offices, with Postmaster names sometimes noted. A copy of the ledger can be viewed at https://archive.org/details/cu31924075136444/page/n1.</p>
1777–1778	<p>The Journals of Ebenezer Hazard, Surveyor of Post Offices and Post Roads, 1777-1778 Hazard’s journals, in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, contain references to Postmasters and Post Offices. Extracts appear in the following articles:</p> <p>Johnston, Hugh Buckner. “The Journal of Ebenezer Hazard in North Carolina, 1777 and 1778,” <i>The North Carolina Historical Review</i>, July 1959, 358–381. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23517485.</p> <p>Merrens, H. Roy. “A View of Coastal South Carolina in 1778: The Journal of Ebenezer Hazard,” <i>The South Carolina Historical Magazine</i>, October 1972, 177-193. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27567144.</p> <p>Shelley, Fred. “Ebenezer Hazard in Pennsylvania, 1777,” <i>Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography</i>, January 1957, 83–86. Available online from https://journals.psu.edu/pmhb/article/view/41240/40961.</p> <p>Shelley, Fred. “Ebenezer Hazard’s Travels through Maryland in 1777,” <i>Maryland Historical Magazine</i>, March 1953, 44–54. Online at https://archive.org/stream/marylandhistoric4619mary/marylandhistoric4619mary_djvu.txt.</p> <p>Shelley, Fred. “The Journal of Ebenezer Hazard in Georgia, 1778,” <i>The Georgia Historical Quarterly</i>, September, 1957, 316-319. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40577794.</p> <p>Shelley, Fred. “The Journal of Ebenezer Hazard in Virginia, 1777,” <i>Virginia Magazine and History and Biography</i>, October 1954, 400–423 (excerpt at https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/The_Journal_of_Ebenezer_Hazard_in_Virginia_1777).</p>
1782–1790	<p>Ledgers of the General Post Office, 1782–1790, “Ledger A” Ledger A, the first in a series of financial ledgers, contains quarterly accounts of Postmasters, by Post Office, from May 1, 1782, to March 10, 1790. It is located at the National Archives. See series description at https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2788646.</p>
1788	<p>List of Postmasters by Post Office in July 1788 A list of 69 Postmasters and Post Offices is included in a report to the Continental Congress dated July 7, 1788, on the status of the Post Office Department. The report is part of <i>The Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789</i>, NARA M247 (roll 75, item 61, 587–588). It’s available online at https://www.fold3.com/image/177192.</p>
1789–1836	<p>Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789–1836 The earliest letters of the Postmaster General sometimes mention Post Offices and postmasters; online at https://www.uspcs.org/resource-center/government-documents/postmaster-general-letter-books-1789-1836/.</p>
1793-1800	<p>Letters sent by the First Assistant Postmaster General, 1793-1800 Letters sent by the First Assistant Postmaster General sometimes mention specific Post Offices and Postmasters. Copies of these letters are online at https://www.uspcs.org/resource-center/government-documents/1st-asst-postmaster-general-letter-books-1793-1800.</p>
1789–1818	<p>Record of First Returns Received from Postmasters, 1789–1818 This record of Postmasters by Post Office is especially useful since records of Postmaster appointments before 1814 were destroyed by a fire at Headquarters in 1836. The record is online at https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75493318.</p>
1814–1832	<p>Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1814-1832 This record shows the names of Post Offices, the dates of their establishment and discontinuance, any name changes, and the names and appointment dates of Postmasters. It’s available online as follows: 1814-1818 https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75493677; 1818-1824 https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75493864; 1824-1828 https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75494072; 1827-1828 https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75494343; 1828-1832: A to L https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75494575; and 1828-1832: M to Z https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75494785.</p>
1832-1971	<p>Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832-1971 This record is similar to the entry described above; it’s been reproduced as NARA M841 and is available online by subscription at https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/usappointpost.</p>

