

JOHN WANAMAKER
Postmaster General
March 5, 1889, to March 1893

John Wanamaker was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1838. He began his successful business career at the age of 14 as an errand boy for a bookstore. In 1861 he and his brother-in-law Nathan Brown founded the clothing firm of Brown and Wanamaker. After Brown's death in 1869, Wanamaker founded John Wanamaker and Company; by 1872 his company was one of the largest clothing retailers in the nation.

Wanamaker created his famous department store in 1876. His original intention was to join other merchants in filling space in the old freight station next to the Pennsylvania Railroad. He planned to call this new retail area the "Grand Depot" and open it with a big celebration to commemorate the nation's centennial anniversary. Other merchants shied away from joining him and, out of financial necessity, Wanamaker created a department store when he began filling this retail space with his "specialty departments."

Wanamaker's success was based on his willingness to guarantee the quality of his goods. Early in his career, he and Brown had refused to dilute the value of their men's woolen clothes by adding a cotton blend when most other merchants were doing this to compensate for wool shortages during the Civil War. In the 1870s he became one of the earliest to adopt a return policy. He also firmly enforced a one-price system. These policies eliminated arbitrary bargaining at his store and developed good customer relations. ¹

An innovator, Wanamaker introduced new and progressive ideas into the retail business. He enthusiastically supported advertising; provided unheard-of fringe benefits to his employees, including payment for further education, vacation time, life insurance, and a pension plan; and eagerly embraced new technology. ² His store was one of the first to introduce telephone orders.

An admirer of President Abraham Lincoln, Wanamaker increasingly became involved in Republican politics in the decades following the Civil War. In the presidential election of 1888, Republican candidate General Benjamin Harrison surprisingly won in the electoral college after losing the popular vote. Harrison selected his Cabinet members from the ranks of the new and powerful business class. ³ His first instinct was to appoint Wanamaker as Secretary of the Navy. He reassessed this decision when Wanamaker responded, "I can't do it . . . if I take anything I will take the hardest place you have got" so Harrison appointed him the nation's 38th Postmaster General effective March 5, 1889. ⁴

A Time of the Telephone, Telegraph, and Trusts

One of the Harrison administration's primary concerns was the economic power of corporate monopolies. Rapid industrialization in the 1870s and 1880s created a new breed of robber barons who had amassed enormous fortunes by consolidating control over the oil, coal, steel, and railroad industries. To restrict the growth of monopolies, Harrison signed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 into law during his first year in office.

In tune with the president, Wanamaker expressed concern over communications monopolies in the 1890 *Report of the Postmaster General*. He advocated placing both the telegraph and telephone industries under the control of the federal government and argued that the Post Office Department was better equipped to supply these services "at less cost than any corporation." ⁵ He pointed out that the telegraph



John Wanamaker (1838-1922)

"... a man above middle height, rather lightly built. His face is fresh colored, smooth shaven and young looking. His eyes are dark grey, very bright and observant; forehead large, lower face slender in proportion, a good sized, business-like nose. There is a certain quiet energy and enthusiasm in the expression of his countenance ... his conversation is thoughtful, terse and low voiced."

Marshall Cushing,
The Story of Our Post Office
(Boston, MA: A.M. Thayer, 1893), 885.

had received crucial financial support from the Post Office Department during its initial development phase. Former Postmaster General Amos Kendall, a business partner of telegraph inventor Samuel Morse, had convinced the Department in 1843 to underwrite an experimental telegraph line from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore. Three years later, the Department decided private companies should provide this service under contract.⁶

By the 1890s, financier Jay Gould's Western Union and the Postal Telegraph company exerted a virtual monopoly, charging both the Post Office Department and the American public exorbitant rates. Wanamaker feared that the telephone industry, still new and in an early development stage, would suffer the same fate.⁷ Few shared Wanamaker's foresight or understood the significance of either the telegraph or the telephone. Wanamaker's critics rationalized "the telephone is a thing of the future" and "only one person in sixty had the need to use the telegraph."⁸

New Ideas

Fortunately, several of Wanamaker's other innovative concepts — rural free delivery (RFD), commemorative stamps, Streetcar Post Offices, and pneumatic tubes — were successfully implemented. Their impact was felt decades after he left office as Postmaster General.

Wanamaker's business instincts told him that rural free delivery, a service providing free mail delivery in the countryside, would pay for itself. When he first considered this proposal, free delivery service was available only in large cities. In rural areas, people picked up their mail at the nearest Post Office. For some this meant going without mail for weeks, depending on the weather and how often they traveled into town.

Wanamaker consulted with groups such as the National Grange Patrons of Husbandry, National Farmers Congress, and State Farmers Alliance, who agreed that rural Americans would benefit greatly from home delivery.⁹

Congressional authority for RFD was not granted until the month Wanamaker left office.¹⁰ It took another three years before experimental routes were put into action in West Virginia. The program proved enormously popular.

Beginning in 1891, Wanamaker campaigned for Parcel Post. As a merchandiser, he was aware of the enormous success that companies were having by advertising products through the mail. Once farmers ordered goods, they were delivered to the nearest railroad depot. If the railroad depot was located near a town large enough to support a private express company, the farmer could pay an additional cost to have this company deliver the goods directly to his door. If not, he had to make arrangements to pick up the products himself. Wanamaker believed that the Post Office Department should provide this service at a competitive rate but was opposed vigorously by express companies as well as small town shop owners who feared that Parcel Post would lead to reduced business. Wanamaker and successive Postmasters General were unable to overcome this opposition for the next two decades. However, in 1912, the declaration of a large dividend by one of the express companies so outraged the public that Congress granted the Post Office Department the authority to launch Parcel Post in 1913.¹¹



One-horse RFD wagons were manufactured and sold by private distributors for approximately \$45. They came complete with sliding doors, windows that could be opened and closed, pigeonhole letter cases, a "desk" surface, and a cash-and-stamp drawer with lock and key.



Issued in 1893 at Chicago's Columbian Exhibit, these \$1 and \$2 stamps are part of the first commemorative stamp series.

Another one of Wanamaker's progressive ideas was the issuance of commemorative stamps. He predicted that instead of being "unnecessary" as Congress believed, they would generate revenue. He made the first series available at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, between May 1 and October 30, 1893. To demonstrate his confidence in this new product, he purchased \$10,000 worth of stamps with his own money.

Each of the 15 stamps in the first series had a face value ranging from one cent to five dollars and bore the dates 1492 and 1892.¹² The stamp designs replicated works by various artists who visualized Columbus differently. For example, the one-cent Columbian stamp showed Columbus clean-shaven, spying land from aboard his ship. The two-cent stamp was taken from the *Landing of Columbus* painting in the Rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. It showed him landing, presumably a few hours after the scene in the first stamp, with a full beard. Critics denounced the designs, but customers and collectors loved them. Hundreds of people stood in line to purchase the stamps, and their popularity was credited for making the Chicago Exhibit a success. Wanamaker's belief that the stamps would be revenue-generating was proven right when more than two billion stamps were sold at a value of \$40 million.

Wanamaker started two other projects that used new technology to move mail more quickly through congested city streets. The first was the introduction of a Streetcar Post Office in St. Louis in 1891. Within a few years, Streetcar Post Offices were in other metropolitan cities throughout the country.

The second project was the development of pneumatic tube systems in large cities, beginning with Philadelphia in 1893. Lines were added in New York and Boston in 1897, in St. Louis in 1902, and in Chicago in 1903. Each individual tube could be stuffed with 600 letters and then dispatched every six to 15 seconds. The tubes could move approximately 360,000 letters per hour, traveling through mostly underground tunnels. In addition to improving distribution between stations, pneumatic tube lines made it possible for out of town letters to be sent from the main Post Office to the railway terminal up until the last few minutes before a train departed.



Streetcar Post Office
Baltimore, Maryland, circa 1903

Following President Grover Cleveland's inauguration in 1897, John Wanamaker returned to his department store in Philadelphia and worked with his sons to expand the business. Wanamaker remained active in politics and Philadelphia charities such as the YMCA until his death in 1922.

To learn more about John Wanamaker:

Appel, Joseph Herbert. *The Business Biography of John Wanamaker, Founder and Builder, America's Merchant Pioneer From 1861 to 1922*. New York, NY: AMS Press, 1970.

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Zulker, William Allen. *John Wanamaker: King of Merchants*. Wayne, PA: Eaglecrest Press, 1993.

Endnotes:

¹ Henry Adams Gibbons, *John Wanamaker*, Vol. 1 (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1926), 81-95.

² Gibbons, 96-110.

³ Gibbons, 262-267.

⁴ Philadelphia Citizens, *John Wanamaker: The Record of a Citizens' Celebration to Mark His Sixty Years Career as Merchant (April 1861-April 1921)* (Philadelphia, PA: Printed for the Committee, 1921), 37.

⁵ Gibbons, 289.

⁶ Entry 12, Records of the Office of Electro-Magnetic Telegraph, 1837-1846, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁷ Gibbons, 289-291.

⁸ *Ibid*, 290.

⁹ Daisy Ridgway, "Sharing the Story of 100 Years of Rural Free Delivery in America," Research Report No. 80 (Washington, DC: National Postal Museum, Summer 1997).

¹⁰ Authority was granted on March 3, 1893. U.S. Statutes at Large 27 (1893), 732.

¹¹ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), 182-183 citing Wayne Fuller, *RFD, the Changing Face of Rural America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), 204 and Henry Adams Gibbons, *John Wanamaker*, Vol. 1, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1926), 303-305.

¹² Wanamaker added a sixteenth stamp when the fee for registering letters was reduced from 10 cents to eight cents.