

PENNSYLVANIA POSTAL HISTORY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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BY 1790 there were twenty-one counties in Pennsylvania with a population of 434,373. About one-half of this number resided in the counties of Berks, Bucks, Chester, Lancaster, Philadelphia, and York, which was a region composed of prosperous farms, varied trade, and most of the industry of the eighteenth century. West of the mountains were Allegheny, Fayette, Washington, and Westmoreland Counties, with a population of 63,566. In this area agriculture, commerce, and industry were still in the pioneer stages of development, being seriously impeded by lack of transportation and market. As a matter of fact, bartering was used almost exclusively, as there was not enough money or credit available to meet day-to-day living costs. North of Harrisburg there were few settlements in the Susquehanna Valley. Other settlements in the Wyoming Valley and north to New York had been founded before the Revolutionary War. In central Pennsylvania, in the Juniata region, settlers were clearing the wilderness.

Also, by 1790, communications were well developed in the southeastern counties. References to these routes of communication and to others in scattered parts of Pennsylvania may be found among the records of the Post Office Department in the National Archives. These records are voluminous and provide a graphic description of postal operations of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. It is, therefore, necessary to limit the scope of this article, and this I have done by confining material to the period 1789-1799. Records examined were manuscript lists, correspondence of the Postmasters General and their assistants, and general ledgers of

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the General Post Office. These provide information about Pennsylvania post offices, postmasters, mail contractors, mail routes, and the transportation of newspapers. Archival material is supplemented by data obtained from reliable secondary sources, including histories written by regional historians.

POST OFFICES

Between 1789 and 1799 there were nearly one hundred known towns and villages in Pennsylvania. Almost all of them had their beginnings during the colonial period. Most of the villages began as trading centers, while others grew out of the establishment of military posts on the frontier. Fifty-nine of these one hundred communities had official postal facilities at one time or another during the last decade of the eighteenth century. The date of founding of the communities, however, does not bear any correlation to the date of the establishment of their official post offices. For instance, there was a lag of twenty-seven years at Uniontown, twenty-six years at Pittsburgh, twenty-two years at Bedford, eleven years at Columbia, and eight years at Brownsville.

The postal records in the National Archives show the existence in the period 1789-1799 (and in many instances the approximate beginnings) of the following Pennsylvania post offices:¹

Aaronsburg	April 1, 1792
Abbottstown	October 1, 1794
Alexandria	September 1, 1797
Bath	April 2, 1793
Bedford	February 14, 1789
Bellefonte	September 1, 1797
Bethlehem	September 3, 1792
Bristol	February 23, 1784
Brownsville	January 1, 1795
Cannonsburg	June 1, 1797
Carlisle	October 5, 1789
Centre Furnace	April 4, 1798
Chambersburg	October 5, 1789
Chester	October 5, 1789
Columbia	April 1, 1799
Connellsville	November 16, 1797

¹ The dates shown are the earliest for Pennsylvania post offices appearing in the official postal records for the period 1789-1799.

Craigfort	April 1, 1799
Downingtown	September 10, 1796
Easton	June 12, 1792
Ephrata	----- 1797
Fairfield	April 1, 1796
(Name changed from Millerstown about September 1, 1797)	
Gettysburg	July 1, 1795
Greencastle	July 1, 1797
Greensburg	October 5, 1790
Hamburg	March 29, 1798
Hanover	August 4, 1794
Harrisburg	June 12, 1792
Huntingdon	January 1, 1795
Lancaster	October 5, 1789
Lebanon	January 12, 1792
Lewisburg	October 27, 1795
Lewistown	September 1, 1797
Mifflinburg	September 1, 1797
Mifflintown	September 1, 1797
Milesburg	April 1, 1799
Millerstown	January 1, 1798
Milton	July 29, 1799
Morrisville	January 1, 1795
Muncey	August 14, 1799
New Geneva	August 29, 1799
Norristown	January 29, 1799
Northumberland	April 2, 1793
Petersburg	August 4, 1794
Philadelphia	October 5, 1789
Pittsburgh	October 5, 1789
Plumstead	July 1, 1796
Pottsgrove	January 1, 1793
Presque Isle (or Erie)	April 1, 1799
Reading	June 12, 1792
Shippensburg	October 5, 1789
Somerset	May 9, 1797
Strasburg	February 2, 1793
Sunbury	April 17, 1795
Uniontown	November 9, 1794
Washington	April 1, 1795
Wilkes-Barre	November 29, 1793
Williamsburg	April 2, 1793
York	October 5, 1789

There are no specific statements among the official postal records showing the authorization dates of Pennsylvania post offices

with the exception of New Geneva, established on August 29, 1799,² and of Norristown, established on January 29, 1799.³ As for Norristown, it was known to be a postal stop as early as 1790. In that year William Coleman, a mail contractor and owner of a stage line on the King's Highway, delivered mail to the village of Norristown.

The forty-one Pennsylvania communities of the 1790's not having official postal facilities maintained private communication systems. Sometimes some of the private postal centers were taverns located strategically in populated townships where mail could easily be brought or collected. More often, communities not served by federal post offices were adjacent to towns or villages that did have such post offices.

Post offices were opened in certain communities as a result of petitions and/or recommendations from prominent persons within those settlements. It is generally known that post offices were named after the earliest settlers (John Harris—Harrisburg), the first postmaster or his family, a European town or city, a geographic location, or a manufactory enterprise (Centre Furnace). Unfortunately, official correspondence and petitions relating to the naming of post offices have and still are being disposed of systematically by the Post Office Department with the concurrence of the Congress.

With the exception of the Philadelphia post office there is no evidence of physical locations of local operations within a community in the postal records in the National Archives. To find these interesting and much desired data, it is necessary to examine private correspondence, contemporary newspapers, and local histories.

The stage coach taverns were both the official and unofficial post offices of the eighteenth century. Unlike a small office where the profits were trifling, post offices at taverns prompted the interest of tavern-keepers. However, the Postmaster General considered post-office business conducted in taverns susceptible to abuse. Mails were opened in tavern barrooms instead of offices or private rooms set aside for postal business, and newspapers

² Letterbook "I" of the Postmaster General, p. 224.

³ Letterbook "H" of the Postmaster General, p. 252.

were frequently carried away by travelers or others to whom they were not addressed.

The location of post offices in the homes of postmasters or in rented space was also disadvantageous. Some offices were so distant from stage houses that double delays arose—first, at the office in changing mails, and secondly, at the mail contractor's tavern in changing horses, wagons, or stages. The Postmaster General occasionally insisted that the post office be near the tavern and the adjoining market, thereby decreasing not only the cost of postal operations, but unnecessary delays.

The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania, by Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck, indicates that John Scull's post office in Pittsburgh was at his printing shop on Water Street near Ferry. His successor, George Adams, removed it to a log house on Front Street near Ferry.

The ten different locations of the Philadelphia post office are mentioned in three sources: the outgoing letters of the Postmaster General, the *Annals of Philadelphia* by John F. Watson (III, 476), and the *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* by J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott (III, 1810). They were:

1785: Front Street near Chestnut Street.

1790: No. 7 South Front Street, below Market Street.

1791: No. 36 South Front Street, fifth house north of Chestnut Street.

1793: During the fall of that year, when yellow fever was "very much extended" throughout Philadelphia, Robert Patton, the postmaster, removed himself to Bristol. Upon reviewing the applications of merchants and others remaining in Philadelphia, the Postmaster General forbade the removal of the post office to Bristol. Mr. Davidson, a special agent of the General Post Office, who had temporarily taken over the Philadelphia postal operations, moved the office to the old college on Fourth Street, where there was more room for shelter for applicants in bad weather "and better air."

1794: No. 34 South Front Street.

1797: North side of Market Street, first house west of 11th Street. During the same year it was moved to 12th Street.

1798: Again Philadelphia was plagued with yellow fever. The

Postmaster General did not want the post office moved to Germantown or Frankfort, but only one-half mile from Broad Street and in any direction towards the upper-lower, or middle ferry, so as to accommodate the remaining unfortunate citizens and the government.

1799: No. 27 South Third Street, below Elbow Lane, east side. During the same year it was moved to the upper end of Market Street.

A description of the furnishings of an eighteenth-century post office may be obtained from a list of contingent expenses of the General Post Office. These included writing desks, stools, bookcases, cases with pigeonholes, chests, trunks, scale beams, brass weights, pens, ink, maps, twine, "U" candles, snuffers, keys for opening portmanteaus, maps, cords of wood, a yard of zinc under the wood stove, and the usual folios and ledgers.

DEPUTY POSTMASTERS

One hundred and nineteen men served as deputy postmasters in Pennsylvania between 1789 and 1799. The Postmaster General characterized the qualified postmasters as being "accurate and punctual in the business and of perfect Integrity, who would give entire satisfaction to the people of [any community]. . . ."⁴ Since it was difficult to find persons throughout the country (and Pennsylvania was no exception) capable of operating post offices, the Postmaster General relied heavily upon recommendations of printers, traders, merchants, stage owners, and former army officers who were acquainted with men who were "well behaved" and could give "good security to discharge faithfully the trust reposed in them." This practice of accepting recommendations prevailed for all United States post offices during the eighteenth century.⁵

Postmasters at Bedford, Bristol, Carlisle, Chambersburg, Chester, Lancaster, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Shippensburg, and York, who had been reappointed after the formation of the government of the Constitution, during October of 1789, helped in two im-

⁴ Letterbook "C" of the Postmaster General, p. 45.

⁵ One exception to this system occurred in Pennsylvania during 1797, when the Assistant Postmaster General was surprised to discover that William McClure, a mail contractor, acted as postmaster at Washington for a few months after Gabriel Blackney had resigned.

portant ways: First, they recommended their successors, and secondly, they recommended men for newly established post offices.⁶

The procedure was generally as follows: a prospective candidate for postmaster was sent a letter of appointment by the Postmaster General or his assistant; a bond and oath were also enclosed. The former was executed with "sufficient sureties" (two) and dated, and the oath was subscribed to and taken. After these required forms were returned to the General Post Office, the postmaster was sent his commission, which was to last for the tenure of the Postmaster General then in office, but could be re-issued by the Postmaster General. (There were three Postmasters General⁷ during this decade.)

As in other parts of the country, Pennsylvania postmasters were oftentimes involved with other activities. John Scull of Pittsburgh and his partner, John Hall, printed the *Pittsburg Gazette* and in 1796 arranged for private mail service to Erie. William Hamilton of Lancaster was also a printer, as was the other candidate for the position of postmaster of Lancaster. Although the Postmaster General opposed the appointment of printers as postmasters (for obvious reasons), he was unable to locate other qualified persons in those communities to undertake the low-paying jobs. This situation changed in 1797.

Captain William Rippey of Shippensburg and Hunt Downing of Downington (of the "Sign of General Washington") were also landlords of taverns. John Anderson⁸ of Bedford and George Moore of Lancaster were medical practitioners. The former lived six miles from his office and delayed the departure of the post rider so frequently that he was requested to have a member of his family transact the postal business in Bedford when he could not conveniently do so. Matthias Slough of Lancaster and Joseph Clunn of Bristol served briefly as mail contractors on the route of Lancaster-Philadelphia and Bristol-Burlington (New Jersey), respectively.⁹ When Thomas Hamilton of Greensburg was appointed prothonotary (notary) of his country, the Postmaster General

⁶ Letterbook "D" of the Postmaster General, p. 333.

⁷ Samuel Osgood, Timothy Pickering, and Joseph Habersham were appointed Postmasters General on September 26, 1789, August 12, 1791, and February 25, 1795, respectively.

⁸ Letterbook "B" of the Postmaster General, p. 246.

⁹ Letterbook "F" of the Postmaster General, p. 514.

requested him to resign, feeling it incompatible with the Pennsylvania constitution for Hamilton to hold both local and national offices.¹⁰ Because Robert Dunn of York was so frequently involved with his avocations or other causes and there were many complaints to the Postmaster General about Dunn's lack of "care & punctuality" as postmaster during 1793, he was told "to deliver all letters and papers and property belonging to the office" to Jacob Spangler when he applied for them.¹¹

Shortly after a postmaster took over his duties, he was sent a table of United States post offices (showing also their distances from the seat of the government), a copy of the most recent postal laws and regulations (1792, 1794, or 1797), a copy of the map of the United States,¹² a saddle bag or portmanteau (the latter was lined with an oil cloth and within that a common lining), a key for opening the locks of portmanteaus, seven varieties of forms, a table of rates of postage, and ledgers.

John Scull of Pittsburgh charged the General Post Office \$20 a year for stationery supplied from his printing office which was used in his post office. This expense was considered excessive; therefore, the Postmaster General allowed him only a small portion of that amount from postal funds. Ordinarily, all stationery was supplied by the General Post Office. Thomas Hamilton of Greensburg insisted upon having the seal of the General Post Office. This, the Postmaster General informed him, was not necessary for a local office; but he was permitted to make such a purchase and charge it to postal funds.

Except for the period 1792-1794, postmasters were granted the franking privilege on their mail. However, postal laws were not very clear regarding newspapers and whether these were to be included as free of postage. The Postmaster General admitted that his deputies "very generally received them so, and their right has never been questioned."¹³ Postmasters were also exempted from militia duties or any fine or penalty for neglect thereof. From

¹⁰ Letterbook "B" of the Postmaster General, p. 483.

¹¹ Letterbook "D" of the Postmaster General, pp. 62-63.

¹² Although the General Post Office had not printed any post route maps during the eighteenth century, it may have sent to deputy postmasters copies of the maps of the United States prepared either by Samuel Lewis or Abraham Bradley. Library of Congress, Division of Maps and Charts.

¹³ Letterbook "H" of the Postmaster General, pp. 82-83.

time to time the Pennsylvania postmasters gave advice about changes in postal operations, and the Postmaster General relied upon them to arrange for mail route contracts.

The hours for operating a post office were indefinite. They are mentioned in a letter of the Postmaster General of March 2, 1796, to James McCrea, a postmaster:

I have in no instance undertaken to say what shall be the particular hours, for performing the duties of a Post Office. Indeed it becomes a difficult matter to determine on the precise time, which will be sufficiently accommodating to the Citizens, as well as the Post Masters, at the respective Office. On the one hand it ought to be fully sufficient for receiving and forwarding letters within the proper time; but on the other it cannot reasonably be expected that a Post Master should devote the whole of his time to the business of an office, when a portion of it, by having fixed hours, will answer every purpose.¹⁴

The handling of a mail in a post office was more or less a routine procedure. Upon its arrival at the office, the postmaster or his assistant unlocked the portmanteau and removed only those bundled letters and packets addressed to his office. (There were two exceptions to this procedure: (1) On April 22, 1793, Robert Patton of Philadelphia was ordered to examine all incoming mail which might have been erroneously inserted in the wrong bundles. This precautionary measure continued until the Postmaster General returned from his mission of arranging for an Indian treaty. (2) On March 31, 1797, George Adams of Pittsburgh was instructed to open the mail destined for the West, to extract letters addressed to Senator Brown, and to hold them for him until he picked them up and continued on to Kentucky.) The mail was accompanied by a post bill showing the number of letters enclosed and the postage on each. Another bill known as the "way bill" of the through mails showed the arrival time of the mail, and was endorsed at each post office. These way bills enabled the General Post Office to locate all mail delays and penalize contractors for late mail deliveries. The postmaster marked all letters, notes paid and dead letters on hand, kept quarterly accounts, and made up

¹⁴ Letterbook "B" of the Postmaster General, p. 16.

the land or sea mail. Before 1792 the postmaster was not obliged to keep bags for letters detained for overseas transportation. However, Robert Patton accepted such a responsibility and advertised in his office the days on which sea mail would depart and on which vessels. This information was printed without cost by the Philadelphia newspapers.

Also before 1792, the Postmaster General was empowered to fix the amount of commissions paid to postmasters. They were allowed 40 per cent of the gross receipts of the office, or a commission not exceeding \$50 per year. If the receipts were between \$125 and \$167, 50 per cent was taken; if between \$165 and \$334, 30 per cent. From the latter figure to \$500 of receipt, \$100 was paid, and 20 per cent of the postage over \$500. In addition, the postmaster was entitled to 50 per cent of the postage paid on newspapers. The method of ascertaining the proper commission was also set forth: namely, to charge 20 per cent in the first three quarters, and corrected to 20 per cent on the year's receipts from the account rendered on December 31 of each year.

This somewhat complicated method was changed by the 1792 postal act, which provided that 40 per cent should be paid until the commission was \$50, then 30 per cent to \$100, and over that 20 per cent. The maximum annual compensation which any postmaster might receive was \$1,800. In 1797 the commissions were reduced, though the law directed the Postmaster General to give the postmasters "such compensation as shall be adequate to their respective services and expenses." Thirty per cent was allowed on the first \$100 quarter, 25 per cent on the next \$200, and 20 per cent from \$400 to \$2,000, and 8 per cent above the latter figure. In addition, \$25 per quarter was given to those postmasters who handled foreign mail, and a special allowance of not more than \$50 per quarter for night work, that is between the hours of 9 p.m. and 5 a.m.

The only exceptions to the percentage computing method of fixing compensation were those of the legislatively fixed salaries of the postmasters at Philadelphia and New York. The accounts current and other ledgers of the General Post Office of the eighteenth century show that the revenues of Pennsylvania post offices were small. John Anderson of Bedford, Jacob Karch of Lebanon, Samuel Quigley of Shippensburg, and Samuel Turbett of Lan-

caster left their positions because of their low incomes.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, many other Pennsylvania postmasters did not serve very long for the same reason, but resignations found in postal records do not always give the reasons for their leaving office.¹⁶

The system of accounting by postmasters to the General Post Office was handled very simply. With the exception of Robert Patton of Philadelphia, who submitted monthly accounts, each postmaster submitted quarterly transcripts of accounts of letters and newspapers received and sent, ship letters received and receipts for the monies paid for these letters sent by sea from the sea post office, printers' account receipts for advertising unclaimed letters (plus a copy of the newspaper itself containing the advertisement), a bill for dead letters, post bills, receipts for contingent expenses, and quarterly accounts. "It was the duty of the Postmaster General to cause suit to be commenced against the person or persons so neglecting or refusing."¹⁷

Each of the Pennsylvania postmasters was frequently prodded to submit his quarterly accounts more promptly even though some accounts were of little consequence. These persistent reminders occasionally resulted in reprimands that were usually handled by the First Assistant Postmaster General. Occasionally, former postmasters were requested to come to Philadelphia to settle their accounts. This was done by James Edie of York in 1794. Parts of his ledgers had been destroyed by fire during the previous year. Before Henry Willcocks of Lancaster left for India, he came to Philadelphia to settle his account of \$189.75 owed to the government. The Postmaster General eventually collected \$80 from Willcocks, \$50 from his partner (William Hamilton) and was given the mortgage on a lot in the town of Oxford, York County. The long overdue accounts of Matthias Slough of Lancaster and of Samuel Quigley of Shippensburg resulted in court action handled by William Rawle, an United States attorney. Thomas Hamilton of Greensburg complicated his accounts with the United

¹⁵ Letterbook "D" of the Postmaster General, p. 292, and Letterbook "B" of the Postmaster General, pp. 497-498.

¹⁶ From time to time postmasters were induced to hold their appointments in expectation that the postal law would be amended so as to afford them some relief.

¹⁷ Act of May 8, 1794.

States by ignoring postal regulations. He gave credit for postage and then was not able to collect from those indebted to him.

Payments on accounts by postmasters were sent in the form of drafts or monies. No losses of the cash transactions were reported. During 1790 and 1791, however, gold plug and paper money sent by Pittsburgh, Shippensburg, and Bedford postmasters were not accepted by the New York banks. On the other hand, as late as March of 1799, the General Post Office accepted pounds, shillings, and pence for settling accounts.

MAIL CONTRACTORS

On May 8, 1794, a law was passed giving the Postmaster General supervision and control of all mail transported via stage coach. This became necessary for a variety of reasons. Before 1794 the General Post Office was plagued by complaints arising from the fact that both stage coach passengers and drivers carried mail privately without benefit of postage. (They were prohibited by law to be paid for this service.) However, most of them did not distinguish between accepting letters from private individuals or public officials, and as people generally were inclined to be faithful in forwarding letters of public officers, they were thus unwittingly and unlawfully extending the United States postal service.

After May 8, 1794, mail contracts held by stage proprietors were a mixed blessing—proprietors were faced with the desire to accommodate their passengers while at the same time fulfilling their mail contracts.

The problem of schedules was especially difficult.¹⁸ Schedules were made and supervised by the Postmaster General. Some leniency was allowed on side roads where proprietors usually set their own schedules; but on main post roads, where connections were involved, failure to meet schedules resulted in penalties.

In addition, the conditions of the contract provided that the

¹⁸ An unfortunate example of the failure to maintain the postal schedules occurred during November, 1796, when three large packets of returns of electors of the President and the Vice President from some of the western counties of Pennsylvania and the Pittsburgh mails were delayed and returned to Pittsburgh from Shippensburg. The extraordinary circumstances embarrassed the administration. Letterbook "F" of the Postmaster General, pp. 4-5.

Postmaster General "may alter the times of arrival and departure at any time during the continuance of the contract, he previously stipulating an adequate compensation for any extra expense that may be occasioned thereby."¹⁹

There was constant resistance by the stage proprietors and tavern keepers to any changes in mail schedules which conflicted with their business and with the interests and comforts of their customers—the passengers. Eating and lodging stops were pre-arranged at certain taverns along the road. Therefore, they objected particularly to the efforts of the Postmaster General to accelerate the speed of the mails, on the grounds that their passengers would thereby be inconvenienced. Nevertheless, progress won out, and as staging increased in volume on the busier roads, the interests of the mail prevailed, and the Postmaster General gained the whip hand when mail contracts were prepared.

Except on five post routes, Pennsylvania contractors began their mail service by employing post riders as mail carriers.²⁰ This was also true during the winters of 1797 and 1798 and on the main line between New York and Philadelphia when enormous quantities of newspapers interfered with the regularity of mail deliveries. Occasionally, public carriers walked the mail over frozen rivers and streams on which freshets had occurred. Once, when the mail could not be forded over Shamokin Creek between Lewisburg and Reading, the Postmaster General advised that canoes should be used. Lameness of a horse causing late mail delivery at Sunbury in 1799 was not accepted as an explanation. Even bad weather was no excuse for the failure of a mail. Such might have been the beginnings of the famous "Neither rain nor snow. . . ."

Some of the post riders carried identification certificates signed by the Postmaster General. The one issued to Zenas Wells contains the following words:

The Bearer, Zenas Wells is a postrider employed to carry mail between Philadelphia and Pittsburg. Should any accident happen to render assistance necessary to get

¹⁹ On December 31, 1793, the Postmaster General authorized Mr. Mofat to ride one-half mile off the route to Easton so as to deliver mail to Charles Croxall of Belvidere and to receive his mail in that community of three stores and a merchant mill. Letterbook "C" of the Postmaster General, p. 48.

²⁰ The post rider between Bethlehem and Easton was paid \$10 for the last three months of 1792.

on with the mail, it is desired that it may be attended, for which I shall be enabled to make satisfaction by the General Post Office.

Timothy Pickering
Postmr Gl.

Philadelphia
May 31, 1794.²¹

Apparently, Zenas Wells was very conscientious and punctual. When he was detained in 1792 at the Shippensburg post office so long that he had to push his horse to accomplish his whole journey in time, Samuel Quigley, the postmaster at that town, was instructed not to allow more than fifteen minutes for delivery and pick up of mail. In 1793 Wells complained that the quartermaster at Pittsburgh detained him twelve hours. The Postmaster General reminded the Pittsburgh postmaster that no one had a right to detain a post rider beyond the fixed time of the contract. Later, in 1796, the post rider between Pittsburgh and Shippensburg was allowed a led horse to aid him in carrying the increasing number of weighty newspapers.

Warham Strong, another post rider, was awarded a one-year mail contract between Bethlehem and Wilkes-Barre beginning April 1, 1793. Aside from carrying the letters, he was engaged also to transport newspapers weekly. On October 25 of the same year, Strong refused to continue his contract. This disruption of mail service did not surprise the Postmaster General, who already had received reports that Strong was unfit for his employment. When Strong wanted approval of claiming postage of mails carried by private persons after he ceased to ride, he was reminded that he was liable for damages for failing to execute his contract.

Another method of mail transportation was by sulky. One was used during 1796 when the western mail increased between York and Carlisle. A similar vehicle was used to transport mail between Bristol and Philadelphia. On August 20, 1795, John Brown was overturned in his sulky near Bristol, and he blamed C. R. Stanley and G. W. McElory for the accident. The mishap was reported to the General Post Office by Joseph Clunn, postmaster at Bristol, and by Jonathan Lowensberry,²² who witnessed

²¹ Letterbook "C" of the Postmaster General, p. 294.

²² Letterbook "D" of the Postmaster General, p. 274.

the accident. The latter submitted an affidavit to the Postmaster General and explained what had happened. He said Stanley and McElory had not obstructed the passage of mail nor were they men who would deliberately do so. What happened was that the two men were turning out of the road to make way for the mail carrier when Brown's sulky was upset, causing some injury and delay. Evidently, the Postmaster General felt compelled to use the incident to express strong feelings about the safety and celerity of mail service, for he wrote to Stanley and McElory that: "The safe and speedy transportation of the mail is an object of the highest importance, not only to the government but to the citizens of the United States, & he must be a bad member of society who would not where an opportunity offered render every assistance in his power to accelerate the passage of it, but no one could be so worthless as wantonly to obstruct it."²³

Before the act of 1794 designated for the first time the provision for "the carriage of mail on any road on which a stage wagon or other stage carriage shall be established," the mail had already been carried on such vehicles with the repeated sanctions of the Postmaster General. Early stage mail proprietors operating in Pennsylvania were General John Noble Cumming and John Inskip (New York by way of Philadelphia to Baltimore), Gabriel Van Horne and Matthias Kerlin (Philadelphia to Baltimore), William Coleman (Philadelphia to Carlisle and later between Reading and Lebanon), Matthias Slough and William Geer (Philadelphia to Lancaster and later between Lancaster to Harrisburg), and Samuel Wood (Philadelphia to Bridgetown, New Jersey). Stage mail service was introduced between Carlisle and Harrisburg in 1796 and between Philadelphia and Bethlehem in 1798. There was even a government-owned stage mail service during 1799 between Philadelphia and Baltimore.

Until the latter part of the eighteenth century, stage coaches or wagons were generally heavy. After that, there were successive modifications in construction to improve the comfort and convenience of passengers, culminating in the development of the oval Jersey stage coach which was characterized in all newspaper advertisements, correspondence, and literature of the day as the "post coach." Many of its features appeared in a model developed

²³ Letterbook "D" of the Postmaster General, p. 274.

in 1799 by the General Post Office for use on the Government line between Philadelphia and Baltimore. Joseph Habersham, Postmaster General, described his idea of a stage coach as one having two lamps, seats for six passengers, and drawn by four horses. At each end of the coach, within the body, there was to be a covered chest or box, twenty-two inches wide and as long as the width of the stage.²⁴ These chests were covered with seating material for use of additional passengers. Habersham described the painting of his mail coach as follows:

The body painted green, color formed of Prussian blue and yellow ochre, carriage and wheels red lead mixed to approach vermilion as near as may be; octagon panel in back, black; octagon blinds, green; elbow piece, or rail, front rail and back rail, red as above; on the doors, Roman capitals in patent yellow, "United States Mail Stage," and over those words a spread eagle of a size and color to suit.²⁵

There are also references among the postal records to water mail service. Undoubtedly, mail was carried by travelers on the keel and flatboats that plied the Susquehanna between the towns of Columbia, Harrisburg, Millersburg, and Sunbury. Government-owned and operated coastwise mail service existed during 1798 and 1799 between New York and Philadelphia and between Philadelphia and Charleston. This service was mainly concerned with the transportation of newspapers. During the 1790's the Bush Line supplied de luxe passenger, freight, and mail service between Wilmington and Philadelphia on the *Nancy*. The trip took from six to nine hours; departures (which depended upon the tide) were signalled by the ringing of a large bell on the Wilmington storehouse of the firm. This water mail service increased during the fall of 1799 when John and William Warner and James Hemphill of Wilmington began running competing packets to Philadelphia.

MAIL ROUTES

Arranging for the execution of mail contracts was one of the chief duties of the Postmaster General. Public notice of such con-

²⁴ Letterbook "H" of the Postmaster General, p. 302.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

tracts appeared for a minimum of six weeks in one or more newspapers at the seat of the government and in one or more newspapers published in the state or states where the contracts were to be performed. The advertisement showed the description of the route, sometimes the mode of transportation (horse, wagon, sulky, or stage coach), the schedule (days and hours), and penalties for failures. The Postmaster General was originally instructed to enter into mail contracts for a period not to exceed eight years. However, for the period 1789-1794 mail contracts were let for about one year, and they generally became effective on January 1. The 1794 postal act allowed them to be made for a four-year period, if desirable, and the starting dates were at the beginning of quarterly periods.

Nearly all payments for mail transportation were controlled by Congress, and the Postmaster General did not always have an opportunity to display his bargaining ability. It was the practice of the General Post Office to make a contract "on condition that the expense thereof shall not exceed the revenue thence arising. . . ." Mail contractors were paid for their services by drafts on postmasters on the routes they serviced. This payment was made promptly irrespective of whether the legal requirements were met.

To encourage the extension of postal service to frontier settlements, the Postmaster General was allowed "to authorize the person or persons contracting to receiving, during the continuance of such contract according to the rate by this act established, all the postage which shall arise on letters, newspapers and packages conveyed by any such post."²⁶ Private post roads were at first financial burdens, and the average cost of carrying weekly mails on such roads was \$15 a mile during 1789-91, \$5 during 1791-95, and \$6 during 1795-1801.

Postal laws of the eighteenth century authorized the establishment of post routes throughout the United States. Those in Pennsylvania were as follows:

February 20, 1792

New York by way of Bristol, Philadelphia, and Chester to Baltimore

²⁶ Act of May 8, 1794.

Philadelphia by way of Lancaster, Yorktown, Carlisle, Shippensburg, Chambersburg, Bedford, and Greensburg to Pittsburgh
Philadelphia to Bethlehem

Bethlehem by Reading and Harrisburg to Carlisle

Bethlehem by way of Easton, Sussex C. H., Goshen, Ward's Bridge, and Kingston to Rhinebeck

Philadelphia by way of Salem to Bridgetown

Baltimore by way of Fredericktown and Hagerstown to Chambersburg

May 8, 1794

Philadelphia by way of Norristown, Pottsgrove, Reading, Lebanon and Harrisburg to Carlisle

Pittsburgh by way of Washington, West Liberty, Wheeling, and Limestone to Fort Washington

Yorktown by way of Hanover, Petersburg, Taneytown, and Fredericktown to Leesburg

Baltimore to Yorktown

Hagerstown by way of Hancock, Oldtown, Cumberland, Morgantown, and Uniontown to Brownsville on the Monongahela.

February 25, 1795

Brownsville to Washington

Reading by way of Sunbury and Northumberland to Lewisburg

Yorktown by way of Abbottstown and Gettysburg to Hagerstown

Philadelphia by way of Bethlehem and Alexandria to Pittston

March 3, 1797

Philadelphia to Tuckerton

Bristol to Burlington

Bethlehem by way of Easton to Wilkes-Barre

Somerset by way of Connellsville to Uniontown

Bedford by way of Somerset to Greensburg

Harrisburg by way of Petersburg, Millerstown, Thompsonstown, Mifflintown, Lewistown, Huntingdon, Alexandria, Centre Furnace, Bellefonte, Milesburg, Aaronsburg, Mifflinburg, Lewisburg, Northumberland to Sunbury

The general Post Office also received memorials for establishing cross post routes between Pennsylvania and New York. No action was taken on the one received in 1798 from the inhabitants of Northumberland. They wanted a post route between their town and Wilkes-Barre and Niagara. The request was forwarded for action to Joseph B. Vanum, chairman of a congressional post-office committee. During January of 1799 the Postmaster General denied the petition of the inhabitants of Allegheny County to extend the post route between Pittsburgh and Beavertown. Six months later the Postmaster General, in denying another petition, stated the post route between Easton and Chenango would be unproductive of correspondence because it was thinly settled. He estimated that the proposed mail service once fortnightly would cost \$500 per annum and would probably yield \$50 during the same period. In this instance, however, the Postmaster General was strongly urged to experiment with the operation of this post route extension.

NEWSPAPERS

During the last decade of the eighteenth century there were at one time or another seventy-two Pennsylvania newspapers, which averaged about three years of existence. Of these, forty-one were published in Philadelphia, and included five French and two German language papers.

Until 1792 newspapers were not part of the mail. They were carried either by private riders (and sometimes for printers of newspapers),²⁷ public riders, or stage proprietors who, with the permission of the General Post Office, made their own personal arrangements with the printers. Mail stages on main routes carried newspapers independently of the mail and often without charging the printers.

The postal act of 1792 established rates of postage for carrying newspapers within the mail. Each paper was charged one cent for one hundred miles and one and a half cents for any greater distance. This act encouraged the spread of journalism and continued the practice of carrying "printers' exchanges" free. The postal law of 1794 included a provision that a newspaper carried to any post office in a state in which it was printed, whatever the

²⁷ Letterbook "B" of the Postmaster General, p. 11.

distance, be charged one cent. These rates prevailed for the remainder of the eighteenth century. The postal legislation of the 1790's also provided for mail carriers under contract with the General Post Office to continue, if they wished, to carry newspapers outside the mail by private arrangements with printers who cared to employ them. Mail carriers who took advantage of this provision were required to state in their bids the additional cost for which they would carry the mail with the newspaper privilege and without it, so that the General Post Office could compare with other bids and decide intelligently.

With the introduction of weighty newspapers into the mail, their transportation created irregularities in mail schedules, dissatisfaction to merchants and printers, and manifold hardships for mail contractors and their post riders. In 1792 the Postmaster General discovered the mail delays between Baltimore and Pittsburgh (by way of Chambersburg) were caused by the late printing of newspapers in Baltimore on Tuesdays and Fridays. As a consequence, the post rider leaving Baltimore for Chambersburg never met the one who departed earlier for Pittsburgh, and the Baltimore newspapers were held two weeks in Chambersburg before they were carried westward.

In 1794 the Postmaster General reported to Chairman Tracy of a congressional committee on the post office that beginning in 1792 six hundred bundles of newspapers arrived weekly for Philadelphia printers.²⁸ The Postmaster General proposed that if the printers were charged with postage, the mutual exchange of newspapers would be limited to six or eight of the best newspapers in the larger towns. The Postmaster General felt his proposal to charge postage for newspapers would also discourage the practice among publishers of receiving copies of all papers published. He concluded that if the number of newspapers carried were reduced by four-fifths, their distribution would become more expeditious and would counterbalance the expense of conveyance. Moreover, the printers demanded (and later received) pay for listing dead letters not called for at post offices. In Philadelphia the pay for such service was \$100 a year, which was at rates less than the usual advertising prices.

Throughout 1795 the General Post Office received complaints

²⁸ Letterbook "C" of the Postmaster General, pp. 122-124.

about irregularities of newspaper mail deliveries south of Petersburg, Virginia. Subsequently, Robert Patton of Philadelphia was instructed to forward papers twice a week from his office and not to close his mails until 8 p.m. on the days they were dispatched. Thus, printers would then be able to send their late printed papers to their subscribers.

There were outcries of mishandling of letters and newspapers in Reading, Sunbury, and Northumberland. In 1796 Gotlieb Jungman of Reading was accused of detaining the mail.²⁹ A Mr. Schneider, printer in Jungman's town, informed the Postmaster General that the local postmaster denied him the privilege (which the law provided) of exchanging newspapers with other printers free of charge. Schneider discovered that his newspapers were held in the post office until subscribers paid the postage thereon. The complaints resulted in Jungman's receiving a reprimand from the Postmaster General for interfering with the orderly handling of United States mail.

During 1797 John Scull, publisher of the *Pittsburg Gazette*, was particularly concerned about the delivery of his newspapers to subscribers. He was informed that the post rider was not bound to deliver them to individuals, but if he did so the papers were charged with postage as prescribed by law. To aid Scull, the Postmaster General instructed the post rider to leave newspapers in bundles at certain stands whenever the subscribers did not reside in post towns, thus lessening the delay of other mail deliveries.³⁰

The greatest number of complaints about late newspaper deliveries related to the route between Philadelphia and Baltimore. An effort to correct the situation was finally made on February 8, 1797, when each postmaster and driver of stages on the route was notified that a way bill would accompany the newspaper mail. Drivers were ordered to call at each postmaster with the newspaper mail so that the postmaster could note the time of arrival and departure. In the same year, on August 16, when there were no newspaper deliveries for two days, each postmaster on the route was requested to find the reason for the "extraordinary detention of the newspaper Mails and send any information respect-

²⁹ Letterbook "E" of the Postmaster General, pp. 328-329.

³⁰ Letterbook "B" of the Postmaster General, p. 311.

ing it to the General Post Office."³¹ Reasons for the newspaper delays are not given; however, it is known that stage drivers often left bulky newspaper portmanteaus behind during inclement weather when the roads were muddy and travel difficult. Their most frequent offense, however, was to carry newspapers on the dashboard under their feet, where they were not only exposed to all the elements, but also subjected to sharp jolting of the stagecoach and abuse by the feet of the drivers.

In 1798 Congress forwarded a petition to the General Post Office from Messrs. Yundt and Brown and Thomas Dobbins, printers of newspapers, concerning the delays of the arrival at Baltimore of newspapers from Philadelphia and New York. Jonathan Dayton, Speaker of the House of Representatives, was notified by the Postmaster General that the irregularities of newspaper mail during January and February were caused by mounting ice from freshets in the Susquehanna which prevented the use of the ferry. The Postmaster General then seized the opportunity to complain that newspapers and their covers were usually packed while still in freshly inked condition. Thus, it was not surprising that mail directions on newspapers were often lost as papers became smeared and the writing obliterated. Printers were reluctant to go to the trouble of providing individual wrappers for each newspaper, and consequently the postmasters were unable to repack and direct them.

Dayton was further informed that although Philadelphia had only fifteen printers of newspapers, these fifteen actually received 930 exchange papers every week. On the supposition that there were about 250 printers of newspapers in the United States during 1798, and that the printers in Philadelphia received one-tenth part of the whole number of exchange papers, about 9,300 exchange papers circulated weekly in the mail. A large proportion of these papers were carried on the main post routes, creating hazards to the letter mail not only by their bulk and weight, but by imparting moisture to letters during rainy and snowy days.

To alleviate these problems and lessen the hardships to mail carriers along the main post route, the General Post Office inaugurated government-owned and -operated coastwise mail service between New York and Philadelphia, and from Philadelphia to

³¹ Letterbook "F" of the Postmaster General, p. 420.

Charleston, South Carolina. Three vessels, the *Ann*, the *Yeatman*, and the *Susan* were purchased during 1798. After a fair trial of sixteen months, the water mail packets failed to provide fast and secure mail communication for the General Post Office and for the merchants of New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston.³² Reasons for failures were: rough weather, recurrent damages to the vessels with resultant delays for repairs, irregularity of sailing schedules because of growing dependency upon passengers and freight to help defray mounting expenses of operations, difficulty in securing good masters and crews—most of them were indifferent to the public welfare, and continual public complaints about the unevenness of water mail schedules.

CONCLUSION

The information just presented is a guide to a small segment of history and helps us follow the development of mail communications in Pennsylvania after the Revolutionary War. It is interesting to see how quickly the establishment and growth of postal facilities generally followed and paralleled the founding of colonial settlements and their growth into towns and cities. This was true, of course, not only in Pennsylvania, but throughout the United States generally during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and by studying the history of the development of mail communication, we can at the same time study the expansion and development of the country as a whole. The importance of wide and efficient distribution of mail, and especially newspapers, was early recognized as a potent factor in the maintenance and spread of the democratic way of life. It was so recognized during the 1790's by the Chairman of the Committee on Post Roads of the House of Representatives, when he said about newspapers: "They are the surest means of preventing degeneracy of a free government, as well as recommending every public measure to the confidence and coöperation of all virtuous citizens."³³

³² Arthur Hecht, "Government Owned and Operated Coastwise Mail Service of the Eighteenth Century," *The American Neptune*, XXII, No. 1 (January, 1962), 55-64.

³³ Wesley Everett Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), p. 91.