

# The nineteenth-century postmaster and his duties

The post office, the newspaper, and the grapevine. Those were the sources for your ancestor's family and public news before the telephone, telegraph, telegram, radio, television, e-mail, cell phone, instant messaging, Blackberry, and the Internet.

The post office was so important that every crossroads community in America wanted one. When a small community's post office closed in the early twentieth century, it was either the harbinger or the result of that village's demise.

Some postmasters served only a few months, while others served for decades. Most were men; some were women. It was a political appointment and a position of trust. The postmaster handled money; other federal agencies counted upon the postmaster for honest opinions. For example, throughout the millions of Civil War pension files there are countless letters by postmasters penned in answer to a Pension Office request for information about a person's honesty or the claimant's physical condition or economic situation. On 11 August 1882, Postmaster Zabina E. Chambers of Hartland, Michigan, told the Pension Office that Dr. William M. Hayford's testimony "is not only unimpeachable but unquestionable" and that Civil War veteran David C. Smith's health "was good" before the war "but is verry Poorley now and has been for some years."

Chances are good that one of your relatives was a postmaster. Records of appointment of postmasters are among the many records of the Post Office Department (Record Group 28), and related record groups, in the custody of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). This article will highlight microfilmed records and published government documents.

## Postmaster appointments

Postmaster appointments have been microfilmed in two National Archives publications:

- M1131, *Record of Appointment of Postmasters, October 1789–*

*1832* (4 rolls). The post offices are arranged alphabetically by post office name.

- M841, *Record of Appointment of Postmaster, 1832–30 September 1971* (145 rolls). The post offices are arranged alphabetically by state, then by county, then by blocks of years, and then alphabetically by post office name. (See Figure 1)

Postmaster appointment records provide the name and date of appointment of each postmaster. The postmaster officially served until his successor took over, so also make note of the successor's name and date of appointment.

Livingston County, Mich.			
Brighton	John L. Smith	30 Sept. 1856	James B. Lee 9 Oct. 1858
Conroy	Henry Snyder	15 Aug. 1853	
Overbrook	William How	2 Mar. 1848	Non-Jeremy How 13 Feb. '64
Heming	John W. Smith	22 Aug. 1842	John W. Fowler 23 July 1860
do	Charles Kildobson	13 April 1848	Discontinued 13 Jan. 1854
Howlerville	Touman B. Cook	16 Oct. 1854	Wm. P. Stow 25 Mar. '61
Lenox	Chester Hayward	16 Apr. 1858	John Weimaster 3 Dec. '58
Green Oak	George H. Leopold	12 Oct. 1854	John N. Clark 25 Mar. '61
Hamburg	Leland Walker	27 Oct. 1854	Ford & Grison 25 Mar. '61
Hamburg Village	Reuben S. Hall	21 Mar. 1856	Ferdinand Grison 13 April '61
Hartland	William M. Hayford	28 Jan. 1871	Albert L. Nathaway 5 Jan. 1878

Figure 1. Postmaster appointments for Livingston County, Michigan, from M841, *Record of Appointment of Postmaster, 1832–30 September 1971*.

Let's follow one postmaster's career and see what can be learned from the dates of his appointment. William McCullar Hayford was appointed postmaster in Hartland, Livingston County, Michigan four times:

1. Appointed 15 January 1853; followed by Abram F. Chambers, who was appointed 30 January 1856.
2. Appointed 23 January 1857; followed by Albert L. Hathaway, who was appointed 5 January 1858.
3. Appointed 28 January 1859; followed by Chauncey P. Worden, who was appointed 19 March 1861.
4. Appointed 5 June 1885; followed by G. Winfield Wallace, appointed 24 April 1889.

The postmaster was a political patronage job and so the dates of appointment sometimes provide valuable clues to the postmaster's

political affiliation. The alert genealogist will compare appointment dates to the date spans of presidential administrations. Some dates of appointment suggest removal for political reasons, while others may not. Hayford's 1853 appointment was near the end (3 March 1853) of Whig President Millard Fillmore's term. Chambers' 1856 appointment and Hayford's 1857 appointment were both during Democratic President Franklin Pierce's term. Hathaway's 1858 appointment and Hayford's 1859 appointment were midway through Democratic President James Buchanan's term. None of those changes (without other information) show a strong political motive; the Whig party had collapsed by 1856.

Chauncey P. Worden's 19 March 1861 appointment within two weeks after Republican Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural (4 March 1861) is clearly different,

and very strongly suggests Worden was a Republican appointed to replace Democrat Hayford. Then, for Hayford, there was a long dry spell, since he was not appointed postmaster again for nearly twenty-five years. Timing strongly implies that politics drove Hayford's 1885 and his successor Wallace's 1889 appointments. Hayford was appointed soon after the inauguration of Democrat Grover Cleveland (4 March 1885), and Wallace even more quickly after the inauguration of Republican Benjamin Harrison (4 March 1889).

The appointment and removal of most postmasters was handled by the First Assistant Postmaster General in Washington, D.C. However, the postmasters who earned more than \$1,000 annually were nominated by the President and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, and the dates of some of these actions are noted in Microfilm Publication M841.

Presidential nomination and Senate confirmation will lead you to published government documents available at U.S. Government Depository Libraries (large public or university libraries). The Senate's receipt and confirmation of the nomination will be found in both the *Journal of the Executive Proceedings*

*To the Senate of the United States:*

I nominate James L. Scott to be postmaster at Mattoon, in the county of Coles and State of Illinois, in the place of John Cunningham, resigned.

EXECUTIVE MANSION,  
Washington, December 14, 1887.

Figure 2 (above). Exact text of the James L. Scott nomination as postmaster for Mattoon, Illinois, from *Journal of the Executive Proceedings of the Senate of the United States of America*, volume 26, page 23. Figure 3 (right). The same appointment for James L. Scott as condensed in the *Congressional Record*, volume 19, page 63.

1887. CONGRESSIONAL RECORD—SENATE.	
<p>said office having, by law, become vested in the President from and after October 1, 1887.</p> <p>Will J. Furlong, to be postmaster at Rochelle, in the county of Ogle and State of Illinois, in the place of Henry H. Glenn, removed.</p> <p>Joel H. Johnson, to be postmaster at Woodstock, in the county of McHenry and State of Illinois, in the place of Gardner S. Southworth, whose commission expired March 2, 1887.</p> <p>James Keagy, to be postmaster at Cambridge, in the county of Henry and State of Illinois, in the place of James E. Ayers, removed.</p> <p>Marcellus Keene, to be postmaster at Atlanta, in the county of Logan and State of Illinois, in the place of Richard T. Gill, deceased; William T. Kirk, who was appointed March 7, 1887, having died before taking possession of the office.</p> <p>Walter Kirkpatrick, to be postmaster at Virden, in the county of Macoupin and State of Illinois, in the place of George W. Cox, resigned.</p> <p>Thomas J. Mathews, to be postmaster at Grayville, in the county of White and State of Illinois, the appointment of a postmaster for the said office having, by law, become vested in the President from and after April 1, 1887.</p> <p>Samuel A. Murdock, to be postmaster at Havana, in the county of Mason and State of Illinois, in the place of Oliver C. Easton, whose commission expired February 15, 1887; John H. Havighorst, who was confirmed February 22, 1887, having declined the appointment.</p> <p>John McNamee, to be postmaster at Bement, in the county of Piatt and State of Illinois, in the place of Francis A. Jones, removed.</p> <p>Harry W. Roberts, to be postmaster at Chester, in the county of Randolph and State of Illinois, in the place of Hugh B. Nisbet, removed.</p> <p>Agnes Ross, to be postmaster at Ravenswood, in the county of Cook and State of Illinois, the appointment of a postmaster for the said office having, by law, become vested in the President from and after January 1, 1886.</p> <p>James L. Scott, to be postmaster at Mattoon, in the county of Coles and State of Illinois, in the place of John Cunningham, resigned.</p>	<p>Wright and State of Iowa, the appointment of a postmaster for the said office having, by law, become vested in the President from and after April 1, 1887.</p> <p>Hull Hoagland, to be postmaster at Palo Alto and State of Iowa, in the place of John H. Hoagland, resigned.</p> <p>Amos H. Kisner, to be postmaster at Cerro Gordo and State of Iowa, in the place of Thomas C. Medary, to be postmaster at Alamacake and State of Iowa, in the place of Newton S. Noble, to be postmaster at Jones and State of Iowa, in the place of William P. Ross, to be postmaster at Muscatine, and State of Iowa, resigned.</p> <p>Nicholas C. Stanton, to be postmaster at Muscatine and State of Iowa, in the place of Nicholas C. Stanton, removed.</p> <p>John H. Stuberbauch, to be postmaster at Marion and State of Iowa, in the place of William C. Swigart, to be postmaster at Jackson and State of Iowa, in the place of William C. Swigart, whose commission expired February 7, 1887.</p> <p>George Underhill, to be postmaster at Nona and State of Iowa, in the place of John F. Baker, to be postmaster at Worth and State of Kansas, in the place of Frank S. Blades, to be postmaster at State of Kansas, in the place of John W. Brown, to be postmaster at State of Kansas, the appointment of a postmaster for the said office having, by law, become vested in the President from and after January 1, 1887.</p> <p>Archibald G. Buchanan, to be postmaster at State of Kansas, in the place of John W. Brown, to be postmaster at State of Kansas, the appointment of a postmaster for the said office having, by law, become vested in the President from and after January 1, 1887.</p>



of the Senate of the United States of America and in the *Congressional Record*. The difference between the two is that the *Senate Executive Journal* will have the complete text of the President's nomination (see Figure 2). For example, James L. Scott was nominated by President Cleveland on 14 December 1887, and confirmed by the Senate on 20 December 1887. The president's form language nomination read:

*To the Senate of the United States:*

*I nominate James L. Scott to be postmaster at Mattoon, in the County of Coles and State of Illinois, in the place of John Cunningham, resigned.*

GROVER CLEVELAND  
*Executive Mansion  
Washington, December 14,  
1887.*

Related records in Record Group 130, Records of the White House Office, include registers of appointments to public office, 1857–1913, that include postmasters with their dates of nomination and confirmation. These records, which have not been microfilmed, are lists of names that provide no personal data.

### **The postmaster's duties**

Post Office regulations specified in great detail the duties of postmaster. Here are some of the more interesting aspects from the *Laws and Regulations for the Government of the Post Office Department* (Washington, D.C.: C. Alexander, Printer, 1852).

Immediately upon receiving his appointment, the postmaster was to sign an oath of office before a magistrate (or justice of the peace) and execute a bond providing that two sureties would pay the amount of the bond in the event of the postmaster's malfeasance in office. (The date and amount of the bond are sometimes shown in M841.) Upon receipt of these documents, the First Assistant Postmaster General would issue the postmaster his commission authorizing him to serve. The postmaster was required to serve until his successor was appointed and received his commission, even if his own term had expired.

Upon taking charge of the post office, he would inventory all its property and the mail on hand. All postmasters were required to appoint an assistant postmaster to do his work in case the postmaster was absent, traveling, sick, dead, or tendered his resignation. (Assistant postmasters were likewise required to sign an oath of office but records of appointment of most nineteenth-century assistant postmasters do not exist, since that arrangement was between the postmaster and the assistant. Often the assistant would be the postmaster's spouse.)

The postmaster was to keep the post office open Monday through Saturday during the "usual business hours" of his town. When mail arrived on Sunday, he was to keep his office open for one hour or more after its arrival "after religious services" had ended.

Mailing a letter was normally done at the post office. The post-

master would write the name of the post office, the date it would leave his post office, and the amount of postage. Before 1 April 1855, you could prepay postage or make the recipient pay postage! The postmaster was to sort and bundle the outgoing mail in packages marked to expedite their way either directly to their destination or routed through the appropriate distribution office. Naturally, there was paperwork that had to be properly prepared and attached to the bundles. The receiving postmaster also had to check the paperwork and the contents of the bundles to make sure none of the letters were under- or over-charged. And there were quarterly reports to be made to the Postmaster General of the various types of mail sent and received, moneys received, and expenses paid.

### **Pay**

How much was the postmaster paid? That depended upon the postage sold per quarter. The 1852 *Laws and Regulations* describe the compensation as a percent of the quarterly sales: for sales under \$100, 40 percent; sales from \$100 to under \$400, 33-1/3 percent; sales from \$400 to under \$2,400, 30 percent; and for sales over \$2,400, 12-1/2 percent.

Names and amounts of compensation of nearly all U.S. Government employees, including postal employees, are found in the biennial *Register of Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States, on the Thirtieth September, [year]*,

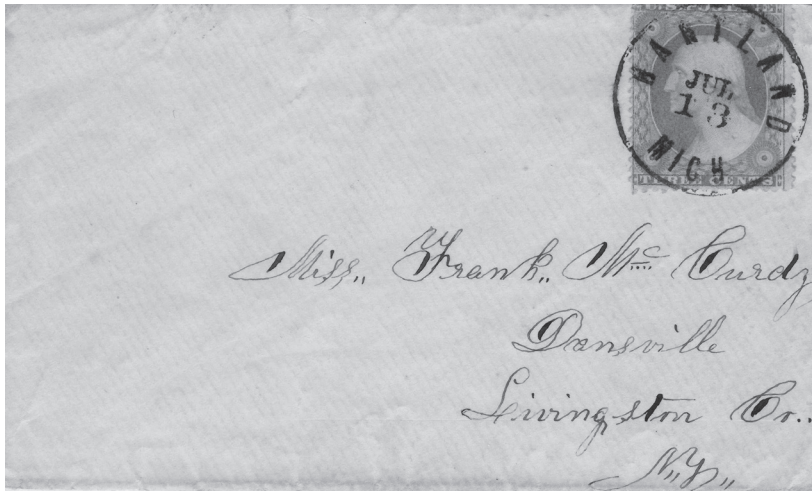
from 1816 to 1905. Often simply called the *Official Register of the United States*, this publication is available in the library in the National Archives Building and the Library of Congress, both in Washington, D.C., and at many U.S.

Government depository libraries.

Let's use Hayford as our example again. From the *Official Register*, we learn that Hayford earned \$76.29 from 1 July 1854 to 30 June 1855, and the net profits of his post office during the same time were \$45.97. He earned \$47.31 from 1 July 1860 to 16 April 1861, and the net profits of his post office during the same time were \$43.41. He earned \$252.70 from 1 July 1884 to 30 June 30, and \$255.79 from 1 July 1886 to 30 June 1887. In comparison, for the year ended 30 June 1887, Postmaster I. W. Bush at the Livingston County seat of Howell earned \$1,500 and Postmaster A. W. Copeland at Detroit earned \$3,700. (In those days, the Federal Government's fiscal year ended on 30 June; today it ends on 30 September).

### **Post office site location reports**

Postmaster reports of the post office locations and requests for change in location of the post office have been reproduced in NARA microfilm publication M1126, *Post Office Department Reports of Site*



*Locations, 1837–1950* (683 rolls).

These reports are arranged by state, then by county, then by post office. Postmasters described the location of the post office by geographic location (such as township, range, section) and in relation to nearby post offices, roads, rivers, canals, and railroads. Requests for change of location of the post office typically indicate the reason for moving the post office, and may provide more detail about the local area. For example, the reports for Dorset, Ashtabula County, Ohio, include a circa 1905 map of the commercial area of Dorset Township that shows the locations of the current and proposed post office sites, two churches, a cheese factory, two hotels, two stores, and the railroad depot. The Dorset postmaster wanted to move the post office from the south end of the commercial district to its center.

### **Letters remaining at the post office**

In most cases, our ancestors had to go to the post office to pick up mail. Until the mid-nineteenth century, mail that had not been picked up in a reasonable time was advertised in the newspaper. The

frequency of advertisements depended upon the post office's gross receipts. In the early years of the nineteenth century, advertisement was typically done four times a year. The 1852 *Laws and Regulations* stipulated that if the post office earned less than \$500 per quarter, advertisement for "un-

called-for letters" could be done every six weeks. Post offices with less than \$1,000 in gross receipts could advertise once a month; those with less than \$7,500 could advertise twice a month; and those over \$7,500 could advertise twice a week. Advertisements were to be in a newspaper published in that town. If the town didn't have a newspaper, then the postmaster could post lists in public places "in the town and neighborhood." Advertised letters that remained unclaimed for three months or more were "dead letters" to be sent to the Postmaster General in Washington, D.C. First established in 1825, U.S. dead letter offices are now called "mail recovery centers."

The postmaster could employ a mail carrier who would charge two cents for every letter and a half cent for every newspaper he delivered. More than one mile from the post office, the mail carrier was also authorized to accept letters to be mailed (called "way letters") for the usual postage plus a one cent fee. Free mail delivery began in 1863 in cities in which the revenues from postage were sufficient

to pay for the service. Free rural delivery began in 1896 in West Virginia and was expanded over the years.

### Postage, postmarks, and post cards

Postage stamps, postmarks, and post cards were nineteenth-century innovations. The first U.S. postage stamps were issued in 1847 and the first postcards were used in 1873. The “Worcester, Massachusetts Postal History Site” at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/index.htm> is a good introduction to the wide variation of postmarks, from the postmaster’s signature of the 1790s to 20th century machine cancellations. Interest in a postmaster’s work may lead you to a new hobby—postmark history and collecting—and two organizations may pique your interest: the Post Mark Collector’s Club <http://www.postmarks.org/> and the U.S. Cancellation Club <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/2088/usc-chome.htm>.

### Other postal employees

Records of appointment for other postal employees have also been microfilmed. These include NARA microfilm publications M2075, *Record of Appointment of Substitute Clerks in First- and Second-Class Post Offices, 1899–1905* (1 roll); M2076, *Index and Registers of Substitute Mail Carriers in First- and Second-Class Post Offices, 1885–1903* (1 roll); and M2077, *Indexes to Rosters of Railway Postal Clerks, ca. 1883–ca. 1902* (1 roll).

### For more information

Schafer, Louis S. “Rural Free Delivery.” *Michigan History* 90 (March–April 2006): 28–35. Discusses how the post office changed the lives of rural Americans. Call 800-366-3703 to purchase this issue for \$3.

United States Postal Service. “Sources of Historical Information on Post Offices, Postal Employees, Mail Routes, and Mail Contractors.” Publication 119 (September 2004). Online at <http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/pubs/pub119/> (HTML) and <http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/pubs/pub119.pdf> (PDF).

\_\_\_\_\_. “The United States Postal Service: An American History,

1775–2002.” Publication 100 (September 2003). Online at <http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/pubs/pub100/> (HTML) and <http://www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/pubs/pub100.pdf> (PDF).

*Claire Prechtel-Klusens, a microfilm projects archivist at NARA, Washington, D.C., served as NGS registrar (1996–98) and director (1998–2000). She can be reached at [cklusens@yahoo.com](mailto:cklusens@yahoo.com). Opinions expressed are her own and do not necessarily reflect the policies of NARA.*

### Simplified table of postage rates

1789–1815	8 to 25 cents per sheet, depending upon distance
1 July 1851–30 March 1855	3 cents per 1/2 ounce, up to 3,000 miles (prepaid postage, or 5 cents if sent collect). More than 3,000 miles, the rate was 6 cents prepaid and 10 cents collect.
1 April 1855–30 June 1863	3 cents per 1/2 ounce, up to 3,000 miles, and 10 cents if more than 3,000 miles.
1 July 1863–30 September 1883	3 cents per 1/2 ounce to all parts of the United States.
1 October 1883–30 June 1885	2 cents per 1/2 ounce to all parts of the United States.
1 July 1885–1 Nov. 1917	2 cents per ounce to all parts of the United States

(There were other rates for newspapers, and for letters that were heavier, being sent to a foreign country, picked up by the mail carrier, or as a result of other special circumstances.)