

Acc.1923.10.1 Jan. 29, 1923 History of the Post Office in Arlington, Mass. By James G. Keenan

The writing of a history of the Post Office in Arlington has been impeded by a difficulty which I regret to say I have imperfectly overcome. The obstacle has been an insufficiency of material, particularly in regards to the earliest times. No one connected with the Postal Service in this town seems to have thought its happenings to have been of enough importance or interest. No doubt because they seemed to him the trivial commonplaces of his daily life. And so I wish here to acknowledge my indebtedness to any and all who have helped me to gather what I have obtained.

But nothing is known, so far as I have been able to find of the actual workings of the Mail Service in our town in its earliest days, yet there is some record of its operations in the colonies, and what was then in general we may reasonably assume to have been true in any particular case.

In 1773, while this country was still under control of the Crown, Hugh Finlay, acting for the British Government, made a survey of the mail service from Quebec, Canada to St. Augustine, Florida. His report was unfavorable. He said that postmasters often had no post office. The tap rooms of taverns and living rooms in private homes were used for handling the mail. Letters were carelessly thrown upon a table or a bar, and might be handled by anyone. Although the private conveyance of mail was forbidden by law, this prohibition was commonly evaded, and wagon drivers, butchers, and any one else who chose carried letters for private profit. Nor was the speed of conveyance all that might have been desired. Alice M. Earle, in her book "Stage Coach and Tavern Ways" says: "In 1778 it took mail four days to go from New York to Boston – in winter much longer. George Washington died in the 14th of December, 1799. As an event of universal interest throughout the nation, the news was doubtless conveyed with all possible speed by fleetest messengers. The knowledge of this national loss was not known in Boston till December 24." That was a matter of ten days. "Two years later," she says, "there was a State election in Massachusetts of most profound interest when party feeling was high. It took a month, however, to get in all the election returns, even in a single state.

Postage rates were based on a zone system, as is done today in the case of the parcel post, and may be said, in a general way to have varied under British management, from four pence to a shilling. After independence was won, a similar system was maintained. The weight of a letter mattered. Double letters were charged a double rate, triple letters three times the unit charge. It cost eight cents to send a single letter sixty miles, and twenty-two cents to send it 450. A packet weighing four ounces was charged at the rate of four single letters. Presumably, then, the unit was a quarter ounce. This being the general condition of the postal service at that time, it is probable that the people of Menotomy had nothing better.

On May 13th, 1775, within one month of the Battle of Lexington, the Province congress appointed James Winthrop Postmaster for Cambridge. As this town was then a part of

Cambridge, he maybe said, in a sense, to have been the first postmaster of Arlington. As the British had control of Boston at that time, the setting up of a post office at Cambridge by the Continentals was no doubt an act of necessity, but it means that Arlington can claim to have been within the area of one of the first post offices so established. Winthrop held the position only until July 8th of the same year, and then was succeeded by Jonathan Hastings. How long the term of Hastings lasted I cannot say; but when a post office at Cambridge was established under the Constitution in 1802, Ebenezer Stedman became its head. Presumably he was still in office when the town was incorporated.

Arlington, though of course by a different name, was chartered as a township in 1807, but it did not officially have a postmaster until five years later. Drivers of stage coaches passing through the town, Mr. Parker tells me, acted as voluntary letter carriers for those who lived on the traveled roads, but letters to those living elsewhere were left at the store of Colonel Thomas Russell, which stood at what is now the corner of Mass. Ave. and Water Street, and were there exposed to public view. No doubt this store was so used because of its convenient location, it being in the center of the town on the Concord road and close to the thoroughfares that connected with Watertown and Woburn. Perhaps the personality of Col. Russell had its influences, as he seems to have been a man who cut considerable figure in his day.

In 1809, Squire Whittemore, who seems to have had influences with the administration of President James Madison, procured a commission as postmaster for Colonel Russell. Perhaps the Squire acted upon his own initiative and without consulting the Colonel. At any rate the appointee declined the appointment upon the ground that the remuneration was too small. The salary of a postmaster was based upon the amount of business done. Mr. J. B. Russell in his reminiscences intimates the pay of the postmaster for this town at that time at about twenty dollars per annum. We can readily understand that the volume of business would not have been large, because the country was sparsely populated and postage rates were high. And as this was before the day of the postage stamp, the postmaster had the work, in many cases, of collecting on delivery; in others of certifying to prepayment. So the position was not very desirable.

Whether Colonel Russell continued to act as postmaster during the next three years does not appear, but in 1812 he secured the appointment for Captain William S. Brooks. Captain Brooks accepted and so became the town's first official postmaster. His place of business was on Massachusetts Avenue opposite what is now Whittemore Street. He had a dry goods and grocery store. A rather humorous side light is thrown upon the political feeling of that day by Mr. John B. Russell, who, in his reminiscences published in the Arlington Advocate says of Captain Brooks, "he was an ardent Federalist but also a public spirited citizen. Apparently Mr. Russell himself was not a Federalist.

Postmaster Brooks held office only six years, being succeeded in 1818 by Amos Whittemore, who moved the post office into his own home, which was the next one to the west of Captain Brooks. Amos Whittemore by one account held the position until 1827, by

another until 1834, but as he appears to have been succeeded by his brother Henry in 1831, it is probable that he held office until such succession. As the houses of the Whittemore brothers adjoined, it is to be presumed that the post office was moved to the home of Henry. Their houses, I understand, are the ones still standing on the land near the Soldier's Monument. (One account has it that the P.O. was in the same house under three postmasters).

Henry Whittemore gave place in turn to Isaac Shattuck, Jr., who took office about 1835. His store was at the corner of Mass. Ave. and Medford Street. Mr. Shattuck's daughter, Mrs. Mary A. S. Stanton, is a resident of New York. Among her father's papers is a letter from the Post Office department announcing mail service to and from West Cambridge by stage route between Boston and Keene, N.H. It is dated April 22nd, 1836. As the railroad did not come into this town until ten years later, the stage coach must have been the common means of mail transportation. It was a slow method at best, and with roads blocked with snow its arrival must have been very uncertain.

IN 1840, Postmaster Shattuck was succeeded by Mr. John Fowle whose store stood at the juncture of Mass. Ave. and Broadway. It is said to have been what we now call a department store, being well supplied with a very varied stock. Mr. Fowle had as clerks Edwin Prescott and Abel Proctor. In 1846 Mr. Fowle disposed of his business to his two employees, and Mr. Prescott became postmaster. Some half-dozen years later the firm of Prescott and Proctor moved to the newly-built town hall, that which is not Old Town Hall, and the post office was set up in that building. The partners occupied the entire first floor, which was reached by a short flight of steps, that being before any part of the building had been cut to the street level. Mr. Proctor in 1862 succeeded Mr. Prescott as postmaster. Mr. Frederick Fowle, son of John Fowle, whom I have previously mentioned, was by now chief clerk in the Town Hall store, and in 1868 or 1869, he became postmaster, which position he held for twenty-five years. (I remember Mr. Fowle, though I can hardly say that I knew him, but I know that he was a man who endeared himself to the people of Arlington).

A note which came into my possession while I was preparing this paper says of this period: "The mails were not delivered at that time and consequently mail times in this town meant a general assembly of people anxious for letters, and any untoward incident as happening was quickly spread abroad." During Mr. Fowle's incumbency Arlington was made a money-order and special delivery office. An additional mail was granted, and the post office was moved to the side of the Town Hall now occupied by a store. In 1895 Mr. Fowle decided not to be an applicant for reappointment, and the position went to Mr. Alfred D. Hoitt.

Mr. Hoitt brought from Cambridge Mr. Grimes, and a young man Frank S. Breen to be his clerks. Mr. Grimes stayed but a short time. Frank Breen was promoted to chief clerk, and Phillip A. Hendrick, whom you all know, became assistant clerk. According to the recollection of Mr. Hendrick, there were but three mails a day received – early morning, near noon, and early evening. The office equipment was scanty as compared with that of today, the sorting of the outgoing mail being done on a table, there being no case for that purpose. There were about

150 lock boxes for patrons and about 700 of the ordinary kind. A list was posted each day of the mail in general delivery.

Early in the year 1896 the Post Office was moved into new quarters in the just constructed Sherburne Block, and then began what I might call its modernization. Mr. Hoitt had determined to mark his incumbency of the office of Postmaster by the introduction of free delivery service into the town, and to that end took up the matter with the authorities at Washington, making several trips to that city at his own expense, I understand. He became convinced that the only practical plan was to bring Arlington in as a station of the Boston postal district. Though this meant that his position would be reduced to a Superintendency and his salary reduced, he advocated the plan.

On May 1st, 1897, free delivery began at the Arlington Station with three letter carriers. One worked on foot, but the others were what was known as mounted carriers, that is they used horse and wagon in their work. The three were Benjamin R. Cleary, Clarke Stearns, and myself. Mr. Cleary and I are still attached to the station. On the first of the following October, Mr. Stearns was succeeded by Michael Neville who is still here. So it happens that three of the present carrier force have been employed at this station for twenty-five years, and Daniel Hooley, senior clerk, who succeeded Mr. Hendrick has almost completed his quarter century in this office.

Two deliveries a day were scheduled at the beginning of the services. The district spread from Forest Street in the north, to the Cambridge line in the south, and from Winchester in the east to Belmont on the west. Though the territory served was extensive, the population was much less than it is today. The total population then, as I remember, was but 8,000, and that included the Heights which was not at first within delivery, now it is. I believe about 22,000. Also, as I remember, the number of pices of mail per capita was very much less. On January 1st, 1898, two carriers were added. William A. McNeill, new Superintendent at the Heights, and John Murray of the Heights station. Mr. Murray served the Heights district as a mounted carrier fr4om the centre station for three months and then was transferred to the Heights.

Collection service in the beginning was given only by the carriers as they made their delivery trips. On Sundays the office was open for an hour or so for the delivery of mail. Gradually both clerical and carrier force was increased as the needs of the district increased, and an additional trip was given to part of the town. In 1909 Mr. Hoitt died, and Mr. Frank S. Breen succeeded him as Superintendent. It was a well deserved promotion and one that gave general satisfaction.

Some eight years or so ago the Post Office wasmove4d from the Sherburne Building to its present quarters. About October 1st, 1918, Superintendent Breen died. I wish here for a moment to pay tribute to the memory of ours of the finest men that have ever known. Splendid in character, kindly in disposition, efficient in his calling; the town and the service

suffered a loss when he died. For more than twenty years I worked with him, and the death of Frank Breen brought sorrow to me.

For a few weeks Mr. Benj. Orthens, new Superintendent of Medford Station acted as Superintendent of Arlington, and then was succeeded by David Pickett, now Superintendent of Back Bay Post Office. Mr. Pickett stayed until January 1920, when the present Superintendent Mr. Patrick J. Madden was assigned here. Mr. Madden has been about thirty-five years in the service and was previously superintendent of Brighton and later of the Cambridge Stations.

And so we come to the present day and may have pause to look back. Arlington has grown from a sparsely settled village to a compact township that is large enough to be a city. And the uncertainties of mail delivery in its beginnings have grown into a reliable system. It has postal quarters that compare favorable with those of most places. Instead of one man who composed the working force in the beginning, there is now an office force of twenty persons. There is a money order registry and special delivery service. The carriers deliver what is known as ordinary mail, and there is also a parcel post service. This latter has grown in the few years since its establishment from a business that was handled by a man on foot to one that requires the services of an auto truck. Besides the regular collection of mail by carriers on their trips there are additional collections by the Parcel Post carriers in the morning, a collection about 5 p.m. by a substitute carrier; and another at 9:45. There are six clerks where there was but a few twenty-five years ago; there are thirteen carriers where there were then but three, two of these having been added since the coming of the present superintendent.

The volume of mail handled has of course grown tremendously. Perhaps a single instance will give an idea of the increase. Mr. Hendrick told me that when he was first in the service a Christmas mail of ten sacks was received. That was thought to be enormous. Mr. Madden told me that I could say that during the last Christmas week an average of about two hundred and twenty-five sacks a day was received, and while Christmas is of course the times when we handle the largest amount of mail, still the amount holds in something like the same proportion throughout the year.

Of course a history of the Post Office in Arlington would be incomplete without a chapter on its institution and growth at the Heights. To Mr. Timothy O'Leary, once postmaster at the Heights, I am indebted for my information. He says: Years ago the need of a Post Office was felt by the few people of the Heights. It was a scattered community, with no street railway, and the only means of reaching the centre was the few trains that ran daily. The logical place for such office was this railroad station. But the salary of a postmaster in such an office was only \$25.00 a month. The railroad company would not consent to the station agent acting as postmaster unless he furnished an assistant, fearing that otherwise he would neglect their business. No agent would take the place on these conditions.

When the Centre R.R. station was completed the agent at the Heights, Mr. Moore, was given that station. Mr. Jason Bailey was appointed station agent at the Heights, and he was the

first postmaster. That was in September 1874. He was a minister and lived in Park Avenue. When he gave up the position of agent, the Post Office was moved to Union Hall building, which he owned, and was kept in the grocery store of Mr. Charles Howard, who became postmaster. After a short time, Mr. Howard sold his business, and the post office went back to the railroad station with Mr. Edward Bailey as postmaster.

In 1888 Mr. Timothy O'Leary took over the position. The office was in a little building built on the side of a brook that crosses Park Ave. Mr. O'Leary held office until 1891. The administration at Washington changed, and Mr. Daniel G. Currier was appointed, and moved the office into another small building on the other side of the brook. Mr. Currier, by the way, at other times kept a jewelry store in the Old Town Hall building.

When politics once more brought about a shift in Washington, Mr. Edward McKenzen became postmaster at the Heights, and the office returned to its original location in the railroad station. Mr. McKenzen was the sixth and last postmaster and his stay was short. For on January 1, 1898 the office was transferred to Arlington Centre and free delivery of mail established with our mounted carrier delivered from centre post office, a sub-station was established in the grocery store of Charles Cushing, who was made clerk-in-charge.

For the next three months the Heights was without a post office, but on April 15 the office was moved back again. It was made a regular station of the Boston Postal district and another carrier was added. For about three years Mr. Cushing held the position of postmaster and then it passed to Mr. Albert Blanchard kept the office in conjunction with his store for four or five years and then it was moved into quarters of its own.

In 1912 Mr. William A. McNeil, the present incumbent of the position was appointed superintendent of the Arlington Height sstation. That station at present has a force of three clerks and five carriers.