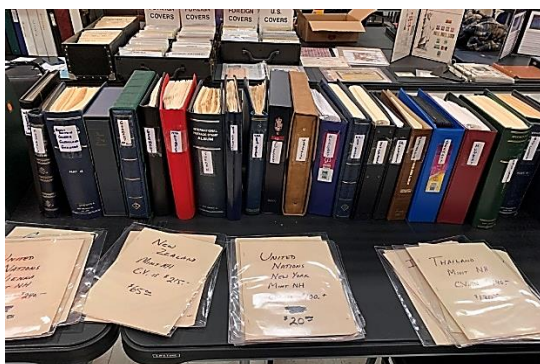


PICTURES FROM AUTUMN STAMP FESTIVAL

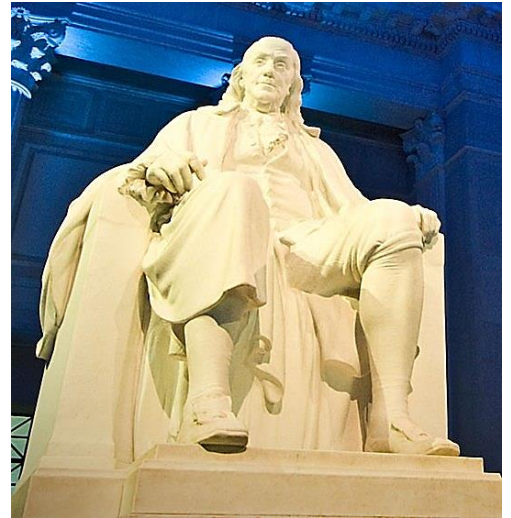
November 23, 2024 at The Knights Hall



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN and the Birth of the US Postal Service – Part 1 of 4

Written by Tom Scudder – Excerpt from *The Elks Magazine* – April 2024

Benjamin Franklin is best known today as a Founding Father, a writer, a scientist, and a diplomat, but he was also a gifted administrator and innovator who is considered the founder of the US Postal Service. He thoroughly reformed the postal system of the thirteen American colonies during British rule and in July 1775 became the first postmaster general of an independent American postal system. Under Franklin's leadership, the newly established American postal system carried out one of the basic functions of a national government by swiftly and reliably delivering mail throughout the country. This young, American-run postal service, which was established nearly a year before the colonies formally declared independence from Britain, also served to demonstrate to the world that Americans could govern their own affairs.



Mail in the American Colonies

Mail delivery in the British-ruled American colonies was established very soon after the founding of the colonies themselves. The first post office in the colonies was established in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1639, when the city was only nine years old, and other local post offices soon sprang up in other American cities. Initially, most of the mail that was sent from these post offices traveled between the colonies and Great Britain rather than within one colony or between colonies. The reason for this was simple: sending mail was very expensive. As a result, typically only the most important messages, often those between Great Britain and governmental bodies in the colonies, were thought to be worth the cost of mailing a letter.

For several decades after mail delivery was established in the colonies, the system by which deliveries were made differed significantly from city to city. This began to change in 1691, when the British government ordered the creation of a central postal service to serve all the colonies. For this purpose, British politician Thomas Neale was appointed to create “an office for receiving and dispatching letters and pacquets” and was given a twenty-one-year monopoly over such deliveries. The various colonies soon established local postmasters’ offices in accordance with the British government’s order. In 1711, after Neal’s monopoly charter expired, this young postal system came under direct British government control and became known as the Royal Mail.



Thomas Neale ran postal system from 1691 to 1711

During this period, colonial mail was typically carried either by ship or on horseback by so-called post riders. The cost of sending mail changed over time and varied depending on the route – for example, in 1711, sending a letter from New York to Philadelphia cost nine pence, but sending one from Boston to Philadelphia cost twenty-one pence. These costs were substantial. To put them into perspective, at about the same time, weekly rent for a room in London, England, was about twelve pence. Another surprising fact, by modern standards, about the postal system at this time is that the recipient, rather than the sender, paid for delivered mail. Furthermore, the letters were not delivered to people’s houses. Instead, individuals would periodically check the central post office and pay for any letters that had arrived in their name.

(Part 2 – next month)