

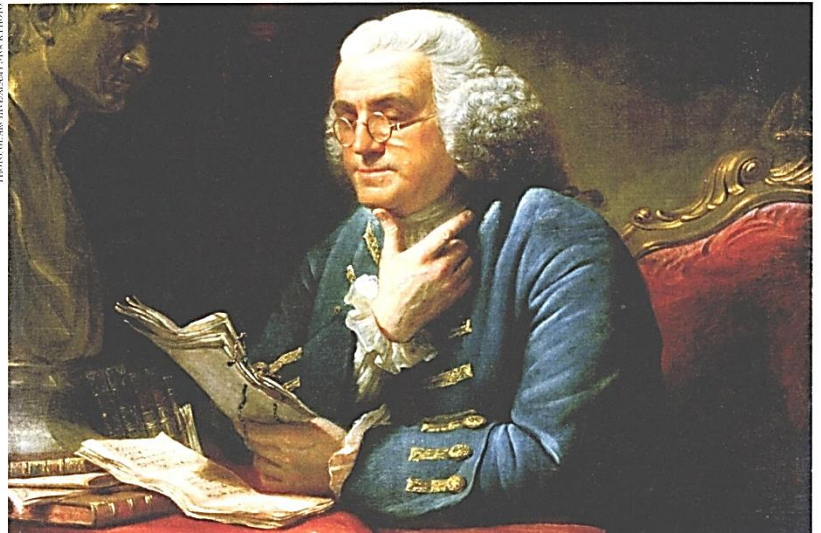
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN and the Birth of the US Postal Service – Part 2 of 3

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

Benjamin Franklin and Mail Reforms

In 1737, a young printer named Benjamin Franklin became the postmaster of the city of Philadelphia. He came to be known for his efficient administration and was eventually appointed as comptroller of the entire postal system in the colonies. In 1753, the postmaster general for the colonies, Elliot Benger, retired, at which point Franklin and Virginia-based printer William Hunter were appointed as Benger's successors. Though in theory the two men split the responsibilities of the postmaster general's office, in practice the ambitious and forward-thinking Franklin took the lead in managing the postal system.

As copostmaster general, Franklin's first priority was to speed up the mail service along the routes between major northeastern cities. At the time he was appointed, it could take as many as six weeks for a letter and its response to make a round trip from Philadelphia to Boston and back, but by having his post riders travel both night and day and increasing the frequency of mail runs, he was able to cut that time in half. These measures also reduced the time it took for a letter to travel one way between Philadelphia and New York to just a single day.

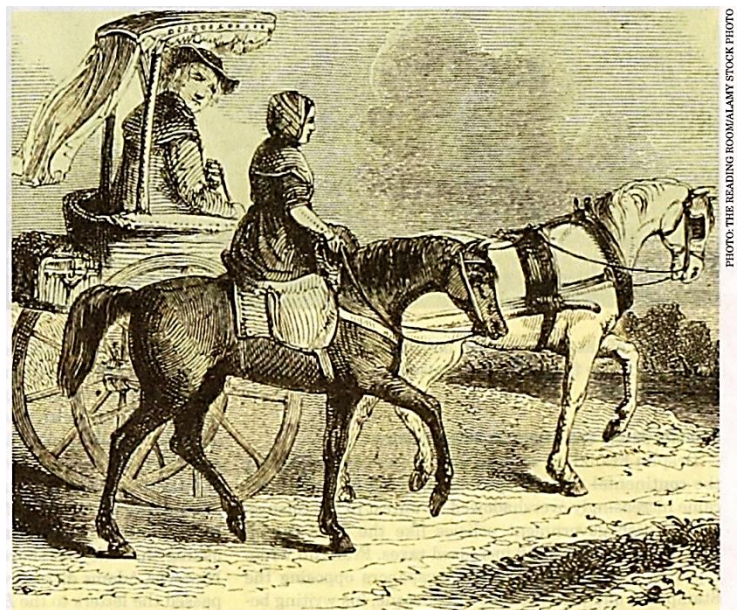


Ben Franklin 1767 Portrait

Another of Franklin's priorities was to improve the management of individual post offices under his jurisdiction. Within a year of assuming office, he issued a manual for postmasters that specified how post riders should be vetted, how mail sent to the wrong location should be processed, how undeliverable mail should be treated, and how all these transactions should be recorded. One of his instructions encouraged his postmasters to deliver mail that had not been picked up at the post office to local addresses – a service that had never been offered before – at a surcharge of half a penny. The manual also established a single, uniform, colony-wide set of prices for sending mail based on the weight of the envelope and the distance a letter traveled.

Another important item on Franklin's agenda was to reform the Royal Mail's policies toward newspapers, which had previously given individual postmasters – many of whom were also publishers – broad discretion as to whether they would transport them at all. Some postmasters had abused this system to favor their own publications over those of their competitors. To counter this, in 1758 Franklin decreed that all newspapers would be carried for a single, uniform fee.

In the late 1750's, Franklin moved to London to represent the colonial government of Pennsylvania. He spent most of the next decade and a half running the American colonial postal system from England, making decisions based on reports he



received by mail from his local postmasters in the colonies. Although his primary residence was in London,

Franklin returned to the colonies several times during the 1760s and continued to improve the postal system. During one notable trip, which took place in 1763, he spent five months surveying the postal roads used to deliver the mail. To help ensure mail was being driven along the most efficient routes, he created an odometer that measured the distance a vehicle traveled by counting the revolutions of its wheels. He then attached the odometer to his wagon and traversed some 1,600 miles of postal roads while the device recorded a precise measurement of the distance traveled along each route.

Franklin's success as postmaster general showed significant results as early as 1760, when the colonial post office earned a profit for the first time. This progress reached a new high point in 1764, when Franklin was able to deposit into the British treasury a modest dividend from the profits of the mail service, marking the first time a postal employee from a British possession had ever done such a thing.

(Part 3 – next month)

SIDEBAR – FRANKING PRIVILEGES

POSTMASTERS IN COLONIAL AMERICA had access to what were called franking privileges, which allowed them to send mail free of charge. Instead of paying a fee to receive their letters, postmasters' correspondents could receive them for free. Beginning in 1737, when he became postmaster for the city of Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin used these privileges to distribute copies of his biweekly, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and to correspond extensively with scholars and scientists in Europe. Thanks in part to this subsidized correspondence, Franklin was able to share the news of his scientific discoveries and inventions, and by the late eighteenth century was perhaps the most famous American in the world.

To signify that a letter was to be sent using franking privileges, postmasters customarily signed their letters "Free" followed by their name. Following this convention, Franklin used the signature "Free B. Franklin" on most of his earlier correspondence. However, starting in the mid-1760's, to protest British policies that he saw as oppressing the colonies, Franklin began to change his signature. Most of his letters from that period and later were instead signed "B. Free Franklin" – a subtle exhortation to his correspondents to be free.

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