



Essential Service



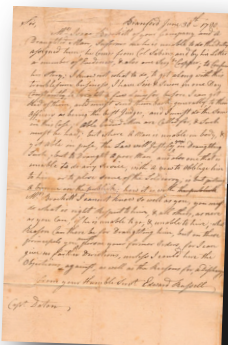
In times of adversity, the country recognizes the importance of its mail and letter carriers

The Postal Service has found itself under an intense spotlight in recent months.

COVID-19 and shelter-in-place orders in many states have caused letter carriers to be designated as essential employees, delivering letters, packages, medications, government checks and other vital items to tens of millions of Americans confined to their homes. Letter carriers have been recognized and thanked for this vital service through countless notes, handmade signs and chalk drawings, as well as in letters to the editor from grateful residents across the country.

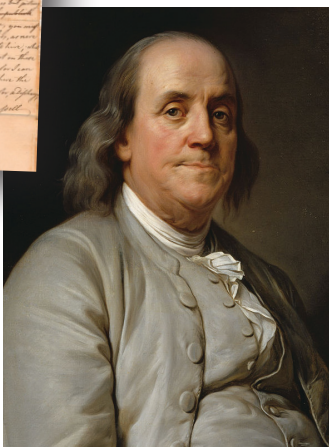
Attention also has been focused on the state of postal finances, with many lawmakers—and citizens—calling for temporary federal financial assistance for an organization seen as even more indispensable than ever during the pandemic. The media have reported heavily on the key role played by letter carriers in allowing people to shelter at home as well as on the financial story, in addition to the issue of vote-by-mail in the fall elections and other postal-related matters.

Given all this, it is worth looking back and reflecting on the importance of the Postal Service to the nation, dating back to even before there was a nation. As they have so many times in the past, U.S. citizens are appreciating the value of the Post Office when they need it most.



Right: Benjamin Franklin was a postmaster general for both England and the new country.

Above: A letter sent during the Revolutionary War

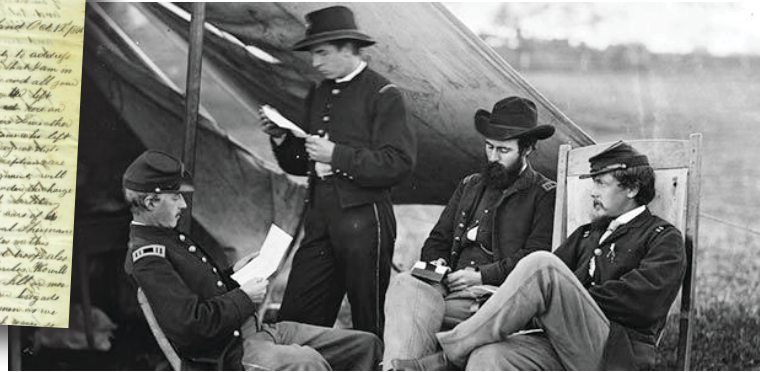
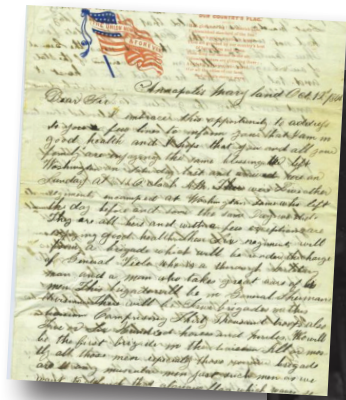


Born in war

Before George Washington was elected president, before the Constitution was written and before the nation even declared its independence, the colonies took care of one of their most pressing priorities: They established the nation's postal service and declared Benjamin Franklin the first postmaster general.

In the early days of the 13 colonies, most mail was sent from England to the colonies or from the colonies to England. There was little mail from one colony to another. And so, the bulk of the mail traveled by

Opposite page (top): The Second Continental Congress, which established the new nation's first postal service
Opposite page: A poster for V-mail
Right: Union soldiers reading letters from home and a letter sent during the Civil War



ship and took months to deliver, with no set schedules and a strong chance that the ship would be blown off course. The lack of post offices in the colonies meant that mail would typically be left at inns and taverns to be picked up.

About 20 years before he became the new country's postmaster general, Franklin served as one of Great Britain's postmasters general in the colonies, based on his experience as postmaster of Philadelphia. He set about making improvements to the postal system, including setting up more efficient routes among the colonies and reducing delivery times by having the weekly mail wagon between New York and Pennsylvania travel both day and night with relay teams. The first rate chart, which standardized delivery costs based on distance and weight, also was created by Franklin.

The improvements he made didn't stop the British from firing Franklin in 1774 for his revolutionary activities. But a year later, he was appointed the fledgling country's postmaster general by the Second Continental Congress. Franklin held the job until late in 1776, when he was sent to France as a diplomat. But the country could now safely, discreetly and reliably correspond across long distances between states.

The postal system was so important that it was included in the ninth of the 13 Articles of Confederation (the national government system that was set in place before the U.S. Constitution) and later enshrined in the first article of the Constitution.

The Founding Fathers saw the mail as an essential means of guaranteeing the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. One of the first postal laws set a special discounted rate for newspapers. But it also helped this large, sparsely populated country grow as a single nation. In his esteemed book, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville noted in the 1830s how "the mail, that great link between minds, today penetrates into the heart of the wilderness."

Close to the heart

Even as the country was using the mail to bind together the states and new frontiers, the Civil War would tear those sutures apart. There were only 75 post offices at the nation's founding, but less than a century later, at the start of the Civil War, there were more than 28,000 spread around the country.

Arguably, Americans have never valued the mail more than during the Civil War, because it connected soldiers on the battlefield with loved ones back home. Wagons and tents served as traveling post offices. Soldiers treasured letters from home, reading and responding to them frequently.

Many kept a letter in their pockets to be sent to their families if they died in combat.

The U.S. Post Office Department introduced several improvements during the war that made it easier to send and receive mail. Since soldiers rarely had stamps—and when they did have them, the harsh conditions often turned the stamps from gummed bits of paper into sodden lumps—soldiers were allowed to mail letters without stamps by writing "Soldier's Letter" on the envelope. The postage was collected from the recipient.

In July 1863, the rate chart originally instituted by Franklin was retired when all distance-based letter rate categories were eliminated, and all letters given the lowest rate. That same month, free home delivery of mail was introduced in the nation's largest cities.

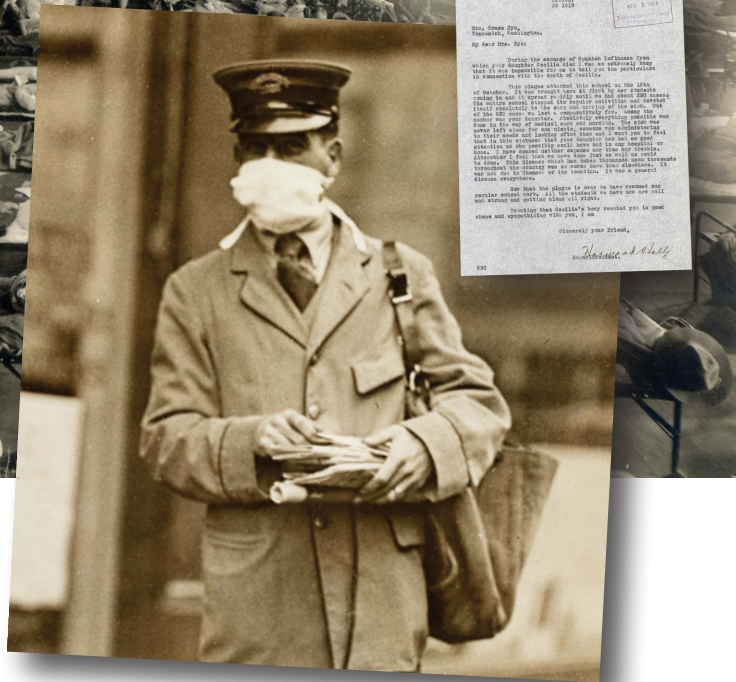
The Confederacy established its own Post Office Department in February 1861, two months before the start of the war. It recruited Southern men who had been working for the U.S. Post Office Department. Many accepted and brought along their expertise, as well as copies of postal forms, postal maps and other supplies.

The United States banned the exchange of mail between citizens of the North and South in August 1861, although smugglers often carried mail illegally across the lines. Prisoner-of-war mail was exchanged between the North and South at designated points under a flag of truce. Citizens could also send letters via the flag-of-truce system, although like prisoners' mail, their letters were read by censors and rejected if the contents were objectionable.

Masked delivery

Pandemics help to remind citizens of the value of the mail in the same way that wars do, as seen during the flu outbreak of 1918-19. It was the deadliest pandemic in modern history, with an estimated 500 million infected (almost a third of the world's population at the time) and 50 million people dead worldwide, including approximately 650,000 (of a population of 103 million) in the United States.

The first U.S. cases of what became known as "Spanish flu" were reported in Boston in August 1918 among servicemen who had returned from World War I. Within weeks, the flu jumped to civilian populations and quickly spread to cities nationwide. From coast to coast, local and state governments enacted social-distancing measures—including closing schools, banning public gatherings and shuttering some businesses.



In Washington, DC, 150 postal clerks and carriers fell ill during the first week of October 1918. The postmaster required all carriers and clerks who interacted with the public to wear masks. He also recruited high school boys who were out of school during the closures to work at the post office.

In other locations, especially in the Western United States, post offices reduced or even suspended service.

In some cities, letter carriers were used to deliver important health notices about social distancing, at a time before television or the internet had been invented.

Jenny Lynch, the Postal Service's historian, explains that the value people place on the mail and in their letter carriers often is strengthened during times of crisis, when people aren't looking for goods and services alone, but also for a special connection with the ones they love.

"The ability to connect can be, quite literally, a lifeline during times of extreme stress," she said. "Mail enables the exchange of vital supplies and information. Perhaps even more important, it can provide hope, comfort and purpose."

Shrines to the American life

The nation had known economic hardship before, but perhaps never so much as during the Great Depression, which started in the United States after stock prices took a sharp fall on Sept. 4, 1929, and became even bleaker weeks later with the crash on Black Tuesday, Oct. 29. Over the next three years, gross domestic product fell by an estimated 15 percent and unemployment rose to 23 percent.

The economic hit hurt the Post Office Department along with the rest of the country. In his 1933 report to the president, Postmaster General James A. Farley noted that, "Never

before in the history of the country have economic conditions been reflected in any substantial reduction in postal volume.... The Post Office Department is now confronted with the problem of maintaining its revenues."

To combat the effects of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt pushed through a series of reforms that came to be known as the "New Deal." Within that policy were several rounds of infrastructure legislation that had a tremendous effect on the physical makeup of post offices around the country.

Emergency appropriation laws in 1934, 1935 and 1936 provided about \$188 million "for the emergency construction of public buildings throughout the country, the projects to be selected by the Postmaster General and the Secretary of the Treasury." With this funding, hundreds of cities and towns across the country built new post office buildings.

For New Deal policymakers, merely adding post office buildings was not enough. They saw an opportunity to display America's heritage through murals, sculptures and other artwork. The Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture beautified hundreds of new and old post offices with scenes from the nation's history, featuring such themes as land settlement, farming, transportation development, city life and Native American cultures. This New Deal artwork was intended to lift the spirits of the people and give them a shared sense of community during the troubled times of the Great Depression.

With economic revival, the financial situation improved dramatically. For the 1935 fiscal year, the postmaster announced a sizable increase in postal revenues and a "substantial increase in the volume of mail." The following year he reported an additional \$35 million increase. By 1940, Post Office earnings were at "an all-time high."

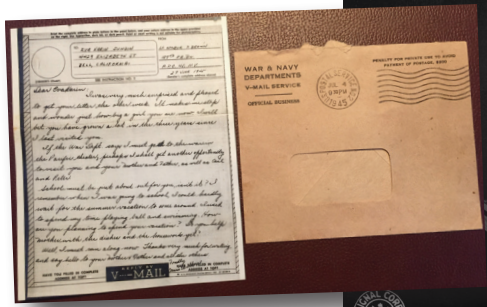
Victory mail

As with previous wars, World War II prompted many people to write letters to their loved ones, especially to



Opposite page (top):
A temporary hospital
set up during the
1918 pandemic
Opposite page: A
New York City letter
carrier wears a mask
while delivering mail
in October 1918 and
a letter about the
pandemic

Right: One of the machines for
photographing V-mail onto film
for delivery overseas
Below: A piece of V-mail



and from those serving in the armed forces. But with the nation preoccupied with moving troops and war materials across the globe as it had never done before, the war effort quickly found itself overwhelmed with mail. Each year of the war, the number of pieces of mail increased. In 1945, 2.5 billion pieces went through the Army Postal Service and 8 million pieces through Navy post offices.

The critical nature of the mail effort was addressed in the 1942 Annual Report of the Postmaster General Frank C. Walker, which said: “The Post Office, War and Navy departments realize fully that frequent and rapid communication with parents, associates and other loved ones strengthens fortitude, enlivens patriotism, makes loneliness endurable and inspires to even greater devotion the men and women who are carrying on our fight far from home and from friends.”

To bring mail service to those serving worldwide, the military postal system required a global network and innovative practice: V-mail, short for “Victory mail.” Used between June 1942 and November 1945, the V-mail system drastically reduced the space needed to transport mail and freed up room for other supplies.

Officially titled the “Army Micro Photographic Mail Service,” War Department Pamphlet No. 21-1 described V-mail as “an expeditious mail program which provides for quick mail service to and from soldiers overseas. A special form is used which permits the letter to be photographed in microfilm. The small film is transported and then reproduced and delivered. Use of V-mail is urged because it greatly furthers the war effort by saving shipping and airplane space.”

An important part of the V-mail system was the use of standardized stationery, which combined the letter and envelope into one piece of paper. These sheets were provided free of charge by the Post Office at the rate of two sheets per person per day. All of the paper used for V-mail had to be the same size and weight, so the pages could be fed into the processing machine for microfilming.

Because the letter was shrunk, letter writers were urged to write in dark ink or pencil. “Faint or small writing is not suitable for photographing,” said the instructions.

The Post Office and the War and Navy Departments worked together in the complex V-mail operation. There were three giant postal centers, one apiece in New York, San Francisco and Chicago, where the letters were photographed. Censors also would read each letter and black out

any critical information before the letter was filmed.

The military was responsible for transporting the reels overseas. The V-mail station overseas would print and distribute them. Each sender station kept the original copies as backups until notified by the receiving station that the reel had been properly transmitted.

All V-mail was sent via air mail, so it was quicker and more reliable than regular mail, which was sent by ship and sometimes lost at sea. V-mail also was free for all servicemen.

V-mail practice saved vital shipping space: 37 mail bags could fit within one mail bag of V-mail and about 1,600 letters could fit on a single 100-foot roll of 16mm film.

Whatever the sending process, mail was appreciated both at home and by the troops abroad. As one serviceman said, “Letters were a great comfort. And the mail was indispensable. We couldn’t have won the war without it. It was terribly important as a motivator of the troops. Mail call, whenever it happened, it was a delight.”

Taking a moment

With a history full of stories of how the mail has been essential during periods of challenge or adversity, it is no surprise that many are taking a moment during this current pandemic to recognize the importance of the mail and the people who deliver it.

Casey Cep of *The New Yorker* magazine recently recounted her own family connection to the Postal Service, the current pandemic-related financial struggles of USPS and some of the history of the Post Office.

In the May article, Cep wrote, “The founders were right to realize that the Postal Service isn’t only a way of moving thoughts and goods from every corner of America to any other, but also a way of uniting one of the largest and most diverse nations in the world. At a time when too few things connect us as a country, and too few of us have faith in our public institutions, we can’t afford to lose the one we trust the most.”

How Americans and their government respond to the pandemic and the existential threat it has brought to USPS will determine in large measure what the future of the Postal Service looks like. But if history and current writers are any indication, the nation has always viewed mail—and letter carriers—as essential services and will continue to do so. **PR**