State Mail Service Spans 300 Years

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South Carolina's Story

The making of a state

WINTHROP COLLEGE

The history of postal service in South Carolina spans three centuries. In 1694 the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly created the Office of Powder Receiver and appointed Capt. William Smith to collect powder from every entering ship to be used in defense of the colony. A second duty of Capt. Smith was to collect all incoming mail and see that it was distributed properly.
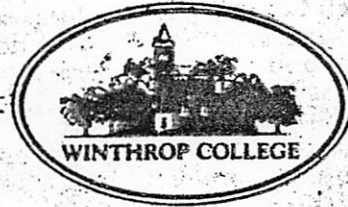
In 1698 the assembly authorized that a post office be maintained in the house of Francis Fidling in Charles Town. An Act in 1702 added the provision that Edward Bourne (the new postmaster) was to make a list of every letter received, post the list in a public list for 30 days, and was to require each person who picked up a letter to sign for it.

It was soon the custom for the postmaster positions to go to the proprietors of the leading inns or taverns. In one case, the editor of the outspoken "Gazette," Peter Timothy, got the prized political plum. One Charlestonian, John Lloyd, in 1721, became the Deputy Postmaster General of America.

Backcountry settlers had no mail service at all beyond that which they could arrange with local storekeepers or with travelers paid to carry their mail for them. Such arrangements were erratic at best and not much improved by the overthrowing of British rule.

When the United States of America was established in 1788, one of the first appointments was that of Postmaster General of the United States. In 1792, the Charleston newspaper advertised for proposals for carrying the mail on a "Post-road" that would run from Virginia through Fayetteville, N.C. and then through Cheraw, Camden, Columbia and Cambridge in South Carolina to Augusta, Ga. A round trip on the proposed route would take 13 days.

In late 1794 the Camden newspaper reported that the gentleman who had won the Petersburg, Va., to Augusta, Ga., contract was sick on the road, and there was no mail received in Camden from Oct. 1 until Nov. 4. In 1797 a worse mail lapse occurred after the mail rider's horse threw him and then fell on him. A "terrible congestion of mail" was described by the newspaper as "four horse-loads for Charleston" and "only a single horse twice a week."

It was 1816 before Camden was to have the benefit of mail delivered twice a week from Charleston. In the 1790s it was believed that the Santee Canal would connect the major points of the upcountry with Charleston. Besides carrying cotton, foodstuffs and heavy articles, a regular fleet of boats was expected to carry the mail and small articles as well. The canal did not work out and finally private mail routes were funded by newspaper subscribers and other private sources.

By 1825 the Charleston post office had the reputation of being "the best and most convenient post office in the United States." In 1831 the South Carolina railroad, the second railroad line in America, began carrying the mail out of Charleston to Hamburg across the Savannah River from Augusta, Ga. The railroad's blue-stamped cancellations have made the envelopes prized items for collectors.

The growth of railroads was a major factor in reducing the cost of delivering the mail. In fact, the postal rates went down even when the general cost of living went up. In 1801 a single sheet cost 8 cents to send 40 miles or less and up to 25 cents for 500 miles or more. By 1846 a letter was delivered for 3 cents up to 300 miles distance and was 10 cents for all above 300 miles.

From the beginning, newspapers were only 1 cent for delivery by mail. The general welfare, it was believed, required a well-informed citizenry.

On May 24, 1984, a special ceremony in Charleston marked the dedication of the Charleston Postal Museum commemorating 300 years of mail service in South Carolina.