



PERSPECTIVES

by Rinaldo S. Brutoco



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What's the "Big Deal" with the Post Office?

The Trump Administration is doing everything it can to make it harder for the Post Office to deliver and collect, in a timely manner, the ballots so we can avoid physically going to the polls in COVID times. Ok, that sounds pretty ugly. Is there more going on? Is there something more important than that we should be noticing? What are the long-term challenges facing the Post Office? Where did the Post Office come from, and why was it created? What is the most useful role for it in the future? Should it be required to make a profit (the State Department and the Pentagon do not, nor does any other major government entity)? What would it take to make it profitable if that is what we require? How can it recreate itself? In an increasingly electronic world, is it a relic of the pre-Internet times or does it have a future we should be embracing and promoting?

These are some of the questions I'll be exploring in the next several columns as we look at this historically vital and totally unique government agency.

In this age of instant communication, the Internet, 24-hour cable news, and a dizzying array of print and electronic information, it is difficult to comprehend just how vital the creation of the Post Office was to the establishment of the colonies, the development of colonial government, and the nation itself. All they had in 1600s and 1700s was the ability to send letters and newspapers between the various colonies. It is a little-known fact that the "Committees of Correspondence" were created in each colony for the explicit purpose of coordinating colonial communication between the rising group of patriots. They relied totally on the Post Office.

Benjamin Franklin was appointed the first Postmaster General for the American Colonies by the 2nd Continental Congress on July 26, 1775. That wasn't a casual appointment. Thirty-eight years earlier, Franklin, at the age of 31, was appointed the Postmaster of Philadelphia. From that date until the end of his life, no single American had such a significant impact on the creation and operation of the emerging postal service.

The first Colonial Post Office was opened in Massachusetts in 1639. The initial purpose for the service was to provide a place to collect mail from the immediate area, bundle it for transport to the appropriate European capital, and then in some cases have it sent back to the colonies by the respective country to which it had been sent. Can you imagine the inefficiency of having to mail a letter from Massachusetts to London to in turn have it sent to Philadelphia? Such was the state of mail delivery chaos inflicted on the Colonies which prompted the creation of the colonial postal system Franklin originally built for the crown, until he was fired for his "colonialist sympathies" in 1774.

Two weeks after the battles at Lexington and Concord, Franklin led an urgently convened special committee of the Continental Congress to create the colonies' own postal system separate from prior crown operations for two reasons: 1) they needed a secure way to get messages between the colonies, particularly between the

various branches of the Continental Army, and 2) they wanted to use postal revenues to build a "post roads" system that would efficiently tie the colonies together.

The Post Office was correctly seen as the essential glue that held the colonies together and provided the optimized communication delivery system of its time. It still is that "essential glue" and is still an optimized delivery system for a wide variety of physical mail delivered items.

If you want to learn more of the fascinating history of the Post Office you can grab a copy of the 144 page, delightfully illustrated "The United States Postal Service: An American History. It is fascinating, informative, and a great way to better understand the challenges and opportunities our young nation faced in trying to bind together the original 13 colonies which were so distant from one another, and so very different in almost every way.

For this column, we need to focus on why both the Articles of Confederation in 1781 and the United States Constitution (Article 1, Section 8) as finally adopted in 1788 outlined only one government service that the new Congress was instructed to create and maintain. Why was it that important? What can we learn from that history to better understand why the Post Office, all these years later, remains an essential government service?

Prior to the Revolutionary War, the Post Office was viewed as the essential way the colonists could learn what was going on from each other, what they were saying, as well as eavesdrop on local and distant gossip of the day. It was the only communication medium Revolutionary Patriots had.

Once the Revolutionary War began, almost all of the mail the Post Office carried was letters between General Washington and his military assistants or between military units. The Post Office was the way military messages were transmitted. Getting ready for that War was why the Continental Congress took the rapid actions to ensure that Franklin would immediately take what he learned from running the crown's colonial postal service and turn it into the engine required to fire up and maintain the Revolution. That's how important the Post Office was to the Founding Fathers.

If one of the original primary purposes for the Post Office was to provide an economic way to pay for and maintain a system of roads, is it still able to play that role today? What useful societal purposes does the Post Office continue to serve? Are there additional critical services the Post Office can provide in the future? How can it help hold a lid on the prices for expedited delivery otherwise private services like UPS and FedEx would charge? Stay tuned into this series over the next few weeks as we explore these topics.

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