

HOUSEHOLD LETTER BOXES REVOLUTIONIZE

LETTER CARRIER SERVICE

By Clifford J. Alexander

July 1, 1863 marked the end of the carrier fee era. On that day, the U.S. Post Office Department ceased charging the public for collection and delivery of mail. Some might assume that this change revolutionized mail service in the United States. However, except for elimination of the separate carrier fees, neither delivery nor collection services were affected. Carriers continued to deliver mail to addresses in the same manner as before; and they continued to collect mail only from Post Office Department boxes located throughout cities, unless it was handed to them as they made their rounds.

Throughout the remaining third of the nineteenth century, the Post Office Department regularly expanded free delivery to other cities besides the 49 that initially qualified. In addition, during the 1880s and 1890s, the Post Office Department experimented with use of pneumatic tubes, streetcars and mail wagons to assist with the collection and delivery of mail. One of the most important initiatives – 30 years after free carrier service was introduced – was a program established during the administration of Postmaster General John Wanamaker to encourage city residents to buy and install household letter boxes in exchange for house-to-house collections.

Confusion can sometimes occur due to the multiple meanings for the term “letter box.” Letter box can include the collection boxes that are located on streets and lamp posts, boxes at post offices, household letter boxes on posts at the sides of highways, boxes located in lobbies of commercial office buildings and boxes attached to or built into homes. This paper is about the introduction of this last type, boxes intended to facilitate both the collection and delivery of mail at the residences of citizens.

Carrier Service from 1863-1893

Prior to July 1, 1863, carriers' compensation depended entirely on the fees they received for collections and deliveries. This system had a number of drawbacks. If a new carrier was added to the routes in a city, the territory – and compensation – of one or more of the other carriers was reduced. This could discourage increases in the number of carriers serving a city. In addition, because the number of daily pieces of mail tended to be steady, there was little incentive for carriers to make more than one round each day.

On July 1, 1863, a number of postal reforms became effective. Two were most important to the subject of this paper. First, carriers were made regular employees of the Post Office Department and paid fixed fees set by Congress. And second, the charge for delivery of mail was eliminated.

However, on that day, only 49 cities qualified for free delivery carrier service, and the post offices in those cities employed only 449 carriers, over 250 of which were in New York City and Philadelphia.¹ This is because Congress only authorized free delivery service – and appropriated money to pay carriers’ salaries – for cities that already had carrier service. The Postmaster General was given authority to expand the service beyond the initial 49 cities, but only where the city had 40,000 residents and sufficient revenue to financially support the service.

Over the ensuing 10 years, the growth of cities and success of the program permitted gradual expansion of the carrier service.² Sixteen cities were added during the next twelve months and as of June 30, 1873, 87 cities with 2,049 carriers had free delivery service. In 1879, Congress revised the limitation to authorize free delivery by post offices with \$20,000 in revenue located in cities with 20,000 residents. The Postmaster General continued to extend the free delivery service to additional cities, subject to Congressional appropriations to cover carriers’ salaries. By June 30, 1883, there were 3,680 carriers operating in 154 cities.

In 1887, Congress again lowered the limitation to extend free delivery to post offices with \$10,000 in revenue that were located in cities with 10,000 residents. Nevertheless, by June 30, 1889, there were only 446 post offices offering free delivery. The other 2,216 U.S. post offices in smaller cities and rural areas continued to operate under the old system in which patrons had to bring mail to and pick it up at their post offices.³

John Wanamaker, Postmaster General

A number of Post Office Department innovations at the end of the nineteenth century were developed and implemented under the leadership of John Wanamaker, who served as Postmaster General for four years, from March 1889 to March 1893. Wanamaker was a successful and innovative owner of a large Philadelphia department store. His store reportedly was one of the first to offer refunds, employee benefits and telephone orders. And, he brought an entrepreneurial vision to the Post Office Department when he was appointed Postmaster General by President Benjamin Harrison effective March 5, 1889.

Like Harrison, who signed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, Wanamaker was concerned about the economic power of corporate monopolies. One of Wanamaker’s unsuccessful proposals was for the U.S. government to assume control of both the telegraph and telephone industries. Although these were young and innovative industries, he also understood that the telephone – not the telegraph – would become the preferred means of communication in the future.

Wanamaker also proposed that the Post Office Department establish rural free delivery, streetcar mail and pneumatic tube mail service. Under his administration, the Post Office Department issued the first commemorative stamps – the Columbia series of 1893. Wanamaker also petitioned Congress to give the Post Office Department authority

to offer a parcel post delivery service, a proposal that was successfully opposed by the express companies until 1913.

In addition, Wanamaker was responsible for greatly expanding the Post Office Department's collection service by authorizing and encouraging homeowners to purchase and install letter boxes. Until 1892, carriers employed by the Post Office Department delivered mail to businesses and houses only when there was a letter to deliver, and only collected mail at houses when they made a delivery and the letter was handed to them. Unless a delivery needed to be made, there was no collection at businesses or houses. Mail also was collected from boxes located at various places throughout cities.

The Introduction of Private Letter Boxes

Until the mid-1890s, home mail delivery was a very personal service. Mail was sorted at the local post offices and, if carrier service had been established in a city, letters were brought to each house and business. Carriers knocked on the door or blew a whistle and waited for someone to answer. If the resident had a letter to send, the carrier would accept it and bring the letter to the post office on his return.

The catalyst for the introduction of home letter boxes did not involve political or social factors. By 1890 the Post Office Department faced a number of practical business challenges. One was lack of space for additional Post Office Department boxes. It was reported that there were 10,000 boxes in the New York Post Office, and that this office was running out of space to meet demands.

Another issue was the time wasted by carriers delivering mail to homes. The Post Office Department estimated that on average one-fourth of each carrier's time was spent waiting for residents to come to the door and accept their mail.⁴ In addition, the Post Office Department believed that home collection service might increase the amount of mail and Department revenue, and that this in turn could help support further expansion of free delivery service.

In the fall of 1890, the Postmaster General appointed a "commission of five of the leading postmasters of the United States" to entertain proposals for a "small, safe, and inexpensive letter box."⁵ Advertisements were published in major newspapers and inventors were asked to submit models.

The commission's activities stimulated a great deal of interest by investors. During 1891 and 1892, 108 patents were issued for "letter boxes," and 45 of these were formally designated letter boxes to be affixed to doors of homes. This represented half of the total of 217 patents for letter boxes that were issued during the entire 10 year period from 1887 to 1896. Some of these patents were for letter box mechanisms, some for street collection boxes and one interesting patent in 1893 was for a letter and bread box combined.

The commission initially received 564 models and designs, as well as testimony from 65 persons.⁶ None were considered to have attributes that satisfied all of the criteria set by the commission:

...the box must necessarily be inexpensive, neat, proof against the weather, proof against mischief-makers or thieves, simple enough not to get out of order and not to require time to open, ornamental enough to please the householder, big enough to receive papers, and ingenious enough to indicate the presence of mail matter to the passing collector.⁷

By June of 1890 the commission had received and examined “1,031 other models and designs.”⁸ Once again none of them completely satisfied the commission. However, 22 of these were placed on exhibit at the Post Office Department for viewing by inventors and other interested persons. The Post Office Department hoped that the exhibit might encourage new ideas and cooperation.

The Approved Letter Box Designs

Ultimately, after examining over 1,600 models and designs, the Post Office Department concluded that it did not make sense to continue looking for a single, perfect letter box design. The Post Office Department also recognized that households would have to be given some flexibility in order to encourage them to add mail slots or put up boxes.

The Post Office Department instead selected four boxes that the commission had determined offered the most advantages and best satisfied most of the important requirements.⁹ Three of the approved boxes accommodated both collections and deliveries, and one was solely a small delivery box.

One of the collection and delivery boxes was designed by Alfred D. Cushing and Alexander Mitchell of Wheeling, West Virginia to fit within doors or walls. It had openings located both inside and outside a patron’s house and it was large enough to accept newspapers and small packages, as well as letters. Patrons could insert and retrieve mail in the security of their houses without going outside or even opening their doors. The patent was transferred to the Postal Improvement Company, which engaged in an active marketing campaign in subsequent years to sell letter boxes.

Two collection and delivery boxes submitted by W. O. Taylor of J. S. Mason & Co., Boston, Massachusetts, were designed only to be placed on an outside wall or door of a house or on a post. The fourth model submitted by John Ringen of St. Louis, Missouri, was a small outside box that only accepted deliveries but was distinguished by its strength and cheapness.

The 1892 Annual Report of the Postmaster General¹⁰ included illustrations of one outside and one inside letter box. The outside box (Figure 1) was affixed to the outside of a house’s door or wall. It had a slit at the top for insertion of mail and a lever that was

raised to signal the carrier that the box contained mail for collection. The carrier opened a bottom door and removed the mail deposited by the resident and inserted mail for delivery.



Figure 1

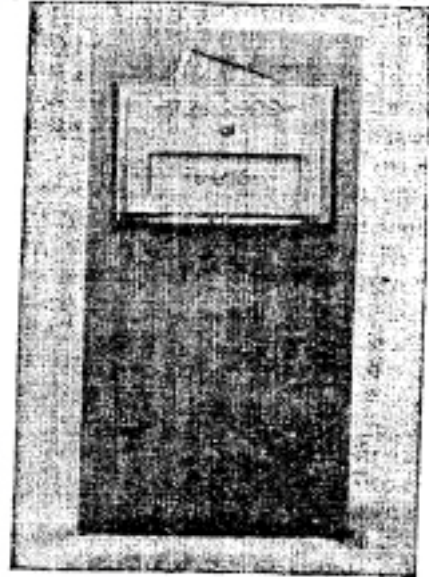


Figure 2

The inside letter box by Cushing and Alexander was designed to be inserted within the door or wall and was more complex. The outside of the box (Figure 2) fit nearly flush with the front of the door or wall and had a rectangular door at the top that the carrier would unlock. It also had a signal lever at the top that was raised to alert the carrier when the box contained mail for collection.





Figure 3



Figure 4

The resident opened a lid at the top of the box that was inside the house and placed mail for collection horizontally on the open lid so that the ends of the letters were touching the outside door (Figure 3). The carrier would unlock the outside door and pull out the mail for collection. The carrier would then shove the mail for delivery vertically down the box. To retrieve the mail being delivered, the resident would open a door at the bottom of the box inside the home allowing the mail to slide down and out (Figure 4).

88 THE POSTAL RECORD.






Postal Improvement Company..
(INCORPORATED).

Manufacturers of Devices for the improvement of the Mail Service.

Exclusive makers of the devices recommended by the House Letter Box Commission and tested and adopted by the Post Office Department for extending the house-to-house collections system to towns and cities having free delivery.

General Office and Factory at Norristown, Pennsylvania.
Office of the Secretary and Washington Director, 1472 Park Street, Washington, D. C.

IN WRITING TO ADVERTISERS, PLEASE MENTION "THE POSTAL RECORD."

Figure 5

Figure 5 is a full-page advertisement for the Cushing and Mitchell box that appeared in the March 1898 issue of *The Postal Record*, a journal published for postal employees.¹¹

Letter Box Tests and Approval

The free collection proposal was not uniformly praised. In the January 1892 issue of *The Postal Record*, one editor raised a number of objections. He wrote that it would “make very crooked and slow the path of the carrier delivery letters,” and that “too much

reliance will be placed on the regularity of carriers' visits" The author preferred that the Post Office Department retain the official post office collection box system then in effect, in which citizens "know where the letter box is, and it is quite generally known that the box is at stated intervals opened so many times a day."¹²

To demonstrate the feasibility of home letter boxes and address criticisms, the Post Office Department conducted tests of four different letter boxes in two cities. In Washington, D.C., boxes that were convenient for carriers to use and service were provided to houses for free. In St. Louis, 93 free letter boxes were attached to homes, 18 of which were placed on or built into walls, and 35 on porches or posts. And the boxes provided to houses in St. Louis were "purposely made as hard [to use] as possible."¹³

The Post Office Department was encouraged by the results of the experiment and reached several conclusions. It found that "the collection of mail from houses could be undertaken without enlargement of the present carriers' forces." It also found that carriers saved an hour or more each day in Washington where the boxes were easy for carriers to access, and there was no loss of time in St. Louis, where the boxes were more difficult. In addition, the Post Office Department discovered that in St. Louis, house collections increased mail volume by 400 percent.¹⁴

Following the tests, the Postmaster General issued an order on September 9, 1892, directing postmasters of free-delivery cities to provide free collections, as well as deliveries, to houses whenever two-thirds of the houses in a particular area had put up an approved box.¹⁵ There were 568 free delivery offices with 10,737 carriers serving nearly three million residences.

The Postmaster General's order extending house-to-house collection service to cities with free delivery was subject to a number of conditions:

1. The householder must, for his own convenience and advantage, and at his own expense, supply a suitable box.
2. The system of house collection can only be introduced in cities when the postmaster is notified that two-thirds of the residents of any one route desire it and agree to erect boxes.
3. Postmasters are instructed to exhibit the various collection and delivery boxes at the post office, give information about them and encourage householders to put them up. Inasmuch as the general use of boxes will increase the safety and speed of the mail, all clerks and carriers are requested to recommend and facilitate their adoption. No objection will be made to employment out of office hours for this purpose, for the introduction being an entirely voluntary matter the purchase can only be suggested, and not urged.

4. Selections of collection boxes are limited to devices and forms recommended by the commission for the reason that it is not practicable to burden or confuse the carriers with numbers of keys.
5. The Post Office Department will not assume the responsibility of collecting mail deposited in any other collection boxes than those approved by the Department.¹⁶

The new service was a success. In 1915, Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson proposed in his annual report that Congress enact legislation providing that carrier service be discontinued for any residents and places of business that did not have a suitable receptacle for the deposit of mail. That law became effective in 1916.

Conclusions

Today, we take for granted the service that letter carriers provide collecting mail from homes and delivering it to them. In fact, throughout the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth century, only homes in the largest cities received mail deliveries. And it was not until the mid-1890s with the introduction of home letter boxes that the Post Office Department offered home collection service.

Home letter boxes revolutionized the post office in a number of ways. They brought regular mail collection to people's homes for the first time in the United States. Residents could mail and collect letters without opening their doors. Letter boxes fostered greater use of the mails for personal correspondence. They reduced the need for individuals to rent boxes at post offices. They freed up carriers from the time-consuming annoyance of having to wait for patrons to answer their doors when they knocked or blew their whistle. And they helped pave the way for rural free delivery.

¹ The 49 cities with free delivery service on July 1, 1863 were Albany, New York; Allegheny, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; Bath, Maine; Boston, Massachusetts; Brooklyn, New York; Cambridgeport, Massachusetts; Charlestown, Massachusetts; Chelsea, Massachusetts; Cincinnati, Ohio; Cleveland, Ohio; Fall River, Massachusetts; Frederick, Maryland; Germantown, Pennsylvania; Hartford, Connecticut; Hoboken, New Jersey; Jersey City, New Jersey; Louisville, Kentucky; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Lawrence, Massachusetts; Lowell, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire; Marblehead, Massachusetts; New Bedford, Massachusetts; Nassau, Newburyport, Massachusetts; New Hampshire; New Haven, Connecticut; New York, New York; Newark, New Jersey; Newport, Rhode Island; Norristown, Pennsylvania; Paterson, New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Pittsburg, Pennsylvania; Poughkeepsie, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; Roxbury, Massachusetts; Salem, Massachusetts; St. Louis, Missouri; Syracuse, New York; Trenton, New Jersey; Troy, New York; Utica, New York; Washington, D.C.; Williamsburg, New York; Wilmington, Delaware; Worcester, Massachusetts; Nashua, New Hampshire; Reading, Pennsylvania; and York, Pennsylvania. Annual Report of the Postmaster General of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1863 at p. 28.

² Annual data on the free delivery service from 1863 to 1892 can be found at *The Postal Record*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1893).

³ Annual Report of the Postmaster General of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1889 at p. 27.

⁴ Annual Report of the Postmaster General of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1890 (“1890 Report”) at p. 40.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Report of House Letter-Box Commission (September 20, 1890), found at Appendix C of 1890 Report at p. 91.

⁷ Annual Report of the Postmaster General of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1891 at p. 78.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Post Office Department Order No. 125 (September 9, 1892) (“Order No. 125”).

¹⁰ Annual Report of the Postmaster General of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1892 (“1892 Report”) at pp. 15-18.

¹¹ *The Postal Record*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (March 1898) at p. 88.

¹² *The Postal Record*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January 1892).

¹³ 1892 Report at p. 15.

¹⁴ 1892 Report at p. 17.

¹⁵ Order No. 125.

¹⁶ Id.