

Postal Service

Recently, I was reviewing the correspondence between the North boys in western New York and their parents in Colebrook. Basically, these were written in the 1820s, and while it is the written content that received our attention, the physical letters themselves also have a story to tell.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, our U.S. Postal Service finds itself in a serious predicament; dramatically reduced volume due to the internet and other electronic options; their costs go up and the revenue goes down. I don't know how it will finally be resolved, but we can be sure that it will leave us with a Postal Service that we wouldn't recognize now.

The beginnings of the American postal system date back to Benjamin Franklin, during the Colonial period. By the year 1789, there were 75 post offices in this country; in 1825, when the North letters were sent, there were 5,677. Apparently, as the number of customers rose, the cost of sending a letter decreased. When the United States introduced adhesive postage in 1847, the rates were three cents for distances less than 300 miles, and ten cents for greater distances. The cheapest rates for a letter was two cents, introduced in 1883. The end of the upward spiral is not yet in sight, as nowadays the rate is in the mid-40 cents, and domestic first class mail stamps are no longer printed with a denomination; they all say "forever".

To return to the early North family letters: they were all written on sheets of unlined white paper measuring $16 \frac{1}{2} \times 12 \frac{3}{4}$ inches, folded in half on the long side, then folded one third of the length measured down from the top, up $2 \frac{3}{4}$ inches from the bottom, then in thirds. One lobe was folded once again in half to be sealed with two nickel-sized globs of wax.

The side opposite the sealed edges was addressed in five lines. There was no hard and fast rule as to the method of addressing these letters, but here is the way the North's did it: 1st line – "Connecticut"; 2nd line – "Mr. Lester North"; 3rd line – "Colebrook"; 4th line – "Meeting House Post Office"; 5th line – "Connecticut" (again). On the left side, written vertically in different ink, and in another hand, presumably the post master's, are the words "Alexander Aug. 14. 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ [cents]. (Alexander, N. Y. was the town of origin.)

That seems quite a bit to send a letter weighing no more than one ounce, especially as in one of those letters is given the rate for shipping along the just-opened Erie Canal, which was 87 $\frac{1}{2}$ cents per hundred pounds.

The North letters seem to suggest that more than one method was employed in sending mail. On February 13th, 1825, the letter begins: "We received a letter from you the last of January informing us that you have not had any letter from us since the first. We wrote a letter and sent it by Mr. Scovil the latter part of Dec. He agreed to leave it at Mr. Hungerford's" [Remembering that human nature does not change, in all probability Mr. Hungerford still has that letter folded up in the back pocket of his overalls!]

I have come across more information concerning letter writing during this time period in B. A. Botkin's invaluable book *A Treasury of New England Folklore*. In it there is an interview with a New Hampshire man who gives the following account:

“Letter writing was a very serious affair to many folks in town, especially the ‘backing’ of the double-fold sheets, which were simply folded and sealed with a red wax wafer, with no thought yet of an envelope. Three sides could be covered with writing, but the fourth must be left empty for the address, which was called the ‘backing’.

‘Uncle says when you back your letters, you should put the town’s name in a large, fair hand.’

Even after the 1860s had brought envelopes, the old expression was in use. ‘George, this is the last envelope you backed for me before you left for the war.’

Because postage was so high, and the earlier letters must be confined to the one sheet, many letters were dizzy affairs with the first part written over crisscross by the latter part, and again some letters were so little more than ‘I take my pen in hand’, and inquiry after the health of each member of the addressed family, that the complaint would come back: ‘Don’t send so much clean paper’, or ‘.....so much waste space paid for!’ Secret missives were written in old Bossy’s milk to be scorched into visibility in front of the receiver’s hearth fire.

Gaiety began to enter the postal ranks when tiny paper wafers of glossy black, carrying some message from Cupid, were affixed to the heated wax wafer. ‘When this you see, remember me, though many a mile we distant be’. One would have a picture of a broken gate: ‘I’m quite unhinged.’”

