

No Fries 'Til Mail—*How tourism brought mail service to the Grand Canyon*

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The first post office at the Grand Canyon opened in 1894. Since then a total of seven post offices have served the needs of the inhabitants and visitors. Five were opened as a direct result of tourism and housed in camps or hotels when initially opened. One was established primarily to serve the white educators who were dispatched to teach the Havasupai Indians, but, today, tourism also accounts for much of the mail that comes through that office. For two decades the seventh post office served the sparsely populated area northwest of the Canyon, where few people venture.

Background

Indigenous peoples have inhabited the Colorado River region and its canyons for more than 4,000 years. In 1540 explorers with the Coronado expedition were the first Europeans to view the area that is now called the Grand Canyon. Three centuries later, in 1848, the United States acquired the uncharted southwest territory including this region from Mexico, as part of the Mexican Cession. United States military expeditions led by Sitgreaves (1851), Whipple (1853), Beale (1857), and Ives (1857-58) began exploring and mapping the Southwest seeking riches and a route for a transcontinental railroad.

Reporting on his exploration of the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon, Lieutenant Joseph C. Ives wrote of his disregard for the area, “It can be approached only from the south, and after entering it there is nothing to do but leave. Ours has been the first, and doubtless will be the last, party of whites to visit this profitless locality.”¹

After the Civil War many people looked to the West for new opportunities. The arrival of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad to Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1882 followed by through-service to the Pacific the next year, set the stage for the arrival of tourists to the Grand Canyon. The trickle

of tourists from a couple of hundred a year in the late 1800s to the river of about 5 million annually today has had a direct impact on the establishment of post offices and mail service at the Canyon.

South Rim

With his early and passionate promotion of the Grand Canyon, Captain John Hance nurtured a growing interest in people visiting it. The coming of the tourists helped cast doubt on the veracity of Ives' observations. Hance perfected a vertical marketing formula to accommodate tourists interested in seeing the Grand Canyon. Upon arriving in Flagstaff, they needed transportation to the South Rim. He ran wagons and then a stage service to the South Rim. Upon reaching the Canyon, the tourists needed accommodations. Hance offered tents and meals. They wanted to see the Canyon. He led guided tours for \$12 a day, plus a \$1 tariff for using his trail, known today as the Old Hance Trail. Finally, he regaled them with tales as big as the Canyon.

Until 1894, settlers and tourists had to take letters and postcards written at the Canyon back to Flagstaff or another town along the railroad to be mailed. The growth of tourism and the competition for that business led to the development of mail service for those living at or visiting the Canyon. The South Rim's first two post offices were located at Hance's camp about 15 miles east of today's Grand Canyon Village. Tolfree, the first post office, opened August 13, 1894, with Lyman Tolfree as the postmaster. The following year Hance sold his homestead and tourist business to Tolfree and James Thurber. However, after the Tolfree post office closed on February 7, 1897, Hance opened the Tourist post office on the same site on May 10, 1897. He was postmaster of Tourist until it closed on April 29, 1899. Only one extant piece of mail, a postal card mailed at Tolfree on June 9, 1895 is known from these first two post offices (Fig. 1).

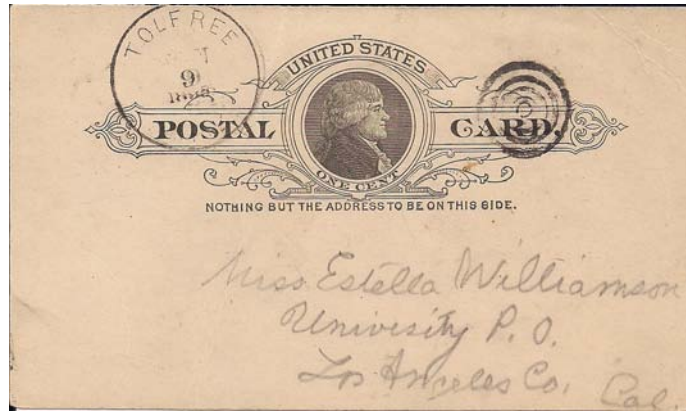


Fig. 1. Canceled at Tolfree on June 5, 1894, this postal card is the Grand Canyon's earliest known postal item.

From 1899 until 1902, mail again had to be taken to Flagstaff to be posted. During this time, the area now called the Grand Canyon Village emerged as a beehive of activity geared to accommodate tourists. In 1900, Thurber built the Bright Angel Hotel and sold it to Martin Buggeln, a Williams, Arizona, businessman, just months prior to the railroad's arrival. Buggeln quickly struck a deal with the Grand Canyon Railway giving him direct access to its passengers, guaranteed supplies, and water. On September 17, 1901, the first trip via train from Williams to the Canyon arrived at the terminus near the Bright Angel Hotel. Thirty passengers and a bundle of mail made the inaugural trip.² The arrival of train service to the South Rim ushered in a new era for travelers, because they could now comfortably make the trip from the Santa Fe's mainline to the Canyon in three hours rather than a bone-jarring one- or two-day excursion. The volume of mail between Williams and the Canyon grew quickly to on average 110 pounds per day by 1906 as the train facilitated the delivery of food via parcel post to the South Rim (Fig. 2).

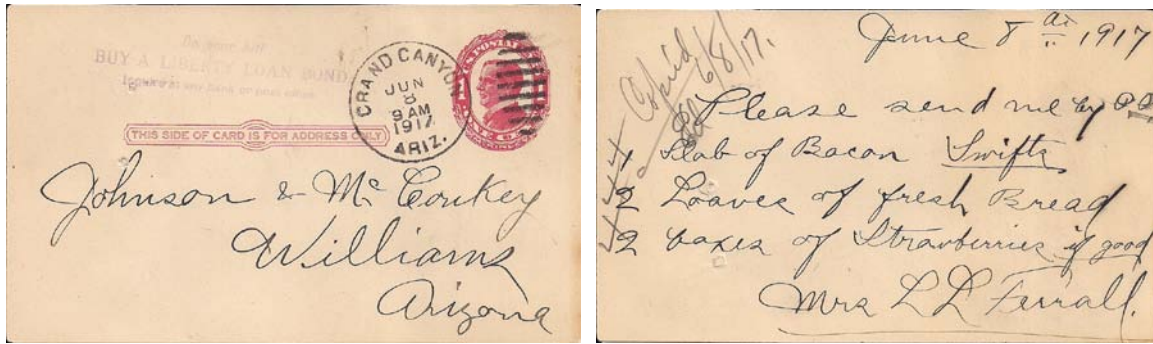


Fig. 2. (front) Posted Grand Canyon, Ariz., on Jun 8, 1917, this postal card was sent to Johnson and McCorkey in Williams, Arizona; (back) Mrs. L.L. Ferrall, the former Grand Canyon postmistress, ordered food from the store with the instructions that it should be sent to her via parcel post. The train would have carried this mail to the South Rim.

The Grand Canyon post office established on March 14, 1902, with Martin Buggeln as postmaster was the third post office to serve the Canyon's South Rim. This April 18, 1902 manuscript cancel on a cover posted a month after the post office opened is the earliest known Grand Canyon postal item. The enclosed letter describes the crowded hotel as "a board affair, inside and out, and part log." Later, the writer referred to the Canyon saying, "It certainly is grand, but the hotel accommodations are nothing to brag about."³ (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Earliest known Grand Canyon post office postal item with the manuscript cancel: Grand Canyon, Ariz. PO, Apr 18/1902.

In 1905, the Fred Harvey Company and Santa Fe Railroad opened the luxury hotel El Tovar. Angling to control more of the tourist market, in 1909 the railroad moved the depot a half mile east and immediately south of the El Tovar Hotel, fueling the fires of a fierce and long battle between it and Ralph Cameron.

Initially housed in Buggeln's Bright Angel Hotel, the Grand Canyon post office moved in 1910 to the closed Cameron Hotel. Three years prior to the move Louisa Buggeln Ferrall was appointed postmistress. Following Martin Buggeln's tenure as postmaster, she served from June 11, 1907 to April 27, 1916. Louisa's husband Lannes L. Ferrall followed her as postmaster serving from April 27, 1916 to July 1, 1922, and again for a couple of months in 1923. The Ferralls were employees and strong supporters of Ralph Cameron who owned the Bright Angel Trail and controlled Indian Gardens where he charged exorbitant fees for the only fresh water and toilets on the Bright Angel Trail between the South Rim and the Colorado River. This put him in direct competition with the Santa Fe Railroad and eventually at odds with the National Park Service. In 1935, a new post office building beside Babbitt's store was erected with WPA funds. The move to this facility ended the practice of post offices housed in hotels on the Canyon's South Rim.

In 1903, located near Grandview Point about 13.5 miles east of Grand Canyon Village, the Grand View Hotel and Resort received permission to open a post office to serve its customers. This fourth South Rim post office operated from November 27, 1903 until November 30, 1907 (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. (front) Grandview Hotel corner card on a cover canceled at the hotel's post office on September 18, 1904; (back) This cover mailed at the Grandview post office was sent to the Grand Canyon post office then carried via train to Williams enroute to its destination. The train was scheduled to leave the South Rim at 9 PM and arrive in Williams at 11:50 PM.

Postmaster Harry H. Smith also managed the Canyon Copper Company that owned the hotel. When the price for copper fell in 1907, the Company closed its mining operations and the hotel as well. The Post Office Department directed the mail service to the Grand Canyon post office.

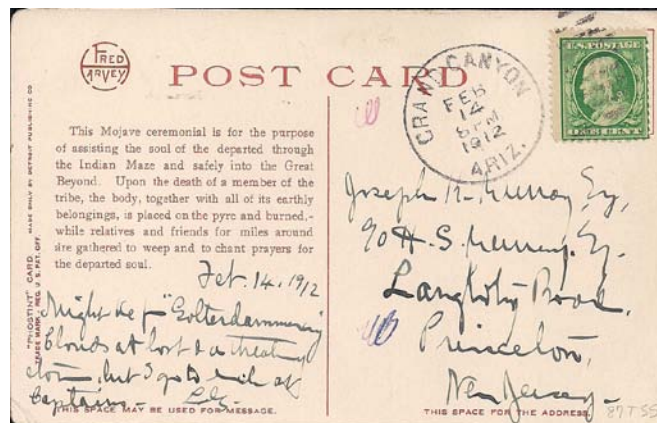


Fig. 5. Fred Harvey post card canceled at the Grand Canyon post office on February 14, 1912, Arizona's first day of statehood.

Since 1907 the Grand Canyon post office has been the only postal facility operating on the South Rim. While millions of letters and post cards have passed through this post office,

none is more remarkable than this post card canceled on February 14, 1912, Arizona's first day of statehood (Fig. 5).

North Rim

Remoteness and weather were and still are determining factors for mail service to the North Rim. While only 10 to 18 miles separate the Canyon's rims as the crow flies, you must travel more than 150 desolate miles around the crevice to get from one side to the other, unless you take a rim-to-rim hike. So it was not until later that tourists came to the North Rim's Kaibab Plateau. The first accommodations on the North Rim were built at Bright Angel Point in 1917. Kaibab, the first mail facility at the North Rim, was a summer post office opening in 1926 from June 16 to October 12. A summer post office is open only during the summer season. The weather and presence of people usually determine its days of operation or season. Typically, the North Rim's summer season is from May to October.

The name of the North Rim's post office has changed many times. On February 16, 1928 the name changed to from Kaibab to Kaibab Forest. On June 1, 1947 Kaibab Forest became North Rim. On September 1, 1955 the Post Office Department designated North Rim as a rural substation of the Fredonia post office and introduced a cancel reading: Fredonia, Arizona, North Rim Rur[al] St[ation]. Subsequently, the name was changed back to North Rim. Today the hand cancel reads: North Rim CPO; indicating it operates as a contract post office.

On September 1, 1932 the then four-year-old Grand Canyon Lodge including the post office, burned to the ground. Lacking his official cancel, William P. Rogers, the enterprising postmaster carved a circular Kaibab Forest, Arizona canceling device. The date on this Sept. 7, 1932 cover, which was canceled just six days after the fire, is handwritten (Fig. 6).

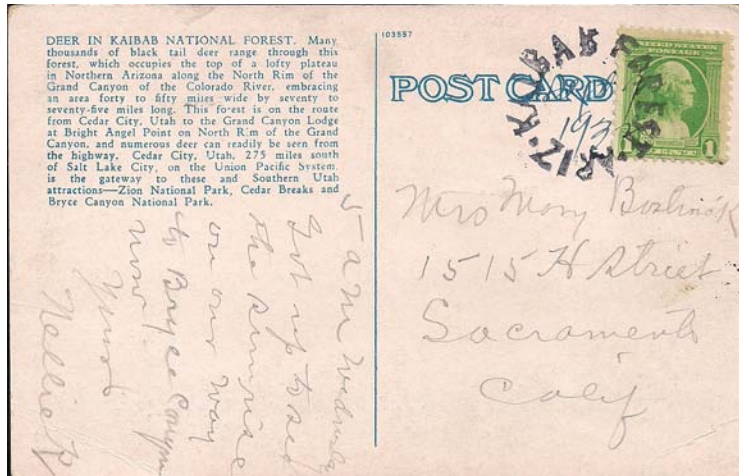


Fig. 6. A circular hand-carved Kaibab Forest, Ariz. canceling device was used to cancel this post card on September 7, 1932, six days after a fire destroyed the lodge and post office on the North Rim.

Located northwest of the Canyon, the Tuweep post office was the most westerly of the postal facilities located within the Grand Canyon area. Its customers were the town's people and local ranchers. Mabel K. Hoffpaur was the postmistress when Tuweep opened June 27, 1929. This sixth Grand Canyon post office closed December 31, 1950 with the Fredonia post office providing mail service to the area. Tuweep was a small settlement serving the ranchers in the area around Mount Trumbull (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Flying Diamond Ranch corner card on a cover canceled at the Tuweep post office in 1930.

West Rim

While competition for tourists and their business raged at the South Rim, the village of Supai home of the Havasupai Indians was also undergoing changes. In the 1890s the Department of the Interior sent government farmer Rufus C. Bauer to teach the Havasupai Indians how to farm. He opened a school to teach the Havasupai children in 1895; and when the post office opened on September 5, 1896, Bauer was its postmaster. A decade later, A.W. Florea was Supai's postmaster and superintendent of the Indian school. Supai's population then included 10 whites.⁴ For many years the post office operated primarily to facilitate communication between the local teachers and the government.



Fig. 8. Posted at the Supai post office in 1943, this cover addressed to Prescott, Arizona, bears the notation: Via Mule Train. Mule mail is a hallmark of Supai's postal service.

Supai's remote location at the bottom of the Canyon's western reaches determined that the village would have mule mail service when the post office was established in 1896. Fig. 8 Delivery of mail by horse or mule was not unusual in the pre-horseless-carriage era. Today Supai and Phantom Ranch (also in the Grand Canyon) are the only places in the U.S. served by mule mail. This article's title, *No Fries 'Til Mail*, refers to a sign posted at the local restaurant awaiting

its shipment of potatoes via the mule mail. Supai's residents and tourists eat more mail than they read.

Each mule carries about 130 pounds of mail, food, supplies and furniture down the 8-mile trail to Supai. A typical day's mail could have more than 3 tons of food and supplies and less than 20 pounds of first class letters. In an average week the mules pack about 20 tons of mail to Supai. Mail service truly is the lifeline for the 500 Havasupai who live in this isolated area of the Grand Canyon, and the 30,000 annual visitors who bring about \$2.5 million to the local economy.

With nearly five million visitors a year, mail continues to be important for tourism at the Grand Canyon. Many visitors will send post cards or letters detailing their experiences at the Canyon. Some will ride or hike to Supai or Phantom Ranch and post letters for the mules to carry on their initial journey through the mail stream. Few, however, will know the Grand Canyon's rich postal history and the impact of tourism on the development of mail service to this remote area of Arizona.

¹ Marshall Trimble. *Roadside History of Arizona*. (Missoula, Montana: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1986), 307.

² Rudy J. Gerber. *The Railroad and the Canyon* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, Inc., 1995), 51.

³Letter posted Grand Canyon, Ariz. P.O., April 18, 1902.

⁴*Arizona Business Directory:1905-1906*.(Denver, Colo.: Gazetteer Pub. Co., 1905), 374.

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