

COMMERCE AND THE MAILS IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

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As the 19th century begins, the nascent United States of America is a vibrant nation, racked with uncertainty yet alive with hope and ambition. It is a time of growth and change. In the period from 1800 to 1860, US population will increase by a factor of six. Seventeen new states will enter the union, and new territories will be acquired and settled. Education reform will lead to significant increase in literacy. Transportation is revolutionized as railroads replace horse-drawn coaches, and steam replaces sail on the high seas. New businesses are springing up almost daily and finding their way in the channels of commerce; many will enjoy dramatic growth. A fledgling government is casting about as well, willing to try new ideas to further its mission. These factors lead to a growing demand for communication. In this environment, the main communication medium is the mails. Postal capabilities determine the ways that companies communicate with one another and their customers. The needs of the business community, in turn, drive the evolution of postal operations.

We will examine several aspects of this evolution, specifically:

- Domestic Rate Changes,
- Rise and Fall of Local Posts,
- Transatlantic Rate Changes,
- Establishment of Registered Mail.

Examples of these changes will be taken from the incoming correspondence of a single company, Nathan Trotter and Company of Philadelphia. A little background on the Company will provide some context for this investigation.

The Company traces its roots back to 1789 when William Trotter joined the Philadelphia import-export firm of Sansom Brothers. He was later made a partner, and soon after the firm divided, with William taking the metals business and the Sansoms the rest. William hired his younger brother Nathan, and soon made him a partner. William was forced to leave the business in 1815 due to poor health. Nathan then became the head of the Company, a post that he held until his death in 1853. In the interest of full disclosure, Nathan Trotter was the author's great-great-

grandfather. However, the author has not been affiliated with the Company. The examples that we shall see were acquired in the philatelic marketplace.

The principal business of the Company consisted of the purchase of bulk metals, processing of the metals in its own facility, and sale of its products to small manufacturing firms. Metals most frequently handled were tin, lead, zinc and copper. Products included faucets, kettles, wire, shot and rivets, as well as small ingots known as pigs. In the earlier years, American mining interests not being well developed, most purchases were made from abroad, mainly Europe. The Company's customers were domestic, mostly within a few hundred miles. The Company is still going as a family-operated business, making it one of the longest continually operating companies in the country.

For most of its existence, the Company was located on Front Street, convenient to the Philadelphia harbor. It is now located in the Philadelphia exurbs, having finally left Front Street when the interstate highway came through. The Front Street façade is still in place (Fig. 1), and is under historic preservation.



Fig. 1: Nathan Trotter & Company historic façade.

The Company's correspondence contains many details of the metals industry and markets, as well as insights into general business practices of the day. However, these will not be addressed here

Domestic Rate Changes

Early postal rates were complex and expensive. Under the postal rate act of March 2, 1799 the rate for a single sheet folded letter ranged from 8 cents to 25 cents in a six tier system depending on distance as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Rate schedule for a single sheet letter per the Postal Rate Act of March 2, 1799.

Distance	Rate	Rate in 2002 Dollars
Not over 40 miles	8 cents	\$1.60
40 to 90 miles	10 cents	\$2.00
90 to 150 miles	12-1/2 cents	\$2.50
150 to 300 miles	17 cents	\$3.40
300 to 500 miles	20 cents	\$4.00
over 500 miles	25 cents	\$5.00

Additional sheets were pro rata. When viewed in 21st century dollars, the rates are alarming, ranging from \$1.60 to \$5.00. Fig. 2 shows a typical folded letter of 1803 to William Trotter, Merchant, from New York bearing the 12-1/2 cent rate for 90 to 150 miles.

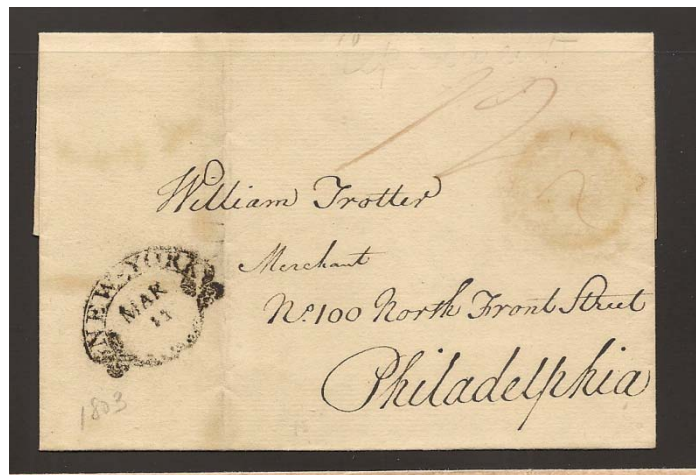


Fig. 2: 1803 New York – 12-1/2 cents for 90-150 miles.

Things could get worse in wartime. On February 1, 1815 Congress applied a 50 per cent surcharge to letter rates to defray expenses incurred in the War of 1812. An 1816 letter from

Maysville, Kentucky (Fig. 3) was charged 37-1/2 cents, compared to the normal rate of 25 cents for more than 500 miles. This surcharge was rescinded on March 31, 1816.

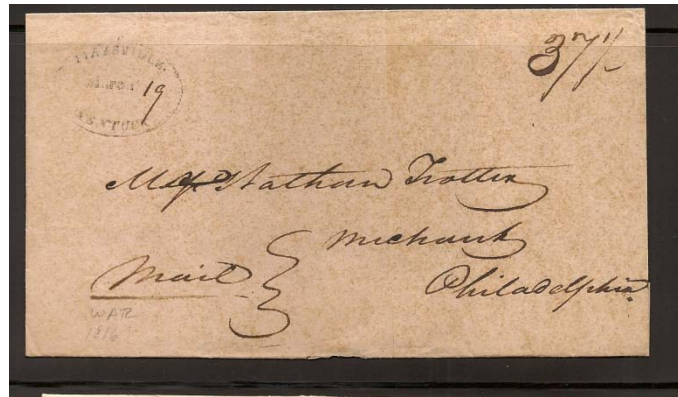


Fig. 3: 1816 Maysville, KY, war rate – 37-1/2 cents for more than 500 miles.

These rates were prohibitive to most of the public, although many were illiterate and would seldom use the mails in any event. Literacy was increasing swiftly, however, and demand for the mails grew along with it. The rates were burdensome to businesses as well, but they had little recourse but to use the mails for necessary communications. Undoubtedly, pressure was applied by business interests whenever and wherever possible to make the medium more affordable.

Although the rates were tinkered with periodically, real relief was not to come until 1845, but when it came it was spectacular. Under the postal rate act of that year, likely inspired by the success of the postal reform in Britain five years earlier, the letter rate was reduced to five cents for distances up to 300 miles, and 10 cents for any longer distance. The single sheet limitation was replaced by a weight limit of one-half ounce, reflecting the increasing use of envelopes.

The impact of this change can be seen in two letters in successive years from Bellefonte, PA to Philadelphia, a distance of about 190 miles (Fig. 4). The 1844 letter above is rated at 18-3/4 cents for 150 to 400 miles. The 1845 letter below required only five cents postage. A dramatic change indeed!



Fig. 4: (Top) 1844 Bellefonte, PA - 18-3/4 cents for 150-400 miles; (bottom) 1845 Bellefonte, PA - 5 cents reform rate for up to 300 miles.

To encourage prepayment and thus avoid revenue loss from unaccepted mail, the postal rate act of 1851 reduced the letter rate to three cents if prepaid (still five cents if not). At the same time, the mileage restriction was increased to 3,000 miles. An envelope of this period from Camden, Delaware (Fig. 5) is prepaid with an optional postage stamp.



Fig. 5: 1851-55 Camden, Del. – 3 cents prepaid with optional postage stamp.

Prepayment became compulsory in 1855. The use of postage stamps became a requirement in 1856; in 1863 the mileage restriction was eliminated.

Rise and Fall of Local Posts

With the high postal rates of the early 1800s, it is not surprising that private carriers flourished. The popular term “local posts” is something of a misnomer, in that a number of these carriers had intercity operations. Their rates were substantially lower than those of the Post Office, and even after the postal reform of the 1840s they could undercut the government rates.

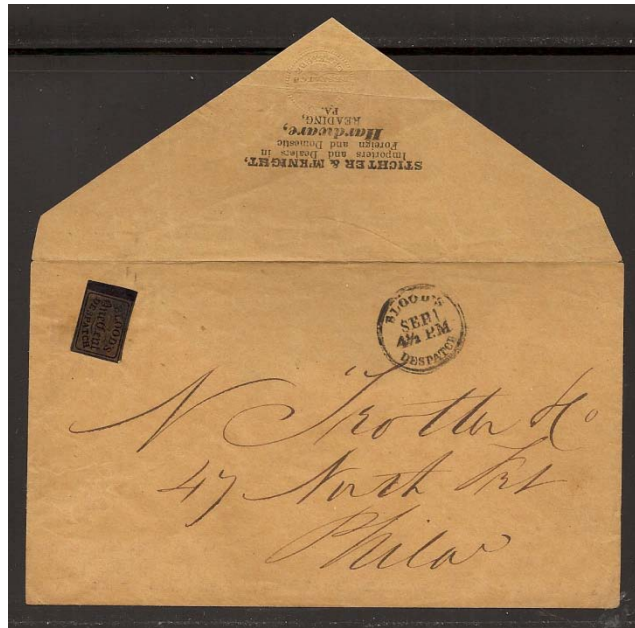


Fig. 6: 1852-53 Blood's Despatch, Reading, PA to Philadelphia – one cent.

An envelope from the 1852-53 period was carried by Blood's Despatch, headquartered in Philadelphia, is shown in Fig. 6. The hardware company corner card on the envelope flap indicates that the letter was carried from Reading, PA to Philadelphia. The Blood's adhesive stamp has a one cent denomination, while the prepaid Post Office rate would have been three cents; still quite a saving for the sender.

The Post Office saw these carriers as competition that was cutting into their revenue stream. The postal rate act of 1855 essentially created a monopoly for the Post Office, requiring that any mail carried by private firms bear US postage stamps paying the going rate. This ended the economic advantage of the private carriers.

Transatlantic Rate Changes

International mail was, of course, more expensive than domestic, and the rate structures were even more complex, bordering at times on the chaotic. We will examine private ship letters, postal reform rates, and treaty rates.

In the earlier years, most transatlantic letters were carried across the ocean on private ships, outside of the mails. The ship captains could charge whatever the traffic would bear. These were called ship letters, and were generally stamped "SHIP" in capital letters. Ship letters

coming into the United States would be deposited at coffee houses and other establishments near the docks, whence they would be introduced into the mail stream. The letters would be charged at the going rate for delivery from the port to their destination, plus a two cent ship fee. This fee was paid to the ship captain if the ship was American flag, and was retained by the Post Office otherwise.



Fig. 7: 1819 American Packet private ship letter – 27 cents for two sheets from New York, plus 2 cents ship fee.

An 1819 two-sheet ship letter from a London exporter (Fig. 7) is rated at 27 cents – double the base rate of 12-1/2 cents for 90-150 miles plus the two cent ship fee. The oval marking largely obscured by the postmark is a private ship's mark reading "American Packet./Courier/ Wm. Bowne". Since the Courier was an American vessel, the ship fee was paid to Captain Bowne. Any additional charges by the captain are left to the imagination.

The increasing importance of transatlantic trade, coupled with the introduction of steam power and increasing numbers of both sail and steam powered ships, led to mid-century relief of the anarchy of postal rates. British postal reform of 1840 established a rate of 8 pence (16 cents US equivalent) for both packet and private ships to the US that covered the sea postage and British inland postage. An 1843 ship letter from Liverpool (Fig. 8) shows this rate (manuscript "8") as well as the pre-reform US inland rate of 12-1/2 cents from New York to Philadelphia, for a total of 28-1/2 cents.



Fig. 9: (Top) 1853 American Packet from Liverpool– British treaty rate 24 cents not prepaid, 3 cents credited to Britain; (bottom) 1854 British Packet from Swansea, Wales, treaty rate one shilling (24 cents) prepaid, 5 cents credited to US.

Fig. 9 shows, at the top, an American Packet letter that originated in Rotterdam, was ferried via Ostende to Britain and crossed the ocean under the British treaty. The 24 cents was not prepaid. A marking indicates that, of the 24 cents collected in the US, 3 cents is to be credited to Britain for their inland postage. Below it is an 1854 British Packet letter from Swansea, Wales that was prepaid in Britain as indicated by handstamps on both ends plus the one shilling (1/-) in manuscript. Another handstamp indicates that 5 cents of the amount collected is credited to the US for inland postage. So there was a significant accounting task on both sides of the pond to keep track of these credits.

New treaties in the 1860s cut the rate by half, and by half again. Fast forward to 1870 and this letter from Pontypridd, Wales (Fig. 10). Under the treaty of 1869, the cost of a one-half ounce letter was set at three pence (six cents US) including the land postage on both sides of the

Atlantic. Our Company and others like it must have breathed a collective sigh of relief at this dramatic reduction in the cost of doing business.



Fig. 10: 1870 Pontypridd, Wales – 1869 British treaty rate of 3 pence (6 cents) for sea post plus land post on both sides.

The multiplicity of treaties and rates for international mail was resolved with the establishment of the Universal Postal Union in 1874.

Those in the know will recognize that we have barely scratched the surface of transatlantic mail, but we have seen enough to make the point that a complex, confusing and expensive collection of rates evolved into a well regulated and quite affordable system.

Establishment of Registered Mail

19th century Americans tended to be wary of banks. They preferred cash transactions. For transactions that could not be face-to-face, it was necessary to send payments through the mail.

Although this was a fairly safe practice, it was hardly foolproof. As early as 1845, in response to business needs for greater security, individual postmasters set up procedures for recording, or registering, mail containing currency or other valuable documents. Although there was no indemnity associated with this mail, it did receive special attention. These letters were typically placed in a separate mail pouch accompanied by a listing of the items, so that the receiving post office could verify that all registered items were received. In 1847 the Post Office Department recognized the practice by issuing a set of instructions to postmasters. The postal rate act of 1855 formally established uniform procedures for registered mail and set a rate of 5 cents per letter. This was the forerunner of present day registered mail.



Fig. 11: (Top) 1845 Lewistown, PA “Rec”(recorded), Philadelphia large blue “R” receiving mark, double strike; (bottom) 1848 Hollidaysburg, PA “secret” registry mark, Philadelphia large blue “R”.

The Philadelphia post office used distinctive markings on registered letters that it received. Other post offices used a wide variety of markings on outgoing registered mail. The 1846 letter from Lewistown, PA (Fig. 11, top) shows a characteristic large blue “R” receiving mark of Philadelphia. The mark comes in two sizes, large and small, and two colors, blue and red. Here the “R” was struck twice, perhaps to emphasize the value of the contents. The text of the letter

indicates that \$40 was enclosed along with an order for sheet iron. The manuscript “Rec” for “recorded” is the registry marking from Lewistown.

An 1848 letter from Hollidaysburg, PA (Fig. 11, bottom) bears the large blue “R”, and also a registry “secret” mark from the sending office, the squiggle of ink under the “5”. The letter contained two notes in lieu of payment. An 1850 letter from Stroudsburch, PA (Fig. 12, top) received the small blue “R” marking. A manuscript registry number “25” was applied at the point of origin. \$12 was enclosed with an order for copper bottoms.



Fig. 12: (Top) 1850 Stroudsburch, PA registry number 25, Philadelphia small blue “R”; (bottom) 1851 Lancaster, PA “R”, “No 39”, Philadelphia small red “R”.

The 1851 envelope from Lancaster, PA (Fig. 12, bottom) bears the small red “R”, as well as a manuscript “R” and registry “No 39” of Lancaster. \$11 was enclosed with an order for copper sheets. By this time, the numbering of the registered items was accepted practice. As a curiosity, there is a double rate marking “5” and “PAID 3”; perhaps the sender initially planned to send it collect, then decided to prepay the postage; or perhaps the postal clerk made a mistake and then corrected it.

Conclusion

We have examined several aspects of the influence of commerce on the mails, and vice versa, in early 19th century America. We saw examples of declining rates for both domestic and transatlantic mail, the use of local posts, and the birth of registered mail. Among aspects not covered, the evolution of postal routes and transportation media is especially worthy of investigation.

All examples were taken from the incoming correspondence of Nathan Trotter and Company of Philadelphia. A well-preserved correspondence can shed light not only on the business practices of the day but also on the postal operations of an era. This is the essence of postal history.

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