New York City Postal Service History

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In the days of the Dutch, letters were brought over from Europe by the shipmasters and delivered to some coffee house keeper, who took charge of them until the persons to whom they were addressed could call for them. This custom was continued under the English until 1686, when the authorities required that all ship letters should be placed in charge of the Collector of the Port. In 1692, the city authorities established a Post-office, and in 1710, the Postmaster-General of Great Britain removed the headquarters of the postal service of the Colonies from Philadelphia to New York. The first city Post-office was located in Broadway opposite Beaver street. About the year 1804, the Post-office was removed to No. 29 William street, corner of Garden street, now Exchange Place, where it remained until 1825, when the Government leased the "Academy building" in Garden street, now Exchange Place, and opened it as a Post-office. In 1827, the office was transferred to the basement of the Merchants' Exchange, the site now occupied by the Custom House. Wall street was then just undergoing the change from private residences to bankers' and brokers' offices. The Merchants' Exchange was destroyed in the great fire of 1835, and the next day a Post-office was extemporized in a brick building in Pine, near Nassau street, and shortly after was transferred to the Rotunda, in the City Hall Park, which had been offered to the Government by the municipal authorities. The Rotunda, however, proved too small for the business of the department, which had been greatly increased by the establishment of lines of railways and steamboats between New York and the various parts of the country, and in 1845 the Post-office was removed to the Middle Dutch Church, in Nassau street, between Pine and Cedar streets, its present location, which was purchased by the Government for the sum of $350,000.

THE OLD POST-OFFICE.

This building has always been entirely unsuited to the needs of a Post-office for such a city as New York. It was dedicated in 1732, and was used for worship by one of the Dutch congregations of the city. In 1776, the British having occupied the city, it was converted into a prison by the conquerors for the incarceration of their rebellious captives. It was subsequently used by them as a riding school for the instruction of cavalry. After the British evacuated the city, the congregation reoccupied it, and refitted it for religious worship. After paying for it the large sum mentioned above, the Government was compelled to make a further expenditure of $80,000, to fit it up for its new uses. Since then many changes, some involving a heavy outlay, have been made in the building, but even now it is not capable of meeting the demands upon it, and the Government is now engaged in the erection of a new building expressly designed for a Post-office.

The Pine street front is devoted to the reception and departure of the mails. The street is generally filled with wagons bearing the mystic words, "U.S. Mail." Some are single-horse vehicles, used for carrying the bags between the main office and the numerous stations scattered through the city; others are immense wagons, drawn by four and six horses, and carrying several tons of matter at a time. These are used for the great Eastern, Western, and Southern, and the Foreign Mails. The Pine

street doors present a busy sight at all hours, and the duties of the men employed there are not light. Huge sacks from all parts of the world are arriving nearly every hour, and immense piles of similar sacks are dispatched with the regularity of clockwork.

The body of the building, by which is meant the old church room itself, is used for opening and making up the mails. This work is carried on the main floor, and in the heavy, old-fashioned gallery which runs around three of the sides. Huge semi-circular forms are scattered about the floor, each divided into a number of open squares. From each of these squares hangs a mail bag, each square being marked with the name of the city or town to which the bag is to be sent. A clerk stands within the curve of the form, before a table filled with letters and papers, and tosses them one by one into the squares to which they belong. This is done with the utmost rapidity, and long practice has made the clerk so proficient that he never misses the proper square. The stamping of the office mark and cancelling of the postage stamps on letters to be sent away is incessant, and the room resounds with the heavy thud of the stamp. This is no slight work, as the clerks who perform it can testify. The upper floor is devoted to the use of the Post-Master and his Assistants, the Superintendent of the City Delivery, and the Money Order and Registered Letter Offices. A wooden corridor has been built along the side of the church along Nassau and Cedar streets, and here, on the street floor, are the box and general deliveries, and the stamp windows. This is the public portion of the office, and is always thronged.

The visitor will notice, in various parts of this corridor, the slides for the depositing of letters and papers intended for the mails. The accumulation of mail matter here is so great that it is necessary that letters designed for a certain part of the country should be deposited in one particular place. Letters for New England must be placed in a certain box, those for the Middle States in another, those for the Southern States in another, those for the West in another. The names of the States are painted conspicuously above each box, so that there may be no mistake on the part of strangers. Letters for the principal countries of Europe and Asia are posted in the same way. Newspapers and periodicals have a separate department. The mails of these journals are made up in the office of publication, according to certain instructions furnished by the Postmaster, and go to the Post-office properly assorted for distribution. This system of depositing mail matter saves an immense amount of labor on the part of the clerks, and also hastens the departure of the mails from the office.

The Box Delivery contains nearly seven thousand boxes, on each of which the enormous rent of $16 per annum is charged. Considering that the box system is quite as advantageous to the Government as to the box holder, this rent is simply extortionate.

The daily business of the New York Post-office is enormous, and is rapidly increasing. The letters received by mail steamers from foreign countries, partly for delivery in the city, and partly to be forwarded to other places, average about fifteen thousand daily. The number dispatched from this office by steamer to foreign countries is about seventeen thousand daily. The number of letters sent from New York to other offices in the United States is about one hundred and fifty-five thousand daily. The number received from domestic offices for delivery in the city is about one hundred and twenty-six thousand daily; in addition to about seventy-two thousand per day, which are to be forwarded to other offices. About one hundred thousand letters, and about twenty thousand printed circulars, are mailed every day in the city, for city delivery. The carriers deliver daily, to persons who do not hire boxes at the general office, about fifty-three thousand letters; and collect from the street boxes about one hundred and one thousand letters every twenty-four hours. About five hundred registered letters, of which about four hundred are for delivery in the city, are received, and about two hundred and fifty are dispatched, daily. About one thousand dollars are paid out daily on money orders, and a much larger amount is received for orders granted to applicants. The sales of postage

stamps amount to about forty-four thousand dollars per week. About two hundred unstamped letters are deposited in the office daily, and about one hundred letters on which the name of the town or State is written improperly, or on which the address is illegible. These are all sent to the Dead Letter Office, in Washington.

The number of persons employed as clerks, porters, etc., in the general office and the various stations, is 715.

The city is too large to admit of the transaction of all its business by the general office. To meet the necessities of the town, and to insure the rapid dispatch of the postal business, about 700 "lamp-post boxes," or iron boxes attached to the posts of the street lamps, are scattered through the city. Letters for the mails and for delivery in the city are deposited in these boxes, from which they are collected by the letter-carriers nine times each day, except Sunday, between the hours of seven A.M. and seven P.M. The Sunday collection is made once, at seven in the evening.

There are fourteen branch or Sub-Post-offices, designated as "Stations," located in convenient parts of the city, north of the general office. They are named from the letters of the alphabet, and are known as "Stations A, B, C, D, E, F, G, J, K, L, M, N, and O." They are designed to serve as distributing centres for certain sections of the city. They receive from the general office all letters and papers for delivery in their sections, and to them the carriers bring all the matter collected from the lamp-boxes. There is no delivery from them except through the carriers. They dispatch to the general office, at stated times throughout the day, all matter deposited in their boxes or collected from the lamp-boxes by the carriers.

A recent writer thus relates some of the gossip connected with the office:

"People who come to the Post-office and make complaints of being robbed, when they discover that they were mistaken never call and make reparation, or relieve the department of the charge made against its employés. A merchant, much excited, complained that a letter sent to him 'by a most responsible house,' containing $500, had not been received. This charge was fortified by showing a letter from the postmaster who mailed the missing letter, certifying that it was forwarded, and contained the $500. Detectives were at once set to work to unravel the iniquity, but all efforts proved unavailing. Finally the Post-office authorities, after weeks of hard work, called on the complaining merchant and asked if he had heard anything about the missing money. 'Oh,' replied the gentleman, with great vivacity, 'that's all right; by mistake that letter was thrown into the safe, and remained unopened nearly four weeks. Funny, wasn't it?' Not even an apology was made for charging the Post-office with purloining the money, or for giving its officers so much unnecessary trouble.

"Charges of dishonesty against the Post-office are made where nobody but 'extraordinary circumstances' are to blame. A letter containing two $1000 bills in it was delivered by the carrier, who, according to custom (ignorant of its contents, of course), at the house of its owner, shoved it into the hallway, under the door. The letter was missing. Complaint was made at the Post-office; evidence was produced that the money had been forwarded. The detectives were set to work to trace out the robbery. The poor carrier, and the clerks in the office who handled the letter were placed under surveillance. The clerks where the letter was mailed were 'shadowed.' Every dollar they expended after the probable robbery was secretly inquired into, to see if any of them had been at any given time, after the letter was lost, unusually 'flush;' but all signs failed. After a long time the

floor covering of the hall was taken up, and there was the letter, ‘safe and sound;’ the unfortunate carrier had thrust it under, instead of over, the oilcloth.

“The misdirection of letters is the cause of serious charges against the Post-office. A letter containing $700 was mailed from Albany to New York. It was sent from a well-known person, and the package which was supposed to contain the letter, made up in Albany, was not opened until it reached New York. Both ends of the line were under suspicion. It was stated that the letter was addressed to Mr. —, Broadway, New York. After a long search it was found that the letter had never left Albany at all, being directed by mistake, Mr. —, Broadway, Albany, and the faithful clerks had thrown it into their own city delivery box instead of forwarding it to New York. The confusion in the mind of the writer grew out of the fact that there is a Broadway in both cities, and from force of habit he wrote the wrong address.

“Miserable chirography is one of the most prolific causes of Post-office inefficiency. It is safe to say that unmistakably written directions would remove nine-tenths of the complaints. What is a non-plussed clerk to do with letters addressed to ‘Mahara Seney,’ ‘Old Cort,’ or ‘Cow House,’ when Morrisonia, Olcott, and Cohoes were really intended?

“One day, possibly four years ago, Mr. Kelly was sitting in his private office opening his personal letters, and enjoying the delusion that everything was working satisfactorily, when, to his surprise, he found one letter from Washington calling his especial attention to the ‘inclosed editorial,’ cut from the Tribune, in which the carelessness of his clerks, and the generally unsatisfactory manner with which he carried on his business, were dilated upon, ending with the startling announcement that, under the present management of the department, it took four days to get a letter from New York to Chappaqua, distance about thirty miles, and made literally no distance by a fast railway! Consternation ensued, and Mr. Kelly, to commence examination into these serious charges, sent a special agent to Chappaqua for the envelope of said delayed letter. At the place named the official fortunately not only found what he went after (the envelope), but also Mr. Greeley and ‘Miles O’Reilly.’ After due explanations, the envelope was handed to Miles O’Reilly, with the query of what he thought was the meaning of the superscription.

“Why,’ said that genial wit, who had once been a deputy postmaster, ‘the devil himself couldn’t make it out.’

“The envelope was then brought to the attention of the berated clerks, who looked at it with glazed eyes, the hieroglyphics suggesting somewhat the same intellectual speculation that would result from studying the footprints of a gigantic spider that had, after wading knee-deep in ink, retreated hastily across the paper.

“At the Post-office, when they distribute letters, those on which the direction is not instantly made out, to save time, are thrown in a pile for especial examination; if a second and more careful study fails, they are consigned to an especial clerk, who is denominated the chief of the bureau of ‘hards.’ To this important functionary the envelope of Chappaqua was at last referred. He examined it a moment, and his eye flashed with the expression of recognizing an old acquaintance. ‘This thing,’ said he, holding up the envelope with the tip ends of his fingers, ‘came to me some days ago along with the other “hards.” I studied the superscription at my leisure a whole day, but couldn’t make it out. I then showed it to the best experts in handwriting attached to the office, and called on outsiders to test their skill; but what the writing meant, if it was writing, was a conundrum that we all gave up. Finally, in desperation, it was suggested, as a last resort, to send it to Chappaqua, which

happened to be its place of destination.' Such is the literal history of the reason of an earnestly written denunciation of the inefficiency of the city post."

In 1869, the General Government decided to depart from the niggardly policy it had hitherto pursued towards the City of New York, and to take steps toward the erection of a Post-office adequate to the needs of the great and growing community which demanded this act of justice at its hands. It was decided to erect an edifice which should be an ornament to the city, and capable of accommodating the City Postal service for generations to come. The Municipal Authorities, in order to secure the erection of the building in the most convenient part of the city, offered to sell to the General Government the lower end of the City Hall Park. The offer was accepted, and the land was purchased by the Government. The corner stone was laid in June, 1869. At the present writing (January, 1872,) the first story has been finished. It will probably require several years to complete the edifice. The price paid for the land was $500,000, a merely nominal sum. It is expected that the building will cost about $4,000,000.

"The exterior walls are to be of Dix Island granite, and the dimensions of the four fronts are severally as follows: the northerly side (toward the City Hall) is about 300 feet; the Broadway and Park Row fronts, respectively, 270 feet; and the southerly part, 130 feet.


THE NEW POST-OFFICE.

"The difficulty of laying the foundations may be judged from the following facts: The depth of excavation over the entire plot was over thirty feet, and the material to be removed was entirely loose sand, while the traffic in Broadway and Park Row, including railroad cars and omnibuses, was enormous, involving the danger of a caving-in of both streets! The trenches in which the retaining walls and pier foundations were to be laid had to be completely incased in sheet-piling, shored across with timbers, under the protection of which the excavation was carried on and the masonry laid. The excavation was done mostly at night, the ground being illuminated by magnesium light. The outer walls, and those of the court, and the foundations of the interior columns are based on huge granite blocks, the granite being laid on massive beds of concrete. One hundred and fifty-nine iron columns in the basement, and 117 in the first story, support the walls and floors. The piers of the cellar are of granite, or arcaded brick and iron; the stairs are of stone and iron; the chimneys, of stone; the roof and its ornaments, of iron, covered with slate and copper. Four large low-pressure boilers supply the steam for heating the entire building. The roofs of the corner pavilions rise 107 feet above the sidewalk. The cellar is a little more than seven feet in the clear; the basement, sixteen feet; the first corridor, fourteen feet; and the half-story above it—both completing the first story—also fourteen feet. The entire circuit of the building is over one-fifth of a mile.

"The style of architecture is the classical Italian Renaissance, with some modifications to harmonize with the treatment of the roofs, which are to be French, as best suited to such architecture on a large scale. The Mansard roof will be covered with an ironclad cornice and metallic cresting.

"The irregular angles imposed by the shape of the lot are marked by semi-hexagonal pavilions. The main building line is withdrawn from the lower, or southerly front, to extend the façade on that

side. The roof, square-domed, rests on three arms of a Greek cross, out of the centre of which rises a heavily buttressed cupola, carrying projecting pediments, with detached columns on its four faces. The foot of the flagstaff, which is to surmount the cupola, will be 160 feet above the sidewalk.

"The fronts on Broadway and Park Row, respectively, are broken by square central pavilions, with pyramidal roofs, of which the first and second stories are faced with detached colonnades of coupled columns. Below are the main lateral entrances to the Post-office corridor. The centre of the largest and northerly front is relieved by a broad pavilion with a two-story colonnade, roofed with a dome, the balustrade of which is 150 feet above the sidewalk. The dome is lighted by a range of round windows, and surmounted by an attic, ornamented by a sculptured pediment and a crown with the national arms. The form of the building is, substantially, a trapezoid, with an open triangular court in the centre, below the main story; it includes a sub-basement, basement, three stories in the walls, and a roof story.

"A drive-way, or street, forty feet in width, reserved from the northerly side of the ground purchased by the Government, serves as an approach to that front, and secures the perfect isolation of the building, with perpetual access of light and air on that side, as well as on the other sides, whatever changes may hereafter be made in the adjoining ground.

"The principal entrances are at the south west front under a portico, which gives access to the Post-office corridor, and by a broad double staircase to the upper stories; and at the northerly corner pavilions on Broadway and Park Row, where two great elliptical stairways lead again to the higher stories, but do not communicate with the ground-floor, being reserved for the United States Courts, and their dependencies. Besides these, there are lateral entrances to the Post-office corridor on Broadway and Park Row, and to the Post-office proper on those two sides, and also on the northerly front.

"The sub-basement, or cellar, and the basement, cover the whole area of the lot, and are extended under the sidewalks, the central court and the drive-way on the northerly side. The cellar will be used for the boilers, engines and heating apparatus, and for the storage of coal and other bulky material. The basements and the first story are reserved for the use of the Post-office.

"The first story occupies the entire space of the building, including the central court, which is here roofed with glass; the walls of which, with all the interior partitions of the stories above, are, in this story and the basement, carried on columns, leaving the whole area of the Post-office roof open to light and free use and communication.

"The corridor for the use of the public occupies the exterior belt of the ground-floor on the southerly front, and on the Broadway and Park Row fronts far enough to include the central pavilions, and it is separated from the Post-office room by a Box and Delivery screen. This corridor is half the height of the first story, and the space above it is occupied by a half-story, which, being entirely open on the inside, forms a gallery encompassing the Post-office room on three sides. The high windows of the first story, running through both the corridor and the half-story, give an uninterrupted communication of light and air to the interior, while the supply of light is increased by the whole breadth of the glass roof over the court. The floor under this floor is also of glass, giving light to the sub-basement, which is also lighted by means of illuminating tile in the sidewalks.

"In the upper stories, corridors fourteen feet wide make the circuit of the whole building; and from those corridors, rooms open on either hand toward the streets and the inner court. The rooms over the principal entrance, and which look down Broadway, are reserved for the Postmaster; and those for the Assistant Postmaster and Cashier are close at hand.

"The whole of the northerly front is given to the United States Courts. There are three court-rooms, of which the two largest are continued up through two stories in height. Adjoining these, are special rooms for the Judges, near which private stairways furnish the only access to the jury-rooms in the third story. The remainder of the second story is occupied by rooms for Marshals, United States Attorney, Clerks of the Courts, record-rooms, etc., etc. Other United States officers are to be accommodated with rooms in the upper story."

III. THE LETTER CARRIERS.

For the purpose of distributing the letters received at the New York Post-office, the Government has organized a force of Letter Carriers, or, as they are sometimes called, "Postmen." All letters that are addressed to the places of business or the residences of citizens, unless such persons are renters of boxes in the General Post-office, are turned over to the Carriers for delivery.

The force is organized under the direction of a Superintendent, who is appointed by and responsible to the Postmaster of the city. Applicants for positions in the force of Letter Carriers must, as a prime necessity, be able to command a sufficient degree of political influence to secure their appointments. Possessing this, they make their applications in duplicate, on blank forms supplied by the Department. The applicant must state his age, general condition, former occupation, experience in business, his reason for leaving his last place, and whether he has served in the army or navy. One of these applications is laid before the Postmaster of the city, and the other is sent to the Post-office Department at Washington. If the applicant is successful, he is subjected to a physical examination by the surgeon of the Department, in order to make sure of his bodily soundness. Good eye-sight is imperatively required of every applicant. If "passed" by the surgeon, the applicant must then furnish two bonds in five hundred dollars each, for the faithful performance of his duties. This done, he is enrolled as a member of the corps of Letter Carriers, and is assigned by the Superintendent of the force to a station.

Together with his certificate of appointment, the Superintendent hands him an order on a certain firm of tailors for an "outfit," or uniform, which consists of a coat, pants, vest, and cap of gray cloth, trimmed with black braid, and with gilt buttons. The cost of this uniform is in winter twenty-four dollars, and in summer twenty dollars. It is paid for by the Post-office Department, and the amount deducted from the first two months' pay of the carrier.

Upon being assigned to a station, the Carrier is required to commit to memory the rules laid down for his guidance. His route is then marked out for him, and he is frequently accompanied over it several times by an older member of the force to familiarize him with it. The Superintendent of the Station is his immediate superior. From him the Carrier receives his orders, and to him submits his reports.

There is a "time-book" kept in each station, in which the employés are required to enter the time of their arrival at the station in the morning. The Carriers are also required to enter the time of their departure on their routes, and the time of their return to the station. Once a month this book is

submitted to the inspection of the Superintendent of the force, and any delays or other negligences that are noted are reprimanded by him.

The Station-clerk, whose duty it is to assort the mail, is required to be at his post at ten minutes after six o'clock in the morning. He places each Carrier's mail in a separate box, leaving to him the arrangement of it. The Carriers must be at the station at half-past six. They at once proceed to arrange their mail in such a manner as will facilitate its prompt delivery, and at half-past seven A.M., they start out on their routes. If any of the postage on the letters to be delivered is unpaid, it is charged by the clerk to the Carrier, who is held responsible for its collection. Once a week the Superintendent of the Station goes over the accounts of the Carriers, and requires them to pay over to him all the sums charged against them.

There are nine deliveries from the stations every day. The first at half-past seven A.M., and the last at five P.M. This entails an immense amount of labor upon the Carriers. They are obliged to perform their duties regardless of the weather, and are subjected to an exposure which is very trying to them. They are very efficient, and perform their task faithfully and promptly.

The pay of a carrier is small. By law he is entitled to $800 per annum for the first six months. After this he is to receive $900 per annum, and at the expiration of one year, he may, upon the recommendation of the Superintendent of the Station, receive an additional $100 per annum; but $1000 is the limit. It is said, however, that it is very rare for a carrier to receive an increase of salary before the expiration of one year. Why the is subjected to this loss, in defiance of the law, the writer has been unable to ascertain.

Although the pay is so small, the Carrier is not allowed to enjoy it in peace. The party in power, or rather its managers, tax him unmercifully. From one to two per cent. of his salary is deducted for party expenses, and he is required to contribute at least five dollars to the expenses of every City and State election. The Postmaster of the city does not trouble himself about this robbery of his employés, but allows it to go on with his indirect approval, at least. General Dix has the honor of being the only Postmaster who ever had the moral courage to protect his subordinates from this extortion.

The Carriers have organized a benevolent association among themselves. Upon the death of a member, each surviving member of the association makes a contribution of two dollars to the relief fund. From this fund the funeral expenses are paid, and the surplus is handed over to the widow and children of the dead man.

The tenure by which the Carriers hold their positions is very uncertain. A new Postmaster may remove any or all of them, to make way for his political friends, and any refusal on their part to submit to the orders or extortions of their party-managers is sure to result in a dismissal.