

The Controversy over the Post Office and the Circulation of Newspapers

Throughout the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, Antifederalists expressed concern that Federalists tampered with their mail. In October 1787 Richard Henry Lee, serving as a Virginia delegate to Congress, reported that letters written by him “and sent by the Post” had been stopped in their “passage” (to Samuel Adams, 27 October). In mid-March 1788 Elbridge Gerry charged that “several letters from my friends in Newyork, & also to them have shared ye same fate ... a species of robbery nearly allied to highway robbery, ... I am sorry to see it so frequent amongst us.” Antifederalists therefore tried to avoid the post office by entrusting their letters to couriers or by addressing their letters to third parties not politically suspect in the eyes of Federalists.

Beginning in January 1788, Antifederalists asserted that the post office itself was waylaying newspapers that contained Antifederalist material. They said that the writings of New York Antifederalists, such as “Brutus,” “Cato,” and “Cincinnatus,” were not allowed to reach Philadelphia while the Pennsylvania Convention was sitting and that the “Dissent of the Minority of the Pennsylvania Convention” was prevented from getting to Boston while the Massachusetts Convention sat. Federalists denied these charges.

Antifederalists and Federalists were both concerned by the official changes in policy adopted by the post office. In November 1786 Postmaster General Ebenezer Hazard believed that stagecoach operators were charging the government too much for the delivery of the mail. He complained that some stagecoach operators would not alter their schedules so as to arrive in major commercial centers at times more convenient for postmasters. (Later Hazard charged that the stagecoach schedules also inconvenienced merchants.) Hazard recommended that stagecoaches continue to carry the mail from Philadelphia southward but that postriders on horseback carry the mail between Portland, Maine, and New York City. Between New York City and Philadelphia Hazard believed that “No Stages can do the Business so well on this Route as Post Riders,” claiming that postriders traveled “Night & Day,” while stagecoach drivers were “careless, & inattentive to the Mail.”

On 14 February 1787 Congress read a draft ordinance for the operation of the post office which, among other things, would have formally authorized the continuation of the traditional practice of allowing printers to exchange single copies of their newspapers postage free. The ordinance, however, stipulated that newspapers would no longer be delivered to subscribers postage free. No further action was taken on the ordinance, but the alarm of many people was well expressed in a widely reprinted article first printed in the *Pennsylvania Herald* on 26 May: “there has hitherto been no charge for the conveyance of newspapers throughout the continent; but it has lately been said that a new arrangement is agitated by the post-masters, which will either deny to the printers the only eligible mode of supplying their subscribers, or impose so heavy a tax, that the remote circulation of their papers must be eventually discontinued. Besides the general arguments against this projected measure, something may be urged from the peculiar circumstances of the country. The strong and invidious distinction, which different habits, manners, and pursuits will naturally create between the eastern and

southern inhabitants of so extensive an empire, can only be counteracted by the freest communication of their opinions and politics, and, at this awful moment, when a council is convened [the Constitutional Convention], it may justly be said, to decide the fate of the Confederation, would it not be dangerous and impolitic to divert or destroy that great channel, which serves at once to gratify the curiosity, and to collect the voice of the people?"

On 15 October 1787 Congress, in response to another plea from Ebenezer Hazard, resolved that the Postmaster General be authorized to contract for the delivery of the mail during 1788 by stagecoaches or postriders, whichever "he may judge most expedient and beneficial; provided that preference is given to the transportation by stages to encourage this useful institution, when it can be done without material injury to the public." Soon after, the post office advertised in newspapers seeking bids for contracts to deliver the mail north of Philadelphia for the ensuing year. Contracts were awarded to postriders whose bids were about forty percent lower than their stagecoach competitors. Hazard also abandoned tradition by disallowing the postage-free exchange of newspapers among printers—each printer was required to enter into an agreement with the postrider who carried his newspaper.

The "new arrangement" broke down almost immediately. Postriders, in general, were less reliable than stagecoaches in maintaining schedules and delivering mail. Postriders also often refused "to take papers for printers." When they did agree to carry newspapers, postriders sometimes found it either easier to throw them away or more profitable to sell them along the post roads. To obtain more reliable service, some printers reverted to stagecoach delivery; and, in an effort to counter the "new arrangement," some stagecoach operators even offered free delivery of letters and newspapers, the latter to both subscribers and printers.

By March 1788 newspaper printers all over the country complained that beginning in January, they had not received their usual newspaper exchanges. Antifederalists believed that the "new arrangement" at the post office was intentionally designed to delay, if not totally stop, the free and widespread circulation of the few Antifederalist-oriented newspapers. The *New York Journal*, the *Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer*, and the *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal* were said to be most affected. (For descriptions of these newspapers. Led by the printers of these newspapers—Thomas Greenleaf, Eleazer Oswald, and Francis Bailey, respectively—Antifederalists asserted that the Postmaster General through his chain of patronage—postmasters and postriders—had cut America's vital link of communications at a critical period in the debate over the Constitution. George Washington was disturbed that the post office's new policies had afforded Antifederalists "very plausible pretexts for dealing out their scandals, & exciting jealousies by inducing a belief that the suppression of intelligence at that critical juncture, was a wicked trick of policy, contrived by an Aristocratic Junto." Hazard had to be warned, continued Washington, "to wipe away the aspersion he has incautiously brought upon a good cause."

Hazard's new policies alienated all newspaper printers and stagecoach operators—two influential groups—as well as many politicians. The opposition to the Post-master General was so strong that he was nearly dismissed from office by Congress in September 1788. By the end of 1788, however, the post office issue had abated, but it remained in George Washington's

memory. As president, Washington did not reappoint Hazard-one of only a handful of Confederation officers turned out of office. The right of printers to exchange their newspapers postage free remained an issue until 1792 when Congress provided by law "That every printer of newspapers may send one paper to each and every other printer of newspapers within the United States, free of postage, under such regulations, as the Postmaster General shall provide."