

This Day in History... March 9, 1858

Street Mailbox Patented

On March 9, 1858, iron manufacturer Albert Potts of Philadelphia patented an early mail collection box.

Letter boxes were used in New York City as early as 1833 to coincide with the penny post. These boxes were placed along delivery routes and carriers collected the mail Monday thru Saturday at 1:00 p.m. They charged a fee of two cents per item to transport these letters to the post office. These boxes only remained in use for a few years before being removed.

Private letter delivery companies also provided collection boxes in larger cities. In New York, the Post Office Department purchased the City Despatch Post in 1842 and had 112 collecting stations at convenient locations throughout the city. However, that service only lasted until 1846, leaving mailers without a convenient place to send out their mail.

Other cities used letter boxes at various times. Collection boxes were installed in Jersey City, New Jersey in 1848 and in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1851. The Post Office once again began using letter boxes in New York City in 1852. There were hundreds of boxes throughout the city by 1855, with carriers collecting mail four times a day. However, some, such as postal reformer Pliny Miles, complained that the system wasn't effective – "1,000 little tin boxes [hidden] in as many places of business in New York" that could only be used when the businesses were open. Plus, the boxes were small and had no locks, so anyone could remove the mail, or even walk away with the entire box!

In Philadelphia, iron manufacturer Albert Potts developed his own solution. On March 9, 1858, he received a patent for a "new and improved combination of Letter-Box and Lamp-Post for municipalities." Potts's patent described in detail how to attach the post boxes to his lamp posts. He said that these new boxes would make it easier and safer for people to drop off their mail at any time of day. And that people visiting the city could easily identify the mailboxes. While his letter boxes were put into use by the Post Office Department, cities didn't purchase his lamp posts to go along with them, as he had hoped. By 1859, more than 300 of Potts's mailboxes were installed on Philadelphia lamp posts "bringing the Post Office to everyone's door."

Other cities continued to test their own letter boxes. On August 2, 1858, Boston postmaster Nahum Capen installed 33 secure iron boxes on the city's busiest street corners. New York City started using lamp post mail boxes in November 1859 and by November 1860, had 574 cast-iron boxes around the city, with mail collections four times a day.

The US Post Office inaugurated free home delivery in cities in 1863 and also called for the placement of tin or wood boxes at convenient locations throughout the city where mail could be dropped off. In 1869, Samuel Strong became the first known person to receive a letter box contract from the Post Office, for his Flat-Top Box. While he claimed it was secure and easy to empty, mail carriers disagreed. The Post Office considered a variety of new designs, ultimately deciding on the round-top box. By the 1880s, they had purchased more than 35,000 round-top mailboxes in two sizes. This design wasn't without its flaws. Though simple to use, the letter slot could let in rain or snow, and thieves could figure out a way to steal the mail. Plus, cities used a few different types of letter boxes, which created some confusion, with stories arising of people placing their mail in fire hydrants and alarm boxes.

In 1889, Willard D. Doremus patented a new, more secure design. However, most people were used to the mail going into a slot on the side and were unsure where to deposit their letters in his mailbox. The Post Office spent several years trying to develop the perfect mailboxes. In 1911 they began testing drop-bottom mailboxes, which made mail collection much quicker – letting gravity do the work for mail carriers.

Larger mailboxes had been in limited use since the 1880s. Letter boxes couldn't fit newspapers or packages and people often left these items on top of the mailbox, where weather and thieves could carry them away. With the introduction of Parcel Post in 1913, the need for larger collection boxes increased and most smaller boxes were replaced. While the Post Office has experimented with variations such as foot pedals and snorkel shoots, the overall design has remained much the same since the early 1900s. Mailbox colors changed over the years – green and red were common in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the 1950s, they were made red, white, and blue, and since 1970, have remained dark blue.



Potts's mailboxes were affixed to lamp posts.



Free city mail delivery was introduced in 1863 in response to the Civil War.



Stamp pictures a green post collection box from the early 1900s.



Mail wagons such as this became traveling post offices.



At the time this stamp was issued in 1973, mail was collected from "nearly a third of a million local collection boxes."

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