

This Day in History... November 5, 1639

America's First Postmaster

On November 5, 1639, Richard Fairbanks was made the first official postmaster in an American colony. Many consider this to be the first public postal service in America.

In the early days of the colonies, many citizens attempted to keep in touch with people from their mother countries. When they sent letters to Europe, they could trust that their mail would be handled respectfully, passing through those countries' respective postal systems.

But in the American colonies, there were no established post offices at this time. So it was their responsibility to find out when the ships would be returning from Europe to try to collect their mail.



Stamp pictures a colonial post rider, who carried the mail from colony to colony.

Then on November 5, 1639, the Massachusetts Bay Colony became the first to attempt to remedy this situation. The colony's general court issued an ordinance that all letters that arrived in Boston from Europe or were to be sent from Boston to Europe, should be taken to Richard Fairbanks's tavern. Opened a year or two earlier, Fairbanks's tavern was popular and centrally located. It hosted important committee meetings and returns to the surveyor-general.

For his service, Fairbanks received a penny for each letter delivered. The ordinance didn't require that people take their letters to Fairbanks to be sent to Europe but offered it as a convenience. The full ordinance read:

"For preventing the miscarriage of letters; & it is ordered, that notice be given that Rich[a]rd Fairbanks his house in Boston is the place appointed for all letters which are brought from beyond the sea or are to be sent thither, are to be brought unto; & he is to take care that they be delivered or sent according to their directions; & he is allowed for every such letter a 1d., & must answer all miscarriages through his own neglect in this kind; provided that no man shall be compelled to bring his letters thither, except he please."

From this ordinance, Fairbanks's tavern effectively became the city's post office, and Fairbanks the postmaster. Many also consider this to be the first public postal service in America.



Stamp issued for the 300th anniversary of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.



Stamp block shows traditional methods of mail delivery.

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