

OUR NATION'S FIRST LETTER CARRIER

It was July 1, 1863, when a postal employee named Joseph William Briggs (1813-1872) inaugurated the first free city mail delivery. Here is part of the story of this virtually unknown 'father of free city mail delivery.'

History's pages are stained with the bitter tears of citizens who have rendered our government some monumental service, yet were never accorded the honor of even a minor accolade.

Such is the case of Joseph William Briggs, a humble window clerk in a modest post office in Cleveland during the Civil War. Briggs fathered the idea of free city mail delivery. He was America's first letter carrier and he designed the first letter mailbox. Only weeks before his death, his health broken by ten years of valiantly inaugurating today's system of mail delivery, he called tailors to his bedside and designed the letter carrier's uniform. Counterparts of this uniform are still worn today by Uncle Sam's postmen.



Briggs's novel idea raised the Post Office Department from the silt of mediocrity to its present stature. Yet, despite the endless procession of commemorative stamps issued partly to edify the country's philatelists, there has been no suggestion that such an honor be bestowed on the man whose efforts gave Americans one of democracy's priceless privileges --- free mail delivery to their homes.

Many people today take for granted free mail delivery as part of the duties of the Post Office Department. But it wasn't always that way. If it hadn't been for Briggs, we might still be trudging to a post office to wait wearily in line for hours to get our mail.

Dismal Winter Scene in 1863

One bitterly cold day in 1863, Briggs, from his window in the tiny Cleveland post office, looked out on a dismal scene. It was "Army Day". Hundreds of citizens, most of them being women, were lined up for blocks in a straggling queue, waiting in the snow and slush to pick up their mail. From time to time, a cry went up from the crowd, as the tired and faint dropped to the street in exhaustion.

The Civil War was at the height of its fury. The flower of American youth was in uniform. Wives, mothers, sweethearts and sisters were desperate for news of their loved ones. Every day, the womenfolk, the old men and unbearded youths stood patiently in line for hours on end to find if there was any word from loved ones at the front.

Briggs was compassionate as well as a man of great competence. His heart went out to these people making pitiful efforts to keep warm as they inched their way toward his window. Briggs had an inspiration. "Why not," he asked himself, "devise a way of delivering mail to the homes of our citizens?"

He took his idea to Edwin Cowles, publisher of the Old Cleveland LEADER, and also Cleveland postmaster. Cowles was wealthy but politically minded. At first, he shrugged off the idea, until Briggs pointed out that the paper's circulation would be bound to zoom if it could be mailed to subscribers. Then, Cowles realized that postal revenues would go up under the stimulus of free delivery.

Experiment in Cleveland

He gave Briggs permission to experiment with his plan in Cleveland, fully aware that the wrath of the Postmaster General might descend upon his head. In that day, Washington often resented suggestions from the field. Briggs immediately went to work to implement his idea. He talked to neighborhood grocers in Cleveland. He found they were delighted to cooperate if the Post Office would send mail to their stores, where post office employees would then sort and deliver it to the homes in the vicinity.

When he was satisfied that his plans were workable, Briggs mapped out a route for himself. Then, he loaded a basket with letters and headed out to personally deliver them. Thus, he became the nation's first letter carrier. Cleveland, Ohio, became the birthplace of free city delivery.

Then Briggs's troubles began. He immediately became the most unpopular man in town. Many street names were duplicated, and in other cases, they were just non-existent. House numbers were a rarity. Briggs trudged many weary miles to get streets named. Cleveland had two streets named Lincoln. Many people living on them fervently and vocally wanted them to continue carrying the name of the wartime President. Those on both streets fought to retain it.

Briggs finally resolved the high-decibel hassle by naming one of the streets Abraham. Then all the houses had to be numbered, a most tedious task.

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The idea of delivering mail to homes seems a simple one today, accustomed as we are to such service. But until Briggs's brainstorm, nobody in the civilized world had heard of such a revolutionary concept. Nights were spent by Briggs attending meetings of irate citizens to explain his plan and placate the public. Then private mail carriers who picked up mail for merchants at a price many folks could ill afford, saw their business dwindling. Briggs won the mercenaries over by promising to hire them as government postmen.

Thus the year 1863 saw the Cleveland Post Office handling 115,000 pieces of mail.

Bundles from Grocery Stores

Now Briggs had more problems. People who lived just beyond the line from the definite delivery districts assigned under Briggs to 10 carriers, were furious because they were barred from delivery. They charged discrimination. Merchants wanted Briggs's men to bring enormous packages out with their mail. Housewives were peeved because the carriers would not bring their bundles from the grocery store as long as they were coming their way with the mail they had picked up at the grocery stores.

Undaunted by these frustrations, and envisioning eventual acceptance of his idea, Briggs decided to tilt the windmills of indifference in the Postmaster General's office in Washington D. C. He wrote to the Postmaster General of the United States, describing his idea and successful experiments in Cleveland. To answer the cry that his innovation would be tremendously expensive, Briggs pointed out that it would be cheaper to hire mailmen than to require the entire population of a city to stand in line for hours at each post office throughout the land.

Briggs and Cowles cannily hoped to buttonhole some Senator and enlist him as an ally with the question: "How would you like to sponsor a bill, and get credit for it, that would deliver the mail right to the door of every voter in every big city in America?"

Ally in Postmaster General

Fortunately for Briggs, the Postmaster General in Abraham Lincoln's cabinet was Montgomery Blair of Maryland, one of the most able and remarkable men ever to hold high office in the United States.

Blair was no traditionalist. He had moved to Maryland, after a successful stint as mayor of St. Louis, to become the Postmaster Generalship holder from 1861-1864. His administration was responsible for the money order system and for the use of railway mail cars. Briggs's idea caught fire in his mind.

Blair called Briggs in from Cleveland and placed him in charge of the project. Together they stormed Capitol Hill with their great idea.

Congress Fears Bankruptcy

Congress treated them with scorn. After all, the nation was being torn by a great Civil War and was straining its human and financial resources to the utmost. This they argued, was surely no time to make expensive and radical experiments in the postal establishment. It would be so ruinously expensive as to invite national bankruptcy.

However, the two zealots could not be denied. They argued, stormed and cajoled. Finally they won the battle.

On March 5, 1863, President Lincoln signed a new postal bill to become effective July 1. The key provision of this bill read: "That letter carriers shall be employed at such post offices as the Postmaster General shall direct for the delivery of letters . . . and for the services they shall receive a salary to be prescribed by the Postmaster General . . ." (12 Sta. 701.)

Salary: Up to \$1,000 Per Year

The rate of postage was set at two cents for the first half-ounce plus two cents for every additional ounce thereafter. The pay was set at a rate "not to exceed \$800 per annum". But it was stipulated that, "on satisfactory evidence of their diligence, fidelity and experience as carriers," mailmen could receive up to \$1,000 a year. This was a decent wage in 1863.

Briggs was handed the job of instituting free city mail delivery in half a hundred of the nation's largest cities. In his memoirs, he recalls that at the time he took off for California to install his system in cities like San Francisco, there were no diners on the train. The intrepid champion of free delivery had to carry a basket of "vittles" for the long and tedious train journey, and when it the basket was empty he got along "as I could."

The highest pay he received for his dedicated labor was an annual salary of \$1,000, plus a per diem pay of \$3. It is interesting to note that the service, inaugurated on July 1, 1863, occurred as the Union and Confederate troops were beginning to mass at Gettysburg for one of history's most notable blood baths.

It took an imaginative administration to embark upon such a sweeping experiment at so crucial a time, but the experiment proved an instant success.

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Rise In Postal Revenues

Prior to the institution of free city delivery, postal revenues had been dropping steadily. In 1862, they were recorded at \$8,299,821. In 1863, the receipts rose 35 percent, to \$11,163,790. Of course, the Confederate States had their own postal system and collected their own revenues.

The city delivery system, in its first year, cost the Post office Department \$300,000. It produced ten times that amount in added revenue. To further judge the success of the system, in 1862, the average American spent 25 cents a year on mail. This was one cent less than he spent in 1837, the first year such figures were recorded.

1863, the first year of free city delivery, he spent 33 cents on his mail service. The figure moved to 42 cents by 1865.

For ten years, Briggs traveled around the country indoctrinating postmasters in his system. Only weeks before his death, and when he was seriously ill, he summoned tailors with samples of cloth. Under his direction the first carrier uniforms of gray cloth with black trimmings was adopted. They were still in use over a century later.

Wearied, his health broken by the decade of struggle to sell his idea, Briggs died in Cleveland in 1872. But he lived long enough to see his system overcome the initial bitter opposition and become an accepted benefit to the public of his day and to later generations.

Had it not been for the indomitable will of this dedicated humanitarian, we might still be going to a central post office and spending hours waiting for our mail.

A modest memorial to Briggs is in the form of a tablet which graces the lobby of the U. S. Court and Customs House on Cleveland's Public Square. It is built on the site of the post office in which Briggs was stationed. There is also a Briggs Post office branch out of the Cleveland district which saw the birth of today's free city mail delivery.

— *From Ozark Mt. Branch 203*