

Women Postmasters

Over the course of its history, the United States Postal Service has employed women as postmasters – from a single woman at the birth of our country in 1775 until today, when more women than men head United States Post Offices. Although sometimes popularly referred to as "postmistresses," their official title always has been "postmaster."

Promoting women as managers is a commonplace corporate agenda today; the Postal Service has done it for centuries. During the colonial period, at least two women – Sarah Updike Goddard and Lydia Hill – may have served as postmasters under the British postal system in North America. Sarah Updike Goddard may have handled the postmaster duties in Providence, Rhode Island, in the 1760s, for her only son, William Goddard, after he moved to New York and, later, to Philadelphia to establish a newspaper business and print shop. Lydia Hill reportedly served for many years as postmaster at Salem, Massachusetts, before her death in 1768.

First Woman Postmaster in the United States

Mary Katherine Goddard, William Goddard's sister, was the only female postmaster in office when the Second Continental Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin as the first Postmaster General of the United Colonies in 1775, making her the first female postmaster in the United Colonies, and soon, the United States. She also was a printer, the first to publish the Declaration of Independence in 1776; ran a bookshop; and published *The Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser*, the only newspaper in Baltimore from July 1779 to May 1783.

In November 1789, Postmaster General Samuel Osgood removed Goddard from office. Osgood, a strict financial manager, wanted to install his own postmaster and reorganize Baltimore's postal accounts under his control. More than 200 citizens of Baltimore petitioned the Postmaster General to reinstate Mary Katherine Goddard but he refused, claiming the right to exercise his own judgment. Goddard wrote directly to both President George Washington and the United States Senate to petition for reinstatement and her back salary, but neither intervened on her behalf. When she left office, the only woman listed as postmaster in Post Office Department Ledger A was Elizabeth Creswell, appointed at Charlestown, Maryland, in 1786.

Sarah DeCrow became the first woman appointed postmaster under the Constitution when she was named postmaster of Hertford, North Carolina, on September 27, 1792 – although she kept trying to resign because the pay was so low. Assistant Postmaster General Charles Burrall acknowledged her concerns in a letter addressed to her on November 29, 1794, appealing to her sense of public service by writing:

I am sensible that the emolument of the office cannot be much inducement to you to keep it [the postmastership], nor to any Gentleman to accept of it, yet I flatter myself some one may be found willing to do the business, rather than the town and its neighbourhood should be deprived of the business of a Post Office.¹

Several months later, a gentleman did take over the office.

The second woman to serve as postmaster of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, had no such problem with her compensation. Mary Dickson, who served from April 11, 1829, until 1850, earned a salary of \$1,305.37 in 1847, the fifth highest in the state. Only the postmasters of Erie, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh earned more.

A Question Arises

Still, the appointment of women as postmasters was not always unchallenged. Controversy surrounded the appointment of Rose Wright, who became postmaster of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on March 9, 1814.

Almost three weeks earlier, on February 17, Postmaster General Gideon Granger wrote to the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:

My feelings would lead me to appoint Mrs. Wright in conformity to the wishes expressed in her recommendation, but the Post Office Law has been revised and altered since the appointment of Mrs. Moore and a doubt has been suggested to me from a source that I ought to respect as to the strict legality of appointing a female and on careful examination of the Law I incline to . . . believe that the doubt may be well founded.²

The law referred to was passed in 1810 and contains no specific provision prohibiting the appointment of women postmasters. However, all pronouns substituted for "postmaster" in the act are in the masculine case, so the Postmaster General may have taken this to mean women should not be appointed postmaster.

Despite Postmaster General Granger's doubts, Wright was chosen to head the Harrisburg Post Office less than a month after he wrote the letter. She served more than eight years.

Following the Civil War, many women were hired as postmasters in the South because prior to July 1868, prospective postmasters had to swear that they had not voluntarily aided the Confederacy or Confederate soldiers. Few southern men could take that oath.

The Post Office at Covington, Louisiana, was the first known to be headed by an African-American woman, Mrs. Anna M. Dumas. She was appointed postmaster on November 15, 1872, and served until about June 1885.

In *The Story of Our Post Office*, published in 1893, Marshall Cushing estimated there were 6,335 women postmasters at that time:

A whole book could be written about the many admirable women who work away with all their tact and business prudence, . . . trying to please their patrons and the Department alike, and pleasing both because they try. . . . Sometimes they are the most important persons in their towns.³

Cushing gave brief biographical sketches of more than two dozen women postmasters, including:

Mrs. Mary Sumner Long, postmaster at Charlottesville, Virginia, who was "a lady of marked social and literary tastes and acquirements, as well as of great business capacity. . . . [and whose] business-like administration of the post office . . . has been very satisfactory to all her patrons."⁴ (See sidebar.)

Mrs. Mary E. P. Bogert, postmaster at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, who "kept a general supervision of every department of the office, giving personal care to all details, stimulating each employee to give to his work the best that was in him . . ."⁵

Mrs. Lucy S. Miller, of Mariposa, California, who was "faithfully at her post" daily by five in the morning, when "the morning mail reaches Mariposa . . . summer and winter," to get the "mail in



Mary H. Sumner Long, Postmaster

Mary H. Sumner Long was appointed postmaster of the Charlottesville, Virginia, Post Office by President Ulysses S. Grant on March 2, 1877 – one of his last days in office. She held the position until her death in 1900.

Though as a Democrat she was on the wrong side of the political fence, Long had friends in Washington who supported her petition for office on account of her father, the late Union General Edwin V. Sumner. Her husband was the Confederate General Armistead L. Long, who had resigned as her father's aide at the beginning of the Civil War and later became one of General Robert E. Lee's closest aides.

The story goes that when Mary Long's friends urged President Grant to support her request for the postmaster position on account of her father – the Union general – Grant replied: "I have great respect for Gen. Sumner. He was a gallant soldier. But Gen. Long was also a gallant soldier, and I will help Mrs. Long on her husband's account" (*The Washington Post*, June 26, 1898). By that time, Armistead Long had gone completely blind, due perhaps to his war service, and relied upon his wife for support.

readiness for the different carriers as they call."⁶

By the end of the 19th century, women managed about ten percent of the country's 70,000 Post Offices. Pennsylvania had more female postmasters – 463 – than any other state, although Virginia was a close second with 460.

20th Century Achievements

Women postmasters began setting new records in the 1920s. Appointed postmaster of Tampa, Florida, on January 26, 1923, Elizabeth D. Barnard became the highest paid female postmaster on record with a salary of \$6,000 at a time when the average annual salary for postal employees was just \$1,870.

During World War II, the number of female postmasters increased significantly – to more than 17,500 out of 42,680 in 1943. After World War II, the overall number of women postmasters decreased slightly as men returned from the war and reclaimed their jobs. In August 1949, more than 40 percent of the nation's 41,575 postmasters were women.

On February 3, 1958, the Post Office Department issued a press release on "lady postmasters," proud to announce the department employed "the largest number of women branch managers of any business type operation in the world." According to then-Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield:

With our near 16,000 women Postmasters representing close to half of our entire management staff, we believe it is fair to say the American Post Office Department . . . recognizes the management abilities of women perhaps more than any other private or governmental organization anywhere.

The same release noted that several women postmasters headed offices with more than a million dollars in annual receipts, including Beverly Hills, California; Boys Town, Nebraska; Hackensack and Union, New Jersey; and Corpus Christi, Texas.

In the 1960s women benefited from a string of executive orders promoting equal employment in the federal workforce, beginning with President John F. Kennedy's July 1962 order that federal appointments and promotions be made "without regard to sex."⁷ In 1967, the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) was created at Post Office Department Headquarters, with EEO coordinators designated for the field.

In 2008, 15,388 of the nation's 25,089 postmasters were women, representing more than 61 percent.⁸



**Kathryn S. Wilson,
MSC Manager/Postmaster**

In July 1963, President John F. Kennedy appointed Kathryn S. Wilson postmaster of the Pasadena, California, Post Office – the largest Post Office headed by a woman at that time. Wilson had acted in the position since 1961.

In 1971, Wilson became one of the first women to manage a sectional center when the Pasadena Post Office was designated as such. (The Lansing, Michigan, Post Office/sectional center was also headed by a woman.) In 1975, sectional centers were renamed Management Sectional Centers (MSCs). As MSC manager, Wilson was responsible not only for the Pasadena Post Office, but for all Post Offices in the 910-912 ZIP Code area.

Wilson served as MSC manager/postmaster of Pasadena until her retirement in March 1984. She received a service award from Postmaster General William F. Bolger upon her retirement, in recognition of nearly 23 years of dedicated service.

¹ National Archives Microfilm Publication 601, *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836*.

² Ann Moore was postmaster of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1800-1829. National Archives Microfilm Publication 601, *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836*.

³ Cushing, Marshall. *The Story of Our Post Office*. Boston, MA: A. M. Thayer & Co., Publishers, 1893, 443.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 450.

⁶ Ibid., 443.

⁷ John F. Kennedy, "Memorandum on Equal Opportunity for Women in the Federal Service," July 24, 1962. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=8786> (accessed May 30, 2007). In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson amended the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit sex discrimination in hiring in the workplace at large.

⁸ As of May 5, 2008.

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