WHAT ARE CARRIER STAMPS?

Carrier stamps prepaid the fee for service in taking a letter to or from the post office or between correspondents in the same city. The fee, 1¢ or 2¢, varied among cities at the discretion of the local postmaster, usually in response to competition from local posts.

The fee-based carrier system, which dates back to 1836, ended on June 30, 1863, when the government Post Office Department began paying carriers a salary, in lieu of compensating them for each letter. This date also marks the end of 1¢ plus 3¢ carrier-rate covers.

WHAT ARE LOCAL POSTS?

At a time when mail delivery between one's door and the post office was a premium service, the government and scores of enterprising individuals vied for this business. The men hired by the Post Office Department were the Carriers. The private firms carrying mail within city limits were the Local Posts.

Although inter-city mail routes were suppressed in 1845, the local posts operating within city limits continued to carry letters to and from the post office and between local correspondents. They were able to avoid government interference as long as city streets were not declared post roads closed to private mail carriers.

What are the 1844 independent mails?

In 1844, express companies such as Adams, American Letter Mail Co., Hale & Co., Harnden and Pomeroy expanded the letter-carrying business along the eastern railroad routes used to carry freight. These firms, known as the Independents, generally charged letter rates based on circulating silver coins: 6¢, or half a bit (12¢), a bit being an eighth of a silver
dollar. Stamps purchased in quantity were discounted to 20 for a dollar.

The rates charged by the Independents were a fraction of the postage charged by the United States post office. This savings, combined with reliable, efficient service and innovations such as prepayment by adhesive stamps, made the 1844 independent mails very popular with the public.

The government was threatened by the Independents, who siphoned revenues from profitable eastern mail routes, while leaving the government to subsidize money-losing rural routes and high-volume newspaper delivery. In fact, historians generally agree that the Independents were a catalyst for the postal reforms of 1845, which lowered and standardized rates.

After fighting the independent operators in court, the government finally won in 1845 by threatening to cancel mail contracts with railroad companies who permitted the Independents to use their lines to carry letters. This effectively shut down transportation of inter-city letters by the express companies, but they continued to carry freight and valuables considered to be non-letter mail. In areas where government service was unavailable, private expresses continued to carry mail. The Western Expresses in mining regions are the best-known of the post-1845 independent mail routes.

DIVERSE IMAGES AND FIRSTS IN PHILATELY

Stamps issued by the local posts not only indicated prepayment; in many cases they served as miniature advertisements. Some were little more than typeset labels with the name of the post. Others were designed with elaborate images to capture the public's attention.

In an article published in the Chronicle (Nov. 1996, U.S. Classics Society), local-post specialist Gordon Stimmell identified several "firsts" in topical philately. Some of these are:

- The first-ever depiction of an actual building on a stamp — in 1843 Robertson & Co. issued the Striding Messenger stamp, which pictures a giant mail-carrier stepping over the Merchant Exchange building in Philadelphia. The competitive meaning was obvious to locals who knew that the Philadelphia post office was housed in the Merchant Exchange building.
- A tiny ocean steamer was depicted on the Hartford Mail Route stamp issued in 1844 (80L1, 80L3). This is believed to be the earliest representation of a vessel on any stamp.
- The first political-campaign image: Bouton’s stamp portraying “Old Rough and Ready”, the 1848 presidential candidate Zachary Taylor (18L1–18L2).