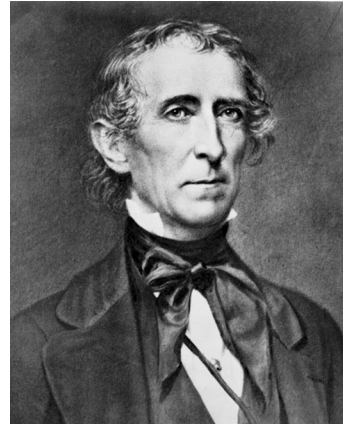


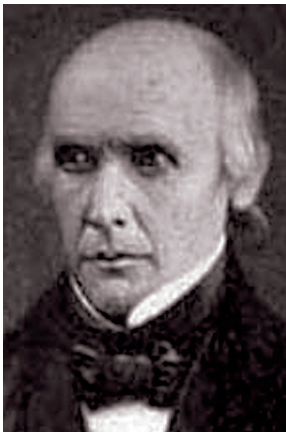
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Introduction to United States Postmasters' Provisionals: The Path to Postal Reform

One day before James K. Polk's inauguration as the nation's eleventh President, Congress passed the Post Office Reform Act of March 3, 1845, which greatly simplified and reduced postal rates, effective July 1, 1845. The Act was signed by President John Tyler on his last day in office, which left the task of implementing the reform measures in the hands of Polk's new Postmaster General, Cave Johnson (1793-1866). Johnson, a Democratic congressman from Tennessee since 1829, had been among the opponents of the Cheap Postage movement, arguing that such a drastic reduction in postage rates would financially cripple the postal system and increase the risk of privatization. Now, as Postmaster General in President Polk's cabinet, Johnson was responsible for making sure the nation's postal system provided the same level of service, despite the reduction of rates and the significant curtailment of franking privileges and transportation subsidies.



President John Tyler (1790-1862)



Cave Johnson (1793-1866)
Postmaster General
1845-1849

The profound changes in the nation's postal system effected by the 1845 Post Office Reform Act set the stage for the introduction of adhesive stamps to prepay postage, a concept initiated in Great Britain in 1840 and proposed in Congress by Senator Daniel Webster in the same year, but not authorized until 1847. In the two years between July 1, 1845, when the 5-cent and 10-cent rates took effect, and July 1, 1847, when the first United States General Issue stamps were issued, adhesive stamps and specially-marked envelopes valid for government postage were provided by postmasters. These stamps and envelopes are known as Postmasters' Provisionals — *postmasters*, because they are the people who issued them, and *provisionals*, because the stamps filled a need until the government's first general issue became available.

Eleven post offices are known to have issued provisionals: Alexandria, D.C. (or Virginia); Annapolis, Maryland; Baltimore, Maryland; Boscawen, New Hampshire; Brattleboro, Vermont; Lockport, New York; Millbury, Massachusetts; New Haven, Connecticut; New York, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; and St. Louis, Missouri.

The provisionals were valid only at the issuing post office, and they were as novel and convenient to the public in 1845 as plastic debit cards are to us today. The use of provisional stamps in New York was carefully observed by Postmaster General Johnson and paved the way for the 1847 General Issue. Even now, 167 years after the first Postmasters' Provisionals were placed on sale, affixing a stamp to an envelope is the most convenient and practical way to send a letter by mail.

Exploring the Causes of Postal Reform

The postal historian's mantra is that, before the electronic age, the letter-mail system was society's only means to achieve inter-connectedness. For this reason, the subject of the postal system is really a study in communications and mass media.

The greater appreciation of letter communication has spurred a more comprehensive and integrated analysis of the various factors affecting postal systems. Researchers such as Dr. Richard R. John and Kelly B. Olds have incorporated traditional postal history into their study of communications, resulting in a fresh analysis of data and new insights into dynamic periods of postal development. This scholarly activity has helped the 19th century Postal Reform movement emerge as a separate area of concentrated study, reflecting the multiple influences of social, political, geographic, economic and technological factors.

Postmasters' Provisional stamps are of the utmost importance to philatelists, admired for their primitive character and great rarity, but they are just one practical element in the history of the Postal Reform movement. To better appreciate the stamps, it is useful to follow the steps of Postal Reform, from its roots in religious and political activism, through the rise of competitive enterprises that precipitated legislative change, and finally to the creation of a system that was cheaper and easier to use and manage.

Religion and Politics

The roots of American Postal Reform are found in religious and political movements of the early 19th century. The Second Great Awakening, starting in the United States around 1800, brought a strong sense of community and purpose among Christians. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was chartered in 1812 and immediately began a series of missionary journeys to convert non-Christian populations. Church groups were strong advocates of social reform, including the abolition of slavery and the promotion of peace, suffrage, temperance, Sabbatarianism and charity for the poor. The Christian missionaries believed that the Gospel of Christ and their social causes could be better propagated through written communication. Therefore, education in reading and writing became a primary function of traveling missionaries, and cheap postage to encourage letter writing and strengthen the ties among Christians was eventually promoted as one of their causes.



Reverend Joshua Leavitt (1794-1873)
Advocate for Cheap Postage

The relationship between religion, social activism and postal reform is embodied by the Reverend Joshua Leavitt (1794-1873). On the virtues of reduced postage rates, Reverend Leavitt wrote:

The usefulness of cheap postage, in aiding the various enterprises of benevolence and reform, should not be lost sight of, in this recital... Cheap postage, by making these efforts direct and personal, carrying their message from an individual to an individual, will open a new surface to the influence of truth; will awaken to activity new and deeper issues of sensibility; and, by combining as well as arousing, by union as well as action, will reduplicate, to a thousand fold, the benevolent and moral energies thus produced.

Changes in the American political landscape worked in tandem with Christian social activism to move the country toward postal reform. By the 1820's voting rights were extended to almost all white men, regardless of land ownership. With the rise of Jacksonian Democracy and the Second Party system came a tremendous increase in voter participation (the popular vote more than doubled from 1828 to 1840). There was a corresponding increase in the volume of letters, printed circulars and newspapers intended to inform and influence the voting public.



Sir Rowland Hill (1795-1879)
The Father of Postal Reform

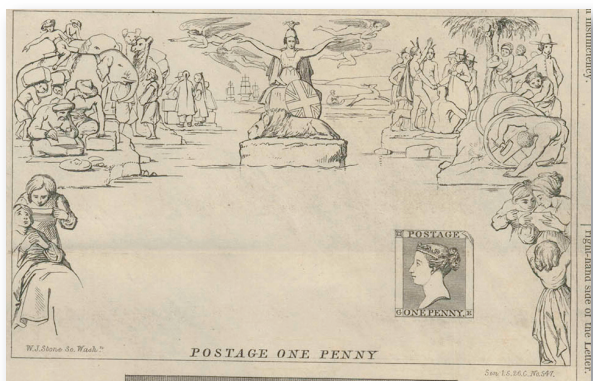
Sir Rowland Hill's Uniform Penny Post

While religion and politics were shaping the American public's desire and need for postal reform, events across the Atlantic provided the test case upon which proponents (and opponents) would make their case.

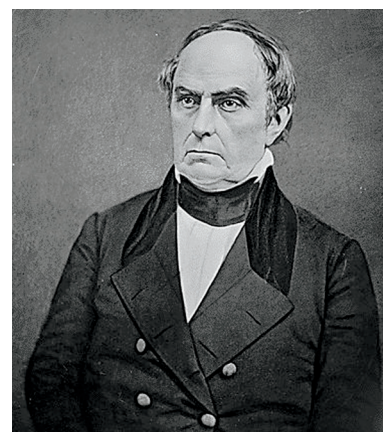
Rowland Hill (who was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1860) first became interested in the British postal system in the mid-1830's. In 1837 he circulated his famous treatise, *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*, and gained the attention of the British government, not all of which was positive. In 1839 Hill's recommendations were put into effect. By February 1840 the basic letter rate

was reduced to one penny (two cents) and franking privileges were curtailed. Lettersheets (the "Mulready") and adhesive stamps (the Penny Black and Two-Pence Blue) were issued in May 1840 and met with immediate success (the stamps more so than the lettersheets, which were rejected for aesthetic reasons). The increase in mail volume and postage revenues completely vindicated Hill's reforms. The British Uniform Penny Post became the shining example of the Postal Reform movement.

In June 1840 the spirit of Great Britain's postal reforms inspired the veteran senator and soon-to-be Secretary of State, Daniel Webster (1782-1852), to propose a resolution to reduce postage rates and to effect "the use of stamps, or stamped covers." Webster showed his colleagues examples of Great Britain's new issues, and a facsimile of the Mulready lettersheet and Penny Black was published in the *Resolutions*. However, Webster's resolution never gained traction.



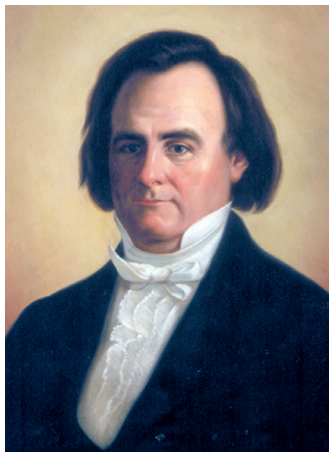
This facsimile Mulready lettersheet and Penny Black was published in the the *Resolutions* of the 26th Congress, in which Daniel Webster introduced a bill to reform postage rates



Senator Daniel Webster
(1782-1852)

The Rise of the Independent Mails

Private express companies began to exert increasing competitive pressure on the Post Office Department in the 1830's, especially as railroad and steamboat routes provided fast and inexpensive transportation, allowing the expresses to charge a fraction of government postage rates. The Post Office 1836-39 Southern Express Mail was launched by Postmaster General Amos Kendall to improve communication speed between major commercial centers and to undermine the influence of northern newspaper publishers. The 1842 Express Mail between Boston, New York and Albany was Postmaster General Charles A. Wickliffe's direct response to the carriage of mail by private expresses on railroad and steamboat routes.



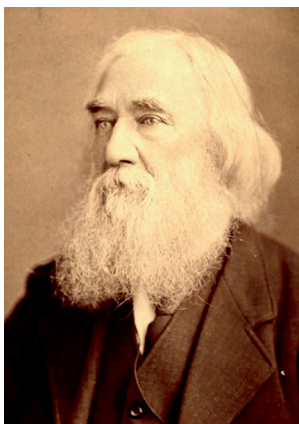
Charles A. Wickliffe (1788-1869)
Postmaster General 1841-1845

Postal officials knew that the more flexible schedules and cheaper rates offered by private expresses were siphoning off letter-mail business, especially along the lucrative northeast routes. Wickliffe attempted to suppress private transmission of mail by investigating and prosecuting express companies for violating the Post Office's constitutional monopoly of postal roads, but in November 1843 the courts ruled in favor of the defendant, Adams & Company, on the basis that the postal laws did not specifically forbid transport of mail by passengers on railroad trains and steamboats (the outmoded language referred only to foot messengers and horse riders). This decision paved the way for the emergence of the "Independents" in late 1843 and early 1844.

The earliest and largest of the Independent Mail operations, which openly advertised letter-mail service in competition with the government post office, was Hale & Company. The firm was founded by James W. Hale (1801-1892), an experienced expressman who had offered a variety of mail-forwarding services before starting his letter express in December 1843. Hale quickly emerged as the leader, with a vast network of offices and agents, and a reported 60% share of the Independent Mails.

The other major Independent Mail operator was the American Letter Mail Company, founded in January 1844 by Lysander Spooner (1808-1887), a vocal Cheap Postage advocate and one of Postmaster General Wickliffe's chief antagonists. In defense of his mail-carrying service, Spooner published *The Unconstitutionality of the Laws of Congress Prohibiting Private Mails*.

The Independent Mail companies carried mail until the Act of March 3, 1845, banned letter-mail services on inter-city postal routes, including steamboat and railroad lines. The last day of the Independent Mails was June 30, 1845, but their impact on the system was everlasting.



Lysander Spooner (1808-1887)
Cheap Postage advocate and founder
of the American Letter Mail Co.—
the "20 for a Dollar" adhesive stamp
issued by Spooner in 1844

High Costs of Carrying the Mail

In 1845 there were 14,183 post offices and an estimated 143,940 miles of postal routes. More than three-quarters of non-military federal employees worked for the Post Office Department.

A thorough analysis of Post Office income and expenses is provided by Kelly B. Olds in “The Challenge to the U.S. Postal Monopoly, 1839-1851” (*The Cato Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1, available at www.cato.org). Olds’ basic premise is that there were two fundamental reasons for the high cost of postal service:

First, high sorting costs and the obligation to run fixed routes at fixed times carrying non-optimal loads raised the cost of all formal mail services. The greatest expense of regularity came in rural regions where a sulky or horseman was often dispatched with a handful of letters. [A “sulky” is a horse-drawn two-wheel cart with a seat for the driver]

[Second] postage served as a tax... Six groups gained financially from the Post Office: (1) coach contractors, (2) rail and steamboat companies, (3) postmasters, (4) publishers of printed matter, (5) officials with the franking privilege, and (6) rural voters.

In round numbers, the Post Office Department’s net revenue for 1845 — the year rates were reduced on July 1 — was \$2.9 million against expenses of \$4.3 million, producing a net deficit of \$1.4 million (*Report of the Postmaster General*, 1845).

Transportation costs made up more than two-thirds of the Post Office budget. Olds estimates that in 1845 coach contractors received prices that were 90% above market, and that the railroad and steamboat companies charged *one thousand percent* over market for comparable transportation based on weight and distance. The overcharging was even more egregious before the Act of 1845 specified that contracts should be awarded to the lowest bidder for what “may be necessary to provide for the due celerity, certainty and security of such transportation” (those three requirements were shortened to three stars, and the routes became known as “Star Routes”).

The cost of distributing the enormous volume of printed matter and free-franked mail was subsidized by letter-mail postage. The relationship between newspapers and letter mail in 1843 is summarized by Olds:

Letters that weighed about one-eighth the average newspaper weight cost up to 16 times as much to mail. In 1843, more than twice as many newspapers were sent through the mails as were letters, and those were almost 97 percent of the paying mail by weight (Post Office Department, 1844). Newspapers, however, paid less than 15 percent of the total postage (\$536,547 out of \$4,249,333).

Before July 1845, higher postage rates placed much of the burden of the operating loss on Post Office patrons who mailed regular letters. Therefore, the inflated postage charges, apart from covering the cost of servicing rural routes (arguably an obligation of democratic society), contributed to subsidizing 1) over-market prices charged by contractors for their services, 2) the loss of revenue due to abuse of the franking privilege, and 3) the politically-motivated policy of carrying newspapers and printed matter at heavily discounted rates. When postage rates were reduced in 1845, the operating losses had to be covered by the treasury, effectively creating a taxpayer subsidy of powerful interest groups. One of the principal purposes of the Act of 1845 was to introduce measures to bring revenue and expenses in line.

Reduced Rates and Simplified Postage (But No Stamps)

The Act of March 3, 1845 (28th Congress, 2nd Session), is titled “An Act to reduce the rates of postage, to limit use and correct the abuse of the franking privilege, and for the prevention of frauds on the revenues of the Post Office Department.” The new rates are stated in Chapter 43, Section 1:

For every single letter, in manuscript, or paper of any kind by or upon which information shall be asked for or communicated in writing, or by marks and signs, conveyed in the mail, for any distance under 300 miles, five cents; and for any distance over 300 miles, ten cents: and for a double letter there shall be charged double these rates; and for a treble letter, treble these rates; and for a quadruple letter, quadruple these rates; and every letter or parcel not exceeding half an ounce in weight shall be deemed a single letter, and every additional weight of half an ounce, or additional weight of less than half an ounce, shall be charged with an additional single postage.

In simple terms, the Act created two letter rates: 5c per half ounce for distances up to 300 miles (and 5c for each additional half ounce); and 10c per half ounce for any distance over 300 miles within the United States. By comparison, the old rates were based on five distance parameters and multiplied by the number of pages in a letter.

The under-300 and over-300 miles distance provision was considered essential, because of the country’s size and the costs of transporting mail. The 5c under-300 miles rate would pay to send a half-ounce letter from New York City to the major East Coast cities of Boston, Philadelphia or Baltimore (but not between Boston and Philadelphia or Baltimore). The distance between post offices was calculated by postal route, not “as the crow flies.” For this reason, a letter might require the higher over-300 miles rate, even though the origin and destination were less than 300 miles apart. For example, someone in New York City sending a letter to Rochester in upstate New York — 250 miles by direct line — had to pay the 10c over-300 miles rate, because the standard railroad maps listed the distance by rail as 413 miles.

The original Senate bill (S. 46, December 19, 1844) and subsequent versions debated in the House and Senate contained different rate calculations, including multi-tiered distance parameters and rate progressions per sheet of paper or quarter-ounce weight increments. The bill was amended on January 16, 1845, to set the distance limit to 100 miles. Finally, on March 1, 1845, the Senate voted 37 to 7 in favor of changing the distance limit to 300 miles. (The various bills and Senate reports can be found on-line at memory.loc.gov).

Unlike the British Uniform Penny Post system, the U.S. Post Office Reform Act did not create an incentive to prepay postage. In other words, the 1845 rates for prepaid and collect mail were the same. Mail was marked “Paid” at the post office of origin if prepaid, or simply rated for postage to be collected from the addressee. The old problems arising from unpaid mail were not remedied by the 1845 reforms, and the introduction of a prepayment incentive (or non-payment penalty) was delayed until 1851.

The absence of a prepayment incentive and reliance on a distance calculation were relatively minor shortfalls compared to the Act’s most glaring omission — the absence of language authorizing the Postmaster General to issue *postage stamps*. This was really an inexplicable failure on the part of Congress to embrace one of the essential elements of Great Britain’s postal reforms.

George Plitt, who was sent to Great Britain and Europe in 1839 to survey and report on the British postal system, recommended adopting postage stamps in his 1840 report to Postmaster General Kendall. Senator Webster stood before Congress in June 1840 with British stamps in hand, proposing that the Post Office issue its own stamps as part of a postal reform measure. Stamps had been issued by the government carrier department in New York City since 1842 and by private local posts in the intervening years. Several of the rival Independent Mail firms issued stamps in 1844 and 1845, which were enthusiastically used by patrons. Yet, despite the proven success of postage stamps in the private and public sectors over a five-year period, Congress did not have the vision to authorize stamps in 1845.

Ironically, an earlier version of the Senate bill authorized the Postmaster General to issue “free stamps or envelopes” to members of Congress and territorial delegates as a substitute for the franking privilege. This provision was dropped in a Senate vote on January 30, 1845, and on February 6 the terms were changed to “franks or free envelopes.” Ultimately, the Act modified the franking procedure and dropped any reference to stamps, except for this enigmatic anti-counterfeiting provision in Chapter 69, Section 5:

That if any person or persons shall forge or counterfeit, or shall utter or use knowingly, any counterfeit stamp of the Post Office Department of the United States issued by authority of this act, or by any other act of Congress, within the United States, or the post office stamp of any foreign Government, he shall be adjudged guilty of felony, and, on conviction thereof in any court having jurisdiction of the same, shall undergo a confinement at hard labor for any length of time not less than two years, nor more than ten, at the discretion of the court.

This part of the Act of 1845 relates to foreign mails. The anti-counterfeiting provision hints at the possibility adhesive stamps were contemplated, but it is difficult to reconcile that interpretation with the omission of language authorizing stamps from any other act of Congress until 1847.

Indeed, Congress would eventually authorize postage stamps for general use, but in 1845 it would be left to the postmasters to innovate.

Postmasters Fill the Void

The eleven post offices that issued provisional stamps range from the major (New York City) to the minor (Boscawen). New York, Baltimore and New Haven issued provisionals around the same time in 1845. The smaller offices followed. It is surprising that postmasters in other large cities — for example, George Lehman in Philadelphia and Nathaniel Greene in Boston — did not choose to issue provisional stamps.

Among the benefits attributed to postage stamps was that they allowed customers to prepay postage on a letter and drop it into a mail box at any hour. This convenience was emphasized in some of the announcements; for example, the St. Louis newspapers carried notices that explained:

They are so prepared that they may be stuck upon a letter like a wafer and will prove a great convenience to merchants and all those having many letters to send post paid, as it saves all trouble of paying at the post-office.

Each postmaster chose his own form of provisional and method of production. The table below summarizes the information for all eleven issuing post offices.

<i>Postmasters' Provisionals 1845-1847</i>			
Post Office	Postmaster	Adhesive/Envelope	Production Method (Scott Numbers)
Alexandria D.C. (Va.)	Daniel Bryan	5c Adhesive	Typeset (1X1, 1X1a, 1X2)
Annapolis Md.	Martin F. Revell	5c Envelope	Handstamped (2XU1)
Baltimore Md.	James M. Buchanan	5c/10c Adhesive 5c/10c Envelope	Engraved (3X1-3X4) Handstamped (3XU1-3XU4)
Boscawen N.H.	Worcester Webster	5c Adhesive	Handstamped (4X1, one known)
Brattleboro Vt.	Frederick N. Palmer	5c Adhesive	Engraved (5X1)
Lockport N.Y.	Hezekiah W. Scovell	5c Adhesive	Handstamped (6X1, one known)
Millbury Mass.	Asa H. Waters	5c Adhesive	Typographed Woodcut (7X1)
New Haven Conn.	Edward A. Mitchell	5c Envelope	Handstamped (8XU1-8XU4)
New York N.Y.	Robert H. Morris	5c Adhesive	Engraved (9X1-9X3 and varieties)
Providence R.I.	Welcome B. Sayles	5c/10c Adhesive	Engraved single plate (10X1-10X2)
St. Louis Mo.	John M. Wimer	5c/10c/20c Adhesive	Engraved single plate (11X1-11X8)

The First General Issue

The Act of March 3, 1847 (29th Congress, 2nd Session) authorized the Postmaster General to issue stamps (Chapter 63, Section 11):

That, to facilitate the transportation of letters in the mail, the Postmaster-General be authorized to prepare postage stamps, which, when attached to any letter or packet, shall be evidence of the payment of the postage chargeable on such letter; which said stamps the Postmaster-General may deliver to any deputy postmaster who may apply for the same, the deputy postmaster paying or becoming accountable for the amount of the stamps so received by him; and if any of said stamps shall not be used, but be returned to the General Post-Office, the amount so returned shall be credited to such deputy postmaster; and such deputy postmaster may sell or dispose of any stamps so received by him, to any person who may wish to use the same; but it shall not be lawful for any deputy postmaster to prepare, use, or dispose of any postage stamps not authorized by and received from the Postmaster-General...

Designs for 5c Franklin and 10c Washington stamps were submitted on March 20, 1847, by the New York firm of Rawdon, Wright, Hatch & Edson to the Assistant Postmaster General. The letters accompanying the hand-drawn essays were recently reproduced in an article by Thomas Lera ("In the National Postal Museum: Cave Johnson, Postmaster General 1845-1849", *Collectors Club Philatelist*, Vol. 90, No. 3, May-June 2011). They are also available at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum website (www.arago.si.edu).

The RWH&E March 20th letter indicates that, at an earlier point of the design process, Postmaster General Cave Johnson had suggested the 5c stamp should portray fellow Tennessean and Democrat, the late President Andrew Jackson, who had died two years earlier in June 1845. When RWH&E sent the essays, they wrote:

In accordance with your [Assistant PMG's] suggestion, we have substituted the Head of Franklin for that of Gen. Jackson, which our Mr. Rawdon was requested to use by the Postmaster General; should the P.M.G. still desire the Head of Jackson, it can be used.

Once the designs were approved, RWH&E made the dies and two steel plates of 200 subjects each. The first supply of 600,000 5c and 200,000 10c stamps was delivered to the Third Assistant Postmaster General John Marron in New York City on June 29, 1847. On July 1 Marron turned over 60,000 5c and 20,000 10c stamps to the New York City post office, and they were placed on sale that day.



Single-rate folded letter mailed from Buffalo to Albany at 10c over-300 miles rate and forwarded from Albany to Albion at 5c under-300 miles rate — both 1845 rates on one cover (Harvey Mirsky collection)

Epilogue

The availability of General Issue stamps brought the two-year era of Postmasters' Provisionals to an end and, it may be argued, contributed to an increase in postal revenues and operating efficiency. By 1849 the Post Office showed a surplus of \$426,127. Contemporary opinion was that the Postal Reforms had succeeded in making the postal system easier to use and more cost-effective. In his State of the Union address on December 4, 1849, President Zachary Taylor commented on the 1845 Postal Reforms:

The act of 1845 reducing postage has now, by its operation during four years, produced results fully showing that the income from such reduced postage is sufficient to sustain the whole expense of the service of the Post-Office Department, not including the cost of transportation in mail steamers on the lines from New York to Chagres and from Panama to Astoria, which have not been considered by Congress as properly belonging to the mail service. It is submitted to the wisdom of Congress whether a further reduction of postage should not now be made, more particularly on the letter correspondence. This should be relieved from the unjust burden of transporting and delivering the franked matter of Congress, for which public service provision should be made from the Treasury. I confidently believe that a change may safely be made reducing all single letter postage to the uniform rate of 5 cents, regardless of distance, without thereby imposing any greater tax on the Treasury than would constitute a very moderate compensation for this public service; and I therefore respectfully recommend such a reduction. Should Congress prefer to abolish the franking privilege entirely, it seems probable that no demand on the Treasury would result from the proposed reduction of postage. Whether any further diminution should now be made, or the result of the reduction to 5 cents, which I have recommended, should be first tested, is submitted to your decision.

Clearly the trend was moving in the direction of Cheap Postage and the use of stamps. Postmasters' Provisionals, by demonstrating the stamps' public acceptance and practical benefits, helped to accelerate that trend.