

American Postal Service

Benjamin Franklin and others in his era get lots of credit for the development of the American Postal Service; but, the early colonists should also be credited for the initial framework and early infrastructure for the system.

After the arrival at Plymouth of the original Separatist Pilgrims in 1620, a second, larger group of English Puritans emigrated to New England. The second wave of English Puritans established the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the New Haven Colony, and Rhode Island. (Khan Academy)

John Winthrop, carrying a charter with him, in 1630 headed the first contingent of new colonists. Winthrop was elected Governor of the new colony at Massachusetts.

This started the Great Migration, when Winthrop's fleet of 11 ships went to Massachusetts. Winthrop brought 800 people with him to New England; 20,000 followed him over the next 10 years. (New England Historical Society)

At that time, those wanting to send mail between England and the American colonies suffered with irregular and extremely limited service. Ship captains crossing the Atlantic often carried mail as a favor, charging small fees for the service. These posts are known as 'ship letters.' (Smithsonian)

Early on, American colonists did not view an intercolonial mail system as a pressing need. The sparsely populated settlements along the Atlantic Coast corresponded more with England than with each other, and the few overland trails that existed did not encourage travel between the colonies. (Schurr)

That changed when England's King Charles II wished his "American subjects to enter into a close correspondence with each other." (Schurr)

A letter written in 1652, by Samuel Symonds of Ipswich, to John Winthrop, Jr., at Pequot, says:

"I cannot say but its besides my intentions that I write not more frequently unto you; I can onely plead this for my excuse (soe farr as it will goe) ... and the uncertainty when and how to convey letters." (Woolley)

Until 1639 there is no trace of a postal system, but under the *Massachusetts General Court Records*, of that year (Nov. 5th), is the following entry:

"For preventing the miscarriage of letters, ... It is ordered that notice bee given, that Richard Fairbanks, his house in Boston, is the place appointed for all letters, which are brought from beyond the Seas, or are to be sent thither;"

"... are to be brought unto him and he is to take care, that they bee delivered, or sent according to their directions and hee is allowed for every such letter 1*d*. and must answer all miscarriages through his owne neglect in this kind; provided that no man shall bee compelled to bring his letters thither except hee please." (Woolley)

The Routing of the Boston Post Road – “Ouer land to Connectecott”

In the earliest days of the New England colonies, towns were surrounded by wilderness. The only roads emanated from the meetinghouse. To the extent the towns were connected, they were connected by Indian trails – a foot-and-a-half wide in some places, across surging rivers in others. (New England Historical Society)

It became apparent that a road was desperately needed between New York and Boston.

Francis Lovelace, is credited with developing what would later be called the Boston Post Road – that led to the first formal postal service. Francis was appointed Royal Governor of New York by the Duke of York. (Chris Stevenson)

The paths that comprised the Boston Post Road began as Native American trails.

Each November Native Americans would “pave” the paths by a process the Dutch termed “bush-burning.” Setting fire to bramble, twigs, and underbrush ensured the paths would not be unpassable.

Just three years after the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, John Oldham and his exploratory party embarked inland on one such native trail, now known as the Old Connecticut Path. (HistoryBandits)

In 1633, on behalf of Governor Winthrop, John Oldham and a small party of scouts set out to travel an old Indian path from Boston to the Connecticut River.

Oldham & 3: with him went ouer land to Connectecott to trade, the Sachem vsed them kindly & gave them some beauer. they brought of the hempe which growes there in great abundance & is muche better than the English. he accomted it to be about 160: miles: he brought some black lead, wherof the Indians tould him there was a whole rocke. he lodged at Indian townes all [the] the waye. (Lawthers)

Based on the description of finding graphite (“black lead”), Oldham probably followed a route that would become known as the Connecticut Path by 1674. Subsequently, the Connecticut Path became the middle segment of the Boston Post Road.

Colonists began pursuing settlements further inland as Boston became strained by a growing population. The towns of New England today owe their roots to the network of trails linking Boston to New York City.



PORTRAIT OF GOVERNOR FRANCIS LOVELACE. Courtesy of Pennsylvania-German Society.

This network dictated where colonists moved inland, settled, and founded new towns. It was their only guide in an untamed wilderness.

In this sense, historian Eric Jaffe describes the network of paths that would come to comprise the Boston Post Road as a “conduit of cultural progress.” (HistoryBandits)

Twelve years later, John Winthrop, Jr. (son of the Massachusetts governor), walked a slightly different route to the Connecticut River, after inadvertently missing the fork towards Hartford once he passed Lake Chabanakongkomun (aka Webster Lake in Webster, Massachusetts).

In choosing his route, he relied on Indian trails: the so-called Connecticut Path running west from Boston and the Bay Path heading into Springfield.

The Colony also grew along these lines: Watertown residents followed the Connecticut Path to establish Sudbury (now Wayland), and Worcester emerged from a request for a town “in the roade way to Springfeild.”



Three decades after his trip, when Winthrop Jr. was governor of Connecticut, he was asked to chart the Colonial mail route between Boston and Manhattan. He used those Indian paths as his blueprint for what would become the Post Road. (The King’s Best Highway, Eric Jaffe)

He kept a detailed diary of his 280-mile trip with a single companion and a horse in bitterly cold weather between November 11 and December 5, 1645.

From Lake Chabanakongkomun he followed the Bay Path to Springfield and then headed south to Hartford and Saybrook. He continued along the coast to present-day New London and thence to Providence and Boston.

Winthrop’s route mostly outlined the other two segments of what became known as the Boston Post Road: the Upper Road (to Springfield) and the Lower Road (through Providence). (Lawthers)

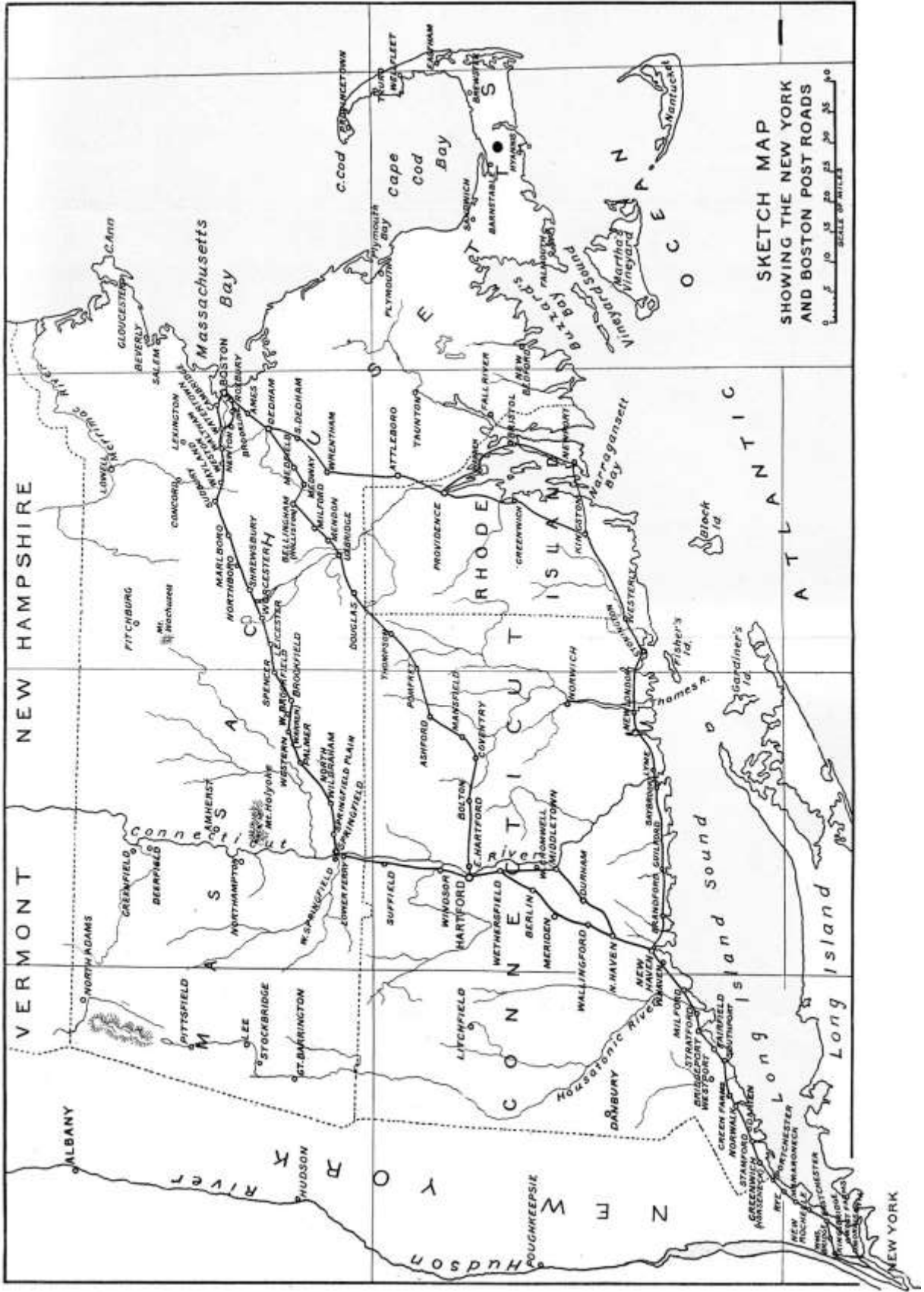
There are actually three Boston Post Roads, all of which merge in New Haven.

The Upper Road, or the Old Boston Post Road, runs from Boston through Worcester, Springfield and Hartford.

The Lower Road heads south from Boston through Dedham and Providence, then runs along the coast of the Long Island Sound.

The Middle Road, less used than the others, leaves Boston through Dedham, Medway, Uxbridge, Douglas, Pomfret and Coventry to Hartford, then to New Haven through Wethersfield, Berlin, Meriden, Wallingford and North Haven.

Much of the Post Road is now U.S. Route 1, U.S. Route 5, and U.S. Route 20. (New England Historical Society)



SKETCH MAP
SHOWING THE NEW YORK
AND BOSTON POST ROADS
0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40
SCALE OF MILES

First Formal Mail Delivery System

Then, Winthrop's son, John Winthrop the Younger (then Governor of Connecticut), and Francis Lovelace, Governor of New York formalized the first intercolonial postal system.

In December of 1672, they initiated a monthly post between New York and Boston, which Lovelace describes in a December 27, 1672 letter to Winthrop Jr,

"I herewith present you with 2 rarities, a pacquett of the latest intelligence I could meet withal, and a post ... by the latter you will meet with a monthly fresh supply;"

"so that if it receive but the same ardent inclinations as first it hath from myself, by our monthly advisers all publique occurences may be transmitted between us, together with severall other great conveniencys of publique importance, consonant to the commands laid upon us by his sacred majestie, who strictly enjoins all his American subjects to enter into a close correspondency with each other ..."

"this person that has undertaken the employment I conceived most proper, being voted active, stout and indefatigable.... I have affixt an annuall sallery on him, which, together with the advantage of his letters and other small portable packes, may afford him a handsome livelihood...."

"The maile has divers baggs, according to the towns the letters are designed to, which are all sealed up 'till their arrivement, with the seal of the secretarie's office, whose care it is on Saturday night to seale them up."

"Only by-letters are in an open bag, to dispense by the wayes...."

"I shall only beg of you your furtherance to so universall a good work; that is, to afford him directions where, and to whom to make his application to upon his arrival at Boston; as likewise to afford him what letters you can to establish him in that employment there."

"It would be much advantageous to our designe, if in the intervall you discoursed with some of the most able woodmen, to make out the best and most facile way for a post, which in processe of tyme would be the king's best highway; as likewise passages and accommodation at rivers, fords, or other necessary places." (Woolley)

The Boston Post Road has never enjoyed the same name recognition as Route 66, the Oregon Trail, or even the Pony Express. Given the contribution of this system (and the first ride in particular) to increased communication and trade between colonies, we must wonder why it does not stack up to similar watershed moments in history.

The Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock, Daniel Boone leading emigrants through the Cumberland Gap on the Wilderness Road, and Paul Revere's ride to warn colonists of the British advance all command respect in America's collective memory.

That a lone rider could trek over 200 miles of dangerous wilderness in less than a month to deliver "divers baggs" of correspondence through "terrifying darkness" should command an equal amount of respect. (HistoryBandits)

The First Mail Deliveries

The first postal run took approximately two to three weeks, as the rider – traveling 250 miles altogether along mostly desolate trails in the wilderness – made mail deliveries in such communities as New Haven, Hartford, Brookfield, Worcester, and Cambridge before finally reaching Boston. He and subsequent postal riders used axes to mark-up trees enroute to help guide others likewise delivering mail

The Boston Post Road was pivotal in more closely linking what had generally been isolated settlements in the northeastern region of the British colonies and paving the way for similar routes elsewhere along the eastern seaboard.

In the longer term, the segments that constituted the Boston Post Road evolved into several of the first major highways in the United States. (TransportationHistory-org)

Governor Lovelace found his “stout fellow, active and indefatigable” in Mathias Nicolls, whose departure from New York City on January 22, 1673 marked the first official post ride. Nicolls departed from the southern tip of Manhattan with explicit orders to stop at the home of John Winthrop Jr in Hartford en route to Boston for further instruction and to switch horses. (Jaffee and HistoryBandits)

Along the way, the post rider would mark trees to aid others using the path for their own travels. He would also scout good locations for inns and taverns along the way. Nicolls stored letters marked “post-paid” in separate saddlebags organized by destination.

At each stop, he would find the ideal place to deliver the mail while also informing locals of his estimated time of return. Nicolls arrived in Boston on February 11, 1673 before returning south to complete the second half of his journey. (HistoryBandits)

On the first Monday of every month, the postrider was to leave New York and return from Boston within the month.

The mail was to be in different ‘bags,’ one for each town to which the mail would be delivered, sealed into they arrived, with the seal of the ‘Secretairie’s Office,’ who would affix it on Saturday night.

Lovelace suggested that Winthrop talk to ‘some of the most able woodmen,’ to find the easiest way, which eventually would become the Boston Post Road.

The first mail was to leave New York on January 1, 1673. Lovelace waited, though, to send Winthrop the latest rumors about a convoy of Dutch warships. The postrider left on January 22, 1673. (New England Historical Society)

The Memorial History of New York describes the reaction to the first postrider,

It is recorded as creating great excitement in the little village of Harlem, when that first postman drew up at the tavern door to refresh himself, as he undoubtedly did, with some good home-brewed Harlem beer - his “portmantles” (portmanteaux) crammed with “letters and small portable goods.”

He himself was “active, stout, and indefatigable”; had been “sworn as to his fidelity”; and was to receive an annual salary," which, with his letters and packages, might afford him a “handsome livelihood.”

Hartford was the first place where he might change his horse.

And meanwhile, before his arrival in Boston, Governor Winthrop is requested by Lovelace (whom we are quoting) to “discourse with some of the most able woodmen, to make out the best and most facile way for a post, which in process of time would be the King's best highway; as likewise passages and accommodation at rivers, fords, and other necessary places.”

But meanwhile the poor fellow, thus laden with letters, portable goods, and “divers bags” for the different towns, is to jog on, through deep forests, through rivers, and in all weathers; to mark trees “ that shall direct passengers the best way”; and “to, detect and cause to be apprehended all fugitive soldiers and servants” from New-York.

Meanwhile also the “locked box” stood in the office of the Colonial Secretary in New-York to accumulate his next month's mail; and what he brought, being “post-paid,” was carried to the “coffee-house,” as a popular gathering-place, and left on the table, to be well thumbed and critically examined, till called for or removed by neighbors or friends.

Of course, at first letters were few. But that “locked box,” quietly awaiting its mail, was the small germ of the present bustling and surcharged New-York Post-office. (Wilson)

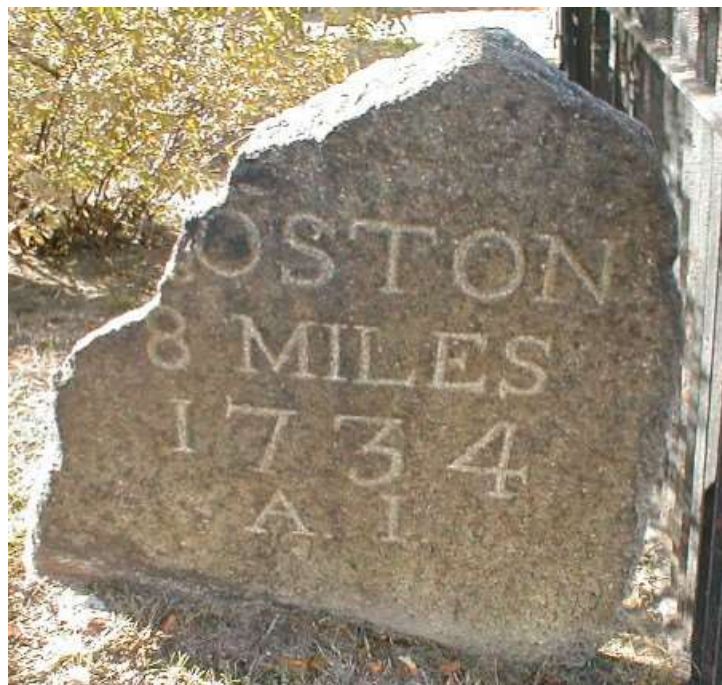
Boston Postal Road Mileage Markers

The New England Historical Society clarified that it is a myth that Benjamin Franklin either set out or ordered the Boston Post Road milestones.

Franklin is said to have measured the road himself with an odometer strapped onto his carriage wheel. One of Franklin's granite milestones still survives on East Main Street – 33 miles from Boston.

The Historical Society says, “It never happened.”

In 1971, Leonard Labaree, editor of the Benjamin Franklin papers at Yale, set the record straight. Labaree wrote that after detailed study of the Franklin papers,



“Not one document in this very substantial mass of contemporary documents has been found to contain so much as a single reference to roadside milestones, erected by Franklin or by any other persons.”

Further, he wrote, Post Office officials had neither responsibility nor budget for building and maintaining roads, bridges, ferries and milestones. The editors of the Franklin papers concluded,

“Milestones were of no particular use to the postal service, for the postriders were thoroughly familiar with the roads they traveled.”

“The convenience of other travelers, on the other hand, was not the Post Office’s responsibility or concern. There seems to have been no good reason why Franklin should have spent time, energy, or Post Office money in erecting milestones, and...there is no documentary evidence that he ever did.”

It is not clear who put them there and when they did it. But many of them along the route continue to incorrectly reference Franklin.

Postal Service “Motto”

Oh, one more thing ... the reputed Postal Service ‘Motto’? ...

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”



Again, it is not so. The U.S. Postal Service has no official motto. (USPS)

Those words are engraved on the front of the James A. Farley Post Office in NYC, set in stone by the architectural firm that built it.

Back in the early twentieth century, the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White was chosen to design the New York General Post Office building. Construction began in 1912 and it was opened to the public in 1914. The building was doubled in size in 1934 and its name was changed to honor Postmaster General James A. Farley.

William Mitchell Kendall was one of the architects. Kendall, who frequently read classic Greek literature for pleasure. He selected a passage (translated by Professor George Herbert Palmer of Harvard University) from book 8, paragraph 98, of *The Persian Wars* by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (c 484–c 425 BCE). The Post Office Department agreed that Kendall's slight modification of the original translation was suitable for the building, and approved it.

During the wars between the Greeks and Persians (500-449 B.C.), the Persians operated a system of mounted postal couriers who served with great fidelity. Herodotus wrote (of the Persians),

While Xerxes did thus, he sent a messenger to Persia with news of his present misfortune.

Now there is nothing mortal that accomplishes a course more swiftly than do these messengers, by the Persians' skillful contrivance. It is said that as many days as there are in the whole journey, so many are the men and horses that stand along the road, each horse and man at the interval of a day's journey.

These are stopped neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.

The first rider delivers his charge to the second, the second to the third, and thence it passes on from hand to hand, even as in the Greek torch-bearers' race in honor of Hephaestus. This riding-post is called in Persia, *angareion*. (Herodotus)

Information here is from *The Early History of the Colonial Post-Office*, Mary E. Woolley; Khan Academy; National Postal Museum, Smithsonian; Cathleen Schurr; *New England Historical Society*; *The King's Best Highway The Lost History of the Boston Post Road, the Route That Made America*, Eric Jaffee; *American Ancestors*. Ann Lawthers; *US Postal Service' TransportationHistory-org*; Chris Stevenson; *TheHistoryBandits-com*; *The Memorial History of the City of New-York*, James Grant Wilson; *The King's Best Highway*, Eric Jaffe; Herodotus.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young