

RFD Mail Boxes – The Early Years

This exhibit chronicles the history of Rural Free Delivery Mail Boxes during the early years of the RFD Service by tracing the promulgation and implementation of important POD regulations relating to their design and use on RFD Routes and ending with the regulation mandating rural mail box numbering.



Row of Rural Mail Boxes
Bettendorf, Iowa circa 1910

Bettendorf Iowa was served by Davenport
RFD Route #3 established August 1, 1900

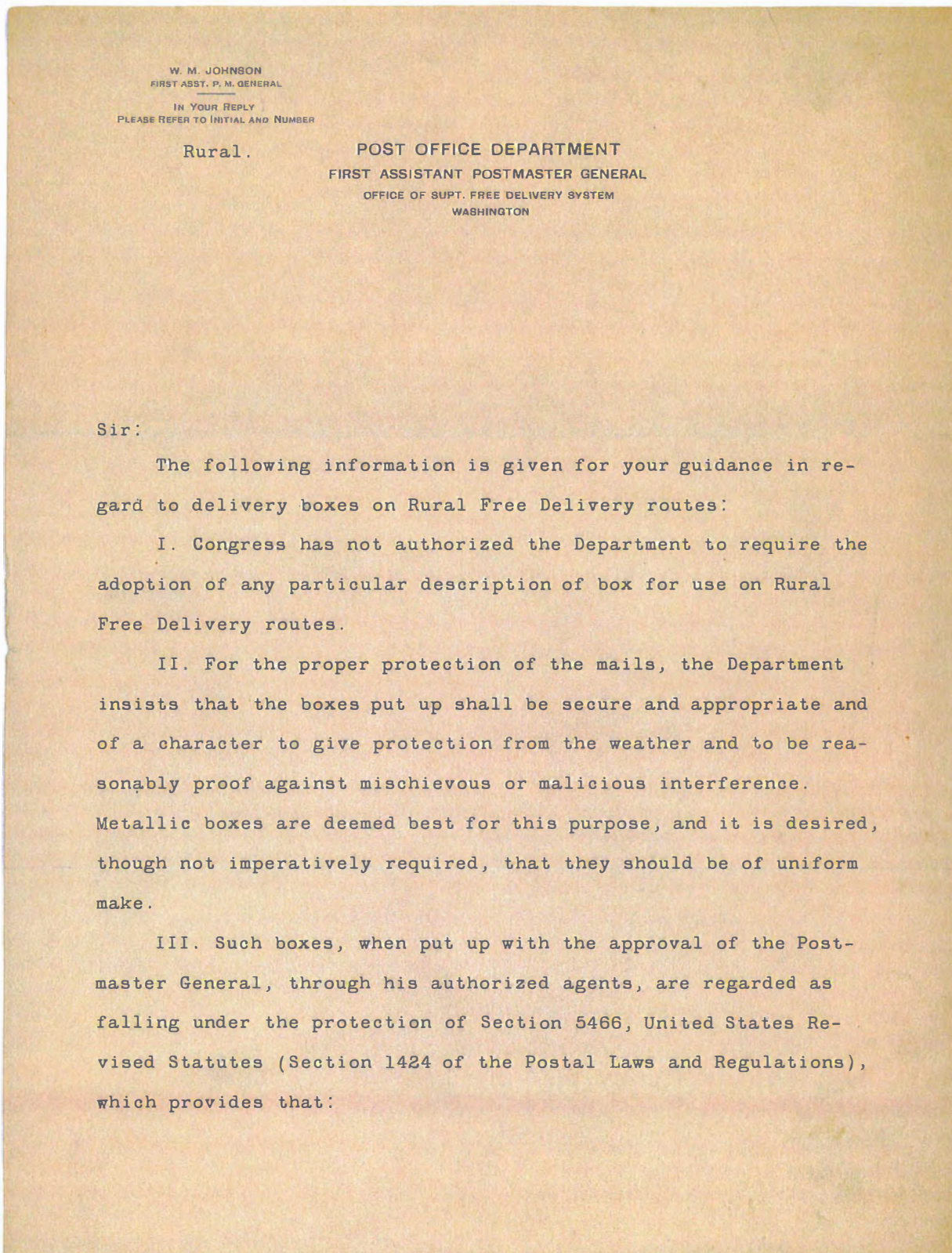


Important Regulations and Exhibit Plan

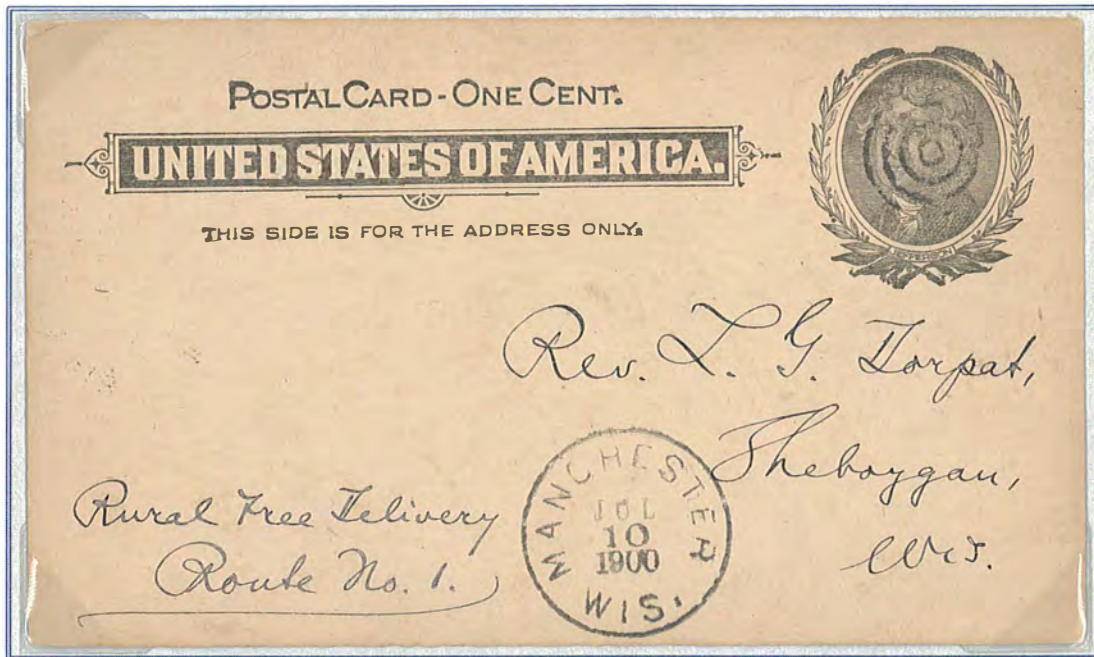
- Oct 1 1896 Rural Free Delivery Started - Limited Box Design Regulations*
- Spring 1901 First Mail Box Design Regulations and Designs Approved*
- Apr 21 1902 Codified Federal Offense to Tamper with Mail Boxes*
- Oct 1 1902 PMG Order 739 Provides First Strict Mail Box Regulations*
- Dec 1 1902 First Comprehensive Mail Box Compliance Inspections*
- Jul 11 1904 All Approved Box Designs Must Include Signals*
- Aug 7 1905 Directive to Sequentially Number Boxes on Rural Routes*
RFD Box Number Addressing and Undeliverable Mails

When Rural Free Delivery was first established regulations regarding mail boxes were very limited:

- In order to receive service Rural Route patrons were required to erect a mail box at their own expense
- Boxes only needed to be secure and provide protection from the weather and malicious interference
- Boxes were not numbered, but should bear the name of the family being served
- Legal protection against box depredation was loosely covered by existing mail tampering regulations



Because early boxes were not numbered, early mail was typically addressed to include RFD and the Route Number. Rural Carriers also maintained a route book with the names of all residents served by each box on their route.



July 10, 1900 card from Manchester WI to Sheboygen WI addressed to "Rural Free Delivery Route No. 1"

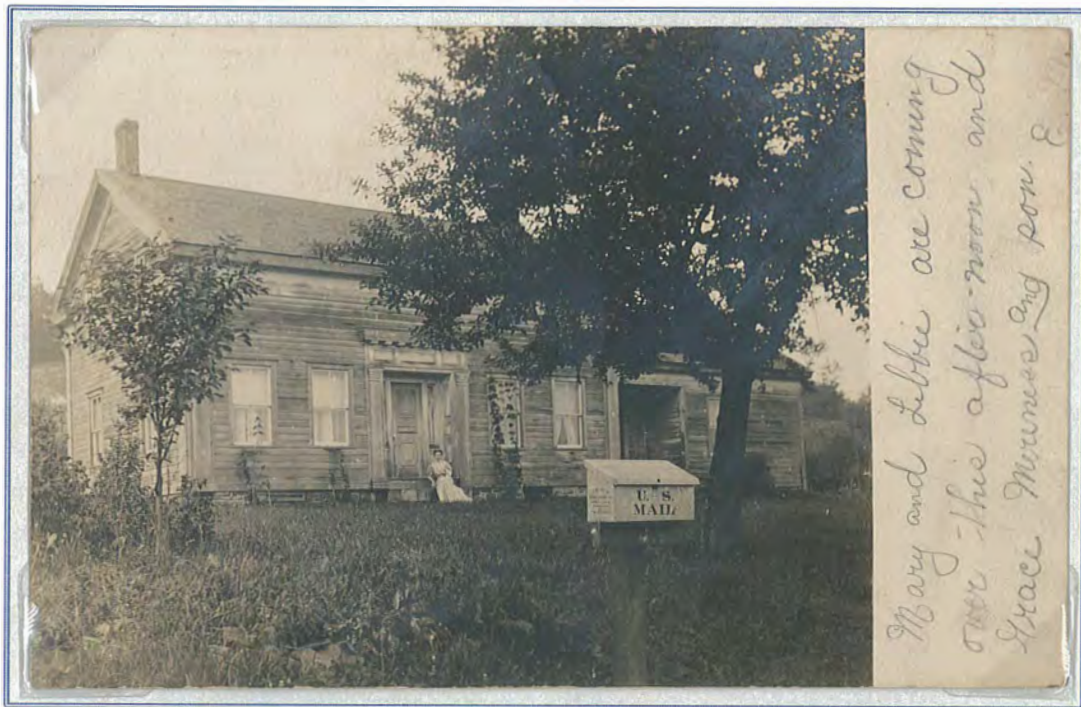


Delivery of mail to transient residents or visiting family members was often helped by clear and detailed delivery directives:

R.F.D. # 1
 c/o David D. Hess's Box
 Fairview Nerseries (sic)

April 7, 1903 letter from wife Bertha at home on RFD 1 Millersville PA to husband David visiting family in Lancaster PA

Secure, weatherproof mail boxes, placed near the highway, in such a location that the carrier can conveniently reach them to deposit and collect the mail without dismounting



Typical home-made wooden rural mail box in front of farmhouse in Worcester, NY in 1907

RURAL FREE-DELIVERY SERVICE.

....., 1900.

SIR:

PATRONS of RURAL FREE-DELIVERY ROUTES are expected to provide secure, weatherproof mail boxes, placed near the highway, in such a location that the carrier can conveniently reach them to deposit and collect the mail without dismounting. The box put up by you does not comply with these conditions. You must supply a suitable box, or replace the unsafe one now in use.

Unless this request is complied with, within a reasonable time, the Rural Free-Delivery Service will be withdrawn from your premises. Rural carriers are not required to leave their routes to deliver mail to houses which stand back from the main road.

By order of the First Assistant Postmaster General.

.....
Postmaster.

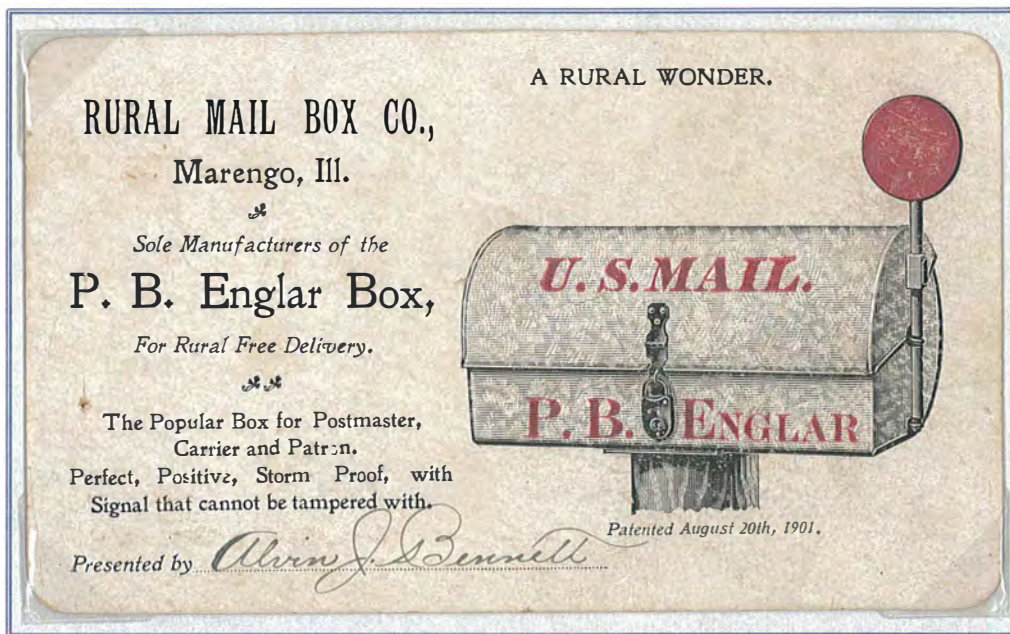
5-4888

Unused 1900 patron notification form about box condition or location non-compliance and warning that RFD service would be withdrawn if a suitable box is not supplied or the unsafe box replaced.

On January 12, 1901 PMG Charles Emory Smith established a Commission to develop guidelines for the preferred construction of rural mail boxes, to accept and examine submissions from inventors, and to recommend those that seemed best suited. 63 box designs were submitted and reviewed from which 14 were found to be acceptable.

On March 28, 1901 the report of the Commission was approved by PMG Smith. The promulgated regulations resulting from this report also included:

- Before RFD service will be established it will be necessary for the patrons to make selection from this list of approved boxes and agree to equip their route with them.
- That boxes on this list would be considered by the Department to fall under Section 5406 of the US Revised Statutes which provides severe penalties for willfully injuring, defacing or destroying mail matter deposited in any letter box established by the authority of the Postmaster General.

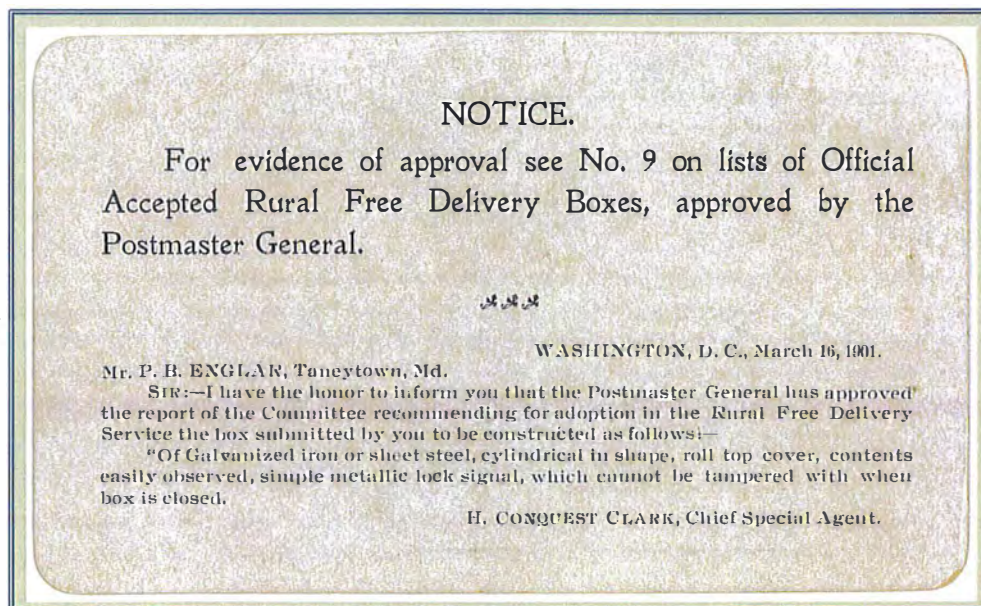


Salesman's trade card for the P.B. Englar Box.

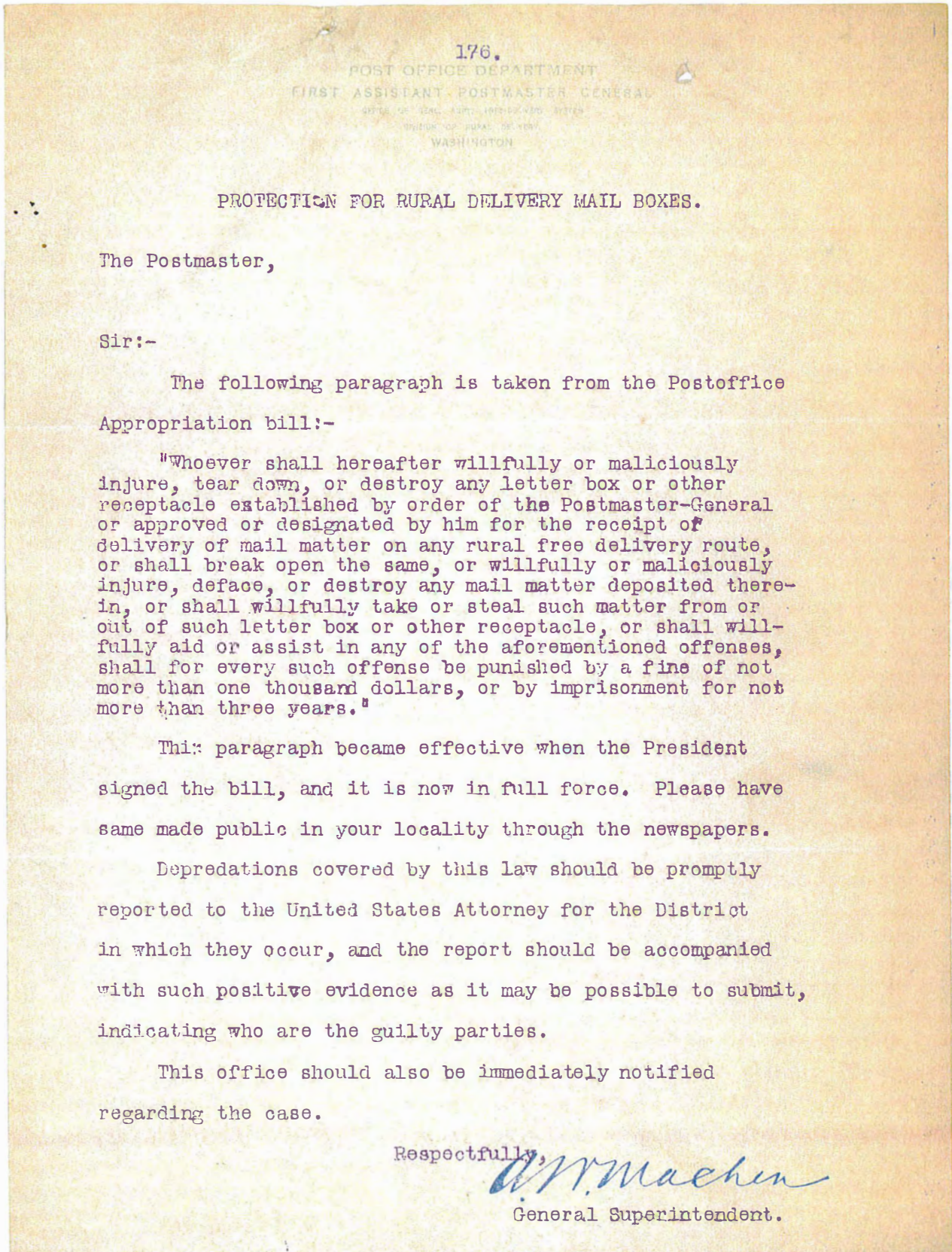
One of the 14 boxes first approved by the special Commission and patented by P.B. Englar of Taneytown MD

These boxes were manufactured and sold by the Rural Mail Box Company of Marengo IL

Copy of the reverse of the trade card with a facsimile of Commission Approval Letter



On April 21, 1902 as part of the Congressional Appropriation Bill for the Post Office Department for Fiscal Year 1903 it became a specific federal offense to tamper with Rural Mail Boxes and any Mail Matter contained therein.



"Protection for Rural Delivery Mail Boxes"


1902 Postmaster notice issued by AW Machen, Superintendent of Rural Free Delivery, detailing the new law.

On July 9, 1902 PMG H.C. Payne issued Order 739, effective October 1, 1902, which provided more strict but less complicated rural box construction requirements and for box design approval by divisional Special Agents in Charge.


The order also:

- Authorized all such approved mail boxes to bear the words "Approved by the Postmaster General"
- Required all "unsafe and unsuitable" boxes on rural routes to be replaced with conforming boxes

BEST AND CHEAPEST RURAL MAIL BOX MADE.



BOX CLOSED.



BOX OPEN.

The Hessler Rural Mail Box

OBSERVE RULES.

ORDER OF THE POSTMASTER GENERAL

Approved Boxes for Rural Free Delivery.

OFFICE OF THE POSTMASTER GENERAL.
WASHINGTON, D. C., July 9, 1902.

ORDER No. 739.

ORDERED, That in all rural free delivery service established on and after October 1, 1902, these requirements shall be observed.

Each person desiring the rural free delivery service must erect at his own cost, and in the manner prescribed by the regulations of the Department, a box complying with the following specifications:

MATERIAL.—All square or oblong boxes shall be made of not less than 20 standard gauge sheet iron or sheet steel, and galvanized, the edges of which shall be supported or strengthened either by folding the metal back upon itself, or by riveting to the edges band iron or steel at least 1-16 inch in thickness and at least ½ inch in width, or by wiring with at least No. 10 gauge wire; provided, if a box be made of a heavier material than 20 gauge, the above requirements as to reinforcements need not be observed.

Circular, semi-circular or rounding boxes shall be made of not less than 22 gauge iron or steel; provided, however, that should boxes be made of black iron or steel, and galvanized after they are made they shall not be made of lighter than 24 gauge. Circular, semi-circular or rounding boxes shall have the openings made so that there shall be no unsupported edges; and edges must be strengthened by either corrugated, bending, curling or wiring with No. 10 gauge wire, or by folding the metal back upon itself, or by supporting by riveting to such edges band iron at least ½ inch in width. See the "Hessler."

WORKMANSHIP.—All boxes must be made in the best workmanlike manner, and there must be no joints depending solely on the solder to hold the different parts of the box together, but all joints must be either seamed, curled or riveted; Covers, lids or incasements shall be hinged or riveted in a strong substantial manner, and edges of same shall extend down or lap over the mail holding compartment for a sufficient distance, so that when closed it will thoroughly protect the mail from rain.

Boxes thus marked will come under the protection of that provision of the Act making appropriation for the Postal service of the United States for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1903 (approved April 21, 1902), which read as follows:

"Who ever shall hereafter wilfully or maliciously injure, tear down or destroy any letter box or other receptacle established by order of the Postmaster General or approved or designated by him for the reception or delivery of mail matter on any rural free delivery route, or shall break open the same, or wilfully or maliciously injure, deface or destroy and mail matter deposited therein, or shall wilfully take or steal such matter from or out of such letter box or other receptacle or shall wilfully aid or assist in any of the aforementioned offenses, shall for every such offense be punished by a fine of not more than one thousand dollars, or by imprisonment for not more than three years."

Each box must be erected by the roadside, so that the carrier can easily obtain access to it without dismounting from his vehicle. The same box must not be used for more than one family, except in the case of near relatives or those residing in the same house.

Persons, neglecting or refusing to comply with these conditions will be regarded as not desiring rural free delivery and the rural carrier will be directed not to serve them.

The fourteen designated boxes included in Department order of March 28, 1901, as receiving the approval of the Postmaster General, will be accepted as falling within the provisions of the statute as above quoted, when contracted for or erected in good faith prior to the date when this order goes into effect; but on and after October 1, 1902, the manufacturers whose boxes have been heretofore approved will be required to conform to the stipulations herein set forth as to size, shape, material and workmanship of boxes supplied by them.

In all service heretofore established, and wherein inappropriate, unsafe and unsuitable boxes are in use the Department will expect

A slightly adapted version of PMG Order 739 printed by the H.E. Hessler Company of Syracuse NY advertising their "Hessler Rural Mail Box"

PMG Order 739 also provided that:

“No official of the Post Office Department can be permitted to act as agent for, or by himself or others, become interested in the sale of any rural free delivery letter box.”

Postmasters and Rural Carriers could advise patrons whether the box they were considering was on the list of approved designs, and could actually order the box for the patron at cost, but could not “deal” in rural boxes or promote any one manufacturer or design over another. Oddly enough, regulations relating to the commencement of rural delivery service recommended that all patrons on a given route obtain boxes of the same design.

These regulations did little to deter companies from promoting the potential financial gain from buying their boxes.

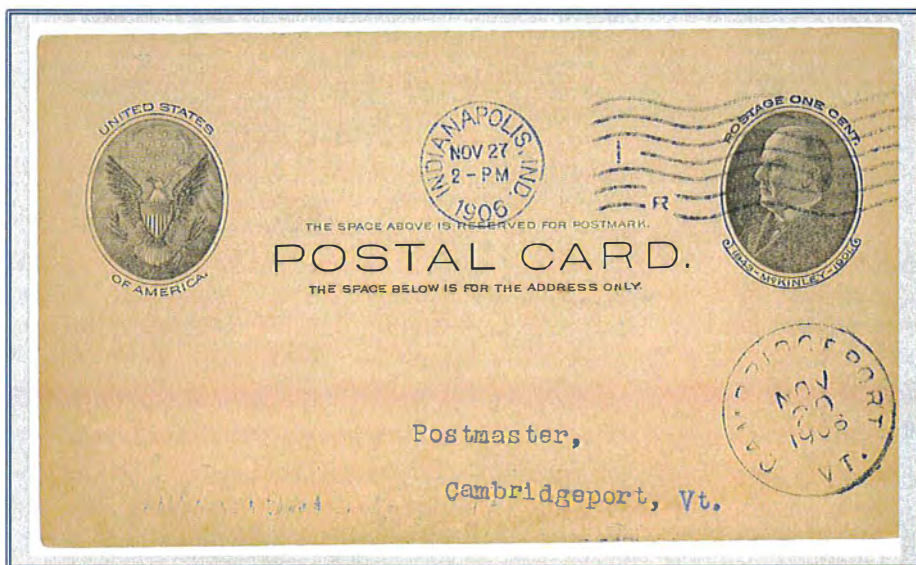
Blick No. 3 will get the business
 \$12.00 worth for \$5.88
 They are money makers
 See ?

The Blick-Williams Company Model No. 3 was actually of a design that would later become the iconic Rural Mail Box – dome topped with a drop down front door, lock hasp at the top and swivel flag at the side

Copy of address side of card directed to the Postmaster at Cambridgeport, Vermont

November 27, 1906

Likely part of a mass mailing, for an investment of under \$500 a company could reach the Postmaster at every office with Rural Routes and a potential market for over 5,000,000 rural boxes



In the 1902 Report of the Postmaster General, First Assistant PMG R.J. Wynne announced that Rural Mail Box Inspections would be conducted on all Rural Routes beginning December 1, 1902.

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT. OFFICIAL CARD.
RURAL FREE-DELIVERY SERVICE.

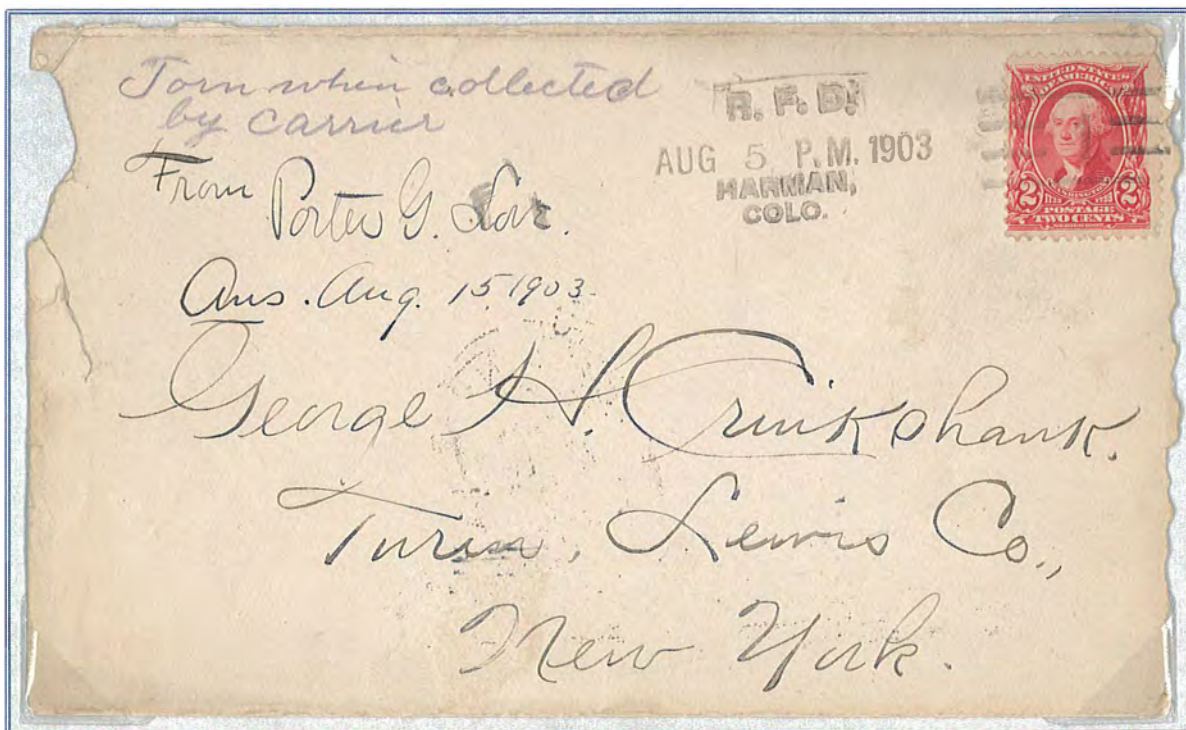
MR. O. Stevenson ROUTE No. 1
Sheridan, P. O., Ind State.

SIR: Patrons of Rural Free-Delivery Routes are required to provide letter boxes approved by the Post Office Department, so located near the highway that the carrier can reach them to deposit and collect mail without dismounting from his conveyance.
 Rural carriers are not required to deliver mail to houses not immediately on their routes, except in case of registered mail, pension letters, and special-delivery letters.
 The mail box put up by you is **NOT SECURE, NOT WEATHERPROOF.**
 Within thirty days from this date you must supply one of the approved boxes enumerated on the reverse side of this card or your service will be withdrawn.
 By order of the First Assistant Postmaster General.

Date, 12/18 J. H. Moore
 Route Inspector.

Report delinquencies of carriers to General Superintendent, Free-Delivery System, P. O. D., Washington, D. C. 5-125

Dec 18 (1902) Route Inspector Rural Box Non-Compliance Notice to O.S. Stevenson on RFD 1, Sheridan IN The reverse of this notice contains a list of the 14 rural mail box designs approved by the 1901 Commission



“Torn When Collected By Carrier” Aug 5, 1903 RFD 1 Harman, Colorado
 Indelible purple pencil notation from RFD Carrier on mail damaged when collected from Rural Mail Box
 Mail could easily get snagged and damaged in improperly constructed rural mail boxes

"I wonder if Mr Wolf had to get a new mail box. They condemned 117 on Dudley's route they say. We have one but Mrs. Batchelder has not they won't deliver her mail so she has to send to the office for it."

family. I always liked it immensely but was never blessed with any talent that way. I wonder if Mr Wolf had to get a new mail box. They condemned 117 on Dudley's route they say. We have one but Mrs Batchelder has not they won't deliver her mail so she has to send to the office for it. There seems to be a

The consequences of having both substandard boxes and failing to even put up a box

Newsy Mar 30, 1903 letter from "Your Friend Mable" to Ann Thomas in Mt. Vernon, IL

Collected and postmarked on RFD 37, Webster, NY part of the Monroe County RFD System



Although PMG Order 786a of July 11, 1904 required that approved rural mail box designs must include a signal to alert the carrier that the box contained mail for collection, it was not until July 1, 1906 that the use of these signals was required. If the carrier had no mail for delivery at a box they were no longer required to stop and check for mail to be collected unless a signal was displayed on the box. After collection the carrier lowered the signal.

IN YOUR REPLY
PLEASE REFER TO INITIAL AND NUMBER

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
FOURTH ASSISTANT POSTMASTER GENERAL
DIVISION OF RURAL DELIVERY
WASHINGTON

May 20, 1906.

TO POSTMASTERS:

1. On and after July 1, 1906, patrons of the rural delivery service will be required to display signals on their boxes when they leave mail in them for carriers to collect, as, after that date, carriers, when serving their routes, will not be required to open and examine any mail boxes except those to which they have mail to deliver and those on which signals are displayed to indicate there is mail for carriers to collect.

2. Those patrons whose boxes are not provided with signals must attach thereto some device which, when displayed, will plainly show passing carriers there is mail to be collected. It is not necessary that such device shall be either complicated or costly; a very simple arrangement will answer the purpose.

3. Carriers must lower the signals on boxes after making collections, provided no mail is left therein; and must display the signals when they deposit mail for patrons, unless the patrons have made request to the contrary.

4. The carriers must be instructed to promptly inform patrons of their routes with regard to this Order, and you should, without expense to the Department, use such other necessary means for informing them as will secure a complete understanding and full compliance by all patrons on the date mentioned.

5. Two copies of this letter are herewith inclosed, one to be immediately posted by you in a prominent place in the public part of the post office, and the other to be placed on file.

Very respectfully,



Fourth Assistant Postmaster General.

While rural box signals we see today are simple flags, typically red, that are raised or lowered to indicate mail in the box to be collected, early regulations only required an “adjustable durable metallic signal” of no specific design. By May 1, 1904 the list of approved rural mail boxes had grown to 186 designs produced by 134 manufacturers.



“The Hessler” employed a hanging “Tag on Chain” that fit into a slot on the front corner of the box when not in use



“The Gem” employed a sliding bar extending from the bottom corner of the box to signal mail for collection

A directive on August 7, 1905 by Fourth Assistant Postmaster General P.V. DeGraw mandated that all rural mail boxes entitled for service by a rural mail carrier be designated by number by November 1, 1905.

This directive also removed the prohibition for the delivery of rural mails addressed to route and box number only. This "junk mail" prohibition was restored by a September 15, 1905 supplemental directive prior to its effective date.

SUBJECT: Numbering rural mail boxes.

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
FOURTH ASSISTANT POSTMASTER GENERAL
DIVISION OF RURAL FREE DELIVERY
WASHINGTON

August 7, 1905.

TO POSTMASTERS:

For public convenience and to facilitate a more accurate handling of mail by rural free delivery carriers, it has been decided that each rural mail box in use on a rural route, which, under the regulations of the Department, is entitled to service, shall be designated by number in the manner and by the method hereinafter set forth; and the delivery by rural carriers of ordinary mail matter of all classes addressed to such boxes by number alone is authorized so long as improper and unlawful business is not conducted thereby.

1. Postmasters at the respective distributing offices are hereby directed to instruct the carriers of all rural free delivery routes which have been operated sixty days or more, to review the rural mail boxes in use on their routes in the interval between the receipt of this order and September 30, 1905, and report which of them conform to the regulations and are thus entitled to designative numbers.

2. The following, when found to be safe, weatherproof, and fit receptacles for mail, are entitled to numbers:
(a) Boxes "approved" under Order No. 739.
(b) Non-approved boxes erected prior to October 1, 1902.

3. No non-weatherproof or otherwise unfit receptacles for mail shall be numbered. All such must be replaced with regulation "approved" boxes by the owners, or no numbers will be assigned.

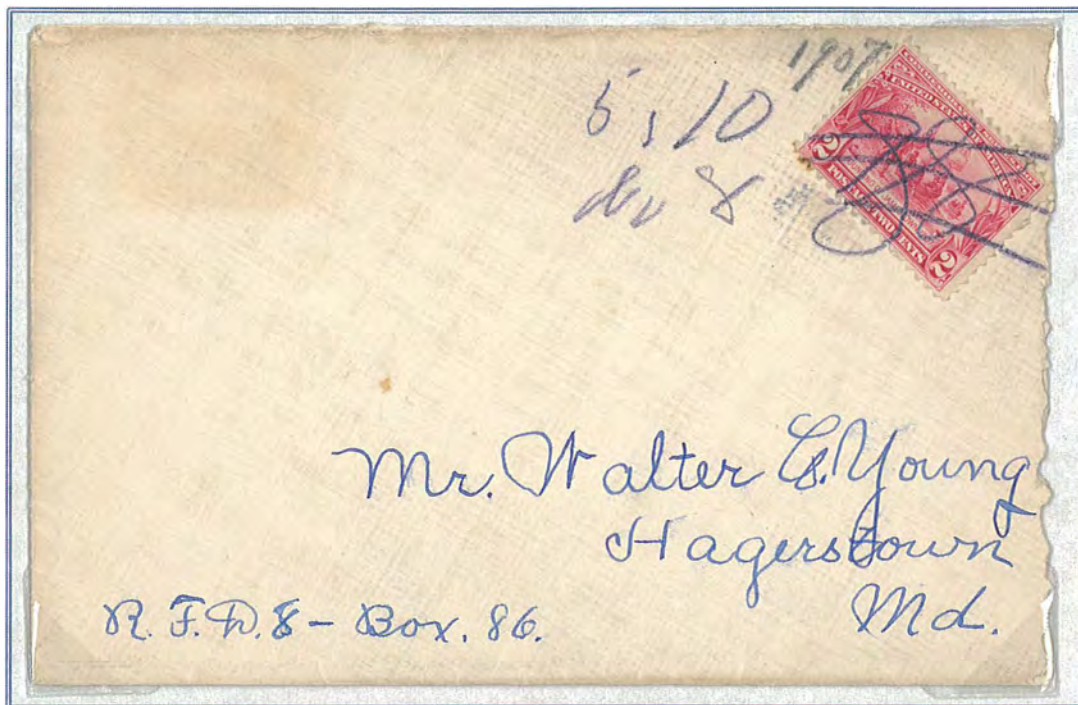
No rural mail box erected within the limits of an incorporated city or town or within one-half mile of a post office at an unincorporated town or village shall be numbered unless such box was erected prior to October 3, 1903, or is being served by specific order of the Department.

Service must not be withdrawn, however, from any box now being served, until such withdrawal is expressly ordered by this office.

4. The numbers assigned to boxes on each route will commence with "No. 1," which will pertain to the first regulation box reached by the carrier after leaving the starting point of his route, traveling in accordance with official description; box after box thereafter to be counted and given the proper number in regular sequence in order of service from "No. 1" to and including all those boxes entitled to service located on the route.

5. Each number thus arrived at should be recorded in the carrier's roster book opposite the name of the owner of the box so designated,

Although Rural Boxes were assigned numbers as of November 1, 1905 mail delivered on rural routes was not required to bear the box number in their address. The practice was encouraged, but not widely adopted by correspondents.



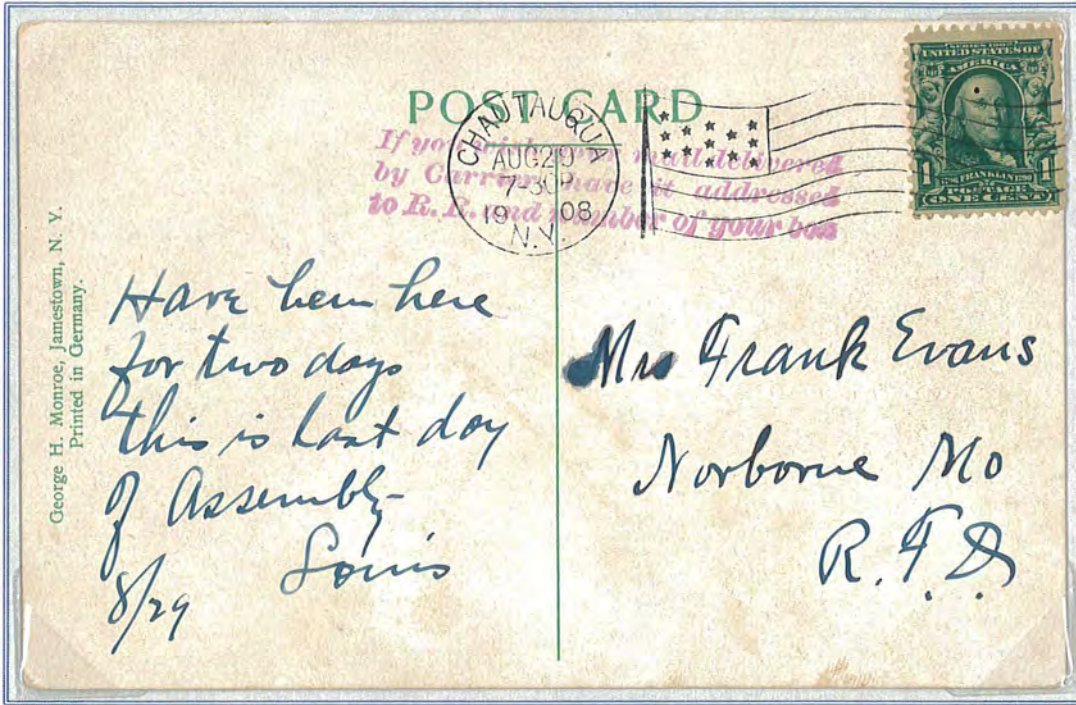
May 10, 1907 letter collected and delivered on the same trip by the Carrier on RFD 8, Hagerstown MD "Up the Line" mail was rarely fully and properly addressed with the town, state, route and box number.



Addressed "Concord, NH RFD 1 Box 50 care of W.E. Goodwin" this July 26, 1913 card also included the rural mail box owner's name in the address to facilitate delivery to a transient resident or visiting relative.

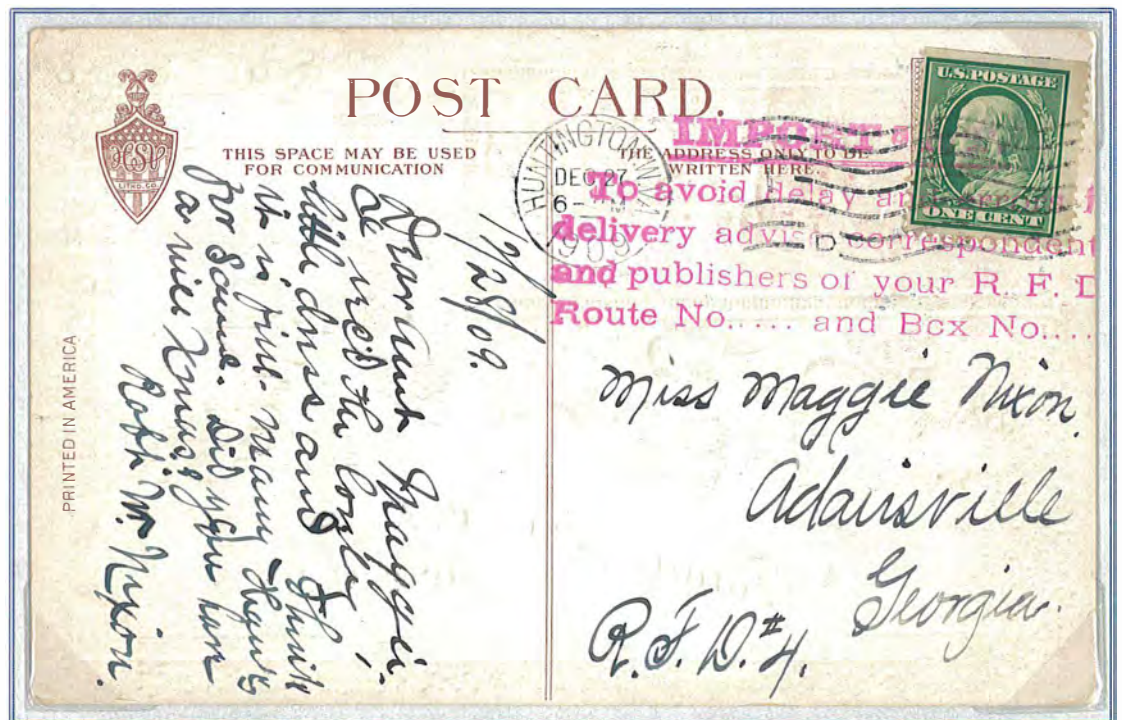
As RFD became available to the majority of Rural America (more than 39,000 routes by July 1908) the quantity of poorly addressed mails necessarily increased. One of the easiest methods to communicate the need to have rural mails properly addressed was for the delivery office to use advisory handstamps on mail with incomplete addresses.

After box numbering was implemented these advisory markings began to request the use of box numbers as well.



“ If you wish your mail delivered by Carrier have it addressed R.R. and number of your box “

December 1909 RFD 4 Adairsville, Georgia

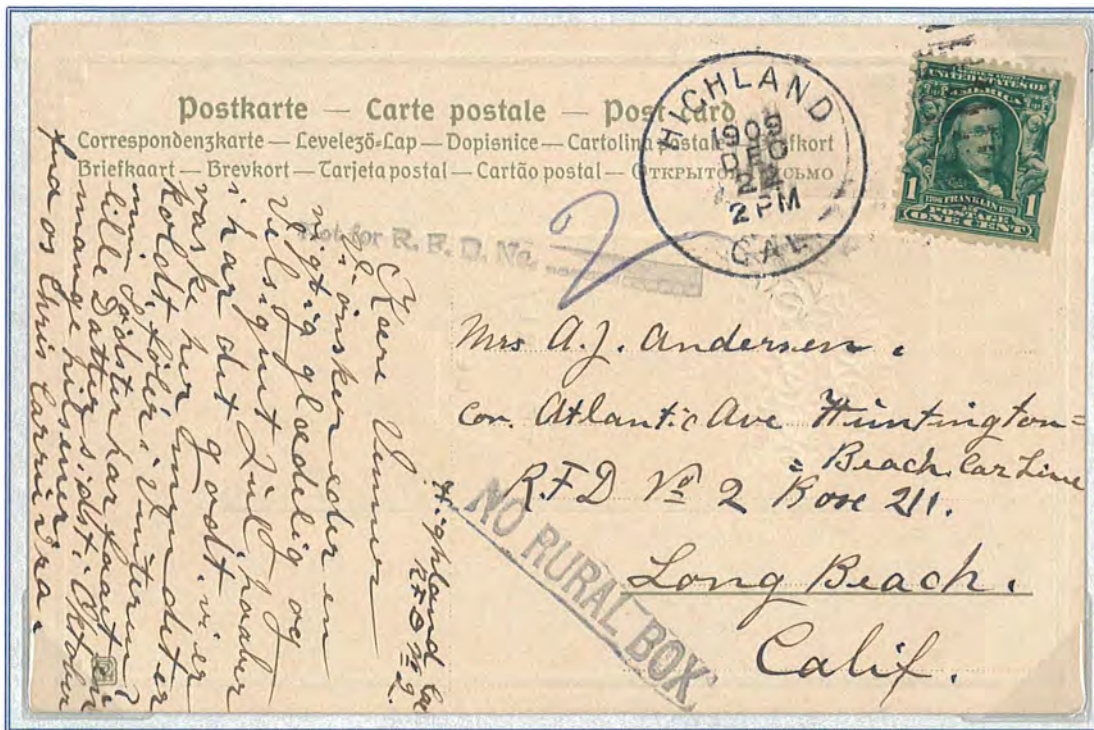


IMPORTANT
To avoid delays and errors in delivery advise correspondents and publishers of your R.F.D.
Route No.....
and Box No.....

August 1908 Norborne, Missouri (without rural route number)

Receiving RFD Service was predicated on erecting a suitable Rural Mail Box on the route traveled by the Carrier.

Mails addressed to persons on a Rural Route without a box, or where the box had been condemned, was held as General Delivery and returned if not claimed within the time specified by the return address or default regulations.



“ NO RURAL BOX “

Even with specific address

Cor(ner) Atlantic Ave
Huntington Beach Car Line
RFD No 2 Box 211
Long Beach, Calif

If the rural route patron
did not have a rural box
the mail could not be
delivered



Undeliverable because of no rural box, unclaimed and returned to write after 10 days per return address directive

“ No Box “ manuscript along with “UNCLAIMED” and “Return to Writer” pointing hand handstamps

December 23 Washington, PA RFD 3 Carrier backstamp and December 30 Washington, PA main office backstamp