

United States Private Mail System Definitions
by Richard Frajola, January 2007 (rev. 2)

A “private mail system” is a planned and organized system for handling written communications, owned and operated without government control or subsidy. Since Colonial days such systems have existed and thrived in the United States often providing service to persons without the benefit of government mails or providing faster, cheaper, or innovative services. The definitions below represent the start of a project designed to reach a consensus in categorizing these individuals and companies. Many of the companies operated in more than one of these categories.

Forwarding Agents – Private individuals or companies that arranged the transport of letters between other private companies or government postal systems without actually transporting the letters themselves over considerable distance. A typical service provided would be to pick up mail addressed to a client and re-mail to a new address or to forward by a private conveyance to another address. Forwarding agents began in the earliest days in America and were particularly important in expediting ocean mails. Some few used adhesive labels but generally they used manuscript or hand stamped endorsements. Although American consuls frequently also served as mail-forwarding agents, they should properly be considered as subsidized rather than private because of their status as employees of the State Department.

Local Posts – Privately owned companies that delivered letter mail and circulars within a city or carried mail from or to a nearby post office. Services commonly offered included taking mail from a post office and delivering to a street address, taking mail from their office, or a letter box, to the nearest post office, and both receiving and delivering mail from their offices. They became prominent in the largest cities after 1842 and gradually died out as the government began to supply similar services culminating with the Act of March, 1863 that abolished additional carrier fees. Many issued adhesive postage stamps. Excluded are those posts that were inspired by philatelic considerations. Some posts started as local posts and became philatelic local posts.

1844 Independent Mail Companies – The name given to the group of companies that carried letter mail between American cities between 1840 and 1845. They became prominent in 1844 and existed until June 30, 1845. Most were located in the North East portion of the country and utilized existing rail and waterway routes. Several issued adhesive postage stamps. When the Post Office Department lowered the postal rates, effective July 1, 1845, they also imposed heavy fines for carriage of mail matter by private expresses over mail routes in the United States.

Parcel Express Companies – Privately owned companies that carried merchandise, money and/or packages between cities. These companies actually began during the Colonial days when stage coaches were used. They began to flourish with the advent of the railroads. Adhesive labels were used by many of the companies and such use may have indicated the prepayment of the fees. Letter mail carrying was limited to varying degrees by postal law with exceptions generally being made for letters that dealt with the cargo, bills of lading, money including bank drafts, and newspapers.

Western Expresses – Private individuals or companies that operated west of the Mississippi River and carried letter mail between cities. This group of companies became prominent after 1849. Letter mail was handled by them to areas and towns that did not have established post offices and hence the carriage did not contravene any postal laws that prohibited mail carried privately on postal routes. After the Act of August 31, 1852 that allowed the private conveyance of letter mail if it was enclosed in a government stamped entire, and bore an amount of postage equal to that charged by the government, they began to handle mail from and to towns that did have postal facilities. Although the carriage of letter mail was usually a component of their business, many of these companies also handled gold, parcels and some even provided banking services. Some issued adhesive stamps for premium services or sold government postal entires that bore an additional frank to indicate prepayment of express fees. Some used adhesive labels without denomination to indicate payment of fees or used special stamps for additional categories of mail matter such as newspapers.

Eastern General Expresses – This group includes the smaller expresses that handled limited amounts of letter mail on their eastern parcel express routes in the period both before and after the Act of August 31, 1852 that required privately carried letters be contained in government stamped entires. It also includes those companies that carried letters over routes that were not government postal routes and the early "subscription posts" that operated between cities. Adhesive labels were used by some of the companies and these are especially prevalent in the South after the Civil War when the expresses operated during the period before the re-establishment of United States post offices.

Through The Lines Civil War Expresses – With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 the normal mail routes between North and South were severed. Starting in June 1861 private companies began to handle letter mail across the lines dividing North and South. These expresses ceased to operate by the end of 1861. Other private companies endeavored to transport mail from and to the blockaded South. This group of expresses does not include the numerous General Expresses or the money and package expresses that continued to operate as they had before the war. Also not included are the special military expresses that were not private enterprises.

Steamboat Expresses – This group of companies carried letter mail on steamboats on the various rivers, notably the Mississippi River and its tributaries. They were mostly steamboat owning companies that handled letter mail as an adjunct to their primary business of transporting freight and passengers. Mail carried privately on steam boats was subject to a series of changing, special laws developed after 1809. Many letters bear manuscript, handstamped or other types of "name of boat" markings. Adhesive labels and corner card envelopes are seen less frequently and have an advertising flavor. Note that this category does not include other companies that may have carried mail on steamboats, only those that owned and operated steamboats.

Extraterritorial Expresses – This group of companies operated expresses outside of the borders of the country and includes those that operated over land routes to Canada and Mexico as well as those that used sea routes for carriage. These originated in Colonial times when companies involved in trans-Atlantic and coastal shipping carried letters between ports of call as an adjunct to their primary freight and passenger business. Mail carried privately on sailing ships was

subject to a series of changing, special laws. Letter mail carried over land routes was carried over routes that were not postal routes in the United States or in compliance with the Act of 1852. This is a very diverse group of companies. In the early period, before 1830, several ship pursers used hand stamps to mark mail. Later, a few companies issued adhesive postage stamps. Many used adhesive labels that may represent prepayment of fees and still others used hand stamps or manuscript endorsements.

Hotel Forwarders – Several major hotels, mostly in the 1840's and 1850's, provided mail handling services. The service most commonly provided was the delivering of letters to the post office. Handstamps, or rarely adhesive labels, were used to indicate service. These handstamps may represent a fee paid or the service may have been provided gratis. At least one hotel, Howard's Hotel in New York City, also operated as an 1844 Independent Mail Company.

Telegraph Companies – These companies frequently provided message delivery services along with the telegraphic component of their service. As “special messengers” they were allowed to deliver what could have been considered letter mail over postal routes without penalty. At various times the companies operating in the United States used adhesive postage stamps, hand stamps, labels and franks.

Special Messenger Companies – This group of companies operated primarily in larger cities delivering written messages and small parcels. Some issued adhesive stamps or labels.

Package Delivery Companies – These companies delivered parcels and within larger metropolitan areas. They probably began with the advent of the rail roads and provided the needed service of getting merchandise from the rail depot, or later the air terminal, to the addressee. Several issued adhesive labels or franks.

Philatelic Posts – This group includes those private enterprises that started as, or became, primarily concerned with issuing postage stamps or postal artifacts for the sale to collectors rather than providing a service to the general public. They purport to represent the fulfillment of a wide range of special needs ranging from blizzard conditions to train strikes. The issuance of postage stamps is a necessary requisite of the group.