

*Connecticut
Postmaster Free Frank
Census*

Free

William J. Duffney

Introduction

The practice of free franking of mail immigrated from England as a part of the British mail system. It had been an accepted practice from Cromwellian times. By a decree of the Council of State in 1652 select government officials were given the privilege of using their signatures on mail in lieu of payment of postage. When eventually extended to local postmasters, the desirable financial advantage of using the mails for personal and private business enticed many entrepreneurs with political connections to serve as postmasters, even in small offices where the salary was insignificant. Merchant-grocers, too, saw that they could also increase trade with everyone in town getting their mail in their general stores.

Benjamin Franklin was appointed Postmaster of Philadelphia in 1737, and Joint Postmaster General of the Colonies for the Crown in 1753. Serving as Postmaster of the American Colonies for the British, Franklin created the most desirable of all postmaster free franks by signing, “B. Free Franklin,” the syntax letting his patriotic sentiments be known.

On July 26, 1775, just a year after being humiliated and dismissed by the British Privy Council, the Second Continental Congress appointed Franklin Postmaster General of the United Colonies. Franklin essentially took over the ‘Constitutional Post’ system created by New London native William Goddard. The practice of distributing newspapers in the post without charge and the privilege of free franking helped the printer Franklin increase his wealth and influence in America.

There were only nine official post offices in Connecticut when the Constitution became effective in 1789: Fairfield, Hartford, Middletown, New Haven, New London, Norwalk, Norwich, Stamford, and Stratford. (Danbury was operating as a private post.) That number increased to forty-one by 1800. Postmaster free franks from the embryonic 18th century period are exceedingly rare and valuable. Unfortunately, no laws specifically awarding the franking privilege to postmasters during this period were found. But it was done, even if informally. Examples do exist.

The practice became more clearly codified after the ratification of the United States Constitution. A summary of the laws is presented later. The reader will see that Congress tried to tweak the laws to prevent abuse of the privilege with each revision. Be that as it may, the ingenious always found gray areas of which to take advantage.

As the Postal Laws attest, many postmasters of the United States had the privilege of sending and receiving mail free of postage for much of the 19th century. When exceeding a half ounce weight limit, an excess rate was added. (see *Figure 1*)

Clever postmasters are known to have used their franks rather liberally in business. It is reported that some operated subscription agencies and insurance agencies where postage was a significant expense. Lawyers and politicians also found that it was a handy financial benefit. In one well known case, a postmaster actually ran a lottery using his free frank to send advertisements and increase his profit.

Oliver Steele, a New Haven printer, not a postmaster, joined in with his own scheme. He tried to sell printed forms for post office use in 1808. Since his intended customers were all postmasters, he took advantage of their privilege of receiving mail free when he addressed his advertising literature and samples to them at no expense to himself. Auditor to the Postmaster General Amos Kendall, a man who eventually would become the PMG himself, took note of this type of caper. In 1840 he sent out 13,000 free franked letters to postmasters strongly suggesting that they subscribe to his newspaper.

Postal historians recognize the definitive postmaster free frank as typically a stampless letter with the originating office identified (manuscript or handstamp), signed by the postmaster, and marked ‘Free’ in place of the usual rate notation [FFS - Free Frank Sent]. Letters addressed to the them must, of course, be considered another type of postmaster free frank [FFR - Free Frank Received]. To frank a letter in those cases, the sender had to include the title of ‘postmaster’ with the name of the addressee. The office which accepted the letter would recognize the franking privilege of the addressee and either apply the word ‘free’ or leave it to the receiver to complete. The identification of the postmaster and ‘free’ served as the frank. In both cases, however, the letters were accepted on the legal privilege conferred upon postmasters.

Another situation needs to be recognized — postmasters used their franking privilege even when traveling. Upon such occasions a postmaster would send a free franked letter from an office which was not his own. It was accepted into the mails as a courtesy by a second postmaster [FFT - Free Franked while Traveling]. The letter would of necessity have the sending postmaster’s signature, identifying him as postmaster of a given office, and have a postmark from the second office. The Post Office Department expected the traveling postmaster to be present at the time of mailing because some of them had been leaving behind blank writing paper for their friends and family to use in their absence.

The US Postal Laws and Regulations delineate severe fines and consequences for unethical postmaster free franking. They are warned, "When a postmaster abuses his franking privilege, he violates his oath of office, as well as the law, and will assuredly be removed from office upon detection, and otherwise punished to law."

Some postmasters took pride in their office and showed it by carefully executing their franks. Consistently among the more attractive examples are those that were prepared by Chaplin Postmaster Walter Goodell, using a variety of interesting postmarks, including an Asa White patented attached free CDS. Goodell even went so far as to have a form printed for his office returns. Postmaster Russell Hitchcock of Derby used a dramatic fancy townmark with a garland at the bottom along with a matching fancy free in a scroll handstamp. Woodstock had an unusual set of oval matching handstamps which Postmaster George Bowen applied with red ink.

Many free franked items do not have handstamps, of course, but pride could still be shown. Postmasters David Bolles, Jr., of Ashford and North Stonington's Thomas P. Wattles used monogram-like flourishes to great visual effect. Others used a variety of colored inks and paper. At the bottom of the spectrum would have to be the nearly illegible handwriting of Suffield Postmaster William Gay. And then there was Ralph Isham of Colchester, who would, more often than not, lazily just initial his free franks.

All free franking privileges were terminated in 1873, replaced by official stamps and penalty envelopes. This census table is an attempt to record existing Connecticut postmaster free franks. It has been updated since 2005, when it first appeared, for the internet. Admittedly, the approximately 3,700 entries are just a beginning, realizing that there are many items that have not as yet been seen and should be included in future editions.

W.J. Duffney
November 2011

Acknowledgments/Provenance

The compiler is grateful to have had access to two major holdings of Connecticut postmaster free franks which deserve special mention. The first is the largest known private collection of Ralph A. Edson. It was begun by the late John W. Longnecker in 1933, sold to the late Arthur J. Warmesley. Mr. Longnecker was awarded a trophy at the Fourth Philatelic Congress held at Hartford November 11, 1938 for a paper on his collection. Each philatelist has added significantly to the collection. It is now in good hands. The second holding is the Connecticut Postmaster Returns, part of the manuscript collection of the Connecticut Historical Society. I had the privilege of cutting the original bank file twine tying bundles of dozens of untouched free franks. The files cover the years 1818, 1820, and 1824 through 1834. For many of the offices all four quarterly returns are there, sent using the postmaster's franking privilege.

A letter from D.J. Schoonmaker, dated 1948, to John W. Longnecker must be mentioned. It states, "I wish I had known about your interest in Wildman (Zalmon Wildman, Danbury Postmaster) and the other Connecticut postmasters some years ago when I uncovered a barrel full of his family's correspondence in the attic of their old house up near Brookfield." Braggadocio such as this is often dismissed out of hand, but this should not be for examples from the Wildman correspondence are among the most numerous surviving of all Connecticut postmasters, and the statement is probably true.

Connecticut has had several postmasters that have become national level luminaries, such as Hartford Postmasters John M. Niles, U.S. Postmaster General under Martin Van Buren, and Gideon Wells, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy. Winchester Postmaster William S. Holabird is also a figure of note. He was the U.S. District Attorney representing the United States in the famous Amistad case. Most of the Holabird correspondence is presently part of the collection of Vin Vaicekauskas. Through his courtesy, much of it has been recorded herein.

Thanks are also due to the following philatelists who were generous with their significant contributions. Their help has been invaluable in completing this work: John Amberman, Ralph A. Edson, the late Steve Ekstrom, the late Ed Festi, Richard C. Frajola, the late Gerry Heresko, Roger Hinze, Robert Lorenz, John Olenkiewicz, William K. Sacco, and Vin Vaicekauskas.

Summary of Postmaster Free Frank Laws

Act of February 20, 1792 (1 Stat. 237, 238):

All letters and packets to and from the Postmaster General and his assistant are to be conveyed by post free of postage.

Act of May 8, 1794 (1 Stat. 361):

Extended the franking privilege to deputy postmasters for letters sent or received by them, not exceeding one-half an ounce.

Act of March 2, 1799 (1 Stat. 737):

Reenacted the provisions of February 20, 1792 and continued to extend the franking privilege to postmasters.

Act of March 3, 1825 (4 Stat. 110):

Each postmaster given franking privilege for letters sent or received by them, not exceeding one-half an ounce.

Act of July 2, 1836 (5 Stat. 88):

Provided that no postmaster shall receive, free of postage or frank, any letter or package containing anything other than paper or money.

Act of March 3, 1845 (5 Statutes 732-735, 739):

Privilege revoked except that the deputy postmasters may send through the mail, free of postage, all letters and packages which it may be their duty to transmit... which shall relate exclusively to the business of their respective offices or to the business of the Post Office Department, and shall indorse over their own signatures 'Post Office Business'.

Act of March 2, 1847 (9 Stat. 153):

Provided that each deputy postmaster, whose compensation for the last preceding year did not exceed \$200, may send all letters written by himself, and receive all written communication addressed to him, on his private business, which do not exceed one-half ounce in weight, free of postage. (*see Postmaster Compensation Table*)

Act of March 3, 1863 (12 Stat. 708):

Authorized free franking privileges to postmasters for their official communications to other postmasters.

Act of June 1, 1864 (13 Stat. 95):

Provided that all communications relating to the official business of the department to which they are addressed shall be received and conveyed by mail, free of postage, without being endorsed 'Official Business' or with the name of the writer.

Act of March 1, 1869 (15 Stat. 280):

Provided that anyone entitled to using the franking privilege must not exercise that privilege other than by applying his or her autographed signature.

Act of June 8, 1872 (17 Stat. 306, 307):

The authority to frank mail was conferred upon postmasters to cover all official communications to other postmasters only... anyone entitled to using the franking privilege must not exercise that privilege other than by applying his or her autographed signature.

Act of March 3, 1873 (17 Stat. 559):

Repealed all laws and parts of laws permitting transmission by mail of any free matter whatsoever.

☞ Key to Postmaster Free Frank Census ☞

AKA	also known as	PdofOp	Period of Operation
APP	Appointment/appointed	pm	Postmaster
B	Branch	PMK	Postmark
c	Circa (placed at end of figures)	PO	Post Office
C	Change	POD	Post Office Department records
CDS	Circle Date Stamp	RB	Rural Branch
Co	County	Re-est	Re-established
CoC	County Change	S	Station
CtR	Connecticut Register	Sp	Spelling
DC	Double Circle	SpC	Spelling Change
Disc	Discontinued	SpV	Spelling Variation
DPO	Discontinued Post Office	TH	Town history
Est	Established	USR	United States Register
FFT	Free frank sent from an office other than a postmaster's assigned one while traveling; signed	[1], etc.	Denotes a single name designation that was assigned more than once, not necessarily to the same office location
FFI	Illegal use of a free frank		
FFR	Free frank received; normally not signed	Counties	
FFS	Signed free frank sent from postmaster's assigned office	F	Fairfield
fr	from	H	Hartford
hs	Handstamp	L	Litchfield
ipo	in place of	M	Middlesex
Ms	Manuscript; all markings done in pen	NH	New Haven
NC	Name Change	NL	New London
Op	Operating	T	Tolland
		W	Windham

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☞ Postmaster Compensation for Fiscal Year 1846-47 ☞

Congress temporarily revoked postmaster franking privileges of personal mail in 1845, undoubtedly in response to rampant abuses. They reinstated the privilege in 1847 to postmasters whose compensation was less than \$200 for the previous fiscal year. Of the 281 Connecticut post offices in operation, 32 had postmasters that exceeded the \$200 limit. However, all postmasters continued free franking of post office business.

Compensation for Fiscal Year 1846-47 Below \$200

Abington	51.31	East Killingly	53.72	Lebanon	100.94
Andover	58.58	East Lyme	68.98	Ledyard	20.76
Ashford	61.17	East Windsor [3]	33.08	Leesville	12.35
Avon	77.99	East Windsor Hill	108.07	Liberty Hill	38.45
Bantam Falls	40.57	Eastford	51.73	Lime Rock	34.80
Barkhamsted [2]	29.62	Easton	51.29	Lisbon	44.01
Bethany	18.52	Ellington	103.77	Lyme	137.30
Bethel	159.57	Ellsworth	17.62	Madison	96.70
Bethlehem	66.77	Enfield [1]	140.60	Manchester [1]	136.77
Bloomfield	78.82	Essex	194.23	Mansfield	107.34
Bolton	34.13	Fair Haven	157.58	Mansfield Centre	92.96
Bozrah	40.49	Fairfield	175.11	Marlborough	40.58
Bozrahville [2]	28.89	Falls Village	118.33	Middle Haddam	126.29
Branford	73.09	Fishersville	86.25	Middlebury	44.50
Bridgewater	52.41	Franklin [1]	31.45	Milford	152.75
Broad Brook	74.25	Gales Ferry	15.24	Mill Brook	17.82
Brookfield	150.89	Gardners Lake	4.71	Mill Plain	17.97
Brooklyn	167.86	Gaylords Bridge	55.81	Millington	26.68
Buckland Corners	40.77	Gilead	28.53	Milton	54.70
Burlington	62.74	Glastenbury	113.24	Monroe [1]	43.90
Canaan	163.09	Goshen	118.89	Moodus	66.19
Canterbury [1]	78.82	Granby	63.65	Moose Meadow	10.36
Canton	39.79	Greenfield Hill	48.04	Moosup	42.18
Canton Centre	31.77	Greenwich	170.35	Mystic [1]	134.83
Central Village	88.01	Griswold	9.10	Mystic Bridge	160.77
Chapinville	4.39	Groton	41.13	Naugatuck	184.47
Chaplin	52.40	Guilford	182.36	New Boston	28.13
Cheshire	127.78	Haddam	66.50	New Fairfield	37.10
Chester	138.99	Hadlyme	36.38	New Hartford	134.50
Chesterfield	28.32	Hamburg	39.29	New Hartford Centre	52.52
Clinton	88.98	Hamden	99.69	New Preston	96.80
Cold Spring	20.91	Hampton	89.87	Newington	44.30
Colebrook [2]	92.48	Hartland [1]	29.79	Noank	35.67
Colebrook River	34.70	Harwinton	109.21	North Ashford	17.20
Collinsville	178.88	Hawleyville	1.35	North Branford	24.80
Columbia	62.37	Hebron	108.90	North Canton	16.94
Cornwall	32.36	Higganum	68.50	North Colebrook	33.42
Cornwall Bridge	105.86	Hitchcockville	92.31	North Goshen	9.50
Cornwall Hollow	27.78	Howards Valley	22.29	North Granby	25.37
Coventry [1]	59.56	Humphreysville	139.04	North Guilford	19.28
Darien [1]	95.82	Huntington	34.03	North Haven	56.44
Deep River	132.68	Jewett City	155.00	North Killingly	8.01
Durham	109.84	Kensington	105.64	North Lyme	17.73
East Granby	53.30	Kent	115.29	North Madison	11.01
East Haddam	169.14	Ketch Mills	18.39	North Somers	14.25
East Hampton	60.85	Killingly [2]	69.84	North Stamford	23.40
East Hartford	101.50	Killingworth [2]	36.05	North Stonington	64.05
East Haven	26.71	Lakeville	78.73	North Windham	29.20

Compensation for Fiscal Year 1846-47 Below \$200 (Continued)

North Woodstock [1]	80.73	Sherman	37.29	Wallingford	196.53
Northfield	43.22	Simsbury [2]	71.68	Warehouse Point	143.23
Northford	41.78	Somers	95.43	Warren	76.00
Northville	26.69	South Britain	40.23	Washington	104.84
Oakland	30.75	South Canaan	56.91	Waterford	78.80
Oxford	61.71	South Coventry	130.34	Watertown	134.33
Pendleton Hill	20.55	South Farms	71.68	West Brook	62.68
Plainfield	116.57	South Glastonbury	83.61	West Chester	25.39
Plainville	104.90	South Kent	18.05	West Cornwall	87.64
Pleasant Valley	33.28	South Killingly [2]	19.96	West Granby	25.95
Plymouth	165.04	South Lyme	35.71	West Hartford	51.78
Plymouth Hollow	134.57	South Norwalk	113.73	West Hartland	17.66
Pomfret	105.39	South Port	179.58	West Killingly	181.45
Pomfret Landing	34.03	South Windsor	27.75	West Stafford	24.36
Poquetanuck	41.29	Southbury	37.19	West Suffield	54.41
Poquonock	45.33	Southford	14.90	West Woodstock	58.88
Poquonock Bridge	11.84	Southville	35.48	Westford	32.49
Portersville	85.88	Square Pond	12.94	Westminster	25.35
Portland	172.95	Stafford	136.86	Weston [2]	19.27
Preston	42.63	Stafford Springs [2]	69.51	Westville	82.63
Prospect	43.35	Stanwich	46.05	Wethersfield	189.63
Redding [2]	67.02	Stepney	53.37	Wilkinson	78.52
Redding Ridge	40.24	Sterling [1]	48.20	Willimantic	167.11
Ridgebury	13.20	Straitsville	14.78	Willington	79.71
Ridgefield	180.51	Tariffville	171.11	Wilton	132.84
Rockville	197.87	Terryville	118.34	Winchester Centre	82.70
Rocky Hill	94.36	Thompson	182.35	Windham	146.68
Round Hill	27.21	Tolland	113.39	Windsor	143.22
Roxbury	55.33	Torrington	35.26	Windsor Locks	145.60
Salem	47.65	Trumbull	18.28	Winthrop	14.94
Salisbury	135.83	Trumbull Long Hill	36.06	Wolcott	31.20
Saybrook	138.32	Uncasville	83.95	Woodbury [1]	170.58
Scitico	28.37	Union	47.00	Woodstock [1]	68.65
Scotland	50.61	Vernon [1]	83.81	Woodville	35.20
Sharon	182.91	Voluntown	45.82	Zoar Bridge	12.89

Compensation for Fiscal Year 1846-47 Above \$200

Berlin	208.92	Newtown	202.96
Bridgeport	988.34	Norfolk	206.02
Bristol	338.66	Norwalk	445.96
Colchester	206.84	Norwich [2]	1,184.38
Danbury	452.55	Norwichtown	200.93
Derby [1]	349.62	Southington	255.06
Farmington	276.47	Stamford	429.60
Hartford	1,914.22	Stonington	392.67
Litchfield	431.78	Stratford	221.73
Meriden [1]	463.92	Suffield	298.17
Middletown	975.98	Thompsonville	200.42
New Britain	430.37	Waterbury	533.14
New Canaan	210.34	West Meriden	278.18
New Haven	1,236.97	Westport	251.59
New London	1,116.16	Winchester	341.13
New Milford	269.63	Wolcottville	246.29

POST-MASTERS

WILL take notice that the following public officers are authorised to frank letters and packets written by themselves, or by their order on the business of their several offices, and receiving such as are addressed to them free of postage, under the restrictions referred to.

President of the United States,
Vice President of the United States,
Accountant of the Navy,
War,
Adjutant and Inspector General, 1.
Adjutants General, 1.
Adjutants General of Militia, 2.
Apothecary General, 1.
Assistant Post-master General,
Attorney General,
Auditor of the Treasury,
Clerk of the House of Representatives, 3.
Collector of Direct Taxes, 1.
Commissary General, 1.
Do. do. of Ordnance,
Do. do. of Supplies,
Commissioner of the General Land Office,
Commissioner of the Navy Board, 1.
Commissioner of the Revenue, 4.
Comptroller of the Treasury,
Inspector General, 1.
Inspector of the Army,
Paymaster of the Army,
Physician and Surgeon General, 1.
Post-master General,
Post-masters, 5.
Quarter-master General, 1.
Register of the Treasury,
Representatives in Congress, 3.
Secretary of Navy,
Senate, 3.
State,
Treasury,
War,
Superintendent General of military supplies, 1.
Superintendent of Indian Trade,
Treasurer of the United States.
The Vaccine Agent may frank letters and packets, and receive free of postage, such as relate to vaccination, and do not exceed half an ounce in weight.
John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, late Presidents of the United States.

Figure 1 — Post Office Department circular directed to post-masters explaining the free franking laws in effect in 1815.

NOTES.

1. May receive free of postage, and frank, letters and packets on public business only; news-papers are not free.
2. May receive free from any Major General or Brigadier General of Militia, and frank, letters and packets addressed to those officers, which merely relate to the militia.
3. May not frank or receive free letters and packets weighing more than two ounces, and only during actual attendance, and for twenty days after the expiration of the session. Their newspapers free for the same periods.
4. Not entitled to newspapers free.
5. Post-masters can only frank and receive as free, letters and packets which do not exceed half an ounce in weight.

The several officers and persons above named are authorised to receive newspapers free of postage, excepting those having the reference 1 or 4.

The Secretary of the Treasury, of State, of War, of the Navy, and the Post-master General, may frank letters and packets on official business prepared in any other public office, in the absence of the principal thereof. Every person who shall frank letters other than those written by himself, or by his order on the business of his office, excepting in the above case, incurs a penalty of ten dollars.

If any person authorised to receive letters free of postage, receives any letter or packet addressed to a person not authorised to receive them free, it is his duty to mark on the letter the place whence it came and to return it to the post-office that it may be charged with postage.

Every postmaster is hereby required to prosecute immediately for every breach of the law in relation to franking which comes to his knowledge, and without delay to communicate the subject to this office. The great number of persons who are authorised to frank, and consequent injury to the revenue from abuses, makes it important that the postmasters should be vigilant in this respect.

R. J. MEIGS, Jun.

Postmaster General.

General Post-Office, April 12, 1815.

Post Office Department
Appointment Office
18. July 1839

Sir:

Answer to the inquiry contained in your letter of the 16th inst., viz, "Are Letters that are written to & addressed to a Post Master & duly mailed as "Free" while he holds & executes the duties of the office, but arriving after he is superseded, to be charged with the ordinary postage?", I am authorized to inform you that a person holding and executing the office of Postmaster at the time when letters are actually mailed to him as "free" is entitled to receive such letters free of postage, even if they arrive at their place of destination after he has transferred his office to a successor.

Saml. F. Lambert Esq.

Wilton
Fairfield Co. Ct.

Very respectfully

John W. Perot.
Rob. Johnston
W. Post. M. Genl.

Figure 2 — July 18, 1839 Post Office Department Appointment Office reply to Wilton Postmaster Samuel F. Lambert on processing free franked mail addressed to recently replaced postmasters.