

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

One of the nation's first post offices

Readers may know that Alexandria predates the United States of America, but did you know that Alexandria had one of the first American post offices?

Alexandria's first postmaster was Robert McCrea, who served from 1776 to 1793. The son of some of the first settlers of Alexandria, McCrea served as postmaster until his death. His son John succeeded him at the appointment of President George Washington, and John McCrea served as postmaster until the end of John Adams' presidential term in 1801.

The significance of the post is reflected in the fact that it required a presidential appointment and that most postmasters in the pre-Civil War years had both a personal connection to the president who appointed them and military experience.

For instance, Col. George Gilpin served as postmaster during James Madison's administration. Gilpin had been the town surveyor for many years, but he had also been

an honorary aide to Washington when he was appointed as commander-in-chief by Adams in the quasi-war with France.

Daniel Bryan served our city as postmaster longer than anyone else in the 19th century. First appointed in April of 1821, Bryan stayed in the position until 1853. This spanned the administrations of James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, James Polk, Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore.

Formerly a school teacher, he married the daughter of the Honorable Philip P. Barbour. Known as a quiet citizen and a devotee of literature, Bryan and his young family lived at the Lloyd House on the corner of Queen and Washington streets after Benjamin Hollowell left as a tenant.

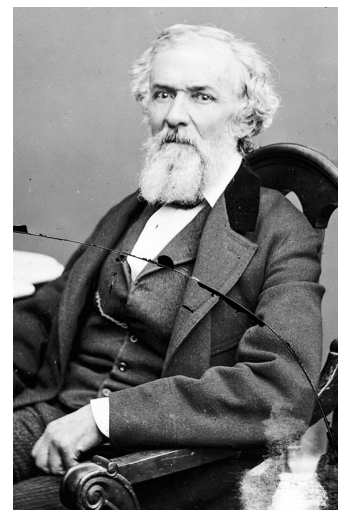
Bryan was also the postmaster who issued the "Alexandria Blue Boy" provisional stamp to James Wallace Hooff. More than a hundred years later, that stamp was sold for \$1 million.

In 1858, the Alexandria Custom House and Post Office was built at the southwest corner of Prince and St. Asaph streets. It was a fireproof structure, made of granite with cast-iron doors, window frames and stairways.

In 1902, when a fire broke out in the basement, there was significant smoke but no damage to the building. In the fall of 1930, 72 years after it was built, the old custom house was razed.

A notable postmaster of Alexandria who served in the custom house was Nicholas Trist, who served from 1870 to 1874. Previously, Trist had been the assistant secretary of state and had negotiated the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ceded California and New Mexico to the United States from Mexico. Trist died in Alexandria in 1874.

The role of postmaster meant something much different in the 19th century than it does today. Just as, if not more important than getting communication to residents in a



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Nicholas Trist.

timely manner, political connections seem to have been a prerequisite for the position.

This article is part of an ongoing series celebrating Alexandria's participation in the America250 program. For more information on America250 events in Alexandria, please visit alexandriava.gov/America250.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.