



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The Alexandria Post Office: A history of more than stamps

Alexandria Times, January 10, 2019

Image: Daniel Bryan, Postmaster 1821-1853.

After last week's column on the formerly most expensive stamp in the world, the "Alexandria Blue Boy," we wanted to focus on the history of Alexandria's post office over time. Mail was transported to this area as early as 1695, but there's no sign of a mail system until 1745 at the earliest.

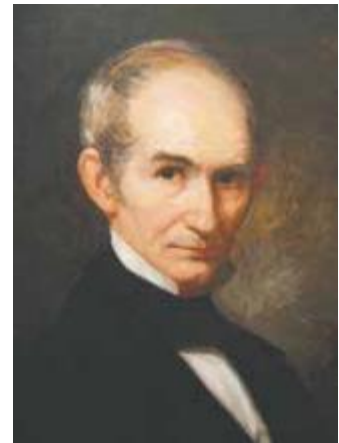
Alexandria's first postmaster was Robert McCrea, who served from 1776 to 1793. The son of some of the first settlers of Alexandria, McCrea served as postmaster until his death. His son John succeeded him at the appointment of President George Washington, and he stayed in office until the end of John 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, as well as military experience.

For instance, Col. George Gilpin served as postmaster during the term of James Madison. 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 (pictured here) served our city as postmaster longer than anyone else in the 19th century. First appointed in April 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 Hon. 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, after Benjamin Hallowell left as a tenant. Bryan was also the postmaster who issued the "Alexandria Blue Boy" provisional stamp to James Wallace Hooff.

Another notable postmaster of Alexandria was Nicholas Trist, who served from 1870 to 1874. Previously, Trist had been 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 timely manner, political connections seem to have been a prerequisite for the position. In a time when everyday aspects of our lives have become increasingly politicized, let us be thankful that the delivery of our mail has become less so.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.