

13th CONGRESS.]

No. 28.

[3d SESSION.]

CONDITION OF THE DEPARTMENT AFTER THE INCURSION OF THE ENEMY, IN 1814.

COMMUNICATED TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, OCTOBER 26, 1814.

GENERAL POST OFFICE, *October 25, 1814.*

SIR:

In compliance with the resolution of the House of Representatives on the subject of information relative to the destruction of official books and papers belonging to the General Post Office, in consequence of the late incursion of the enemy, you are informed that *no* official books or papers were lost, belonging to the Department, in consequence of the late incursion.

I have the honor to be, &c.

R. J. MEIGS, JUN.

The Hon. the SPEAKER of the House of Representatives.

13th CONGRESS.]

No. 29.

[3d SESSION.]

SUNDAY MAILS.

COMMUNICATED TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JANUARY 20, 1815.

Mr. RHEA, from the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, to whom were referred sundry petitions and memorials remonstrating against the usage of transporting and opening the mail on the Sabbath, and the report of the Postmaster General relating thereto, reported:

That they have had the same under consideration, and deeming it of great national importance, particularly in time of war, that no delay should attend the transportation of the mail, they deem it inexpedient to interfere with the present arrangement of the Post Office establishment, and, therefore, submit the following resolution:

Resolved, That it is inexpedient to grant the prayer of the petitioners.

GENERAL POST OFFICE, *January 16, 1815.*

SIR:

The Postmaster General, to whom were referred sundry memorials against the usage of transporting and opening the mails on the Sabbath, has the honor to report the following facts and observations:

The usage of transporting the mails on the Sabbath is coeval with the constitution of the United States, and a prohibition of that usage will be first considered.

The mail passes every day in the week from Portsmouth, N. H. to Savannah, in Georgia, and from Wiscasset, in Maine, to Schoodic Falls, without resting on the Sabbath. And the same practice prevails on the great route from Washington City to Ohio, Kentucky, and the Missouri territory; and from that city to Tennessee, Mississippi territory, and New Orleans; and from Charleston, S. C. to Tennessee and Kentucky; and on several other great chains of communication.

If the mail was not to move on Sunday on the first mentioned route, it would be delayed from three to four days in passing from one extreme of the route to the other. From Washington City to St. Louis, M. T. the mail would be delayed two days; from Washington City to New Orleans the mail would be delayed three days; from New Orleans to Boston it would be delayed from four to five days; and, generally, the mails would, on an average, be retarded equal to one-seventh part of the time now employed, if the mails do not move on the Sabbath.

On the smaller cross routes, the transporting of the mail has been avoided on the Sabbath, except when necessary to prevent great delays, and to preserve connexions with different routes.

In relation to *opening* the mails on the Sabbath, it may be noticed that the ninth section of the "Act regulating the Post Office establishment," makes it the duty of the Postmaster to attend to the duties of his office "every day" on which a mail shall arrive at his office, and at "all reasonable hours" on every day of the week. When a mail is conveyed on the Sabbath, it must be opened and exchanged at the offices which it may reach in the course of the day; this operation, at the smaller offices, occupies not more than ten or twelve minutes: in some of the larger offices it occupies one hour; and, it is believed, does not very greatly interfere with religious exercises, as to the Postmasters themselves.

The practice of "delivering" letters and newspapers on the Sabbath is of recent origin, and directed by the above quoted section, commencing in 1810. Prior to that period, no Postmaster (except the Postmaster at Washington City) was required to deliver letters and newspapers on the Sabbath. The "*reasonable hours*" were to be determined by the Postmaster General, who established the following regulations, now existing: "At Post Offices where the mail arrives on Sunday, the office is to be kept open for the delivery of letters, &c. for *one hour* after the arrival or assorting of the mail; but in cases that would interfere with the hours of public worship, then the office is to be kept open for one hour after the usual time of dissolving the meetings for that purpose." Also, if the mail arrives at an office too late for the delivery of letters on Saturday night, the Postmaster is instructed to deliver them on Sunday morning, at such early hour as not to trench upon the hours devoted to public religious exercises. If these regulations are not strictly attended to, it must be imputable to the urgency of applicants and the complaisance of Postmasters.

After the preceding statement, it is to be observed that public policy, pure morality, and undefiled religion, combine in favor of a due observance of the Sabbath. *Nevertheless*, a nation owes to itself an exercise of the means adapted to its own preservation, and for the continuance of those very blessings which flow from such observance; and the nation must sometimes operate, by a *few* of its agents, even on the Sabbath; and such operation may, as in time of war, become indispensable; so that the *many* may enjoy an uninterrupted exercise of religion in quietude and in safety. In the present state of the nation, it may be supposed necessary, *daily*, to convey Governmental orders, instructions, and regulations, and to communicate and receive information. If this daily carriage of the mail be, as relates to the safety of the nation, a matter of *necessity*, it also becomes a work of *mercy*. When peace shall arrive, the necessity will greatly diminish, and it will be at all times a pleasure to this Department to prevent any profanation of the Sabbath, as far as it relates to its official duty or its official authority.

The preceding statement of facts and observations are submitted with much respect for the memorialists, and with great deference to yourself and the honorable the House of Representatives.

RETURN J. MEIGS, JUN.

To the Hon. the SPEAKER of the House of Representatives.