

19th CONGRESS.]

No. 61.

[1st SESSION.

FRANKING PRIVILEGE OF DEPUTY POSTMASTERS.

COMMUNICATED TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, MARCH 17, 1826.

SIR:

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT, *March 14, 1826.*

As the abolition of the privilege of franking, at present enjoyed by postmasters, will, like most other measures, be attended by consequences of a mixed nature, the inquiry indicated by the resolution of the House of Representatives of the 16th of January will be best satisfied by ascertaining to which side the balance would probably incline.

One good effect likely to result from the adoption of this measure is, that it would conform to the great principle of justice, in proportioning the compensation of these public agents to the amount of services they respectively perform. This privilege constitutes an integral part of the compensation; but it is obvious that it may well be, and often is, exercised to a greater degree by a postmaster whose office yields fifty or a hundred dollars, and who opens and closes but one mail a week, than by the postmaster at New York, through whose office mails from all parts of the world are incessantly passing. In the most extended, and therefore most favorable view of it, it presents this legislative incongruity, that it is an invariable reward for fluctuating services; while the other element of this compensation, that is, a commission on the receipts of the offices, is as nicely and fairly adjusted to the value of the service rendered as the various situations of postmasters, and the frequent changes in the transportation of the mail, will admit. To establish the compensation entirely on this latter basis would, therefore, form the best connexion between labor and its reward that the case admits of. Another consequence of a favorable description, which the abolition of this privilege would produce, is, that, with the privilege, the abuse of it would cease. The reasons for continuing the privilege appear to be principally the following, which are either such as tend to counteract the advantages on the other side, or are substantive, and unconnected with them. The abuse of the privilege of franking, although not extirpated entirely, is now under a course of vigilant correction, and, from the elevated morality and public spirit exhibited by the postmasters, the belief is cherished that the amount of it will soon be materially reduced. No very accurate estimate can be formed of the sum of postage which this privilege, in its enjoyment by postmasters, covers; but it is apprehended that it does not far fall short or exceed, annually, \$80,000. The extinction of the privilege, however, would not increase the revenue to this amount, for the correspondence of postmasters would be greatly restricted by the loss of the privilege, and would probably not reach half its present value; and would fall short of an equivalent to the additional amount of positive compensation that the suppression of the privilege would require. This, it is feared, would exceed what the means of the Department could justify. In many cases, it would be difficult, if not impracticable, to obtain the services of competent persons for postmasters, if the temptation of the privilege were withdrawn; and from its utility in this respect is derived the strongest reason for its continuance. It may readily be conceived that no rate of compensation in a variety of small offices would command the services and responsibility of intelligent individuals, while the advantage held out by the power of franking seldom fails to command them. Such persons, while they only value a right, are proud of a privilege, and esteem it a far greater reward than any pecuniary compensation that it would be prudent to give, or fair to require. Considering the very great importance of the duties performed by postmasters, their confidential nature, and their great value to the public, it is conceived that no officers under the Government are more penuriously paid for their services than a great majority of them are; and if the privilege should be withdrawn, it is believed that the pecuniary addition, which would be required, to the amount of money they now receive, in order to bring up their compensation to a level, in their estimation, with its present value, would embarrass the operations, impede the utility, and probably exceed the means of the Department.

It will hardly be necessary, after this comparative view of the subject, to say that I consider the abolition of the privilege at present inexpedient.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

JOHN McLEAN.

19th CONGRESS.]

No. 62.

[1st SESSION.

ACCELERATION OF THE SOUTHERN MAIL, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF THE POST OFFICE AT WASHINGTON.

COMMUNICATED TO THE SENATE, MAY 20, 1826.

SIR:

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT, *May 19, 1826.*

In obedience to the resolution of the Senate of the United States directing the Postmaster General to "inquire into the practicability of accelerating the southern mail in its passage to Washington, so that the mail shall be delivered and opened immediately on its arrival, and also that unnecessary delay in the speed of the mail coach on the road be retrenched," I have the honor to state that the mail referred to is transported under contracts made more than three years ago, and which will expire with the present year; that proposals will shortly be published for mail contracts in the Southern States, and, in making them, many important changes are contemplated, which, it is hoped, will greatly add to the facilities of correspondence now enjoyed. These changes cannot be made under the existing contracts, without subjecting the Department to a large additional expenditure; but no doubt is entertained that the competition which will be raised by inviting bids for new contracts will secure to the public many advantages over the present arrangement, without any increase of expense.

The mail is now transported from Charleston to this city, a distance of five hundred and fifty-three miles, in about six days, after deducting the necessary delays at the different post offices. Under the new contracts, this time will be reduced to five days, which is believed to be as great an increase of expedition on this route as the state of the roads renders practicable. In the winter and spring, such is often the condition of a part of this road, that it is extremely difficult to avoid failures at the present rate of travel. It is often beyond the compass of human effort to drive stages, whatever force may be applied to them, with sufficient rapidity to meet the regular hours of arrival; and the mail, of necessity, is placed in carts prepared for that purpose, which the strength of four horses is scarcely able to drag through the mud, in some places from one to two feet deep.