

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.

In its passage south during the session of Congress, the great weight of the mail forms a serious obstacle to its speedy transmission. It sometimes requires six or eight large bags to contain it, and weighs not less than twenty-five hundred pounds.

From Richmond to this city, a distance of one hundred and twenty-three miles, the mail by contract is conveyed in twenty-six hours, though it is often delivered into the office here in less than twenty-five hours.

While the navigation of the Potomac is closed, as is generally the case the greater part of the winter, and the mail is necessarily transported on the land route, greater expedition than this is scarcely practicable. It often happens, when the road is bad, that no exertions can perform the trip in the time now allowed.

For some years past, since steamboats have plied between Washington and Potomac creek, near to Fredericksburg, the travel has been withdrawn from the road, and it has been consequently neglected. At that season of the year when it is used for the conveyance of the mail, it is in the worst possible condition, and causes the destruction of many horses.

The arrival of the steamboat at this place is very irregular. It is often impeded by winds, by tides, by fogs on the river, and by casualties, to which every vessel of this kind is more or less subject. Its usual time of arrival is from three to four o'clock in the morning, though sometimes it is delayed until six or seven. By contract, the mail is required to be delivered into the post office here at six o'clock, but the hour has been changed to five. When the boat arrives at two or three o'clock in the morning, which is sometimes the case, an earlier delivery of the mail might be made, though little or no advantage would result to the public from such occasional deliveries.

It is the better policy, in the transportation of the mail, so to regulate its delivery at important points as to combine certainty with celerity. If the acceleration be greater than can be accomplished, except under the most favorable circumstances, the public inconvenience, from frequent failures, will greatly overbalance any occasional advantage.

To the second part of the resolution, which directs "that the Postmaster General cause an inquiry to be instituted into the conduct and management of the post office at Washington," I have the honor to transmit to the Senate a letter from the postmaster, and the answers, under oath, of the clerks employed in that office to interrogatories which are believed to embrace the grounds of complaint. The messengers of both Houses who are charged with the conveyance of letters to the post office are not under the control of this Department. As letters of various sizes and documents of considerable weight are promiscuously thrown into a linen bag at the Capitol, those which have been freshly sealed with wafers are liable to be forced open. The corner of one letter slipping into the fold of another, closed with a wafer not dry, will certainly open it, and may make a small rent in the paper. This, it would appear from the affidavits enclosed, is not an unfrequent occurrence. It will be readily admitted that, in any office where many thousand letters are handled daily, the utmost vigilance cannot prevent occasional mistakes. These are sometimes made by the writers of letters, in their superscriptions or otherwise, while for the consequent failure the Department is held responsible.

With great deference I would observe that, on the day on which this resolution was passed by the Senate, the honorable mover sent a letter to the post office for the mail, without any endorsement upon it whatever; and it was only ascertained to be his by comparison with other letters which accompanied it bearing his frank, and folded in the same manner, sealed with similar wax, and the same impression.

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

JOHN McLEAN.

JOHN C. CALHOUN, *Vice President of the United States.*

SIR:

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT, *May 19, 1826.*

I wish you to have the following interrogatories answered by the clerks employed in your office, with the least possibly delay; and you will please to communicate to the Department any facts embraced by the interrogatories which come within your own knowledge.

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

JOHN McLEAN.

THOMAS MUNROE, Esq., *Postmaster, Washington City.*

Interrogatories to be put to the clerks in the post office at Washington, to be answered under oath.

- 1st. What number of clerks are usually engaged in opening the southern mail on its arrival? and how soon after its reception are you prepared to deliver letters?
- 2d. State, in detail, the labor necessary in examining the mail, before any part of it is ready for delivery.
- 3d. Have you any knowledge of the delay of letters in the Washington post office which are sent here for delivery, or of letters which have been improperly delivered?
- 4th. Who makes up the southern mail, and at what time is it made up?
- 5th. By whom are letters and packets delivered into the post office from the Capitol? Are these deliveries made regularly before the departure of the mail by which such letters and packets are to be sent?
- 6th. Are the letters and packets from the Capitol uniformly delivered into the post office in good order?
- 7th. Have you any knowledge, either directly or indirectly, of any letter or packet being purposely delayed in your post office, or of its contents, or any part of them, being examined?
- 8th. Have you any knowledge, either directly or indirectly, of the seal of a letter deposited in your office for the mail being broken, or opened and read, whether sealed or unsealed?
- 9th. Has any one access to letters in the office except those who are regularly employed, and have been duly sworn?
- 10th. What is the order in which your business is transacted during the session of Congress? State the average amount of labor daily.

SIR:

POST OFFICE, WASHINGTON, *May 20, 1826.*

I received your letter yesterday, enclosing interrogatories, ten in number, "to be put to the clerks employed in your [this] office;" and I now have the honor to enclose their answers thereto, under oath, to the truth of which I am willing to add my own affidavit, if required.

Your letter requires that I will "communicate to the Department any facts embraced by the interrogatories which come within your [my] own knowledge;" but, from an attentive reading of the clerks' answers, nothing occurs to me that might be deemed relevant or necessary which these answers do not contain.

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

THOMAS MUNROE.

The Hon. JOHN McLEAN, *Postmaster General.*

Answers to the interrogatories put to the clerks in the post office, Washington, by the Postmaster General.

To 1st. There are in the post office four clerks, and sometimes five, engaged in distributing and assorting the southern mail. There have been, however, some few instances in which a smaller number have been present.

The letters received by the southern mail have generally been ready for delivery in from one hour to one hour and a half after their reception; which reception, during the session of Congress, has generally been at about five A. M.

To 2d. It is necessary, during the time mentioned in the foregoing answer, to open and distribute the mails from the south for the northern post offices; to assort and distribute from one to three bushels of newspapers from the south for the northern post offices; to distribute and arrange the newspapers sent from the offices of the National Intelligencer and National Journal, received generally between five and six o'clock A. M., and from the office of the United States Telegraph, received during the night; to mark with postage, stamp, arrange, and distribute for mailing, the letters, sometimes in great numbers, dropped into the office during the night for the morning's mails; and, that the mail stages and carriers may not be delayed, if avoidable, beyond the hour for their departure as fixed by their contracts, all this labor has been invariably performed before the southern mail for *this delivery* has been opened and assorted; except, on special applications, particular mails have been examined and letters delivered. In further answer to this interrogatory, it should be stated that, on Sunday, Tuesday, and Saturday mornings, no mail is made up at and despatched from this office but the great northern and eastern mail, which departs every day; that, on Monday morning, the mails for Annapolis and the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and for the post offices in Charles and St. Mary's counties, in Maryland, are made up and despatched; on Wednesday, the mail for Annapolis; on Thursday, the mail for Charles and St. Mary's counties; and, on Friday, a large mail for Annapolis and the Eastern Shore of Maryland; and all of these mails are generally made up and despatched before six o'clock.

To 3d. We do remember some instances in which letters received for this delivery have been delayed, in consequence of being accidentally overlooked when applied for; and that it has sometimes occurred that letters, in the necessary rapidity with which they are assorted and distributed into the boxes provided for their reception—letters for the public Departments and both Houses of Congress—have been thus unintentionally delivered, or sent to the wrong Department or House of Congress, and thereby they have been unavoidably detained, for a short time, from those to whom they have been addressed.

To 4th. All the clerks are generally engaged in the making up of the southern mail. It has been closed, agreeably to the instructions of the Postmaster General, during the present session, at noon; and the time occupied in preparing it for departure has been, according to the magnitude of the mails to be made up, from three-quarters of an hour to one hour and a half.

To 5th. The letters and packets from the Capitol are delivered at the post office by the messengers of the Senate and House of Representatives, respectively, generally about the following times during the day: at noon, at three o'clock P. M., at five P. M., and at eight P. M.; and also commonly immediately after the adjournment of the House of Representatives. The bags in which the letters from Congress are sent contain letters for nearly every mail route, with apparently little regard to the times fixed by the office arrangements for closing the mails.

A large proportion of letters from members of Congress, perhaps a fifth or fourth part of the whole, are usually sent to the office by the servants of boarding-houses; and, in those last cases, reference appears to be had by the writers to the days and hours of closing, but, in a great many instances, such letters have been received, not only after the closing, but after the departure of the mails for which they were intended.

To 6th. The letters and packets from the Capitol are not uniformly delivered at the post office in good order. It has frequently been observed that such letters have been burst open (as was the case in two instances this day) while the wafers were moist; and sometimes we have found the corner of one letter firmly sealed to another, in consequence of its being forced under the fold or seal before the wafer had become dry. Sometimes, too, in rainy weather, a part of the letters in the bags have been so wet as to make it necessary to have them dried before they could be mailed; but, in all cases where the seals were thus broken, the letters have been *immediately* resealed, without any examination of their contents, and forwarded to their destination.

To 7th. We have no knowledge of any such case as is alluded to in this interrogatory.

To 8th. Letters have sometimes been deposited in the office without superscription or frank, when it has been considered necessary to open and so far examine them as to ascertain the writers' names, or their probable destination; but we aver that in no case has a knowledge of the contents of any packet or letter been unlawfully, or from culpable curiosity, obtained; nor has any part of the contents of letters unsealed or without address, which may have been seen in (warrantably, as we have supposed) endeavoring to ascertain the writers' names, ever been mentioned, or intended to be used or communicated to any person or persons whatsoever, so as to put them in possession of such contents or parts of contents. In some cases, however, we have been enabled to ascertain or conjecture the writers of letters so deposited without superscription, (as was the case a day or two ago, with a letter of Mr. Senator Randolph,) by an acquaintance with their seals, which have been returned to them without being opened.

To 9th. In the hours of business, it unavoidably happens that some persons, not under oath or in the service of the post office, gain access to the post office, and, if so disposed, they might possibly, unobserved by us, lay their hands on letters; yet the utmost watchfulness has been exercised to prevent such persons having access to any letter under our care, and we have no reason to believe that there ever has been a fraudulent act committed in the post office by such persons.

To 10th. The business of this office, besides the labor which is undergone during the first hour or two in the day, as detailed in the answer to the second interrogatory, consists in arranging and mailing letters, packets, and newspapers for the great southern, northern, and western mails, daily; in preparing, in anticipation, during the latter part of the day, every thing which is to be despatched by the next morning's mails; in receiving, opening, and making up several mails for the cross post routes, some three times per week, and others weekly, some of which are of considerable size and importance; in registering the post bills, and keeping up the various accounts of the office, as well with individuals as with the General Post Office Department; and in giving constant attendance, during the hours prescribed by the Postmaster General, in answering various inquiries and the almost incessant applications for letters, &c.

The amount of labor performed daily, being so various and irregular, cannot be accurately stated, but it may, in some degree, be estimated by the fact that, during the sessions of Congress, it is not unusual, besides the immense masses of public documents, newspapers, and packets *assorted* by us, for near forty thousand letters to be *mailed* here in a single week, and for those that were free (being about three-fourths of that number) no compensation is allowed, by law or otherwise, though it has been supposed, if not asserted, that two cents for each free letter *mailed* is allowed; but that allowance is made only for free letters *received and delivered* here.

GEORGE SWEENY,
EDWARD DYER,
COLUMBUS MUNROE,
THOS. L. NOYES.

COUNTY OF WASHINGTON, in the District of Columbia, to wit:

On the 20th day of May, in the year 1826, before the undersigned, one of the justices of the peace for the said county, personally appeared George Sweeny, Edward Dyer, Columbus Munroe, and Thomas L. Noyes, clerks in the post office of the city of Washington, and severally made oath on the Holy Evangelical of Almighty God that the answers to the foregoing interrogatories, ten in number, are just and true, to the best of their knowledge and belief.

Sworn before

CHARLES H. W. WHARTON,

Justice of the Peace.