Connecting With My Grandfather

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Connecting With My Grandfather

In early 2020, we learned about an illness that would have a great impact on life in our world, an influenza called Covid-19. From the start, I knew this could be a very serious matter because the so-called Spanish Flu had killed my maternal grandfather, Wesley Everett Rich, in 1918.

In December of 2020, I was admitted to the hospital, diagnosed with Covid as well as pneumonia. Lying in bed in quarantine, I reflected on the fact that I never knew my namesake who had died from a variation of the same affliction, at the age of 29. Who was he? What was he like? What were his interests? How could I connect with him?

I was named after him, Wesley Rich Higbie, and his widow paid me special attention as I grew up. Oddly, I don't recall any tales about him that gave me any sense of him as a person.

Fortunately, my mother wrote memoirs including a brief essay, "The Father I Always Wanted to Know." My mother writes:

> By the time I was a month old, the United States had entered the war in Europe. This was the beginning of the end of the happy family life at 10 College Place. When conscription started, Wes's number was one of the first to come up. The College wanted him deferred and his two daughters would have been reason enough to get him excused. But he believed that it was the duty of men of education and social standing to enter the military by the same route as everyone else and then depend for advancement on the quality of service they could perform. . . . That tells me that I am the daughter of a man who had high principles and acted upon them.

Professor Charles J. Bullock of Harvard's Economics Department appears to have been his major professor. Dr. Bullock himself was an authority on government finance. In 1895 he had authored *Finances of the United States from 1775 to 1789 with Especial Reference to the Budget*, cited as a reference in Wesley's Bibliography.

Wesley's dissertation, *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829*, reflects an emphasis on economics in the history of this important institution. This work includes the colonial period and the first 40 years under the then new Constitution, and ends as Andrew Jackson's presidency makes some sweeping changes, including a wide application of the spoils system. During this period the Post Office takes shape as a hybrid of business and government, and an important element in the growth and development of a dynamic and expanding nation.

I read his book to get to know him, and found aspects of his personality and humor along the way. For those of you with Ph.D.'s, what would your descendants learn from reading your doctoral dissertation? I assume that the author's personality and character are not often encouraged in such works. Here is what I found.

One valuable source is the Introduction to Wesley's Post Office history, where Dr. Bullock says:

> This volume of the Economic Studies is a doctor's dissertation offered in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. at Harvard University in 1917. It is but the beginning of a comprehensive investigation which Dr. Rich intended to make of the history and present operations of the United States Post Office. The untimely death of the author leaves it for others to complete the study which he had begun with such zeal and intelligence; but fortunately, his thesis had covered in a substantially complete way the earlier history of our Post Office, and will smooth the pathway for subsequent investigators. . . [This] book is a worthy memorial of a young economist of great promise who gave his life for his country in the recent war.

> Wesley Everett Rich was born at Chelsea, Massachusetts, on August 13, 1889, and died at Camp Devons on September 25, 1918, from an attack of influenza which developed into pneumonia. He received his bachelor's degree at Wesleyan University in 1911, and his master's degree from that same institution in 1912. From the fall of 1911 until June, 1914, he was a graduate student in economics at Harvard University; and upon the completion of his thesis, he received from that institution the degree of Ph.D. in 1917. At the close of his resident study at Cambridge he was appointed, in the fall of 1914, instructor in economics and social science at Wesleyan University; and was later advanced to the rank of associate professor. Receiving leave of absence for service in the United States Army, he left Wesleyan on December 3, 1917, leading a company of Middletown soldiers. . . .
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> This brief statement of what Dr. Rich did in the years allotted to him give us a measure of the man. Modest and unassuming at all times, generous, friendly, and loyal in all relations in life, he united great intelligence and exceptional power of accomplishment. Content always to do, and do well, the natural and obvious thing that lay next at hand, he was able, none the less, to look far ahead in his professional work and to move steadily toward any goal that he set himself. To excellent scholarship he added marked ability in research; and when the opportunity offered, proved equally successful as a teacher of economic and social science. When the war came, he again did the right thing, laying aside professional work, upon which he had entered with distinction, to take his place in the ranks at Camp Devons where he felt that he belonged. He could ill be spared, and its hard for one who knew him to reconcile himself to the loss of a man of such marked promise and engaging qualities. That he left, in form substantially complete, this latest edition to the Harvard Economic Studies is, therefore a cause for satisfaction. While it serves as a worthy memorial for a young economist who gave his life in regular line of duty, may it also stimulate and assist some other investigator to carry on to its conclusion the investigation which Dr. Rich was not permitted to complete.

Postal Service in the Colonies

So, what is the history of the Post Office as told by Wesley Rich?

His dissertation begins in the early 17th Century, when the British postal service was focused on communications between and amongst government offices. Business and personal correspondence were sent by entrusting letters and parcels to travelers and coachmen who planned to go to or towards the desired destinations. Much of this traffic

went through inns along the chosen routes. Some private correspondence may have gone in the saddlebags of the government riders, as a side business. To cross the ocean, mail was entrusted to ships' captains.

In North America, several of the colonies established their own postal systems which were focused on delivery of government letters within each colony, although some colonies explicitly provided for communications with adjacent colonies. Massachusetts sent riders from Boston to Hartford, and Pennsylvania sent riders to Delaware and Maryland.

In 1684, a more ambitious project for intercolonial postal communication was proposed to the Duke of York by the Governor of New York, a chain of post houses from Nova Scotia to the Carolinas. The Duke's Secretary replied that,

> it seems a very reasonable thing and you may offer the privilege thereof to any undertakers for ye space of 3 or 5 years by way of farme; reserving wt part of ye proffitt you think fit, to the Duke (not less yn one tenth) the farmers to acct to ye Duke either upon oath or by inspection into their bookes or any other way wch. You shall judge convenient and safe for the Duke, to know the true value thereof.

This reference to "undertakers" reflects the terminology of an emerging business environment, and the reference to farming suggests the operator must find any compensation from cash-flow.

New York did not hire an undertaker for that proposed system, but it did establish rates "for riding post at 3d. per mile, for every single letter not above one hundred miles, three pence; if more proportionably." Much later the US Post Office adopted a uniform rate structure which varied by weight but not by distance.

In 1692, after the Glorious Revolution, the Crown issued Neale's Patent which established a unified postal system from a mix of existing colonial systems, some of which included post to other colonies and various treatments of letters coming via ship from England. Mr. Neale never travelled to America himself, but did appoint Andrew Hamilton to be Deputy Postmaster. Hamilton had been in the Jerseys (called East Jersey and West Jersey) since 1685, holding various government positions.

Fortunately for the postal service, senior management had some sense of economics. Mr. Hamilton noted that the quantity of mail at stated rates was insufficient to cover operating costs, and he proposed raising rates of postage. The Postmasters General in Britain did not approve. They said that "the inland rates he had proposed were too high, and that the end he sought would be better obtained by lowering rather than raising the charges." They cited the increase in revenues of the British Post Office which had followed the lowering of rates between England and Scotland in 1657. This was an early perception of price elasticity by a government agency.

In 1711, an act was passed by Parliament for the purpose of reorganizing and consolidating the postal system in all the British Dominions. This was expected to raise a steady revenue for war expenses, with the entire establishment to be under the control of the Postmaster in London, with deputies in Edinburgh, Dublin, New York and the West Indies. The 1711 law provided that £700 per week and one-third of the colonial revenue in excess of £111,461 should be at the disposal of Parliament for military purposes. Somewhat less than £75,000 was allowed for the expenses of the entire service. The law required all letters be sent by means of the post office with limited

exceptions, and established higher rates for postage in the colonies. This was the beginning of a postal monopoly on the carrying of private letters.

In Virginia, a serious opposition developed to the new postal law on the basis that the establishment of the new rates by Parliament constituted taxation of the colonies without their consent. Considering that one purpose of the act was to fund war expenses, this was not a bad argument. This was about fifty years before such views became common in the colonies.

Benjamin Franklin

It has been said that Personnel is Policy. Especially in a new organization, policies reflect the people who have been appointed to authority. This is true of the appointment of Postmaster Benjamin Franklin who transformed the post office into a profitable enterprise, that paid for its growth largely from its own revenue.

Mr. Franklin had founded and operated several successful businesses. He famously arrived in Philadelphia with two loaves of bread in his pocket, and no money to his name, and became a very wealthy man. He saw value in the printed word, became a printer and then a publisher of newspapers, almanacs, etc. He depended on the mail to bring news for his newspapers as well as to deliver his publications. In 1737 he became the Deputy Postmaster of Philadelphia. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin declares that he never once sought advancement. Wesley states:

> The fact of the matter is, however, that in the instance now before us he not only sought the office, but did so with great haste and persistence. In 1751 news reached him that [Postmaster General] Elliot Benger was ill, probably dying. With all speed, thereupon, he made arrangements to get the place and wrote to Peter Collinson [in Ireland] as follows:

The occasion of my writing this *via* Ireland is that I have just received Advice that the Deputy Post Master General of America (Mr. Elliot Benger residing in Virginia) who has for some time been in declining Way is tho't to be near his end. My Friends advise me to apply for this Post and Mr. Allen (our Chief Justice) has wrote the enclos'd to his Correspondent, Mr. Simpson, in my favour requesting his Interest and Application in the Affair and impowering him to advance a considerable Sum if necessary.

I have not heretofore made much scruple of giving you Trouble when the Public Good was to be promoted by it, but 't is with great Reluctance that I think of asking you to interest yourself in my private Concerns as I know you have little Time to spare. The Place is in the Disposal of the Post Masters General of Great Britain with some of whom or their Friends you may possibly have Acquaintance. Mr. Allen has desired Mr. Simpson to confer with you on the Affair and if you can without much Inconvenience to yourself advise and assist in endeavoring to secure the Success of this application you will whatever may be the event add greatly to the Obligations you have already conferred on me: and if it succeeds I hope that as my Power of doing good increases my Inclination may at least keep pace with it. I am quite a Stranger to the Manner of managing these applications so can offer no particular instructions. I enclose a copy of the Commission of a former Deputy Post Master General which may be of some use. The Articles of Agreement referred to in the Commission I have never seen but suppose they have always been nearly the same whoever is appointed, and have been usually sent over to America to be executed by the New Officer; for I know neither of the last two Officers went to England for the Commission. The Place has commonly been reputed to be worth about £150 a Year, but would otherwise be very suitable to me, particularly as it would enable me to execute a Scheme long since form'd of which I send you enclosed a Copy, and which I hope would soon produce something agreeable to you and to all lovers of Useful Knowledge for I have now a large Acquaintance among ingenious Men in America. I need not tell you that Philadelphia being the Center of the Continent Colonies and having constant Communication with the West India Islands is by much a fitter Place for the Situation of a General Post Office than Virginia, and that it would be some Reputation to our Province to have it established here. I would only add that as I have a Respect for Mr. Benger I should be glad the Application were so managed as not to give him any offense

> if he should recover. But I leave everything to you and Mr. Simpson, referring you to Mr. Allen's letter to that Gentleman for further particulars, and am dear Sir, Your affectionate humble Serv't,
>
> B. FRANKLIN
>
> P.S. I have heard that £200 was given for the office by Mr. Benger and the same by his Predecessor. I know not whose Perquisite it was. But lest that should not be sufficient and there may be some contingent fees and Charges Mr. Allen has offered £300. However, the less it costs the better as 't is an office for Life only which is a very uncertain tenure.

Wesley says, "The thing which gives the keenest point to the whole story is that Benger did not die in 1751 as he was expected to, but lived on until 1753." Inclusion of this letter tells us that Wesley thought we should know Franklin's humanity as well as his genius. He is not only vying for the appointment, but offering to pay an additional £100 for the post.

When Franklin became co-Postmaster General (along with William Hunter of Virginia) he opened the service to carrying newspapers of all publishers. Franklin reorganized the rate for newspapers in 1758 "to remedy the inconvenience and yet not discourage the spreading of newspapers which are on many occasions useful to government and advantageous to the Publick." Newspapers went at a rate substantially less than private letters.

Franklin's management expanded the service and made the system speedier and more dependable. Operating results for the Post Office went from operating deficits of more than 50% of the disbursements to operating surpluses of more than 50% in the period 1753-1761. When the American Post Office paid £494 as surplus revenue in 1761, the British Post Office noted that this was the first remittance of that kind.

An Act of Parliament in 1765 made considerable changes in the post office, including reduced rates for postage. In the meantime, Franklin had become a lobbyist for Massachusetts and other colonies and spent much time in England. Much of his efforts there were aimed at the repeal of the Stamp Act, in part based on "no taxation without representation." "This activity of his, coupled with his long absences from the country where he held office, finally cost him his place." After the removal of Franklin, the service became less efficient and "On all sides disregard for the laws of the post office was widespread. Post riders jogged leisurely along their routes, stopping often to transact some business with which they had been entrusted."

In this period stage coaches started to be contracted to carry the mail, initially between Boston and Portsmouth. This had the advantage of the stage service carrying paying passengers, which helped defray the costs of operations. Use of stages for the post encouraged the use of stages for travel in addition to mail delivery, like the later use of aircraft for air mail encouraged and subsidized the development of air travel.

Many of the records cited to support this part of the *History* are from the Master of the Rolls in London. Since this research was done before copy machines and the internet, I assume Wesley traveled to Britain to read them.

Emergence of Post Office Independent of Britain

As the colonies shifted into rebellion they no longer relied on the British postal system. By the spring of 1775, the breach between England and the colonies had widened by the skirmish at Lexington, "and soon the revolt was full grown." The Continental Congress felt the need of an independent postal establishment, and on May 29, 1775, appointed a committee headed by Franklin to organize it. In the new

institution, every colony north of the Carolinas had at least one office and, "communications was established between all the leading towns except Boston, which was in the hands of the British." "The competition of the "Continental Post, had killed the service of the British office . ." By May 4, 1775, the British Postmaster General had discharged his New York- Philadelphia riders for lack of funds. All of this was a year before the Declaration of Independence.

Early Days of the American Post Office

"The Continental Congress was on the threshold of a great struggle in May, 1775. It was necessary that the best and speediest system of communication obtainable be put into operation to insure the needed cooperation between the colonies." Congress naturally turned to Franklin, who headed a committee which presented a plan for the establishment of a general post office with a line of posts from Falmouth in Maine to Savannah in Georgia, with postmasters to be paid out of revenue and net profits (if any) to be paid to the Continental Treasurer. The system largely resembled the British Post under the prior regime with improvements based on experience. Franklin was again named Postmaster General.

The main problems of the office in this period were to keep open sure and secure lines of communication between Congress and the armies in the field, and to keep the various colonies in touch with each other. Despite a great reduction in the revenue from postage, Congress greatly expanded the franking privileges, which allowed mail to be sent free of postage, so that it included generals, then officers and then all soldiers, as well as all members of Congress.

Post Office and Post Roads under the Constitution

The US Constitution adopted in 1789 specifically authorizes the federal government to create and operate Post offices and Post Roads.

Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution begins,

> The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes; …
>
> To establish Post Offices and post Roads . . .

The inclusion of this power served to promote growth, to promote commerce and to promote national identity. Note that this power is explicitly vested in Congress, but the actual operation of the Post Office has always been in the Executive Branch.

Since the 1760's, the Post Office had generally run at a surplus which was then deposited in the Treasury. The Post Office was included in the Treasury Department under Alexander Hamilton, over the objections of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson.

The economic data available reflected the practice of Congress making appropriations for the "administrative expenses" of the Department which included headquarters and regional supervisors, but not the postmasters, who received commissions from the postage revenue.

In general, post roads were financed in an indirect way, with the transportation contractor including the costs of the road in fees charged. Some post roads merely required upgrading or maintenance, while others required building new roads along a chosen route. To the frustration of an economist, the costs of these roads were buried in transportation costs which included the costs of riders and stages as well as the costs of any road construction. Available data shows ever increasing miles of post roads, but not their cost.

One advantage in having the postal function at the federal level rather than in individual states is that it facilitated the growth and connectedness of the nation as a whole. President Washington, in messages to Congress, called attention to the services of the Post Office "in spreading throughout the country a knowledge of the actions of the Government." In 1791 he told Congress that:

> the importance of the post office and post roads on a plan sufficiently comprehensive as they respect the expedition, safety and facility of communication is increased by their instrumentality in diffusing a knowledge of the laws and proceedings of the Government, which, while it contributes to the security of the people, serves also to guard them against the consequences of misrepresentation and misconception.

Washington urged Congress to establish more cross posts (branching out from the main post roads), especially in the northern and western parts of the country.

In 1792, Congress adopted the Postal Service Act which provided a more permanent footing for existing practices and also provided special reduced postage rates for newspapers. Timothy Pickering, the first Postmaster General, specifically wanted to promote newspaper service to remote areas, reasoning there were fewer printing presses without the public post roads, which left these areas "destitute of every necessary information." Along these lines, a postal surveyor wrote to Pickering:

> Nothing can be more fatal to a Republican Government than ignorance among its citizens and they will be made the easy dupes of designing men, instead of supporting the laws, the reason and policy of which they are ignorant, they will flock in thousands after a demagogue who sets up to oppose every measure of government which he is able to persuade them is not in their interest; in such circumstances the well disposed are born down and carryed away with the flood. They are incapable of opposing for want of information that those within the circle of political information are possessed of.

Does this sound rather contemporary for 1794? I see my grandfather's sense of right and wrong in his inclusion of this quotation.

> The desire to promote the establishment of post roads was one of the chief ideas underlying the movement for internal improvements, and the power granted to Congress for this end was one of the main bases on which the exponents of such schemes rested their defense of the constitutionality of their proposals. [John C.] Calhoun said in 1817 that Congress ought to "bind the public together with a perfect system of roads and canals." "Let us conquer space," said he; "it is thus that a citizen of the West will read the news of Boston still moist from the press. The mail and the press are nerves of the body politic." Henry Clay also held this view and was an ardent advocate of internal improvement at Government expense.
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> In spite of the Constitutional scruples of Madison, Monroe and Jackson, several important projects were carried through by the Federal Government. Chief of these was of course the Cumberland Road. This furnished a highway over which the mail stages traveled to Wheeling and beyond, across the state of Ohio. All through this period Congress was besieged with petitions from the inhabitants of many sections of the country, mostly from the West, requesting the expenditure of the nation's funds on their roads.

Remember, expansion of the post office and its route system was generally financed by postage revenue, so appropriations were generally not necessary.

Expansion of the postal service followed close on the heels of settlement. One requirement was that service was required to go to each county seat, thereby supporting local government. For most citizens, the local post office was their only contact with the new federal government. People could have knowledge of issues being considered in other parts of the country and which might facilitate debate among various interests and locales.

Trends in the expansion of post roads varied from modest to extravagant which reflected the policies of various Postmasters General. Establishment of post roads was one of the favorite species of Congressional "pork." As the system grew, the number of appointments and the scale of its revenue and its operating expenses, including road construction and maintenance, grew. There were 75 post offices in 1790, 903 in 1800,

2300 in 1810, and 8050 in 1829. Many appointments and more on the way. Postal revenue was funding an ever-increasing post road network. In 1790 there were 1875 miles in the network, in 1800, 20,817, in 1810, 36,406. By 1829 there were 114,780 miles of post road connecting villages, towns and cities throughout the United States

Some postmasters became involved in lotteries and posted printed lottery materials as newspapers to qualify for favorable postage rates. A Postmaster General of the time said, "Circulars devoted to lotteries were no more newspapers than a book of poetry was a newspaper because poems were occasionally printed in newspapers."

Patronage, where did that come from? From Founding Father Thomas Jefferson. After he had observed the workings of the Post Office for several years under the Federalist regime, Jefferson wrote to Madison in 1796:

> I view it as a source of boundless patronage to the executive, jobbing to members of Congress and their friends and a bottomless abyss of public money. You will begin by only appropriating the surplus of the post office revenues; but other revenues will soon be called in to their aid and it will be a source of eternal scramble among the members, who can get the most money wasted in their states; and they will always get most who are meanest.

Evidently Jefferson was more impressed by the Congressional scramble for "pork" than by the abuse of executive power through patronage. It was Jefferson who, "by his recognition of party allegiance as a controlling factor in the appointment and removal of officers," introduced patronage into federal employment. As a "reform," the Jefferson administration removed many postmasters appointed by the Federalists, including many who were printers or editors, on speculation of abusing their franking privilege, especially if they were of Federalist sympathies. The Federalist editor of the New York Post said:

> Mr. Jefferson's Postmaster General, Gideon Granger . . . in the plentitude of his sagacity, discovered that a "printer of a newspaper" is more susceptible to perjury and mal-conduct in transacting the duties required in that Department than in any other profession, notwithstanding a difference of opinion hitherto held by predecessors as experienced and nearly as respectable as Citizen Gideon.

Wesley goes on to say, "Why this should have been the case with Federalists alone is difficult to understand, yet we know that Republican printers were undisturbed in their offices." Again, his sense of right and wrong comes through to us, as well as an eye for fine detail. Congress made several attempts to make appointments to important post masterships subject to the advice and consent of the Senate, but these were unsuccessful. Some Presidents wanted to exercise this patronage themselves, while others left it to their Postmaster General.

The rates charged for newspapers since Franklin in the 1750's were set below cost, and since 1794, each publisher could send copies for free in exchanges with other publishers, of whom there were now over 600. Newspapers were heavy and bulky, compared to letter mail, and were often left behind by riders and coaches in a hurry. There continued to be controversy in this area with strong feelings on both sides. In 1822, the Detroit Free Press protested against this "unconstitutional scheme of stopping in any degree the sources of that information which distinguishes Americans from the people of all other countries." Wesley observed, "When the considerable services of the newspapers to the politicians are borne in mind, it is not surprising that their pleas carried weight with legislators and that the much-prized right of free exchanges remained untouched." I think my grandfather showed political insight here.

The *History* examines the business practices of the Post Office and concludes they did not measure up to the prevailing standards of the day. "The laws required but

meagre accounts from the Postmaster General, in whose hands lay the disposition of the entire revenue of the Department." Accountability was weak and Treasury did not exercise strong management. It was not practical to have Treasury make all disbursements as this would greatly hamper what was basically a network of thousands of offices and thousands of contractors. The objective was service not revenue, and its accounting was haphazard from the beginning. One practice which helped control expenses was compensating postmasters by commissions based on net revenue. Expense management from the bottom up, rather than top down.

"There was always confusion in the accounts, and a constantly increasing balance of payments due the Department from postmasters who failed to remit the proceeds of their offices." Other problems arose from the confused state of the currency, including payment in notes from State banks which could change in value relative to the US dollar.

Financial reports were given by the Post Office at irregular intervals, and were not made on the basis of regions even though such division had early been made for the purpose of negotiating and administering transportation contracts. There is no clear statement of operating results, as Congress, from 1799 on, made appropriations for the salaries and office expenses at headquarters, while the operating expenses including postmasters' commissions and contractor charges were paid out of postage revenue. Wesley's comments in the chapter on Financial Operations of the Post Office show the great frustration of a researcher encountering jumbled and inadequate data. Much of the detailed records had been destroyed by a major fire in 1836.

He ends on an up note, saying:

In summing up the development of the Post Office in the first forty years after the adoption of the Constitution, it may be said that during this period there grew up a policy which came to be accepted as the traditional American policy for the Office. The aim was service rather than revenue, and to this end the receipts were put back into the extension of roads to all parts of the country. For the period when the country was young and rapidly growing, the policy was undoubtedly of immense value to the nation. Above all, it serves to emphasize the fact, often neglected in discussion concerning the Post Office, that this important activity of Government is more than a mere fiscal device, or even a vast industrial enterprise. It is a social force of great magnitude.