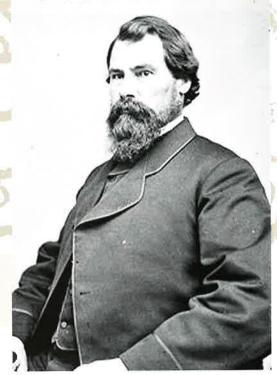# Special Delivery

*Our post offices have always played a
significant role in local history*

by John T. Toler

*Confederate Postmaster
General John H. Reagan*

Even before the Declaration of Independence, the founding fathers addressed the need for a postal service. At the Second Continental Congress in May 1775, they determined that "The conveyance of letters and intelligence was essential to the cause of liberty."

A committee led by Benjamin Franklin was appointed to devise a new postal system, and on July 25, 1775, plans were in place and Franklin was appointed the first Postmaster General. During the American Revolution, the primary duty of the postal service was to carry communications between the U.S. Congress and the Continental Army.

Once the war was over, the fledgling U.S. postal service was expanded to fulfill its civilian responsibilities, connecting former colonial towns and new villages being started on the frontier. Dumfries, then a seaport, was the first town in Prince William to get a post office, which opened in 1782.

Originally known as Red House, Hay Market (two words) was chartered in 1799, and got its first post office in November 1800 – making it the *second* oldest post office in Prince William County.

According to Sarah M. Turner in *Haymarket, a Town in Transition* (1998), it is likely that the Hay Market Post Office was originally located in the Red House Tavern building in the center of town. William Morgan was the first postmaster, serving until 1806.

Other early post offices established nearby included Buckland, which opened later in 1800; New Market in 1806; and Thoroughfare and Groveton, both of which opened in 1832.

Along with distributing local mail, postal delivery routes between villages in the region were established. "Haymarket first appears in postal route books as part of Route 1911, which J. M Smith agreed to carry for $280 per annum, beginning Oct. 2, 1838," according to Postal Service Historian Megaera Harris, quoted in *Haymarket, a Town in Transition*.

"Mr. Smith promised to carry the mail from Salem (today's Marshall) in Fauquier County five miles to The Plains, five more miles to Thoroughfare in Prince William County, four-and-one quarter miles to Hay Market, and three miles to Buckland," or

about 17 miles, according to Ms. Harris.

The route was run twice a week, and connected with other routes, including the main north-south mail route, which was operated by entrepreneur William "Extra Billy" Smith of Warrenton. Mail from Haymarket being headed for Washington, D.C. was picked up in Buckland by one of Smith's mail coaches.

The Hay Market mail route was soon transferred to Thomas Foster, who carried the mail three times a week for a mere $200 per year. "Our records do not show how either man delivered the mail; it could have been by horse or by a four-horse post coach in the summer and by horseback the rest of the year," wrote Ms. Harris.

A significant change occurred in December 1846. After the postmaster at Buckland resigned and there was no one to take his place, the route ended at New Stable, a mile-and-a-half north on the Warrenton-to-Alexandria Turnpike.

By 1847, postal records show that the spelling of the town became Haymarket (one word), and the postal route, then designated Route 2509, was carried by John Brown, of Washington, D.C. Route 2509 intersected with postal routes at Salem and Buckland.

Railroad routes

Mr. Brown's contract was nullified in September 1852, after the Postal Service signed a contract with E. C. Marshall, president of the Manassas Gap Railroad. The MGRR ran between Alexandria and the Shenandoah Valley, passing through the towns and villages formerly served by deliverymen on horseback. *(See Haymarket Lifestyle, June 2014)*

The new rail route was designated No. 2518, and beginning in October 1852, the MGRR was paid $1,414 to carry the mail six days a week from Manassas Junction (formerly called Tudor Hall) to Piedmont Station (today's Delaplane). As part of the agreement with property owner Thomas Brawner Gaines, who contributed the right-of-way through the area, New Stable was renamed Gainesville in 1856.

(1) Haymarket Post Office on Washington Street, taken in about 1900. This is the building that burned in 1945. (2) The Catharpin Post Office opened in 1875, and was located in the J.W. Alvey Store for many years. Four generations of the Sanders/Alvey family served as postmasters at Catharpin; the last, J. W. Alvey Jr. retired in 1990 after a 35-year career. Courtesy of the Ruth E. Lloyd Information Center (RELIC). (3) A pharmacy originally occupied the building on Washington Street that was used for the Haymarket Post Office from 1945 to 1981. Courtesy RELIC.

The train left Manassas Junction at 10:45 a.m., stopping at the towns along the way before reaching Piedmont Station by 1:15 p.m. Mail from the station and points west would then be loaded on the train, and brought back to Manassas Junction in time to meet the 4 p.m. train going to Alexandria.

This system worked well, and as the MGRR line was expanded, included Markham, Front Royal and Strasburg. Connecting with the Orange & Alexandria Railroad at Manassas Junction, an efficient network was created. However, with the outbreak of the Civil War, all of this would change.

Aware of the importance of a postal service, the Confederate States of America Post Office Department was established – at least on paper – by the beginning of hostilities in 1861.

John Henninger Reagan, a native of Tennessee and a capable administrator, headed the Confederate postal service. However, mail service in the Confederacy "…was continuously interrupted," according to the online *History of the U.S. Postal Service*. "Blockades and the invading Union army, as well as a scarcity of postage stamps, severely hampered postal operations."

If that were the case in other parts of the South, it was particularly true in Northern Virginia, where the battles, skirmishes and raids were virtually continuous. The suffering of Haymarket was among the worst, when nearly all of the town – including most of the residences and all of the commercial buildings, including the post office – were burned in November 1862.

The strategic Manassas Gap Railroad was the "spine" mail route for many of the towns and villages in the area during the 1850s. It was virtually destroyed by early 1864, and not rebuilt until after the war.

According to *The History of the U.S. Postal Service*, once hostilities ceased, federal mail service in the South was gradually resumed. "By Nov. 15, 1865, 241 mail routes had been restored, and by Nov. 1, 1866, 3,234 post offices out of 8,902 in the South were returned to federal control."

Confederate Postmaster General Reagan was arrested and imprisoned after the war, but was eventually pardoned, and returned to Texas. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1875, and served as chairman of the Committee on Post Offices and Post Routes.

Post offices opened – and closed

The postal service would play an important part in the recovery of local economies. Between the end of the Civil War and the late 1890s, the number of post offices in Prince William County grew from the pre-war number of 15 to 35. Six new post offices were opened in Western Prince William: Sudley Springs (1871), Waterfall (1874), Hickory Grove and Catharpin (1875), Broad Run (1886), and Woolsey (1897).

This was largely a result of President Grover Cleveland's recommendation that rural post offices be no more than four miles apart, so that no patron would have to walk more than two miles to pick up their mail.

Most of the smaller post offices were located in country stores, and because the position as local postmaster was a political appointment, there was some shifting around when the party of the administration in Washington, D.C. changed after Election Day.

As the road systems improved and the automobile began to replace the horse-and-buggy, the emphasis on postal delivery shifted from a large number of small post offices to fewer large ones, with mail delivered to patrons' homes under the Rural Free Delivery (RFD) program.

"By the early years of the 20th century, President Teddy Roosevelt thought that RFD was the way to go, and by horseback, wagon and then auto, mail came to your house," wrote historian Eugene M. Scheel in *Crossroads and Corners* (1996). "Small post offices closed, and fewer folks came to the stores."

The Great Depression that started in late 1929 and the Drought of 1930 had a devastating impact on local farmers and the stores that supplied them, resulting in more closed businesses – and post offices. According to Mr. Scheel, gas rationing during World War II kept many people close to home, which helped some of the small store/post offices, but hurt others like Thoroughfare, which closed in 1944.

During the consolidation of postal service that took place under the Eisenhower administration (1952-60), hundreds of small post offices across America were closed. Both Waterfall and Broad Run were targeted for closure, but since Broad Run was the post office used by U.S. Rep. Howard W. Smith (1883-1976) – a long-time member of Congress and chairman of the House Committee on Rules – it was spared.

Haymarket Post Office

Robert C. Smith served as Haymarket postmaster from 1933 until 1959. For many years, the post office was located in a building on Washington Street, which

(above) The Bristow Post Office operated out of this small building on Rt. 28 for many years. (below) Completed in 1959, the new Gainesville Post Office served until 1986. Courtesy of Mrs. Evelyn Lunsford.

burned – along with Haymarket's telephone exchange building – on Sept. 1, 1945 (See *Haymarket Lifestyle,* May 2014).

After occupying temporary quarters in the upstairs of the old bank building, the post office was moved briefly to Gossom's (Rector's) Store. It was then relocated in the building owned by Mr. Smith on Washington Street across from the Town Hall.

Built c. 1900, this 2-story building had once housed Hunt's Pharmacy on the first floor, and a community theater on the second floor. It was sold to Mason Pickett in 1968.

After briefly serving as the officer-in-charge of the Haymarket Post Office, Ellen Wilson was appointed postmaster in January 1976. She had previously worked in a postal facility in Alexandria.

"When I first came to work in Haymarket, it was just me and one clerk,"

she recalled. "We had only one delivery route, and it done by Bob Kilby. There were 800 deliveries on that route, and he carried it six days a week."

One of Ms. Wilson's first moves was to split the route, which was divided between Mr. Kilby and his son, Robert Jr. Later, Ms. Wilson hired two part-time clerks to help handle the growing volume of mail.

In 1981, the Haymarket Post Office was moved to a building on Jefferson Street Road northeast of town, known by many as "the Barn," due to its gambrel roofline. Active in her community, Ms. Wilson was a member of the Gainesville Women's Club, past president of the Gainesville Ruritan club. In 1978, she volunteered to serve on Haymarket's first planning commission, and later that year, helped start organize the first Haymarket Day celebration.

During the 1990s, large-scale development was taking place around Haymarket, including Piedmont and Dominion Valley. By the time Ms. Wilson retired on Jan. 1, 2001, the number of daily deliveries handled by the Haymarket Post Office had grown to 4,000. "I had the best job anyone could ever ask for," said Ms Wilson recently. "I loved the job, and loved the people."

The Haymarket Post Office outgrew the building on Jefferson Street, and on Sept. 1, 2006 operations were moved to a new post office building on Gap Way off Rt. 55 east of town, where it is today.

Gainesville Post Office

In 1936, the Gainesville Post Office was located in a room in a building at the southeast corner of U.S. 29 and Galleher Road known as "the Creamery." It was owned by Gainesville Postmaster John Sweeney Jr., who also had his store there. During World War II, the post office was moved from the Creamery to another building on Lee Highway a few doors to the west.

Mrs. Marjorie Smith Partlow came to work at the Gainesville P.O. in 1947 as a temporary rural carrier. In 1948, Mr. Sweeney transferred to a position as a rural carrier, and Mrs. Partlow was appointed postmaster. For several years, Mrs. Partlow and her clerk, Mrs. Bernice Lightner, were the only employees working there.

In 1959, a modern, new post office was purpose-built by Henry Florance on U.S. 29, next to the old Phil's Market. Two years later, Evelyn Smith Lunsford joined the staff as a "part-time flex" employee. Mrs. Lunsford was promoted to substitute window clerk in August 1969, and became a full-time employee in February 1974.

She recalls that on the night of Jan. 16, 1967, burglars pried open the front door of the Gainesville P.O., and cracked open the safe. Prince William County Sheriff Ralph G. Shumate and Deputy Al Rollins investigated the crime before the case was turned over to federal authorities. The thieves were never apprehended.

Mrs. Partlow retired in March 1973, and was replaced by Jack Rosenberger, a 20-year veteran of the postal service, who previously worked in Arlington and Merrifield.

Mrs. Lunsford, now 91, recalls that both Mrs. Partlow and Mr. Rosenberger were excellent bosses, and in 1982 she earned a Special Achievement Award from the USPS. Mrs. Lunsford retired in September 1984, before the post office's next move.

Starting in 1983, the USPS and Prince William County were deliberating over the location on U.S. 29 that the USPS had selected for the new Gainesville Post Office. It was a lengthy, ongoing controversy, and even after the construction contract was signed, the project was stalled by requirements for off-site improvements.

The details were finally worked out, and Postmaster Rosenberger informed customers that effective Oct. 27, 1985, the post office would be operating out of two trailers at 14689 Lee Highway, while construction of the permanent facility was underway. The new building was completed in May 1986.

Today's Postal Service

With the passage of the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, the old Post Office Department became the U.S. Postal Service the following year. The purpose of the reorganization was to move the postal service from being a tax-funded government department to a self-supporting, quasi-independent agency.

Another big change was the de-politicizing of the postal service, where important positions, like postmaster, were no longer handed out as patronage. Ms. Wilson notes that from then on, it was possible for dedicated postal workers – including women – to move up based on merit, not political connections.

A Board of Governors manages the U.S. Postal Service, and the Postal Regulatory Commission sets rates. Labor contracts are worked-out by postal management and employee unions, or decided by a third party.

However, important decisions regarding the USPS business model, especially those involving delivery service, must be approved by the U.S. Congress.

There have been many challenges

John R. Sweeney served as Gainesville postmaster from 1936-1948.

Post offices that are open eight hours a day – Gainesville, Bristow, Catharpin and Haymarket – have an on-site postmaster. Those open six hours a day or less, like Broad Run, are remotely managed by a larger facility, in this case, by Gainesville.

Another big change in our area was the consolidation of the rural delivery routes at a single site. For years, carriers picked up their mail at each post office, and set out on their routes. Starting in 2012, rural deliver routes in Western Prince William – 52 in all – have been handled out of a facility located on Limestone Drive in Gainesville. Centralizing the delivery routes has been a gradual process, with the last being Catharpin's routes in May 2014.

Another issue has been the proposed elimination of Saturday mail delivery. Over the years, different options have been considered, including going to Monday-Friday mail delivery, and Monday-Saturday package delivery. And then, the on-line retailer Amazon took off, promising delivery of its orders seven days a week.

In order to compete with UPS and FedEx, the USPS had to initiate seven-day-a-week package delivery, including Sundays and most holidays. This expanded package delivery service started in our area in October 2014.

Concurrently, there has been a drop in the amount of first-class mail, due largely to the growing use of e-mail and on-line bill payment. "Package delivery is where the business is headed right now," said Mr. Cox. "We're doing everything we can to capture as much of that new growth as we can."

in the 40-plus years since the USPS was established, mostly due to new technologies, demographics and competition. The USPS continues to evolve. It isn't easy, and decisions made far away can have local implications.

For many years, the U. S. General Accounting Office (GAO) advised the USPS that it could save millions of dollars annually by shutting down thousands of small post offices, much like what was done in the 1950s.

However, Congress was against another round of closings, and the USPS has had to come up with alternatives in order to cut costs. This has led to recent changes in how mail is delivered in Western Prince William County.

The region is served by five post offices: Gainesville, Haymarket, Catharpin, Bristow and Broad Run. Each year, these post offices are evaluated, based on revenue, traffic, size of the post office box section, and other criteria. Based on the results, it is determined whether the post office should be open eight, six, four or two hours a day.

"The original plan was to shut down the small post offices," said Gainesville Postmaster Joseph R. Cox. "The sole purpose of the reduction in hours is to ensure that every community can maintain its post office, which is often considered its identity."

With the establishment of the USPS in 1971, the patches on postal workers' uniforms changed from the round "Post Office Dept." to the rectangular "U.S. Mail." Courtesy of Mrs. Evelyn Lunsford.

A first day cover noting the inauguration of the USPS was processed in the Gainesville Post Office on July 1, 1971. Note the 8-cent first class stamp. Courtesy of Mrs. Evelyn Lunsford.

In 1982, Gainesville Postmaster Jack Rosenberger presented Postal Clerk Evelyn Lunsford with a USPS Special Achievement Award. Courtesy of Mrs. Evelyn Lunsford.

Area Post Offices

Gainesville 20155: *14689 Lee Highway. (703) 754-3443. Postmaster: Joseph R. Cox*
Haymarket 20169: *14658 Gap Way (703) 754-0937. Postmaster: Jim Ford*
Catharpin 20143: *4625 Sudley Road. (703) 754-8944. Postmaster: Tara Bariteau*
Bristow 20136: *11151 Valley View Dr. (703) 368-8209. Postmaster: Tommy Tran*
Broad Run 20137: *5073 John Marshall Highway. (703) 754-4560. - Managed by the Gainesville P.O.*

Author John Toler is a writer and historian and has served Fauquier County for over 50 years, including 4 decades with the Fauquier-Times Democrat. He has written and lectured about many legendary characters in Fauquier County's history. Toler is the co-author of 250 Years in Fauquier County: A Virginia Story, and author of Warrenton, Virginia: A History of 200 Years.