

A Postal History Of The Town Of Guilderland

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A U.S. postal system in the Town of Guilderland was a reality as early as April 25, 1810, when the fledgling Congress of the United States authorized a post road from Albany to Aurora, N.Y. over the Great Western Turnpike which threads through the town. However, no actual post office existed until Nov. 11, 1815, when Guilderland (Hamilton village) became the first post office in the Town of Guilderland. Another 14 years would pass before the population increase could support still another post office at West Guilderland (now Altamont), followed approximately a year later by a post office at Guilderland Center.

Ultimately there would be seven post offices operating in the town. This occurred during the period from 1872 to 1905. Each of these seven post offices will be described in subsequent articles. Ironically, today there remains but three independent offices — the original three mentioned above. Unfortunately, McKownville, Dunnsville, Fuller's, and Meadowdale were discontinued, in that order, as additional rural free delivery (R.F.D.) routes were established.

Let us review briefly a picture of New York State following the Revolution. According to A.F. Harlow, in his book, "Old Post Bags," he states: "In 1783, western New York State was just about as wild as the Ohio country and beyond. There were no settlements of any consequence west of Albany. In 1800, there were only four cabins on the site of Buffalo. In 1810, the site of Rochester was a forest, and a tiny salt-boiling hamlet called "Salina" was the embryo of the future city of Syracuse."

The population of Albany County was also slow to develop, due in part to the patroon system. What is Albany County today was owned by the patroon family of Rensselaerwyck, with the exception of the City of Albany. This included, of course, all of the region that would become the Town of Guilderland in 1803. The patroon's policy was to lease or rent land, not to sell it! Those potential farm and hamlet families had looked elsewhere, I'm sure, before being enticed to take everlasting leasing arrangements with the patroons. Bear in mind, however, there were scattered farms in the area that were established as far back as 1740, who were paying yearly rents to the lord of the Manor of Rensselaerwyck.

There was no U.S. post office in the town until 1815. Prior to that time, settlers looked to Albany for posting or receiving mail. Incoming letters for the surrounding townships lay in the

Albany post office until called for. All letters were C.O.D., until postage stamps were introduced in 1847. So your neighbor would be somewhat reluctant to bring home your mail from Albany, since it would cost 25 cents, for example, to retrieve from the postmaster a two-sheet folded letter mailed to you from New York. You could elect not to accept this rather expensive message and some did. However, you weren't allowed to peek at the handwriting to make this decision.

Soon after the adoption of the Constitution on Sept. 23, 1788, the new government listed 75 legally established U.S. post offices in all the 13 states. New York City was the only one listed in New York State, although we are aware that there was a colonial period postoffice at Albany. However, it was classified as a state postoffice under the jurisdiction of the postmaster at New York after the Revolution. Not until July 31, 1792 was the Albany post office recognized as an official U.S. post office; another was established at Schenectady on Nov. 19, 1793 (Note: Schenectady County was a part of Albany County until 1809).

Good old Yankee ingenuity again prevailed. The Albany post office was too remote to provide service at the local level, thus private or informal postal services sprang up, usually between local taverns and stage

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drivers or horseback riders. As was the pattern elsewhere in the country, McKown's Tavern at McKownville, Sloan's Hotel at Guilderland, Mynderse Tavern at Guilderland Center, and Severn's Tavern at Altamont (West Guilderland) served as "posting places" for the delivery and pick-up of newspapers and messages for those settlers willing to strike a bargain with the innkeepers. By and large, the early tavern or inn was the center of life for many a hamlet, where local court convened, meetings were held, advertisements posted, and the forementioned private mail service provided.

We have a fine example (see photo accompanying this article) of a letter (folded sheet sealed with wax) which was delivered by private carrier dated Jan. 17, 1810. This letter was conveyed by stagecoach over the Great Western Turnpike from Broome County, addressed to Philip Streit, Near the Glass Factory (Guilderland). No U.S. post road or post office had yet been established in the Town of Guilderland.

Starting A Post Office

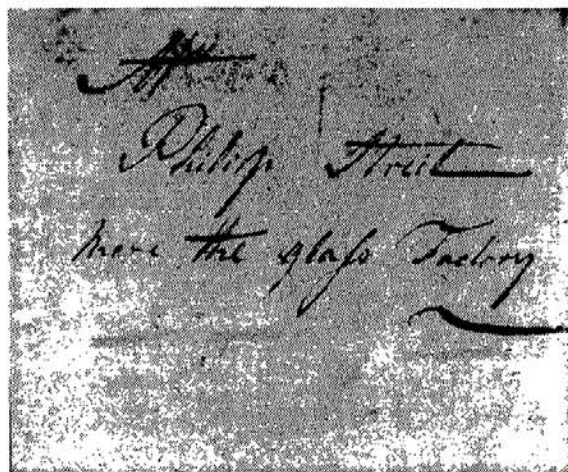
According to M. Custing, in his book entitled "The Story Of Our Post Offices," he writes: "The application for the establishment of a new U.S. post office was made, in a great majority of cases by ordinary petition. The Post Office Department had a blank petition which was to be signed by those who were to be the patrons of the office in the event of approval. No definite number of names were required. Some ask for the office in very few words; others went into detail." The petition form asked, among other things, who was being proposed as postmaster and the exact location. The recommended site had to be on or near a post road which had been established by Congress. (Getting a new post road was a major undertaking.) The innkeeper or country store keeper had the edge in getting the postmaster's job in those early days, since his establishment was probably in the center of a hamlet and he could keep accounts. Believe it or not, the fledgling nation had lots of reports for the postmaster to complete and submit, from the very beginning of the postal system. Surprising as it may seem today many early doctors of medicine were postmasters, and in the larger communities, newspaper publishers sought the office.

The petition could suggest a name for their post office, which could not conflict with an already-established post office in the state. When the petitioners were at loggerheads in suggesting a post office name, they might follow the example of a small town in Pennsylvania: The post office name of Aitch, Pa. was developed from the first letters of the last names of petitioners Anderson, Isenberg, Taylor, Crum, and Henderson in that order.

The rural postmaster was compensated by a percentage of the mail receipts only. He provided his own facilities, including the mail boxes, canceling device (many used pen and ink to cancel), and light and heat. As we have mentioned, there were no postage stamps until 1847, and there were no envelopes until around 1848. The sheets of correspondence were folded to about letter size and the last sheet became the wrapper, which was sealed with wax. All letters were C.O.D. and charged by the number of sheets of paper and the distance sent. The postmaster received one-fifth of the postage collected and he also received one-half cent on newspapers delivered by mail. Each incoming letter was itemized in his ledger form and he was allowed to keep separate charge accounts in his postal business with good paying customers.

Obviously, after adhesive stamps were available, most mail came prepaid and the postmaster was paid a fixed salary according to the business he did. Until after the Civil War period, the postmaster had franking privileges, like the President and congressmen. This allowed him to send and be the recipient of letters without postal fee.

In subsequent articles I will deal with the seven post offices, individually, in the Town of Guilderland, in the order of their establishment, starting with Guilderland village.



LETTER (folded sheet, sealed with wax) addressed to "Philip Streit, Near the Glass Factory (Guilderland)." Dated Jan. 17, 1810, it was delivered by stagecoach over the Great Western Turnpike from Broome County, N.Y. (No U.S. post office had yet been established in the Town of Guilderland.)