

TIMOTHY PICKERING

Postmaster General

August 12, 1791, to February 1795



Timothy Pickering (1745-1829)
Adjutant General, Quartermaster
General, Postmaster General,
Secretary of War, Secretary of
State, Senator, Congressman

Timothy Pickering was born into an established New England family in Salem, Massachusetts, on July 17, 1745.¹ He went to Harvard University in 1759 at the age of 14 and graduated four years later. He soon found a job as a clerk in the office of John Higginson, the Essex County Register of Deeds. By age 18, his long career as a civil servant had begun.

Citizen of Salem

Pickering studied law and was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1768, though he didn't pursue law as a career.² In the early 1770s, while still working for Higginson, his civic duties in Salem multiplied – he served as selectman, town clerk, overseer of a new hospital, and as a member and chairman of Salem's Committee of Correspondence. In October 1774, following Higginson's death, Pickering was elected Essex County Register of Deeds. In late 1775 he became a justice of the peace, a justice of the inferior court of common pleas for Essex County, and sole judge of the maritime court for the counties of Suffolk, Essex, and Middlesex. In June 1776, the town of Salem elected him as its representative to the Massachusetts General Court.

Pickering had a keen interest in military strategy. In 1766 he was appointed a lieutenant in the Salem militia. In 1769 he was promoted to captain and published newspaper articles urging militias to take their training more seriously. Early in 1775, he became a colonel of the Essex County militia, and later that year published *An Easy Plan of Discipline for the Militia*, a strategy manual that other colonial militia and Continental Army officers used to prepare new recruits to fight in the Revolutionary War.³

Revolutionary

Though as a young man Pickering was loyal to British rule, by 1770 he advocated the rights of the American colonies. Still, he was by nature conservative and hoped for reconciliation with Britain. When news of the battle of Lexington reached Salem on April 19, 1775, Pickering argued for restraint but was outvoted, so as colonel of the Essex County militia he led 200 to 300 men in an unsuccessful effort to block the British retreat.⁴ On Christmas Eve 1776, Pickering and 700 men from the Essex County militia volunteered to serve three months with the Continental Army.

In the spring of 1777, General George Washington appointed Pickering to be adjutant general of the Continental Army. As such, Pickering personally assisted General Washington in the field of battle and in camp, ferrying messages, writing to Congress, and issuing Washington's orders and seeing that they were carried out. Washington described Pickering as:

a great Military genius, cultivated by an industrious attention to the Study of War, and as a Gentleman of liberal education, distinguished zeal and great method and activity in Business.⁵

In January 1778, Pickering left the army to serve on the Continental Congress's Board of War Committee.

Pickering had seen first-hand how the troops at Valley Forge suffered from the lack of supplies and vigorously argued for reform of the department of the Quartermaster General, which supplied the army. Congress responded in August 1780 by making Pickering Quartermaster General. Unfortunately, after

five long years of war, the new American government was short of both cash and credit. Rations, forage for horses, transportation, and clothing were in short supply, and some soldiers threatened mutiny.⁶ In 1781, General Washington complained that powder and lead had "become very scarce Articles" and that unless an "effectual Plan" for feeding the army was enacted, it would disband.⁷ Regarding summer clothing, he saw

no other possible Alternative, but for the Troops to be provided with it, by their own States, or become literally naked.⁸

Pickering had no money to purchase adequate supplies. Increasingly, the army relied on impressments – taking supplies by force from private citizens – to survive. George Washington and his generals entreated state governments to fulfill their obligations to supply the army, as Congress had directed. Washington also secretly took money meant to pay troops and gave it to Pickering to pay to transport supplies. In the summer of 1781, Robert Morris, a powerful merchant and the newly-appointed superintendent of finance, used his personal credit to arrange for the purchase and delivery of 3,000 barrels of flour to the Continental Army, enabling it to survive and ultimately defeat the British at the Battle of Yorktown later that year.⁹ The army demobilized in 1783 after a peace treaty was signed with the British.

Negotiator

Pickering tried unsuccessfully to establish himself as a merchant in Philadelphia. He also speculated in real estate, purchasing vast tracts of land in then-northwestern Pennsylvania – all while living off his army salary. After his position as Quartermaster General was abolished in 1785, he surveyed this land, which he hoped to develop and sell at a profit. He returned there in 1787.

At his request, the Pennsylvania State Assembly had granted Pickering several civil offices in newly-formed Luzerne County, where his land was located, and asked him to mediate disputed land claims in the area – dangerous work. Pennsylvania and Connecticut settlers were at odds, and both groups distrusted the government. Pickering persevered. He faced angry mobs and slept with a gun to protect himself. In the summer of 1788 a band of angry settlers, dressed as Indians, abducted Pickering and fled with him through the woods for 19 days, dodging a pursuing militia. They hoped to exchange him for one of their own, jailed for political reasons in Philadelphia. When it became clear that Pickering was useless as a bargaining chip, he was released. Ultimately, Pickering could not bring peace to the area because of lack of political support in Philadelphia.



1937 reprint of a map in the January 1788 issue of Philadelphia's *Columbian Magazine*. Newly-formed Luzerne County is shown at top center. Map in the collection of the Library of Congress.

In 1787 and 1790, Pickering participated in conventions that helped create the new framework of government in the United States. He represented Luzerne County at the Pennsylvania convention ratifying the Constitution of the United States and was part of the convention that wrote the new state constitution for Pennsylvania. On September 3, 1790, one day after Pickering finished work on the state constitution, President George Washington appointed him to go to Tioga Point (present-day Athens, Pennsylvania) to meet with the Seneca Indians, members of the powerful Six Nations confederation. The Senecas were upset by the murder of two of their tribe and the loss of their lands. Washington was eager to befriend the Six Nations, as other western tribes were openly hostile and British troops along the frontier were encouraging factions within the Six Nations to attack American settlements. Pickering – impoverished and in debt – welcomed the chance to negotiate and the government salary it would bring. He successfully concluded a peace treaty with the Senecas in November 1790. The next year Washington asked Pickering to meet with the Senecas once again. In July 1791, after prolonged discussions, Pickering successfully negotiated a peace treaty between the new American government

and the Six Nations. Washington rewarded Pickering with a long-hoped for federal appointment: the President appointed Pickering to be Postmaster General on August 12, 1791.

Postmaster General

As Postmaster General, Pickering appointed postmasters, settled accounts, and oversaw compliance with postal laws. He extended and improved mail service by arranging transportation contracts and negotiated an agreement with Canada. With the help of an assistant and a clerk, Pickering ran the General Post Office from two rooms of his rented house on Second Street in Philadelphia.

During Pickering's tenure as Postmaster General, the number of Post Offices more than quadrupled, from 89 in 1791 to 450 in 1794. Pickering was "overwhelmed" by applications for postmaster positions -- positions he sought to fill fairly.¹⁰ He wrote to his niece, who had pleaded for a friend's appointment, "I am anxious to preserve a character for rectitude and impartiality in the administration of a public office," and refused to replace the incumbent postmaster without due cause.¹¹ Responding to a citizen of Savannah who wanted that city's postmaster removed for political reasons, Pickering defended the postmaster's right of free speech, stating:

In this land of liberty every citizen has a right to express his sentiments political as well as religious; and as no mode of professing the latter disqualifies a man for publick office, neither should it seem ought any declaration of the former to exclude him; provided these are not incompatible with the constitution he has sworn to support . . .¹²

On March 17, 1792, Timothy Pickering wrote to Hugh Finlay, postmaster general of Canada, proposing terms for the first U.S.-Canada postal convention, signed later that year. The convention permitted Canadian mail to and from Great Britain to travel through New York City to Burlington, Vermont, via American couriers, and then to travel to Montreal via a Canadian courier.¹³ Canada benefited from the use of the "natural highway" between New York and Montreal, which had been severed by the Revolutionary War, and the United States benefited from postage paid by Canada for its mail to travel in the United States.¹⁴

At the beginning of Pickering's tenure, mail service was concentrated along the eastern coast of the United States, from Wiscasset, Maine, to Savannah, Georgia, except for a mail route to Pittsburgh.¹⁵ Within a year, Pickering expanded service westward. He established Post Offices along routes to Burlington, Vermont; Albany, New York; Hagerstown, Maryland; Winchester, Staunton, and Wythe Court House, Virginia; Danville, Kentucky; Salem, North Carolina; Columbia, South Carolina; and Augusta, Georgia. By the end of 1794, service stretched west to Louisville, Kentucky; north to Passamaquoddy, Maine; and south to Saint Marys, Georgia. That same year, Pickering worked closely with military commanders to extend mail service along the Ohio River as far as Cincinnati, Ohio, using three boats crewed by five men each. This route was hazardous in places due to Indian attacks. Crews were hard to come by and sometimes abandoned their boats mid-journey, but mail service -- essential to binding the nation together -- continued.¹⁶ In August 1794, General Rufus Putnam wrote to Pickering:

If it is considered in a Political light only . . . communications with these remote parts of the American Empire may be of infinite consequence to the government. Nothing can be more fatal to a republican government than ignorance among its citizens . . .¹⁷

Despite the cost, dangers, and delays inherent in the Ohio River mail route, the General Post Office continued it until 1798, then opted for an overland route.

Pickering juggled his job as Postmaster General with continuing duties in Indian affairs. In March and April 1792, Pickering helped General Knox, Secretary of War, negotiate with a delegation of Indians visiting Philadelphia. The press of business delayed Pickering's bringing his family to join him in Philadelphia. On March 22, 1792, Pickering wrote to his wife, Becky:

To-day I was requested by General Knox to join him in . . . negotiations with the Indians. . . . I yielded to the request because . . . I had made certain promises (in behalf of the United States) to the Indians, and I was anxious to see them fulfilled.¹⁸

In May 1793, Pickering traveled to Canandaigua, New York, as one of three commissioners appointed by President Washington to meet with the western Indians.¹⁹ The next year, Pickering spent two months negotiating with the Six Nations at Canandaigua. He signed a treaty with them on behalf of the United States on November 11, 1794.

Secretary of War, Secretary of State

On January 2, 1795, Washington rewarded Pickering's success among the Indians by appointing him Secretary of War. Pickering continued to handle postal affairs for several months, until the new Postmaster General took over.²⁰ As Secretary of War, Pickering oversaw General Anthony Wayne's successful negotiation of the Treaty of Greenville, signed with formerly hostile western tribes on August 3, 1795, under which most of the territory of Ohio was ceded to the United States. He also oversaw construction of the frigates *United States*, *Constitution*, and *Constellation*.²¹

At President Washington's request, Pickering acted as Secretary of State after that office was vacated on August 19, 1795, and accepted an appointment to the position on November 13, 1795.²² As the nation's chief diplomat, Pickering oversaw the final negotiations and ratification of Jay's Treaty, which arranged for English troops to withdraw from forts bordering the Northwest Territory, and Pinckney's Treaty, which set the southern boundary with Spain at 31° N (the northern border of western Florida) and provided that the Spanish would abandon their military posts above that line. Pickering continued as Secretary of State following John Adams' election to the presidency in 1796. Increasingly, though, Pickering disagreed with Adams' policies and even obstructed them. Most notably, deteriorating relations with France led Pickering to conclude that war with France was inevitable, while Adams believed peace was both in the national and his own political interest. Adams dismissed Pickering from office on May 12, 1800.

Senator, Congressman, Farmer

In late 1801, at the age of 56, Timothy Pickering returned to his home state of Massachusetts. He was elected in 1803 to fill the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Dwight Foster and was reelected in 1805. In 1811, Pickering became the first senator to be censured after reading a confidential document openly during a Senate debate, and he lost his bid for re-election to the Senate. Following a year spent at his farm in Wenham, Massachusetts, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He returned to Congress for two terms. Finally, at the close of the 14th Congress in March 1817, Pickering, 71, ended his long service to the nation.

Pickering continued his public service at the state level. Shortly after his return to Massachusetts, he was elected and served for one year as a member of the state's Executive Council.

From 1817 to 1828, Pickering was president of the Essex Agricultural Society, his last public office. A native of Topsfield, Massachusetts, later recalled:

[In 1820] the society held, in my native town, its first cattle-show, and perfectly do I still recall the tall and venerable form of its first President as I saw him holding his own plough in the competitive trial . . . Having, not long before, retired from the public service, he was living, a hard-working farmer, on his own ground, near Wenham Pond.²³

In his last address to the Society, delivered in September 1828, Pickering called farming an "honourable pursuit," improved by "the mutual communications of valuable discoveries and useful practices." He urged his fellow farmers to "do good, and to communicate."²⁴ Timothy Pickering died a few months later, on January 29, 1829, at the age of 83.

A political foe who served with him in Congress, Charles Jared Ingersoll, wrote of Pickering:

His reputation was that of a consistent, upright man, who lived and died, firm in the convictions he cherished, hard, but honest.²⁵

To learn more about Timothy Pickering:

Allis, Frederick S. Editor. *The Timothy Pickering Papers*. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1966. (69 microfilm reels)

Clarfield, Gerard H. *Timothy Pickering and the American Republic*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980.

----- . *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy, 1795-1800*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1969.

Pickering, Octavius and Charles W. Upham. *The Life of Timothy Pickering*. Vols. 1-4. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1867-73.

Prentiss, Hervey Putnam. *Timothy Pickering as the Leader of New England Federalism, 1800-1815*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1972.

¹ Pickering's date of birth is given according to the current, Gregorian calendar. He was born on July 6, 1745, under the old, Julian calendar.

² Octavius Pickering, *The Life of Timothy Pickering*, I (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1867), 31. **Note:** A December 31, 1768, memorandum in Frederick S. Allis, editor, *The Pickering Papers* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1966), reel 33, seems to indicate Pickering applied to the bar on that date.

³ Gerard H. Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and the American Republic* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 28. Pickering's manual is used today by Revolutionary War re-enactors. [www.nwta.com/couriers/5-97/bayonet.html, June 20, 2003]

⁴ Gerard H. Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy, 1795-1800* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 8; *The Pickering Papers*, reel 53, 6/26/1807 memorial of Timothy Pickering. General Heath claimed that Pickering's troops numbered 700 and that their late arrival prevented a victory over the British (Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and the American Republic*, 32, citing Heath's memoirs).

⁵ May 24, 1777, letter to the President of Congress, in John C. Fitzpatrick, editor, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1933), Vol. 8, 114-115.

⁶ "Instead of having Magazines filled with provisions, we have a scanty pittance scattered here and there . . . Instead of having our Arsenals well supplied . . . they are poorly provided, and the Workmen all leaving them.": Washington journal entry dated 5/1/1781, cited in *Ibid.*, Vol. 22, 23. "Troops on the frontier are on the point of Mutinying . . . for want of Provisions of every kind": Washington to Pickering, 5/7/1781 (in *Ibid.*, 53).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 64 (Washington to General Heath, 5/9/1781).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 182 (Washington to General Heath, 6/8/1781).

⁹ See Erna Risch, *Supplying Washington's Army*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1981), for an account of the challenges encountered in provisioning the army. [www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/RevWar/risch/risch-fm.htm, 8/6/2003]

¹⁰ Charles W. Upham, *The Life of Timothy Pickering*, III (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1873), 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9, citing letter of October 30, 1791.

¹² NARA Microfilm Publication 601, *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836*, Roll 3, Pickering to John Brickell, November 19, 1793.

¹³ William Smith, *History of the Post Office in British North America, 1639-1870* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 90. Under the 1792 convention, the United States and Canada also set up procedures to exchange mail between private citizens in each country.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81. In a letter of February 7, 1794, Pickering stated that he had hoped money received from Canada would be enough to pay for mail transportation in Vermont. Letters of August 6 and November 15 indicate that Canada paid as much as \$1,000 for postage in 1794 (NARA Microfilm Publication 601, *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836*, Rolls 3 and 4).

¹⁵ Prior to statehood in 1820, Maine was part of Massachusetts.

¹⁶ Jerry B. Devol and Richard B. Graham, *Establishment of the First U.S. Government Post Offices in the Northwest Territory* (State College, PA: The American Philatelic Society Inc., 1975), 22-23: Putnam to Pickering, 8/30/1794, boat departure delayed due to Indian threat; 30: Craig to Pickering, 6/19/1795, "Mail Boat No. 3 . . . [was] fired upon from the Kentucky shore by between twenty and thirty Indians . . . a Mr. Stout who commanded the boat was killed and two other mortally wounded; the remaining two men returned with the Mail Boat to Graham's Station. . . "

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23, citing Putnam to Pickering, 8/30/1794.

¹⁸ Upham, *The Life of Timothy Pickering*, III, 34. On April 12, Pickering wrote: "I have got through one pressing business in the Post-office; but am now in the midst of negotiations with the Indians; and, as soon as I have done with them; I must take up one other matter in the Post-office." *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The commissioners returned home in August empty-handed, as they could not accede to the western Indians' demand that the Ohio River serve as a boundary for American settlement. Upham, *The Life of Timothy Pickering*, III, 48-52.

²⁰ Pickering's last letter in *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836* (Roll 4), is dated March 26, 1795. (The next Postmaster General's first letter is dated July 1, 1795.) Devol and Graham, 33-34, cite a letter written by Pickering on March 17, 1797, to the Ohio River mail contractor, at the request of then-Postmaster General Habersham. As was the case with his involvement in Indian affairs, Pickering's sense of personal responsibility for agreements he had made while in office continued even after he had left the office.

²¹ Upham, *The Life of Timothy Pickering*, III, 154. The USS Constitution, on view in Boston Harbor, is the oldest commissioned warship afloat anywhere in the world. [<http://www.usconstitution.navy.mil>, 7/24/2003]

²² Pickering continued to serve as Secretary of War until that post was filled in early 1796.

²³ Upham, *The Life of Timothy Pickering*, IV, 354, citing 1865 address of Nehemiah Cleveland.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 352. The Essex Agricultural Society remains active. [June 2003, <http://www.topsfieldfair.org/general%20info.htm>]

²⁵ Upham, *The Life of Timothy Pickering*, IV, 304.