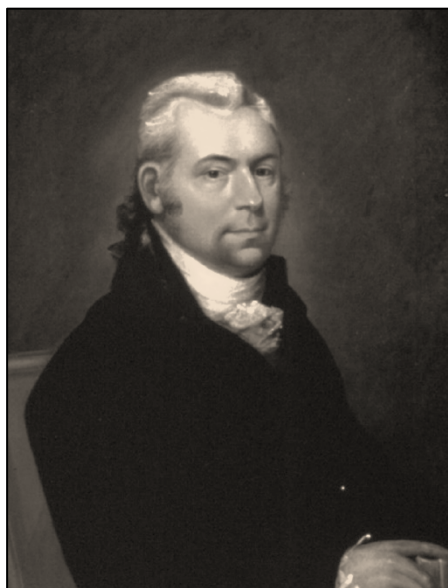


GIDEON GRANGER, JR.

Postmaster General

November 28, 1801 – March 17, 1814



Gideon Granger (1767-1822)
Postmaster General from 1801 to 1814

Gideon Granger, Jr. was born in Suffield, Connecticut on July 19, 1767. After graduating from Yale, he was admitted to the bar in Connecticut in 1789. Granger married Mindwell Pease of Suffield in 1790. He served in the Connecticut state legislature for ten years. In 1798, he ran unsuccessfully for a seat in Congress.

As a reward for his staunch support, Thomas Jefferson asked Granger to be his postmaster general in 1801. But not wanting to uproot his family, he was reluctant to accept the position. With Jefferson's urging, Granger relented and made the 400-mile trek on horseback from Connecticut to Washington. In 1802 he purchased a home at 2017 Eye Street NW, which now serves as home of the Arts Club of Washington.

Granger served through both of Jefferson's terms and for six more years under President James Madison. He served until March 17, 1814, making him the longest-serving postmaster general in U.S. history.

The election of Jefferson marked the first time in U.S. history that the party in power changed. Granger planned to fill Post Office positions with Jeffersonian Democratic-Republican party loyalists. In 1802, Granger replaced Federalist postmasters with Jeffersonian appointees. As the spoils system took shape, Granger's dismissals were "carried out with a courtesy which [had] been sadly lacking on other occasions." Several of the displaced postmasters "were given warning of their approaching fate, and even trained their successors in the duties of the positions."¹ Granger especially targeted postmasters who published newspapers. He told one outgoing postmaster that "the printer of a newspaper is not the most proper person to discharge the duties of a postmaster owing to the jealousies which will exist."²

Granger also relied on personal relationships and nepotism to fill jobs. When the position of Second Assistant Postmaster General was created, Granger filled it with his brother-in-law, Seth Pease.³ While it is unclear if Granger influenced their appointments, it is rather curious that six natives of Suffield, Connecticut, were hired as clerks at the General Post Office in Washington.⁴

After the 1803 Louisiana Purchase nearly doubled the size of the country, Granger placed a high priority on establishing mail service to America's new western settlements. As he told Congress in 1810, "From the nature of our government, it becomes a matter of the highest importance to furnish the citizens with full and correct information... particularly in the interior, by extending to it the facilities of this office."⁵ Many of his ideas, including creating cheaper postage rates for newspaper delivery and contracting mail routes to private carriers improved the finances of the Post Office Department. While Granger initially opposed the hub and spoke sortation system established by his predecessor, he quickly recognized its advantages for the distribution of mail.⁶

Granger's many accomplishments as postmaster general were somewhat overshadowed by a ban on Blacks carrying the mail instituted during his term. When Granger took office in 1802, the Caribbean island of San Domingue (now Haiti) had been in a decade-long slave revolt. Many southern politicians feared that by allowing literate slaves access to mail, especially to newspapers, they would learn of the rebellion and use it to foment slave uprisings in the United States.⁷

In March 1802, the Chairman of the Senate Post Office Committee, James Jackson of Georgia, asked Granger what could be done to carry the mail more safely. Granger's answer focused on managing contracts and improving service. But he also suggested prohibiting "contractors from entrusting the mail to negroes, or people of color." Granger reasoned that Blacks, being banned from testifying against Whites in many states, would be targeted for attacks and mail theft. In another letter to Jackson, Granger noted that when it came to employing Black mail carriers "an objection exists of a nature too delicate to engraft into a report which may become public."⁸

Although Blacks had been used to carry local mail since colonial times, Granger encouraged Congress to enact the ban. In a letter to Senator Jackson, he detailed his concerns:

The most active and intelligent [slaves] are employed as post riders... By traveling from day to day, and hourly mixing with people... they will acquire information. They will learn that a man's rights do not depend on his color. They will, in time, become teachers to their brethren... One able man among them, perceiving the value of this machine, might lay a plan which would be communicated by your post riders from town to town and produce a general and united operation against you.⁹

Granger conceded to Senator Jackson that, "The hazard may be small," and the "prospect remote, but it does not follow that at some day the event will not be certain."¹⁰ Granger reiterated to the Senate that knowledgeable Blacks, "might lay a plan which would be communicated by your post-riders from town to town, and produce a general and united operation against you. It is easier to prevent the evil than to cure it."¹¹ Congress passed an act on May 3, 1802, that stated, "No other than a free white person shall be employed in carrying the mail of the United States."¹² This prohibition continued for almost sixty years

Granger also voiced reservations about appointing a woman as postmaster of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. When Rose Wright was nominated, Granger wrote that "a doubt has been suggested to me from a source that I ought to respect as to the strict legality of appointing a female." His concerns, however, seem to have stemmed from a regulation using masculine pronouns to describe postmasters.¹³

Granger recognized that mail service was vital for the growth of commerce in the growing nation. In 1802 Granger observed, "The mail has become the channel of remittance for the commercial interest of the country," adding, "and in some measure, for the government."¹⁴ Granger noted in 1805, "I have closed contracts for the establishment of a line of mail-coaches, from Wheeling, Va. through the State of Ohio, to Frankfort, Ky: when these lines go into operation all the States will be knit together by lines of public carriages."¹⁵

Granger set up a relay to transport mail to New Orleans without going through territory claimed by Spain. He desired that the mail move 120 miles in a day aided by horses stationed 30 miles apart. Riders were furnished with lights so mail would not be delayed by darkness. Granger was focused on expediting the mail, instructing an agent that, "In the selection of riders you must always take persons of integrity, sound

health, firmness, perseverance and high ambition, pride of character. Among these a preference is due to young men, the less their size the better.”¹⁶

As he worked to provide service to the sparsely populated frontier, Granger sometimes paid more to contractors than the routes would generate in revenue. He felt that profits from urban areas should be used to expand and support mail delivery to new settlements.¹⁷ Overall Granger was able to keep the costs of providing service to 81 percent of the postal revenue received.¹⁸ Granger contracted for steamboats to transport the mail from New Orleans to Natchez by June 1813. Over the next decade steamboat usage became common and in 1823 Congress designated their routes on inland waterways to be post roads.¹⁹ Granger took a keen interest in the mail service to Ohio and throughout the Western Reserve.

In a time of limited communications with the American West, Jefferson used postal officials to assist in monitoring subversive activities. In the months before former Vice President turned military adventurer Aaron Burr was captured, Granger maintained a special horse express to provide Jefferson with information about Burr’s movements.²⁰ During Burr’s attempts to gain supporters to his cause, Granger felt his efforts would fail, saying “It will be found that in this, as in all similar cases, that crooked schemes will end by overwhelming their authors and coadjutors in disgrace.”²¹

Granger faced opposition from those who believed that Post Offices should not be open, nor mail sorted, on Sundays. Granger required postmasters to sort the mail every day that it arrived, including Sundays. Some postmasters felt conflicted by their desire to open their Post Office on Sunday for the convenience of those in town for church services, and their own desire to observe the sabbath. When Granger was challenged on his policies requiring Sunday work he said, “I cannot think,” that post office work on Sundays, was “immoral or offensive to Heaven.”²²

An 1810 bill requiring postmasters to sort mail upon arrival seven days a week received immediate criticism and the conflict between the federal government and Sabbatarians continued long after Granger left office. By January 1811, Granger was urging Congress to repeal the law. He acknowledged that periods of “extreme anxiety or national calamity,” might necessitate opening Post Offices on Sunday. But he asked that the Postmaster General should make that decision.²³ He said the current law was a hardship for postmasters and that postal operations on the Sabbath would create “disuse and disrespect” of the “institutions of the holy day.”²⁴

In 1810 a vacancy opened on the Supreme Court and Granger expressed interest in the nomination. Two of the nominees declined the position and another was rejected by the Senate. Jefferson backed Granger for the position, but President Madison declined to nominate him. One factor in Madison’s refusal to make the nomination may have been Granger’s entanglement in a land speculation scheme in Alabama and Mississippi.²⁵ Granger’s disappointment over the Supreme Court nomination cooled his relationship with Madison. Madison continued to allow Granger to appoint local postmasters, but the appointment of one of Madison’s opponents as postmaster of Philadelphia was the breaking point. Granger resigned as postmaster general in March 1814.²⁶

After leaving Madison's cabinet, Granger moved to New York, where he practiced law and invested in real estate connected with the Erie Canal. He served one term as a New York state senator from 1820-1821. Granger died on December 31, 1822, in Canandaigua, New York.²⁷ Granger was survived by his

widow and three sons, Ralph, Francis, and John Albert.²⁸ Upon learning of Granger's death, Jefferson wrote, "Few had better occasions than myself of knowing the great worth of Mr. Granger's character.... I was a constant witness of the ability, the diligence, and fidelity with which he discharged the duties of his office, and he was a faithful friend and adviser to me in mine."²⁹

The inscription on Granger's tombstone reads: "For thirteen years he presided over the General Post Office department with zeal and usefulness. Bold in design and ardent in execution, true to his friends and liberal to his adversaries, warm in attachments and social in his habits, his life was endeared to his associates and valuable to mankind."³⁰ In 1841, President William Henry Harrison appointed Francis Granger postmaster general, the only instance thus far of father and son holding that office.

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¹ Arthur S. Hamlin, *Gideon Granger* (Canandaigua, NY: Granger Homestead Society, 1982), 11.

² Hamlin, *Gideon Granger*, 11.

³ Silvio A. Bedini, "Seth Pease 1764-1819," *The American Surveyor*, February 28, 2006, <https://amerisurv.com/2006/02/28/seth-pease-1764-1819/>.

⁴ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 126.

⁵ *American State Papers, Class VII. Post Office Department* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 42.

⁶ Bedini, "Seth Pease 1764-1819" and John, *Spreading the News*, 74.

⁷ Winifred Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2016), 142.

⁸ Bland Whitley, "Postal Dreams Deferred," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, January 12, 2024, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/stories-from-the-papers/postal-dreams-deferred/>.

⁹ *American State Papers*, 27.

¹⁰ John, *Spreading the News*, 141.

¹¹ Devin Leonard, *Neither Snow nor Rain*, (Grove Press: New York, 2016), 21.

¹² 2 Stat 191 "An Act Further to Alter and Establish Certain Post Roads; and for the More Secure Carriage of the Mail of the United States".

¹³ Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America*, 110.

¹⁴ John, *Spreading the News*, 54.

¹⁵ "To Thomas Jefferson from Gideon Granger, 19 July 1805," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-2110>.

¹⁶ Hamlin, *Gideon Granger*, 20.

¹⁷ Gallagher, 53.

¹⁸ Hamlin, 12.

¹⁹ Carl H. Scheele, *A Short History Of the Mail Service* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970), 68.

²⁰ John, *Spreading the News*, 134.

²¹ Hamlin, 15.

²² John, *Spreading the News*, 170.

²³ *American State Papers Bearing on Sunday Legislation* (Washington: Religious Liberty Association, 1911), 178.

²⁴ John, *Spreading the News*, 172.

²⁵ Hamlin, 39-46.

²⁶ Hamlin, 47-49.

²⁷ University of Virginia Miller Center, "Gideon Granger (1809–1814)," U.S. Presidents, 2023, <https://millercenter.org/president/madison/essays/granger-1809-gideon-postmaster-general>.

²⁸ Hamlin, *vi*.

²⁹ "Thomas Jefferson to Francis Granger, 24 January 1823," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-19-02-0235>.

³⁰ Hamlin, 70.