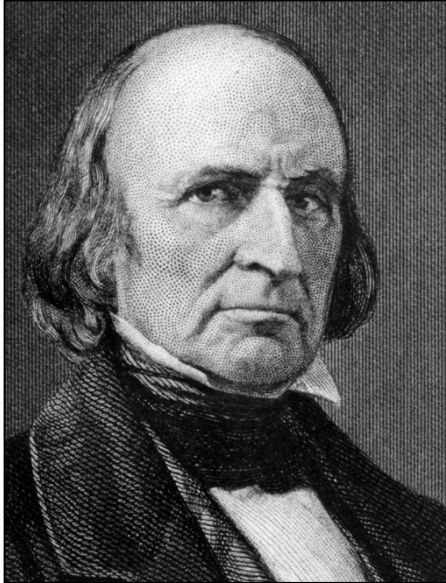


JOHN McLEAN

Postmaster General

June 26, 1823 – March 4, 1829



John McLean (1785-1861)
Postmaster General from 1823 to 1829

John McLean served as postmaster general during a time of rapid change in the United States. He served under three presidents before being appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. McLean was born in Morris County, New Jersey, on March 11, 1785. His family moved to western Virginia, then to Kentucky, before settling in Warren County, Ohio, in 1797.¹

McLean studied the law and entered the Ohio bar 1807. He also ran a printing office and published the *Lebanon Western Star* newspaper, a pro-Jeffersonian weekly journal.² McLean was elected to Congress in 1812 and was elected to the Ohio Supreme Court in 1816. During that time, he backed James Monroe's presidential nomination. Once elected, Monroe appointed McLean as Postmaster General to replace Return Jonathan Meigs, Jr.

McLean's reputation led one Cincinnati paper to predict that his term as Postmaster General "will be productive of great improvements in the system and infuse new energy and promptness throughout the whole establishment."³ He

reorganized the Post Office Department and set standards for accounting and record keeping. McLean required postmasters to keep a record of newspapers published in their town and mailed as well as a record of receipts from newspapers delivered. He began collecting past-due balances from postmasters. In one case, a postmaster in New York's Hudson Valley had not made a return for four years. McLean warned that "he would not tolerate one-fourth of such tardiness in the successor."⁴

McLean pushed back against the powerful stagecoach companies and insisted that the mail be carried on horseback unless the population and road conditions were conducive to stagecoaches. In 1825 he wrote to a friend of his "inability to perceive the propriety, or to comprehend the force, of your objection to the transportation of the mails by horseback.... The intelligence of more than half the nation is conveyed on horseback."⁵

McLean saw the Post Office as a public service, not a profit-making enterprise. He later told a Senate committee that the Post Office "funds should be actively employed in extending the operation of the mail."⁶ McLean said, "By withdrawing mail communication from all unproductive routes...a very large surplus of funds would accumulate, but the public convenience would be greatly lessened."⁷

McLean established a centralized Dead Letter Office and cracked down on postal crimes. As the population grew and mail routes expanded, robberies increased. While vigorously prosecuting postal workers for theft, McLean nevertheless resisted paying them fair compensation. In 1824 he wrote that he had no intention of paying postal workers compensation to provide a livelihood without other means of support.⁸ He told Henry Clay that while postmasters were the most poorly paid officials of the government, "competent persons to discharge the duties of Postmasters have been willing to serve in every part of the country."⁹

One benefit enjoyed by postmasters was the franking privilege, which allowed them to send and receive letters for free. Some postmasters abused this privilege by extending it to family and friends.¹⁰ A few postmasters even used their franking privilege to run lotteries. In 1827, McLean pushed Congress to forbid postmasters from acting as lottery agents.¹¹ He also noted that some lottery advertisements were disguised as newspapers, which could be mailed at a much lower rate. McLean wrote, "this was not a newspaper, any more than a volume of poetry could be considered a newspaper because poems were occasionally printed in newspapers."¹²

McLean expected postmasters to show a zeal for public service and concern for their customers. He encouraged the postmaster at Zanesville, Ohio, to accommodate customers by opening on market mornings and granting reasonable requests for letters. Another Ohio postmaster was admonished that letters were opened and read before they were delivered to the addressee, and their contents "sometimes known in the neighborhood." He instructed the Philadelphia postmaster to discipline his clerks who were "for the most part uncivil, vexatious, and even brutal in their deportment and conduct." He demanded that a postmaster in central New York answer charges that he was "habitually given to intemperance, abusive in temper [and] that the office was kept in the bar-room of a tavern, the resort of the profligate."¹³

Postal crime was on the increase, but the Post Office Department was ill-equipped to enforce postal laws.¹⁴ McLean helped establish the Office of Instructions and Mail Depredations in 1830.¹⁵ He ordered that large portmanteaux should be opened only at major Post Offices and have different locks from those on ordinary mail bags. He sent test packages through several suspect offices, monitoring to detect culprits. "It is not only desirable," McLean stated, "that such dishonest postmasters should be discovered, but that they should be punished."¹⁶

McLean opposed using private letter boxes (post office boxes) fearing it would give preferential treatment to those who paid. Letter boxes, if adopted, should be free of charge he wrote, "in order to avoid invidious discrimination." In New York City, he experimented with the collection of mail, by setting up a box in a Chatham Square from which carriers collected mail and took it to the Post Office.¹⁷

By using detailed maps created by assistant postmaster general Abraham Bradley, McLean improved the efficiency of the mail coach network.¹⁸ He began penalizing contractors who failed to meet contract requirements regardless of cause. Penalties increased for every seven minutes delay. Failure to complete a connection with another mail line could result in forfeiture of the contract.¹⁹

McLean made so many contributions as postmaster general that Congress raised his salary to match members of the president's cabinet. President John Quincy Adams kept McLean on as postmaster general, even though McLean was friendly with Adams' political rival, Andrew Jackson. Despite the apparent disloyalty, Adams noted that McLean had been the best and most efficient postmaster general to serve the nation.²⁰ During the Adams administration McLean insisted on selecting his own postmasters, declining presidential and congressional recommendations. McLean argued that appointing only those who supported the president would lead to offices "filled not with high-minded and patriotic citizens but by fawning sycophants, loud in their professions, without principle."²¹

Andrew Jackson held a different view. After his election in 1828, Jackson removed Republicans, Federalists, and anyone else who was not a loyal Democrat. He replaced them with members of his own party, regardless of merit. When Jackson demanded that McLean fire veteran postmasters who were not Democrats, McLean resisted. Thereupon Jackson offered him a promotion, allegedly saying, "Mr. McLean, will you accept a seat upon the bench of the Supreme Court?"²²

President Jackson nominated McLean to the Supreme Court of the United States on March 6, 1829. He served 32 years on the bench, making him one of the longest serving justices in U.S. history.²³ Perhaps his most famous opinion while on the Supreme Court was his 1857 dissent in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. McLean stated that Congress should exclude slavery from the territories and liberate enslaved people in "free" states.

McLean died of pneumonia on April 3, 1861, the last surviving member of the Monroe and Adams Cabinets, a link between the nation's founders and the Civil War.²⁴ McLean was eulogized by U.S. Attorney General Edward Bates: "I did not consider him a man of brilliant genius, but a man of great talents, with a mind able to comprehend the greatest subject, and not afraid to encounter the minutest analysis. He was eminently practical, always in pursuit of the truth, and always able to control and utilize any idea that he had once fully conceived. In short, he was a sincere, earnest, diligent man."²⁵

¹ "John McLean, 1829-1861," Supreme Court Historical Society, <https://supremecourthistory.org/associate-justices/john-mclean-1829-1861/>.

² "John McLean," Oyez, https://www.oyez.org/justices/john_mclean.

³ Francis P. Weisenburger, *The Life of John McLean, A Politician on the United States Supreme Court* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 35.

⁴ Weisenburger, *The Life of John McLean*, 39.

⁵ Gerald Cullinan, *The Post Office Department* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 38.

⁶ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 39.

⁷ Clyde Kelly, *United States Postal Policy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932), 49.

⁸ William C. Doherty, *Mailman U.S.A.* (New York: David McKay Company, 1960), 272.

⁹ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 39.

¹⁰ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 39.

¹¹ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 40.

¹² Wesley Everett Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office in the Year 1829* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 126.

¹³ Weisenburger, *The Life of John McLean*, 41.

¹⁴ Winfred Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 65.

¹⁵ Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America*, 65.

¹⁶ Weisenburger, *The Life of John McLean*, 40.

¹⁷ Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office*, 105.

¹⁸ Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America*, 66.

¹⁹ Weisenburger, *The Life of John McLean*, 41.

²⁰ Paul Finkelman, John McLean: Moderate Abolitionist and Supreme Court Politician, *Vanderbilt Law Review* 62, no. 2 (2019): 522, <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vlr/vol62/iss2/7>.

²¹ Cullinan, *The Post Office Department*, 41.

²² Devin Leonard, *Neither Snow Nor Rain, A History of the United States Postal Service* (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 24.

²³ Paul Finkelman, John McLean: Moderate Abolitionist and Supreme Court Politician, 62 *Vanderbilt Law Review* 519 (2019) Available at: <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vlr/vol62/iss2/7>

²⁴ Finkelman and McLean, "John McLean," 520.

²⁵ "John McLean," The Supreme Court of Ohio, <https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/courts/judicial-system/supreme-court-of-ohio/justices-1803-to-present/john-mclean/>.