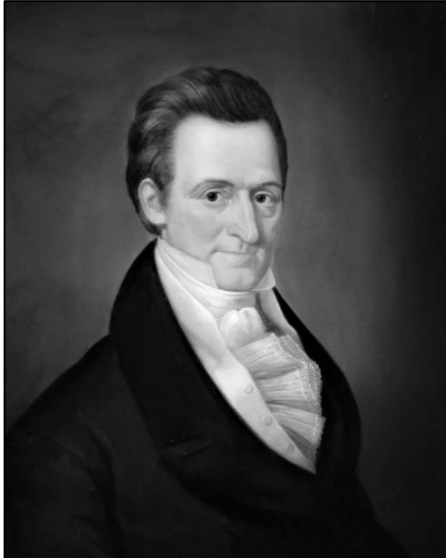


RETURN J. MEIGS, JR.

Postmaster General

March 17, 1814 – June 26, 1823



Return J. Meigs Jr. (1765-1825)
Postmaster General from 1814 to 1823

Return Jonathan Meigs, Jr. was born in Middletown, Connecticut, on November 17, 1765. He studied law and graduated from Yale in 1785. Meigs was an early settler of the Northwest Territory. In 1788 he opened a law practice in the territorial capital of Marietta and served as court clerk. When a Post Office was established in Marietta in 1794, Meigs briefly served as postmaster. He then held several positions in the judiciary and legislature, including chief justice of the Ohio Supreme Court and U.S. Senator.¹ He was elected governor of Ohio in 1810, and organized the militia and construction of forts during the War of 1812.

In 1814 President James Madison nominated Meigs to succeed Gideon Granger as postmaster general. Having spent much of his life in Ohio, Meigs held that the country's future depended upon the postal system being expanded.

As the first westerner to serve as postmaster general his policy was that the Post Office was a public service and should operate without regard to cost.² His position was supported by important members of Congress including Henry Clay of Kentucky and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina.

The number of Post Offices doubled from 2,437 in 1810 to 4,834 in 1823, and the number of letters doubled from about 4 million to 8 million. Postal service was extended into newly settled regions including the Northwest Area (Illinois and Indiana) and Arkansas.³ Meigs was convinced money could be saved by turning the government-owned Philadelphia-to-New York stagecoach line over to a contractor. The only bid submitted was highly inflated, and Meigs decided to let the Post Office continue operating it. He wrote that the government-run line acted "as a check upon contractors, both in repressing and stimulating contractors to a faithful discharge of their duty."⁴

While it was becoming more difficult for Post Office revenues to cover expenses, in 1821 Meigs returned more than \$379,000 to the Treasury from postal profits.⁵ But the Post Office's financial practices suffered from poor recordkeeping. Many postmasters were slow to pay their remittances. While Meigs appears to have had enough reserve funds to avoid taking money from the Treasury, by the end of his time as postmaster general the surplus held by the Post Office was not enough to cover its yearly disbursements.⁶

In 1815 a temporary 50 percent increase in postage rates helped the Treasury recover debts from the War of 1812.⁷ In 1816 new postage rates were adopted, based on the number of pages and distance traveled. Yet the departmental profits did not increase. The cost of mail transportation, \$7 per mile under Meigs's predecessor, rose to \$13 a mile while he was postmaster general.⁸ Meigs' preference for stagecoaches over post riders led to accusations of reckless spending. Several investigations by Congress found no corruption, only careless recordkeeping and inefficiency.⁹ Meigs was criticized for running a sizable deficit, but he

welcomed and requested investigations to address reports “unfavorable to the character of this department, in relation to its fiscal concerns.”¹⁰

The establishment of post roads in sparsely populated areas became the political “pork” of the day. Congress continued to extend routes to less populous areas, which could not generate enough revenue to cover their costs. Congress wanted to please constituents by extending mail service but provided no funds to pay for it. Another factor was stagecoach companies with influential connections in Congress who lobbied for their special interests.¹¹

While Meigs recognized the importance of correspondence and newspapers for the expanding nation, he opposed mailing certain types of printed material. In 1814 Meigs prohibited the mailing of books, saying he didn’t want the mails filled “with novels and the lighter kind of books for amusement.”¹²

Meigs expanded service to encompass 84,860 miles of post roads. In 1819 alone, the Post Office added 8,000 miles of post routes. Meigs took a hands-on approach to overseeing the growing transportation network. In November 1822, he traveled the entire length of the Cumberland Road (linking the Potomac and Ohio rivers). Some sections were “in a ruinous state, and becoming rapidly impaired.” Mail contractors sometimes had to stop to remove obstacles. Detours increased distance and travel time, “retard[ing] the expedition of the mail, and considerably enhance[ing] the expenditure of the Post Office Department.”¹³

Confronting a rise in crimes against the Post Office and its employees, the Senate discussed the possibility of placing armed guards on mail coaches. Meigs argued that having guards would imply a “distrust of the civic virtues and moral energies of the people.”¹⁴ He said that if guards were added to one route, they would need to be added to all routes lest criminals target the unguarded ones. In addition, it was possible that the guards themselves would become criminals and that two guards would be necessary as a check. In a letter to Congress, Meigs asked, “who is to guard the guards?”¹⁵

Meigs faced resistance from Sabbatarians, who believed that no mail should be delivered, sorted, or transported on Sundays. He contended that suspending Sunday transportation would impact more than 700 routes. He thought the delays would make it possible for foreign agents to receive information prior to the government during wartime. Not operating on Sundays would hurt stagecoach companies that contracted with the Post Office because they would be limited to six days for carrying passengers. He also said Sabbath travelers might start carrying letters outside of the mails, decreasing postal revenues.¹⁶

As private carriers emerged to handle letters in 1817, Massachusetts Congressman Elijah Hunt Mills said banning transmission of mail, but not outlawing other modes of transportation on the Sabbath, would result in far more noise and commotion than was currently experienced. He wrote that moving the mail on the Sabbath was a “sound and enlightened policy” that also conformed to the “requirements of the moral law.”¹⁷ Meigs concluded that working mail on the Sabbath contributed to the peace of the nation, and that having a few postal employees work was necessary “so that the many may enjoy an uninterrupted exercise of religion in quietude and safety.”¹⁸

Meigs was aware that a conflict with President Madison over a postmaster appointment had resulted in his predecessor’s dismissal. When in January 1822, New York Senator Martin Van Buren objected to the appointment of Solomon Van Rensselaer as postmaster of Albany, Meigs

deferred the matter to Monroe. But the President said he would not intervene and noted that Congress had given the power to appoint postmasters to the postmaster general.¹⁹

Meigs resigned in 1823 due to ill health. After his resignation as postmaster general, Meigs returned to Marietta, where he died on March 29, 1825. He was buried in Mound Cemetery, where a graveside memorial lists his public accomplishments and lauds his devotion to family.²⁰ Meigs married Sophia Wright in 1788. Their only child, Mary, later married congressman and federal Judge John George Jackson of Clarksburg, Virginia. Meigs County, Ohio was named to honor Return Jonathan Meigs, Jr.²¹

¹ "Meigs, Return Jonathan Jr.," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/m000633>.

² Daniel Y. Meschter, "Return Jonathan Meigs, Jr. 1814-1823," *La Posta*, 33, no. 6 (January 2003), 30.

³ Gerald Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service* (Praeger Publishers: New York, 1973), 48.

⁴ Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail Enlarger of the Common Life* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1972), 153.

⁵ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 107.

⁶ John, *Spreading the News*, 109.

⁷ Daniel D. Tompkins Leech, *The Post Office Department of the United States of America* (Judd & Detweiler: Washington, DC, 1879), 17.

⁸ Cullinan, 46.

⁹ Fuller, 53.

¹⁰ *Niles Weekly Register* (January 27, 1816), 379, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101042849826&seq=395>.

¹¹ Cullinan, 46-47.

¹² Fuller, 119.

¹³ United States Congress. House, Meigs, R. J. & United States Postmaster General. Letter from the Postmaster General, in relation to the state and condition of the Cumberland Road. Made in pursuance to a resolution of the House of Representatives of the 31st ult. January 7, 1823. Read, and ordered to lie upon the table. Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2022696827/>.

¹⁴ Fuller, 243.

¹⁵ *Niles Weekly Register* (February 27, 1819), volume 16, 4, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3488310&seq=16>.

¹⁶ John, 178.

¹⁷ John, 178.

¹⁸ *Niles Weekly Register* (February 25, 1815), volume 7, 407. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101064076894&seq=417>.

¹⁹ Meschter, 32.

²⁰ "Return Jonathan Meigs Jr.," The Supreme Court of Ohio & The Ohio Judicial System, 2025, <https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/courts/judicial-system/supreme-court-of-ohio/justices-1803-to-present/return-meigs-jr/>.

²¹ "About Meigs County," Meigs County Chamber of Tourism. 2025, <https://meigssohio.com/cvb/history/>.

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