

'Father of 3-cent Stamp' Spooner fought Post Office

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The United States has a habit of commemorating firsts. We have had stamps honoring Benjamin Franklin, the first postmaster general; John Hanson, the first president of the United States under the Articles of Confederation; and George Washington, the first president of the United States under the Constitution.

But the United States Post Office and the United States Postal Service have both failed to commemorate Lysander Spooner, the first man in American history to do something about high postal rates and win.

Lysander Spooner was born in Athol, Mass., in 1808. As a young man he studied law, pamphleteered, and crusaded upon dozens of causes before he hit upon an adversary worthy of his mettle and training - the U.S. Post Office. He was so successful that he nearly put it out of business!

Like most of us today, the spiraling cost of postal rates in 1844 so irked Spooner that he began an extensive study of the situation, using his legal background. There was not questions that the rates were too high; it cost 18 3/4 cents to send a letter from Boston to New York, and 25 cents from Boston to Washington, D.C.

At this time railway mail service was no better. A letter from Boston to Albany N.Y., written on a quarter-ounce of paper and carried on the Western Railroad at that time, cost two-thirds as much on a freight charge as carrying a barrel of flour the same distance.

Spoooner concluded that there were high costs and no services involved in such a system. He also discovered that the public was using quite a few methods to circumvent these high postage rates. But for the most part, they were failing in their efforts.

There was no federal monopoly on the mail service at this time. Spooner face a loud "hurrah" to those who were trying to outmaneuver the system, but he also say they were fighting a losing battle.

With no other solution in sight, Spooner decided to compete with the U.S. Government!

First of all, he could not see why the government should have monopoly on mail delivery. He knew that the Constitution ordered that Congress provide for mail delivery, and that Congress had done so with a U.S. Post Office Department.

But Spooner's loophole was that the Constitution did not say that private citizens could not carry and deliver mail also. The battle was on!

Using this loophole as his main ammunition, he organized his own postal service and audaciously called it the American Letter Mail Company. The company offered to deliver letters, with no limit on weight, at reduced prices.

Then he really tweaked the government's nose. He ran an advertisement on the front page of the *New York Daily Tribune* with the following information:

"AMERICAN POST OFFICE - The American Letter Mail company has established post offices in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston, and will transmit letters daily from each city to the others - twice a day between New York and Philadelphia. Postage 6 1/4 cents per each half-ounce, payable in advance always. [Stamps 20 for a dollar.](#)"

"Their purpose is to carry letters by the most rapid conveyances, and at the cheapest rates and to extend their operations (as fast as patronage will justify) over the principal routes of the country, so as to give the public the most extensive facilities for correspondence that can be afforded at a uniform rate."

"The Company design also (if sustained by the public) is to thoroughly agitate the questions, and to test the Constitutional right of the competition in the business of carrying letters - the grounds on which they assert this right are published and for sale at the post offices in pamphlet form."

The gauntlet was down. The public enthusiastically supported the venture of paying one-quarter to one-third the going government rate. But Congress was furious, and the Post Office Department set up a howl that echoed in the halls of Congress. All of the city of Washington was thoroughly enraged.

Washington lawmakers had no intentions of sitting still for Lysander Spooner's shenanigans. The midnight oil was burnt as lawyers poured over their books. Soon, suits against Spooner and his associates began.

The U.S. gave railroad heads full warning that the government mail, a lucrative source of income, would be removed unless space and passage were denied to the private letter carriers.

Round one was won by the government when one of Spooner's agents was found guilty of transporting letters in a railway car over a post road of the U.S. He was fined.

But Spooner won round two when the judge advised the jury that owners of conveyances were not liable under law if, unknown to the owners, a letter carrier brought mail on board a train or steamboat.

Spooner also won round three. A "not guilty" verdict was sustained by the U.S. District Court! The court expressed doubt that the U.S. had the right to monopolize transportation of mail. This was tantamount to a commendation for Lysander Spooner's theories.

It was a low blow for the Post Office. It sought further legal means to stop Spooner and his trouble-making company. More court reversals followed.

At last, the postmaster general finally felt that he had to bow to the issue and went before Congress for the authority to lower postal rates.

In March 1845, a reduction in postal rates was authorized to be put into effect in July. Letters weighing less than half an ounce were to be sent for any distance less than 300 miles for a mere 5 cents, instead of 18 3/4 cents or 25 cents.

Rates for newspapers were reevaluated. They could now be sent free for any distance up to a 30-mile radius of the place of publication.

But Spooner was not through fighting. He felt that he and his company were doing a lot of good for the country, and his counteraction caused even a greater concern to his opponents. He lowered his rates! So the battle of laws and loopholes continued.

The end result was that in 1851 Congress again had to lower the postal rates to a uniform 3 cents. It simultaneously enacted a law to protect the government's monopoly on the distribution of mail.

Threat of jail and other measures had not dampened or fazed Spooner's zeal in the fight. This move by Congress forced him into defeat. His battle ended, and he disbanded his famous company. But he gained the title of the Father of the Three-cent Stamp.

Sooner died in 1887, his death barely noted by a public which daily benefited from the fruits of his labor.

But it is not too late. We have a new series of Prominent Americans being issued by the USPS. What more fitting tribute could we give to this courageous man than to issue the 3 cents stamp in this series to honor Lysander Spooner?