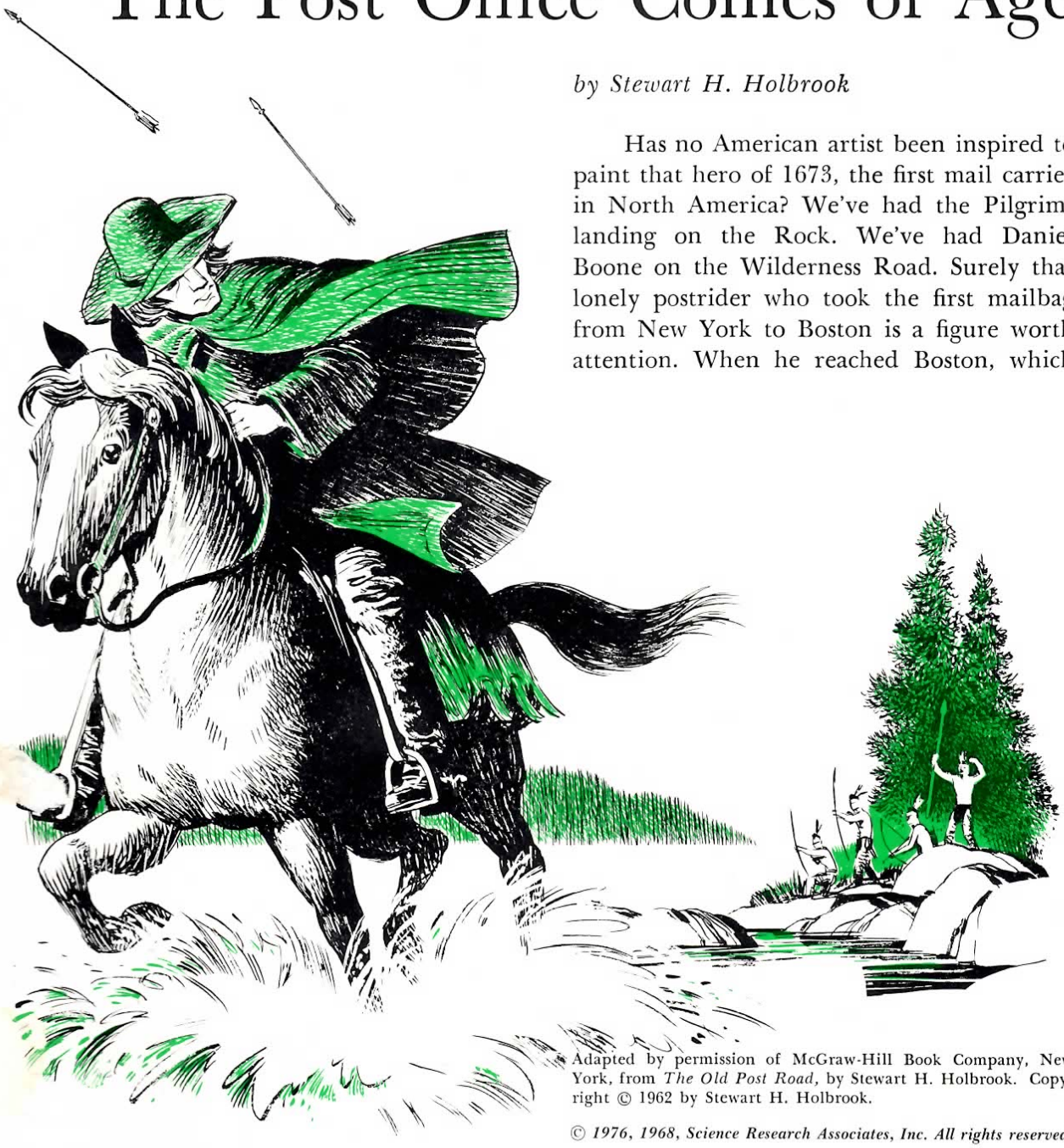
The Post Office Comes of Age

by Stewart H. Holbrook

Has no American artist been inspired to paint that hero of 1673, the first mail carrier in North America? We've had the Pilgrims landing on the Rock. We've had Daniel Boone on the Wilderness Road. Surely that lonely postrider who took the first mailbag from New York to Boston is a figure worth attention. When he reached Boston, which



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was then only forty years old, he had come alone through a trackless wilderness as dangerous (because of the Pequot Indians) as anything on the continent.

This pioneer mail carrier whose name, unfortunately, is now unknown, rode at the command of Charles II, king of England. Late in 1672 in an official communication to Governor Francis Lovelace of New York, His Majesty urged his American provinces to enter into a "close correspondency with each other." Almost immediately Governor Lovelace set out on horseback to discuss the matter with Governor John Winthrop of neighboring Connecticut. The two men happened to be among the most energetic officials of all the colonies. They planned wisely and well for the first mail service in the New World.

Lovelace proposed that the postrider should be "a stout fellow, active and indefatigable, and sworne as to his fidelity." He would be paid an annual salary plus stated charges for letters and packages. On the first Monday of every month the rider would set out from New York City and would "return within the month from Boston to us againe." The mail was to be in "divers baggs, according to the townes the letters are designed to . . . all sealed up till their arrivement." Letters from intermediate points were to be in an open bag and dispensed along the way.

Hartford, Connecticut, would be the first stage for the rider to change horses. Upon the carrier's arrival there, Winthrop was to advise him to whom he should report in Boston. Lovelace also suggested that it would help if Winthrop "discoursed with some of the most able woodmen, to make the most facile way for a post, which in the process of tyme would be the King's best highway."

It was planned that the first mail should leave New York on the first day of January 1673. There was a delay, however, and the postrider did not get away till the twenty-second day of the month. He arrived in Boston on or about February 5, where he delivered his mail and also "received congratulations on the success of his journey."

That Governor Lovelace's heroic fellow got to Boston in two weeks with the first mail must be counted as something of a marvel. The road was little more than a trail marker here and there along a dim moccasin path, with surging wild rapids to ford and many a tangle of wind-felled timber to negotiate. The woodmen had not yet made a "facile way," and there is no doubt that the rider must have been "a stout fellow, active and indefatigable."

From a dim footpath, the post route gradually grew into a road. By the time of the Revolution, the Old Boston Post Road, as it was known in both terminal cities, had been used for a century, though it had passed through difficult periods lasting for weeks, even months, when few if any postriders were seen over much of its length. These bad times were due to circumstances—Indian raids and the like—wholly beyond the control of what eventually earned the name of the Post Office Department.

Many of the steps by which the post office in America gradually took form can be credited to Benjamin Franklin. When the

crown appointed him a deputy postmaster in 1751, the colonial mails were still slow, expensive, and undependable. In the next ten years Franklin completely reorganized the colonial post office. He systematized accounts and selected roads, fords, and ferries for postal routes. He had forms and instructions printed and sent them to postal officials from New Hampshire to South Carolina. Though at first he continued to use postriders to distribute newspapers free of charge, he thought this unfair and eventually abolished it. Henceforth all newspapers, including his own, paid postage.

The salaries of Franklin and the other deputy postmaster were to be paid out of the money received from the postage of letters—if, that is, any should be left over after payment of operating expenses. So well did the two men work together that in 1761 they were able not only to pay themselves but to remit to London the first money ever earned by the American post office.

Franklin demonstrated great ingenuity in conducting post office affairs. In the summer of 1753 he spent ten weeks in New England, where he noted the constant wrangling between post office clerks, patrons, and the postriders themselves about estimated distances. (Letters were charged for by the mile.) Franklin promptly invented or adapted an odometer, an instrument for measuring distances. Then, in "a chaise of his own design," he drove over the Boston Post Road, followed by men with carts loaded with stones. The stones were marked and placed along the road at intervals of one mile.

These milestones were of infinite aid in regulating postal rates. They were also a fine advertisement, not only because the public found them useful in matters having nothing to do with postage, but also because they added tone to official post roads, giving them new dignity.

Franklin had been accustomed to print in his *Gazette* newspaper the names of persons who had letters waiting for them in the Philadelphia office. Now he introduced this practice in other towns having newspapers, requesting that letters not claimed after three months be forwarded to the general post office in Virginia. This was the beginning of the dead-letter office in America.

Postmasters throughout the colonies must have quickly realized that they now worked for a man who meant business. Postal service quickened its pace. For the first time mails traveled night and day from Philadelphia to New York and back; later the same service was extended to Boston.

The Revolution did not end Franklin's interest in the mails. He headed a committee appointed by Congress to establish a postal system for the new nation. Eventually he was named postmaster general. Under his guidance the United States Post Office took shape, and the network of post roads continued to spread.

Today swift mail trucks rumble along the Old Boston Post Road that started it all. And the wilderness path on which that first lone postrider galloped is now just one small link in a 3000-mile chain stretching from ocean to ocean.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **The terminal cities for the first postal route in North America were**
   A Boston and Hartford
   B New York and Boston
   C Hartford and New York

2. **The first postrider on the American continent is honored in a famous**
   A painting
   B statue
   C Neither A nor B

3. **The first mail service in North America was planned in detail by**
   A the king of England
   B two colonial governors
   C the Post Office Department

4. **If he met Governor Lovelace's requirements, the postrider was**
   A tall, slender, and graceful
   B strong, active, and untiring
   C light, small, and quick-moving

5. **The postrider who inaugurated mail service in North America started off**
   A about three weeks late
   B a few days ahead of time
   C exactly on schedule

6. **In its first century, mail service along the Boston Post Road was badly handicapped by**
   A squabbling among the postmasters
   B lack of accurate guideposts
   C dangers along the mail route

7. **To solve the problem of estimating postage for mail on the Boston Post Road, Ben Franklin**
   A set up mile markers along the route
   B ordered a fixed rate for all mail
   C issued odometers to the postriders

8. **Before Franklin put a stop to the practice, the postriders had to**
   A deliver newspapers free of charge
   B advertise the mail service
   C ride the post roads at night

9. **Under Franklin, the American post office was first able to**
   A pay adequate salaries
   B send money to London
   C cover operating expenses

10. **Plans for a postal system for the United States were drawn up by**
    A the entire body of Congress
    B a committee headed by Franklin
    C a conference of governors