The history of the British Post Office in America has been interpreted from many different angles. Some historians approach the topic from an economic viewpoint. Others examine the colonial post through extant postmarks, covers and ephemera. These approaches, and others, have made significant contributions to our knowledge of the British colonial post. But rarely have historians approached the British Post from the 18th century constitutional perspective of the British colonists in America. This perspective was revealed when the colonists protested the British Post in 1718, then in 1764 and again in 1774. I propose this approach opens a new understanding of the British Post as well as its constitutional role in the origins of the American Revolution.

To fully appreciate the controversy that surrounded the British Post, we must first attempt to understand the colonists themselves. Particularly, how the colonists saw themselves as part of the British Empire governed by “ancient rights and privileges.” As British subjects, the colonists considered the “ancient constitution” of England, and its common law emphasis on precedent and consent, as their birthright. A Briton’s rights, they asserted, follow him whether he’s “moving from London to Dover, from one side of the street to the other,” or from England to America. When the colonists asserted their rights, they argued from this frame of reference.

Understanding this reference system and seeing the British colonists as they saw themselves, not only sheds light on the British colonial post; it also reveals how British constitutionalism contributed to the broader conflict that erupted in 1776. The British Post controversy can be considered, quite simply, as a dress rehearsal for the American Revolution.

Introduction: So that that we recognize the colonists and their arguments, my essay will begin with a brief survey of British constitutionalism to illustrate the colonists’ understanding of their birthright.

Episode One: When in 1718, the British Parliament’s appointee tried to extend the Royal Post into Virginia, the colony’s elected representatives in the House of Burgesses protested vociferously. The few historical essays that mention this protest understandably focus mainly on rates and routes. Indeed, pragmatic grievances were raised by the burgesses from James City, New Kent, and Prince George. The House of Burgesses’ primary objection however, was ideological. Without an appreciation for the burgesses’ constitutional frame of reference, some may see this objection as a red herring. After all, the colony had previously accepted the post under the Neale patent. But, what cannot be overlooked, are two differences of extreme, constitutional importance to the colony. First, unlike in the Neale patent, rates were not set by the colonies but by Parliament. Second, the Royal Post was established as a general tax to raise revenue for war expenses. Virginia’s Lieutenant Governor explained in a letter to the Board of Trade that the burgesses objected because they believed “that the Parl’ t could not Levy any Tax... here without the Consent of the General Assembly.” The Royal Post was unconstitutional in the minds of the burgesses for there was no precedent for it nor had they given their consent to it.
**Episode Two**: The Stamp Act Crisis in 1765 further embroiled the Royal Post in the constitutional conflict between Britain and its American colonies. The colonists claimed the Stamp Act was unconstitutional because there was no precedent for a general tax on the colonies. However, as John Phillip Reid points out, they worried incessantly about the constitutional implications of the British Post. Their concern was realized when Prime Minister Grenville argued that postage was the legal precedent for the constitutionality of the Stamp Act. The Tory satirist, John Shebbeare, described the precedent thusly, the difference between postage and a stamp tax was simply one was a tax on folded paper, the other a tax on unfolded paper.

Although the Stamp Act was eventually repealed, this episode taught the colonists just how dangerous the British Post could be to their ancient rights and liberties. It also alerts today’s historian to the colonists’ perspective when they moved to replace the British Post in 1774 with the “Constitutional Post.”

**Episode Three**: By 1774, the British Post had become more than an ideological flashpoint in the constitutional debate, it had become the symbol of Parliaments’ unconstitutional and arbitrary rule. Consequently, William Goddard’s plan to replace the “unconstitutional” British Post with an American “Constitutional Post” was met with enthusiasm by the committees of correspondence as well as the general public. Newspaper op-eds reminded readers of the constitutional dangers of the British Post, warning it was being used again as a precedent by Parliament. The British Post was that “establishment upon which every other unconstitutional act, had been grounded; as our tame submiffion to it, has confantly been urged, by the enemies of our country, as a precedent against us”

Goddard and his effectiveness or ineffectiveness has been explored via different approaches to postal history. However, his effectiveness as well as that of the “Constitutional Post” itself is only one measure. A more important measure is the influence his idea had on the formation of the early American post and the broader conflict only moments before the outbreak of war.

This approach to the history of the British colonial post affords us the constitutional vantage point of the colonists themselves. In each episode we learn more about the colonists and their relation to the British Post. Moreover, laying the conflicts side by side provides a vista into the unchanging reasons the British Post, and eventually the British government, was opposed.