Newspapers in the Mail: Strategic Postal Unification of the British American Colonies

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10 August 1753, Benjamin Franklin and William Hunter were jointly commissioned by the Crown as Deputy Postmasters General for Britain’s mainland colonies in North America.

“Mr. Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, and Mr. William Hunter of Williamsburg in Virginia, their Deputy Postmaster and Manager of all his Majesty’s Provinces and Dominions on the Continent of North America in the stead of Elliot Benger Esq. deceased, to commence this day at an allowance or salary of £600 per annum.”

Their postal administration not only earned a profit but it also framed the strategy for the intercolonial wars among France, Great Britain and the Native Americans.

The previous postmaster general was Elliot Benger - when did Benger die?
For postal historians, from Rich, through Konwiser and Robson Lowe, to ter Braake, Benger died in 1753.

Yet at the same time Rich was writing, in 1924, appeared the definitive:

In 1751, Eliott Benger’s death was more broadly known - it was mentioned in a letter from Virginia tobacco planter Francis Jerdone of 21 May:
“The Postmaster Generals place is now vacant by the death of Mr. Elliott Benger.”

notice of his death appeared in the *Maryland Gazette* of 22 May.
No Colonial PMG from 1751 to 1753: an *INTERREGNUM*

But the British colonial post survived well:

Benger had made Franklin comptroller

![1745 Post Bill, Philadelphia to Boston](image)

In this vacuum of power, both Franklin & Hunter operated with initiatives developed within networks of association (insurgencies that would come to define “American”)}
NETWORK of ASSOCIATION: the London coffeehouse scene

Franklin at 19
in London November 1724 to July 1726:
employed as a printer,
enjoyed the coffeehouses:

The Pennsylvania
The New England
The Virginia
The Horn
Batson’s
London still reeling economically from the South Sea Bubble of 1720

Franklin’s argument for paper currency 1729

Currency in New England (until 1684 the “tree” shillings)

Currency in the Chesapeake colonies
tobacco = a value in exchange for gold
Franklin’s favorite author Daniel Defoe

*Robinson Crusoe* 1719
*Moll Flanders* 1722

Account of the famous “Thief Taker” Jonathan Wild 1725. He was hanged before crowds in 1726.
Jonathan Swift

Gulliver’s Travels
1726

Map from first edition showing Brobdingnag as a peninsula off the Pacific coast of North America
The maps were created by cartographer Herman Moll, a coffeehouse friend of Defoe and Swift.
Herman Moll’s 1715 “Map of the Dominions of the King of Great Britain on the Continent of North America” (the ‘Beaver Map’)

Herman Moll
Moll’s French competitor: Guillaume de l’Isle 1700 reissued 1708
Comparison of British claims interpreted by Moll with French claims interpreted by de l’Isle
Moll included a road drawn all the way down the Atlantic coast - the first to be shown on a North American map.

Paragraph from Moll 1715 - stresses regularity of the Colonial Post
NETWORK of ASSOCIATION: Colonial Printers

Franklin learned printing in London
His press imported from London
Official printer for Pennsylvania
*The Pennsylvania Gazette* 1729
*Poor Richard’s Almanack* 1733

Hunter apprenticed to William Parks 1745
Official printer for Virginia 1752
Prints Virginia’s first paper currency 1757
Printing supplies from London
*The Virginia Gazette* 1751
*Virginia Almanack* 1751

Painting by Charles Mills, Detroit Publishing Co.

Re-enactment of William Hunter’s printing press at Colonial Williamsburg
Franklin’s monthly - the first such in North America 1741

William Parks as Official Printer to The Virginia Colony 1733 - before Hunter joined his shop
As job printers, Franklin, protegee James Parker, and Hunter produced colonial currency. Franklin and Parks built a paper mill in Williamsburg completed 1743.
Both Franklin & Hunter edited their colony’s newspaper of record - free of Britain’s tax on paper, usually carried by post riders, subject to their prejudices.
Postmaster General Spotswood commissions Franklin as Philadelphia postmaster 1737

Hunter becomes postmaster of Williamsburg on the death of Parks 1750
[Before the colonial mails of 1753, “For his Majestys Service”] Cover to a 1744 letter postpaid from John Short to Conrad Weiser in Heidleburg, Pennsylvania, entering the mail at Boyd’s Hole, Virginia (on the Potomac River), rated 4dwt. Weiser was responsible for negotiating every major treaty between the colonial settlers in Pennsylvania and the Iroquois Nations from 1731 to 1758. He was also a cigar maker, and John Short grew tobacco.

[Williamsburg post office after William Hunter’s death] Letter datelined Havre de Grace, September 24, 1773. It entered the post at Hampton, Virginia, rated in red 5d[wt] 5g[rains], to New York, which included the ship fee. It transited through the post office at Williamsburg where it received the red handstamp WmsBURG. At New York it received a black arrival mark. The red “2/7” is payment by recipient in local New York currency. The letter is from Andrew Limouzin discussing the market for wheat and corn in France.
ROYAL NETWORK:
Friends in London

Peter Collinson, Royal Society, who shared Franklin’s interest in electricity

119. TO PETER COLLINSON ¹

Philad. May 21, 1751

DEAR SIR

... I have just receiv’d Advice that the Deputy Post Master General of America (Mr. Elliot Benger residing in Virginia) who has for some time been in declining Way is tho’t to be near his End. My Friends advise me to apply for this Post....

The Place is in the Disposal of the Post Masters General of Britain with some of whom or their Friends you may possibly have Acquaintance....

I need not tell you that Philadelphia being the Center of the Continent Colonies and having constant Communication with the West India Islands is by much a fitter Place for the Situation of a General Post Office than Virginia, and that it would be some Reputation to our Province to have it establish’d here....

Your affectionate humble Serv’t
B. Franklin.

P. S. I have heard £200 was given for this Office by Mr. Benger and the same by his Predecessor. I know not whose Perquisite it was. But lest that should not be sufficient and there may be some contingent Fees and Charges Mr. Allen has ordered £300. However the less it costs the better as ’tis an Office for Life only which is a very uncertain Tenure.

¹ From the original in the collection of Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan.
The Deputy Postmasters General of Great Britain in 1751:

Thomas Coke, 1st Earl of Leicester

Sir Everard Fawkener

Introduced to Franklin through his paper on electricity at Royal Society 1751
Alexander Spotswood (died 1740)
Governor of Virginia
Tobacco Act
Trade with Native Americans
Ironworks
Colonial Postmaster General
Named Franklin postmaster

Colonial Postmasters General from Virginia:
Spotswood until 1739
Head Lynch until 1743
Elliot Benger until 1751
Tobacco planter Francis Jerdone
William Hunter’s half brother John, tobacco agent
Franklin & Hunter as joint PMGs 1753

First, the two postmasters inspected the roads
“A voluntary Union entered into by the Colonies themselves, I think, would be preferable to one imposed by Parliament; for it would be perhaps not much more difficult to procure, and more easy to alter and improve, as Circumstances should require, and Experience direct. It would be a very strange Thing, if six Nations of ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union, and be able to execute it in such a Manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a Dozen English Colonies, to whom it is more necessary, and must be more advantageous; and who cannot be supposed to want an equal Understanding of their Interests.” Franklin to James Parker, 20 March 1751

Franklin & strategic union of colonies to face the French
New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North & South Carolina

William Hunter in his *Virginia Gazette* of 19 July 1754 reported Washington’s defeat at Fort Necessity: “Surely this will remove the infatuation of security that seems to have prevailed too much among the other colonies [and] enforce a late ingenious Emblem worthy of their Attention and Consideration.”
Albany City Hall

Albany Conference
19 June to 11 July 1754

“Short Hints Towards a Scheme for a General Union of the British Colonies on the Continent”

&

Treaty with the Iroquois Six Nations - who determined to remain neutral, yet warned: “the French have their Hatchet in their Hands”
Four intercolonial wars in America were all conflicts with the French and Indians of New France:
- 1688-1697 King William’s War
- 1709-1713 Queen Anne’s War
- 1744-1748 King George’s War
- 1754-1763 French and Indian Wars (coinciding with the Seven Years War in Europe)

Route traveled by General Braddock & troops was made possible by Franklin’s organization of wagons.
Franklin & Hunter, both in London, draft an order to allow newspapers to travel under the protection of the mail & make arrangements for announcements to be published in the colonies

“... not to discourage the Spreading the News-papers, which are on many Occasions useful to Government, and advantageous to commerce, and to the Publick.”

Newspapers in the Mail 1758 at the same uniformly low rate (9d per annum under 50 miles, 1/6d under 100, etc.) - post riders to be paid proportional to travel. Compared to high letter postage (until 1765).
Laft Night we received a Washington Mail containing Communications that will prove of Interest to the Publick with some of thefe Particulars following:

Jameſtowne, 1657. The feveral Planters of the Colony of Virginia were duly inſtructed by the General Assembly in this Year to keep the various official Letters and Poft moving from Plantation to Plantation until they reached their respective Deftinations. This being the firft Step to improve the Poftal Service of the Colony, a Fine was to be enforced of a Hoghead of Tobacco for failure to comply with faid Directive.

London, 1711. The Parliament of Great Britain in this Year eftabliſhed the Office of Poft Master General for the Colonies in North America in the faid City of London with a Deputy to superintend the Operation of faid poftal System in America.

Williamſburg, 1718. That faid Service in thefe early Days was Unfatisfactory becaule of bad Roads, swollen Streams, high Poftage, and public Indifference can be feen in the ferval Comments of Major John Cuffie who flated, We have a dam’d confounded, pretended Poft Office here, whch keeps Letters as long as they fee Fit.

Williamſburg, April, 1738. William Parks, Printer of this City was commiffioned in this Year to extend the Poft-Rider Service southerward to Edenton in the Colony of North Carolina and to Charleston in the Colony of South Carolina. This would result, advifed Mr. Parks, in frequent opportunities to Georgia. In this Year there was a Poft-Rider arriving in Williamſburg from the North on every other Saturday.

Williamſburg, 1753. William Hunter, Associate of faid Parks and his Succesor in this Shop was appointed in this Year with his Colleague one Benjefin Franklin of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania Deputy Poft Master and Manager of all his Majesty’s Provinces and Dominions on the Continent of North America. The Salary of these Deputies to be £300 per Annum for overseeing the poftal Routes, Rates, Procedures, and Poft Riders of the feveral Colonies. Said William Hunter provided sleeping Quarters for several Riders in this Shop where he kept his Printing and Poft Office.
British newspapers were carried out of the mail. But the paper itself required a Stamp Tax (since 1684)

Colonial newspapers carried under protection of the mail, from 1758. But the Stamp Act of 1765 taxed them

A Revolution brewing
Benjamin Franklin & Postal History:

- improved routes

- evaluated post riders

- designed postmaster forms

- issued *Instructions and Directions* for postmasters

- newspapers in the mail at a low uniform rate of postage:
  an egalitarian change that fostered a less provincial, more broadly American perspective