

Friday, September 21, 7 pm at the Starr Library

David Miller will take us through the history of mail delivery in Rhinebeck. If you want to hear more about the creation of Albany Post Road, mounted post, stagecoaches, the creation of the Postal Service, early post offices and stamps come to this lecture and slide show.

President's Message Fall 2012

I trust that your summer has been a delightful one. Our summer events began with a very informative tour of the Rhinebeck Cemetery given by Steven Mann. Steven introduced us to many of Rhinebeck's famous residents from the past. His knowledge of the history of many of the families who have lived in Rhinebeck is amazing.

In June, we had a very special joint event with the Egbert Benson Historical Society of Red Hook. We celebrated the 200th anniversary of the separation of Red Hook from Rhinebeck at Rokeby. J. Winthrop Aldrich, Rokeby's owner, gave a presentation and slide show about the separation to more than 160 people who were in attendance. We all had a great time sitting on the lawn at Rokeby enjoying cold drinks and snacks during the event.

Also in June, Bob Wills from Dutchess County Planning gave us an online tour of the county website, Parcel Access and GEO Access, which are used for obtaining information about the historic properties and maps of the county.

All three events were filmed so, if you missed any of them, you can borrow the DVD from the Starr Library collection.

RHS board member Michael Frazier has written a book "Rhinebeck" in Arcadia's Images of America series. The book contains many photographs from the RHS and the Museum of Rhinebeck History collections. On July 19 Mike had a book signing at the Oblong Book Store. The event was well attended and the owner of Oblong, Suzanna Hermans, donated a portion of the sales of the book to the RHS and Museum and we thank her for that.

In July we held our first joint event with the Museum of Rhinebeck History which was a progressive dinner at two fabulous homes: Half Moon on the river in Rhinecliff located on the Levi P. Morton property and Stonecrest on Old Post Road with great views of the river as well. Well over 100 people attended and enjoyed great food at Half Moon and fabulous desserts at Stonecrest. We want to thank our two homeowners, as well as our donors and sponsors for making the event such a success. We raised a considerable amount of money which was shared by both organizations. We are currently beginning the planning process for our joint 2013 Progressive Dinner.

I would like to extend a very special "thank you" to the Frost Memorial Fund for their generous contribution to the Historical Society. Funds were granted to support an effort to scan slides of Rhinebeck taken by Tom Daley. Tom has taken photographs of Rhinebeck over the years and is working with us to select several thousand of them, send them out to be digitally scanned and then allow the scans to be stored in our archives. The scans of Tom Daley slides will be a valuable addition to our collection.

David Miller, President

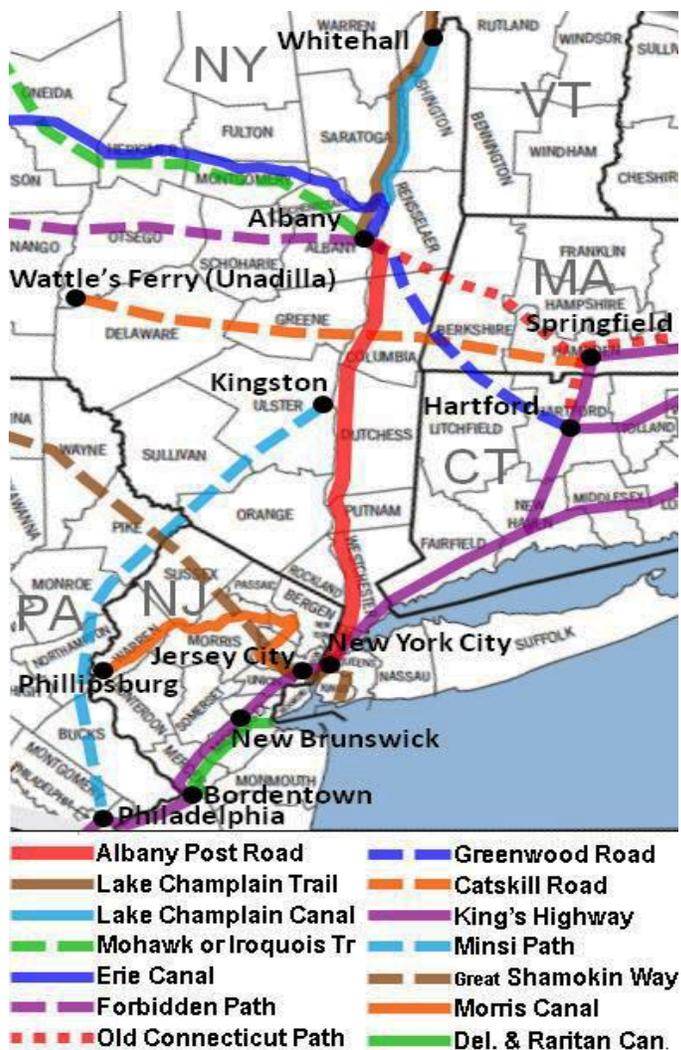
The History of Mail Delivery in Rhinebeck By David Miller

Due, in part, to email, online bill paying, and FedEx and UPS delivery services eating into their business, the United States Postal Service is changing. No doubt, you have heard on nightly news, programs the threats of post office closings, staff and service hour reductions, and the elimination of Saturday delivery that are being proposed. Wondering what impact the impending changes will have on our two Rhinebeck Post Office's spurred my interest in how mail delivery began in Rhinebeck.

Three hundred years ago the postal service was one of the most critical functions of the government. It was the only way that people were able to keep in touch or learn what was happening over the vast expanse of our growing country. In fact, it was newspapers rather than letters that were the most important thing the Postal Service delivered. It began in 1669 when the Dutch government of New Netherland designated a postal route between the colony's two most important cities, New Amsterdam (NYC) and Albany. It was little more than a path in some places using the old trails of local Native American tribes. Indeed, when a Postal Service was established in 1671, Native Americans were used to carry the mail on foot. In 1703, after the colony became British, funds were provided to enlarge the road to as much as 50 feet wide. It ran from Kingsbridge in the Bronx all of the way to a ferry landing in present-day Rensselaer. As it became the main route between the two cities, inns sprang up along

the way to serve the travelers. In 1740 a service by 'mounted post' was established. When the Beckman Arms was built in 1766, it was an official post station where horses were changed out, riders ate, rested and slept. Winter months were the busiest times for horseback riders because the frozen river prevented the mail from moving via boats. According to historian Howard Morse, *"The post-rider usually carried "special delivery" messages to Col. Beekman. He would leave his outfit at Traphagen's (The current Beekman Arms) and ride at breakneck speed to Col. Beekman's on his mission. The qualifications for the position of a post-rider were good health, vigor, strength, courage and honesty. He was required to be polite and obliging. He was to report occurrences and happenings and watch keenly for fugitive servants. It was half a century before the snap of the stage driver's whip was heard."*

The map below shows the early roads/trails in the tri-state area. (You can see the color version of this newsletter on our website)



In 1753 Benjamin Franklin was appointed Postmaster General for the British Crown. He ordered new surveys of Post Road and established mile markers. The next year major improvements were performed to support the shipment of military supplies north to the British troops that were fighting the French and Indian war in Quebec. These improvements in the road made mail delivery easier.

For the first 100 years of the Postal Service most of the mail was moved on foot or horseback. In the late 1700's a major technological breakthrough occurred with the invention of the Stagecoach. After the Revolutionary war the New York State legislature chartered a regular stagecoach route along Albany Post Road for mail delivery. The most popular stagecoach of the era was the Concord which was manufactured in Concord, N.H. The first Concord stagecoach was built in 1827. It employed leather strap braces under the stagecoach which gave a swinging motion instead of the jolting up and down of a spring suspension. Most stage coaches carried the mail under the driver's seat. On the New York to Albany route there was a locked box under the driver's seat that only the postmasters at each end had keys to.



The Beekman Arms was the stagecoach stop in Rhinebeck. The drivers became local folk heroes. You can get a feel for what stagecoach travel was like from this quote by Howard Morse; *"The driver had his own blankets and often a straw mattress upon which he slept in cold weather. He would sleep on the tap room floor feet to the fire. He would stable his horses and get his breakfast at the tavern. The New York Post of February 13, 1803 contains the following: New York and Albany Mail Stage leaves New York every morning at 6 o'clock lodges at Peekskill and Rhinebeck and arrives in Albany on the third day".* Historian Richard Palmer describes a typical driver: *"He was a personage in every village which depended on his arrival for the mail and the latest*

news from the outside world. He was an expert reinsman whose reputation was counties wide. Gazed upon with awe by the children, he was worshipped as sort of a hero of romance, who never worked, but drove his galloping horses back and forth though a perpetual holiday. The stable boys soon trotted out a fresh team and in a few moments the passengers reclaimed their seats. The driver mounted his seat, slung the mail pouch underneath, sounded his bugle, and with a crack of the whip galloped off down the dusty road”.

The drivers appear to have been quite a macho and competitive lot. Several laws had to be put in place by the NYS Legislature forbidding racing of the coaches, blocking another coach from passing and other rules protecting both the horses and passengers from harm. Fines or imprisonment could be imposed on drivers who broke these laws. The mail and passengers were moved from the City to Albany for the next 50 years until the Hudson River Railroad was completed in 1850 at which time moving the mail via the road became obsolete and stage service ended.

Railway Mail Service began nationwide on all trains in 1869 when congress created the Railway Mail Service. Trains could move along the tracks at high speed and pick up the mail as they passed through towns without ever stopping using special Railway Post Offices (RPO cars). Mail was hung on bags and the postal worker hooked it as the train passed through the town at high speed.



The mail was sorted on the train on its way to the destination. So that mail picked up along the way from Albany to the city would be ready for distribution when the train arrived.



Railway Mail Service lasted 100 years coming to an end in the mid 1900's as passenger train service declined and mail moved by airplane or in mail trucks along the new high speed interstate highway system.

This article has barely scratched the surface on the story of early mail delivery methods. What about post offices, stamps, post cards and the delivery of the mail to people's homes? To learn more of what I discovered please come to my talk on the evening of September 21st.

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