

THE POST OFFICES OF  
NORTHEASTERN KENTUCKY

(A SURVEY OF THE 343 POST OFFICES  
OF GREENUP, LAWRENCE, CARTER, BOYD,  
AND ELLIOTT COUNTIES)

BY

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## INTRODUCTION\*

As with my two volumes on the Bluegrass area post offices and the ones on the post offices of the Salt River and Northern Kentucky areas,<sup>1</sup> this book began with the idea of a series of articles for LaPosta, a west coast magazine specializing in U.S. postal history. It was later decided to compile my data into several books, each dealing with the post offices of the counties in each of Kentucky's dozen or so cultural-historical regions.

This volume deals with the five counties of northeastern Kentucky that were wholly within Mason County until 1803. In that year the first of these counties, Greenup, was organized by the state legislature. In 1822 Lawrence County was created from part of Greenup<sup>County</sup>, and part of Floyd County (the latter taken from Mason in 1799). Later, from Greenup came all of Carter and Boyd and most of Elliott. The five counties are now functionally tied together as the FIVCO Kentucky Area Development District.

Again, as with the other books in this series, readers are cautioned not to expect more of this book than what is indicated in its title. It will merely describe the post offices of each of the five counties of northeastern Kentucky. We will present, as briefly as necessary, the geographical setting and developmental history of each county, but most of the text will be devoted to the post offices themselves. Most of the offices whose sites are known will be located by their distance and direction from the court house or post office in the county seat. Others will refer to places closer by or of greater significance to them. A brief history of the community or area served by the post office will be presented along

with the date and circumstance of the office's establishment and the name of its first postmaster or that person most influential in getting it started, the date it closed (most did), the derivation of its name (and whether this has been confirmed or is merely assumed or suspected), and the other names (if any) borne by the post office or the community it served. - 2 -

I had three reasons for doing this series on Kentucky's post offices. One was to correct some errors of fact in my Kentucky Place Names book.<sup>2</sup> I also wished to expand on some of the entries in that book, and, of course, to include those offices that, for space reasons, had to be omitted from it. Each of the 343 post offices known to have operated within the current boundaries of these five northeastern Kentucky counties is included. The counties will be considered in the order of their establishment.

The post offices of a county are among its easiest named entities to study since they can be approached from already available lists. This cannot be said of most other named places. Only the principal streams and hills of a county, for instance, are identified on maps or listed in gazetteers; most man made features are not. Moreover, the names identifying many of the features that are shown on published maps are not always those by which these features are actually known by local people. Post office names, though, are official. They are, at least for a limited period of time, the only names used to identify the particular post offices, though the communities they served sometimes had other names.

A nearly complete list of Kentucky post offices, by county, may be found in this state's Records of Appointments of Postmasters (1832-1971) available on microfilm from the National Archives. (A separate list of offices for the period before 1832 is also available on film, but alphabetically for the entire country rather than by individual states, and the offices were not identified by counties until the mid 1820s.) The Records of Appointments provides, for each office, the date of its establishment, the names of the first and subsequent postmasters and the date each was appointed, and the date the office was closed. (Records after 1870 named the post office to which the closed office's papers were sent.) Dates of the office's re-establishment and change of name or location, if this were the case, are also given. Unfortunately, these records do not give us the two kinds of information most sought after by post office researchers: the locations of the offices and the derivations of their names.

So how were our post offices located? Current post offices are nearly always found on current topographic and state highway maps, though not necessarily where they should be. Since these maps are not kept uptodate, some offices may be shown at a former site and not at their present one. In some cases the labels applied to the post office and the community it served are some distance apart.

Since the large majority of Kentucky's post offices are not current, they had to be located on historic maps; or references to them were found on old land records in county court houses or the Kentucky State Library. Few nineteenth century maps are available for Kentucky. The postal route maps of the 1880s and the Rand McNally and other commercial maps from the mid 1880s through the 1920s were not of a scale to show any but the principal post offices of a county, and they obviously could not locate these offices precisely. The same can be said of the early twentieth century railroad maps which, of course, identified railroad stations, many, though not all, having their own post offices. Though the several county atlases, like those those published by Beers and Lanagan and the D.J. Lake Co., both of Philadelphia, were of a sufficient scale to accurately include all post offices they, like other maps, could only show the offices in operation at the time of publication. None of these maps, however, were entirely accurate.

Another source of post office locations, though somewhat limited in usefulness, were the Site Location Reports, also available from the National Archives. These provided general locations in terms of distance and direction from major streams, railroad tracks and stations, and other post offices. The postmaster-designate was asked

to locate his proposed post office by road miles from existing offices (or, if it were a site change, from the office's previous location) and to give its distance from the nearest river and creek which he would take literally and state simply that the office would be (for example) thirty miles from So-and-So River and ten miles from Such-and-Such Creek. This would hardly do for pinpointing locations. In other words, he would seldom locate the place itself (as, say, one hundred yards below the mouth of Jones Branch of Smith Creek, much less precisely place the site by geographic coordinates with which he would be totally unfamiliar.) Moreover, distances and directions were usually in terms of existing roads, most of which are now unlocated; seldom were air distances noted, except from the nearest county lines. Also, many of these postmasters had no sense of direction. So these records are not very accurate or precise. They were also not available for offices in operation before the late 1860s.

The Site Location Reports also reveal, at least for some of the offices, the names proposed for them that, for some reason, were not acceptable to the Post Office Department. These were usually names already in use in Kentucky for the Department long proscribed the duplication of names in any state.

The reports also show the several changes in post office location. Post offices with more than one postmaster seldom stayed in one place. Office sites moved with nearly every change in postmaster for these were usually in that person's home or store. Except in the largest towns, few offices were permanently situated until well into the twentieth century. Even fewer postmasters were not political appointees.

When a new party came to power after an election, the postmaster of the losing party was usually replaced. Civil Service appointments are a relatively new thing. In the Site Location Reports many (though not all) of an office's moves were recorded. A post office may have had a half dozen different locations, some even as high as eight or ten, over a several square mile area.

An obvious question here for us post office surveyors is whether it would be sufficient to identify an office at only one of its sites, or if we should distinguish each of an office's several locations. And if only one, which--the first, last, or longest? In common usage we refer to a post office, like a community of any kind, as a place. But if it occupied several sites can we refer to it as only one place? Must the post office by name be limited to a particular point in space? Would a post office with seven or eight different sites be seven or eight different places? This could make for very congested mapping. For most post offices information on all their locations is not available. A post office's last location is more likely to be known. But some historians would prefer to locate the first site. Researchers must decide for themselves whether to call a post office one place or several. Strictly for convenience, and on the basis of available information, I arbitrarily considered each post office described below as "one place", acknowledging that some had several sites and giving site changes when known or when I felt they were historically significant. However, when a site change was for more than several miles and was accompanied by a change-in-name, and especially when there was an interruption in service, I usually considered the subsequent office as a different place.

When maps or Site Location Reports were not helpful, as with early or shortlived post offices, I had to depend on any references to these offices I could find in early county records. From old land deeds, for instance, I was sometimes able to locate the home of the first postmaster about the time his office was established, and assumed that his home and office were in proximity. (Knowing the poor condition of antebellum roads in Kentucky this seems most likely). But some post offices could not be located at all.

For other information on north<sup>eastern</sup> Kentucky post offices--particularly their histories and name derivations--I consulted all the available literature (published or otherwise) about the county in local and state libraries and archives, noting any references to the post offices by name, and especially to the families of early postmasters. Since at least half of the post office names seem to be personal names--many the same as an early postmaster's--and since other researchers have learned that post offices elsewhere were, as often as not, named for local or area persons, I figured that by examining Census records and family biographies in nineteenth century county histories, I might be able to identify most of the personal name sources.

For the most part I was successful. Postmaster-designates or at least the persons who petitioned for the establishment of their offices, were usually given the right to name them. Often the namer would select his own name or his family's, or that of some specific family member, a neighbor, or (for political or economic reasons) some important local person.



The postmaster-designate, however, was not always the petitioner; nor was he necessarily the first postmaster. For reasons not revealed in the postal records, the first appointments for several area offices were rescinded and other persons assumed charge of these offices. The petitioner was sometimes the owner of the store in which the office was located, while the first postmaster was an employee hired to run it, and was often replaced shortly after the office opened. Unfortunately, post office petitions signed by the persons who established the offices are no longer available. (I have heard they were long ago discarded by the Post Office Department). The Site Location Reports, though, were submitted by the first (and often subsequent) postmasters. The Census records, from 1860 on, give occupations, and local storekeepers are usually identified. However, postmasters are not, suggesting that postmastering was not, at least in the late nineteenth century, a fulltime occupation. Interestingly, many Kentucky postmasters are listed in the nineteenth century Censuses as farmers or blacksmiths.

Post office or community names had a number of other derivations. Many were named for the streams on which they were located or for nearby churches, schools, mills, mines, or landings. Or they identified some ongoing economic or social activity of the residents. Many names were brought with them by the first settlers from an earlier home. Family histories tracing forebears back to their Virginia, Carolina, Pennsylvania, Maryland, or wherever roots might reveal the significance of the post office name in the old home state.

Other post office names honored famous Americans, or places elsewhere that were in the news at the time their names were applied

and were of evident interest to the namers. A few names reflected the namer's sense of humor, or his literary partialities, or his aspirations for the community that would grow up around his post office.

But some derivations, like some locations, could not be found. And a few may never be learned no matter how hard they are pursued. Some names were given to places by outsiders (like railroad officials) and thus have no local significance. Some were even suggested by non-local postal officials (though this was not as common as some people think). The derivations of later names are especially elusive. By 1900, in most states, all the good names had been taken. By then federal standards limiting acceptable names had been enacted, and the Post Office Department retained its policy of not duplicating already existing names. (This was before zip codes). Desperate postmasters were often vulnerable to suggestions from outsiders. Or they would select a name randomly from a book, or coin a name out of the blue. And the name might thus have no significance at all.

Many post offices were given names they were not originally intended to bear. And many had names different from those of the communities they served. Often this was because the community's name had already been applied to another Kentucky post office then in operation. In the late nineteenth century post office petitioners were usually asked to list several names, in order of preference, and one would be chosen by the postal authorities. (Most Kentuckians then lacked complete lists of post offices in the state and probably did not know if a particular name was already in use.)

A number of post offices had name changes during their lifetimes. Several that closed and were later re-established to serve the same communities were given other names if their original names, by then, had been assumed by other offices in the state.

Many post offices were established to serve already settled and named communities and for the most part simply assumed the communities' names. Most, though, were created to serve rural areas, and communities grew up around them, taking their names from the post offices'.

The large majority of the 343 operating post offices described in this book served definable communities of some kind, if only a rural hamlet around a single non-residential institution. Most of them were located in a store or a rail depot or by a river landing, or in an old stage-coach stop, or at least in the postmaster's home near one of these.

Most of the northeast Kentucky offices, like most of the state's, are no longer in operation. A large <sup>number</sup> of these, having served their patrons for several generations, closed in the first decade of the twentieth century. This followed the advent of Rural Free Delivery and the considerable amount of road building throughout the region which provided easier access to larger places.

I have long recognized the need to be wary of the seemingly obvious in place names research, a trap I and other researchers still sometimes find ourselves falling into. I am especially cautious about not assuming anything from the names themselves until all possibilities are considered--certainly not assuming a name's derivation from its application elsewhere. The meaning or origin of a name

is not inherent in it. I also learned the hard way not to automatically assume that an office bearing the name of its first postmaster or the petitioner was named for him. In many cases I discovered that it honored an earlier bearer of the same name, a father or grandfather, perhaps, who had been the community's founder.

Moreover, simply learning the derivation of a name won't be of much use in determining why that name rather than something else was given to a particular office. Since very few namers ever left records of the reasons for the names they gave, we may never know why most of the post offices or almost any other places were so named.

Another caveat: none of the post office source documents, including the Records of Appointments and the Site Location Reports, and certainly the nineteenth century Censuses, are error-proof. Post office, postmaster, and family names are often misspelled since postal and Census clerks in Washington usually had to contend with careless spelling and illegible handwriting, and they usually lacked the time or the inclination to check what the petitioners or the enumerators intended. Moreover, for much of the nineteenth century, even fairly educated persons did not adhere too strictly to spelling conventions; nor were they even consistent with the spelling of their own names. Too, nineteenth century clerks generally recorded everything in long-hand and their writing is often undecipherable to late twentieth century researchers.

In each of the chapters the county's post offices are generally ordered chronologically though offices serving the same areas or neighborhoods are usually grouped together. Pronunciations are given

for several office names that may not be familiar to non-residents.

This pronunciation key is followed:

<u>symbol</u>	<u>pronounced as</u>	<u>symbol</u>	<u>pronounced as</u>
ae	bat	aw	awe
ā	ate	oi	toy
ah	stop	uh	cup
a:	[midway between ah and <sup>3i</sup> eye]	ur	virgin
ai	eye	u	June
eh	yet	yu	union
ee	bee	ə	[alone, system (unaccented syllable)]
ε	dare	gh	give
ih	sit	dj	Joe
oh	old	ŋ	sing
ow	cow		

The maps for each county precisely locate its offices in terms of railroad tracks or contemporary roadways. The sites shown are the last, the longest, or the best known of the several that individual offices occupied during their lifetimes. Obviously excluded from the maps are those offices whose locations are not known. The points of location of the county seats are their centrally located downtown business districts. Information sources and references for each county are given at the end of its respective chapter.

- \* This introduction is, in part, a revision of an article on post office research methods published in the Bulletin of the American Name Society, #89, August 1992, Pp. 1-6. It was also used to introduce the four earlier volumes on Kentucky post offices published by The Depot.
1. Robert M. Rennick, Kentucky's Bluegrass: A Survey of the Post Offices, Lake Grove, Or: The Depot, 1993; Kentucky's Bluegrass: A Survey of the Post Offices, Vol. 2, Lake Grove, Or: The Depot, 1994; Kentucky's Salt River Valley: A Survey of the Post Offices of the Greater Louisville Area, Lake Grove, Or: The Depot, 1997; The Post Offices of Northern Kentucky, Lake Grove, Or: The Depot, 1998
  2. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984. For a brief description of the establishment of post offices in Kentucky and elsewhere, readers are referred to the introduction to this book, especially pp. xiv-xix.