St. Louis Builds a Post Office

BY DAVID L. STRAIGHT

The Post Office occupied the ground floor of this modest Italianate building at 22 North Second Street from 1852 until 1859. The C. A. Roberts Company, which stored steel tubing on the ground floor, was the last tenant. Eugene Taylor took this photograph in 1936. *(Photo: National Park Service, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Archives, Record Unit 106.8-5 Parcel Files)*

By 1851, Postmaster Archibald Gamble realized that St. Louis needed a larger post office sooner than Congress would act to provide one. The cramped quarters he rented at 87 Chesnut were no longer adequate for either the city's rapidly growing population or the surging mail volume encouraged by cheap postage. From 16,469 inhabitants in 1840, the population of St. Louis had exploded to 77,860 by 1850. It would more than double again, reaching 160,773 in 1860. St. Louis was the eighth-largest city in the nation, closely trailing Cincinnati and New Orleans. Nationally, the U.S. Post Office delivered slightly fewer than 40 million letters in 1845, the first year of reduced postage rates. By 1854, that volume had swollen to nearly 120 million letters. Exceeding mere population growth, the average number of letters received per capita more than tripled from 1.61 in 1840 to 5.15 in 1860. Having the support of local investors, Gamble wrote to Third Assistant Postmaster General John Marron in October 1851:

> have therefore made an arrangement with some Gentlemen here to build a Post Office, the house to cover 60 by 96 feet at the corner of Second and Chesnut Streets for the lower story of which I agree to pay $1500. And in as much as I had no authority to lease it for a term of years, they build under the expectation that the Department will permit it to be so occupied for eight or ten years.

This building, erected on the southeast corner of Second and Chesnut streets, approximately one block west from what is today the north leg of the Arch, was the first building constructed in St. Louis to be a post office.

The first meeting of business leaders to discuss memorializing Congress for the construction of a post office in St. Louis was held in November 1838; committees were formed, but their efforts came to naught. At that time, newspapers comprised 95 percent of the mail by weight. Most Americans received no letters; those mailed usually concerned business and legal matters, not chatty family correspondence. The condition and location of the post office was primarily a concern of the business community. Although resulting from a change of administrations in Washington, the appointment of Archibald Gamble as Postmaster coincided with the rebuilding of St. Louis in the wake of the 1849 fire, which had destroyed much of the business district. Born in Winchester, Virginia, and trained as a lawyer, Gamble had moved to St. Louis in 1816 when he was about 24. He first worked as the clerk of the St. Louis Bank, then as a deputy court clerk. Territorial Governor William Clark appointed him Clerk of the Circuit Court and ex officio recorder of deeds for St. Louis County, a post he held for eighteen years. In 1822, he married Louisa, the daughter of Rufus Easton, the first St. Louis Postmaster. Gamble's career included several local business ventures as well as serving as city alderman and the legal agent for the public schools. After Congress appropriated $50,000 in September 1850 for a combined customhouse, post office, and sub-treasury in St. Louis, wrangling over its location began. Gamble

The Gamble family burial lot was among the earliest purchased at the rural cemetery in St. Louis, Bellefontaine. *(Image: Bellefontaine Cemetery Association)*

began searching for an immediate solution to the needs of the St. Louis Post Office.

In the spring of 1851, the county was considering constructing two office buildings—one on Chesnut, the other on Market—in front of the unfinished courthouse. Gamble requested that they include temporary quarters for the post office and the customhouse. For the post office, he requested "one apartment be set aside, forty feet front by one hundred in depth." The County Court did not agree to build a temporary federal office building. In the meantime, the St. Louis Post Office Building Company organized, leased a vacant lot (burned in the 1849 fire) from D. D. Page, and approached Gamble with a proposal to construct a post office to his specifications. He accepted, as outlined in his letter to John Marron, and they erected a three-story brick building, with a modest cornice and stone quoins at the corners, in the popular new Italianate style for commercial architecture. Prominent St. Louis architect George I. Barnett designed the building. With all the chimney flues located in the exterior walls and only three rows of wooden structural columns, the large open ground floor was easily customized for the needs of the post office. Lawyers' offices were planned for the second floor and "sleeping or other private apartments" for the third. Gamble opened his new post office on April 18, 1852.

This new St. Louis Post Office served a population that had grown far beyond the city boundaries, set in
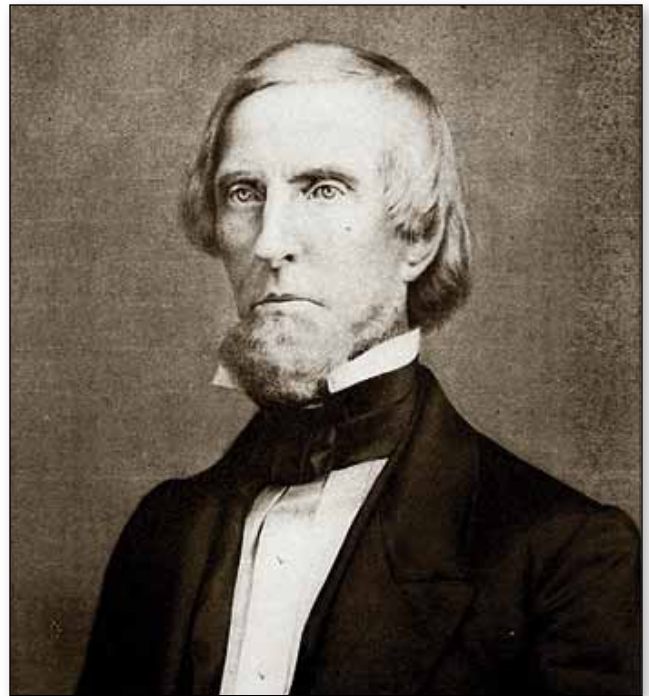
Archibald Gamble (1792-1866) St. Louis Postmaster 1849-1854. *(Image: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)*

October 15, 1851, letter from St. Louis Postmaster Archibald Gamble to Third Assistant Postmaster General John Marron, informing him of the plans for a new St. Louis Post Office. *(Image: United States Postal Service Library)*

P. O. St. Louis, Oct. 15, 1851

Sir

    Having had some correspondence with you on the subject of a Post Office building for St. Louis, without obtaining the authority asked, and the matter being left to my judgment and discretion restricted by the amount of commissions. I think it my duty to communicate what I have done in the premises.

    The office I now occupy and for which I pay a rent of $1000 per annum is too small for the business and labor to be performed, and still I should have to pay an advance upon that rent of $250 if I continue to occupy it. I have therefore made an arrangement with some Gentlemen here to build a Post Office, the house to cover 60 by 96 feet at the corner of Second and Chesnut Streets for the lower story of which I agree to pay $1500. And in as much as I had no authority to lease it for a term of years, they build under the expectation that the Department will permit it to be so occupied for eight or ten years. The position is central and will give general satisfaction.

    As the rates of commissions to the Post Masters under the new law has not yet been fixed this item of increased expense of the St. Louis Office should be borne in mind.

With great respect
your obedient servant
Archibald Gamble, PM

Hon: John Marron
   Washington City
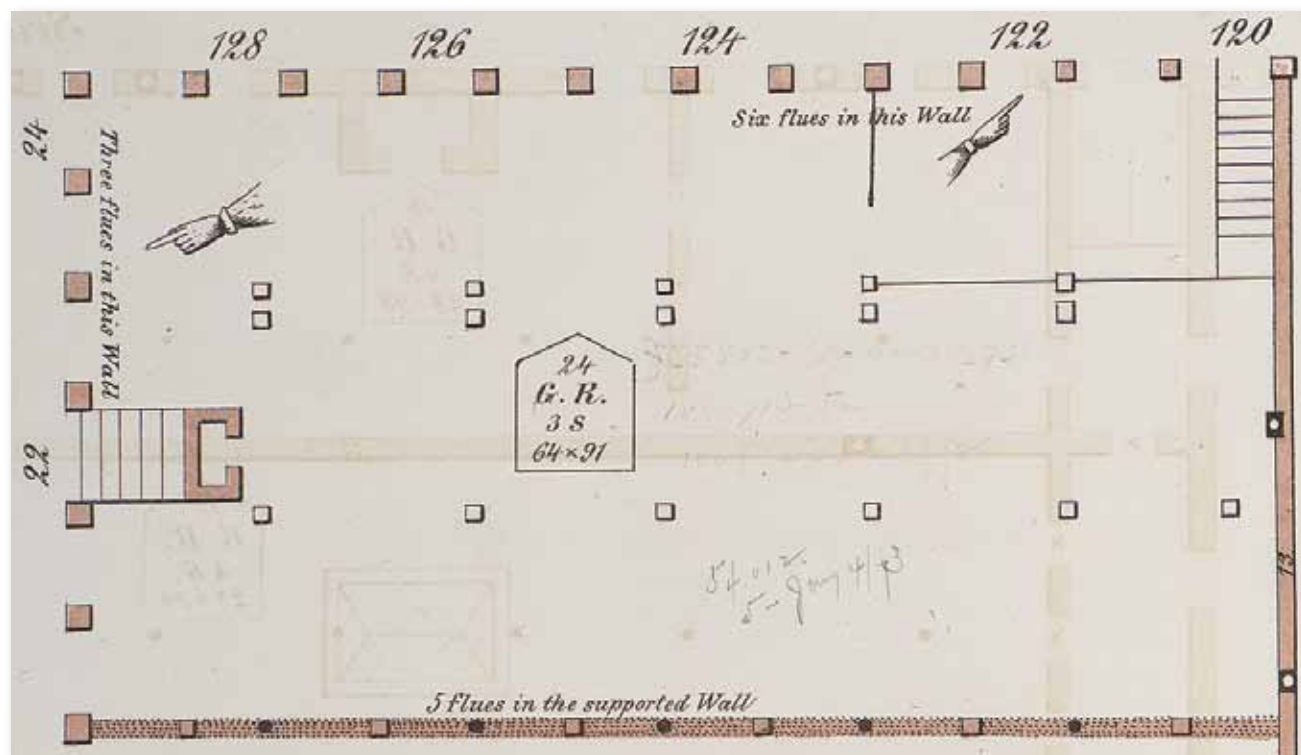
A ground floor plan from *A. Whipple & Co.'s Insurance Map of St. Louis, Mo.* (1870) provides construction details. The pentagon in the center gives the dimensions of the building, 64 by 91 feet; three stories in height; a gravel roof; and walls extending 24 inches above the roof. Three rows of wooden posts support the upper floors. The east wall (at right) is thirteen inches thick. The south wall (bottom) has both iron and wood support columns, as well as five chimney flues. The west (left) and north (top) walls consist of masonry columns with large window openings; there are chimney flues in those walls as well. Street numbers are shown outside the building. The entrance is on Second Street at the left. *(Photo: The Unreal City: Historic St. Louis Maps, http://digital. wustl.edu/w/whi/)*

1841 at 18th Street. Finally, in 1855, the state legislature extended the city boundaries to Keokuk Street on the south, 660 feet west of Grand Avenue, and East Grand Avenue on the north, incorporating several subdivisions and settlements previously outside the city limits. Carondelet, which would become part of St. Louis, had its own post office. The farmers residing in the rest of St. Louis County received their mail from post offices in the villages of Belle Grove, Bridgeton, Des Peres, Ellisville, Fee Fee, Fenton, Florisant, Fox Creek, Jefferson Barracks, Manchester, Oakville, Rock Hill, Sappington, or Waltonham.

1851 was a pivotal year for the U.S. Post Office; it marked the beginning of a substantial growth in letter mail. The cheap postage reforms had brought the cost of mailing a letter within the financial means of all American families. Before 1845, the maximum postage rate, 25 cents for each sheet of paper mailed over three hundred miles, exceeded the daily wage for most people. In that year, the rates were reduced to five cents per ½ ounce under three hundred miles and ten cents over three hundred miles; most St. Louis correspondence traveled over three hundred miles. Rates were further reduced in 1851 to three cents per ½ ounce, except for transcontinental letters, which were

charged six cents. The introduction of postage stamps in 1847 simplified mailing letters; they could be stamped and simply dropped into collection boxes. Weight-based rates (rather than rates based on the number of sheets of paper) encouraged using envelopes rather than folding letters and sealing them with wax, because using an envelope, another sheet of paper, no longer doubled the postage cost. The 88-percent reduction in postage rates between 1845 and 1851 transformed the way Americans used their Post Office. With this communications channel now affordable, they responded by writing letters. At a time when America began to experience large population movements—the gold rush, western settlement, the Civil War, and urbanization—the new postage rates allowed families to stay in contact. A flood of chatty, personal letters came to dominate the mail stream.

The St. Louis Post Office employed only nineteen men in 1853. Besides the Postmaster, there was a Principal Assistant, the Chief Clerk for the Distribution Room, the Chief Clerk for the Newspaper Room, the Principal Box Clerk, thirteen other clerks, and a Mail Agent, stationed on the wharf to accept mail from steamboats. The most obvious difference from today was the absence of mail carriers. Until 1863, when city carriers were introduced

in the largest cities, mail had to be picked up at the post office. Also, there were no collection boxes, branches, or substations. Outgoing mail from the entire city had to be brought to the post office at Second and Chesnut. The post office was open long hours; in 1850, "from sunrise to sunset" six days a week and one hour on Sunday to distribute mail.

To receive a letter, one entered the Distribution Room, gave his or her name to the clerk, and waited while the clerk checked to see if there was any mail. With this system, the post office naturally became a place of social interaction where one might see neighbors or business colleagues. By 1859, St. Louis, like most urban post offices, had established a separate entrance and window for women, so they did not have to stand in line with the men. Because of the large immigrant population, the St. Louis Post Office had a separate window and clerk for German mail. Many who regularly received mail found that renting a box at one dollar per three months was more efficient for collecting one's mail. The 1859 post office had nearly 5,000 boxes for rent. Those not wishing to make a trip to the post office to pick up or drop off mail could hire

a carrier. There were both private firms and government contract carriers in St. Louis in the 1850s. They charged a penny or two for each letter carried to or from the Post Office.

Upon receiving a letter, postage might be owed. Originally, nearly all letters were sent collect out of a fear that prepayment removed the incentive to have them actually delivered. Prepaying postage was a social slight, suggesting the recipient was too poor to afford to receive mail. However, following the introduction of postage stamps, prepayment quickly became the norm. The social mores changed to suggest that senders who failed to stamp their letters were rude. The post office encouraged prepayment by charging a higher rate for unpaid letters. Finally, in 1855, prepayment became mandatory for letters.

The volume and clerical burden of newspapers and magazines required a separate room and division of clerks in the post office. As with the Distribution Room, unless a patron rented a box, he or she gave a name and waited while the clerk searched for the newspapers. By 1859, a separate clerk handled German newspapers. From the Post Office Act of 1792 until today, letter

The interior of Gamble's Post Office as it looked in 1938, just prior to demolition. This view from the southeast corner of the first floor shows the three rows of columns supporting the upper floors, the entrance at the left, and the windows on Chesnut Street (right) and 2nd Street (center). A man holding a signboard to identify the building appears in many Historic American Buildings Survey photos. *(Image: National Park Service, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Archives, Record Unit 106.8-5 Parcel Files)*

The basement at 22-26 North Second Street. Before structural steel, a three-story building required a wide stone foundation and massive wooden beams. *(Image: National Park Service, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Archives, Record Unit 106.8-5 Parcel Files)*

postage has subsidized low rates for newspapers and magazines. Publishers did not prepay their postage until 1875. Although the rates were cheaper if a subscriber prepaid their postage one quarter in advance at their local post office, many newspapers still arrived with postage to be collected. Publishers mailed copies to former subscribers as well as large numbers of sample copies in hopes that someone would pay the postage and read their publications. As a result, every post office in America was burdened with mounds of unclaimed newspapers, which the post office had already transported without receiving postage.

In 1852, the federal government purchased the St. Louis Theater at the corner of Third and Olive streets and hired George I. Barnett to design the post office and customhouse. David Armstrong succeeded Gamble as St. Louis Postmaster in 1854. Now over sixty, Gamble retired; he died in 1866. Although by 1858 it was "not

sufficiently large for the increasing business," Gamble's post office continued to serve the citizens of St. Louis until the Greek Revival structure on Olive Street was finished in 1859. Afterwards, the building at Second and Chesnut served a variety of tenants. Business directories list commission merchants in lumber, grain, butter, and eggs; salesmen of surgical instruments; distillers' agents and gaugers; and small newspapers. Gradually, the renters became more industrial—a machine shop and a warehouse for steel tubing—while the upper floors became a flophouse. The building was part of the riverfront property purchased by the National Park Service in the 1930s for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. Before they were demolished, the Historic American Buildings Survey photographed and measured the buildings that once comprised a vibrant business district in St. Louis.

1   Before the Civil War, Chestnut Street was often spelled without the first t. Buildings in St. Louis were numbered consecutively westward from the Mississippi River. Six different city directories published between 1844 and 1850 give the post office address as "87 Chesnut," while W. D. Skillman's *The Western Metropolis; or St. Louis* (1846) gives the location as "the north side of Chestnut Street, between Third and Fourth." Quite likely, these are the same location.

2   Postal reformer Pliny Miles provided these estimates in his tract *Postal Reform: Its Urgent Necessity and Practicability* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1855), 26-27.

3   Allan Pred, *Urban Growth and City Systems in the United States, 1840-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1980), 224.

4   Archibald Gamble to John Marron, October 15, 1851, United States Postal Service Library.

5   J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County* (Philadelphia: Everts, 1883), 2:1434.

6   Richard John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 38.

7   William Hyde and Howard L. Conard, *Encyclopedia of the History of St. Louis* (St. Louis: Southern History Company, 1899), 2:861; and Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County*, 2:1469.

8   Lawrence Lowic, *The Architectural Heritage of St. Louis, 1803-1891* (St. Louis: Washington University Gallery of Art, 1982), 76.

9   *Missouri Republican*, May 6, 1851, 3.

10 *Missouri Republican*, October 9, 1851, 3.

11 *Missouri Republican*, November 9, 1851, 3, gives the name as George G. Barnett, probably a typo.

12 *Missouri Republican*, November 9, 1851, 3.

13 *St. Louis Intelligencer*, April 18, 1852, quoted in "Building History, Parcel 215, Block 33" in the National Park Service, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Archives, Record Unit 106.8-5 Parcel Files.

14 *History: Physical Growth of the City of Saint Louis* (St. Louis City Planning Commission, 1969) 14-15.

15 Taken from the Missouri list in *The United States Post Office Directory* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1850), 97-99. [reprinted Holland, Michigan: Theron Wierenga, 1981]

16 The social significance of this change in letter writing is explored by David Henkin in *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

17 Their names are listed in William L. Montague, *St. Louis Business Directory for 1853-54* (St. Louis: E. A. Lewis, 1853), 119-20.

18 James Green, *The Saint Louis Business Directory for the year of our Lord 1850* (St. Louis: McKee, 1850), 96.

19 There is no surviving description of the interior or operation of Gamble's post office. However, there is an excellent description of the "new" (1859) post office in Robert V. Kennedy's *St. Louis Directory for 1859* (Appendix, 10-12). Some of the procedures that Kennedy documents may have been implemented in the previous building.

20 Jacob N. Taylor and M. O. Crooks, *Sketch Book of Saint Louis* (St. Louis: George Knapp, 1858), 40.