

Put a stamp on it: Many still cherish the post office

By James Sullivan Globe Correspondent, Updated September 24, 2020, 12:19 p.m.

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The Post Office in North Pembroke has been serving the community for over 150 years. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

As director of education at the Spellman Museum of Stamps & Postal History in Weston, Henry Lukas knows the history of the postal service down to the letter. Young students, he says, are fascinated by the subject.

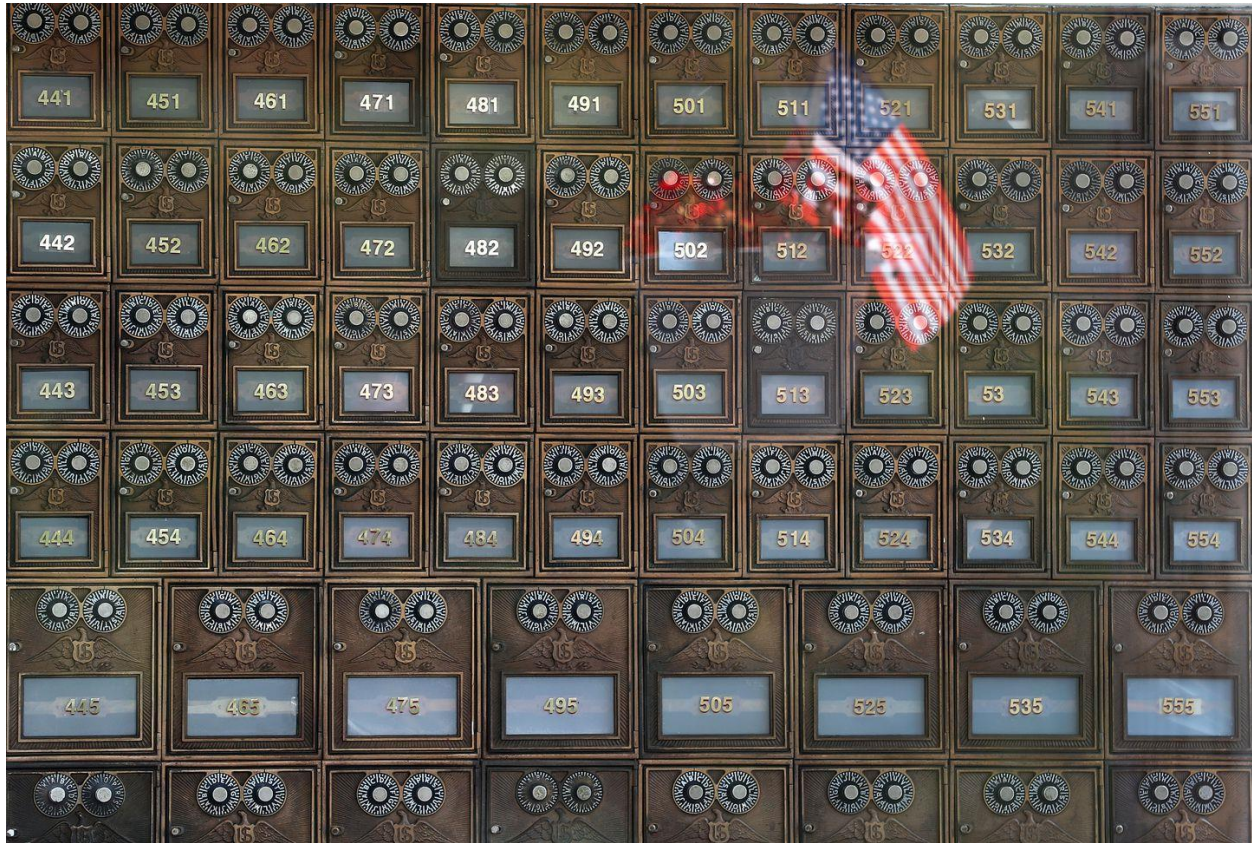
And there's plenty for them to learn.

For one thing, he says, "Kids don't know about licking stamps."

It's been more than 40 years since the Postal Service introduced self-adhesive stamps. It's been more than 20 years since e-mail and the Internet became routine conveniences of daily life. To younger generations, the post office may seem like a relic of a bygone era.

But in recent months, the Postal Service has emerged as an unlikely political flash point. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, appointed in May, caused an uproar when he ordered cuts and operational changes, which led to Democratic Party concerns about mail-in ballots and the upcoming election. A federal judge has since ordered DeJoy to postpone the cuts.

One side claims the service is outdated and should be privatized; the other argues that the post office wasn't designed for profit and should be cherished as a beloved institution.



Many residents still come to pick up their mail at the historic post office in North Pembroke. A view of the post office boxes shows an American flag reflected in the window. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

“People feel quite passionately about the post office,” says Sally Jacobson. As a member of the board of directors for the Galleries at Lynn Arts (GALA), she conceived and curated a summerlong exhibit of “mail art” — the practice of sending whimsical postcard-sized collages, paintings, and other artwork through the mail.

The art form, which had a heyday in the 1950s and '60s, has enjoyed a revival during the pandemic, Jacobson says. Many artists like herself went into the lockdown thinking they'd get a lot of work done, then found themselves distracted, she says. The gallery's call for submissions was intended to inspire more creative work.

“It's kind of fun to get mail,” she says.

John Kappy has owned and operated Kappy's Coins & Stamps in Norwood for almost 50 years. Stamp collecting was a thriving hobby when he was a kid; almost every small downtown had a storefront like Kappy's.

Now, he says, “I'm one of the few shops left in New England. Our stamp inventory has dust on it.”

Ironically, that's partly due to the Internet revolution. Collectors of all kinds can now order anything they're looking for online and get it in the mail.

"I still use the mail every day," says Kappy. "I sell more on eBay than in the store."

Kappy is realistic about the future of the postal service.

"Back in yesteryear, when families were apart, you needed the post office for communications," he says. "I don't know if we need it as much now."



Joseph W. Mullin, executive director of the Spellman Museum of Stamps & Postal History in Weston, looks out of a facade that was taken from a 19th-century post office that's now a part of the museum's store. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The nonprofit Spellman Museum, founded in 1960 and opened to the public on the grounds of Regis College in 1963, is named for Cardinal Francis Spellman, an enthusiastic collector who called stamps "miniature documents of human history." Portions of the collection once belonged to devoted hobbyists, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the violinist Jascha Heifetz.

Next year, the Stamp Museum plans to host an exhibition of photographs by Matt L. Barron, who has been taking pictures of rural post offices across New England since his childhood in the 1960s.

“They’re in general stores and in people’s homes,” says Barron, a political strategist who grew up in Brookline and lives in western Massachusetts. “They’re unique, and many of them are long gone.”

For him, the post office represents a way of life.



Some of the collection from former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt is on display at the Spellman Museum of Stamps & Postal History. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

“The post office in rural America is more than just a place to get stamps,” Barron says. “It’s a place where small-town folks gather and socialize. In many communities, it’s the only thing that has the name of the town.”

The post office in North Pembroke recently celebrated its 150th anniversary with a keepsake picture postmark. Rather than the usual cancellation mark, for one day the post office stamped its outgoing mail with an image custom-designed by Lynn McKay, a longtime clerk. A line drawing of a fish (a nod to the annual Pembroke Herring Run), the custom postmark became an instant collector’s item.

“The town was known for a long time for cardboard boxes and crates,” McKay says. “But that wasn’t going to translate well onto a cancellation stamp, so I just thought I’d go with a fish.”

Through the years, she’s gotten to know many of her neighbors over the counter at the post office.

“They tell you their business like you’re a bartender,” she says with a laugh.

It was an honor to create the postmark, McKay says.

“Maybe in 25 years, when they do the 175th anniversary, they’ll recycle it,” she says. “I’ll probably still be here.”



Postal hand cancels at the the Spellman Museum of Stamps & Postal History in Weston. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The quality and quantity of postal service was in decline long before Louis DeJoy assumed the role of postmaster general this year, says Joe Mullin, executive director of the Spellman Museum. The volume of first-class mail plummeted with the advent of e-mail; in recent decades, for-profit businesses such as FedEx and UPS have provided competition where there previously was little.

“As a boy, I can remember when the mail came two times a day,” Mullin says. Growing up in Maynard, he had an uncle who was a mailman. His aunt and uncle gave him their collection of stamps issued by the United Nations Postal Administration.

“I thought they were giving me all the gold in Fort Knox,” he says.

Mullin, who has served as a selectman in Weston and helped revitalize Maynard’s Clock Tower Place in the late 1990s, notes that the post office has faced threats for years. Those threats have ranged from rural closures and the proposed elimination of Saturday delivery to legislation passed in 2006 that required the agency to prefund 75 years of retirement benefits within 10 years.

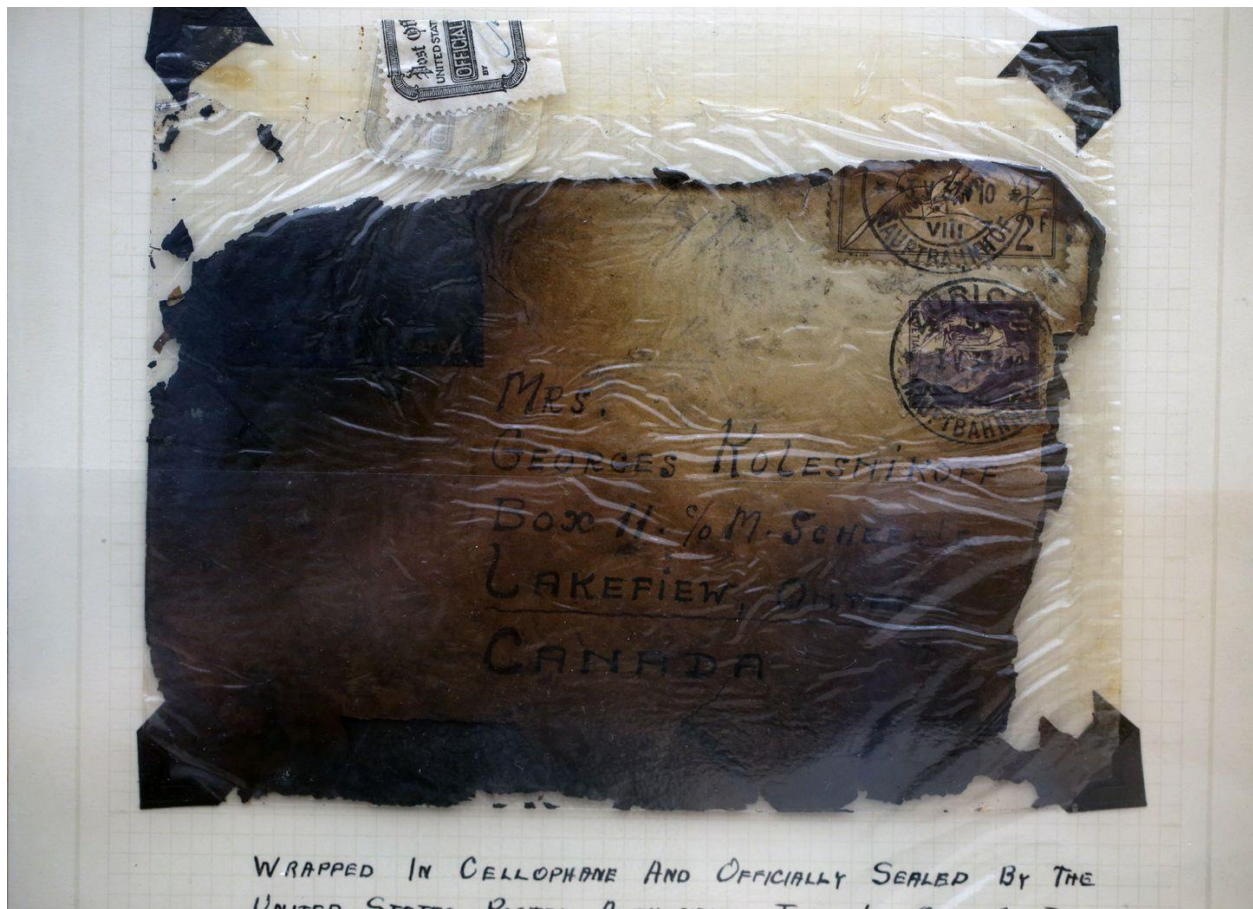
“It’s an impossible burden,” says Mullin, who is serving his second term as the Stamp Museum’s executive director.

The eventual privatization of the Postal Service may be inevitable, some observers say. Five years ago, the UK government sold off its remaining shares in the Royal Mail, ending its nearly 500 years as a public service.

If the US post office goes private, says John Kappy, stamps will become obsolete. That in turn could be good news for investors.

“They’ll become antiques,” he says, “and then they’ll be desirable again.”

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A letter from the Hindenburg disaster is displayed at the Spellman Museum of Stamps & Postal History. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF