Myron E. Foster, Postmaster
A Case Study in Using Original Records

Nine billion pages of textual records; 7.2 million maps, charts, and architectural drawings; more than 20 million still photographs; billions of machine-readable data sets; and more than 365,000 reels of film and 110,000 videotapes. All of these materials are preserved by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) because they are important to documenting the workings of the Federal Government, have long-term research worth, or provide information of value to citizens.

Have you, dear reader, taken the plunge and actually done research in the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.; at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland; or at any of the thirteen NARA Regional Archives where original, one-of-a-kind, federal records are available for your use? Have you gotten past microfilm yet? Have you limited yourself to microfilmed images available online on commercial genealogy websites?

There truly are wonderful original records waiting for discovery. In 2007, Military Archivist Trevor Plante discovered a handwritten Lincoln note that had not been seen since 1863. In 2005, an obscure surviving remnant of the 1890 federal population census of Delaware was published because another archivist recognized its importance in filling part of the gap left by the destruction of most of the 1890 census. Other researchers have visited, found great items, and published their finds. What’s waiting to be discovered by you?

Let’s work on a typical family history research question. In the 1910 federal population census, Myron Edwin Foster was enumerated (as M. E. Foster) at Early, Sac County, Iowa. His occupation was “postmaster.” What records document his employment as postmaster?

Library research
Comprehensive library research in relevant books is an essential component of every genealogical research project. There’s a paragraph in William Hart’s History of Sac County, Iowa that mentions Foster along with a description of his post office:

 “…A.P. Mennis…was succeeded in 1908 by the present incumbent, Ed. Foster, who was commissioned by President Roosevelt. It is a third class postoffice [sic], with three free rural delivery routes, making a total of seventy-eight miles traversed each day by the three carriers, the longest route being a little less than twenty-seven miles. The savings deposits have never quite reached the five-hundred-dollar mark.”

This nice gem tells us the year of Foster’s appointment, as well as much about the business of his post office, and should spur curiosity and background research into the rural free delivery system, postal savings deposits, and the meaning of a “third class” post office.

NARA
Records are arranged by federal agency (referred to as record groups), and so we should focus on Record Group (RG) 28, Records of the Post Office Department, as well as RG 287, Publications of the U.S. Government, and RG 46, Records of the U.S. Senate. I’ll number the items searched for convenience.

RG 28, Records of the Post Office Department
We should logically expect to find most relevant records created by this agency.

Item 1. Postmaster appointment. National Archives Microfilm Publication M841, Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832–September 30, 1971, Roll 39, Sac County, Iowa, Volume 93, circa
1900–30, indicates Myron was first appointed postmaster at Early, 18 July 1908, then reappointed in 1910. These records indicate “Pres. January 1, 1910,” indicating presidential nomination on that date, and “Reappt. (P&S), 20 January 1910,” indicating Senate confirmation on that date. His successor was Joseph M. Kelly, who was appointed 2 February 1914 (P&S).

**Item 2.** Site location reports. National Archives Microfilm Publication M1126, Post Office Department Reports of Site Locations, 1837–1950, Roll 185, includes a section for Early County, Iowa. If Foster ever submitted one of these reports to postal officials in Washington, D.C., it has not survived.

Now we need to move to original records (they’re not on microfilm, and not online either). There are several legacy finding aids, including Preliminary Inventory No. 168, Records of the Post Office Department (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1967), and master location registers (MLRs) for finding aids “A1” and “UD.” Legacy finding aids will eventually be superseded by the Archival Research Catalog (ARC) online at [http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/](http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/); as of 20 November 2009, ARC includes series listed in Preliminary Inventory 168 but not the A1 or UD series.

**Item 3.** Orders (“Journals”) of the Postmaster General, July 7, 1835–March 5, 1953 (PI 168, Series 1; ARC Identifier 612762). Volume 171 (unpaginated) is arranged chronologically. On a page for 18 July 1908, a long list of appointments includes Foster:

Post Office Department, Washington, DC, July 18, 1908. Saturday. Orders of the Postmaster General, prepared in the Office of the First Assistant Postmaster General, Division of Postmaster Appointments.

*** APPOINT THE FOLLOWING POSTMASTERS AT: *** Early, Sac County, Iowa, Myron E. Foster in place of A.P. Mennis, resigned. I.R. for removal for insufficiency. ****

Neither the volume containing January 1910 or the volume containing February 1914 contains anything about Foster.

**Item 4.** Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, October 3, 1789–December 31, 1952 (with gaps) (PI 168, Series 2; ARC Identifier 2635734). This series is not very promising since the Postmaster General did not routinely correspond with individual postmasters in the early twentieth century. There could be mention of a postmaster in connection with a citizen’s complaint, but a search for the entire 1908–14 period would be lengthy, and I didn’t do it.

**Item 5.** Registers of Postmasters’ Claims, 1882–1929 (PI 168, Series 57; ARC Identifier 2663078). This series is arranged chronologically by the date of submission of claims for loss from fire, theft, or other causes. The names of the post office and postmaster are given, the dates of loss and submission of the claim, and resolution of the claim. Volumes 6–7 include the years 1908–14. Volume 7, pages 1–100, for July 1910–January 1912, did not include Foster. I believe it would be worthwhile to finish the search.


Item 6. Daily Records of the Appointment of Postmasters and the Establishment, Discontinuance, and Name and Site Changes of Post Offices, January 1899–December 1914 (PI 168, Series 71; ARC Identifier 609185). The volume for 1908 has a carbon copy of the 1908 appointment record found in the Orders of the Postmaster General (Item 3, above). Neither Foster’s 1910 reappointment or his successor’s 1914 appointment are mentioned in this series.

Item 7. Records Regarding the Appointment and Reappointment of Postmasters, 1907–1913 (PI 168, Series 74; ARC Identifier 609273). This series is arranged by state, then by post office, but there was nothing relating to Iowa.

Item 8. Records Relating to Candidate Postmasters (“Briefs”), 1897–1909 (A1, Series 315; MLR 194223). Box 4 contains Iowa, 1901–09, but there was nothing about Foster or the post office at Early.

Item 9. Reports on Additional Services Needed, 1912–1913 (A1, Series 330; MLR 194276). This series has letters from postmasters. It is arranged by state, then by post office. Box 2, Iowa, includes nothing from Early.

Item 10. Post Office Receipts and Postmasters’ Salaries, 1905–1914 (A1, Series 333; MLR 194296). This series is arranged by state, then post office. Box 7 has one oversize card for Early, Iowa. It indicates that Early advanced from being a fourth class to a third class post office on 1 January 1910. The postmaster’s annual salary was $1,000 (1910); $1,100 (1911); $1,200 (1912); $1,100 (1913); and $1,200 (1914). Quarterly sales of “stamps and misc.” are given for each quarter of 1911–14, as well as the annual total for 1910. The annual amount of postage sold was roughly double the postmaster’s salary: $2,014.37 (1910); $2,186.44 (1911); $2,405.71 (1912); $2,208.20 (1913); and $2,417.28 (1914).

Item 11. Record Cards Showing the Annual Adjustment of Postmasters’ Salaries, 1914–38 (A1, Series 349; MLR 194351). This series is arranged by time period, then by state, then by post office. Like the above series (A1 Series 333), this series also shows post office receipts. Myron E. Foster is not named.
**Item 12.** Record Cards of Appointment of Postmasters, 1905–1944 (UD, Series 5, MLR 194410). These records are arranged by state, then by post office. Box 31, Iowa, includes two oversize cards for the Early post office. The first card indicates Myron E. Foster was appointed 18 July 1908, commissioned 21 July 1908, and received a presidential appointment on 1 January 1910. His salary was $999. The second card lists all the presidential appointments from Foster (1910) through Ralph E. Kelley (1939). From this card we learn that Foster’s term as postmaster ended because his commission expired. (We can infer that President Wilson, a Democrat, chose not to reappoint Foster, who had been appointed by a Republican).

**Item 13.** Photograph. An inquiry to NARA’s Still Pictures Branch at the National Archives at College Park, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001, elicited a reply that NARA has no photographs for any post office building at the town of Early, Iowa, in RG 28.

**RG 217, Publications of the U.S. Government**

U.S. Government publications are found nationwide in large public libraries and university libraries. Ask a library’s government documents librarian for assistance and education in navigating these interesting and useful publications.

**Item 14.** Senate Executive Journal. Its complete formal title is *Journal of the Executive Proceedings of the Senate of the United States of America*. Volume XLI (61st Cong., 2d Sess., 6 December 1909 to 25 June 1910), contains several items of interest. Pages 141–142 have the president’s nomination messages naming Myron E. Foster and others on 17 January 1910. Pages 143–44 show that the president’s postmaster nominations were referred on 17 January 1910 to the Committee on Post-Offices and Post-Roads. Pages 155–56 show that the Committee on Post-Offices and Post-Roads reported favorably, 17 January 1910, on the nomination of Myron E. Foster and others. Pages 157–59 show that the Senate, on 20 January 1910, confirmed the appointment of Myron E. Foster and others. Finally, Foster’s name is in the index on page 824.

**Item 15.** Congressional Record. Volume XLV (6 December 1909–25 January 1910), contains several items. Pages 692–93 have the president’s nomination messages naming Myron E. Foster and others on 17 January 1910. Page 791 indicates the Senate went into Executive Session on 19 January 1910. (This is when nominations were referred to committee although the *Congressional Record* does not indicate this). Page 837 shows the Senate confirmed Myron E. Foster and others on 20 January 1910.

**Item 16.** Statutes at Large. Vol. XXVI, Part 1 (March 1909–March 1911), does not have nominations of postmasters, but it does include the Act of Congress of June 25, 1910, “An Act to establish postal savings depositories for depositing savings at interest with the security of the Government for repayment thereof, and for other purposes.” This legislation is relevant background information because the Early, Iowa, post office had postal savings deposits according
to Hart’s History of Sac County, Iowa, mentioned earlier in this article.

**Item 17.** Official Register of the United States was a biennial publication, 1816–1959, that listed federal employees. Two volumes are relevant to Foster. First, the 1909 edition lists all the employees at the Early, Iowa, post office, with their salaries: Myron E. Foster, postmaster, $1,000 annually, plus rural delivery carriers Charles Averill, Forest T. Head, and William T. Roche, who each earned $900 annually. We also learn that Head and Roche were born in Iowa and Averill was born in Kansas, and that all three lived in Sac County in the 11th Iowa Congressional District at the time of their appointments.

Second, the 1911 edition likewise lists all the employees at the Early, Iowa, post office, with their salaries, and state or country of birth: Myron E. Foster, postmaster, New York, $1,200 annually; Mrs. Maud E. Foster, Wisconsin, assistant postmaster, $120 annually; and the three rural delivery carriers Averill, Head, and Roche, who now earned $1,000 annually. The carriers’ birthplaces are again indicated, as well as their (and Mrs. Foster’s) residence in the 11th Iowa Congressional District at the time of their appointments.

The federal government saved taxpayer money when it published the 1913 edition by not including the postal service outside of Washington, D.C.

**RG 46, Records of the U.S. Senate**

I limited my research span to the 61st Congress, 2d Session, which was is session 6 December 1909 to 25 June 1910. This was the period covering Foster’s 1910 appointment that received Senate confirmation.

**Item 18.** Committee papers. The records of the Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, File SEN61A-F24, contained nothing relating to Myron E. Foster.

**Item 19.** Petitions, memorials, resolutions of state legislatures & related documents that were referred to committees. There are two files for the Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, but neither has anything relevant. File SEN61A-J83 has petitions and memorials regarding a bill sponsored by Representative William E. Tou Velle of Ohio. File SEN61A-J84 has petitions and memorials submitted from 16 April 1909 to 28 February 1911 concerning various aspects of the management of the Post Office Department.

**Item 20.** Nomination messages. File SEN61B-A3 (part) for 5 January 1910 to 8 March 1910 includes presidential message no. 306 that names Myron E. Foster and others.

**Conclusions**

In this case study, we searched and found information in three record groups. We searched twenty record series and found relevant materials in eight. It was great fun examining records people rarely use (but should). Some record series had nothing useful, which is normal, but “negative findings” are something a researcher should always note in writing the biography or history of a subject. Remember that the number and types of records available about other postmasters depends upon what records were created and retained from the years that postmaster served. Happy hunting!

**Notes**


7. On Volume 171, the spine reads: Journal/Vol. 041/July 1908/Post Office/Department/Orders/of the/Postmaster/General).


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