

This 1851 check from the Post Office Department carries a signature on the front lower right from Nathan K. Hall, the postmaster general of the day.



## PAY TO THE ORDER OF ...

### A USPOD check to a postmaster from the postmaster general

By Charles J. DiComo, PhD

I truly enjoy the search for U.S. Post Office-related artifacts not often seen by philatelists and postal historians. The draft check illustrated fits the bill.

Shown is a U.S. Post Office Department check dated February 19, 1851 and signed by Postmaster General Nathan K. Hall.

Hall (March 28, 1810-March 2, 1874) served as President Millard Fillmore's postmaster general from 1850 to 1852, when the president appointed him U.S. district judge for the Western District of New York. He held that office until his death in 1874 in Buffalo.

This handsomely designed and finely engraved check was printed by Hufty & Danforth, with offices in Philadelphia and New York.

The engravers utilized images typical of the era on the obverse: at top center, a portrait of George Washington; at upper right, Lady Liberty with cap, shield and cornucopia; at lower left, rail cars crossing the country; and at upper left, a steam vessel and dinghy ploughing the sea. At left is a beautifully framed "Transportation of the Mails."

The check (draft No. 6415) is made out to M. Wheeler, the postmaster of the Hancock, N.Y. post office. The amount of \$40 was to be paid to a "T.J. Townsend, Treas."

The check was received at the Hancock post office and is marked on the reverse with a manuscript, "Pay to the order of A.B. Chamberlain, Agt." in one hand, signed by Chamberlain, in his hand, and then signed by Thomas Townsend.

President Fillmore (1800-1874) and Hall, 10 years his

junior, had a long history, in friendship, politically and professionally. Both were both were born in the same area of the state, Fillmore in rural Cayuga County; Hall in Marcel-lus in adjacent western Onondaga County.

Fillmore had little formal schooling, but studied to become a lawyer and became prominent in the Buffalo area as an attorney and politician.



Postmaster General  
Nathan K. Hall.

He was elected to the New York Assembly in 1828 and the House of Representatives in 1832. Fillmore initially belonged to the Anti-Masonic Party, but became a member of the Whig Party as it formed in the mid-1830s.

Hall moved with his family early in his youth to Erie County, attended the district schools, and engaged in shoemaking and agricultural pursuits. It wasn't too long before Hall turned his attention to the law, and studied under Fillmore's tutelage. Hall was admitted to the state bar in 1832 and joined Fillmore's practice as partner. Not long afterward, Hall joined his mentor Fillmore in the Whig Party.

Hall became involved in local politics, serving as deputy clerk of Erie County, as clerk of the Board of Supervisors, and as member of the Board of Aldermen of Buffalo. In 1839, New York Governor William Henry Seward appointed Hall as a mastery of chancery – essen-





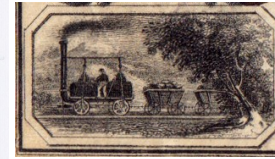
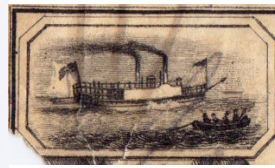
The reverse of the Post Office Department check.

tially a judge of the court of chancery. Two years later, Hall was elected judge of the Court of Erie County, where he served until 1845.

Hall was elected in 1847 as a Whig from New York's 32nd Congressional District, serving until March 3, 1849.

In the meantime, Fillmore was active in state and national politics, and is said to have declared slavery evil but said it was beyond the federal government's power to end it. Fillmore was prominent enough, though, to gain the vice presidential seat under Zachary Taylor, a former military hero who served just 16 months before dying in office, succumbing to a stomach disease.

The pre-Civil War era was tumultuous with a lot of indecision and polarizing views on slavery. Fillmore seemed to have a disdain for slavery, he signed into law a bill that culminated in the Fugitive Slave



Details from the check: railroad cars, watercraft, George Washington portrait, Lady Liberty and Hall's signature.



was especially valued by his colleague, [Secretary of State Daniel] Webster."

"During Hall's

Act, which endorsed the return of escaped slaves to their acclaimed owners.

In a more mundane area of his presidency, Fillmore appointed Hall as the 17th postmaster general, then a Cabinet position, serving from July 23, 1850, to August 31, 1852.

After leaving the Cabinet, Fillmore appointed Hall as U.S. district judge for the Western District of New York.

An article by Jeremy Morlock in the April 26, 2008 Herald Courier of East Aurora (Erie County) offered more about Hall and Fillmore. Morlock drew on material from James O. Putnam, a contemporary of both men who had access to Hall's unpublished autobiography.

"He (Hall) was fully in sympathy with the President upon all the great questions and measures of the time, but his own immediate responsibility began and ended with his own Department," Putnam records. ... To his Cabinet office he brought the same zeal, energy, judgment and fidelity which had distinguished his professional and official life. As a Cabinet officer he took high rank and

tenure as postmaster general, the postal rate was reduced from 5 cents per stamp to 3 cents per stamp on prepaid letters," notes Morlock. "The change was made by the Post Office Act of March 3, 1851.

"Many accounts written following his death at just a few days shy of age 64 attribute [Hall's] declining health to overwork, but praise him for his devotion. The New York Times noted that on March 3, 1874, the U.S. District Court in which Hall had served adjourned in Hall's memory.

"In Hall's obituary the same day, the Times noted that "Judge Hall was a man of much ability, of genial though retiring disposition, and much esteemed as a lawyer and Judge."

The two old friends died six days apart in 1874, Hall on March 2, Fillmore on March 8. They are buried very near each other in Forest Lawn, Buffalo.

(Additional biographical information about Hall and Fillmore were sourced from Find a Grave, Wikipedia, and the Miller Center at the University of Virginia.)



# Excelsior!

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## Upcoming Shows

**New York      October 20**  
Albany Fall Stamp & Postcard Show, Fort Orange Stamp Club, American Legion Hall, Joseph E. Zaloga Post 1520, 4 Everett Road. Ext., Albany. **Contact:** Mike Krug. <http://www.fortorangestampclub.org/>.

**New York      November 10**  
Syracuse Stamp Show. Free admission and parking. Holiday Inn (formerly Maple Wood Inn) 400 7th North Street, Liverpool (off Exit 36 NYS Thruway). Website: <http://syracusestampclub.org/syracuse-stamp-show/>.

**Pennsylvania      November 15- 16**  
Postal History Symposium, APRL, APS, and the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, American Philatelic Center, 100 Match Factory Place, Bellefonte. <https://stamps.org/news/c/collecting-insights/cat/postal-history-symposium>.