



UPU

UNIVERSAL
POSTAL
UNION

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What is the Universal Postal Union (UPU)?

By Douglas Files

The Universal Postal Union is an international organization that provides a network for 192 nations' postal systems to work with each other. According to its website, the UPU "sets the rules for international mail exchanges and makes recommendations to stimulate growth in mail, parcel and financial services volumes and improve quality of service for customers". In this article we will consider how the organization was formed and what sort of work it performs.

Let's begin our story of postal reform in the 1800s with Sir Rowland Hill. This British postal official introduced prepaid letters and adhesive postage stamps in England in 1840. The great success of these innovations led to widespread adoption worldwide. Twenty years later an American took a leading role in updating mail delivery. This was Iowa delegate to the Republican National Convention in the United States, John A. Kasson. At the Republican convention Kasson had been the main architect of Abraham Lincoln's platform, including the anti-slavery positions. When Lincoln was elected president he appointed Kasson First Assistant Postmaster General. This was partially to thank him, but also Lincoln appreciated Kasson's ideas and work ethic.

In 1862 John Kasson was elected a congressman from Iowa (with experience running the Post Office Department). In his new position he lobbied Postmaster General Montgomery Blair to convene a meeting of industrial nations to set postal standards. Blair was convinced of the utility of this idea and Secretary of State William Seward arranged a meeting. Fifteen nations sent representatives to Paris, France to discuss simplifying postal rates and treaties. Some postal standards were eased but not all nations would agree to identical standards. Still, the stage was set for further innovations in the future. Ten years passed during which Heinrich von Stephan of the North German Confederation's postal system drew up the outline of a reform plan. Also, during this decade Germany won the Franco-Prussian war and the various German principalities united into an empire. When that occurred the German reichspost had established common rates for the empire and the mishmash of existing international

agreements seemed old-fashioned. In 1873 the Swiss government organized another major meeting in Bern and 22 nations sent representatives.

The delegates negotiated in earnest and eventually arrived at an agreement. The 12-page treaty which resulted formed the basis for the UPU – although the group's original name was the General Postal Union. The name was optimistically changed in 1878 to the Universal Postal Union to encourage more countries to join. The treaty was signed on the 9th of October 1874 and went into effect the following year. October 9th is now celebrated as World Post Day and Heinrich von Stephan is celebrated as the founder of the UPU.

The main idea of the fledgling organization was that the 22 countries in the union would consider themselves all part of one large postal territory inside of which the same rates and rules would apply. Member postal systems would treat international mail and domestic mail similarly and each country would keep all the money it collected for international mail that was sent. Stamps from any nation in the UPU would suffice for delivery to another member nation. This was a major point because prior to this postal customers had sometimes had to place stamps on their envelope from each nation a letter would travel through. Companies who sold items across borders had to maintain stocks of postage stamps for many different nations.

The new standards were particularly useful to customers and postal clerks. Previously, not only had every set of two countries set up their own bilateral postal rates, but depending on the route the mail traveled, several different rates might apply. If no postal treaty applied, mail might have to be forwarded by a third nation. These rules had made the understanding of rates confusing, and books are still published in the current century to explain international postal rates in the 1800s to postal history collectors.

Under the UPU's new system the rate to send a letter less than 15 grams (about a half ounce) would be standardized. That is, to send a letter from member nations such as the U.S. to Norway or from Greece to Russia would cost approximately the same amount.

Because the international diplomatic language was French in 1874 the rate was set in French money at around 25 centimes. To be more precise, the various nations agreed to set their general international postal rate somewhere between 20 and 32 centimes. Moreover, if the letter had to travel over 300 nautical miles by ship, the postal services could charge an extra fee to pay the ship captain. But the fee could not exceed half of the normal international rate in that nation. Interestingly, French continued to serve as the working language of the UPU until 1994 when English was permitted as an alternate official language for the organization.

The UPU's simplifications greatly eased international mail delivery and it was able to set standards which applied nearly everywhere. For example, at the end of the 1800s concerns mounted about confused postal clerks not knowing how much postage had been paid in another country. Accordingly the UPU mandated that all stamp values had to be printed in numerals, not typed out in letters. Also, in every member nation post card stamps had to be green, normal letter stamps had to be red and international mail stamps had to be blue. Clerks could then often tell at a glance if the correct postage had been paid in a foreign country. The stamp color rule remained in effect for a few decades but it was discarded in the mid-1900s.

Overall the UPU functioned so smoothly – and so much better than the prior mess - that more and more nations joined it. In order for a new country to join currently, it can either join the United Nations or else two-thirds of member countries have to agree to the new member. The UPU functioned independently for many decades, but when the United Nations was formed after World War II it folded itself into the larger organization.

In the 2020s nearly the entire world is covered by the rules of the Universal Postal Union. Only three or four very small nations remain outside the UPU. The group continues to advise national postal services and set rules for international mail. The four current sub-parts of the UPU are as follows:

- 1) The UPU Congress serves as the supreme authority of the UPU and it meets once every four years.
- 2) A Council of Administration runs the UPU in between congresses.
- 3) A Postal Operations Council serves as a technical and operational body.
- 4) the International Bureau provides logistical and technical support.

In the mid-1900s smaller nations complained that since their citizens received more mail from other countries than they sent, their postal systems bore the brunt of the work without being compensated extra. The UPU postal congress of 1969 thus established that richer nations would pay fees called “terminal dues” to smaller nations to make up for this difference. Ever since the controversial creation of terminal dues, every four years congresses have considered re-negotiating them. Through the 1970s and 1980s the terminal dues rates were increased several times. The dues were based on weight rather than number of items so magazines incurred much higher dues than letters. This fact made it so that some nations gained money from other countries through mail delivery and others lost money. In the 1990s the U.S. gained money by sending mail but in recent years it has lost money by having to pay terminal dues to small nations. In 2018 Americans claimed that Chinese postal customers could send international mail to the United States for less money than Americans could send domestic mail to each other. The U.S. announced that in one year it would pull out of the UPU and choose the rates it would pay to other countries. Worried about the potential loss of its largest member, the UPU responded by calling an extra congress in 2019. At the meeting the U.S. proposal to choose terminal dues was voted down. Instead the congress adopted a compromise to allow self-declared terminal dues up to 70% of domestic postage rates and increase UPU terminal dues. In addition, any nation receiving more than 75,000 tons of mail annually – only the U.S. was in this category – could use self-declared terminal dues in 2020 if it paid a contribution of \$40 million to the UPU. On this basis the U.S. agreed to remain in the UPU.

In a development of interest to collectors, since 2002 the UPU works with the World Association for the Development of Philately to create a numbering system for stamp issues. Some numbering has occurred for stamps from 162 different countries. But it is slow going; only 25,000 stamps have been registered so far.

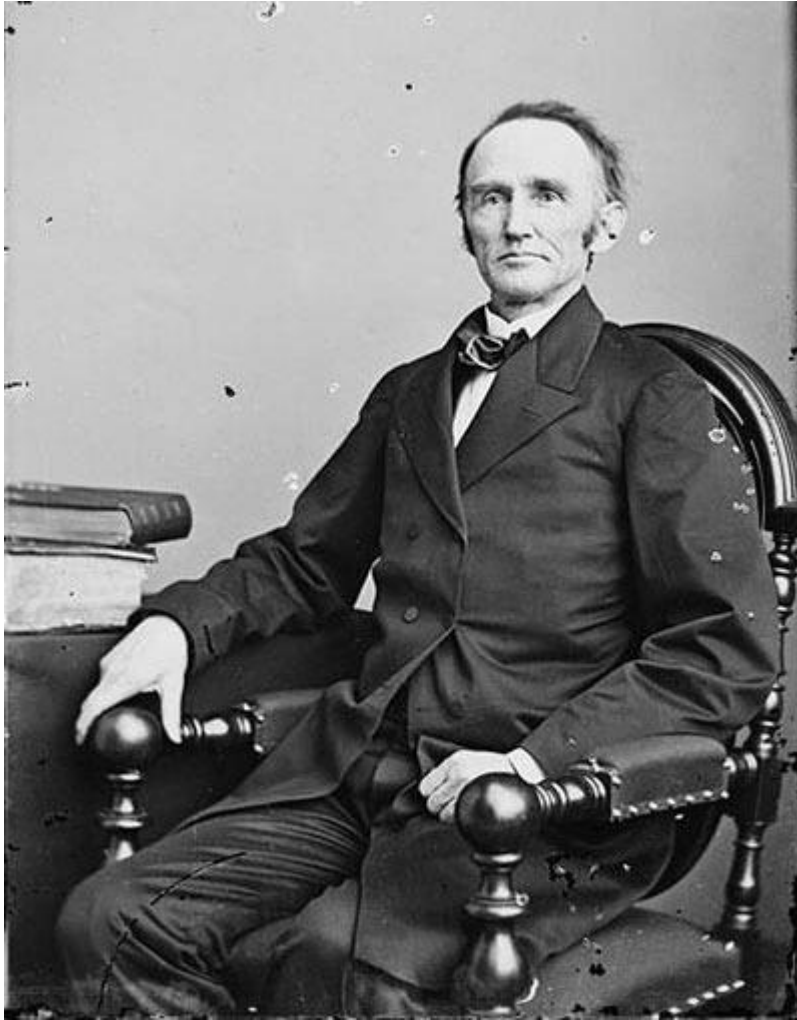
Another recent UPU project involves the electronic transmission of mail. Eventually the UPU and the International Telecommunication Union hope to offer a range of international digital mail services. Other 21st century UPU programs have fought counterfeiting, mail bombing and money laundering

through the postal system. Overall the Universal Postal Union remains a key part of the international mail system and it is actively working toward more safe and effective mail delivery worldwide.



Representative John A. Kasson

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Postmaster General of the United States Montgomery Blair

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Heinrich von Stephan, German Postmaster-General and founder of the General Postal Union

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UPU monument in Bern, Switzerland (created by Rene de Saint-Marceau)

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