

A flight back into Ballston Spa, NY's Air Mail history

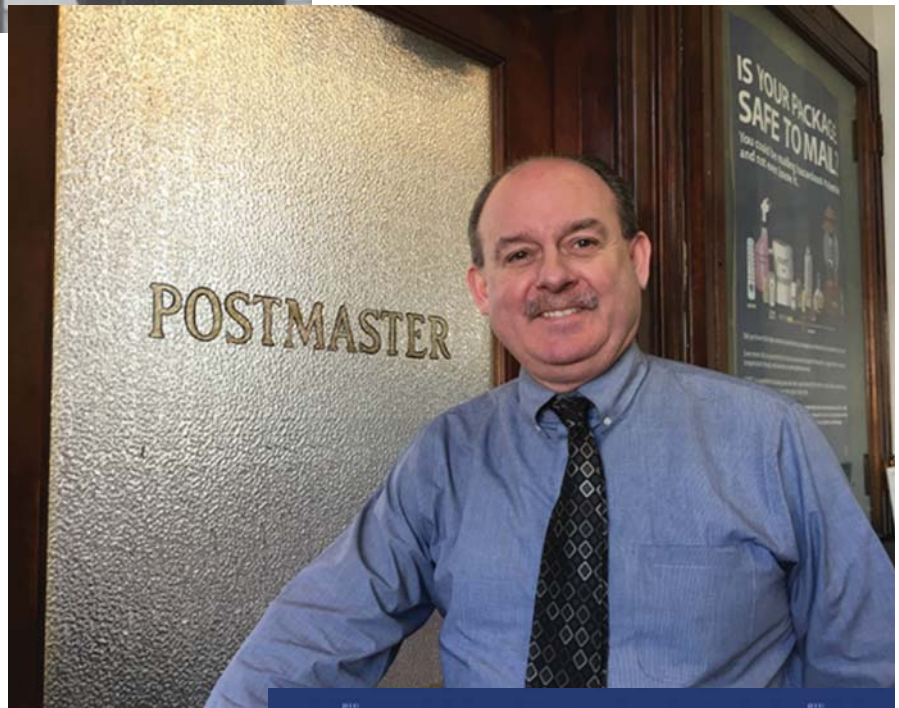


On May 19, 1938, Boy Scout Maurice "Christopher" Morley, youngest son of Ballston Spa Postmaster Edward J. Morley, was an eyewitness to United States postal history when he was present at the village's first Air Mail delivery. Chris, who was 16, would decades later recall that "a bagful of special Air Mail flew out of Ballston Spa from just outside the village limits on County Farm Road." Included in the bag, he said, were a few envelopes with special postage stamps and a message imprinted on the fronts proclaiming *FIRST FLIGHT AIR MAIL BALLSTON SPA, NY*. The envelopes additionally referenced *BALLSTON SPA, NY NATIONAL AIR MAIL WEEK MAY 15-21, 1938*. As it happens, the 80th anniversary of this historic postal milestone coincides with the 100th anniversary of the very first official Air Mail delivery in the United States of America. To learn more, please visit <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/airmail.pdf>.

Although United States Air Mail was formally established as a new service by the United States Post Office in May 1918, the first such delivery out of Ballston Spa didn't take place until 20 years later.

*"Neither snow nor rain
nor heat nor gloom
of night stays these
couriers from the
swift completion of their
appointed rounds."*

While by no means the official creed or motto of the United States Postal Service, this passage was one Chris Morley oft quoted in conjunction with letter carriers in the village. Another favorite saying -- *"The mail must go through"* -- was later recorded as a Disney song for children.



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**PORTRAIT OF BALLSTON SPA  
 POSTMASTER JOSEPH AMASH  
 AND 2018 GLOBAL FOREVER  
 STAMPS FEATURING THE MOON  
 BY TAMMY BIASINI. OTHERS  
 COURTESY OF THE USPS &  
 THE MORLEY COLLECTION.**  
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First Ballston Spa Air Mail delivery

1938



THE SARATOGIAN, SARATOGA SPRINGS, N. Y., MOND. SEPTEMBER 9, 1940

Clear Ground for Ballston Spa Airport



Above shows action in clearing land for the Saratoga County Central Airport on the Milton Plateau south of Ballston Spa and South of Saratoga Springs. One runway is about completely cleared. Workers hope to have the 'port' cleared for planes this fall. Photo shows Bryan Morley releasing cable from tree just pulled out, with Harold Cull letting up tension on the winch. Robert Shortleaves, truck and winch operator, is walking up to help Morley. Postmaster Edward J. Morley stands behind trees in the foreground.

Air Mail deliveries aren't anything to write home about these days, but they were the stuff of which village headlines were made near the end of the Depression. The above photograph was taken on the occasion of the first Air Mail delivery near County Farm Road in Ballston Spa, NY in 1938. From left to right are George M. Pike, Sidney Wiswall (brother of Irving Wiswall of Wiswall Park fame), Raymond Randall and Mayor Fred Morehouse. The Boy Scout grew up to be Village History Consultant Maurice "Christopher" Morley. The plane's unidentified pilot is beside him, followed by Postmaster Edward Morley and Assistant Postmaster William G. Boyce. Inset images feature Postmaster Morley and wife Mabel (to whom the first village Air Mail envelope was addressed) a few years later seated before a portrait of their youngest son. As per the 1945 news clip, the former Boy Scout went on to distinguish himself as a US Marine during World War II. Not surprisingly Air Mail communications flew between him and loved ones in the village. The 1940 newsclip documents the clearing of land for what is now the Saratoga County Airport on Geyser Road.

Pony Express (of sorts!) along Milton Avenue



Ballston Spa Postmaster Edward Morley (seen in younger years with his horse at left) and the ancestral Morley homestead at 142 Milton Avenue (bottom left) where the village's very first Air Mail letter was sent on May 19, 1938. The equine at bottom right would later be immortalized as a wooden toy named Daisy The Dancing & Prancing Pony by the boy who had proudly ridden her in and around his hometown during the late 1920s and early 1930s. (Please see related photo essay on next page.)





Daisy, The Dancing & Prancing Pony

My name is Daisy of Milton Avenue
 And I would like to dance for you.
 But I'll need you to give me a hand
 By lifting me up off of my stand.
 Next you'll need to jiggle my pole
 Tho' made of wood, I've got soul.
 I especially love to jingle bell rock
 All around the Christmas clock.

Hand-crafted by Village History Consultant &
 Toy-Maker Maurice "Christopher" Morley

Among the hundreds of wooden toys Chris Morley hand-crafted over the decades was one honoring the memory of a cherished childhood pet he dubbed "Daisy, The Dancing & Prancing Pony." The one-of-a-kind toy, along with an accompanying original rhyme by Morley, was donated to a Silent Auction to assist with medical costs for a young mother that weren't covered by health insurance in 2010. Later that same year, Morley, then 88, arrived at a Halloween party costumed as a Talking Horse. The cowgal with him in above photo is Mary Hauprich Reilly, whose video creations of Morley demonstrating some of his toys may be enjoyed on www.LegaciesUnlimited.com.



Eagle Hotel once stood on Post Office site

Jury still out on whether or not historic property is haunted. YOU be the judge!

By Maurice “Christopher” Morley
As told to Ann Hauprich
October 2010

BALLSTON SPA – A bustling hotel once graced the lot where the Post Office now stands at the corner of Front Street and Milton Avenue. It was called the Eagle Hotel, and when it burned to the ground in 1932, the ashes included ghostly traces of evidence of a ghastly murder that had taken place a century earlier.

According to an account in *The Bench & Bar of Saratoga County*, which was published in 1876, Aaron Case – who was temporarily in charge of the Eagle Hotel while its proprietor was absent — was fatally stabbed on the night of November 9, 1833 after discovering an intruder in the hotel’s baggage room.

The Bench & Bar states that Case died inside of the Eagle Hotel of a stab wound to the throat that severed his jugular vein. The suspect in the case was described in the book as “a disreputable mulatto barber of the village” by the name of John Watkins. Details of the grisly murder are spelled out as follows by author Enos R. Mann inside of the pages of *The Bench & Bar*: “On the fatal day, Case discovered Watkins in the baggage room of the hotel and endeavored to capture him. The latter seizing a knife from behind the bar ran out into the street followed by Case. Reaching the middle of the street, he (Watkins) halted and plunged the knife into the throat of Case and then fled. Case walked back into the hotel, sat in a chair and fell dead.”

The stabbing was reportedly witnessed by Samuel R. Garrett, a farmer who had just come upon the street from the hotel’s shed. As soon as the alleged murderer fled the scene, Garrett reportedly “gave chase, sounding the alarm.”

Watkins was soon seized by Samuel S. Wakeman in front of what is now Village Hall – but was then the First National Bank – at the corner of Front and Bath Streets. *The Bench & Bar* goes on to credit Wakeman, aided by Stephen Fox, Abraham T. Davis and Moses Williams, with securely tying and delivering Watkins to Jailor Dunning.

During the trial that followed inside of the courthouse that once stood at the corner of Bath and West High Streets, Watkins was defended by attorney Oran G. Otis. However, the book states “the culprit having no witnesses to prove mitigating circumstances, counselor Otis had only to depend on cross examination (of witnesses sworn for the people) to furnish his defense.”

District Attorney Warren secured a conviction and Watkins “was sentenced to be hanged on Friday, January 17, 1834.”

What happened next reads like a Fright Night thriller. It seems that Watkins gained “popular sympathy” while awaiting his execution “by professing great religious zeal and repentance for past misgivings.”

Indeed it was reportedly believed efforts by Otis to have the convicted barber’s sentence commuted “would have been effectual, doubtless, had not Watkins by another base and murderous act sealed his fate.”

This occurred during December 1833 when Jailor Dunning entered Watkins’ cell to read a chapter in the Bible to him. The passage continues: “While the good man was reading the sacred text, the culprit struck him with a billet of wood, seized his keys and escaped. He (Watkins) concealed himself for some days in S.S. Seaman’s barn in Ballston, and went from there to a barn in Malta, on the Merrill farm. While in (one of the barns), his feet were badly frozen. His hiding place was at last divulged by a colored man and he was taken back to his doom. On the appointed day, he was taken to the spot where (another convict) 13 years before had expiated his crime, and on the same gallows, he was hanged by the neck until he was dead by Sheriff John Vernam. He, too, was prepared for the fall by Sheriff Joseph Jennings, who yet retains the noose used on the occasion.”

The 1876 account goes on to say that prior to his public execution, Watkins confessed to having been a murderous pirate before settling in Ballston Spa. The confession — which was printed in sensational *Police Gazette* style — was allegedly made by Watkins in the hope of securing a reprieve, however, “on the gallows, he declared it was false.”

Not included in *The Bench & Bar* book are accounts I recall reading elsewhere that the location of the hanging was up on Lowell Street and that uniformed soldiers were called upon to keep the crowds back as Watkins was carried to the scaffold while secured to a chair. This method of transporting Watkins to the gallows was necessary because his feet were so badly frostbitten that he could no longer walk.

Other accounts stated that the so-called “colored man” mentioned in *The Bench & Bar* had promised the suspect, who was “part Negro and part Caucasian”, that he would take him to a safe destination if only he would hide his face and body beneath blankets in the back of a rig. Instead, he took him directly to the authorities in the village.

It seems that at least two promises made to Watkins were broken prior to his execution. So if you see a shadowy figure lurking between Post Office and Village Hall on Front Street on the night of the next full moon, you’ll have a pretty good idea of who he is and why his spirit may still be restless after nearly 200 years.



THEN & NOW

Photographer W. Bronson Taylor captured the hustle and bustle of the Eagle Hotel for posterity on a glass plate negative in a bygone era while credit for the May 2018 digital camera image of the exterior of the Post Office that now occupies the historic corner lot in the heart of Ballston Spa, NY goes to USPS Clerk Tammy Biasini.



AUTHOR'S NOTE: While preparing these pages about the Post Office in Ballston Spa which occupies the corner of Front Street and Milton Avenue where The Eagle Hotel once stood, I recalled some of Chris Morley's tales about the landmark's basement being haunted. And indeed a few employees readily admitted to "getting chills" or "an eerie feeling" when they descended into the area that is now primarily used for storage. But the most vivid account was shared by clerk Tammy Biasini on (of all days!) Friday, the 13th of April, 2018. "I was downstairs getting my lunch ready and heard a locker close in the next room. I thought it might be a co-worker who sometimes has lunch at the same time I do. But when I looked, no one was there. When I returned to the lunch table, I heard someone sniffle. Again nobody was there." Upon returning to the main floor, Tammy found the maintenance man and asked if he or anybody else had just been in that part of the basement. The answer was no. (Unless, of course, you believe in ghosts!)

When the telegram delivery boy wore webbed snow shoes

Chris Morley delighted in musing that he "just beat the child labor laws" when he landed a job as a messenger for the D & H Railroad at age 10. He especially enjoyed reminiscing about the time when as a telegram delivery boy in the early 1930s he trudged on old-fashioned snowshoes from downtown Ballston Spa to Saratoga Lake -- a round-trip trek of nearly 15 miles. Chris recalled stopping at the ca. 1830 cobblestone farmhouse at 458 Malta Avenue (then home of relatives of his mother, Mabel, inset) to sip hot cocoa while warming himself by a fire on the way to and from his destination. (As per the inscription on the historic marker, the property was owned by Philip Riley and heirs from 1857 until 1971. Chris vividly recalled receiving a five dollar tip for the delivery -- a reward virtually unheard of during The Great Depression. In those days, webbed snow shoes similar to those photographed by Tammy Biasini were worn by the lad rather than the modern ones below that Tammy dons for fun winter adventures in the great outdoors with husband Wayne today.



Making tracks: Then & Now

Ballston Spa Post Office Clerk Tammy Biasini cannot help but marvel at the strength and endurance it took for young Chris Morley to deliver a telegram from Ballston Spa to Saratoga Lake with snow shoes resembling tennis rackets strapped to his feet. "Our modern day snow shoes make adventures in the snow much easier than Mr. Morley's long ago trek to the lake," beams Tammy, who enjoys making tracks on snow-covered winter wonderlands with husband Wayne (in red jacket) and friends Patrick (below left) and Amy (far right) Rogers on winter weekends. "We typically travel between two or two-and-a-half miles in two hours or so. Making tracks on the wider and much longer webbed shoes, Mr. Morley's gait was most likely considerably slower due to the size and shape of his shoes ..."



... if I had to guess I would say his expedition of about 15 miles round-trip probably took 16 or 17 hours, as he would have been walking slower than our modern day shoes take us. I'm very happy we are not delivering mail on webbed shoes these days!" laughs Tammy.



PHOTO OF TAMMY BIASINI AND AMY ROGERS BY PATRICK ROGERS.
PHOTO OF PATRICK ROGERS WITH WAYNE BIASINI BY AMY ROGERS.
PAIR OF INSET SNOW SHOE PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAMMY BIASINI.