

# Lysander Spooner: The Forgotten History of the Man Who Started the First Private Post Office

Lysander Spooner is an important – and not exactly obscure – figure in the history of the liberty movement. He’s an idiosyncratic figure from the 19th century with no small cheerleading section in the 21st century. A bit of a throwback to a very different time, Spooner was a champion of the labor movement and was even a member of the First International at a time when socialists and anarchists coexisted peacefully within that movement.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about Spooner is that he ran a private company in direct competition with the United States Post Office. This endeavor predictably failed not because the American Letter Mail Company couldn’t compete, but because Spooner was hamstrung by lawfare.

Spooner was born in Athol, MA, in 1808, a descendant of Mayflower pilgrims and the second of nine children. His career as a lawyer set the template for the rest of his life’s work: Spooner had studied under a number of prominent lawyers (a practice known as “reading law,” which was much more common at the time). However, he did not have a degree and state law required that he study further under a lawyer. He considered this legal discrimination and went ahead and started practicing law anyway.

In 1836, the state legislature got rid of the requirement. Indeed, Spooner was against any legal requirement for licensure of any profession, something that would come up again later on in his battle against the United States Post Office. This was part of Spooner’s belief in a natural law, whereby any act of coercion was *ipso facto* illegal.

Spooner’s law practice was not a success, nor were his attempts to dabble in the real estate market. He moved back onto his father’s farm in 1840. It was here that he hatched the plan for the American Letter Mail Company.

## The American Letter Mail Company

Throughout the 1840s, the rates of the Post Office were a source of national controversy, with many Americans considering them exorbitantly high. For context, in those days it cost 25 cents to send a letter from Boston to Washington, D.C. That’s about \$7.50 in 2020 dollars. Freight, however, was significantly cheaper: a barrel of flour cost about 2/3 what it cost to send that very same letter.

Spooner astutely noticed that while the Constitution provides for a state-run Post Office, it does not prohibit private citizens from running their own independent post office. With Spooner’s independent solution on the market, prices began to drop significantly. Court

cases were generally found in Spooner's favor, with the U.S. Circuit Court agreeing with his argument that the United States government had no right to monopolize the mail system. Congress took action, passing a law in 1851, that made the United States Post Office a legal monopoly.

This spelled the end of Spooner's company, but he was known thereafter as "the father of the 3-cent stamp."

### Spooner's Abolitionism and the Civil War

Where Spooner primarily came to public attention was as an abolitionist. In 1845, he published a book called *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery*, in which he argued that the United States Constitution prohibited slavery. Part of his argument was predicated upon his belief that all unjust laws were unconstitutional and could be struck down by judges. His arguments were cited in the party platform of the Liberty Party and were cited by Fredrick Douglass as changing his mind on the subject.

*Lysander Spooner: The Forgotten History of the Man Who Started the First Private Post Office originally appeared in the Resistance Library at Ammo.com. Check out the Resistance Library Podcast for more information on Lysander Spooner.*