JAMES A. FARLEY
Postmaster General
March 4, 1933, to September 1940

James A. Farley (1888-1976)

James Aloysius Farley, the son of Irish immigrants, was born in Grassy Point, New York, in 1888. His father and uncle were brick makers in Rockland County who shipped their wares down the Hudson River to the growing metropolis of New York City. After his father died suddenly, Farley helped his mother tend a bar and grocery store that she purchased to make a living. Following high school, he studied bookkeeping at the Packard School of Commerce in New York City and, after graduation, was employed by the United States Gypsum Company.[1]

In 1912, tiring of the daily commute to and from New York City, Farley decided to run for election as town clerk in his hometown. The fact that he was a Democrat, and Grassy Point was solidly Republican, did not discourage him. He honed his person-to-person campaign skills and won three elections between 1912 and 1919.

Farley entered state politics in 1918 with a visit to Alfred E. Smith, president of the New York Board of Aldermen. As he recollects in *Behind the Ballots*, his offer to help Smith win the election for governor was bold and audacious because the Tammany Hall politicos were offering Smith their own advice. Farley helped organize a grassroots level campaign through upstate New York. Following Smith's election, Farley was made warden of the Port of New York.[2]

Farley first met Franklin D. Roosevelt when Farley was Democratic Party county chairman and Roosevelt was running for vice president of the United States. That election was a crushing defeat for the Democrats. Disappointed, Farley concentrated on his personal finances and joined his brother-in-law to form the General Builders Supply Corporation. In 1922 Farley ran for the New York State Assembly and won; politics in Albany during his one term in office related mainly to enforcement of Prohibition. After Farley lost the next election in 1923, Governor Smith appointed him deputy superintendent of Public Works, and in 1925, chairman of the State Athletics Commissions. In this capacity Farley oversaw state boxing and wrestling championships until he left this office in 1933.

In 1928, as secretary of the New York State Democratic Party, Farley helped organize Franklin Roosevelt's campaign for governor. Roosevelt was victorious, but Farley's friend and mentor Alfred Smith lost the nomination for president by a disastrous margin.[3] For the next four years, Farley worked within the Democratic National Party structure to promote Roosevelt. Both men rose quickly through the political ranks. Farley became known at the Democratic National Committee as "the man who effectively provided the New Deal muscle…a powerhouse of the Democratic party who energized the state and county leaders to get out the vote."[4] In the 1932 presidential election, he helped Roosevelt defeat incumbent Herbert Hoover by a resounding 57 percent to 39 percent. Impressed by his campaign management skills and grateful for victory, Roosevelt appointed him the nation's 53rd Postmaster General.

Declining revenues plagued the Post Office Department during the Depression. The drop began between 1931 and 1932 when postal income plummeted from nearly $657 million to $588 million; it continued dropping in 1933 and 1934. At last, in 1935, finances slowly began to rebound as revenues reached approximately $631 million. The following year revenues again rose to nearly $665 million. [5]

Farley's first job during this difficult period was to make certain that postal employees did not join the ranks of unemployed Americans. While postal employment dropped from 254,956 persons in 1929 to 229,646 in June 1934, this reduction largely was due to retirements, deaths, resignations, and other normal causes. To ensure that the Department did not have to cut positions, Farley implemented several

payless furlough days, which were discontinued after 1934.[6]

Farley supported the New Deal, a policy focused on increasing the role of the federal government as a way to stimulate the marketplace and end the Depression. To accomplish this, Farley approved the construction of new Post Offices and the acquisition of artwork for these buildings. Under the Act of June 19, 1934, the Department launched a new public-building program that involved 361 projects at a cost of $65 million.[7]

Farley also moved the Post Office Department into new headquarters. Construction on the site had begun in 1931 and, under Farley's direction, continued through the Depression. Designed by Delano and Aldrich of New York City, the building occupied an entire block between 12th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue (between the Capitol and the White House). It had a limestone exterior, spacious interior with 1,200 steam-heated rooms, and reception rooms designed in an elegant Georgian style – one of the most handsome buildings in the nation's capitol.

Post Office Department Headquarters, Washington, D.C., July 19, 1934
This Classical Revival-style building at 12th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, Northwest, served as postal headquarters from 1934 to 1973. The Washington Monument is visible in the background.

Between 1934 and 1943 Farley oversaw the acquisition of art for the new headquarters building and Post Offices around the country by working with the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, later called the Section of Fine Arts. In contrast with the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) designed to provide general economic relief, the Treasury program's mission was to commission art, murals, and sculptures for newly-constructed federal buildings.

The art purchased for headquarters included murals and sculptures for the facade and interior of the building. Another 1,200 murals and 300 sculptures were commissioned for Post Offices. Works were selected through national and regional competitions, and winning artists were asked to consult with Postmasters and townspeople before starting a project. In his own words, President Roosevelt wanted the art to be "painted for the people of this country by their own kind in their own country, and painted about things they know and look at often and have touched and loved."

As Postmaster General, Farley quickly learned an important lesson about philately. In mid-1934, he ordered the production of sheets of ungummed imperforated stamps to hand out as favors to political friends and other high government officials. The philatelic community soon raised a hue and cry and President Roosevelt, a stamp collector, asked Farley to terminate this policy. The public and Congress further demanded that the imperforated stamps be issued "in sufficient quantity to meet the philatelic demand."[8] Farley took this lesson to heart and became a strong advocate for philatelists.

In 1940 Farley split publicly with President Roosevelt. While serving as Postmaster General, Farley also chaired the Democratic National Committee and was interested in exploring his own presidential ambitions. Roosevelt already had served two successful terms, and Farley joined other Democrats who thought the president should allow someone else to run. Farley was nominated as a presidential candidate at the Democratic National Convention but, before the convention ended, he decided to decline the nomination. Roosevelt went on to win an unprecedented third term.

After resigning as Postmaster General, Farley headed the Coca-Cola Export Corporation and remained active in New York politics until he died on June 9,1976. Six years later, the Post Office Department renamed the New York City Post Office with its famous "Neither snow, nor, rain, nor gloom of night . . ." slogan in Farley's honor. In dedicating the building to Farley, Postmaster General William F. Bolger called it "a monument of a building for a monumental man."[9]

To learn more about James A. Farley:

Casey, John T., and James Bowles. *Farley and Tomorrow*. Chicago, IL: The Reilly & Lee Co., 1937.

Farley, James A. *Addresses By James A. Farley*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office: 1940.

Farley, James A. *Behind the Ballots: The Personal History of a Politician*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1973.

Farley, James A. *Jim Farley's Story: The Roosevelt Years*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984.

"Farley's Follies Embarrassed Roosevelt," *Linn's Stamp News*, September 24, 1990, 6.

A Guide to the Painting & Sculpture in the Post Office Department Building, Washington, District of Columbia. Washington, DC: Art in Federal Buildings, Inc, 1938.

Sloat, Ralph L. *Farley's Follies*. Norristown, PA: Bureau Issues Association, 1979.

Whitman, Alden. "Farley, 'Jim' to Thousands, Was the Master Political Organizer and Salesman," *New York Times*, June 10, 1976, K62.

Endnotes

[1] Also known as the Universal Gypsum Company.

[2] James A. Farley. *Behind the Ballots: the Personal History of a Politician*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1973), 21-27.

[3] Alfred E. Smith won only 40.9 percent of the popular vote compared to Herbert Hoover's 58.2 percent.

[4] Alden Whitman, "Farley, 'Jim' to Thousands, Was the Master Political Organizer and Salesman," *New York Times*, June 10, 1976, K62.

[5] Carl H. Scheele, *A Short History of the Mail Service*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970), 169.

[6] U.S. Post Office Department, *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1934 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1934), ix-x.

[7] U.S. Post Office Department, *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1935 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1934), xiv.

[8] Ralph L. Sloat, *Farley's Follies* (Norristown, PA: Bureau Issues Association, 1979), and "Farley's Follies Embarrassed Roosevelt," *Linn's Stamp News*, September 24, 1990, 6.

[9] Maurice Carroll, "Farley Hailed By Renaming of Postal Site," *New York Times*, Metropolitan Report, May 25, 1982, 1.