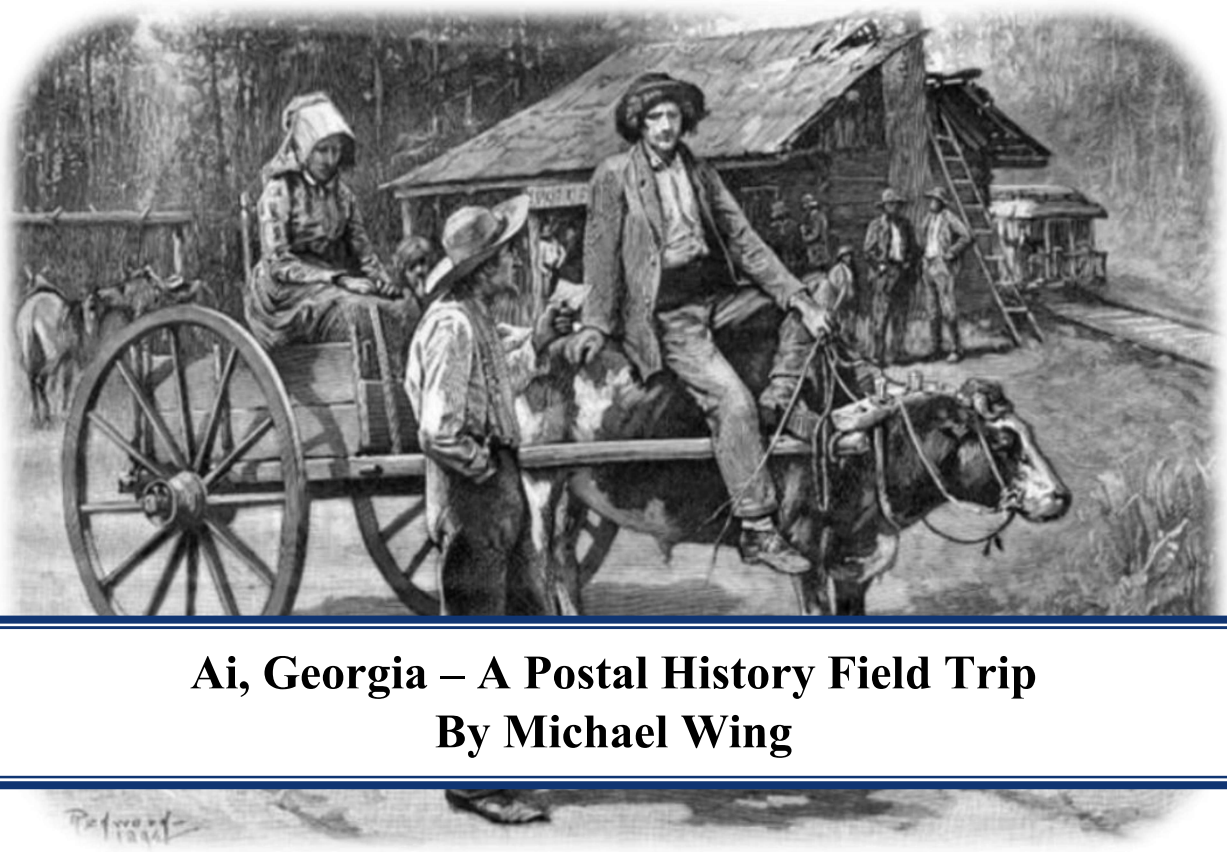


Ai, Georgia – A Postal History Field Trip
By Michael Wing

A late nineteenth century North Georgia post office on the railroad.

"Select a Short Name . . ."

On April 12, 1898, when Confederate veteran Ninnian Norris (1840-1923) completed the paperwork for a post office in the mountains of Gilmer County in North Georgia, he took the above instruction contained on the application form seriously. He chose the name Ai. It was then and remains today the shortest name for a post office in Georgia, and in a tie for the shortest name in any state.



The postcard from Ai, Georgia (Figure 1) bearing a type 2 Doane cancel, dated January 9, 1914, is striking not only for the brevity of the post office's name but also for the brevity of the message from postmaster W.H. Johnson.

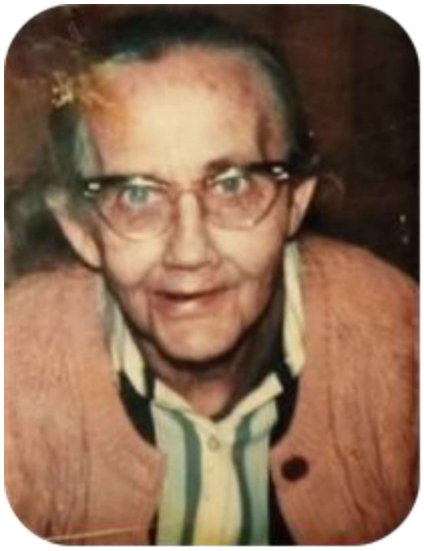
The entire body reads, "I did not understand your letter."

Figure 1. Postmarked AI GEORGIA JAN 9 1914.

There is no reason to think that the Reverend Norris was strictly playing to the novelty of the short name he chose. He was a religious man who would be "instrumental and the organization of numerous churches in North Georgia, and East Tennessee," according to his obituary

Ai, meaning "the heap of ruins," was the site of a defeat followed by a victory for Joshua in the Hebrew Bible. Four other states have had post offices named Ai. The name is pronounced with two syllables like the acronym for Artificial Intelligence: "A.I." The local Gilmer County pronunciation is consistent with the original Hebrew pronunciation. The post office would also be referred to locally as "Cashes Valley" after the valley in which it was located about eleven miles south of the Tennessee state line.

Rev. Norris' communication with the Post Office Department stated that the post office proposed to serve about fifty families and that it would be in Gilmer County six miles to the south of the post office at Chestnut Gap, Georgia in Fannin County. The post office at Ai would serve the residents of Cashes Valley from 1898 to September 15, 1932. During that period, eleven postmasters would serve there with Mary Hollifield Ash (Figure 2) being the last.



Additionally, the Spearman, Watkins, Stanley, Johnson, and Dover families had one or more members who ran the post office through the years. The change in the location of the post office among the families in the valley was never more than 1/6 of a mile.

In 1899, the first full calendar year of operation, postmaster Norris would earn $4.62 based on forty percent of the post office income that year of $11.64. Future yearly income figures for the post office would not exceed one hundred dollars.

Figure 2. Mary Hollifield Ash, Ai's last postmaster.

The current on-line map showing the location of Ai (Figure 3) presents the very image of isolation with no defined site within five miles. Gilmer County is a pleasant drive of under two hours from the northern suburbs of Atlanta. The area today is a desirable retirement location. Rental cabins, wineries, good restaurants, and mountain scenery attract visitors.

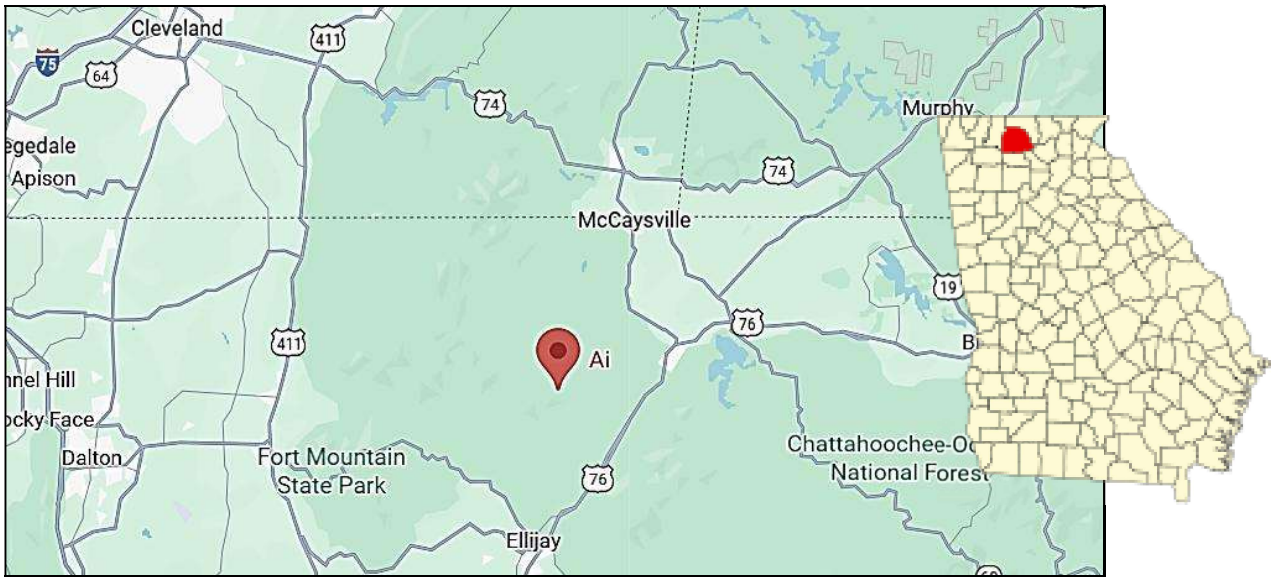


Figure 3. Online map of Ai, Georgia.

An email to the Gilmer County Historical Society requesting information on the post office at Ai yielded no information. “Other than knowing that there was a post office in the community of Ai, I don’t have any information,” was the terse response. Questions remained: Why did the post office at Ai survive for so long? What replaced it?

Sometimes you just need to go there

The decision to visit the site of the post office at Ai was an easy one. My wife and I have driven from the suburbs of Atlanta up to the mountains of Gilmer and Fannin Counties on several Sunday afternoons just to enjoy the scenery and other attractions. It was an easy sell to talk her into the trip. She envisioned the mountain scenery, a good meal and perhaps a side trip to a vineyard, time permitting.

I wanted to lay eyes on the site of the Ai post office, which had opened in 1898, on the eve of the implementation of Rural Free Delivery. Those decades after the opening of the post office at Ai in 1898, were perilous ones for the survival of small fourth-class post offices. In 1900 there were over 76,000 post offices in the United States. By 1932 when the post office at Ai was closed that number was down to about 48,000. Why did the post office at Ai survive for so long and why did it eventually close?

First Try

Our drive on a cloudy Sunday afternoon January 26, 2025, was uneventful enough until we were within five or six miles of Cashes Valley and Ai. Turning onto Bushyhead Road off Boardtown Road, the pavement ended (Figure 4).

Even when the road was unpaved, at this point in the trip it was passable with caution. We would later be told that this intermittent paving was the road winding along the county line between Gilmer and Fannin Counties.

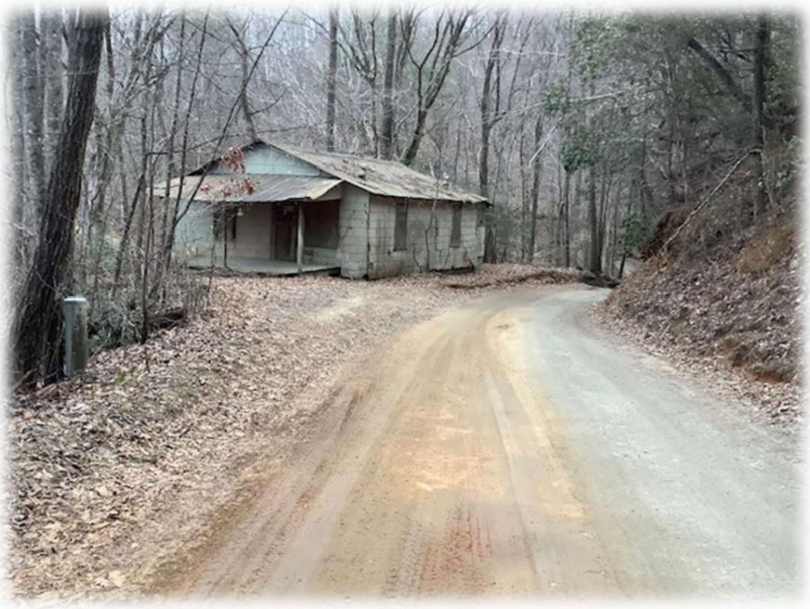


Figure 4. Bushyhead Road.

Despite the bleak-appearing abandoned house in Figure 4, the few occupied homes in the area were attractive and of newer construction. At a certain point the houses became fewer and further between and the road became narrower. Cell phone signals faded and GPS as well. I urged my wife - she was driving her nice car - to keep driving based on the specious logic that it would be more dangerous to turn around than it would be to keep going.

I really wanted to see Ai. We turned onto Cashes Valley Lane and then left onto Cashes Valley Road, the road that leads deep into the valley and to the site of the post office at Ai.

Then, in about a mile, we confronted the scene in Figure 5 (next page). Fightingtown Creek ran across the road. This ford seemed passable to me, perhaps twelve to eighteen inches deep. My wife thought otherwise and it was her car. My offer to take the wheel and drive across the ford, was countered by her offer to let me get out of the car, wade the creek, and walk to Ai. Her superior debating skills meant I would have to put off the visit to Cashes Valley to another day.



Figure 5. Fightingtown Creek.

Finally Reaching Ai

Mike Fleming, my friend of over fifty years, the owner of a big four-wheel drive pickup truck was willing to help. He was keen to challenge the road to Ai. We set out on the morning of April 16, 2025, a sunny day after a period of dry weather. After arriving at the ford across Cashes Valley Road, Mike engaged the four-wheel drive and we made it across the ford.

The challenges that were just beginning proved that my wife had been correct back in January. There were five more fords before we reached the site of Ai and the road became increasingly narrow and full of ruts (Figure 6). Also, the other fords across Fightingtown Creek on the way to Ai, are wider and deeper than the first one that deterred my wife. One of them (Figure 7) requires briefly driving up the bed of the creek. Even in a big four-wheel drive, this crossing is a challenge. We were to learn later that vehicles occasionally do lose traction and require a tow to get out. Not a mortal danger unless there have been heavy rains, but a fate to be avoided in any case.

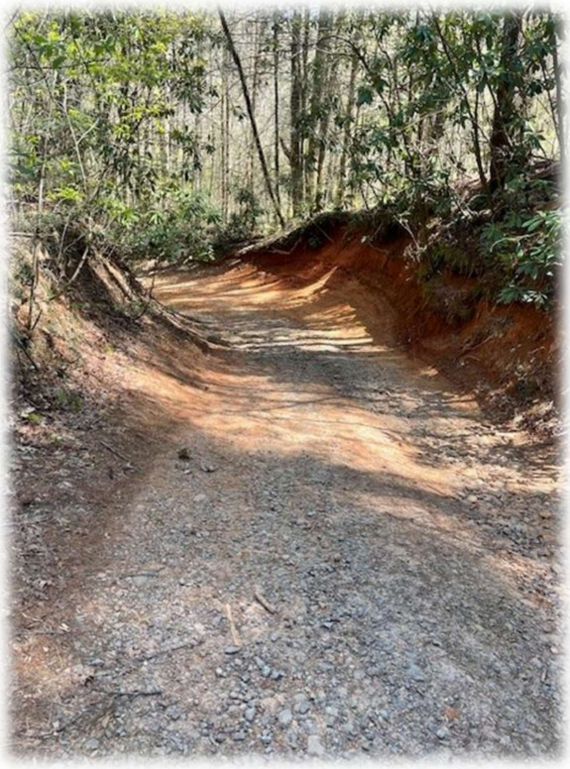


Figure 6. Increasingly narrow road.

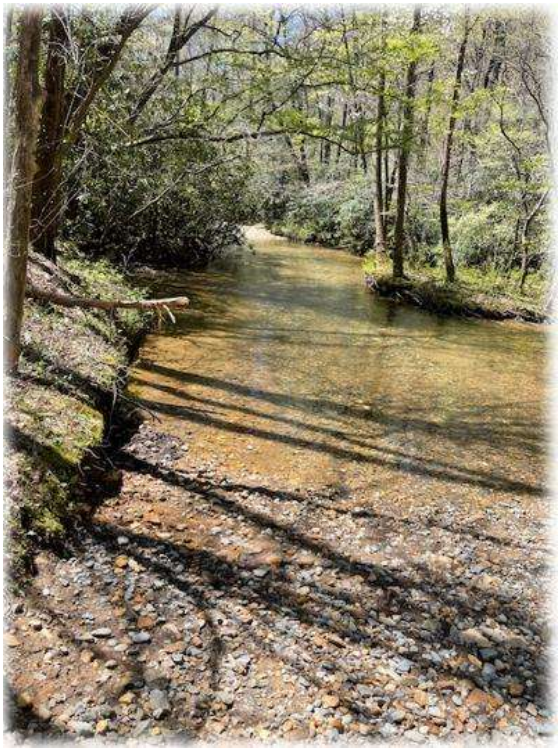


Figure 7. Road section through creek bed.

While the road to Ai and Cashes Valley is relatively unknown to the local history society; it is well known to the community of all-terrain vehicle enthusiasts. One of them accidentally clipped the rear bumper of the pickup on our way out, but no harm was done to either vehicle. Even the wider stretches of the road are a tight squeeze for two vehicles. The ATVers rate the trip to Ai, at 5.2 miles in and out, as being of moderate difficulty in an ATV and not advised at all of course in a family car.

The only structures after the first ford are at the location identified as the site of Ai. They are a collapsed shed (Figure 8) and two tin roofed sheds of recent construction apparently for camping or ATV parking. The road ends two or three miles from the first ford with a gate where private property begins. While no vintage structures exist today along Cashes Valley Road and Ai, one such structure survived until 1993. In that year, the Cashes Valley Church of Christ, (Figure 9) a few hundred yards from the site of AI, was burned by vandals. The one room schoolhouse was intentionally dismantled in 1973. (Figure 10)



Figure 8. Collapsed shed.



Figure 9. Cashes Valley Church of Christ.



Figure 10. One room schoolhouse.

Too Rural for RFD

Understanding American postal history requires an understanding of the history of its roads. The roads leading into Cashes Valley and the site of Ai are a case study on the limits of Rural Free Delivery.

Although initial funding for a study of the feasibility of RFD had been appropriated in 1893, the opposition or indifference of Postmaster Generals and President Grover Cleveland impeded the process, and it was not until 1896 that the U.S. Post Office began to seriously experiment with the idea by opening eighty-two rural routes in various states. The experiments established both the popularity and feasibility of delivering mail to rural postal customers.

In 1902 it was made a permanent service of the Post Office Department. RFD would be the biggest and most expensive program ever implemented by the United States Post Office.

The Lack of Improved Roads

RFD could not become a reality without decent roads. The Post Office did not build roads at the turn of the twentieth century. That task devolved to the states where it was usually passed down to local governments.

Wayne Fuller, the author of several books on RFD explains the situation." As late as 1904 only 151,666 miles of the nation's 2,151,000 miles of roadways had been improved with gravel, shell, oil, or some other substance. The rest, nearly 2,000,000 miles of them were dirt, rough, rutted. . . often impossible…. "

"Dirt, rough [and] rutted," indeed describes the road into Cashes Valley and Ai. The requirements for roads to qualify as a rural mail route were not highly technical and detailed, but roads were required to be passable year-round. Postal Inspectors were assigned to evaluate road conditions and routes. The road into Cashes Valley is not passable today except by four-wheel drive vehicles and in wet weather impassable even to all-terrain vehicles.

Roads used for rural delivery were not required to be paved and today mail travels over the gravel road shown in Figure 4, and many others. It meets the definition of an improved road.

The need for improved roads in America was recognized before Rural Free Delivery was implemented. RFD created an extra impetus to the movement for good roads, which improved local economies in addition to allowing the delivery of mail.

Ai and Cashes Valley are now and have always been in a network of dead-end mountain roads. The valley's inaccessibility is a major factor in explaining why the post office lasted so long. While rural routes were spreading over the territories formerly served by small post offices, Ai remained secure in its remote valley, at the end of the route. Beginning in 1916 federal funds were allocated to the states on a limited basis to help with road building. There would be future allocations of federal road money but none of it reached Cashes Valley, Georgia.



Figure 11. Chestnut Gap, Fannin County, post office.

Ai was supplied by a carrier twice weekly from the post office from Chestnut Gap (1874 – 1937) in Fannin County (Figure 11).

Ai was at the end of the Star Route. A six-mile trip by mule or horse, two days a week through the mountains, was possible. Delivering the mail to all the houses along the narrow and sometimes submerged Cashes Valley Road six days a week was not a task the Post Office Department chose to take on. This factor earned the small post office at Ai a reprieve for three decades.

Shrinking Population

In addition to the factor of remoteness, Ai and Cashes Valley were losing population. The population of Gilmer County shrank from 10,198 in 1900, to 7,344 in 1930. This 28% population decline seems to have been due to trends affecting the economy of entire Appalachian region. The lumber industry was in decline and small farms were at a competitive disadvantage. People were moving to the cities. Cashes Valley, being remote even by Gilmer County standards, was almost totally depopulated over the decades. A comparison of two maps starkly makes this point.

Figure12 is a portion a topographic map of the area around the site of Ai. It shows an area of about one and a half square miles of Cashes Valley and was prepared from the memories of two gentlemen familiar with the area and its history. The handwritten label on the map from which this small portion was taken reads; “Memories of H. Clay Holloway and Quentin Holloway-- Cashes Valley and Upper Boardtown Communities 1800’s and Early 1900’s” It is dated May 15, 2014.

Even the limited geographic scope of this sketched map shows about twenty families within a mile or so of the site of the post office. The larger map, from which it was taken, shows many additional homesteads in the area. The prediction of the original postmaster that the office would serve about fifty families was justified, for a time.

A current satellite map (not shown) of the about the same area shows the tops of two tin roofed sheds at the site of Ai, while the thick canopy of trees obscures the narrow track of Cashes Valley Road. This is consistent with a ground level view.

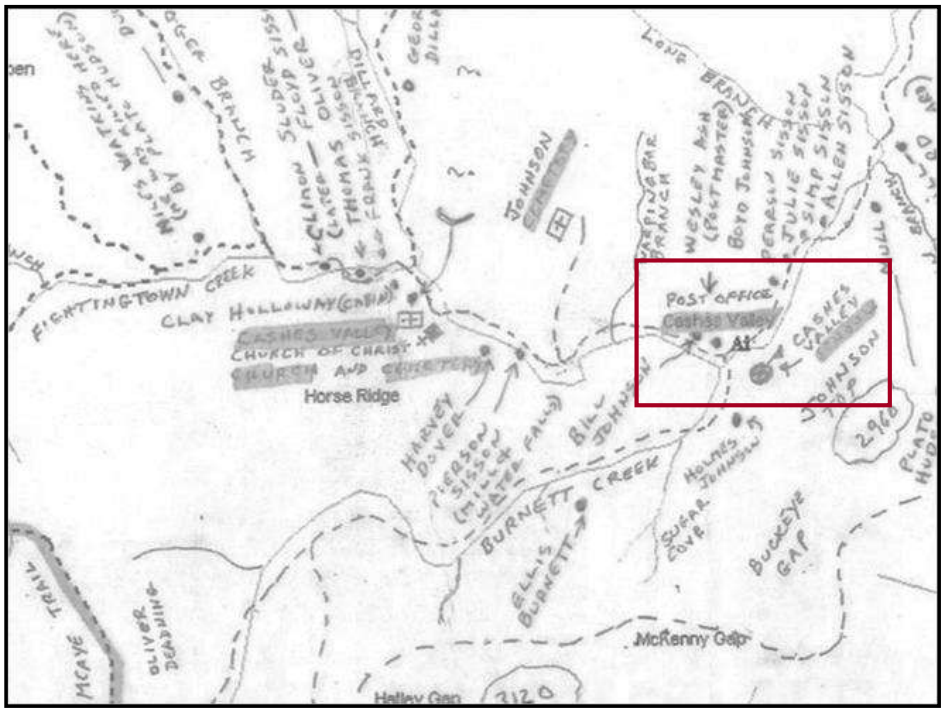


Figure 12. Topographic map of the Cashes Valley area around the site of Ai.

The Closing of the Post Office, and Afterwards

While bad roads held back RFD and secured the existence of the post office at Ai for three decades, the dwindling population did not justify the continuation of the post office at Ai. The post office at Ai closed September 15, 1932. But the hardy remaining residents of Cashes Valley still needed their mail.



Figure 13. Higdons Store post office (1888 – 1950), Fannin County.

After 1932, the residents of Cashes Valley received their mail through the Chestnut Gap post office shown in Figure 11, which had been the departure point of the Star Route that ended in Ai.

That post office closed in 1937, with the mail for Cashes Valley then going to Higdons Store (Figure 13), also in Fannin County. The first Postmaster in 1888 was Reece Higdon. The store was located in a valley just below Mt. Moriah Baptist Church.

The name of this post office would be shortened to Higdon, (Figure 14) on July 1, 1950, and it would close in 1961.

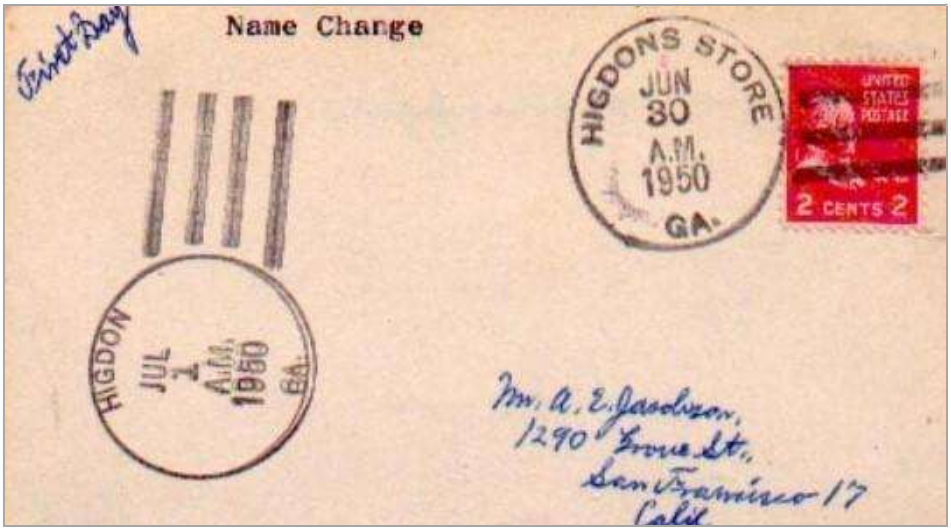


Figure 14. Post office name changed to Higdons Store.

Today

In 1905, there were thirty-nine post offices in Gilmer County, Georgia. Today there are three; Elijay, East Elijay with Cherry Log to the east being the third.



Figure 15. Current Cherry Log post office.



Figure 16. Prior Cherry Log post office.

The post office at Cherry Log (Figure 15) serves Ai and Cashes Valley. It lies fourteen miles to the east of site of Ai. The Cherry Log post office opened in 1855. Clearly a factor in Cherry Log's longevity and continued existence is the fact that it lies on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad as well as state and federal roads. The Cherry Log post office opened in its current building in 1985. Prior to that time, it was in a store located across the street from the current post office (Figure 16). That abandoned building is still standing.

Cherry Log has changed its name not once but twice, first from Cherry Log to Cherrylog in 1895, and then back to Cherry Log (two words) in 2008 (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Cherrylog and Cherry Log names.

Nobody lives near the site of the old post office at Ai today. But if they did, sending and receiving mail would be a challenge. The nearest mailboxes, all twenty-eight of them, (Figure 18) are on posts at the intersection of Cashes Valley Lane and Cashes Valley Road some five miles away over a barely passable road.

Most of those mailboxes serve patrons that are not physically located near the old post office but rather scattered in the secluded area around the mailboxes. These homes are all handsome and well maintained, some being leased out as vacation rentals. A trip to the mailbox from Ai would confront the previously mentioned fords and rutted roads; open to the public but privately maintained. A trip to the post office at Cherry Log would involve traveling another nine miles or so.



Clearly for at least twenty-eight families living in and around Cashes Valley, Georgia the charms of living in the seclusion of the Southern Appalachians more than compensates for the inconvenience of living where RFD dare not go.

Figure 18. Twenty-eight mailboxes at the intersection of Cashes Valley Lane and Cashes Valley Road.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my friend Mike Fleming who was generous enough with his time, vehicle, and ability to negotiate mountain trails to make the trip to Ai possible.

Also, thanks to Mike for using his common sense to open the door to a new research tool, which never occurred to me - social media; in this case Facebook. It turns out that many communities, such as Gilmer County, have on-line groups that are rich sources of local history. After a short search/chat, Holly Sisson Barr, member of an old Gilmer County and Cashes Valley family, provided the wonderful map shown in figure 12. The complete map is much larger and more detailed than what is shown. Many thanks as well to Mrs. Barr.

Resources

Bible Speak. https://biblespeak.org/

Cashes Valley Road. https://www.alltrails.com › trail › us › Georgia › cashes-valley-road

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United States Official Postal Guide, Series 2, Vol. 26, No. 1. Jan 1, 1904, United States Post Office Department.

Congratulations to Member Michael Wing

The Georgia Postal History Society congratulates member Michael Wing for his literature awards earned at the August 14-16, 2025, American Philatelic Society's Great American Stamp Show.





GOLD AWARD: "When the US Post Office Silenced the Father of Rural Free Delivery"

GOLD AWARD: "Georgia Postmaster and County Postmarks"