FIRST FEMALE NEW JERSEY POSTMASTERS: A Research Odyssey

By Jean R. Walton

This article reflects only those women who were officially appointed as New Jersey postmasters from the beginning of Statehood in 1787 to 1828. It does not include the service that was freely given, without a formal appointment, by wives and daughters of men appointed but unable to be consistently available to fulfill the office.

Currently, Gemini (an "Artificial Intelligence" or AI tool associated with Google©) identifies the earliest recorded female postmaster during Statehood in New Jersey as Elain Genung, on February 23rd, 1828, of Warren (a township in Somerset County) – but as Gemini admits, it can make mistakes.

Recently I was asked by a seller if I could help find a home for an official postal document appointing a woman as a U.S. postmaster in New Jersey. It seemed to record an earlier appointment of a woman at a different post office than was reported in an AI search for information. This newly discovered document identified Frances Morford of Princeton (then in Somerset County) as a woman, appointed postmaster on January 11, 1825.

Barring any mistakes, this new document would move the date of first woman postmaster three years earlier. A significant step earlier than AI reported, by three years.

It would seem that AI relied heavily on a study entitled *New Jersey Women First Postmasters, 121 Women Appointed 1828 – 1974*. This is an interesting and worthy study at NumismaticMall.com,[1] which covers all post offices listed in Kay and Smith, a "bible" of New Jersey postal history collectors.[2] Kay and Smith, however, names only the first postmasters in each town, i.e., *initial* postmasters when the office was created, or when there was a post office name change. It does not list other postmasters in the life of a post office, and thus excludes women who were appointed *later* – a place where many women postmasters might be hidden.

Research is a tricky thing. Sources may be difficult to access, and once accessed, may be difficult to read. In most cases, they need verification, and cross referencing with other sources. This is as true in postal history research as in any other historical research, and seems to have been the case with this story – we found at least two other women who were appointed postmasters in New Jersey, in this early period of Statehood.[3] Both of these appointments were at much larger post offices than Warren in Somerset County. Both post offices existed before Statehood, and had long been on postal routes: Trenton, established in 1734, and Princeton, in 1757.[4] These women appointed were not the *first* postmasters when that post office was created so were not mentioned in Kay & Smith. There may be others yet to be discovered.

There are two main sources for establishing a record of the postmasters of a particular town or village. The first is The National Archives (NARA) U.S. Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832-Sept. 30, 1971.[5] This is useful for the vast majority of post offices, and is available in microfilmed records on National Archives. A digital version is available on Ancestry.com.

For appointments before 1832, it is necessary to consult earlier NARA microfilmed files, which are images of cursive pages and far more difficult to read, and complicated in their arrangement. National Archives however provides a very useful guide to using these earlier files at https://www.archives.gov/research/post-offices.

The second tool which is often useful is the USPS Postmasterfinder[6] by City at https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/postmaster-finder/postmasters-by-city.htm. Where research has been completed on the Postmasterfinder site, it is extremely useful. Although many cities and towns remain undone, the ones that have been done are often very complete. Neither site, however, provides the sex of the postmaster – that is left to the researcher to determine from the name of the postmaster. Those names are sometimes gender-neutral, being only initials, or names that might have been used for a man or a woman. Gender information often needs to be verified from other historical resources.



Fig. 1: Map of Warren Township, Somerset County, NJ.[7]

For Elain Genung, the USPS Postmasterfinder was no help – which meant no postal research has yet been done on that particular post office. The Postmasterfinder does not include a space to include the county, and Warren is not, despite the name, in Warren County, NJ. It was, and still is, in Somerset County. So this put me back into the National Archives microfilmed pages of post offices before 1832. There I found in NARA Microfilm M1131-05 this image for Elain Genung in Warren Township. Later images in a different hand preserve the dot over the latter part of the first name, making it look like an "i" in the name.

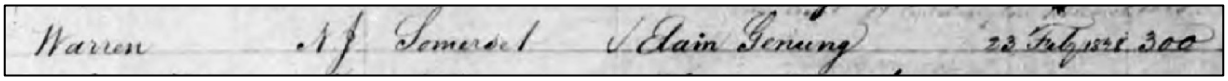


Fig. 2: First postmaster at Warren Township, appointed February 23, 1828, in Somerset County. It seems an odd spelling of Elaine. A man? Or a woman? Was it Elain? Or Elam?

I had found the name of Elam Genung in Warren Township history pages online, [8] but, still dubious, I wondered if Elain and Elam were in fact the same person. Elam Genung was a familiar name in Warren Township history, so I contacted the president of the Warren Township Historical Society. Alan A. Siegel, a well-known local historian and author of a number of local books. He sent me pages from their newsletter on the early history of former Union Village and the Warren post office created there in 1828.[9] He informed me that *Elam* Genung was their first postmaster, a town founder and owner of a general store at the corner of Mountain Avenue and Hillcrest Rd, and 32 years of age when he was appointed Warren Township's first Postmaster. He was quite definitely not a woman, and not named Elain. I searched various genealogy sites and could find not any mention of an Elain Genung who might have superseded him into the office, but none occurred, in Elam's family or otherwise. I was forced to discard the Elain error, made early-on and perpetuated in later NARA files, and conclude Elam was the correct name of Warren's first postmaster.

Elam Genung was a veteran of the War of 1812, and came to Warren Township some years later. He received his appointment as postmaster on February 12, 1828, thus establishing the Warren post office, which was located in his store. He also became a minister in the local community. In later years he moved with his wife and family to Indiana.

What I had originally thought must have been an Optical Character Recognition mistake was not the case – it appears that the cursive script of the original recorder had created the misunderstanding. It has been misread in postal files since its origin – even appearing in the U.S.

Registries for many years as Elain, and at one time it was rerecorded as Edwin. But the historians of Warren Township knew who their first postmaster was by his real name. I am grateful to Alan Siegel for the help. It did mean, however, that Elain Genung was not an early female postmaster of New Jersey.

The newly discovered document for Frances Morford in Princeton leaves no doubt as to her sex. She was not, however, the first postmaster in Princeton – in fact, she followed both her father and brother William into that position in 1825, and served until 1834.



Fig. 3. The official appointment as Postmaster for Frances Morford, signed by John McLean, Post-master General, and dated January 11, 1825. Note the pronouns have been crossed out and changed from his to her – denoting that Post-master General McLean clearly understood he was appointing a woman.

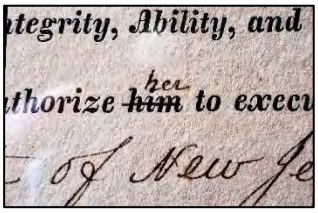


Fig. 3a: Details and signature of John McLean, Post-master General from June 1823 to March 1829.[10]

JOHN McLEAN, POST-MASTER GENERAL

OF THE

United States of America,

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, GREETING:

Know ye, That confiding in the Integrity, Ability, and Punctuality of Frances M. Morford

I DO APPOINT ~~him~~ her a Post-Master, and authorize ~~him~~ her to execute the duties of that Office at Princeton

in Somerset County and State of New Jersey according to the laws of the United States,

and such regulations conformable thereto, as he shall receive from me: TO HOLD the said Office of Post-master, with all the Powers,

Priviliges and emoluments to the same belonging, during the pleasure of the Post-master General of the United States for the time being.

In Testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of my Office to be affixed,

at Washington City, the Eleventh day of January in the year of our Lord

one thousand eight hundred and twenty five and of the independence of the United States

the forty ninth

January 1825.

Post-master General of the United States for the time being.

my hand and caused the seal of my Office to be affixed,

January in the year of our Lord

and of the independence of the United States

Frances's father, Stephen Morford, born in 1756, was a Major in the Revolutionary War. He held the position as Princeton's fifth postmaster since 1776, and the second during Statehood, serving from January 1802 to 1818. At that point his eldest son William took over, and was appointed March 26, 1818, perhaps because of his father's advancing age. William died in December of 1824, and Frances, Stephen's eldest daughter, took his place on January 7, 1825. Her official appointment shows the date as January 11, 1825. (see above). She served almost ten years until September 1834, when John Perrinne was appointed Princeton's next postmaster.



Fig.4: From the National Archives microfilmed record M1131-04 (1824-1828) record, where her name is spelled correctly with a "e", 7 Jan 1825. At this time, Princeton was still in Somerset County. [11] ***The preceding postmaster is shown as William Morford, her elder brother, who died December 23, 1824.***

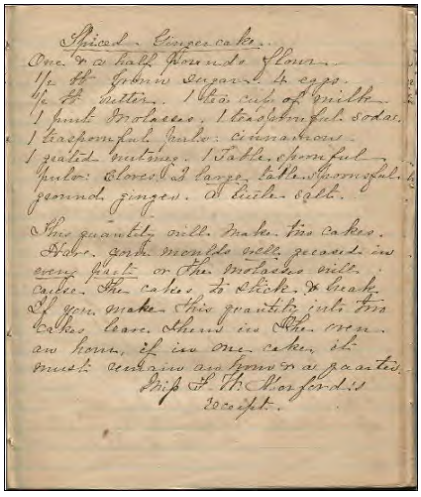
For a little over 30 years, the Morford family and the post office "*occupied the house so long known as the old post office corner - N W corner of Nassau and Witherspoon Street. The post office was kept there for thirty years first by Major Morford himself and then by his son William and finally from 1824 to 1834 by his oldest daughter Frances Witherspoon Morford, so well known to a former generation as Miss Fanny."*[12,13]

Frances Morford was born in 1793. She was in her thirties when appointed, and left Princeton about the time her last term as postmaster ended. Her father died in 1833, and her mother had predeceased him in 1831. She moved west to Lynchburg, Virginia, and lived with her younger sister and brother-in-law, who conducted a school there. As oldest living descendant of Major Morford at that time, she subsisted on her father's Revolutionary War pension. She never married, and apparently never took another position. She died in 1879 of gastritis, and is buried there. She was known for her piety, and was well-respected in the community. She left behind a recipe for a Spiced Gingercake.

Fig. 5 & 6: At left, obituary for "Miss Fanny"[14] ***and at right, a recipe for Spiced Gingercake, by Miss F. W. Morford, in a Lynchburg Museum. This recipe comes with a bit of history.***[15]

FUNERAL OF AN OLD RESIDENT.—The funeral services of the late Miss Francis Witherspoon Morford, were held yesterday afternoon at the First Presbyterian Church, and attended by a large number of those who had known and esteemed her for her singular piety. It was the eighty sixth anniversary of her birth. She had resided here and held her membership in the First Presbyterian Church since 1835.

Born at Princeton, New Jersey, she had resided successively in Columbus, Ohio, in Charleston, South Carolina, and in this city. Dr. Hall, in closing his funeral discourse, remarked that wherever she had been known, she had been known as a christian. She was a sister in-law of the late Amos Botsford.



Joseph Felcone received the following letter from Princeton University through the kind auspices of Gabriel Swift, Librarian of Early American Collections, Princeton University Library Special Collections, regarding this specific appointment. It was sent on January 13, 1825.

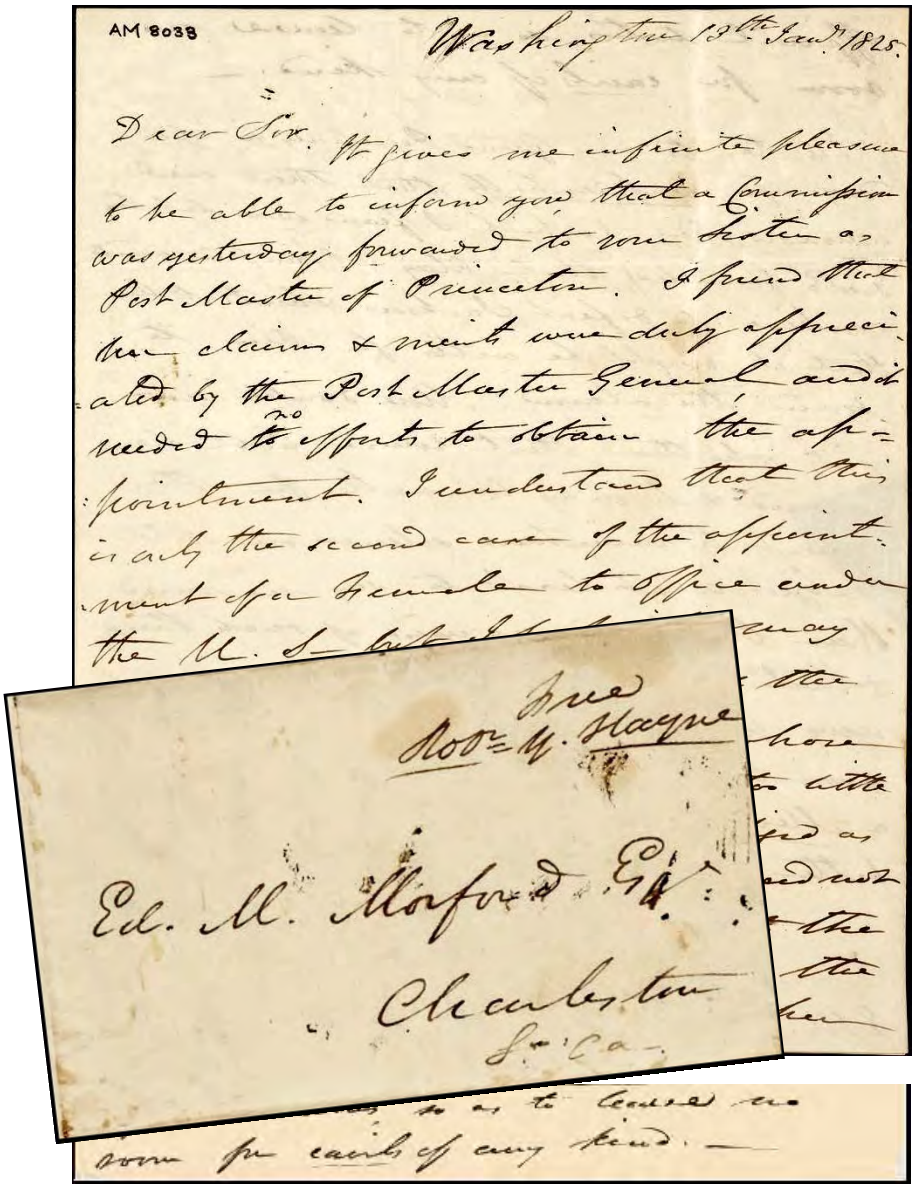


Fig. 7: Letter written by Robt. Y. Hayne with his Senatorial Free Frank dated January 13, 1825 to Frances' brother Edmund, who had relocated to South Carolina, informing him of his sister's appointment as Postmaster at Princeton. Images Courtesy of Princeton University Library [16]

Washington 13th Jany 1825

Dear Sir,

It gives me infinite pleasure to be able to inform you that a Commission was yesterday forwarded to your sister as Post Master at Princeton. I know that her claims & merits were duly appreciated by the Post Master General and it needed no efforts to obtain the appointment. I understand that this is only the second case of the appointment of a female to office under the U. S – but I hope it may lead to some amelioration of the condition of a class of Society whose interests have certainly been too little regarded in the usages of civilized as well as barbarous nations. I need not caution you how essential to the interests of your sister will be to the most scrupulous attention to her official duties so as to leave no room for cavils of any kind. ……

Signed:

Robt. Y. Hayne

(U.S. Senator, So. Carolina)

It is possible that Senator Hayne was referring to female appointments in the entire U.S. at that time, not just New Jersey. All these things were promising, but before concluding Miss Morford was the first or even the second female New Jersey postmaster, further research was necessary. This led me on a search for more information.

I went back to a document titled *New Jersey Postmasters of the Stampless Era 1789 – 1857.*[17] It not only lists first postmasters of locations from 1787 to 1853, but every other postmaster in that period, making it an invaluable New Jersey resource. Frances Morford is listed there after her father and elder brother, but misspelled with an "i" in Frances.

I also discovered a 2021 post office document by the USPS Postal Historian, entitled *Women Postmasters*.[18] It is a very complete history of women who served as postmasters during colonial times up through and including Statehood. It included, in Footnote 9, the name of Jane Wilson who served as postmaster in Trenton for almost 11 years, from August 8, 1824 to January 5, 1835. This appointment was five months earlier than Frances, and ran a year or two longer.

That sent me looking for the Official Registers of the United States, which were first published in 1816, listing federal employees including postmasters at the time of publication. It was printed biennially, and can be found online at various sites. I recommend HathiTrust, which lists a number of them.[19]

Jane Wilson was not in the Coles & Griffith document, *New Jersey Postmasters of the Stampless Era*, nor by her true name in the digital version of the NARA 1832-1971 document on Ancestry.com, where her name is mis-transcribed as "Lane" Wilson," but going back to the earlier NARA files, she was clearly appointed postmaster as Jane Wilson on August 7, 1824, and appears in the U.S. Registries as Jane Wilson. She thus preceded Frances Morford by five months, putting her (so far) in the position of first female postmaster in New Jersey.

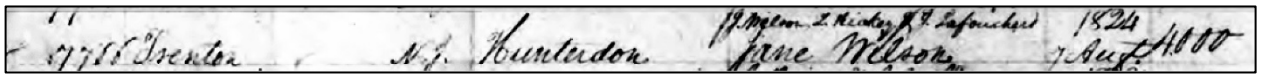


Fig. 8: From Post Office Records Microfilm M1131-04, 1824-1828. Appointment of Jane Wilson as Postmaster at Trenton NJ (then in Hunterdon County). An earlier document (1818-1824) shows her husband's appointment in 1821, but it is dark and very hard to read.

The story behind Jane Wilson's appointment carries with it a sad story. Her husband, James Jefferson Wilson, was a printer by trade, and became editor of Trenton's *True American*, a very influential newspaper. His political influence and position had led him into a number of government positions, including being elected as a U.S. Senator in 1815. He served there until 1821, resigning shortly before the end of his term, as his bid for re-election had been unsuccessful. At this point in his life, his former reputation as a "man of extraordinary talents and wide political influence"[20] in the Republican Party had begun to falter, and he seemed to be descending into alcoholism.[21] While appointed Postmaster in 1821, it is likely that those duties fell to his wife. He suffered from dementia, and had a severe accident as a result, he jumped or fell from a second story window of his office, thinking the building was on fire, breaking both his legs above the knees. These and other injuries plagued him for the few remaining years of his life, and contributed to his death.[22]

James J. Wilson's death in 1824 left his wife Jane and their 11 children destitute, and it appears those around them strove to provide her with a livelihood and other means of support – one of these being the position of postmaster held by her husband,[23] to which she was appointed after his death. Born in 1780, she was an estimable woman in her own right. She served in that position until 1835. She appeared later in the 1860 US Census, then living with her children in Newark. She died in 1861 at age 80.[24]

I scoured the pages of *New Jersey Postmasters of the Stampless Era* for any other postmaster with a female name earlier than her appointment on August 7, 1824, or any that might be non-gender in appearance, to find other possible candidates for female postmasters earlier than the 1824 date for Jane Wilson. But by now I knew errors could occur – no matter what the source. Other sources may bring to light another woman as first female postmaster of New Jersey, and I suggest others take up the search. There are other postal records to be searched – for instance the first returns of postmasters – or other historical sources which may prove useful, but for now, Jane Wilson holds the position of earliest discovered female postmaster in New Jersey, serving 1824 to 1835. Many genealogical sources seem to have overlooked the fact that she served for over 10 years as postmaster at Trenton.

The Morford appointment document coming to light prompted this search for the first female postmaster in New Jersey. Without the kindness of the seller in seeking out the New Jersey Postal History Society, that document might have been lost to us. Many thanks to the seller, and to Joseph Felcone, who helped complete the sale to Princeton University, where it joins the letter from Senator Hayne contributed by Princeton University on this appointment, courtesy of Gabriel A. Swift of Princeton University Library Special collections, to whom we owe our gratitude.

While it did not turn out that Frances Morford was the first female postmaster in New Jersey, I think she would be pleased to know of the efforts made to preserve her mark on New Jersey history, as would Jane Wilson, who for the moment holds the position of first female postmaster in New Jersey since Statehood.

End Notes:

[1] John N. Lupia, III, *New Jersey Women First Postmasters, 121 Women Appointed 1828-1974*, https://www.numismaticmall.com/home/new-jersey-women-first-postmasters . Copyright 2000-2025. The source he shows is Kay & Smith's *New Jersey Postal History*, published in 1977 by Quarterman Publications, Lawrence, MA. Pages 139-171 contain the first postmasters of each community. Note his web article is entitled New Jersey *Women First* Postmasters, *not* New Jersey *First Women* Postmasters. It does not include women appointed to that post but not in the initial position.

[2] *New Jersey Postal History, The Post Offices and First Postmasters, 1776-1976* by John L. Kay and Chester A. Smith, Jr., published by Quarterman Publications, Lawrence, MA, in 1977 – one of two major references used frequently by New Jersey History Collectors.

[3] New Jersey had several post offices before the Statehood Period began in December 18, 1787, when New Jersey ratified the Constitution. Kay and Smith note nine in existence in 1787. Some of these existed in colonial times, for example, Amboy and Burlington in 1692 and 1693 respectively, Trenton (1734), New Brunswick (1748), Elizabethtown and Princeton (in 1757), and Newark (1766) (dates from William Coles' *The Postal Markings of New Jersey Stampless Covers*). We have not included that period or attempted to determine whether any of these early post offices ever had a female in the office of Postmaster.

[4] P.O. dates from *The Postal Marking of New Jersey Stampless Cover*s, by William C. Coles, Collectors Club of Chicago, 1983.

[5] The National Archives in Washington, DC; Washington, DC, *Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832-Sept. 30, 1971;* Record Group: Records of the Post Office Department; Record Group Number: 28; Series: M841; Roll Number: 83. A guide for using these microfilmed images is available at https://www.archives.gov/research/post-offices/postmasters-1832-1971.html . They are also available transcribed on Ancestry.com (requires membership) at https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1932 where the names appear as text, and a link is available to the original image of the listing. Always check that image, as mistakes were sometimes made in reading the cursive script, or simply because the pages have been torn or damaged.. In this case, both Jane Wilson is mis-transcribed as Lane, and Elam Genung is mis-transcribed as Edwin. Frances Morford was often transcribed as Francis.

[6] The USPS Postmasterfinder tool is available at https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/postmaster-finder/postmasters-by-city.htm.

[7] Wikimedia, at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e3/Warren_twp_nj_035.png/250px-Warren_twp_nj_035.png.

[8] Warren Township history at https://www.westfieldnj.com/whs/history/warren2.htm.
[9] Newsletter of the Warren Township Historical Society, No. 2, Fall 1989.
[10] John McLean, Postmaster-General of the U.S. Post Office. See post office biography at https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/pdf/pmg-mclean.pdf
[11] Find-a-Grave, for Frances Morford, at https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/235262746/frances-witherspoon-morford. She was born in 1793, and died in 1879 in Lynchburg, Virginia, the day before her 86th birthday. It includes the obituary shown.
[12] *History of Princeton and its Institutions*, by John Frelinghuysen Hageman, J.B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia,1879, Vol. 2, pp. 22-23 (Princeton Post Office and Mails), and available online at: https://commons.princeton.edu/josephhenry/wp-content/uploads/sites/71/2026/03/HistoryofPrinceton.pdf. See also Google Books at https://books.google.com/books/content?id=uYwMAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA191&img=1&zoom=3&hl=en&bul=1&sig=ACfU3U00wqJeK8wsBhhKQgL5ltAW6BDTgQ&ci=134%2C314%2C712%2C797&edge=0
[13] After the death of her father, (her mother had died in 1831), Frances moved to Lynchburg Virgina, where she lived on her father's war pension with her sister and brother-in-law, dying just shy of age 86. See Find-a-Grave.
[14] A part of her Find-a-Grave page, from The News and Advance, Lynchburg, Virginia, Tue, Mar 18, 1879 - Page 3.
[15] See https://lynchburgmuseum.org/2019-12-20-museum-foodies-the-lynchburg-museum-system-shares-our-favorite-food-traditions-part-five-1/ and scroll beneath the recipe itself to learn a little about Miss Fanny and her family. Thanks to Ted Delaney, Lynchburg, VA Museum Director & Chief Public History Officer.
[16] Hayne, Robert Y., 1791-1839; General Manuscripts Miscellaneous Collection, C0140, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
[17] *New Jersey Postmasters of the Stampless Era, 1789 – 1857*, by William C. Coles, Jr. and Stanley Griffith, in the pages of ***NJPH*** and collected separately in an online document at www.njpostalhistory.org/media/pdf/ColesNJPMs1789-1857.pdf.
[18] *Women Postmasters*, USPS Postal Historian 2021, at https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/women-postmasters.pdf. This history includes women postmasters in the colonies to the present (2021). Footnote #9 mentions Jane Wilson as listed in the 1825 U.S. Registry.
[19] U.S. Registries at https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002137439. These were printed, so attempting to read old cursive is not necessary, but also can have mis-transcribed a name or two.
[20] A short biography of both Jane Cox Wilson and James Jefferson Wilson on Ancestry.com, in *The Cox Family in America* in their Family History Books (search Jane Cox) at https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/62282/images/62282_b1099726-00252?usePUB=true&usePUBJs=true&pId=4393832621
[21] Henry Southard, Samuel L. Southard's father and a member of Congress at that time, wrote his son that Wilson was eating little and drinking heavily, and not fulfilling his duties as Senator. These letters were dated January 6th and 11, 1819. See *Samuel L. Southard, Jeffersonian Whig*, by Michael Birkner, pp 46 & 209. When Wilson was not re-elected to the Senate, he chose to retire instead of completing his term. Samuel Southard was appointed to complete his term, and then continued in his place in the Senate, until appointed Secretary of the Navy in 1823.
[22] See the *Gettysburg Compiler* (Gettysburg, PA. Dec. 24, 1822) at https://genealogytrails.com/njer/mercer/news_sicklist.html
[23] Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, NJ Adjutant Generals, p. 10, NJ State Archives. See https://www.nj.gov/dma/history/assets/documents/NJ-TAG.pdf .
[24] Ancestry.com Public Family Trees at https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/173368250/person/162354348104/facts?_phsrc=sSx158&_phstart=successSource