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JULY 1, 2021 KABRAMSON

Papers of H. Bentley Hahn: The Man Who Invented the 5-Digit ZIP Code

(This post was published on our previous blog on 5/15/2015.)

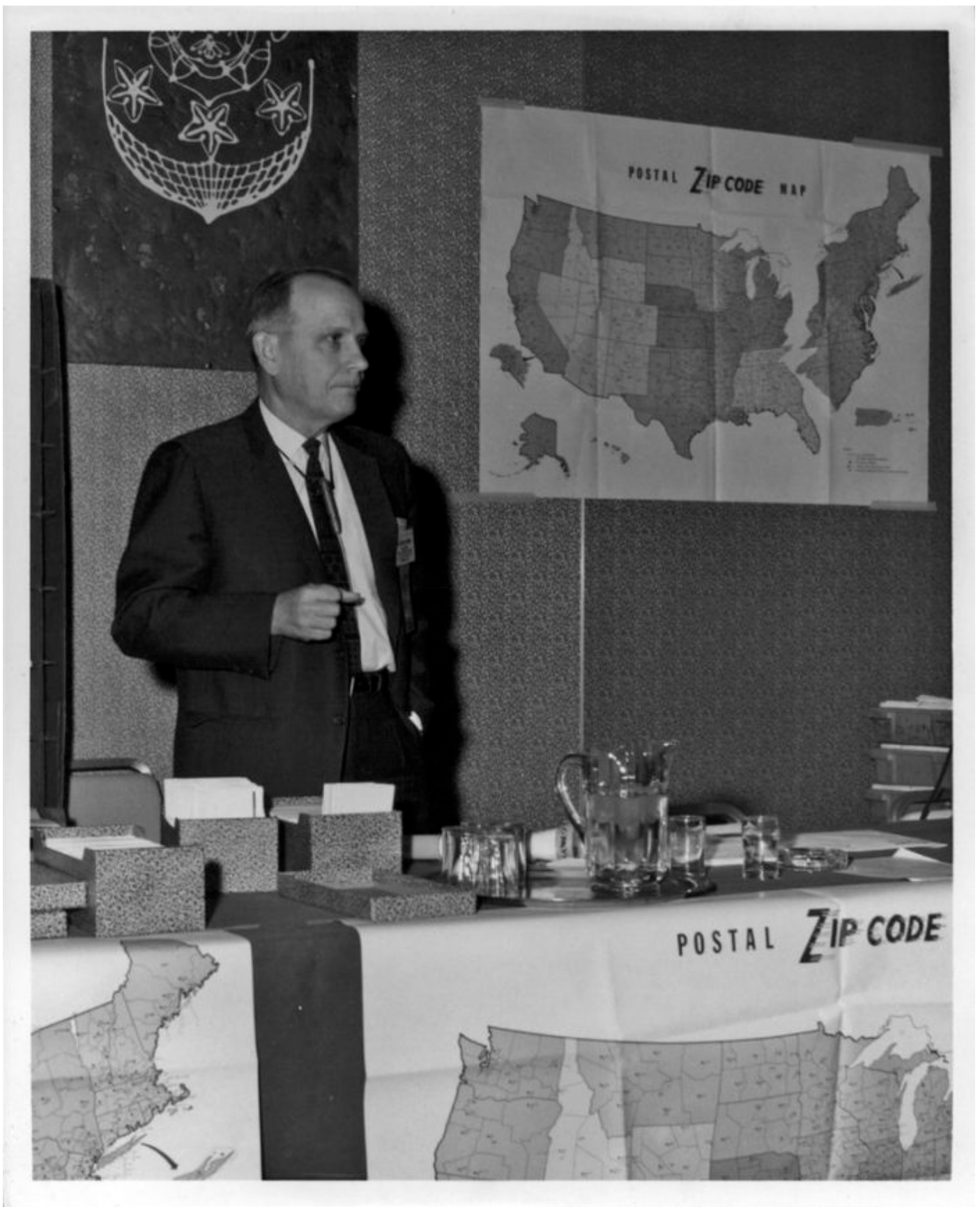
By Lauren Wallace, Former Graduate Student Intern (Simmons University)

[The following post has been republished to mark the 58th anniversary of the U.S. Postal Service's five-digit ZIP Code system, which was instituted on July 1, 1963.]

We are pleased to announce that the [H. Bentley Hahn Personal Papers](#) collection is fully digitized and available on our website.

The digitization of the H. Bentley Hahn Personal Papers was part of my final capstone internship for my Masters degree in Library and Information Science and Archives Management at Simmons College. It was exciting, yet challenging, to apply the skills I had learned over the course of my degree. In digitizing this collection, what struck me was the simplicity of a program that we now take for granted and how it completely revolutionized the U.S. Postal Service. The story of

the ZIP Code and of the Mr. ZIP marketing campaign provides insight into a rapidly-changing postal system. In working with H. Bentley Hahn's papers, I discovered a small snapshot of history that I would have never seen otherwise and I am excited to be able to share it with others.



HBHPP-001-029-p0013. Photograph of H. Bentley Hahn at the ZIP Code Symposium in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 16 March 1965. View the rest of the folder [here](#).

Henry Bentley Hahn, Sr. was born on March 14, 1910 in Beaumont, Jefferson Co., Texas and served in the United States Air Force from 1942-1946. Upon his return Hahn became a postal inspector for the United States Post Office Department. It was the work he performed in this position for which he is best remembered.

In 1961, the volume of magazine and circular mail bundles in the United States averaged 43 million pieces per week, with a total of about 30 billion pieces annually. [1] The U.S. Post Office was still dealing with the loss of many trained employees from World War II and did not have the necessary resources to increase the specialized training required to handle this amount of mail. With mass mail marketing campaigns and magazine circulation on the rise, the U.S. Post Office was searching for ways to manage the exponentially increasing load more effectively.

After spending six years evaluating the operations of the field postal service, Hahn submitted a report entitled, "Proposed Reorganization of the Field Postal Service" (1953) to the Inspector in Charge, C. C. Garner, as a solution to the developing mail problem. This proposal would later contribute to the, "Zone Improvement Plan," establishing the five-digit ZIP Code.[2] The first three digits of the ZIP code were invented by Robert A. Moon, who came up with a system for dividing the country into approximately 900 geographical areas. Eventually, H. Bentley Hahn contributed the fourth and fifth digits, which added further precision to geographic locales. The five-digit ZIP code plan was announced to the public on November 28, 1962 and implemented on July 1, 1963.

(Below) The first three slides from Hahn's presentation and the transcript to "Technical Explanation of Post Office Department's Proposed 'Zip Code' Program for the Postal System." The presentation was delivered following the official

announcement by the Postmaster General in November 1962. View the rest of the presentation slides, [here](#). View the rest of the speech [here](#).



HBHPP-001-028-p0002

HBHPP-
001-
028-
p0003.

HBHPP-
001-028-
p0004.

*Series of ZIP
Code
marketing
presentation
slides,
November
1962. View
the rest of
folder [here](#).*

*Please
credit:
United
States. Post
Office
Department.
H. Bentley
Hahn
Personal
Papers.
John F.
Kennedy
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Library and
Museum,
Boston.*



TECHNICAL EXPLANATION OF POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT'S PROPOSED
"ZIP CODE" PROGRAM FOR THE POSTAL SYSTEM
BY MR. BENTLEY HAHN OF THE
BUREAU OF OPERATIONS, POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
NOVEMBER 28, 1962

The Post Office Department is developing a Five-Digit Distribution Code for use by publishers, direct mail advertisers and other large mailers in presorting mail. The code also will aid us in the manual distribution of mail and will pave the way for mechanized distribution of mail in post offices when suitable equipment is available.

A separate code number will be assigned to each post office, each delivery station and to large firms, large buildings and other major delivery points.

In zoned cities the first three digits will identify the city and the last two digits will be the same as the present zone number.

In less populated areas the first three digits will identify the main focal points of air, highway and rail transportation and the last two digits will identify the post office or delivery station. In the Postal Service these focal points of transportation are called "Sectional Centers."

We have a set of slides which will help to show how we are proceeding with the assignment of numbers and how we anticipate the system will work.

The "Service Areas" slide shows the country divided into ten geographical areas following State lines. These areas roughly follow the nationwide transportation pattern and the size of each area is based on number of offices and postal receipts. The area number is the first digit of our code.

The "Service Area Subdivisions" slide shows the further breakdown of the "0" Service Area which indicates the second digit of our code.

The "Local Area" slide shows the breakdown to large cities and sectional centers which gives us the third digit of our code. In this example, 070 and 071 identify Hartford City and 072 to 074 identify Hartford Sectional Center.

The "Hartford City" slide shows the final breakdown to zones with the fourth and fifth digits being the same as our present zone numbers. The other numbers allotted to Hartford will be assigned to large firms, etc. or will be held in reserve for future expansion.

The "Hartford Sectional Center" slide shows the truck routes out of Hartford and shows the post offices assigned numbers in sequence following the flow of the mail. Your attention is invited to the small town "Granby, Conn." which in this example is assigned the number 07454. We will refer to this office in a later slide.

(more)

The ZIP Code plan created a hierarchy based on national region, sub-region, post office, and delivery station.[3] Using the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library ZIP Code as an example (02125), the region is 0, sub-region is 2, post office is 1, and delivery station is 25. As found in trial areas, the new ZIP Code eased the sorting process by removing delivery steps and effectively utilizing electronic data processing equipment in the pre-sorting of mail. This approach ultimately led to a decrease in cost and delivery time.[4]



Mr. Zip (Zoning Improvement Plan) illustrates the new national Zip Code Mail Distribution Plan which Postmaster General J. Edward Day announced Wednesday. It will be available on July 1 to large mailers using automatic data processing equipment.

The first three digits of the Zip Code identify one of 637 sectional centers by geographical division (9-California), sub-division (8-Northern California) and sectional center offices (7-Sacramento). The fourth and fifth digits (12) in the Zip Code could specify either a single smaller post office served by the sectional center (Colfax, California), Zone 12 in the City of Sacramento or an office building receiving large volumes of mail (California State Executive Offices).

Postal technicians throughout the country are now designating by number the sectional centers, post offices, zones and individual buildings which will comprise the national Zip Code.

HBHPP-001-026-p0007. Mr. ZIP, the United States Post Office Department mascot, promoting and explaining the new ZIP Code system. View the rest of the folder [here](#).

HBHPP-001-
032-p0001

Memorandum
from James F.
Kelleher,
Special
Assistant to
the
Postmaster
General, to all
Postmasters
at Cities
Formerly
Zoned and
Cities Newly
Zoned, 29
April 1963.
The
memorandum
mandated
that
Postmasters
“immediately
launch a
saturation
campaign to
fully inform
the residents”
of their
respective
cities. View
the rest of the
folder [here](#).

In order to implement the new program successfully, the U.S. Post Office set out to create an effective, mass marketing campaign. However, due to the limited time frame between the program’s official public announcement and its expected implementation, a majority of the campaign efforts was left to the regional and

local post offices, some of which only received two months notification prior to the July 1, 1963 implementation date.

To accomplish this ambitious goal, regional and local post offices were utilized to saturate the community with information. The U.S. Post Office mandated that the campaign inform residents on how to use the ZIP Code, when to start, and why the change was necessary.[5] With a “tremendous job to do and a very short time in which to do it,” local post offices were entrusted with promoting and informing their residents in a very short period of time.[6]

Shortly afterward, reports of success started to come in from the regional postmasters, with minor issues to be addressed. Despite these issues, the ZIP Code was considered by the U.S. Post Office to be a huge success. Some counties saved as much as \$10,000 per year, speeding up delivery by up to 48 hours in some locations and easing the process of sorting without a reduction in staff or closing local post offices.[7] Below is a sampling of the reports sent in by postmasters shortly after the implementation of the ZIP Code:

*HPHPP-001-
002-p0026*
*. Memorandum
regarding the
implementation
of the ZIP Code
system in
Seattle,
Washington, 2
March 1967.
View the rest of
the folder [here](#).*

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
ROUTING SLIP

TO:	BUREAU OR OFFICE	ROOM NO.
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

FROM: Postmaster
Newark, N.Y. 14513

EXTENSION

DATE

7/9/64

ROOM NO.

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| ☐ APPROVAL | ☐ NECESSARY ACTION | ☐ AS REQUESTED |
| ☐ SIGNATURE | ☐ INVESTIGATE | ☐ INFORMATION |
| ☐ COMMENT | ☐ RECOMMENDATION | ☐ READ AND RETURN |
| ☐ SEE ME | ☐ PREPARE REPLY | ☐ READ AND FILE |

REMARKS:

Bently:

You may be pleased to know that your suggestion has worked out very well.

This sort of 1,000,000 pieces has been completed in record time and at considerable less expense to the Company than was expected.

There will be no more terminal sorting of circulars from the J&P people if the Department approves.

As you further suggested, we did a bit of testing along the lines of our discussion, and we are anxiously waiting for the results.

(Additional Remarks on Reverse)

POD Form 13
July 1954

Replaces previous editions of POD-13 which may be used. 648 16-75094-1 GPO

[HBHPP-001-010-p0039](#). Memorandum from the Newark, New York Postmaster to H. Bentley Hahn, reporting back on the new ZIP Code system a year following its introduction, 9 July 1964. View the rest of the folder [here](#).

While there were challenges to work through with the new system, postmasters throughout the region reported overall success in the implementation of the ZIP Code system. Almost 52 years later, the system remains in effect and has continued to adapt to many changes, including advancements in technology.

[1] [HBHPP-001-004-p0002](#)

[2] [HBHPP-001-012-p0003](#)

[3] [HBHPP-001-025-p0004](#)

[4] [HBHPP-001-025-p0004](#)

[5] [HBHPP-001-032-p0001](#)

[6] [HBHPP-001-032-p0014](#)

[7] [HBHPP-001-012-p0001](#)

- 📁 ARCHIVAL HOLDINGS 📁 GETTING TO KNOW THE PEOPLE FEATURED IN OUR COLLECTIONS
- 📁 HISTORICAL ANNIVERSARIES 📁 NEWLY DIGITIZED COLLECTIONS
- 🔗 ARCHIVAL DIGITIZATION 🔗 ARCHIVAL INTERNSHIPS 🔗 C.C. GARNER 🔗 H. BENTLEY HAHN
- 🔗 JAMES KELLEHER 🔗 MR. ZIP 🔗 PERSONAL PAPERS 🔗 POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
- 🔗 POSTAL INSPECTORS 🔗 POSTAL SYSTEMS 🔗 ZIP CODES 🔗 ZONE IMPROVEMENT PLAN (ZIP)

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10 comments



Did you know the ZIP code was invented by an Air Force veteran? | Social Marketing by WordPress

JUNE 17, 2015 AT 9:20 AM

[...] more about the ZIP code implementation and check out the fully digitized H. Bentley Hahn Personal Papers now available to view from the [...]

REPLY



Mena Bielow

JUNE 17, 2015 AT 5:04 PM

Very interesting!

Was the USA the first country to use Zip Codes? Because other countries use zip codes too. If his idea was adopted by other countries it means that he influenced the way mail is distributed across the world.

REPLY



Did you know the ZIP code was invented by an Air Force veteran? | lielizchuren

JUNE 17, 2015 AT 11:33 PM

[...] more about the ZIP code implementation and check out the fully digitized H. Bentley Hahn Personal Papers now available to view from the [...]

REPLY



Did you know the ZIP code was invented by an Air Force veteran? | Madison Dawn

JUNE 18, 2015 AT 8:57 PM

[...] more about the ZIP code implementation and check out the fully digitized H. Bentley Hahn Personal Papers now available to view from the [...]

REPLY



Did you know the ZIP code was invented by an Air Force veteran? | leatroachez

JUNE 18, 2015 AT 9:00 PM

[...] more about the ZIP code implementation and check out the fully digitized H. Bentley Hahn Personal Papers now available to view from the [...]

REPLY



Rachel

AUGUST 17, 2020 AT 12:43 AM

Henry Bentley Hahn, Sr. is actually my great-grandfather. Thank you so much for honoring his legacy.

REPLY



kadlerabramson

AUGUST 17, 2020 AT 2:20 PM

Thank you for letting us know! We're delighted that you found this post on your great-grandfather!

REPLY



Kevin Bentley Kusreau

FEBRUARY 8, 2021 AT 1:00 PM

Henry Bentley Hahn was my great-uncle. I am named after him. He presented his invention at my first grade show and tell.

REPLY



kadlerabramson

FEBRUARY 8, 2021 AT 1:34 PM

Well, that is an awesome piece of information. I imagine you were quite proud of your great-uncle. Do you mind sharing the location of this presentation? The ZIP code will do!



REPLY



Brandon Moon

MARCH 7, 2024 AT 1:00 PM

Robert A. Moon was my great-grandfather as well, I am glad our ancestors worked to where we have a great system put into place!

REPLY

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NAME *

EMAIL *

WEBSITE

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Post Comment



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