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History of the U.S. Postal Service

1775-1993

The Postal Role in U.S. Development

Between the Revolutionary period and the first World War, United States postal officials applied themselves to improving transportation of the mails. From those early days to the present, the Postal Service has helped develop and subsidize every new mode of transportation in the United States. The postal role was a natural one; apart from postal employees themselves, transportation was the single most important element in mail delivery, literally, the legs of communication.

Even when the general public was skeptical or fearful of a new means of transportation, postal officials experimented with inventions that offered potential for moving the mail faster, occasionally suffering embarrassment, ridicule, or even abuse in the process.

As mail delivery evolved from foot to horseback, stagecoach, steamboat, railroad, automobile, and airplane, with intermediate and overlapping use of balloons, helicopters, and pneumatic tubes, mail contracts ensured the income necessary to build the great highways, rail lines, and airways that eventually spanned the continent.

By the turn of the 19th century, the Post Office Department had purchased a number of stagecoaches for operation on the nation's better post roads -- a post road being any road on which the mail traveled -- and continued to encourage new designs to improve passenger comfort and carry mail more safely.

Ten years before waterways were declared post roads in 1823, the Post Office used steamboats to carry mail between post towns where no roads existed.

In 1831, when steam-driven engines "traveling at the unconscionable speed of 15 miles an hour" were denounced as a "device of Satan to lead immortal souls to hell," railroads began to carry mail for short distances. By 1836, two years before railroads were constituted post roads, the Postal Service had awarded its first mail contract to the railroads.

As early as 1896, before many people in the United States were aware of a new mode of transportation that would eventually supplant the horse and buggy, the Post Office Department experimented with the "horseless wagon" in its search for faster and cheaper carriage of the mails. In its *Annual Report* for 1899, the Department announced that it had tested the practicality of using the automobile to collect mail in Buffalo, New York. In 1901, the Post Office Department entered into its first contract to carry the mail by automobile between the Buffalo Post Office and a postal station in the Pan American Exposition grounds. Although it took 35 minutes to traverse the 4 1/2 miles between the two offices, the Department professed great satisfaction with the contract and prepared for similar service on January 1, 1902, at Minneapolis.

From 1901 to 1914, the Post Office performed all of its vehicle service under contract. Then, unhappy with exorbitant rates and frequent frauds uncovered in these accounts, the Department asked for and received approval from Congress to establish the first government-owned motor vehicle service at Washington, D.C., on October 19, 1914.

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Pony Express

In the meantime, in the first half of the 19th century, the population of the United States began to flow steadily into the newly acquired territories of Louisiana, Oregon, and California. Wagon trains inched along the old Santa Fe, Mormon, and Oregon Trails, their passengers often ravaged by ambushes, hunger, disease, and pestilence.

When gold was discovered in California in 1848, the pioneer movement quickened, and in that year the Post Office Department awarded a contract to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company to carry mail to California. Under this contract, mail traveled by ship from New York to Panama, moved across Panama by rail, then went on to San Francisco by ship. It was supposed to take three to four weeks to receive a letter from the East, but this goal was seldom achieved.

Some overland mail reached California as early as 1848, if erratically, via the military through Fort Leavenworth and Santa Fe. Scheduled overland service for semi-weekly trips began on September 15, 1858, after the Post Office issued a contract to the Overland Mail Company stage line of John Butterfield, whose stages used the 2,800-mile southern route between Tipton, Missouri, and San Francisco. Although the specified running time was 24 days, cross-country mail often took months.

Californians felt their isolation keenly. Los Angeles, for example, learned that California had been admitted to the Union fully six weeks after the fact. Three years later, in 1853, the *Los Angeles Star* somewhat plaintively asked its readers: "Can somebody tell us what has become of the U. S. mail for this section of the world? Some four weeks since it has arrived here. The mail rider comes and goes regularly enough but the mail bags do not. One time he says the mail is not landed in San Diego; another time there was so much of it the donkey could not bring it, and he sent it to San Pedro on the steamer -- which carried it up to San Francisco. Thus it goes wandering up and down the ocean" It was abundantly clear that faster transportation was needed to the Pacific.

In March 1860, William H. Russell, an American transportation pioneer, advertised in newspapers as follows: "Wanted: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred."

Russell had failed repeatedly to get backing from the Senate Post Office and Post Roads Committee for an express route to carry mail between St. Joseph, Missouri -- the westernmost point reached by the railroad and telegraph -- and California. St. Joseph was the strategic starting point for the direct 2,000-mile central route to the West. Except for a few forts and settlements, however, the route beyond St. Joseph was a vast, unknown land, inhabited primarily by Native Americans.

Many people believed transportation across this area on a year-round basis was impossible because of the extreme weather conditions. Russell, however, thought a route was feasible and was ready to organize his own express, with or without a mail contract, to prove it.

As a first step, Russell and his two partners, Majors and Waddell, formed the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company. They built new relay stations and readied existing ones for use. The country was combed for good horses, animals hardy enough to challenge deserts and mountains and to withstand thirst in summer and ice in winter. Riders were recruited hastily but, before being hired, had to swear on a Bible not to cuss, fight, or abuse their animals and to conduct themselves honestly.

Starting on April 3, 1860, the Pony Express ran through parts of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and California. On an average day, a

rider covered 75 to 100 miles. He changed horses at relay stations, set about 10 or 15 miles apart, transferring himself and his mochila (a saddle cover with four pockets or cantinas for mail) to the new mount, all in one leap.

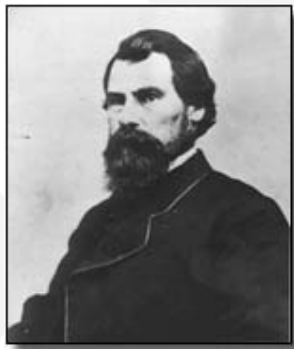
The first mail by Pony Express via the central route from St. Joseph to Sacramento took 10 1/2 days, cutting the Overland Stage time via the southern route by more than half. The fastest delivery was in March 1861, when President Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address was carried in 7 days and 17 hours.

From April 1860 through June 1861, the Pony Express operated as a private enterprise. From July 1, 1861, it operated under contract as a mail route until October 24, 1861, when the transcontinental telegraph line was completed, and the Pony Express became a legend.

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Confederate Postal Service

The Post Office Department of the Confederate States of America was established on February 21, 1861, by an Act of the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States. On March 6, 1861, the day after Montgomery Blair's appointment by President Abraham Lincoln as Postmaster General of the United States, John Henninger Reagan, a former U. S. Congressman, was appointed Postmaster General of the Confederate States of America by Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States.



*John H.
Reagan,
Postmaster
General
of the
Confederate
States of
America*

South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas already had seceded from the Nation. In the following months, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and most of Tennessee followed suit. Reagan instructed southern postmasters to continue to render their accounts to the United States as before until the Confederate postal system was organized. Meanwhile, he sent job offers to southern men in the Post Office Department in Washington. Many accepted and brought along their expertise, as well as copies of postal reports, forms in use, postal maps, etc.

In May 1861, Reagan issued a proclamation stating that he would officially assume control of the postal service of the Confederate States on June 1, 1861. Postmaster General Blair responded by ordering the cessation of United States mail service throughout the South on May 31, 1861.

Although an able administrator headed the Confederate Post Office Department, its mail service was continuously interrupted. Through a combination of pay and personnel cuts, postage rate increases, and the streamlining of mail routes, Reagan eliminated the deficit that existed in the postal service in the South. But blockades and the invading army from the North, as well as a growing scarcity of postage stamps, severely hampered postal operations.

The resumption of federal mail service in the southern states took place gradually as the war came to an end. By November 15, 1865, 241 mail routes had been restored in southern states; by November 1, 1866, 3,234 post offices out of 8,902 were returned to federal control in the South.

Postmaster General Reagan was arrested at the end of the war but later was pardoned

and eventually made it back to Congress, where he became chairman of the Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads.

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Railway Mail Service



*Railway
mail
clerk
preparing
to catch
mailbag,
1913*

At least three decades before the Pony Express galloped into postal history, the "iron horse" made a formal appearance. In August 1829, an English-built locomotive, the *Stourbridge Lion* completed the first locomotive run in the United States on the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company Road in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. One month later, the South Carolina Railroad Company adopted the locomotive as its tractive power, and, in 1830, the Baltimore & Ohio's *Tom Thumb*, America's first steam locomotive, successfully carried more than 40 persons at a speed exceeding 10 miles an hour. This beginning was considered somewhat less than auspicious when a stage driver's horse outran on a parallel track in a race at Ellicotts Mills, Maryland, on September 18, 1830. Later, however, a steam locomotive reached the unheard-of speed of 30 miles an hour in an 1831 competition in Baltimore, and the dray horses used to power the first trains were eased out.

The Post Office Department recognized the value of this new mode of transportation for mail as early as November 30, 1832, when the stage contractors on a route from Philadelphia to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, were granted an allowance of \$400 per year "for carrying the mail on the railroad as far as West Chester (30 miles) from December 5, 1832." Although the Department apparently entered into a number of contracts providing for rail transportation as a part of the stage routes in succeeding years, the Postmaster General listed only one railroad company as a contractor during the first six months of 1836, "Route 1036 from Philadelphia to Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania. "

After passage of the Act of July 7, 1838, designating all railroads in the United States as post routes, mail service by railroad increased rapidly. The Post Office appointed a route agent to accompany the mails between Albany and Utica, New York, in 1837. The first route agent was John Kendall, nephew of Postmaster General Amos Kendall.

In June 1840, two mail agents were appointed to accompany the mail from Boston to Springfield "to make exchanges of mails, attend to delivery, and receive and forward all unpaid way letters and packages received."

At this time, mail was sorted in distributing post offices. The only mail sent to the agents on the railroad lines was that intended for dispatch to offices along each route. The route agents opened the pouches from the local offices, separated the mail for other local points on the line for inclusion in the pouches for those offices, and sent the balance into the distributing post offices for further sorting. Gradually, the clerks began to make up mail for connecting lines, as well as local offices, and the idea of distributing all transit mail on the cars slowly evolved.

The first experiment in distributing U.S. mail in so-called "post offices on wheels" was made in 1862 between Hannibal and St. Joseph, Missouri, by William A. Davis, postmaster of St. Joseph. Although this new procedure expedited the connection at St. Joseph with the overland stage, it was discontinued in January 1863. On August 28, 1864, the first U.S. Railroad Post Office route was officially established when George B. Armstrong, the assistant postmaster of Chicago, Illinois, placed a postal car equipped for general distribution in service between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa, on the Chicago

& Northwestern Railroad. Similar routes were established between New York and Washington; Chicago and Rock Island, Illinois; Chicago and Burlington, Illinois; and New York and Erie, Pennsylvania.

When railway mail service began, mostly letter mail was sorted on the cars, which were not equipped to distribute other kinds of mail. By about 1869, other mail, except packages, was sorted as well.

In 1930, more than 10,000 trains were used to move the mail into every city, town, and village in the United States. Following passage of the Transportation Act of 1958, mail-carrying passenger trains declined rapidly. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail; by 1970, the railroads carried virtually no First-Class Mail.

On April 30, 1971, the Post Office Department terminated seven of the eight remaining routes. The lone, surviving railway post office ran between New York and Washington, D.C., and made its last run on June 30, 1977.

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Free City Delivery

In the early part of the 19th century, envelopes were not used. Instead, a letter was folded and the address placed on the outside of the sheet. The customer had to take a letter to the post office to mail it, and the addressee had to pick up the letter at the post office, unless he or she lived in one of about 40 big cities where a carrier would deliver it to the home address for an extra penny or two.

Although postage stamps became available in 1847, mailers had the option of sending their letters and having the recipients pay the postage until 1855, when prepayment became compulsory. Previously, if the addressees refused to accept the letter -- and they often did -- the Post Office's labor and delivery costs were never recovered.

Street boxes for mail collection began to appear in large cities by 1858. In 1863, free city delivery was instituted in 49 of the country's largest cities. By 1890, 454 post offices were delivering mail to residents of United States cities. It was not until the turn of the century, however, that free delivery came to farmers and other rural residents.

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Rural Free Delivery

Today it is difficult to envision the isolation that was the lot of farm families in early America. In the days before telephones, radios, or televisions were common, the farmer's main links to the outside world were the mail and the newspapers that came by mail to the nearest post office. Since the mail had to be picked up, this meant a trip to the post office, often involving a day's travel, round-trip. The farmer might delay picking up mail for days, weeks, or even months until the trip could be coupled with one for supplies, food, or equipment.

John Wanamaker of Pennsylvania was the first Postmaster General to advocate rural free delivery (RFD). Although funds were appropriated a month before he left office in 1893, subsequent Postmasters General dragged their feet on inaugurating the new service so that it was 1896 before the first experimental rural delivery routes began in West Virginia, with carriers working out of post offices in Charlestown, Halltown, and Uvilla.

Many transportation events in postal history were marked by great demonstrations: the Pony Express, for example, and scheduled airmail service in 1918. The West Virginia experiment with rural free delivery, however, was launched in relative

obscurity and in an atmosphere of hostility. Critics of the plan claimed it was impractical and too expensive to have a postal carrier trudge over rutted roads and through forests trying to deliver mail in all kinds of weather.

However, the farmers, without exception, were delighted with the new service and the new world open to them. After receiving free delivery for a few months, one observed that it would take away part of life to give it up. A Missouri farmer looked back on his life and calculated that, in 15 years, he had traveled 12,000 miles going to and from his post office to get the mail.

A byproduct of rural free delivery was the stimulation it provided to the development of the great American system of roads and highways. A prerequisite for rural delivery was good roads. After hundreds of petitions for rural delivery were turned down by the Post Office because of unserviceable and inaccessible roads, responsible local governments began to extend and improve existing highways. Between 1897 and 1908, these local governments spent an estimated \$72 million on bridges, culverts, and other improvements. In one county in Indiana, farmers themselves paid over \$2,600 to grade and gravel a road in order to qualify for RFD.

The impact of RFD as a cultural and social agent for millions of Americans was even more striking, and, in this respect, rural delivery still is a vital link between industrial and rural America.

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