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Joseph M. Adelman
Framingham State University

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Narrative (Joseph M. Adelman)

Description

On his tour of the United States in 1830 and 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville was struck by the interconnectedness of Americans, even in the backwoods of Michigan and the Old Northwest. Americans, he noted, had a thirst for news. He was amazed—pleasantly so—that the residents of tiny villages had continuous access to news from the seats of power along the Atlantic seaboard, more than a thousand miles away. The glue, he recognized, was “that great instrument of intellectual intercourse:” the United States Post Office. In the past fifteen years, attention has again centered on the post office, but now the focus is on whether the postal service is a sustainable or even desirable government function. With billion-dollar deficits crippling the finances of the organization, it is no longer clear whether the United States Postal Service will continue to deliver mail to homes and businesses throughout the nation. At such a moment of peril, a historical perspective on the post office in American life is essential to understanding its public functions and to explaining how it arrived at the precipice.

Founded in 1775 by the Continental Congress as a means of providing free and open communication among colonies at war, the United States Post Office grew from a small, largely coast-bound system into the most far-reaching institution of the federal government by the Jacksonian era, employing thousands and serving as a news conduit throughout the United States, from the largest Atlantic seaports to the smallest backwoods villages in the West. By the twentieth century, the post office had become an unsung engine of social change, pioneering service into hard-to-reach rural areas, hiring thousands of African-Americans before the Civil Rights movement, and reorganizing Americans’ conceptions of the nation’s geography through technological innovations such as airmail and ZIP codes.

The key question for Americans has long been to determine what role the post office should play in a national communications infrastructure. In The Rise and Fall of the Post Office in America, I argue that the post office’s complicated mission and structure derive from the central paradox of its founding: that it should both serve a universal civic function and generate enough revenue to sustain its operations. During the early republic, it was clear that the post office was an institution designed with a “civic mandate,” in Richard John’s terms. It served as a way to maintain free and open channels of communication for news and public information as well as the private correspondence of a geographically dispersed nation. With a reach throughout the nation, the Post Office represented the existence of the federal government for many people, and magnified its perception as a central institution of government because it served as the largest employer in the United States.

In the last forty years, however, the reorganization of the United States Postal Service has made revenue generation the primary focus of the institution as Congress made the Post Office a private corporation that should support itself. Although still requiring the postal system to meet the civic mandate of universal service, this reorganization pushed the Post Office to act as a business rather than a civic institution. The Rise and Fall chronicles this story and demonstrates that recent policy changes have imperiled both the mission and the very existence of the Post Office in the United States.

The idea of providing a channel for free and open communication has long been an animating principle of the Post Office, and its workers and routes have served as conduits for public news, political debates and business correspondence, as well as for private letters, cards, and packages. Recent efforts to force the Post Office to survive only on its revenue threaten that historical civic mission, while paradoxically also threatening its business model by leaving in place regulations that prevent the Post Office from setting prices or reducing its unprofitable services as a private business would. This tension is unsustainable over the long term.

Significance
As the main communications conduit for much of the nation’s history, the Post Office has also faced enormous challenges as American culture and society have changed. The Rise and Fall will examine several major issues in the history of the post office. First, the book will trace the technological changes in communication that have both aided the post’s service and eroded its monopoly as a broadcaster of information, from the nineteenth-century introduction of the railroad, the telegraph, and the telephone, to the twentieth-century advent of radio, television, air travel, and the internet. None has completely displaced the functions of the post, but each has eroded the post office’s share of information. Second, the book will chronicle the changing ways in which Americans have used the mail. Initially established with the transmission of public information in mind, primarily by newspapers, the post office shifted its attention over time to personal letters, business correspondence, and—in the late twentieth century—bulk mail. Third, the book examines the Post Office as a focal point in American political life. Long a source of patronage for the party holding executive power, in the twentieth century the postal system became the largest employer of civil servants. Last, the book will highlight some of the ways in which Americans have portrayed the Post Office as a source of national pride—extolling Benjamin Franklin, the Pony Express, and their local mail carriers—and at the same time denigrated the post as the exemplar of inefficient government services with shiftless, lazy employees. Broad-ranging in its scope, The Rise and Fall will use these themes to develop the argument that the Post Office has been central to American communications over its lifetime and is exemplary of debates about the nature and role of government and business in American life.

Methodology and Sources

As a synthetic history, the project first builds on a rich literature on the post office and the history of communications. In addition, I have conducted primary source research at the National Archives, the National Postal Museum, and the US Postal Service headquarters in Washington, DC, which hold considerable postal system records. I have also conducted extensive reviews of Congressional records of debates about the Post Office and its significance as well as relevant newspapers, periodicals, and autobiographies and biographies about Postmasters General and other postal employees. These documents reveal a range of opinions about how the Post Office ought to function at key moments in the history of the United States.

Organization and Plan of Work

The Rise and Fall of the Post Office in America is organized into seven chapters. Chapter One explores attempts to create a postal system in colonial British North America, which date to 1673. By the era of the Revolution, the post office was a key network for the circulation of information in the British Empire, allowing newspapers to travel across the continent with updates on imperial and colonial affairs. One of the few national institutions created before independence was declared (only Congress itself and the Army are older) its mandate was to serve the entire nation with mail service—even to its least profitable points. Chapter Two focuses on the Post Office Act of 1792, which revolutionized the political economy of information in the early United States by providing cheap rates for sending newspapers through the mail. That Act established the Post Office as the infrastructure for political communications for the new nation.

The next chapters take the story of the Post Office through the nineteenth century. In Chapter Three, the focus turns to the role of the Post Office in national debates about slavery—its mandate to deliver nationally made it a focus for abolitionists to circulate their arguments to the South. During the Civil War, the Confederacy experimented with a Post Office that had a constitutional mandate to turn a profit. It did, but at the expense of providing quality service. After the Civil War, as Chapter Four notes, technological change quickly offered new opportunities to reach American homes but also challenged the Post Office’s longstanding role as the monopoly carrier of information across long distances. Railroads, telegraphs, and
the invention of pneumatic tubes all put the Post Office at the center of questions about the development of a national communications infrastructure.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Post Office reached its apex as part of the American communications network, as discussed in Chapter Five. During this period, the Post Office sought to remain at the cutting edge of technology and delivery, funding early experiments in air travel, initiating parcel post delivery, and generating revenue through new services such as Postal Savings Accounts. That status was challenged through the middle decades of the twentieth century, but as Chapter Six shows, it continued to be a lightning rod for debates over civil rights, technology, and the proper function of government. The final chapter examines the culmination of sorts for that debate, with a look at the Post Office since its conversion to the United States Postal Service, a government-owned corporation that receives no federal funding and must live only on the revenues it generates.

The project is under contract to Harvard University Press with a manuscript delivery date of September 1, 2016. I am currently writing Chapter Three, which will be reviewed by the Press this fall. Over the coming academic year I intend to draft four additional chapters. During the term of the award, June and July 2016, I intend to complete drafts of the final two chapters as well as the introduction and conclusion, for a total book of about 80,000 words. Meeting that goal will allow me to have the manuscript edited and prepared for submission by the September 1, 2016 deadline.

Outcomes

Though the post office is an institution that Americans interact with nearly every day, there has not been a full history of the postal system since the early 1970s. This project therefore aims to reach a broad general audience interested not only in the history of the post office, but also in the workings of American government institutions and the interactions of government and business interests in the American past. I have presented pieces related to the project at scholarly meetings such as the annual conference of the American Historical Association, and published an article in the business history journal *Enterprise & Society*, which won the 2011 Rita Moroney Prize from the U.S. Postal Service. In addition, I have accepted invitations to speak with audiences of both scholars and philatelists on several occasions. As a scholar, I see it as one of my primary goals to reach a broader audience, which I have done by writing about the Post Office and its history for such news sites as *The Atlantic* and *Bloomberg* as well as *The Junto*, a popular early American history blog. *The Rise and Fall* aims to advance that writing goal by bringing rigorous academic research to the general public in a broadly accessible style.