Early U.S. Postal Routes and the Communications Infrastructure

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Alexis de Tocqueville, the noted French political thinker, had the opportunity to observe a great deal about life in the United States during his tour here in 1831. This included the chance to witness firsthand something that is still very much a part of our daily existence – U.S. mail delivery.

As Tocqueville later recounted in his landmark book *Democracy in America*, "I traveled along a portion of the frontier of the United States in a sort of cart, which was termed the mail. Day and night we passed with great rapidity along the roads, which were scarcely marked out through immense forests . . . From time to time we came to a hut in the midst of the forest; this was a post-office. The mail dropped an enormous bundle of letters at the door of this isolated dwelling, and we pursued our way at full gallop, leaving the inhabitants of the neighboring log houses to send for their share of the treasure."[1]

This description provides a helpful reference point for the nation's mail-delivery operations at that time. Much like the young nation in which it existed, the U.S. postal system had steadily evolved in the previous decades from a provincial entity to a much wider-ranging enterprise. A key measure of that progress could be seen in the number of post offices throughout the land and how many people they each served. By 1828, there were 74 post offices for every 100,000 Americans; in contrast, at that same time Tocqueville's native France had only four post offices for every 100,000 people while Great Britain had just 17.[2]

The United States' numerical advantage in this area was due to the dramatic growth and development of its post roads during the crucial period between 1792 and 1828. That era marked a time when Americans actively sought to expand their roads network for transporting mail well beyond the original 13 colonies along the Atlantic seaboard. In extending that network, the United States did more than simply ensure that citizens in far-flung locations could get their mail; the new country also laid the groundwork for its first interactive mass communications infrastructure.[3]

This all-embracing development did not just spring up from nowhere. Its origins, as a matter of fact, can be traced back to colonial rule during the 17th century. In 1673, a monthly post route was set up between New York and Boston primarily to facilitate communication between colonial governors in that region. The one-time Native American trails along that route – collectively known first as the King's Best Highway and later the Boston Post Road – constituted the first officially designated post road in what would become the United States. The use of that route for regular mail delivery was decidedly short-lived, however, and the overall quality of postal transport service under British rule left much to be desired well into the mid-18th century.[4]

All of that began to change significantly in 1753 with the appointment of Benjamin Franklin as one of two joint postmasters general for the colonies. The energetic and innovative Franklin, who oversaw postal operations in the northern colonies, introduced several urgently needed reforms to the disorganized British colonial mail-delivery service.[5]

These reforms included promoting the improvement of colonial post roads for quicker and more consistent mail delivery. A key part of Franklin's efforts involved an extensive inspection tour of those roads. Franklin, while traveling along those routes in a carriage, painstakingly kept track of each and every inch with an odometer. As he measured out each mile, men following him in carts would stop and set up stones to mark the distance. Franklin, further underscoring his commitment to faster and more standardized mail delivery, also set up central routes between such New York and Philadelphia that considerably lessened the time it took to transport letters.[6]

That system he did his best to nurture would only grow in importance over the next couple of decades, especially once hostilities ended with Great Britain and the new nation grappled with how to best sustain an effective interstate mail-delivery network over the long haul. State-run postal systems, and private posts operated by entrepreneurs, did what they could throughout the 1780s but none of them were able to realistically serve the great mass of the public-at-large.[7]

The answer for a broader network started to make itself known with the creation of a stronger national government. Article I, Section 8, Clause 7 of the Constitution empowered Congress "To establish Post Offices and post Roads."[8]

The Post Office Act of 1789, in the wake of that constitutional authorization, extended the life of the General Post Office (as it was often called during that era) and made the postmaster general subject to the president. Samuel Osgood was subsequently named by President George Washington as the first postmaster general under the Constitution. At the time, there were only 75 post offices and approximately 2400 miles of post roads in existence.[9]

The Post Office Acts of 1790 and 1791 were basically holding patterns for their 1789 predecessor, with each measure extending the General Post Office by another year. Throughout this period, however, there was also steadily growing momentum for a far wider expansion of the General Post Office and the roads it used. Members of Congress, still trying to come to terms with meeting the needs and expectations of a fledgling federal government, vigorously discussed and debated the future of those postal operations.[10]

No less a figure than the president staunchly advocated for an expansion of that service. As a military veteran, Washington understood the importance of roads in transporting manpower, resources, and information. He also appreciated as president how the survival of the newborn republic – growing larger and increasingly setting its sights westward -- would depend on a knowledgeable citizenry and the timely, regular flow of information to accomplish that.[11]

As Washington proclaimed in his third annual message to Congress in October 1791, "The importance of the post office and post roads on a plan sufficiently liberal and comprehensive, as they respect the expedition, safety, and facility of communication, is increased by their instrumentality in diffusing a knowledge of the laws and proceedings of the Government, which, while it contributes to the security of the people, serves also to guard them against the effects of misrepresentation and misconception."[12]

A huge step towards achieving those aims finally took place that following February, when Washington signed into law the Post Office Act of 1792. That act is perhaps one of the most crucial but underappreciated initiatives ever to become law in the United States. Similar to prior acts, it gave the General Post Office a two-year extension (a law passed in 1794 would in fact continue the agency indefinitely). The 1792 law, however, also achieved a lot more than anything previously enacted. Above all else, it ushered in a period of dynamic growth for the General Post Office and the roads it used.[13]

The law did so through two key provisions that would have far-reaching implications for both the post roads and the nation as a whole. The first of these provisions entailed formally accepting the era's most popular source of information – newspapers – as a regular mail-delivery item and at comparatively low rates in order to facilitate the exchange of information about national affairs.[14]

Another provision, with as much if not more significant impact, involved setting forth procedures to enlarge the scope of the post roads well beyond their existing framework. Specifically, in accordance with what the Constitution mandated, the provision spelled out Congress's unique role in creating the post roads. The pre-1792 expansion of that network had been inhibited by the assumption that any new routes had to be self-supporting. With the 1792 act, however, that constraint no longer applied and Congress was given freer rein than before to authorize post roads even when they might not be expected to break even.[15]

Congress, to further promote the extension of the post roads nationally, encouraged citizens wanting new routes for their communities to submit official requests in the forms of petitions. In no time at all, petitions from all over but especially outlying areas flooded Congress.[16]

In short, the Post Office Act of 1792 was a demarcation line between older practices with respect to post roads and new attitudes about how that network could further connect the nation. The growth of those routes was explosive. Between 1792 and 1828, the post roads expanded at least twentyfold from approximately 5600 to 114,000 miles. The reach of those roads extended dramatically beyond the seacoast and into areas – including Vermont, Kentucky, Tennessee, and

the entire West -- which as of 1792 did not even have any post offices. Later federal measures enacted during that era further strengthened and lengthened that network.[17]

Through those post roads and the information they carried, more Americans than ever before were regularly linked with each other and what was happening across the nation. The roads also accelerated the creation of a full-fledged and nationwide commercial market that became an economic lifeline between the Atlantic seaboard and the transappalachian west[18].

The network of post roads, crisscrossing vast expanses of land, completely blanketed the United States and its territories then in existence by 1828. By that time, the network had also more than proven itself a steady nationalizing influence in the daily lives of many Americans.[19]

Those early post roads left their long-range imprint on the nation they traversed in other ways as well. That expanded network:

- Increased the reach and responsibilities of postal operations in the everyday lives of Americans;
- Set the stage for an enhanced federal funding role for the highways we still use and rely on today; and
- Built up the power and influence of the press through the extended dissemination of newspapers.[20]

These contributions were undeniably consequential and have long been examined. An often overlooked legacy, however, involves that network's pivotal and pioneering contributions to the electronic means of mass communication that followed.

The early U.S. post roads, far from constituting a mere pre-electronic placeholder that held us together until something better came along, are most fully appreciated as both the prototype and pacesetter for all those technologies that likewise have taken root in the American experience and kept citizens connected with each other. This is because that network, during a crucial stage of national development, nurtured and perpetuated the cultural norms and expectations for across-the-board daily information exchange in the United States. More specifically, the network adapted large groups of Americans to the two following tenets for long-distance mass communications that many of us take for granted today:

- Minimizing the time for delivery of information; and
- Maximizing the territory and populations covered for delivery of information.[21]

The first of these tenets, building on Benjamin Franklin's ambitions decades earlier for faster and more punctual postal transport, has been aptly characterized by postal historian Richard R. John as the "gospel of speed."[22] Amos Kendall, who served as President Andrew Jackson's postmaster general, offered a similarly cogent summary. He ventured that rapid mail-

delivery signified a fundamental element in the American character, namely that no people appreciated economy in time more than the people of the United States.[23]

Several key innovations were put in place to further speed up that transmittal of newspapers and other correspondence along the post roads. During the 1790s alone, both stagecoaches and hour-by-hour schedules were integrated more fully into those delivery operations.[24]

Many of us who are accustomed to transmitting facts and opinions with the click of a mouse or the punch of a speed-dial might understandably regard the pace of postal traffic on those early routes as hopelessly slow and therefore irrelevant to subsequent modes of communications. What is important to remember, however, is that the flow of information along those roads was indeed swift by that era's standards and thus set the tempo proportionately for the effectiveness of technological alternatives.[25]

This debt was readily acknowledged by Samuel F.B. Morse, whose electrical telegraph helped make communication instantaneous and freed it from the constraints of geography. "The mail system," he once noted, had been founded on "the universally admitted principle" that "the greater the speed with which intelligence can be transmitted from point to point, the greater is the benefit derived to the whole community."[26]

This is not to say, however, that the "gospel of speed" was institutionalized without controversy. The debates in Congress during the 1790s verify that. One congressman, North Carolina's Hugh Williamson, argued that "the object of an established post was not to afford the most speedy conveyance, by the straightest line between two places but to accommodate as many persons" as possible.[27]

Ultimately, Congress had it both ways, committed to the goal of "the most speedy conveyance" but also pledged to maximizing the territory and populations covered. That tenet of widespread accessibility reflected in large part George Washington's hopes of binding as many citizens as possible to the federal government and keeping them involved and engaged in national affairs. As described by another congressman, Georgia's Abraham Baldwin, it was the government's "duty" to provide "at least some channel of communication" to all its parts. The citizenry's general concurrence in those sentiments is well-documented in the numerous petitions for postal routes during that period.[28]

A case in point was the request for service from a group in South Carolina in 1793. "We recommend that a post be established to our district and county towns," the petition read, since "such communications were the 'soul of commerce!'" Those petitioners went on to assert that the lack of a "direct, regular, and immediate communication by posts" meant they were "kept in

ignorance" and "know not anything which concerns us, either as men or planters." In another example, an 1809 petition from Connecticut maintained that it was "incalculably advantageous" for "every well regulated government" to keep its citizenry well informed by "disseminating every species of useful information among them."[29]

Congress did its best to authorize the majority of these requests and somehow the post roads managed to keep pace with the huge public demand, even when the Louisiana Purchase doubled the nation's size. Several decades before "universal service" was commonly used to describe the new technology of telephones, that phrase easily applied to the scope of post roads and their role in providing numerous communities with "their share of the treasure."[30]

Those tenets involving time and space cemented the importance of the post roads to the nation's communications infrastructure.[31] The overall linkage between the nation's roads and more modern technologies has indeed been undervalued, but not necessarily ignored altogether. President Bill Clinton, for example, cited that linkage when he signed into law the Telecommunications Act of 1996. He specifically likened that act's intent with the "spirit of connection and communication" behind the authorization of the Interstate Highway System four decades earlier.[32]

On an even longer-term and larger scale, however, the early U.S. post roads deserve recognition as not just a similarly fitting allegory but also as the vital antecedent for technological communications throughout most of American history.

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[1] Quoted in The United States Postal Service (USPS), *The United States Postal Service: An American History, 1775-2006* (Washington, D.C.: USPS, 2007), 11; see also Richard J. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] I am heavily indebted to Richard R. John for his own considerable scholarship and insights in this area of study. As he asserts in *Spreading the News*, vii, "Telegraphs, telephones, and all of the other modes of long-distance communication with which we today are so familiar were in the future, while the postal system was widely hailed as one of the most important institutions of the day. And with good reason. No other institution had the capacity to transmit such a large volume of information on such a regular basis over such an enormous geographical expanse." See also Nancy A. Pope, "Transportation," *Arago: People, Postage & the Post*, National Postal Museum, http://www.arago.si.edu/index.asp?con=1&cmd=1&mode=&tid=2032161, accessed 27 March 2009; David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), ix, x;

[4] James H. Bruns, *Mail on the Move* (Polo, IL: Transportation Trails, 1992), 9; USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 4; The American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO), *Historic American Highways: Significant Incidents in the Development of Highway Transportation in Colonial America and the United States During More Than Four Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: AASHO, 1953), 24, 25; "The Post Road," *The New York Press*, 22 October 2002, http://www.nypress.com/article-6537-the-post-road.html, accessed 27 March 2009; James E. Vance, Jr., *Capturing the Horizon: The Historical Geography of Transportation Since the Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 167.

[5] Ibid.; USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 5, 8; Bruns, *Mail on the Move*, 10; *Benjamin Franklin*, National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2a1c_bfranklin.html, accessed 30 March 2009.
[6] AASHO, *Historic American Highways*, 32, 33; USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 5, 8; Bruns, *Mail on the Move*, 10; Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2003), 157, 158; H.W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2000), 339; "The Post Road," *The New York Press*, 22 October 2002, http://www.nypress.com/article-6537-the-post-road.html, accessed 27 March 2009; *Benjamin Franklin*, National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2a1c_bfranklin.html, accessed 30 March 2009
[7] John, *Spreading the News*, 28.
[8] USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 6, 7.
[9] Ibid., 7, 11; Bruns, *Mail on the Move*, 11.
[10] USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 7, 11; John, *Spreading the News*, 30, 31; *1790 Postal Act*, National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2a1g_1790act.html, accessed 30 March 2009.
[11] John, *Spreading the News*, 59, 60; George Washington, Second Annual Message, 8 December 1790, The American Presidency Project, http://www.presidency.ucsb/edu/ws/print.php?pid=29432, accessed 4 April 2009; George Washington, Third Annual Message, 25 October 1791, The American Presidency Project, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=29433
[12] Ibid.
[13] John, *Spreading the News*, 24, 25, 30, 31; USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 7; Carlene E. Stephens, *On Time: How America Has Learned to Live by the Clock* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Company, 2002), 59; John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 47; *1792 Postal Act*, National Postal Museum, http://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2a1h_1792act.html, accessed 30 March 2009;USPS, "Celebrating USPS – George Washington History: Post Office Act Signed Into Law 216 Years Ago," press release (Washington, D.C.: 14 February 2008).
[14] John, *Spreading the News*, 31-34; USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 7; Richard B. Kielbowicz, *Universal Postal Service: A Policy History, 1790-1970* (report prepared for the Postal Rate Commission, 2002), http://www.prc.gov/prc-docs/library/refdesk/techpapers/Kielbowicz/paper.pdf, accessed 4 April 2009, 15-18..
[15] John, *Spreading the News*, 25, 44, 45, 47, 49-51; Kielbowicz, *Universal Postal Service*, 19; Larson, *Internal Improvement*, 46; *1792 Postal Act*, National Postal Museum, http://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2a1h_1792act.html, accessed 30 March 2009
[16] John, *Spreading the News*, 30, 44, 45, 49-51; Kielbowicz, *Universal Postal Service*, 19.
[17] John, *Spreading the News*, 25, 30, 31, 44, 45, 50, 56; USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 7; Bruns, *Mail on the Move*, 12; Richard B. Morris and Jeffrey A. Morris (eds.), *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 598; John Quincy Adams, Fourth Annual Message,2 December 1828, http://www.Presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=29470, accessed 4 April 2009.
[18] John, *Spreading the News*, 31, 53, 56; Kielbowicz, *Universal Posta Service*, 19; Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 8; Stephens, *On Time*, 61.
[19] John, *Spreading the News*, 53, 56; Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 8; Stephens, *On Time*, 61.
[20] John, *Spreading the News*, 8, 18, 31, 53, 56; AASHO, *Public Roads of the Past*, 108, 112, 113.
[21] John, *Spreading the News*, vii, 83; Kielbowicz, *Universal Postal Service*, 13: Henkin, *The Postal Age*, ix-xi; Stephens, *On Time*, 59.
[22] John, *Spreading the News*, 83-89; see also Stephens, *On Time*, 61.
[23] Robert Dalton Harris, *Postal Route Gazetteer, Part I: New York State 1839* (New York, NY: Postilion Publications, 1992), I.
[24] Bruns, *Mail on the Move*, 11-13; Stephens, *On Time*, 59, 60.
[25] John, *Spreading the News*, 10, 17, 18; Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 8, 16.
[26] Quoted in John, *Spreading the News*, 87.
[27] Ibid., 47; Larson, *Internal Improvement*, 47.
[28] Ibid.; John, 49-51, 59, 60; Kielbowicz, *Universal Postal Service*, 1, 10, 13, 19.
[29] John, *Spreading the News*, 50.

[30] Henkin, *The Postal Age*, ix-xi; ,Kielbowicz, *Universal Postal Service*, 1 10, 13, 19; USPS, *The United States Postal Service*, 11; Janet F. Davidson and Michael S. Sweeney, *On the Move: Transportation and the American Story* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of American History/National Geographic, 2003), 16.
[31] Henkin, *The Postal Age*, ix.
[32] William J. Clinton, Remarks on Signing the Telecommunications Act of 1996, 8 February 1996, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=52278, accessed 4 April 2009.