

Postal History Timeline

Early Romans and Persians had message and relay systems.

1775 Continental Congress creates a postal system and names Ben Franklin the Postmaster General. He had also been a postmaster for the crown. Among his achievements as Postmaster for the Crown were establishing new postal routes, establishing mile markers, and speeding up service.

IMPORTANCE: In early times, correspondents depended on friends, merchants, and Native Americans to carry messages. In 1639 a tavern in Boston was designated as a mail repository. England had appointed Benjamin Franklin as Joint Postmaster General for the Crown in 1753. Franklin inspected all the post offices, and created new shorter routes. However, in 1774 Franklin was dismissed because his actions were sympathetic to the cause of the colonies.

1832 First time railroads were used by the Postal Service to carry the mail. In 1864, railroad cars were set up to carry mail and equipped so that mail could be sorted on the railroad car. Railroad mail service ended in 1977.

IMPORTANCE: Apart from the employees, transportation was the single most important element in mail delivery.

1840 The first adhesive postage stamp is created in England as part of a postal reform movement spearheaded by Roland Hill. Quickly, other countries started using this system of ensuring letters were paid for. Before this system, people would send letters postage due, with codes in the address or as a blank letter. This way the message would be received, but the recipient would not pay for the letter.

1847 The first U.S. postage stamp is issued.

1858 Butterfield Overland Mail provides service between Missouri and California. Delivery could take anywhere from 24 days to months. Imagine an event of nationwide significance, like a Presidential assassination, which part of the country did not know about until weeks after.

IMPORTANCE: Prior to this, mail destined for California went by steamship. At one time it went around South America. Later it went to Panama, was carried across Panama, and then loaded on another ship to California.

1860 Pony Express service begins. This gets delivery time down to 7 to 10 days. This was a dangerous job and the recruitment posters asked for orphans. (Pony Express was one man on a horse and the Butterfield system used stage coaches.)

IMPORTANCE: Cut delivery time to California.

1861 Transcontinental Telegraph puts Pony Express out of business. While the telegraph was great for short, critical messages, it was very costly.

IMPORTANCE: Messages could be sent “almost immediately” to the Western states.

1863 City Free Delivery. This provided for the delivery of mail to a person’s residence so they did not have to pick it up at the post office. This service was only available in certain cities.

1872 Mail Order Service begins. While Sears was the most famous, mail order actually began with Montgomery Ward. People were able to order many things through the catalogue from build it yourself car and house kits to everyday necessary items. This service was especially important to those living far away from major cities.

1874 The Universal Postal Union. This organization helped establish promote worldwide mail delivery. It also established rules about mail to prisoners of war and works to prevent crimes through the mail. One person involved in the development of the UPU was Montgomery Blair, who was Postmaster for Abraham Lincoln.

IMPORTANCE: Prior to the establishment of the UPU, a country had to conclude a separate postal treaty with each other country that it wished to carry international mail to or from. The UPU established that (1) there should be a more or less uniform flat rate to mail a letter anywhere in the world; (2) postal authorities should give equal treatment to foreign and domestic mail; and (3) each country should retain all monies it collected for international postage.

One of the most important results of the UPU treaty was that it ceased to be necessary, as it often had been previously, to affix the [stamps](#) of any country through which one's letter or package would pass in transit; the UPU provides that stamps of member nations are accepted for the whole international route.

1896 Rural Free Delivery experiments begin. This service not only provided much needed faster service to rural areas, but also helped farmers get products to customers.

IMPORTANCE: Persons living outside the town limits no longer had to go into the post office to collect their mail, which sometimes could take days. Or they would pay for private delivery.

1913 Parcel Post. This made mail order service more profitable and the service grew as a result. Prior to this private companies carried larger packages.

IMPORTANCE: The term "parcel post" refers to the sending of packages through the mail service.

A large fleet of trucks started delivering parcel post shipments in 1918. Farmers were then able to ship eggs and other produce directly to the customer. Eggs quickly became a mainstay of parcel post. In fact, six eggs were the first objects sent by parcel post from St. Louis, Missouri to Edwardsville, Illinois. Mailed at noon, the eggs returned to St. Louis seven hours later, baked

in a cake. Small animals that did not require food or water while in transit were accepted as parcel post.

1918 U.S. Airmail begins. The world's first official airmail flight was in 1911 in India. Many of the first airmail pilots were killed.

IMPORTANCE: Mail which took 10 days to travel from New York City to Chicago, could now be delivered the same day.

1935 Trans Pacific airmail service begins.

1939 Trans Atlantic airmail service begins.

1963 The use of Zip codes began to help speed the sorting of the mail and speed up delivery service.

IMPORTANCE: (means Zoning Improvement Plan) code. Every post office in the United States was assigned a unique ZIP code to help speed delivery of the mail. However, the mail was still being sorted by hand, much in the same manner as it was done 100 years earlier. In 1966 the Chicago Post Office ground to a virtual stop under a logjam of mail.

1998 U.S. starts using bar codes to further speed up delivery service.

IMPORTANCE: Machines can read the zip code and apply a bar code. The bar codes can be read by machines that automatically sort the mail. Zip + 4 allow these machines to read and sort the mail so that it is in the correct order for delivery by the mailman.