Evolution of Intercity Mail Transportation Modes 1840-1880: Insights from Postmaster General Annual Reports
William J. DeWitt, III, Ph.D.

The era from 1840 to 1880 was a time of significant and strategic shift for intercity mail transportation in the United States. This report will show and discuss the evolution of the United States Post Office Department’s (USPOD) continued search for leading-edge transportation modal options (types of transportation). These options not only responded to the rapid growth of the country, but also to the greater weight of the mails and the accompanying expectation for increased speed of the mail.

The report will focus on, graphically show, and discuss in detail, the evolution of intercity mail transportation from horse-powered and sail in the early days of the United States, to steam-powered ships and steam locomotive-powered railroads that took America into the 20th century. This material is drawn from the author’s transportation spreadsheet data derived from the Postmaster General Annual Reports, 1820 to 1920. Significant graphics and insights from each decade, 1840 to 1880, will be presented and discussed showing intercity modal transportation mail-route-miles (point to point designated routes) and intercity modal transportation mail-miles-traveled (distance mail was carried on designated routes). It is hoped that this material encourages more research from the Postmaster General Annual Reports.

The years 1840 to 1880 were a time of transition for the intercity transportation of United States Mail. Horseback, coaches, and sail-powered ships were being overtaken by the steam-driven vessels and railroads which had begun coming into their own. This report looks at and discusses the intercity transportation modal changes implemented by the USPOD from 1840-1880 as it proactively engaged in changing intercity mail transportation modal route-miles and mail transportation miles-traveled.

These are two sample graphics of the type that will be used in this presentation: