

Spreading the Word: The Postal System and the Creation of American Society--A Sketch

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Between the election of Andrew Jackson and the Civil War, the American postal system became the catalyst for a vigorous and sustained debate on five perennial issues in American political culture: the relationship of church and state; political corruption; freedom of the press; government ownership versus private enterprise; and the impact of mass media on national identity. My book project, tentatively entitled *Spreading the Word: The Postal System and the Creation of American Society*, is grounded in the premise that by understanding how nineteenth-century Americans grappled with these issues we can better appreciate their continuing relevance today.

My project seeks to locate the nineteenth-century postal system within its cultural, political, economic, and social context; to describe how it became a major arena of social conflict; to consider how it responded to the challenge posed by the railroad and telegraph; and to speculate on its role as an agent of change.

The project is based on extensive research in the published primary sources, a selective reading of the principal newspapers, and an exhaustive survey of manuscript collections at 54 archives in 14 states. My survey of secondary literature has been comprehensive, and includes philatelic (i.e. stamp collecting) books and journals, which until now have been entirely ignored by professional historians. Though the philatelic literature is lacking in analytical content, it provides invaluable information on topics ranging from postal administration to private mail delivery. Just as social historians have discovered the value of genealogical research, so historians of communication should make use of this rich source. In addition, I have worked closely with private collectors in systematically locating hitherto scattered postal circulars and forms, pamphlets, and magazine and newspaper articles.

In the introduction I reconsider the conventional wisdom regarding communications technology in the early republic. Most historians have long assumed that long-distance communication before the advent of Samuel Morse's electric telegraph was slow, unreliable, and extremely limited. In contrast, I contend that the postal system--the principal pre-electronic long-distance communication technology--played an enormous, and hitherto almost entirely overlooked, role in the making of American civilization

¹My dissertation, on which this sketch is based, was written at Harvard University under the supervision of Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. and David Herbert Donald.

before the dawning of the electronic age. To make my point I draw on the literature on print culture (Harold Innis, Elizabeth Eisenstein, James C. Carey, Walter Ong) and suggest how the impact of the postal system might be compared with that of the printing press. Such a comparison was a commonplace to nineteenth-century observers like Alexis de Tocqueville and Francis Lieber. Yet its import has been obscured by the characteristic spatial and temporal biases of our postelectronic age. Though my approach is frankly revisionist, I am aware of the pitfalls of technological determinism. Accordingly, I caution against the crypto-millennialism that is such a conspicuous feature of media critics like Marshall McLuhan.

Postelectronic norms are but one reason the nineteenth-century postal system has been so unaccountably neglected. Equally important has been the tendency of post-World War II historians to overlook the pivotal role of *federal* public policy in shaping the contours of American political economy in the early republic. In particular I question the assumption of business historians Thomas C. Cochran and Louis Galambos that American society in the early republic can be meaningfully characterized as prebureaucratic. Drawing on the literature on bureaucracy (Max Weber, Alfred Chandler), republicanism (John Murrin, Drew McCoy, Robert Wiebe), and state-building (Dietric Rueschemeyer, Peter B. Evans, Theda Skocpol), I suggest instead that such notions are but the most recent chapter in the long history of the "rhetoric of the bureaucratic sublime"--that is, the characteristic strategy by which Americans have simultaneously overstated and underrated the role of large-scale institutions--such as the postal system--in the American past.

Part I ("Affairs of State") considers the origins of American postal policy. Chapter 1 ("Securing the Republic") adopts an international comparative perspective to describe how the Founding Fathers' commitment to republicanism led to the establishment of a rationale for long-distance communications that differed significantly from that in Great Britain and France. Specifically, American postal policy mandated a rate structure that privileged public over private information, a development strategy that privileged expansion through space over improvements in existing service, and a surveillance style that privileged individual privacy over national security.

Chapter 2 ("The Administrative Network") shifts the focus to the postal system itself, and, in particular, to its administration (national and local) under Postmaster General John McLean (1823-1829). It demonstrates how McLean promoted a gospel of speed designed to insure that the public mails would outspeed private enterprise in the transmission of commodity price information; and a road-building program that, had it been implemented, might have transformed significantly the nineteenth-century political economy. These objectives were, it is suggested, far more expansive than those of McLean's Jacksonian successors, William Barry and Amos Kendall.

Part 2 ("Politics") examines the important, albeit largely neglected, public debates over postal policy that raged between 1828 and 1835. Chapter 3 ("The Invasion of the Sabbath") considers the 1828-1830 controversy over the transportation of the mails and opening of the post

office on the Sabbath, which is traced back to legislation passed in 1810. In sharp contrast to previous historians, it contends that anti-Sabbatarians, and not the Sabbatarians, were the aggressors; depicts Sabbatarianism as a reform movement with considerable grassroots support; and speculates on the impact of the protest on American politics.

Chapter 4 ("The Collapse of Autonomy") provides a fresh look at the Jackson administration's removal of postmasters and of the gradual institutionalization of patronage-based mass parties. Combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, it demonstrates that the removals had a distinctly sectional cast, with the vast majority occurring in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the Northwest, precisely those sections country where the Jackson party was weakest. It then contends that this pattern was part of a deliberate strategy to build a pro-Jackson party and that the doctrine of "rotation in office" was little more than a convenient pretext for decisions undertaken for fundamentally partisan reasons. The chapter includes a discussion of Herman Melville's classic short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," in which it is suggested that Bartleby's removal from the dead letter office provides insight into the officeholder's pervasive fear of downward mobility.

Chapter 5 ("The Spectre of Corruption") reconstructs a hitherto obscure episode in the history of public corruption: the postal finance scandal of 1833-35. Though this scandal was by far the most extensive to occur in the first half-century of the American republic, it has been curiously neglected by twentieth-century historians intent upon redeeming the sorry administrative record of the Jackson presidency. My analysis of "Andrew Jackson's Watergate" stresses the pervasiveness of popular apprehensions of executive tyranny and demonstrates how the postal reorganization act of 1836 was spearheaded by Congressional Whigs, and not, as most previous historians have contended, by Jacksonian Postmaster General Amos Kendall.

Chapter 6 ("Federalism and the Freedom of the Press") examines the controversy surrounding the American Antislavery Society's (AAAS) 1835 postal campaign, which culminated in the public burning in Charleston, South Carolina, of a large number of abolitionist publications that the AAAS had attempted to send through the mails. The chapter demonstrates the considerable extent to which the federal response to the AAAS campaign focused not on Southern anxieties about a possible slave insurrection but on the sanctity of money sent through the mails. It concludes that nineteenth-century conceptions of the proper relationship between the state and federal government sanctioned the publication's destruction, and thus that this episode should not be regarded as a violation of the first amendment's guarantee of the freedom of the press.

Part 3 ("Technology") analyzes the principal public policy issues that involved the postal system between the Panic of 1837 and the Mexican-American War. Chapter 7 ("The Challenge of Private Enterprise") contends that the rapid expansion of the railroad and steamboat network, when combined with Postmaster General Kendall's insistence that postage be paid for in specie, spurred the establishment of private expresses that in many markets soon competed successfully with the public mails. By 1843 these expresses had captured an estimated 50 percent of the postal system's

market share, triggering an extended public debate over the merits of government versus private enterprise that ultimately forced the passage of the postal reform act of 1845.

Even more fundamental was the challenge posed by Samuel Morse's electric telegraph. Though the first commercial telegraph line in the United States opened, under the auspices of the general post office (in 1845), and despite Postmaster General Cave Johnson's eloquent insistence that the federal government uphold its traditional commitment to outspeeding private enterprise, Congress demurred and the telegraph went private. Never again would postal officers find themselves in a position, as had McLean, to coordinate the republic's commodity markets.

Chapter 8 ("The Rhetoric of Reform") discusses the postal reform movements that flourished between 1845 and the Civil War. These sought further reductions in the basic letter rate, which culminated in the establishment of Cheap Postage Associations in Boston and New York and the Passage of the postal reform acts of 1851 and 1852; the reduction in international postage, which took much of its inspiration from peace activists like Elihu Burritt; the introduction of free city delivery in the principal commercial cities, which, among other things, superceded the burgeoning private city delivery industry, whose legacy included our modern Valentine's Day; the extension of basic service to the rapidly expanding West, including Overland Mail and the Pony Express.

Part 4 ("Society") speculates on how the communications revolution forged by the postal system and the press helped to establish in the first half of the nineteenth century a distinctively American society. Chapter 9 ("The Postal System and the Creation of American Society") draws on Robert Wiebe's *Opening of American Society* to stress the importance of the postal system in the creation of a national market, a national culture, and a national polity. More than any other large-scale institution, the postal system hastened the transformation of a primarily face-to-face oral eighteenth-century political culture (with a secondary print-based culture in the principal seaboard cities) to a primary print-based nineteenth-century literate political culture (with a secondary face-to-face culture in the rural south).

The epilogue ("The Communications Revolution and the Coming of the Civil War") contends that the transformation described in the previous chapter undermined the harmonious factionalism James Madison described in *Federalist 10*, making inevitable the emergence of mass parties, the ascendancy of popular opinion as a political force, and the sectional polarization between North and South that culminated in the Civil War. As this sketch suggests, my project is *not* merely an institutional history of the postal system. Rather, it is an interdisciplinary history of the postal system's relationship to American culture and society, and of the communications revolution that it wrought.