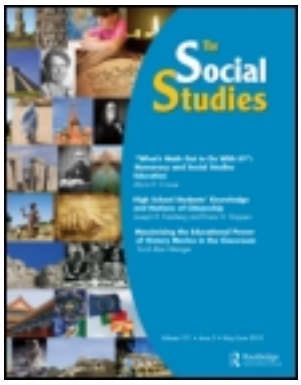

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Changing Technology and the U.S. Mail

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Changing Technology and the U.S. Mail

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The changes in technology that have affected mail delivery are a dynamic way to encourage students to think critically and make meaningful connections across historical eras. In the classroom, personal communication through the mail can become the "thematic glue" used across historical units to highlight the changes in everyday life caused by technological innovation. The post office initiated changes in streetlighting and crosswalks, stimulated the development of rural roads and highways, and provided passenger services on railways. Classroom teachers can use the activities and discussion questions to introduce students to this entity and its influence on our history.

Keywords: mail, technology, thematic unit, Pony Express, post office

Wanted—young, skinny, wiry fellows
Not to exceed 130 pounds,
Not over 18 years old.
Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily.
Orphans preferred.

The first ride of the Pony Express began in April of 1860 in an effort to speed up the western mail service (see figure 1). At this time, mail to California traveled by ship from New York to Panama, moved across Panama by rail, then went on to San Francisco by ship. (Residents in Los Angeles learned that California had been admitted to the Union six weeks after the fact). Relay stations with fresh horses were set up about every ten to twenty miles for the harrowing journey straight through the Indian country between Missouri and California. Riders were only allowed two minutes maximum time at the stations as they made their biweekly trips across the country. The average ride for the Pony Express was eight days. Robert Haslam set the record for the fastest trip of seven days and 17 hours when he carried the text of President Lincoln's inaugural address (USPS 2010). The young riders had to swear on a Bible not to cuss, fight, or abuse their animals and to conduct themselves honestly (Chiaventone 2010; Moroney 1983). Although the Pony Express was only in operation for eighteen months, the young riders carried approximately 35,000 pieces of mail over more than 650,000 miles, and only one rider lost his life and one bag of mail went missing (USPS 1980). Delivery was remarkably reliable, but it was very costly for the time, with rates as high as $15 for a single item. The daily services cost its owners up to $30,000 per month. The high costs and the completion of the transcontinental telegraph led to the demise of the service (Chiaventone 2010).

Students typically learn about the Pony Express in a unit on the "Wild West." Through an exemplary stand-alone unit or making thematic connections between American history units, the study of the history of the mail service (through foot, air, roads, and rail) and the changes in technology that have affected mail delivery is more likely to encourage critical thinking and encourage students to make meaningful connections across historical eras. In the classroom, personal communication through the mail can become the "thematic glue" used across historical units to highlight the changes in everyday life caused by technological innovation.

The United States Postal Service is a powerful entity throughout American history. It carved the country into nine-digit zip codes, which allowed businesses to target and track specific consumers (Stilgoe 1998, 63) and laid the foundation for the 911 emergency system. Rivers, roads, and rails were designated "postal highways" by acts of Congress. The U.S. airmail paved the way for commercial airlines.

Architect William Mitchell Kendall took words from an ancient Greek text written by Herodotus to carve into the facade of the General Post Office built in 1914 in New York City. These words have become immortal as the representation of the postal carrier: "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds" (USPS 2010). Famous postal workers included Abraham Lincoln (president, postmaster), John Brown (abolitionist, postmaster),

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Fig. 1. "Frank E. Webner, Pony Express rider," ca. 1861; Historical Photograph File of the Bureau of Public Roads, 1896–1963; Records of the Bureau of Public Roads, 1892–1972; Record Group 30; National Archives.

Bing Crosby (singer, clerk), Walt Disney (producer, substitute carrier), William Faulkner (novelist, postmaster), and Charles Lindbergh (aviator, contract airmail pilot). The study of the development of such an important institution should not be neglected in the classroom and would connect well with many of the national social studies standards (e.g., Time, Continuity, and Change; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Production, Distribution, and Consumption).

Introducing the Theme in the Classroom

Successful thematic instruction depends on a thorough introduction to the theme and continual reinforcement of the theme throughout each lesson or unit. One or all of the following essential questions can become the focus of instruction.

1. How does changing technology impact the lives of everyday people?
2. Does changing communication technology change the nature of personal communication?
3. Will changing communication technology change the work of historians?
4. Should government sponsor or facilitate personal communication?

When introducing the theme, the teacher should scaffold questions that open discussion about the nature of personal communications in an everyday, modern context and spiral to critical thinking questions related to the essential question. For example, the teacher might introduce this theme by asking the following questions:

1. How do you communicate with other people when you can't communicate face-to-face?
2. Has personal communication changed in your lifetime? In your parents' or grandparents' lifetime? (e.g., letters, telephone, fax, e-mail, cell phones, texting, Skype, Facebook)
3. Before the telephone and computer technology, letters were the primary means of communication. How is communication through a letter different than through a telephone or computer?
4. Do changing communication methods affect events in history? (e.g., the speed of communication increased with the telegraph and telephone; or the spread of ideas such as revolution or independence from colonial rulers)
5. What recent events have been impacted by new communication methods? (e.g., use of Facebook and cell phone technology in 2011 uprisings of Arab peoples in the Middle East)
6. Will the changing technology of communication impact how historians write history? (e.g., advent of electronic communications may mean that historians in the future have fewer extant primary sources than historians that used paper documentation: letters, diaries)
7. Throughout American history, the American government has supported, with tax dollars, a communication network—the U.S. Postal Service. Is this a good use of tax dollars? Why or why not?

To reexamine the thematic essential question throughout the unit or between units, students can complete a matrix that encourages comparisons over time. Table 1 displays an example matrix.

Culminating Activity: Living Postal Museum

Using the content information in this article and further research, students can choose a character role to play in a "living museum" in the classroom. Suggested roles include airmail pilot, railway mail person, postmaster, Pony Express rider, steamboat captain, Mr. Zip, and walking mailperson. Once the roles are chosen, students will write short narratives in the first person that describe their time period, roles with the mail service, and the impact of emerging technology on their job. Students should memorize the script and practice telling their stories in a first-person format to their classmates. Students will need to gather props and create costumes for their role-playing. The museum can be set up in the classroom or hallway to allow for visitors during the day or open in the evening for visitation by parents.

Table 1. Matrix for Comparison to Examine the Essential Question

Essential Question—Should government sponsor or facilitate personal communication?					
	Colonial America	*Early Republic 1789–1850*	*Late 1800s –1900 Civil War; Reconstruction; Gilded Age*	*1900–1950*	*1950 – present*
Dominant form of communication					
Speed of communication					
Cost of personal communication					
New technology / improvements in communication					
Role of government in sponsoring communication					

Postal Service and the Revolutionary War

The history of postal service is an important part of colonial and Revolutionary War history. The first official notice of colonial postal service was a 1639 ordinance of the General Court of Massachusetts designating Richard Fairbank's tavern in Boston as the official repository for mail brought from or sent overseas. As early as 1737, Benjamin Franklin served as deputy postmaster for the British colonial government in Philadelphia. Franklin instituted many changes in the postal system when he served as postmaster in Philadelphia, including providing for all newspapers to be carried by the mails at fixed rates of postage, laying out new post roads (to extend circulation of his newspaper), expanding mail service from Canada to New York, and instituting overnight delivery for the ninety miles between Philadelphia and New York City (USPS 1980). During the years of the revolutionary period, the Second Continental Congress deemed the "conveyance of letters and intelligence as essential to the cause of liberty" and created the position of Postmaster General in 1775 (USPS 2010) and quickly appointed Benjamin Franklin. The postal service became an instrument to unite Americans in a common cause. Benjamin Franklin served as postmaster until 1776, when President Washington appointed Samuel Osgood as the first Postmaster General of the new country. By 1789 there were seventy-five post offices in thirteen states and 2,400 miles of post roads (USPS 1980).

Classroom Applications

1. Benjamin Franklin was dismissed from his position as Postmaster General in 1774 because of his revolutionary activities (Burke 2005). The Sons of Liberty created Committees of Correspondence which communicated revolutionary ideas between colonial towns. For example, a Boston Committee of Correspondence created a pamphlet in 1772 that described Massachusetts constitutional rights and described the ways in which the British colonial government infringed upon those rights. This pamphlet was distributed to Massachusetts towns to spread the concepts of colonial independence (Brown 1968). Student can research the following issues: Would revolutionary anti-British materials such as this be sent by the official colonial post? Why or why not? What alternative methods were used to convey revolutionary ideas among the colonies?

2. Secret correspondence was required by military commanders during the Revolutionary War. "Spy Letters from the American Revolution" (http://www2.si.umich.edu/spies/index-people.html) is an excellent website for students that includes images of actual spy letters, stories about the letters, and information about the methods used to write and convey the secret messages, and classroom activities.

3. Early letters in the colonies used neither envelopes nor stamps. Single folded sheets of paper with the address on the outside were typical types of letters sent. Students may misunderstand The Stamp Act of 1765 by imagining a modern-day postage stamp on the top, right corner of a colonial letter. The Stamp Act of 1765 sought to collect a tax on the sale of many printed materials in the colonies. The law required that documents be on government stamped paper. The "stamps" were not like modern U.S. Post Office stamps affixed to modern letters. In colonial times an "embossed revenue stamp" was used to create an impression on the paper. Only the official British colonial government could make these "stamps," and those seeking a "stamp" on a legal document were required to pay the required tax. Newspapers had to be printed on stamped

paper purchased from government agents at one penny per sheet. (See Smithsonian Institution examples here—http://collections.si.edu/search/results.jsp?q=record_ID:npm_0.022044.2 and http://collections.si.edu/search/results.jsp?q=record_ID:npm_0.022044.1)

Students can do a primary source analysis of the text of the Stamp Act of 1765 (http://www.ushistory.org/DECLARATION/related/stampact.htm) and discuss the impact it would have had on everyday communication as well as its impact on revolutionary thought and actions. The Library of Congress website offers excellent resources that guide students in analyzing primary sources. (http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html)

Changing Technology and the Mail

After the Revolution, Americans continued to correspond through mail, but the rapid changes and growth in transportation technology made mail delivery available to more and more people and increased the speed of communication.

By 1820 more than 200 steamboats regularly delivered mail. Postmasters paid the captain either one or two cents to deliver letters, depending on the status of the craft. Congress declared waterways to be post roads in 1823 (Meyer 2004). Steamship companies carried mail between New York and California in three to four weeks, via Panama (USPS 2010). A letter from the Oregon territory might be sent by clipper ship around South America's Cape Horn to the eastern seaboard (a journey of three months). Migrants began to move around the country and wrote letters to connect with those they left behind. Factory workers on the eastern seaboard wrote letters to family left on the farm. Letters became the tie that bound the changing nation (Burke 2005). But by modern standards, letters were painstakingly slow and may not have arrived at all. For example, during the Civil War, mail addressed to the Confederate States was sent to the Dead Letter Office, and Confederate stamps were considered valueless in the North (Burke 2005).

Railway Mail Service

In the early 1830s, in response to criticism of slow mail (by horse and stagecoach), the postmaster general decided to put mail on trains. By 1838 Congress had declared that all railroads in the United States were considered post roads. For more than 140 years, Railway Mail Postal Service dependably moved and distributed the nation's mail (Romanski 2005a). First-class mail could be sent from New York to Chicago in a day and often fronted the bills that paid for passenger routes (Roseman 2004). Compensation for carrying the mail was at first based on weight but later was based on the amount of space required for handling the mail (Romanski 2005b).

Railway Post Offices (RPOs) were composed of mail-sorting compartments that occupied an entire train car. On the side of the car was a mail hook on a horizontal bar. A postal clerk rotated the arm outward and held it in place as the train approached a crane holding a sack of mail near the track. The hook snagged the bag and the clerk retrieved it. The clerk might then kick out a locked bag of mail destined for that location (Roseman 2004). Before 1869 the clerk used his arm to catch the mail as the train went by. Life as a railway postal clerk was no easy task. Clerks often had to face derailments, train robberies, fires (from early wooden train cars), unsanitary working conditions, and overtime without compensation (Romanski 2005a). Unionism of the Railway Mail Service began with the creation of the National Association of Railway Postal Clerks in 1891. Racial discrimination led to the organization of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, started in 1913 by Negro railway postal clerks (Romanski 2005b).

The 1896 postmaster general's report indicated that mail had been carried across 172,794 miles of railroad. However, the Railway Mail Service was by no means without problems. Disagreements between the Post Office and the railroads concerning pay rates per mile often resulted in the railroads' refusal to deliver the mail. Inconsistency of arrival and departure times of trains, insufficient numbers of mail cars, and ineffective methods of distributing mail further deterred the success of the service (Romanski 2005a).

The U.S. Post Office delivered thousands of personal letters by train, but one could also order a wide variety of merchandise that could be shipped all over the nation on a train. Montgomery Ward sent out the first mail order catalog in 1872, followed soon after by Sears Roebuck and Company. After one year of rural delivery, Sears boasted that the company was selling four suits and a watch every minute (Moroney 1983). One of the most amazing offerings in the mail order catalog was the prefabricated houses. *The House in the Mail* (Wells and Wells 2002) is a children's book that details how a family ordered and assembled their home from a kit ordered through the mail. This Kentucky family received their kit at the Lexington railroad station.

Airmail Service

In the mid-1800s mail was moved across the United States by balloon and carrier pigeon. The first experimental airmail service by airplane began in 1911 in Long Island, New York. The Aero Club of New York created a gimmick at the fairgrounds in which souvenir postcards and letters would be carried aloft each day and delivered six miles away to be returned by regular mail (McAllister and Davidson 2004, 2). The novelty caught the public's attention and inspired the idea of airmail service.

It wasn't until 1918 that Congress appropriated money to establish experimental airmail routes. The first three

months of operation, the postal service used army pilots and planes, but later hired civilian pilots and had specially built mail planes. The first female to carry airmail was a "barnstorming" pilot named Katherine Stinson. Katherine set an endurance record in 1918 of ten hours and ten minutes when flying the mail from Chicago to New York. She was also the first person in the United States to fly solo at night and the first pilot to do night skywriting (McAllister and Davidson 2004, 26).

Early planes had no radios, instruments, or other navigational aids. Pilots flew "by the seat of their pants." The Post Office Department began to build landing fields, towers, beacons, searchlights, and boundary markers across the country. The department also equipped planes with navigational instruments. Because of these important contributions to the development of aeronautics, the Post Office Department was awarded the Collier Trophy in 1922 and 1923 by the National Aeronautics Association (Moroney 1983).

During World War I, the military post used an imaging technique from England to microfilm letters transported on ships and enlarging them to regular size before delivery. Known as "V-mail," this process allowed the military to save cargo space (Burke 2005). It was during World War II that the "Dear John" letter ending a relationship caused heartbreak in many a soldier. In our nation's history, letters served as a connection to families and friends and were read and shared frequently.

Zip Codes

The Zoning Improvement Plan (ZIP) Code was established in 1963 to better handle the increasing volume of mail. The first number of the code represents a general geographic area of the country, from 0 in the East to 9 in the West. The next two digits pinpoint population concentrations in regional areas accessible to common transportation networks. The final two numbers designate small post offices or postal zones (USPS 2010). Zip codes were a fundamental component of America's 911 emergency system and allowed speedy results in times of need. With the use of GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and GPS (Global Positioning Systems), zip codes have become secondary for 911 responses today. The Mr. Zip™ character was used from 1964 to 1986 to help Americans remember to use the zip code (Kowalczyk and Burmeister 2007).

The widespread adoption of the telephone into American homes diminished the need to share personal news by mail. This affordable and instantaneous communication device, however, leaves no written record of what was said (Burke 2005). New technology, such as IM (instant messaging), email, and text messaging with cell phones, means that fewer and fewer letters are being delivered by the U.S. Postal Service.

Classroom Applications

In the classroom the following topics could become the focus of student projects.

1. What have historians learned from the letters of soldiers about the history of war? How does the changing location of a solider at war affect receipt of mail from home? (This website provides many examples: http://www.warletters.com/). The Letter Repository is an archive of letters from normal everyday people of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.
2. Railway transportation declined in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Is mail still shipped by rail? How did the development of Amtrak affect the mail delivery on trains?
3. Why do you think the post office recruited civilian pilots rather than military pilots? Does the post office have its own fleet of planes? How have private shipping companies (Federal Express; UPS) impacted the delivery of mail?
4. The time lapse between the writing a letter and the receipt of the letter was extensive compared to today's instant methods of communication. How long did delivery of personal communication take in the 1300s? 1500s? 1700s? 1900s? 2011? What were the common delivery methods during each time period? How might a delay of weeks or months affect the information in a written letter of the past?
5. Students can explore the Sears archives (http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/byimage.htm) for images and prices of home kits for sale from 1908 to 1940. Furthermore, students could seek to learn if home kits are available for sale today and if those kits are delivered by the U.S. Postal Service or private companies. For example, at ValuBuild (http://valubuild.net/) a prefabricated house can be ordered for about $60,000. Although these types of homes are relatively cheap, there is often a social stigma attached to the low-quality, mass-produced product. Students could make a comparison of social attitude changes over the years related to ordering a house. Students could also research housing in their own communities to see if nineteenth- and early twentieth-century railroad delivered, mail-order homes were purchased and built locally.

Historical Images and Post Stamps

The first postage stamp was issued by Britain in 1840 and featured Queen Victoria. It was known as the Penny Black and had to be cut out with scissors to be used. This stamp was used in the British Isles. U.S. postage rates were standardized in 1845, and special stamps or markings on the letter indicated that the sender had already paid the fee for postage. The first adhesive postage stamps to go on sale in the United States were the 10 cent George Washington and 5 cent Benjamin Franklin (USPS 2010).

Fig. 2. A commemorative stamp shows a railway mail clerk picking up a mail pouch from a catcher arm. (National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution). (Color figure available online.)

Over the years, commemorative stamps have been issued which honor artists, musicians, writers, inventors, inventions, places, holidays, and events. U.S. commemorative stamps help to disseminate an official image of important Americans, holidays, and symbols, creating or sustaining American myths by publicizing of official image images (see figure 2). The first U.S. commemorative stamps were a series issued in 1893 featuring Columbus's voyages to the New World. According to the USPS (2010), the first American woman to be honored was Martha Washington (1901), the first Hispanic was Admiral David Farragut (1903), the first Native American was Pocahontas (1907), and the first African American was Booker T. Washington (1940). Historical errors have been made on U.S Postage stamps. A 1994 stamp depicting Wild West star Bill Pickett actually portrayed the wrong man. Afterward, the U.S. Post Office hired a historian to authenticate all designs (Reebel 2002, 94).

A Stamp Advisory Committee was established in 1957 to provide advice on subject matter, design, production, and issuance of postage stamps. Some of the guidelines included (1) no living person shall be honored by portrayal on U.S. postage; (2) stamps shall not be issued to honor religious institutions or individuals whose principal achievements are associated with religious undertakings or beliefs; and (3) stamps shall not be issued to honor cities, towns, municipalities, counties, primary or secondary schools, hospitals, libraries, or similar institutions (USPS 2010). The U.S. Post Office recently amended the guidelines to allow stamps to honor persons who are living.

Classroom Applications

1. Students can research the images on commemorative stamps relevant to a particular unit in the history classroom and evaluate the facts and the myths represented in the stamp. Through research, students will discover that Americans have not always been willing to recognize the contributions of women and minorities in the years such stamps were issued. They will discover the controversies surrounding some of the commemorative stamps (e.g., Mother Teresa stamp, Muslim holiday stamp, World War II stamp commemorating the end with a mushroom cloud caused by a nuclear bomb on the stamp).

2. Students can create commemorative stamps for their own important events, from people and times in a unit of study, or submit an idea for a stamp to the Stamp Advisory Committee. The committee accepts ideas that will stand the test of time, be consistent with public opinion, and have broad national appeal. Stamp subjects should be addressed to Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, Stamp Development, United States Postal Service, 1735 North Lynn Street Room 5013, Arlington, VA 22209–6432.

3. Students can also explore postal seals and how they have changed over the years. Mercury, the messenger of the gods, was the official seal of Postmaster General Ebenezer Hazard in 1782. Postmaster Amos Kendall ordered that the official seal portray a post horse in speed with mailbags and rider in 1837. In 1970 the bald eagle became the center of the postal service seal (Moroney 1983). Students could design a new seal relative to historical or current events.

Conclusion

The U.S. Postal Service revolutionized person-to-person communication in America. Before 1863 postage paid for mail delivery only covered the trip from post office to post office. When Congress established free city delivery in 1863, cities had to provide sidewalks and crosswalks, ensure streets were named and well-lit, and assign numbers to houses. The postal service also contributed to improvements in rural areas. The typical farm family existed without automobiles, telephones, radio, or television. Often the family would wait months before going to town for supplies and to pick up mail. Storekeepers acted as postmaster. In 1896 Congress established Free Rural Delivery, which stimulated the development of roads and highways and linked industrial and rural America (USPS 1983). The Post Office continues to embrace technological changes to improve the mail service. In the end, new technology may be the undoing of the postal service.

Not only is the Post Office affordable to all and mail is delivered to everyone in the country, the Post Office also supplies public services to the community, including: (1) acting as a depository for VA burial flags, (2) distributing Internal Revenue forms, (3) locating relatives of deceased persons for the Armed Services, (4) accepting passport applications, and (5) distributing food coupons (Moroney 1983). This icon of America is such a part of our daily lives that we often don't think about its importance. Each day the postal service delivers over 175 billion pieces of mail. It is the only

delivery service that reaches every address in the nation and receives no tax dollars (USPS 2010). Hopefully, classroom teachers can take these ideas and expand upon them to introduce students to this entity and the influence it has had on our history. The inscription on the old post office in Washington, D.C. sums it up best:

Messenger of Sympathy and Love
Servant of Parted Friends
Consoler of the Lonely
Bond of the Scattered Family
Enlarger of the Common Life
Carrier of News and Knowledge
Instrument of Trade and Industry
Promoter of Mutual Acquaintance
Of Peace and Good Will
Among Men and Nations
(USPS 1980)

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Relevant Websites

American Philatelic Society for Kids
http://www.stamps.org/kids/kid_QA.htm
Includes the history of stamps and stamp collecting, along with fun activities for kids.

Library of Congress
www.loc.gov
The Library's Geography and Map Division has early post route, railroad, and other historic maps. Search for "map collections."

Mystic Stamp Company
www.mysticstamp.com
Includes pictures of stamps from the U.S. and other places around the world.

National Postal Museum—Activity Zone
http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/activity/8_activity.html
This Smithsonian website offers a wide variety of activities for kids and adults.

Postal Facts 2010
http://www.usps.com/strategicplanning/_pdf/PostalFacts_03_17_2010.pdf
Includes fun facts about the post office.

Smithsonian Kids—Collecting Stamps
http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/idealabs/collecting/main.html
Allows kids to explore the Smithsonian collections and get ideas for their own collections.

Teacher Resources

United States Postal Office Education Kits
http://www.usps.com/communications/community/classroom.htm

Postal Pack for Elementary School Students
http://postalmuseum.si.edu/educators/PostalPack.pdf

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