

FORWARD MOTION

History reflects the Postal Service's role as a transformative leader in American transportation.

A missive by missile? That was the bold idea in 1959 when a Navy submarine fired a guided missile carrying 3,000 letters toward a naval auxiliary air station in Florida. Traversing more than 100 miles in 22 minutes, the projectile's paper payload consisted entirely of letters in special commemorative envelopes from Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield to leading government officials and prominent citizens with a special interest in the Post Office Department, the forerunner of the U.S. Postal Service.

"Before man reaches the moon," Summerfield said during coverage of the event, "mail will be delivered within hours from New York to California, to England, to India or to Australia by guided missiles."

Alas, history has recorded the one-time experiment as a display of Cold War showmanship: See? The U.S. military is capable of such precision in missile flight that it can be considered for postal use. (If you're wondering where the letters were stored, that would be in the space designed to hold the missile's thermonuclear warhead.)

Nevertheless, the episode exemplifies the pioneering spirit of the Postal Service throughout its history when it comes to developing faster, better ways of moving the U.S. Mail.

From stagecoaches to steamboats to trains to planes to just about every kind of automobile imaginable — including the

Left: Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield was a high-profile advocate for mail delivery by guided missile.

future-facing Next Generation Delivery Vehicle, which embraces the potential of battery-electric power — USPS has made optimal use of evolving modes of transportation.

And, at crucial points in time, the Postal Service has done much more than follow trends: It has been the driving force behind fundamental transportation infrastructure that has enabled the country to grow and prosper.



Binding the nation

In the Revolutionary era, founding father George Washington envisioned a nation bound together by post roads and post offices — a mail system that would ensure the free flow of information between citizens and their government.





Left: A rural carrier stands next to his wagon circa 1901.

Building on the Postal Clause in Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution, the Postal Act of 1792 defined the character of the young Post Office Department, with spirited congressional debate examining issues of a free press, personal privacy and national growth.

From its inception as the Post Office Department, USPS has shaped the evolution of transportation.

Breaking away from postal practices under British rule, newspapers could be mailed at low rates to promote the spread of news throughout the states; postal officials were forbidden to open any letters unless they were undeliverable; and Congress assumed responsibility for the creation of postal routes, ensuring that mail delivery would help lead expansion and development instead of only serve existing communities.

By that time, the Post Office Department had already

Right: As an early and significant patron of America's railroad operators, the Post Office Department helped create the world's largest rail network.

begun contracting with stagecoach owners to carry mail along designated post roads, which were growing exponentially following the Colonial era, when Benjamin Franklin — later to become the country's first postmaster general — boosted their expansion and efficient use as joint postmaster general for the Crown.

Post roads increased from 59,473 miles at the beginning of 1819 to 84,860 by the end of 1823. A postal presence was available for citizens in 22 states in 1819, including the newest states of Illinois and Alabama.

Spurred by the 1849 California Gold Rush and the Homestead Act of 1862, which Congress passed to entice settlers into the Great Plains with the promise of 160 acres of free land, the nation grew westward in the 19th century. Despite their hunger for property and prosperity, pioneers still wanted to feel connected to the rest of the

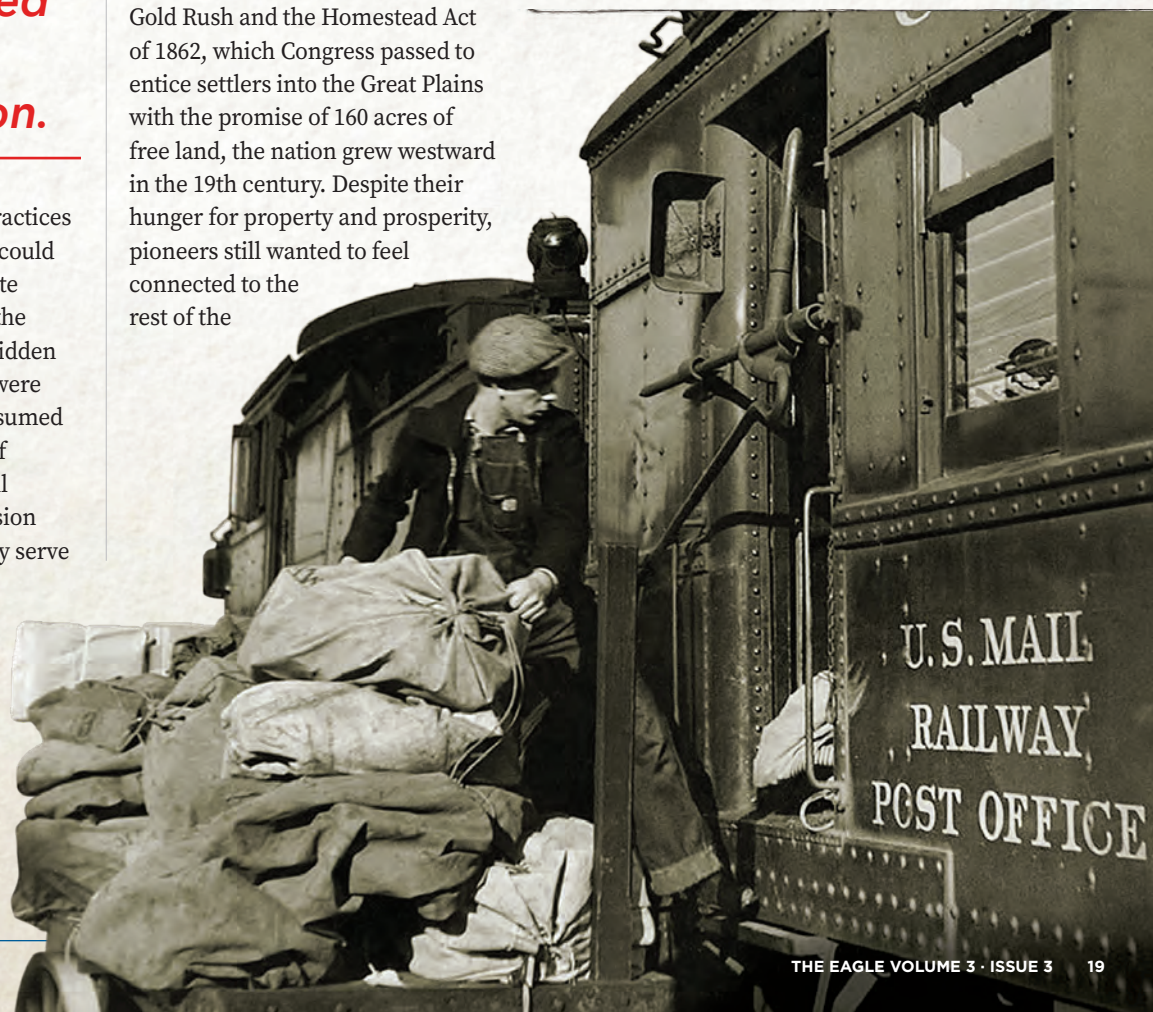
country, at a time when mail was the primary medium of news and information.

Through mail contracts, Congress provided financial incentives to a growing number of stagecoach lines to create and maintain mail routes, which became lifelines into the new territories, populating them with wave upon wave of migrants and fortune seekers.

All aboard!

The 19th century also saw the rise of the railroad, with mail closely linked to its growth and sustenance.

Train cars began carrying mail in 1832, and postal officials inaugurated the Railway Mail Service in 1864, creating specially designed Railway Post Office cars where clerks could sort mail in transit. Lasting for over a century, Railway Mail Service carried the majority of the country's mail for many decades.





In 1838, all U.S. railroads were designated as post roads, encouraging wider access for mail onto America's burgeoning rail lines, launching a period of tremendous growth. By 1840, only 2,818 miles of railroad track had been laid in the United States. By the beginning of the Civil War 21 years later, 30,000 miles of track were carrying passengers and mail throughout the country.

The expanded use of railroads greatly reduced mail transportation time. For example, in 1835, mail going from New York City to Raleigh, NC, took about 94 hours. Two years later, the time had been cut nearly in half to 55 hours. By 1885, it was more than halved again to just over 19 hours.

Innovations in transportation have made mail delivery faster and more reliable.

Bolstered by mail contracts and the growing country's desire for mail connectivity, railroads would become the dominant force in commercial transportation until the ascent of automobiles, highways and airlines in the 20th century.

In 1930, more than 10,000 trains moved mail. Following the passage of the Transportation Act of 1958, which allowed the discontinuance of money-losing passenger trains, mail-carrying passenger trains began a rapid decline.

Taking flight

The Post Office Department's most extraordinary role in transportation was played in the sky. Following several years of experimental mail flights starting in 1911, Congress recognized the potential of commercial aviation and appropriated funds for airmail service that began in 1918, initially in collaboration with the Army.

Later that year, the Post Office Department took over all phases of airmail service, using newly hired civilian pilots and mechanics, and six specially built planes from the Standard Aircraft Corp.

To improve safety, navigation and reliability in the years following, the department installed radio stations at airfields, additional landing fields, towers, beacons, searchlights and boundary markers across the country — as well as equipped planes with luminescent instruments, navigational lights and parachute flares — laying the groundwork for the airline industry to offer passenger service.

The Air Mail Act of 1925, also known as the Kelly Act, recognized the department's leadership role in the aviation field. The act sought to "encourage commercial aviation" by authorizing the postmaster general to contract with airlines to carry mail. Combined with the Air Commerce Act of 1926, the legislation provided the basis for the U.S. commercial aviation industry.

Once commercial airlines began taking over airmail flights in 1926, they depended upon mail transportation contracts for their survival until passenger traffic picked up in the late

Left: Commercial air carriers depended upon mail contracts for their survival until the 1930s, when aircraft like the iconic Douglas DC-3 gave airlines the ability to generate sufficient revenue from paying passengers.

1930s. In that transitional period, the Post Office Department transferred its lights, airways and radio service to the Department of Commerce, including 17 fully equipped stations, 89 emergency landing fields and 405 beacons. With a few exceptions, terminal airports were transferred to the municipalities in which they were located.

Following a controversial period in the early 1930s around government airmail contracts, the Air Mail Act of 1934 ensured a more even distribution of business and lower rates that forced airlines and aircraft manufacturers to devote more attention to serving passengers.



Above: New York City Postmaster Thomas Patten hands a bag of letters to Lt. Torrey Webb for one of the first regularly scheduled airmail flights in the United States in 1918.

The next big thing?

The future may or may not bring an opportunity for the Postal Service to fundamentally shape a new transportation sector like commercial aviation.

Or to grow the nation as it did through its support of road and rail infrastructure.

Yet the same impulse can be seen in every advancement the organization makes — in transportation, technology or otherwise:

To move the mail better, and move the nation forward.