



1996

## How mail delivery connected rural America

**I**n 1863, city delivery began, allowing residents in urban areas to receive mail delivered to their residences rather than having to travel to the post office for their mail. It was popular, profitable and provided employment for many Civil War veterans (see “Free city delivery” in the January 2021 issue of *The Postal Record*). But it also pointed to the divide between urban and rural residents.

“Why should the cities have fancy mail service and the old colonial system still prevail in the country districts?” one farmer was quoted in the 1891 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* as asking.

It would take time—and it wouldn’t be easy—but eventually rural free

delivery connected Americans in a way that they never had been before.

By 1890, nearly 41 million Americans—more than 65 percent of the country—still did not receive mail delivery at their residences. This was before radios, telephones or even

long-distance newspaper deliveries. If they wanted to know about the world, they had to travel over often poorly maintained rural roads, sometimes waiting long periods when the weather was bad, to a distant post office to pick up their mail. If they wanted it faster, or if they wanted newspapers or packages, they had to pay private—and often expensive—couriers to deliver the mail or other supplies to their homes.

Milton Trusler, a farmer from Fayette County, IN, started talking up the idea of mail delivery to rural areas. As the president of the Indiana Grange—a social and political organization that would advocate for farmers—he spread the idea across his state. He insisted that if farm families were paying the same postage rates as city dwellers, they deserved the same service. Spreading beyond Indiana, the idea caught on like wildfire and soon the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry lobbied Congress to make it a reality.

But the calls weren’t universal. The Postal Service’s historian wrote in 2013, “One Kansas farmer expressed concern that rural people would become lazy if they did not have to pick up their mail.”

Those in power in Washington were hesitant, too. Though city delivery had

A rural letter carrier in Nebraska



proven both profitable and popular in the preceding decades, many in Congress thought rural free delivery would be a financial disaster because U.S. geography was simply too large to support such a program. That said, some in Congress thought rural delivery would be politically popular, as about three out of every four Americans lived in rural settings. That ratio would change over time, as today about four out of five Americans live in urban settings.

Members of Congress were also being lobbied by those opposed to free delivery. Private couriers were afraid that they would lose their business, and many town merchants worried that if farm families didn't have to come to town for the mail, they would use the postal system to obtain their goods instead.

However, one merchant saw that as a financial opportunity—and a way to improve the lives of many Americans at the same time—and he used his government position to start the process of making it a reality. That man, Postmaster General John Wanamaker, the owner of a major Philadelphia-based department store chain, argued that it made more sense to have one person deliver the mail rather than making 50 people ride into town to collect it. He also thought that mail delivery could ease the isolation of rural living.

"I think the growth of the Farmers' Alliance movement and the other farmers' movements in the past few years has been due to this hunger for something social as much as to anything else," Wanamaker wrote in 1891.

With the combined support of the farmers and the postmaster general, Congress began to consider rural delivery. In 1892, Michigan Rep. James



A rural letter carrier delivers in 1908.

O'Donnell introduced "A Bill to Extend the Free Delivery System of Mails to Rural Communities," calling for \$6 million to create the service. President Grover Cleveland was hesitant about the expense and called it a "crazy scheme." The daunting price tag ensured that the bill did not make it out of committee.

The next year, Rep. Thomas Watson of Georgia took a more scaled-back approach, introducing legislation that appropriated \$10,000 to experiment with Rural Free Delivery (RFD). However, the next postmaster general, Wilson S. Bissell, didn't pursue the experiment, saying he needed at least \$20 million to create RFD. (The \$20 million price tag was later determined to be mere guesswork.)

In 1895, new Postmaster General William L. Wilson said he'd be willing to research RFD if Congress appropriated more funding, which it did, allocating \$40,000. With the funding, on Oct. 1, 1896, the Post Office began service to five routes, covering 10 miles in Jefferson County, WV. (West Virginia was selected because it was the postmaster general's home state.) Days later, the Post Office Department expanded the test to 44 rural routes in 29 states.

On Oct. 6, 1896, Joshua Corbin became the first rural carrier in Maryland by beating the three other carriers at the Westminster Post Office out the door and onto his wagon hitched to his horse Harry. Corbin's route through the southern end of Carroll County aver-

aged about 30 pieces of mail per day. He was paid \$25 a month and worked 27 days a month.

"At first, the farmers didn't like the service too much," Corbin told a reporter decades later. "They thought they would have to pay for it and getting free mail from the government didn't make much sense at all. But after some time had passed, they were very pleased with it."

Such a view was expressed by an Arizona citizen who wrote to the Postal Service in 1897:

I am more than ever proud of being an American citizen. ... I live three and a half miles from the Tempe post-office, and have been sick for a week past, yet my mail is brought to my door every morning, except Sunday. ... It looks as if 'Uncle Sam' had at last turned his eye in our direction.

In 1898, Post Office officials announced that any group of farmers could have free delivery by sending a petition with a description of their community and roads to their congressman. More than 10,000 petitions flooded in over the next few years.

To receive service, residents needed to have good roads and a good mailbox.

The first mailboxes were everything from "lard pails and syrup cans to old apple, soap and cigar boxes," a USPS historian wrote in 2013. By 1902, the Post Office Department had issued required specifications for mailboxes, or service would not be provided. Boxes could be square, oblong, circular or semicircular, but:



This photo of a Rural Free Delivery vehicle appeared in the September 1905 edition of *Popular Mechanics*.

- The box must be made of metal, 6 by 8 by 18 inches, and be weather- and dust-proof.
- Boxes should be constructed so they can be fastened to a post at a height convenient to the carrier without dismounting from a horse.
- Keys for customers' boxes should be easy to use by a carrier with one gloved hand in the severest weather.

Manufacturers stenciled the words "Approved by the Postmaster-General" on satisfactory boxes.

Because of their distance from the nearest post office, rural carriers operated as traveling post offices, selling stamps, money orders and registered letter services. Unlike city carriers, they also had to supply their own transportation—usually horse and wagon until 1929, when the Post Office noted that motor vehicles had become the norm. Congress passed the Rural Post Roads Act of 1916 to improve the roads, providing federal funds for the construction of any public road over which mail was transported.

Quickly judged a success, RFD became a permanent service effective July 1, 1902.

It wasn't long before rural carriers felt they were underpaid. Corbin, Maryland's first rural carrier, quit after three years because he couldn't afford to live on the pay. To advocate for better pay, the rural carriers moved to unionize, with the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association formed in 1903.

From 1901 to 1910, rural carriers' routes increased from 100,000 miles to almost a million miles. The word "free" was dropped in 1906, since by then it was understood.

A reporter in Michigan rode along with a rural carrier in 1903 and talked to a resident about the service. "It's one of the things that seems to bring back to us farmers some of the money we've been paying out for years for taxes," the reporter quoted the man. "Congress votes money, lots of it, for armies, and war ships, and river and harbor improvements, and public buildings in cities and towns, and a good many of us live and die and never see none of 'em. But here is something that comes right to our very doors, and we can't help seeing and feeling the good of our money."

At a time when the written word was the main means of communication, RFD brought the country a little bit closer together. But in 1913, mail took on more importance with the creation of Parcel Post. Until then, parcels weighing

more than 4 pounds were required by law to travel by private couriers.

Parcel Post allowed the distribution of millions of dollars of sales in mail-order merchandise. While this was a boon to the mail-order companies—such as Sears, Roebuck, and Co.—culturally this meant that rural families could receive books, fashion, and any other product available to urban America.

As a USPS historian wrote, "By bringing farm families newspapers, magazines, and mail-order catalogs, it brought the world to their door. Life in rural America wasn't isolated anymore."

Rural carriers still deliver for the nation's residents. USPS has about 133,000 rural letter carriers serving more than 40 million customers along 80,000 rural delivery routes. Rural routes range from 10 to 175 miles. Rural carriers collectively drive 3.5 million miles every delivery day. They deliver in every state, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. **PR**



A modern rural letter carrier in Hermiston, OR