

## THE TRANSMISSION OF INTELLIGENCE BY THE MAILS

By H. Conquest Clarke, Superintendent of the Atlantic Division of Rural Free Delivery. -- Presented before the Washington Section, A.I.E.E., at the first Fall Meeting in 1904.

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Approximately three hundred and sixty-seven millions of miles of railroad, electric, cable and steamboat lines are covered by the U. S. Postal Service. There were transported over these lines last year more than seventeen billion pieces of ordinary first class mail, and thirty million pieces of registered mail. Taking the present population of the United States at eighty million souls, this means the handling of about two hundred and thirteen pieces of mail a year for every man, woman and child in the United States.

The magnitude of the service having thus been briefly stated, it becomes interesting to trace its origin and to note some of the leading features in its development. Like the struggle for Independence the postal service of this country originated in Boston and culminated in Philadelphia. In May, 1677, in early Colonial days, on petition of merchants of Boston, Mr. John Hayward, scribever, was appointed "to take in and convey letters according to their direction". In July, 1683, William Penn issued an order for the establishment of a post office at Philadelphia, and from this office mails were sent out once a week as far as New Castle, Delaware, the date of departure being "carefully published on the meeting house door and other public places". In 1710, a post office was established in New York which delivered letters and packages within a radius of sixty miles at a cost of one shilling and four pence an ounce, the lowest rate of postage for a single letter being four pence. In 1737, the postmastership of Philadelphia was tendered to Benjamin Franklin, which he quaintly says in his "Life" he accepted readily, "and found it of great advantage; for, though the salary was small, it facilitated the correspondence that improved my newspaper, increased the number demanded, as well as the advertisements to be inserted, so that it came to afford me a considerable income." In 1753, Franklin became Deputy Postmaster General of America by appointment of the home government, and was allowed to keep all the profits he could make out of the office up to six hundred pounds a year. He ran the Department for four years at a loss to himself but great advantage to the country. He established mail communication with New York by stage three times a week in the summer and once a week in the winter, and gave Boston a weekly instead of a fortnightly mail. When the Continental Congress undertook to manage its own postal service, in 1774, Benjamin Franklin was unanimously chosen the first Postmaster General, at a salary of \$1000 a year, his residence to be in Philadelphia. The same Congress authorized the establishment of a line of posts from Falmouth in New England to Savannah in Georgia, with as many cross posts as the Postmaster General might see fit to establish. And this was practically the beginning of our present postal service. Nevertheless, in spite of the efforts of Franklin and others, the eighteenth century



opened with less than a thousand post offices in the United States, and the whole business of the General Post Office was transacted by six men, one of whom was the Postmaster General. Thirty-five years later, when railroads had been introduced, their first attempts at mail carrying were not successful, either in point of time or cost, and in several instances the Post Office Department had to return to the old system by stage coaches, both for expedition and economy. In March, 1835, the contractor for carrying the mails between Philadelphia and New York complained that the railroad usually took more than thirteen hours to make the trip from Jersey City to Philadelphia. Private expresses frequently carried important commercial news days ahead of the U. S. Mails, and even the mail contractors themselves sometimes took pleasure in beating the Post Office in the transmission of news. This led to the insertion of a clause in the printed form of contract, which was retained long after the telegraph had rendered it meaningless, by which the contractor bound himself neither in person nor by his agent to "transmit or be concerned in transmitting commercial intelligence more rapidly than by mail." It is a little curious, as bearing upon the Government ownership of railroads which is now sometimes seriously advocated, that in November, 1841, the President of one of the earliest railroads built, the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore R.R.Co., proposed that if the Government would issue scrip to his road to the amount of one million dollars, at five percent, payable in twenty or thirty years, it could have the perpetual control of the road as far as one mail a day was concerned, free of charge. This offer was declined. The Post Office Department now pays about \$40,000,000 a year for railroad transportation of mails.

In 1835, mails between Washington and New Orleans occupied 330 hours in transit. They now take about 28 hours. In the same year (1835) mails from Washington to St. Louis occupied 322 hours in transit; they now are delivered in 20 hours. Mails from Washington to Cincinnati, in 1835, took 137 hours; now 16 hours suffice. These are but sample illustrations of the rapid advances made in the dissemination of intelligence through the mails. In point of distances traversed for a single rate of postage within its own borders, no nation equals the United States. A letter posted at Miami, Florida, addressed to Blaine, Washington State, is carried the whole distance of 3848 miles for two-cent postage; in like manner a letter mailed at Presque Isle, Maine, is delivered to the addressee in San Diego, California, a distance of 3878 miles, for the same rate of postage. If our territorial possessions, Porto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines, are taken into consideration, the distances covered for a single rate of postage are immensely increased.



Minutes of January 1st meeting of the Washington  
Department of the A. I. R. B.  
The most important step taken in recent years for the dissemination of intelligence by the mails has been the establishment of rural free delivery. In 1897, when the plan of delivering mail by carriers to residents of rural districts living remote from post offices was put to a test on probation, an appropriation of \$40,000 was considered sufficient for that purpose. Year by year the service has grown till now the annual appropriation for its maintenance and extension exceeds \$20,000,000, and the end is not yet reached. The results obtained, however, are deemed to fully justify the expenditure. The enhanced cost of the service is to a large extent offset by a reduction of expenditure in other postal service superseded by rural delivery, and counter-balanced by an increase of postal receipts resulting from improved mail facilities. How keenly the benefits of the service are appreciated by the people served may be judged from the fact that though on the first of October last over 27,000 rural routes were in operation, nearly 4,000 petitions for the extension of the service to new localities were pending that day before the Department unacted upon. It is estimated that by the rural service the U. S. Mails are now brought within easy reach of the homes of more than 12,000,000 residents of rural districts to whom the daily visit of the mail carrier was previously a joy unknown.

Mr. F. G. Burton, Division Superintendent of the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Company, took up the thread of the story where Mr. Maynard's paper left it, showing the growth of the system from 1883 until the present time. Mr. Burton's paper was illustrated with lantern slides, showing many of the old pole lines which filled the streets of the city until a comparatively recent date, and with other photographs showing the underground system of distribution used at the present time. A map was also shown, on which was indicated the existing conduit system of the Company with proposed extensions, and also the location of present and proposed exchanges of the Company.

Curves were shown, indicating the growth of telephony in Washington, and in the United States, from the earliest days until the present time, and showing that almost half of the total number of subscribers in Washington have been added to the system during the past two years.

An exhibit of especial interest was a section of the first system of underground wires laid in Washington for telephonic purposes, and which consisted of porcelain insulators spaced 1 1/2 x 6", which were placed four feet apart in a wooden trough. These insulators were pierced with sixty holes, through which were drawn bare and cotton insulated wires, and the boxes were then filled with tar. The projector of this system had not been calculated as the great cause of a