

Mail by Rail in United States

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At least three decades before the Pony Express galloped into postal history, the "iron horse" made a formal appearance. In August 1829, an English-built locomotive, the *Stourbridge Lion* completed the first locomotive run in the United States on the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company Road in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. One month later, the South Carolina Railroad Company adopted the locomotive as its tractive power, and, in 1830, the Baltimore & Ohio's *Tom Thumb*, America's first steam locomotive, successfully carried more than 40 persons at a speed exceeding 10 miles an hour. This beginning was considered somewhat less than auspicious when a stage driver's horse outran the *Tom Thumb* on a parallel track in a race at Ellicotts Mills, Maryland, on September 18, 1830. Later, however, a steam locomotive reached the unheard of speed of 30 miles an hour in an 1831 competition in Baltimore, and the dray horses used to power the first trains were eased out.

The American Post Office Department recognized the value of this new mode of transportation for mail as early as November 30, 1832, when the stage contractors on a route from Philadelphia to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, were granted an allowance of \$400 per year "for carrying the mail on the railroad as far as West Chester (30 miles) from December 5, 1832." Although the Department apparently entered into a number of

contracts providing for rail transportation as a part of the stage routes in succeeding years, the Postmaster General listed only one railroad company as a contractor during the first six months of 1836, "Route 1036 from Philadelphia to Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania."

After passage of the Act of July 7, 1838, designating all railroads in the United States as post routes, mail service by railroad increased rapidly. The Post Office appointed a route agent to accompany the mails between Albany and Utica, New York, in 1837.

In June 1840, two mail agents were appointed to accompany the mail from Boston to Springfield "to make exchanges of mails, attend to delivery, and receive and forward all unpaid way letters and packages received."

At this time, mail was sorted in distributing post offices. The only mail sent to the agents on the railroad lines was that intended for dispatch to offices along each route. The route agents opened the pouches from the local offices, separated the mail for other local points on the line for inclusion in the pouches for those offices, and sent the balance into the distributing post offices for further sorting. Gradually, the clerks began to make up mail for connecting lines, as well as local offices, and the idea of distributing all transit mail on the cars slowly evolved.

The first experiment in distributing U.S. mail in so-called "post

offices on wheels" was made in 1862 between Hannibal and St. Joseph, Missouri, by William A. Davis, postmaster of St. Joseph. Although this new procedure expedited the connection at St. Joseph with the overland stage, it was discontinued in January 1863. On August 28, 1864, the first U.S. Railroad Post Office route was officially established when George B. Armstrong, the assistant postmaster of Chicago, Illinois, placed a postal car equipped for general distribution in service between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa, on the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad. Similar routes were established between New York and Washington; Chicago and Rock Island, Illinois; Chicago and Burlington, Illinois; and New York and Erie, Pennsylvania.

When railway mail service began, mostly letter mail was sorted on the cars, which were not equipped to distribute other kinds of mail. By about 1869, other mail, except packages, was sorted as well. In 1930, more than 10,000 trains were used to move the mail into every city, town, and village in the United States. Following passage of the Transportation Act of 1958, mail-carrying passenger trains declined rapidly. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail; by 1970, the railroads carried virtually no First-Class Mail.

On April 30, 1971, the Post Office Department terminated seven of the eight remaining routes. The lone, surviving railway post office ran between New York and Washington, D.C., and made its last run on June 30, 1977. (usps.com/history)

