

BY MATTHEW WELLS

## Rural Free Delivery

The free delivery of mail changed daily life for millions of rural Americans

*“Rural free delivery, taken in connection with the telephone, the bicycle, and the trolley, accomplishes much toward lessening the isolation of farm life and making it brighter and more attractive.”*

—From President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1903 Message to Congress

For much of the nation’s history, rural Americans had to travel — sometimes great distances — to send and receive their mail or they had to hire a private courier to deliver it. When the weather made travel on country roads difficult, rural families could sometimes go weeks without any contact or communication with the outside world. This situation was in stark contrast to that of Americans who lived in urban areas, where mail had been delivered daily since 1863. In 1890, however, there were far more people living in the countryside than in cities: 41 million Americans, or 65 percent of the population, called rural America home.

Advocates of free delivery of rural mail in the late 19th century argued that it wasn’t right for so many Americans to be left behind with limited access to news and information, as well as to new economic opportunities made available through the daily free delivery of mail. Through the Post Office Department, the federal government would eventually act in the mid-1890s, implementing Rural Free Delivery (RFD), which brought daily mail to millions of rural homes. As President Roosevelt pointed out, the program positively transformed rural life, ushering in changes in the relationship between rural residents and each other, the economy, and their government.

### FIRST CLASS PATRONAGE

Getting anywhere in rural America in the second half of the 19th century wasn’t easy. Assuming a walking pace of a little over three miles per hour, someone who lived five miles from the nearest town with a post office could expect to spend about three and a half hours just on travel alone. If going by wagon, the traveler was unlikely to be comfortable; historian Wayne Fuller noted in his 1964 book, *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America*, that as of 1906, only about 7 percent of the country’s roads were anything other than dirt. It isn’t hard to see why getting the mail in rural America over 100 years ago was a lot more difficult than simply walking to the end of the driveway.

When they did make the trip into town, rural citizens in the early 1890s would stop by the post office to pick up their mail, which was usually housed in a local general store. There, they’d undoubtedly encounter the store owner, who frequently doubled as the local postmaster. These fourth-class postmasters were paid a small government stipend and made money from selling stamps and other mail services, but most of their money came from the sale of all the other goods in the store to the traffic using the postal services.

Theirs were patronage positions. Local postmasters were appointed by the district’s representative in Congress and acted as part of the party machine in the area, placing the representative’s literature in newspapers and serving as eyes and ears on the ground, reporting any problems or concerns back to him. The arrangement was mutually beneficial, as the representative developed a constituency that depended on — and worked hard for — his success and the postmaster gained the rewards

of machine politics. About 77,000 political appointees served as fourth-class postmasters around the country in the early 1890s. This was by far the largest source of patronage in the federal government, and the Post Office held more patronage positions than all other government departments combined.

At the same time, the Post Office was beginning to crumble under its own weight, running million-dollar deficits annually in the 1880s. Daniel Carpenter, a political scientist at Harvard University, argued in a 2000 *Studies in American Political Development* article that much of that bloating stemmed from the local postmasters, referring to them as “the favored children of congressional and presidential largesse” who “held their jobs with the favor of the party in the White House.”

### A SPUTTERING START

Local postmasters were an entrenched interest who supported the status quo, but pressure for free mail delivery to rural residents had been building for some time. One of the most prominent rural advocacy organizations, the National Grange, first made it a national legislative goal as early as the 1870s, but it gained little traction in Washington until the late 1880s, when John Wanamaker was appointed postmaster general by newly elected Republican President Benjamin Harrison.

As the founder of Wanamaker’s Department Store, Wanamaker had a reputation as an innovator with his introduction of mail-order catalogues and the “money-back guarantee.” He brought that innovative spirit to his job as postmaster general, advocating for radical changes like government ownership of telegraph wires, parcel post, and a postal

savings bank. He also was a strenuous advocate for free rural mail delivery, thinking it made more sense for one person to deliver the mail than for 50 households to travel into town to get it. While he wasn't a progressive populist, Wanamaker met with the National Grange and other groups, spoke with business and civic leaders, and published essays urging farmers to petition Congress to put RFD on its agenda. RFD may have been a policy idea in the abstract before Wanamaker, but his efforts and commitment brought it to life.

Congress extended the Post Office Department a \$10,000 appropriation to be used for RFD on an experimental basis in 1891. By April 1892, Wanamaker reported that 40 of the 46 offices in the experiment had increased revenues, and the department was generating a profit of \$10,000 per year. Newspapers around the country announced these statistics, resulting in even more interest and demand for the program.

Despite what appeared to be clear success, Congress remained skeptical of the program and sent mixed messages regarding its future. In 1892, the House Committee on the Post Office and Postal Roads declared "that rural free delivery will aid materially in stopping much of the growing discontent that now seems to exist among the farming population." But it also stated in the same year that while RFD had been successful in other countries, "the expediency of trying it" seemed "somewhat doubtful." (Rural delivery had started in Great Britain, Canada, and France around that same time, if not before.) Nonetheless, Wanamaker asked Congress for \$6 million in 1893 to expand the program, but he was only given \$10,000. The same year, a new Democratic administration brought in a new postmaster general, Wilson Bissell, who opposed the program and sought to curtail its funding and experimentation.

The Post Office bureaucracy, however, persisted in its support for RFD thanks to the enthusiasm of



The Rural Free Delivery program allowed rural residents who often lived along poorly maintained dirt roads to receive regular mail and parcel delivery for the first time. RFD mail carriers often made their deliveries in horse-drawn postal delivery wagons, as seen here during a 1914 delivery.

August Machen, the new superintendent of free delivery. After Bissell resigned in 1895, Machen continued small-scale trials through small appropriations, and in 1899, a trial experiment in Carroll County, Md., proved decisive for the program's future. In the trial, 63 of the county's 94 post offices were closed and 33 star routes (that is, private couriers contracted to carry mail between post offices and deliver it to private mailboxes along the way) were eliminated, replaced with a total of four postal wagons and 26 letter carriers. The trial's results revealed that the post offices and star routes were both unnecessary and overly costly, as postal revenue in the county jumped 23 percent during the year-long experiment and the net cost of the program was just \$236. In the trial's report, Machen declared that "the results achieved are far beyond the expectations of the most enthusiastic advocates of rural free delivery." At this point, RFD's expansion and permanence was probably inevitable.

## BENEFITS OF BEING LITERATE AND REPUBLICAN

By 1900, the Post Office Department had created a stand-alone RFD division, which had 1,259 routes servicing rural residents. Two years later, President Roosevelt signed legislation making it a permanent federal program. By 1908, the number of rural routes had ballooned to 39,277. For a rural community to get one of these routes, it had to petition its local congressional representative, and any proposed route had to meet a set of conditions: It had to reach a minimum of 100 households, be between 20 and 25 miles long, and use roads that were passable year-round. Demand for routes outpaced the supply, forcing the Post Office Department to decide where the routes would go, which required information regarding a proposed route's economic feasibility.

Washington bureaucrats had no such knowledge, forcing them to rely on railway-trained inspectors on the ground. But two of the Post Office's key criteria in making route determinations

after those requirements were met didn't require inspections — a district's partisanship and literacy rate. Under Republican presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, routes proliferated across wealthier northern districts and rural communities that had been key to their 1896 and 1900 electoral victories. Kansas, for example, was staunchly Republican and ended up with over 1,000 more routes than Democratic South Carolina. Political scientists Samuel Kernell and Michael McDonald reported in a 1999 *American Journal of Political Science* article that Republicans newly elected to the House of Representatives who defeated an incumbent Democrat in 1898 received 11 times the routes given to newly elected Democrats who beat an incumbent Republican.

Why literacy rates? Postal officials needed to show profits so Congress would continue to fund RFD, and the ability to read was seen as a crucial determinant of consumption. In other words, more mail was likely to flow in areas where people could read it. As a result, the department denied requests from low-literacy districts, and those petitioning for routes made sure to highlight their abilities. Residents in Hardin County, Iowa, for example, claimed the “distinguished honor of having the smallest percent of illiteracy of any county in the nation.”

### NEWSPAPERS AND VICK'S VAPORUB

It was clear that while rural residents benefited from RFD, the local postmasters stood to lose thanks to the post office closures that accompanied the program. The Carroll County experiment demonstrated that they were no longer necessary, but for the time being, they were still quite influential. One congressman worried he couldn't “outlive the resentment of the men who would thus be deprived of their annual income” if he supported RFD, viewing it as political suicide. Fuller noted, “[Postmasters] put their congressmen in the unenviable position of having to

choose between their post offices and the new rural routes since it was the Department's policy not to have both if they duplicated one another.” Still, in some areas, postmasters were able to convince delivery route agents to allow the post office to remain open, while in other areas, they were incorporated into the bureaucracy and given salaried positions. To pacify lawmakers who felt they might be left open to retribution, the Post Office in some cases hired more carriers to cover the routes, negating any adverse effect that might arise from a disgruntled former postmaster.

As the postmasters' lives changed, so did the lives of rural residents. In 1899, a former postmaster reflected, “Before free delivery was started, there were thirteen daily newspapers taken at Turner post office. Today, there are 113. With the general extension of rural free mail delivery there will be less talk about the monotony of farm life.”

The newspaper deliveries made a difference. In a 2016 article in the *Journal of Economic History*, Bitsy Perlman of the Census Bureau and Steven Sprick Schuster of Middle Tennessee State University suggested that because RFD regularly delivered newspapers into millions of homes that previously did not have access to them, rural voters were better able to coordinate their support for parties and candidates and to advocate for specific policies. At the same time, smaller parties like the Greenbacks and Populists could better reach farmers through regular mail contact via increased newspaper circulation. Outside of the South, where increasing routes led to Democratic party consolidation, they found that as the number of routes in a county increased, so did the vote share of a wider variety of parties beyond Democrats and Republicans. They also found that in areas where there was active newspaper distribution, elected representatives changed their voting behavior to better reflect their constituents' evolving political preferences, particularly in the areas of temperance and immigration.

“There's an ability for mass media to create concerns that may not otherwise exist,” suggests Sprick Schuster. “The expansion of rural free delivery and newspaper circulation is really the mechanism through which immigration restrictions would gain more support.”

Beyond this political effect, the increased transmission of information via the mail, both through newspapers and mailers, heightened rural residents' awareness of new goods and services available to them. In a 2017 working paper, James Feigenbaum of Boston University and Martin Rotemberg of New York University argued that RFD lowered the cost of advertising, allowing manufacturers to reach more potential customers at a cheaper price. They cited the example of Vick's Chemical, founded in 1890 in rural Selma, N.C. While the firm originally just sent salesmen to neighboring counties to advertise and sell, their model changed significantly in 1903 when the first RFD route went through Selma. Two years later, Vick's developed its famed VapoRub, manufactured it on a mass scale, and used the RFD system to cheaply send advertising material. Rotemberg succinctly summarizes the logic adopted by manufacturers: “Here's this thing you might want to buy. You don't know about it yet, but RFD allows you to learn about it.”

RFD also led to other positive changes. Rural mail delivery required passable roads, and efforts to secure federal funding for road creation and maintenance culminated in the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916, which contained provisions benefiting rural Americans in ways beyond simply receiving mail. In a 1912 debate on the issue, one representative argued, “These roads will enable our farmers to get their products to market more promptly and cheaply, thus giving to the consumer his food fresher and at lower cost. These roads will give to our rural communities better schools and churches. These roads will give our farmers more opportunities for the benefits and joys of social intercourse.”



## "IT HAS GOT ME SPOILED"

As a result of RFD's popularity, the Post Office's legitimacy, reputation, and authority also increased, allowing it to further expand its activities, though not without a struggle. After a 10-year wait following the 1902 authorization of RFD, the Post Office received the go-ahead from Congress to take up parcel delivery in 1912. The long wait was thanks to a strong opposition campaign mounted by retail associations that argued the Post Office was ill-equipped to deliver packages and that doing so would only increase the department's overall budget deficits. The parcel delivery service fulfilled one of John Wanamaker's early aspirations for the department and a goal of populists who called for the public provision of the country's communication and transportation infrastructure. In doing so, the government entered markets that had previously been the domain of private actors. Middlemen like wholesalers and rural storekeepers could be bypassed with a transaction taking place directly between the manufacturer and consumer.

The department's budget deficits, however, had disappeared by 1911, with the *Outlook*, a Progressive Era magazine, declaring, "THE POSTAL SERVICE WAXES PROFITABLE." In his 2000 article, Carpenter argued that this outcome was likely due to increased efficiency in the delivery of city mail, not rural delivery, which stemmed from inspectors tasked with

reducing the unnecessary proliferation of urban post offices and mail carriers. Indeed, while trials showed it was cost effective at a local level, RFD deployment nationally brought large operating costs that overwhelmed any revenue increases it generated. The Post Office's deficit as a percentage of revenue spiked in the years immediately following RFD's 1902 authorization and again in 1908 until ultimately declining in 1909.

Even today, rural post office deficits have persisted: The Post Office reported in 2022 that 63 percent of rural post offices failed to cover their costs. The government is forbidden by law, however, from closing small post offices simply because they operate in the red.

Indeed, free mail delivery generally is now taken for granted as an element of government service, as the Post Office estimated in 2012 that nearly 41 million homes and businesses receive service from rural mail carriers. Some rural communities, however, such as Burlington, Ill., remain unserved, a reality that complicated the Census Bureau's efforts to administer the 2020 Census surveys to households during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, Santiago Pinto, a senior economist and policy advisor at the Richmond Fed, suggests the story of RFD is a reminder that rural areas face persistent challenges when it comes to reducing isolation and improving connectivity to the broader economy and political system.

"In the past, rural communities lacked reliable mail service. In the present, many rural areas face limited broadband availability, restricting economic opportunities and access to information," he says. "The RFD experience offers valuable insights into the economics of market access and 'last-mile delivery.' Serving rural areas remains more expensive and less profitable than urban markets."

RFD's creation was the product of a combined effort. First, the Post Office Department's leadership sought to make more efficient the rural delivery of mail and reduce the power of local postmasters. At the same time, groups that would benefit from free mail delivery — businesses and their customers and would-be customers, as well as farmers — also advocated for change. Lastly, progressive reformers championed a new form of government where representatives shifted from systems of patronage to a belief that electoral success could be won by working to improve the lives of everyday Americans. The comments of Nathan Nicholson of Newcastle, Ind., included in the 1898 Postmaster General's Annual Report demonstrate that those collective efforts paid off: "It [RFD] has got me spoiled. I would rather it had not started if it is going to stop now. If I was going to buy a farm, I would give more per acre on a free-delivery route than I would where there was not any. Let it come. My neighbors and I are willing to pay our part." **EF**

---

## READINGS

Carpenter, Daniel. "State Building through Reputation Building: Coalitions of Esteem and Program Innovation in the National Postal System, 1883-1913." *Studies in American Political Development*, October 2000, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 121-155.

Feigenbaum, James J., and Martin Rotemberg. "Communication and Manufacturing: Evidence from the Expansion of Postal Services." Working Paper, 2017.

Fuller, Wayne E. *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1964.

Kernell, Samuel, and Michael P. McDonald. "Congress and America's Political Development: The Transformation of the Post Office from Patronage to Service." *American Journal of Political Science*, July 1999, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 792-811.

Perlman, Elisabeth, and Steven Sprick Schuster. "Delivering the Vote: The Political Effect of Free Mail Delivery in Early Twentieth Century America." *Journal of Economic History*, September 2016, vol. 76, no. 3, pp. 769-802.