

## Mail by Rail

The Post Office Department recognized the value of rail to move mail as early as November 30, 1832, when stagecoach 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 from December 5, 1832.”<sup>1</sup>

Post Office Department officials enthusiastically embraced this new mode of transportation. In 1834, when railroads were still short, isolated lines and the locomotives that ran on them were sometimes slower than stagecoaches, Postmaster General William Barry spent one whole page of his five-page annual report discussing their prospects and progress. In 1835, when railroads accounted for only one percent of mail transportation and connected only two major cities – Washington and Baltimore -- Postmaster General Amos Kendall predicted that “the multiplication of rail-roads will form a new era in the mail establishment.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the Department apparently awarded several contracts for rail transportation as a part of stagecoach routes in the early 1830s, the Postmaster General listed only one railroad company as a contractor during the first six months of 1836, for Route 1036 from Philadelphia to Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania.

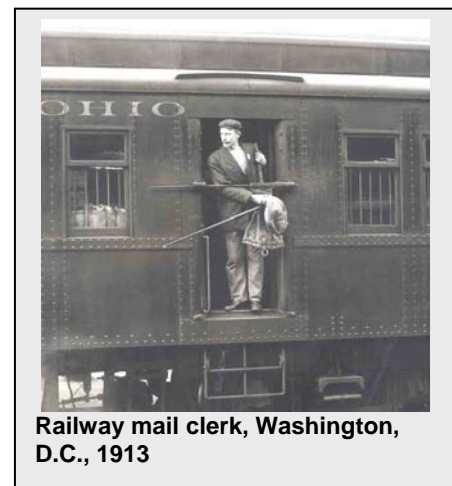
The Department appointed the first route agent, John Kendall, nephew of Postmaster General Amos Kendall, to accompany the mails between Albany and Utica, New York, in 1837. An Act of July 7, 1838, designated all United States railroads as post routes, and railroad mail service increased rapidly.

In June 1840, two mail agents were appointed to the Boston-Springfield route, “to make exchanges of mail, attend to delivery, and receive and forward all unpaid way letters and packages received.”<sup>3</sup> The route agents opened the pouches from local offices, separated mail for other local points on the line for inclusion in the pouches for those offices, and sent the balance to distributing Post Offices for further sorting. Gradually, the clerks began to make up mail for connecting lines and local offices, and the idea of sorting mail on the cars evolved.

In 1862, William A. Davis, head clerk of the St. Joseph, Missouri, Post Office, began the first experiment in distributing mail in railroad cars on the Hannibal-St. Joseph run. Although this practice expedited the connection with the overland stage at St. Joseph, it was discontinued in January 1863. On August 28, 1864, the first U.S. Railway Post Office (RPO) route was established officially when George B. Armstrong, Chicago’s assistant postmaster, placed a car equipped for general distribution in service between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa, on the Chicago and North Western Railroad. Similar routes were established between New York and Washington, D.C.; Chicago and Rock Island, Illinois; Chicago and Quincy, Illinois; and New York and Erie, Pennsylvania.

When railway mail service began, the cars were equipped primarily to sort and distribute letter mail. By about 1869, other mail was being sorted. Parcel Post service, added in 1913, soon outgrew the limited space aboard trains. Terminals, established adjacent to major railroad stations, allowed parcels to be sorted then loaded into mail cars and RPOs for transport to cities and towns.

In 1930, more than 10,000 trains moved mail. Following passage of the Transportation Act of 1958, which allowed the discontinuance of money-losing passenger trains, mail-carrying passenger trains began to decline rapidly. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail, and 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 last Railway Post Office, which operated between New York and Washington, D.C., on Penn Central/Conrail, made its final run on June 30, 1977.

Highway and air congestion and an increase in the weight of catalogs and advertising mail during the 1980s led to renewed rail use. Amtrak carried mail on many trains, and freight trains pulled flatcars holding trailers full of mail. In 1993, Amtrak and the Postal Service reintroduced the RoadRailer®, special intermodal equipment that could travel on highways and on rails without having to be hoisted onto a railroad flatcar.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, rail transportation of mail helped close the gap caused by temporary disruptions to commercial air service.

Although Amtrak stopped carrying mail in October 2004, the nation's freight railroads continue to carry mail through their intermodal service.

#### **Endnotes:**

1. U.S. Post Office Department, *History of the Railway Mail Service; A Chapter in the History of Postal Affairs in the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1885), 28.
2. *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1835, 394.
3. U.S. Post Office Department, *History of the Railway Mail Service; A Chapter in the History of Postal Affairs in the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1885), 41.