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Putting Its Stamp on the States

In 1953, when Arthur Summerfield was named Postmaster General, he learned that the agency employed not one certified public accountant.

By **MARC LEVINSON**
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Who really looks forward to doing business with the United States Postal Service? The stuff the letter carrier brings by the house is largely junk that recipients may not refuse. Important paperwork, like bills, payments, contract documents and even sincere condolences, moves mainly over the internet. Whether goods ordered online are delivered by a postal worker or a Fedex driver is a matter of indifference; the anxious wait for a handwritten missive in a scented envelope is ancient history. The Postal Service is still a substantial enterprise, booking $69 billion of revenue in its most recent fiscal year. But if snow or rain should deter some of its 622,000 employees from the swift completion of their appointed rounds, few of us are likely to care.

It was not always thus. For two centuries, as Winifred Gallagher shows in "How the Post Office Created America," the U.S. Post Office was a central institution in American life. In towns from Maine to California, people gathered at the postal counter to collect their mail, send or receive money and gossip with their neighbors. Letters from home helped settlers cope with the isolation of life on the frontier, and newspapers from distant places, transported at low cost by congressional directive, broadened horizons and tied far-flung communities into a nation. "The history of its Post Office is nothing less than the story of America," Ms. Gallagher's opening sentence declares, and in this lively book she makes the case well.

The United States was not unique in having a postal service in the 18th and 19th centuries. Early European postal systems, though, served mainly to carry official correspondence; if a young man who had gone to the city wished to write his mother back in the village, he would entrust his message to a traveler headed that way, not to a postal courier. The American version, in contrast, was a people's post office from its earliest days. Soon after the Post Office Act of 1792 authorized the establishment of postal routes, riders were covering tens of thousands of miles of routes in every state and territory. "The Post Office Act helped turn the abstract idea of democracy into a concrete reality by authorizing mail service for the entire population rather

than just the privileged few or the conveniently located," Ms. Gallagher explains. She also emphasizes the important role of the thousands of local postmasters, who were the principal link between the young federal government and its citizens.
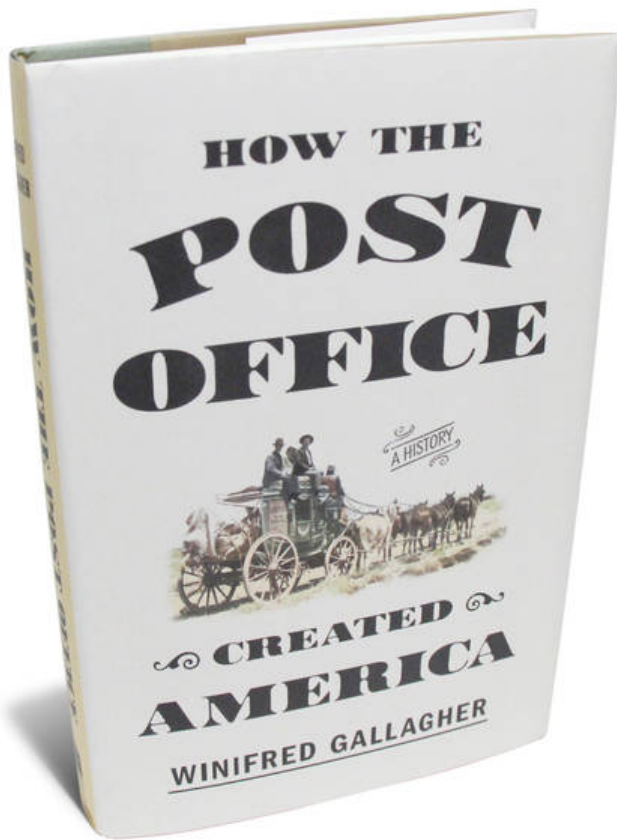
Today, it is difficult to

HOW THE POST OFFICE CREATED AMERICA

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comprehend the ways in which a single government agency shaped American society. The Post Office Department's backing of stagecoach proprietors, steamboat operators, railroads and couriers to carry the mail accelerated the development of a nationwide transportation system. Abolitionists used the mails to spread their anti-slavery creed to the deep South, and advocates of temperance used them to build a nationwide political movement. Once the postage stamp came along in 1847, allowing the sender rather than the recipient to pay for postage, Americans took to sending massive quantities of letters and valentines. Thanks to twice-daily home delivery, implemented in major cities after 1863, formal invitations might receive same-day responses, giving rise to elaborate social rituals.

The social impact of postal innovation was particularly important in

rural America. Rural Free Delivery, introduced at the end of the 19th century, brought postal carriers to the farm—and forced county governments to improve roads and bridges so the mail could get through. The parcel post, authorized by Congress in 1912, allowed farm families to order exactly what they wanted from Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward and have it delivered to their doors, giving them alternatives to the high prices and limited selections of small-town merchants. Although express companies, railroads and retailer associations fought it tooth and nail, "Parcel Post was a phenomenal success and remains a powerful counter to the argument that private industry always serves Americans better than the government," Ms. Gallagher rightly asserts.

The early years of the 20th century were the Post Office's heyday, as express trains hauling steel mail-sorting cars crisscrossed the country. Elaborate marble buildings in cities like New York and Washington attested to the agency's importance. But decline set in after World War I, as successive Republican administrations saw the Post Office Department more as a business than an institution with a higher social purpose. Money for investment grew scarce. The bill came due after World War II, when the system struggled to cope with surging volume. When Arthur Summerfield, the son of a rural mail carrier, was named Postmaster General by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953, he discovered that the agency employed not a single certified public accountant. Major sorting facilities, located adjacent to rail passenger stations, were poorly designed for moving mail by truck, and the workers inside largely tossed letters into slots one at a time, just as their predecessors had done a century earlier. When sorting machines finally arrived in the 1960s, thousands of workers were assigned the mind-numbing job of keying in postal codes, and the results were so poor that around 30% of letters were misdirected.

The entire system came unglued in 1966, when Chicago's Old Main Post Office, the world's largest postal facility, closed for three weeks to clear out a backlog of 10 million pieces of mail. A federal commission called for the department to be turned into a government-owned corporation, declaring, "Today the Post Office is a business." Congress agreed, sort of. In 1970, it voted to reorganize the Post Office Department into an independent corporation with its own board of directors—but it attached strings that have made it difficult for the United States Postal Service to offer new services, close tiny rural post offices and otherwise make a profit. After more than two centuries, the debate over whether the postal system should be a business or a social institution shows no sign of coming to an end.

Mr. Levinson's "The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger" was recently published in a revised edition.