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# 'Paper Trails' Review: Go West, Young Mailman

If rumors of riches triggered a stampede to a mining camp, the Post Office Department was expected to serve the location right away.



A San Francisco post office in 1849.

PHOTO: SARIN IMAGES/THE GRANGER COLLECTION

*By Marc Levinson*

March 24, 2021 6:19 pm ET



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For most of us who call ourselves historians, our work is first and foremost a matter of writing. Our offices teem with books. Our journals feature lengthy articles. We don't shy away from maps, charts, photographs and drawings, but their purpose, more often than not, is to illustrate—literally, to shed light upon—information conveyed by written words.

But technology is reshaping the historian's craft. Cameron Blevins's "Paper Trails:

"The U.S. Post and the Making of the American West" is a wonderful example of digital history built on information technology and archival research.

Mr. Blevins's topic is not new: Many historians before him have explored the role of communications in the white settlement of the West. But by assembling a large amount of data about the Post Office Department into interactive maps and charts and then supplementing it with detailed information about individual postmasters and their customers, Mr. Blevins shows that the West wasn't won quite in the way we thought. "Without the US Post's expansive network, the pace of settler colonization would have been slower, its reach more limited, and its prosecution more difficult," he asserts.

Mr. Blevins owes much of his data to a stamp collector and postal historian named Richard Helbock, who, prior to his death in 2011, filled no fewer than eight volumes with details about long-shuttered U.S. post offices. Using geographic-information software, Mr. Blevins produced maps from Helbock's data, showing where post offices opened, closed or relocated across the West each year between 1848 and 1895.

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Since a new post office was typically the result of a petition to Congress or the Post Office Department, the pattern of openings shows where people were moving to. In the early 1870s, more new post offices opened in eastern Kansas than anywhere else in the country, but between there and San Francisco, in lands where Native American tribes still roamed and government control was weak, post offices were scarce into the 1880s.

The postal system played a crucial role in keeping settlers in the West connected to relatives back East as well as to merchants in nearby towns. This was, as Mr. Blevins shows, no simple task; if rumors of rich ore triggered a stampede to a remote mining camp, the Post Office Department was expected to serve the location right away.

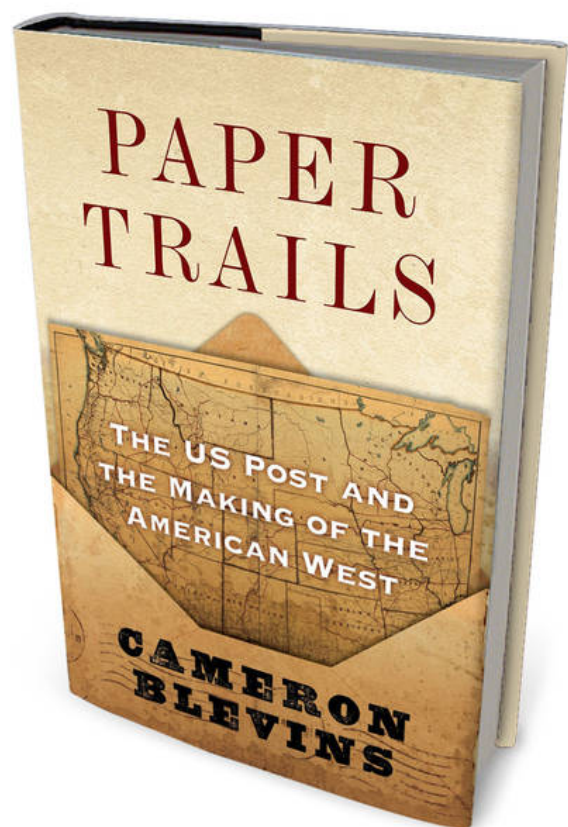


PHOTO: WSJ

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## PAPER TRAILS

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By Cameron Blevins  
*Oxford, 232 pages, \$34.95*

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Except in the largest cities and aboard trains, few of the people handling mail were Post Office Department employees. Most postmasters, often nominated by someone connected to whichever party controlled the presidency, were paid on commission according to the number of outbound letters they stamped. Only a handful of these people were black, but by the end of the century close to one in 10 were female. Native American postmasters were rare, especially after a ruling that members of tribes were not U.S. citizens and hence ineligible for the job.

The position, which might last only until the next election, was attractive mainly to shopkeepers who hoped that people dropping by to collect their mail would also buy a bar of soap or a pound of coffee. No supervisor was at hand to monitor compliance with rules and regulations, leaving each postmaster free to build business in his or her own way. Some succeeded; many failed. On

average, nearly 2,000 post offices were closed or relocated each year, usually because the postmaster found the earnings inadequate.

Similarly, the routes on which mail moved from town to town, usually by stagecoach, were contracted out. Postal contracting was rife with corruption throughout the 19th century. Bid rigging was frequent, and many contractors induced the Post Office Department to pay for more frequent service than the volume of letters and newspapers required. But when it wanted to serve a new place, the department did not need to acquire horses, wagons and way stations; it

could simply direct its contractor to add a stop to its regular route.

The Post Office Department's role in finance, meanwhile, solidified its crucial role in western expansion. Postal money orders, initiated during the Civil War to help Union soldiers send their wages back home, were vital in the West, where banks were scarce and isolated residents needed a way to transfer funds. "By 1880, the average westerner was sending twice as much money as his or her eastern peers," Mr. Blevins finds. Without the ability to send and receive money, many people in the West would have been hard-pressed to pay for amenities that made their isolated living conditions tolerable, such as newspaper subscriptions and purchases by mail from the catalogs of merchants in the nearest city.

With agents rather than regular employees handling most of its business, the Post Office Department had little resemblance to a traditional government bureaucracy. "The western postal system was dominated by local demands, local conditions, local politics, and local actors," Mr. Blevins writes. In this way, he adds, the Post Office Department spun a surprisingly robust "gossamer network" linking the West to the rest of the country. By 1889, the U.S. had roughly 59,000 post offices, two and a half times as many as any other country, and mail routes stretched for 400,000 miles.

While "Paper Trails" is filled with data maps showing how postal service expanded across the West, readers can find yet more at [gossamernetwork.com](http://gossamernetwork.com), a companion website. Together, the book and the website make a strong case that the conquest of the West was erratic, with much failure along the way. "Despite the popular 'Wild West' narrative of self-reliant cowboys and pioneers," the author provocatively concludes, "the real history of the region is one of big government."

*Mr. Levinson's most recent book is "Outside the Box: How Globalization Changed From Moving Stuff to Spreading Ideas."*

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