



How the Universal Postal Union shaped postal policy in the United States, 1874–1913

Richard R. John (Columbia University, United States of America)

Most historical writing on the establishment of parcel delivery in the US Post Office Department focuses on US national politics. In Wayne E. Fuller's *RFD: The Farmers' Mail* (1987), for example, parcel delivery – known in the United States as “parcel post” – is treated as a legacy of a farmer-led populist movement. The US populist movement – the world's first to bear this name – was unquestionably important. Yet this essay takes a different approach.

Parcel post, it contends, emerged as a response to a combination of external and internal pressures – with the external pressures, though little-known, playing a key role in the sequence of events. To understand why, it adopts a comparative institutional perspective. To understand postal policy in the United States, it helps to compare it with postal policy in the United Kingdom and France.

From the inception of the US Post Office Department in 1775, lawmakers had confined it to the circulation of lightweight items that contained what lawmakers called “intelligence” – letters, newspapers, and magazines; anything weighing more than four pounds was banned from the mail. This intelligence-only policy had been instituted to facilitate the circulation of time-specific information on commerce and public affairs, a realm in which the US Post Office Department excelled.

When the United States joined the Universal Postal Union, US postal administrators found themselves obliged to convey parcels that originated in non-US postal jurisdictions. This treaty commitment hastened the establishment of parcel post in the United States in 1913.

My essay is based on published primary sources and archival documents (including hundreds of petitions to Congress that have never before been examined in detail).

My working hypothesis is that, in contrast to the United Kingdom, where distance had little influence on postal policy, and France, where the country's central position in Europe made trans-jurisdiction parcel delivery a lucrative source of revenue, the United States had good reason to limit postal expansion. In fact, in the absence of outside pressure, it might well have continued to rely on non-governmental parcel delivery firms well beyond the First World War.