The Political, Socioeconomic, and Cultural Impact of the Implementation of Rural Free Delivery in Late 1890s US

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Rural Free Delivery in Late 1890s US

by

Judith M. Littlejohn

A thesis submitted to the Department of History of the College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of History

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Introduction

The Museum of the Historical Society of Elba, New York, houses a sleigh long-celebrated by the community as the vehicle used to deliver the mail on the first Rural Free Delivery route in New York State. A mode of transportation available only to those who could afford an extra vehicle in the late nineteenth century, this sleigh represents a conscious choice to provide equal access to information via the postal service. Typically associated with Currier and Ives’ festive winter scenes of travels through snow drifts for social visits, a closer investigation into the purpose of the Elba sleigh reveals that this sleigh initiated a broader transformation of rural culture through consistent, timely access to mass media regardless of geographic location, class, race, or gender.

Initiated at a time when 54% of Americans lived in rural areas, Rural Free Delivery promised efficiency in communication and threatened traditional practices. The nationwide institutionalization of RFD between 1896 and 1906 modernized rural America. The early twentieth century increase in mass communication was more than an urban phenomenon; this ruralization of information effectively diminished rural isolation by providing farm families with reliable access to daily newspapers, politically progressive newsletters, commercial catalogs, and homogeneous consumer goods. Beyond the farm, the establishment of official RFD routes affected small shopkeepers in villages dependent on farmers’ visits, triggered the Good Roads Movement, initiated changes in daily life and social patterns, fundamentally changed the structure of Post Office employment, influenced shifts in the parcel delivery industry, and created increased distribution of mass media through the post.

This paper is a three-part analysis initially discussing the sleigh used on the first RFD route in New York State. As material culture, the sleigh is a primary source representing the
choices made by a community and the repercussions of those decisions. The second part describes the history of postal delivery in the US, tracing the path to the implementation of Rural Free Delivery. The final section analyzes the political, socioeconomic, and cultural impact of the shift from farmers periodically stopping work to travel into town to retrieve their mail to a US postal worker delivering the mail regularly to the farms, examining changes wrought by Rural Free Delivery.

I. An Experiment in Elba

Post Office Inspector William S. Ryan, of Batavia, New York, spent October 6, 1896, interviewing farmers in Elba, New York, to gauge their willingness to serve as mail recipients during the United States Post Office Department’s rural mail delivery experiment. To ensure diversity of climate and terrain, fifteen states were selected by the Post Office Department to participate in the experiment. Fourth Assistant Postmaster General Maxwell, of Batavia, NY, secured Genesee County as New York State’s test region, leaving the specifics to Post Office Inspector Ryan. Ryan commented to the Batavia Daily News that he was pleased with the response he received in Elba, where “one and all expressed themselves as heartily in favor of the project,” as the Elba farmers agreed to provide receptacles by the roadside in which the carriers could place their mail.¹

Determining that three routes would be sufficient to cover the rural areas of the township, Inspector Ryan advertised for bids on the carrier positions. The Post Office mandated that these

¹ Batavia Daily News, October 7, 1896. According to the October 3, 1876, Batavia Daily News, the fifteen states selected were Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.
new carriers would be over sixteen years of age, literate, healthy, possessing strong moral character, and able to provide their own vehicle to use on the routes and put up a $500 bond. The lowest bidders meeting all qualifications were chosen. The three selected, out of twenty-three total bidders, were Truman Barr, Russell Crosby, and J. Newton Phelps, all residents of Elba.2

Russell Crosby, a sergeant in the Eighth New York Heavy Artillery during the Civil War, was sixty years old when he started delivering rural mail on October 15, 1896. Crosby was assigned to Route #2, the northern territory of Elba. Agreeing to the terms of employment, Crosby used his own horses to pull him on his route, attaching them to a carriage or sleigh, depending on weather and road conditions. Initially, the carriers did the best they could with the equipment they already owned. Crosby recalled, in a 1911 interview, “My first wagon was just an ordinary buggy. I had a box in the front of it, divided up into pigeon holes for the mail.”3

In 1901, Crosby ordered the manufacture of a custom-built vehicle, a “carriage postoffice,” to use on his route. The carriage, built by an Elba blacksmith, had the letters “U.S.M.” and “R.F.D.” painted on its exterior sides. This purpose-built conveyance “contain[ed] a full-fledged postoffice, with all the necessary receptacles for mail matter and articles pertaining to the delivery system. John Weber constructed the carriage and W. H. Hunn did the painting and artistic work.”4

John Weber, the blacksmith who constructed Crosby’s postal carriage, operated Weber Brothers blacksmith shop in the village of Elba from 1880 to 1924. Business flourished, and records indicate that by December 1903, John, his brother Leonard, and another employee were

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3 Batavia Daily News, October 14, 1911.
4 Batavia Daily News, May 9, 1901.
averaging 135 horse shoes sharpened or put on daily. An innovator, John Weber received a patent in 1910 for developing a horse shoe which did not slip on ice. In addition to iron work, Weber made carriages and sleighs for commercial and personal use in addition to occasional community donations.⁵

On November 5, 1910, Elba Town Highway Superintendent Driggs officially opened a new bridge in northeastern Elba, near the farm of John Howland. According to the Batavia Daily News, dozens of residents attended a ceremony in which Howland broke a bottle of water on the bridge railing, naming the bridge “Crosby” in honor of the mail carrier’s fifteen years of service.⁶ A few weeks later Elba was struck by winter weather which rendered the roadways impassable without proper gear, forcing Crosby to deliver the mail via sleigh. In mid-January 1912, the Daily News reported that “After 42 days of continuous sleighing wheeled vehicles are being used in Elba.”⁷ Age, weather, and failing health led to Russell Crosby’s retirement on October 1, 1912, prior to the onset of another winter. Crosby’s route was taken over by Elba resident Nelson Dorf who, after passing a civil service exam demonstrating his competency, delivered rural mail in Elba from November, 1912, until his death in September, 1942.⁸

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⁷ Batavia Daily News, January 12, 1912.
⁸ Batavia Daily News, November 30, 1912.
After John Weber sold his Maple Avenue blacksmithing business in 1924, the Town of Elba acquired his building for storage.\(^9\) Maple Avenue has since been extended to provide access to Maple Lawn Cemetery to the southwest of Weber’s building site. The north side of Maple Ave Extension is the site of the campus of the Museum of the Historical Society of Elba, consisting of three buildings: a general museum building (built in 1994), the 1842 Griffin-Hill House, and an agricultural barn (2007). Inside the agricultural barn, among the onion sorters and muck ditch shovels that built Elba’s onion industry, two of John Weber’s sleighs sit side-by-side: one, a cutter, formerly used to transport up to two people to church or to visit neighbors; the second, a New England-style sleigh, was built for utilitarian purposes. This New England-style sled passed from Russell Crosby to Nelson Dorf for use on RFD Route #2 in Elba, NY, and is a tangible reminder of the town’s conscious choice to participate in the rural free mail experiment.

A hand painted sign rests on the seat of the sleigh, stating, “1896: Elba was selected to begin the FIRST Rural Free Delivery Service in NEW YORK STATE. SLEIGH used on 1 of 3 routes in Elba.”\(^{10}\)

The sleigh measures 82” (6 feet, ten inches) from front to back, and 38” (3 feet, two inches) wide. The highest point at the back is 48” (4 feet) from the ground. The runners are 18” tall, while the wooden body is just over 30” tall. Faded gray paint covers the main wooden body. The separate piece in front is red; this is a “fender,” designed to keep the snow and slush kicked up from the horse’s hooves from splashing the occupant. The runners are red wood over metal. Wires wrap the joints where vertical metal rods (knee braces) attached to the cross bars at the bottom of the wooden body are welded to the vertical runner supports (knees). The structure

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weighs about 85 pounds. The weathered wood is dry and brittle; rust speckles the metal. In its prime the fittings would have included an upholstered backrest and seat cushion.¹¹

Whether travelling by carriage or sleigh, most Elbans welcomed the rural carriers. The *Batavia Daily News* reported that on the morning of their inaugural delivery runs, “Mr. Phelps, Mr. Crosby, and Mr. Barr, the carriers, appeared ready for duty and started off amid the blowing of horns and the waving of flags, all business being suspended until the caravan was lost to

¹¹ Susan Green, *Horse Drawn Sleighs.* (Lakeville, Minnesota: The Astragal Press, 2003), 10, 12, 209, 259.
A few weeks later, the newspaper reported, “Several people living in the town of Elba, but who have been getting their mail at the Batavia post office, have had their addresses changed to Daws or East Elba, so as to get the benefit of the free country delivery.”

Reports the following month stated, “There has been a marked increase of mail matter since the free delivery system was established.”

The three carriers handled 5,631 pieces of mail in the month of November, 1896. The combined total for December 1896 and January 1897 equaled 14,636, an increase of at least 30%. Typically the carriers delivered ten pieces of mail for every single piece they collected. By autumn of 1898, the farmers were receiving 2.62 newspapers for every individual first class letter the rural carriers brought to their homes.

Not everyone in Elba cheered the advent of rural free delivery. Some farmers, suspicious of “free” delivery, were concerned that the government would add a surcharge to their mail or create a new tax to subsidize the program. Even before the final selection of the test town, the Batavia Daily News cautioned, “If the scheme proves a success a great change will be seen in the mail facilities of Genesee county (sic) and may result in the doing away of some of the minor post offices in this section.” The Daily News generally supported the experiment, however, favorably characterizing the citizens who spoke in support of it. Reporting on the crowd gathered in Elba Village to see the carriers off on their first day, the Daily News stated, “The farmers won’t come to town at all now,’ said one longheaded man.” This comment was followed in the article by: “It’s all right,” said an up-to-date citizen. ‘I am glad to have Elba touch elbows with

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13 *Batavia Daily News*, November 6, 1896.
15 *Batavia Daily News*, December 2, 1896 for November 1896 figures, April 5, 1897 for December 1896 and January 1897 figures, and October 31, 1898 for August 1898 figures.
16 *Batavia Daily News*, October 7, 1896 and December 1, 1928.
the cities. All we need now is an electric road. We have water works, a graded school, street lamps, and a candidate for School Commissioner. Surely, we are the banner town of the county.”

The rural delivery experiment started at a time when Elba had four post offices – the village post office on Main Street, plus fourth class post offices south of the village in Daws Corners, in the northeast at East Elba, and to the southeast at Newkirk. When Post Office Inspector Ryan selected Elba as the test community, he decided that the three rural carriers would pick up and sort the mail for their routes in the central village post office. Residents outside the village could opt for home delivery or choose to pick their mail up at the post office themselves. Truman Barr, one of the original carriers, explained that prior to the inaugural delivery run on October 15, 1896, he “canvassed all the members of his route to find out who wished the delivery, which was a requisite under the law before the mail could be removed from the post office.”

Uncertainty in the United States Post Office Department delayed changes to the town’s fourth class post offices. The initial plan called for the rural experiment to last until July 1, 1897. Inspector Ryan told the Batavia Daily News in February, 1897, that a bill asking for $50,000 to continue RFD past July was under consideration. In March of that year, the paper reported a steady increase in the amount of mail the farmers received, stating that Mr. Ryan “thinks this is

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18 Batavia Daily News, October 16, 1896. Between 1895 and 1905 several Elbans campaigned for an electric trolley route through town which would connect Batavia with Point Breeze (Lake Ontario) and encourage summer tourism in the area. The trolley route, initially slated to connect to feeder spurs from the Genesee-Orleans Railroad Company, was never completed. Elba residents hoped the project would bring electricity to the village and town. Due to the project’s failure, the village did not receive electricity until 1907; rural areas of the township were granted electricity in 1936. [Scott Benz, “Electric Trolley Almost Comes to Elba.” Town of Elba 175th Anniversary Commemorative Book, 1995, 125-126.]

because farmers, now having mail received and delivered at their door, do more corresponding and taking more periodicals than when they had to go to the post office.”

The Elba farmers, like farmers across the US, expressed their approval of the free delivery service. The *Annual Report of the Postmaster General for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1897* reflects the initial impact of rural delivery in Elba, stating, “Owing to the free delivery a large number have subscribed for daily papers. Others, who reside in adjacent towns, but whose homes are situated on the highways which form the boundaries of the town of Elba, are now having their mail directed to the offices within the limits of the free delivery in order that they may share its benefits.” The *Report* further states, “In an additional report of the results of rural free delivery in Genesee County it is stated that one carrier delivers nearly 150 daily newspapers where previously scarcely any daily newspapers were received.”

In May, 1898, with the future of rural free delivery in jeopardy due to delays in the passage of appropriations funding, the Elba farmers expressed their desire to ensure its continuation. The *Batavia Daily News* reported, on May 13, “The inhabitants of the rural districts of Elba are feeling very much distressed over the prospects of being deprived of the privileges of free mail delivery.” By May 18, the headlines shouted, “Must Have it Some Way: How Elba Farmers Feel about Free Mail Delivery. If the government abandons the service after July 1st those benefitted are talking of continuing the routes and paying the expense themselves.” The article described a plan in which each family who wished to participate would pay a monthly fee to hire an independent carrier to continue the service. The Elba Grange stepped in, urging

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20 *Batavia Daily News*, February 19, 1897 and March 30, 1897.
22 *Batavia Daily News*, May 13, 1898.
23 *Batavia Daily News*, May 18, 1898.
Granges in the other experimental RFD districts across the nation to implore their congressmen to pass the appropriations necessary to continue, and hopefully expand, the free delivery.  

After the appropriations were received, Rural Free Delivery not only continued in the Elba test areas, but expanded. While Post Office Inspector Ryan determined where to establish the next set of routes in Genesee County, Elba’s fourth class post offices gradually met their demise. Fourth class post offices were typically housed in general stores run by shop owners active in local politics. Instead of earning a salary from the Post Office Department, these postmasters profited from the sale of general merchandise to local rural customers who traveled to their shops to retrieve their mail, as well as a small commission on postal charges. The East Elba post office closed first, as was reported on November 16, 1898, “East Elba – O. J. Mills, who has been postmaster at this place for over six years, has forwarded his resignation to the Postoffice Department, as the office does not pay since the rural-mail delivery system was inaugurated in this town.”

Second to close was the Newkirk post office in the southeast part of the township. The Newkirk post office was short-lived; established in 1893 in John O. Newkirk’s General Store, at a five-cornered intersection, the hamlet consisted of the store, an inn, a woolen mill, a brewery, and a half-mile racetrack. Postmistress Mary Snyder discontinued the Newkirk postal service in September 1901.

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24 Batavia Daily News, June 20, 1898.
25 Fourth class post offices are described by the Smithsonian National Postal Museum as follows: “Fourth-class post offices and postmasters comprised the lowest tier of a classification system based on annual receipts and mail volume. These postmasters did not receive salaries like their first, second and third class counterparts. Instead, they earned a commission calculated on the annual sums for box rentals and cancelled stamps as well as amounts received from waste paper, old newspapers, printed matter, and twine sold.” [postalmuseum.si.edu/museum/1d_AccountBook.html]
26 Batavia Daily News, November 16, 1898.
The fourth class post office at Daws Corners survived longer. In 1911 the Post Office Department slated the Daws post office for closure and informed the Elba Postmaster that the carrier on route #2, Russell Crosby, must cover the roads in that area. Bogue Nursery, a thriving business in Daws Corners, utilized the Daws post office for seed sales and catalog distribution, thus rendering that post office profitable longer than the other fourth class establishments.\footnote{Batavia Daily News, January 9, 1908 and October 26, 1911.}

The \textit{Batavia Daily News} maintained a tradition of marking the anniversary of Elba’s RFD experiment starting with a headline in 1905, “Free Mail Delivery in Elba Nine Years,” and in 1908, “Elba Rural Route Has an Anniversary: Russell Crosby, Original Carrier, Still in Service.”\footnote{Batavia Daily News, October 16, 1905 and October 15, 1908.} The 1908 article commented on the twelfth anniversary of the service, stating, “The post office on wheels is a fixture and the carrier is a welcome visitor.”\footnote{Batavia Daily News, October 15, 1908.} A 1910 article, “R.F.D. System Began Fourteen Years Ago,” stated: “It proved such a success at the outset that its gradual installation throughout the country was soon begun.”\footnote{Batavia Daily News, October 17, 1910.} Similar celebratory articles appeared in 1911, 1914, at the twenty-year-mark in 1916, in 1920, for the thirtieth anniversary in 1926, and again in 1927. The \textit{Daily News} published an article after the death of carrier Truman Barr, in 1928, recounting his first delivery run. Final mention of the Elba experiment appeared in a 1937 article recounting Russell Crosby’s life, stating, “The success of the Elba experiment resulted in establishment of the rural mail system throughout the state.”\footnote{Batavia Daily News, July 24, 1937. In 2013 two rural routes remained in Elba; routes were consolidated in the mid-20th century as roads and automobiles improved.}
II. The United States Post Office Department

Article 1, Section 8, Clause 7 of the Constitution of the United States, known as the “Postal Clause,” states, “The Congress shall have power . . . To establish Post Offices and post Roads”. The fledgling United States government followed a long tradition of governmental control of communication first documented by Herodotus, who described the Persian messenger system of post stations approximately twenty miles, or one day’s ride, apart. This messenger service, established to maintain political control of the empire, expedited the delivery of tablets between Persepolis and Susa, Egypt, and Babylonia circa 500 BCE.

The ancient Roman system, the cursus publicus, consisted of fixed stations, “posts”, placed on all roads throughout the Roman Empire. Both the Roman and Persian relay systems were government owned and used solely for government communications, not personal messages. The fall of the Roman Empire marked the demise of structured communications systems until the thirteenth century when disparate groups, especially monks and merchants, formed their own postal services. Private messengers carried correspondence in metal bags, “mail”, maintaining channels of communication between monasteries in France, Spain, and Poland, or delivering messages between university students and their families.
The English relied on a combination of private delivery services for personal correspondence and government-sanctioned postal systems during crises until Henry VIII appointed Sir Brian Tuke Governor of the King’s Posts in 1517, gradually creating a regulated, government postal monopoly. In the following centuries, improvements in private delivery methods, such as fixed rates and postmarks, spurred similar improvements in the Royal Mail to the benefit of the consumer. By the eighteenth century, the British postal service maintained consistent operations throughout the British Empire, charging postage according to the number of sheets of paper sent and the distance travelled, complete with postmarks, with continued efforts to decrease the length of time required for mail to travel across the empire and to increase the amount of revenue realized from the service.  

While mail to British North America followed the established Royal Mail rules in transit, once it reached the shore the colonists were left to their own devices, delivering the mail as conditions permitted. In the 1640s John Winthrop the Younger helped establish a post road between Boston and New York, access to which was inhibited by Indian raids and Dutch ownership of New York. William and Mary granted a royal patent to Thomas Neale, who created the Internal Colonial Postal Union in 1693. Neale, who never visited North America, appointed Andrew Hamilton deputy postmaster, charging Hamilton with setting up postal delivery points in taverns and inns to accommodate service between Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Williamsburg, Virginia. The British Post Office Act of 1710, commonly known as Queen Anne’s Act, established postal laws in North America, set delivery rates, and created the deputy postmaster general position. Benjamin Franklin, named postmaster of Philadelphia in 1737, was messenger dynasty which lasted over 400 years, utilizing relay stations in Central Europe and the lowlands. Through a contract with Charles V, the von Taxis delivered both private messages and government mail throughout Europe.  

appointed postmaster general for the American Colonies in 1753. Franklin organized weekly service between Philadelphia and Boston, utilizing the relay system to reduce delivery time. Dismissed from his postal duties in 1774 by the Crown due to his revolutionary activities, Franklin was appointed postmaster general of the United Colonies by the Continental Congress in 1775.  

Benjamin Franklin initially wanted to be postmaster of Philadelphia in the 1730s because, as a printer and editor, he strove to ensure delivery of his newspapers to his subscribers. Since Andrew Bradford, postmaster of Philadelphia prior to Franklin, did not allow his competitors’ papers to be posted in his office, Franklin had to privately bribe postal riders to carry his publications. Postmaster Bradford profited from first access to the news and leveraged that advantage to sell advertising space in his papers, thus cheating Franklin twice, kindling Franklin’s desire for involvement in the post office. Franklin stated that while the postmaster’s salary was small, “it facilitated the correspondence that improv’d my newspaper, increas’d the number demanded, as well as the advertisements to be inserted, so that it came to afford me a considerable income.”

The Post Office Act of 1792 modified the service, transforming it from a holdover from the British system to a truly “Americanized,” democratic service. The thirty part Act, signed by George Washington on February 20, 1792, paved the way for the postal service to grow with the

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http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Fra2Aut.html Regarding Andrew Bradford, Franklin wrote: “However, as he kept the post-office, it was imagined he had better opportunities of obtaining news; his paper was thought a better distributer of advertisements than mine, and therefore had many, more, which was a profitable thing to him, and a disadvantage to me; for, tho' I did indeed receive and send papers by the post, yet the publick opinion was otherwise, for what I did send was by bribing the riders, who took them privately. Bradford being unkind enough to forbid it, which occasion'd some resentment on my part; and I thought so meanly of him for it, that, when I afterward came into his situation, I took care never to imitate it.” (Page 67.)
nation by granting Congress the power to create postal routes, ensured privacy by forbidding the opening of mail, and set low postal rates for newspapers, thus promoting the flow of information across the land. The Congressional ability to expand postal routes had two benefits: first, citizens were able to exercise their right to petition Congress for routes and services, and second, the official postal rider acted as a visible reminder to people in far-flung communities that they belonged to one united country and that they were active participants in the reception and dissemination of news.\(^\text{39}\)

As the nation expanded, so did the postal service, from 2,610 post offices on less than 40,000 miles of post roads in 1812 to 4,500 post offices on over 72,000 miles of post roads in 1820.\(^\text{40}\) Financial troubles plagued the growth of the postal system as Congress added post roads without appropriating funding, leaving the Post Office Department to pay most expenses from its own revenues. Congressional investigations into the postal service’s finances led to the Postal Act of 1836, mandating the turning over of postal revenues to the Treasury and requiring the postmaster general to submit a projected annual budget to Congress. The required funds were then appropriated by Congress from the general fund to meet the Post Office Department’s expenditures.\(^\text{41}\)

The expanding postal service took advantage of improvements in transportation technology, decreasing the time and cost of travel. Unfortunately, postal rates were not adjusted

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\(^{40}\) The rapid growth in the number of post offices in the early nineteenth century (500 new post offices in 1820 alone) stemmed from a combination of factors: the Louisiana Purchase and subsequent settlement in New Orleans, Ohio’s statehood, increased westward migration after the War of 1812 ended, and demands by Congress to provide postal service for their constituents. Postmaster General Meigs and his twenty-one postal clerks attempted to rein in costs by limiting the types of mail service offered in the most desolate areas by providing weekly or biweekly service on routes with few inhabitants. Fuller, *The American Mail*, 48 – 51.

\(^{41}\) Fuller, *The American Mail*, 49-59.
accordingly, and the persistence of the 1793 rates into the middle of the 19th century drove customers to find alternative means of communication. Historian Wayne Fuller states, “In 1843, for example, it cost eighteen and one-half cents to send a letter from New York City to Troy, New York, but twelve and one-half cents to send a barrel of flour the same distance.” While the law stated that citizens were required to utilize the United States postal system for correspondence, people outraged at the expensive rates found other modes of delivery, such as sending letters via traveling friends or writing notes in newspapers, which enjoyed a special reduced postage rate. Continuous petitions to the Post Office and Congress for lower postal rates paid off between 1845 and 1851 as postal rates gradually decreased, stabilizing at a rate of 3 cents per half-ounce travelling three thousand miles, prepaid.

The changes enacted in the late 1840s stemmed from a gradual shift in perception from the Post Office as a potential revenue-generating industry into a service akin to the military. Other changes in the 1850s included mandating prepaid postage to reduce the number of unclaimed letters, and the use of stamps. Still the Post Office continued to grow, via the creation of additional post roads plus citizens’ petitions for increased service in metropolitan areas. Southern secession in 1861 alleviated some of the demands for more post roads, allowing then-Postmaster General Aaron Brown to focus on improving service in the North and West.

The increasing population in urban areas burdened post offices. In 1825, Congress authorized local postmasters to engage carriers to deliver the mail to peoples’ homes. These carriers were not paid by the Post Office Department, but instead they were paid a delivery fee by the mail recipient. Citizens could opt for this delivery service or choose to stand in line for the

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42 Fuller, *The American Mail*, 61.
mail according to past practice. This unregulated delivery system was fraught with flaws: carriers’ fees often varied; carriers were charged with the task of delivering each piece of mail to the named recipient personally instead of dropping the mail in a mailbox; and private delivery services (“penny posts”) tried to undercut fees and divert business from the postal service. In 1863, Congress agreed to then-postmaster general Montgomery Blair’s plan to increase urban business by hiring postal carriers who would be paid a salary by the Post Office Department to deliver the mail free of charge to residents in cities of more than 50,000 inhabitants. By 1887, the minimum population requirement was reduced to 10,000 in the wake of petitioners clamoring for the service. By the year 1900, free delivery was offered in 796 US towns and cities.\footnote{Fuller, \textit{RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America}, 11-13. “List of Postmasters General,” and “Delivery: Monday through Saturday since 1863.” United States Postal Service Historian, June 2009, from United States Postal Service website, about.usps.com.}

While urban inhabitants in the late 1800s benefited from increased postal services, rural citizens continued the timeless tradition of stopping work once a week or so to travel into the nearest village to discover if any mail had been left for them. In 1892, Mortimer Whitehead, a National Grange officer, undertook a twenty-two state trip to various Granges and farmers’ groups in an effort to ascertain the most pressing issues farmers confronted. During a National Grange session in November of that year, Whitehead reported that the common issues discussed in Grange halls were, “rural free mail delivery, postal telegraph and telephone, and Government ownership and control of the same, in the interest of a quicker dissemination of news, market reports, weather forecasts, &c, and to the advancement of agriculture.”\footnote{\textit{The New York Times}, November 18, 1892.}

Whitehead’s findings reflect the continuing mission of the National Grange of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry, which is to provide “opportunities for individuals and families to develop to their highest potential in order to build stronger communities and states, as well as a
stronger nation,” through fellowship, service, and legislation.\textsuperscript{47} Minnesota farmer Oliver Kelley, founder of the Grange, first came up with the idea for the organization while visiting South Carolina in 1866. Kelley, acting as an agent of the Department of Agriculture, had travelled south to gather statistical information pertaining to agricultural and mineral resources that the Department had no access to during the Civil War years. In February, 1866, Kelley noted, “Politicians would never restore peace in the country; if it came at all, it must be through fraternity. The \textit{people} North and South must know each other as members of the same great family, and all sectionalism be abolished.”\textsuperscript{48}

Appointed to the Post Office Department in January, 1867, Kelley devoted his free time to creating a “Secret Society of Agriculturalists” to serve as “an element to restore kindly feelings among the people.”\textsuperscript{49} Kelley corresponded regularly with his niece, Caroline Hall, who urged him to include women in his new organization, and with W. M. Ireland, Chief Clerk of the Finance Office of the Post Office Department. Kelley and Ireland drew up plans for the organization which hinged on utilizing newspaper editors and the postal system to spread the word to potential members. In a letter to botanist William Saunders, whom Kelley recruited to aid in the creation of the Grange, Kelley stated, “There is nothing now that binds the farmers together, and I think such an Order would, with the most cheerful results. Its tendency would be to encourage the circulation of our agricultural newspapers, which insure the co-operation of the editors.”\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry. \textit{Mission and Vision}. http://www.nationalgrange.org/about-us/vision/
\textsuperscript{49} Kelley, \textit{Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry}, 15.
\textsuperscript{50} Kelley, \textit{Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry}, 20.
In another letter to Anson Bartlett of the Ohio Dairymen’s Association, Kelley wrote, “Encourage [farmers] to read and think; to plant flowers, - beautify their homes; elevate them; make them progressive.” Kelly further emphasized the importance of modernizing agrarian life, “Every thing is progressing. Why not the farmers? The inventive genius of the country is continually at work improving tools, and farmers remain passive.” Later, in September, 1867, Bartlett received another letter from Kelley, this one expounding on the inclusive nature of the Grange, explaining the need to keep membership costs low enough for all farmers to join.\textsuperscript{51}

The tenets of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry include meeting in groups for lectures and discussion, forming cooperative markets for agricultural supplies, and generally working toward the common good. Progressive Kelley ensured, in the development of the organization, that all Grange members received at least one regular agricultural newspaper so the farmers would know how crops were faring and what the market would bear. Kelley, viewing the Grange as a tool for reform, advocated equal pay for equal labor and also provided for the admission of teenaged boys and girls into the order to impress upon them the benefits and importance of rural life and attempt to discourage migration to the cities.\textsuperscript{52}

The exact significance of the role of the Grange in the introduction of Rural Free Delivery cannot be quantitatively measured, but it appears to have been considerable. The relationship between Kelley and Ireland, both with ties to the post office, indicate that Grangers recognized the importance and potential of the mail as a tool of reform from the late 1860s on. The Grange and Farmers’ Alliances were not the only parties interested in expanding postal services in rural areas; others who could benefit from increased consistent communication or

from restructuring the political organization of the Post Office Department also favored Rural Free Delivery.

John Stahl, rural Illinois newspaperman, publicly agitated for free delivery in rural areas in 1879, dubbing himself the “father of rural mail delivery.” Stahl criticized the fourth class postmasters for their resistance to rural delivery, which threatened their livelihoods. Stahl also criticized the star route contractors, who carried mail from railroad depots to the fourth class post offices and charged high rates for their service.

Stahl identified with the sense of isolation farmers felt, stating, “Not one farmer in three hundred got a daily paper. In Illinois the farmer was fortunate if he got his mail once a week. Many farmers of the United States were served by a post office to which the mail was brought only once in two weeks.” Stahl wrote several articles and speeches extolling the potential benefits of regular postal delivery to the farmers.

President Benjamin Harrison appointed reform-minded department store owner John Wanamaker to the position of Postmaster General, an office he held from 1889 to 1893. Wanamaker, an innovator in retail as well as in the post office, implemented the use of pneumatic tubes to send mail swiftly across urban areas, designed Streetcar Post Offices for urban patrons, and issued the first commemorative stamps. Wanamaker also actively tried to secure appropriations to begin free delivery of mail to rural patrons by inciting agrarian groups like the Grange and the Farmers’ Alliance to petition Congress in support of that cause. Wanamaker initiated free delivery experiments in rural villages in 1891, a service that was

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appreciated by the recipients but criticized by merchants, delivery service operators, and small-scale postmasters. According to John Stahl, however, Wanamaker had no interest in extending free delivery out to the countryside: “The experiments of Postmaster-General Wanamaker, which he confined to towns and villages, accomplished nothing except to give a hostile or timid Congressman a reason for not authorizing any effective action.”\(^{56}\)

After years of unsuccessfully attempting to sway Congress to approve funding for expanded rural delivery, Stahl watched from the gallery while his ally, Georgia Congressman Tom Watson, amended a paragraph in the Post Office appropriation bill during the second session of the Fifty-second Congress, February, 1893. Watson’s amendment diverted $10,000 from the general appropriation specifically for use by the Postmaster-General for “experimental free-delivery in rural communities other than towns and villages.” This amounted to a Congressional seal of approval on Wanamaker’s rural experiments of 1891-1892, and mandated their continuation.\(^{57}\)

Those opposed to Watson’s amendment exclaimed that Wanamaker had previously set aside funds for rural delivery, thus rendering Watson’s plan redundant. Watson’s proposed rural experiments differed from Wanamaker’s earlier appropriations, however, in that while Wanamaker focused on “rural communities,” Populist Watson emphasized that the money would be used to establish delivery service in “absolutely rural communities, that is to say, in the


country pure and simple, amongst the farmers, in those neighborhoods where they do not get their mail more than once in every two weeks.”\textsuperscript{58}

President Grover Cleveland appointed Wilson Bissell, a native of Buffalo, New York, as Postmaster General in March 1893. The installation of Bissell just weeks after the approval of Watson’s amendment further delayed the implementation of structured rural mail delivery, as Bissell did not agree with his predecessor’s views. Bissell told his subordinates that the prohibitive potential cost of rural delivery outweighed any advantages and it would not take place during his tenure in office. During the second session of the 53\textsuperscript{rd} Congress, Charles Mason, Congressman from Georgia, criticized Postmaster-General Bissell, declaring, “You appropriate eleven million dollars for free delivery in the cities and towns. It is expended. But they cannot find time to expend $10,000 to test the feasibility of rural delivery.”\textsuperscript{59} Mason voiced the exasperation of farmers everywhere who felt that government increasingly favored big business in urban areas and discriminated against independent farmers. Since rural residents paid the exact same postage rates as urban residents the fact that urban dwellers had their mail brought to their doorstep free of charge while rural folk had to give up production time to travel and retrieve their mail was unfair. Congress urged Bissell to follow through with rural delivery until Bissell, adamant in his opposition to RFD due to financial concerns, resigned in 1895.\textsuperscript{60}

Upon Bissell’s resignation, Cleveland appointed William L. Wilson of West Virginia to Postmaster-General. Wilson, an ex-Congressman, reluctantly agreed to initiate rural delivery. On October 1, 1896, the first carriers quietly set out from Charles Town, Uvilla, and Halltown, West Virginia, to deliver mail and newspapers to the area farmers. Two weeks later the second group

\textsuperscript{58} Woodward, \textit{Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel}, 246.
\textsuperscript{59} Fuller, \textit{RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America}, 31.
of routes started with much fanfare, as farmers outside of tiny villages like Elba, New York, finally found the opportunity to subscribe to daily newspapers that would, in fact, be delivered daily.\textsuperscript{61}

The 1896 “Rural Free Delivery Experiment” continued on a year-by-year basis hinging on whether appropriations would be granted. Routes were added as funding became available, increasing from 59 trial routes in 1896 to 1,638 routes in 1900 as rural residents wrote to their Congressmen expressing their desire for the establishment of the service in their area. After the Cleveland administration ended, McKinley’s newly appointed First Assistant Postmaster General Perry Heath worked with Superintendent of Free Delivery August Machen to improve and stabilize Rural Free Delivery.\textsuperscript{62}

A turning point in RFD occurred in 1899, in Carroll County, Maryland. Edwin W. Shriver, a local postal clerk, devised a fleet of four postal wagons that traveled to outlying areas which did not have Rural Free Delivery Routes. The postal wagons served as traveling post offices, allowing rural residents the opportunity to purchase money orders, register letters, buy stamps, and transact typical postal business at regularly scheduled times in their area. Shriver put these postal wagons into service in April, 1899. By December, he decided the postal wagons could be used to coordinate Rural Free Delivery throughout all of Carroll County, eliminating

\textsuperscript{61} Fuller, \textit{RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America}, 34 – 35.
\textsuperscript{62} Fuller, \textit{RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America}, 40-41; Machen was appointed to the Post Office Department as a Democrat by Cleveland, then, switching to the Republican Party, retained his position under McKinley. Samuel Kernell and Michael P. McDonald, “Congress and America's Political Development: The Transformation of the Post Office from Patronage to Service.” \textit{American Journal of Political Science}, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Jul., 1999), pp. 797. Number of routes: 1896 = 59; 1897-1898= 496; 1899-1900 = 1,638.
the need for fourth class post offices and providing every resident with daily postal service to their homes.63

On the first day of the countywide free delivery experiment, Machen and Heath rode along on one of the postal wagons to observe firsthand how the system worked in practice and to gauge its reception by area residents. To implement the countywide system, sixty-three out of ninety-four fourth class post offices in the county were closed, and thirty-three star routes were eliminated, replaced by 26 carriers and four postal wagons based in the village of Westminster. County resident Louis Shriver noted, on December 20, 1899, “There is a good deal of objection to the new system at Manchester and that is why these extra men went along on that route with the first trip of the wagon.”64

Throughout January and February, 1900, Machen and Heath stayed in Carroll County, reorganizing routes and adding new ones in an effort to ensure no homes were excluded from Rural Free Delivery. As word of the countywide experiment spread, communities began to petition Congress for the same service. It was this countywide system that piqued the interest of previously ambivalent rural residents; the coordinated effort to competently cover entire counties with rural routes drew more attention than the random selection of individual townships previously. A year after implementing the service, Machen declared the Carroll County trial a success, stating, “the results achieved are far beyond the expectations of the most enthusiastic advocates of rural free delivery,” noting that county postal revenues had increased by 23% while the net cost of the service was $236. Machen stated that RFD had “successfully supplanted the

old system, embracing fourth-class post offices and star routes,” indicating a significant institutional change in the national postal system.  

Rural Free Delivery continued to gain favor with farmers while fourth class postmasters and village shopkeepers opposed it. Senator Eugene Hale from Maine and Congressman Eugene Loud from California also opposed it on the grounds that, in Hale’s words, it would mean taking “everyman’s mail to everyman’s door,” thus permanently casting the Post Office Department in the role of a service industry akin to the Army and Navy instead of a potential source of revenue, binding Congress to fund future appropriations. The advocates in favor of RFD prevailed, however, and Congress voted in 1902 to make the service permanent. The popularity of the service increased; 42,199 routes were established by 1912 and over 54,000 routes by 1995. Nationwide, this implementation of rural free delivery ushered in an era of equal access to information and services that helped shape modern America.  

III. Effects of Rural Free Delivery

Those who opposed the institutionalization of Rural Free Delivery did so primarily for economic reasons. Within the structure of the Post Office Department, RFD meant the elimination of fourth class postmaster jobs as well as the consolidation of star route carrier jobs. In rural towns and villages, establishing free delivery posed a potential threat to general store owners and local craftsmen, since rural residents would no longer be compelled to trek into town on a weekly basis for goods that they could purchase via mail-order. The fourth class postmasters received a few hundred dollars a year from the federal government; combined with commissions from the sale of stamps and other services, the individual postmaster's annual remuneration averaged $1000. Importantly, the post office attracted customers to their side businesses – typically general stores or dry goods shops in small hamlets – which subsidized their annual incomes.67

In February 1893, nearly 68,000 fourth class postmasters relied on the income derived from offering postal services in tiny hamlets and villages. These postmasters obtained their appointments from local Congressman in exchange for votes and other discreet services, such as ensuring their political propaganda reached all postal customers. Major staff shifts occurred in the Post Office Department with each party change of presidential administration. When Democrat Grover Cleveland took office in 1885, more than 40,000 Republican postmasters lost their jobs. With Harrison’s election four years later, 50,000 Democratic postmasters were forced out of their jobs, replaced by Republicans. Civil service reform with the Pendleton Act in 1883 led to postal carriers taking civil service examinations, meaning they would be appointed to their positions based on merit instead of political allegiance. However, the Pendleton Act did not

67 Kernell and MacDonald, “Congress and America’s Political Development,” 796.
apply to fourth class postmasters, who were not reclassified as civil service employees until 1912. Thus, as the implementation of rural free delivery instigated the closure of fourth class post offices, thousands of patronage appointments were lost to civil service employees who could hold onto their positions regardless of changes in party dominance. Between 1900 and 1913, over twenty thousand patronage-appointed fourth class postmasters lost their positions, replaced by civil service rural carriers.68

Star route contractors also opposed the notion of rural free delivery, because they profited from arranging delivery from railroad stations and docks to the small post offices, paying deliverymen less than the contracted price and pocketing the difference. John Stahl relates the tale of a situation in Indiana in which a star route contractor was paid $90 a year while the person who arranged the contract was given $400 per year, keeping a $310 profit. Stahl states, “Of course the contractors did not get all of it – they had to divide with officials in the Post Office Department, with Congressmen, and others. All who participated in this graft fought the farmer delivery proposition to the last ditch.”69 However, as the inevitability of RFD’s permanence became apparent, the fourth class postmasters and star route contractors based in village or town centers changed their attitude toward the postal agents in charge of planning new routes, hoping they would be selected as the local distribution point.70

Urban criticism of RFD came from those who expected the Post Office Department to run like a profitable business and feared that rural delivery was implemented to benefit politicians pandering to rural voters to the detriment of the Department’s balance sheet. Critics

70 Fuller, *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America*, 93.
also pointed out the adverse effects the closure of fourth class post offices had on hamlets and crossroads that had few, if any, commercial enterprises. Counter to that, others believed that rural postal customers had been slighted since the implementation of City Free Delivery in 1863; rural customers paid the same first class postage rate as the urban customers whose mail was brought to their door. Fans also emphasized the inclusionary aspect of the service, highlighting the importance of providing all citizens with access to current news and information to ensure that even the furthest flung farmer could participate in government as an informed voter. Urban mail-order houses also advocated for the service since it would add to their customer base.71

A separate urban development, the bicycling craze, affected rural farmers. Organizations such as the League of American Wheelmen desired well-kempt roads on which to tour the countryside. The National League for Good Roads, and the National Good Roads Association, campaigned for road reform to provide rural macadam surfaces. The advent of RFD strengthened the argument in favor of road reform, as the Post Office Department could deny the service on roads that were not maintained well enough to be passable year round.72


Nationwide, independent farmers lived according to the rules of nature, planting and harvesting according to the season, managing their resources and property with minimal outside interference. For farmers to give up independent maintenance of roadways in favor of government intervention and intrusion required an intellectual shift, or change in mindset. Farmers, as a result of the good roads campaigns of the 1890s, gradually accepted the notion that roads were “technology” – publicly owned, human-engineered tools, instead of natural local resources to husband independently. The cost of maintaining good public roads forced rural communities to rely on state funding for road projects, leading to the removal of authority and decision-making over roadways from the farmers and villages to centralized government agencies. 73

By 1899 farmers were helping to build bridges and culverts in order to ensure their rural delivery routes would be approved. In 1901 the Post Office Department instituted a system of periodic route inspections, notifying local authorities and postmasters of unsafe or impassable road conditions; rural carriers could also file road condition complaints as they saw problems arise. By 1905 the Post Office Department and the Department of Agriculture collaborated on road conditions – the former identifying road issues and the latter sending road engineers out to inspect and offer advice on repairs. The Grange advocated good roads, stating “Bad roads spell ISOLATION for the American farmer,” which was doubly true as bad roads prevented mail

delivery and also hindered the shipment of the farmer’s produce to market. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission reported, “Highways that are usable at all times of the year are now imperative not only for the marketing of produce but for the elevation of the social and intellectual status of the open country.”

Once the rural delivery experiment got underway, farmers sought ways to be included on routes. In early 1898 the Post Office Department announced that farmers desiring routes could petition their congressman, and if that congressman approved a new route the Post Office Department would establish it. This opened the floodgates as petitions circulated through villages and across fields and signatures were gathered in the Grange Halls and churchyards. To meet the demand for routes, the Post Office Department hired rural agents, route inspectors, and carriers, creating a new bureaucracy within the Department.

Petitioners and House members could propose new routes, but Congress had the final say regarding route allocation. While providing representatives the opportunity to claim credit for rural route creation, this also led to controversy because Congressmen could effectively prevent the establishment of routes in some regions while concentrating routes in others. As the number of petitions for new routes exceeded the number that could feasibly be established per year more routes were established in the East and West than in the South, causing general disgruntlement among Southerners. The Post Office Department claimed that routes were allocated not by political allegiances but by the volume of mail – correlating the high illiteracy rate in the South to that area’s dearth of new routes. To help remedy this, a new 1899 rule stated that no district

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74 Fuller, “Good Roads and Rural Free Delivery of Mail,” 73-76. U. S. Congress, Report of the Country Life Commission, 60 Congress, Sess. 2, Senate Docs., No. 705, February 9, 1909, 38. The Country Life Commission stated that one of the “great general and immediate needs of country life” was “better means of communication, including good roads and a parcels post, which the country people are everywhere, and rightly, unambiguous in demanding.” (Report of the Country Life Commission, 6 – 7.)

75 Fuller, RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America, 42 – 43.
would receive more than half of its petitioned requests until other districts had received an equitable number of routes.76

By 1901 not only had the political mindset changed as Congressman no longer feared losing an election due to the loss of fourth class patronage appointments, but a social change had also taken root. As Theodore Dreiser pointed out in a *Pearson’s Magazine* article about RFD, “The sentiment in favor of the service is so strong wherever it has been tried that it would cost the seat in Congress of any representative (no matter what his politics) who attempted now to check the development of this great social revolution.”77 Dreiser’s “social revolution” manifested itself in the volume of mail pouring into farmers’ homes. Postal statistics show that in 1898, rural carriers delivered an average of 18,000 pieces of mail per route; in 1903 they delivered 40,932 pieces per route, and by 1929 that figured climbed to over 101,000 pieces of mail per route. Much of the increase was due to second class mail, the newspapers and magazines that relieved the farmer’s isolation by including him in the day-to-day events of the world. Many farmers signed up for two or three daily newspapers, and by 1911 the total number of newspapers and magazines delivered on rural routes topped one billion.78

The Mail Classification Act of 1879 established flat rates for periodicals; in 1885 the postage for second class mail – periodicals intended to disseminate information, literature, science, etc., with less than half of the content devoted to advertising – dropped from two cents per pound to one cent. Populist weeklies abounded, taking advantage of lowered postal rates and allowances for free sample papers. Populist candidates for office could mail thousands of copies

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76 Kernell and MacDonald, “Congress and America’s Political Development,” 799 – 800.  
78 Fuller, *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America*, 292 – 295. During this time period many routes were modified to include more houses as carriers traded in horse-drawn vehicles for automobiles so the figures per route are not attributable to a static number of households.
of their speeches for next to nothing once they took advantage of the “free sample” provision, arguing that their newsletters provided “information of a public character.”

Populists viewed the post office not simply as a means to further their own aims but as a vital national asset, stating in the 1892 *Omaha Platform*:

> We believe that the power of government—in other words, of the people—should be expanded (as in the case of the postal service) as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify, to the end that oppression, injustice, and poverty shall eventually cease in the land.

By the early 1900s, as rural delivery was expanding, the publishing industry had embraced sales of advertising space as their focal point. Paperbacks like Longfellow’s *Evangeline* ushered in a “paperback revolution” in the 1870s, seeding a desire for popular literature. Entrepreneurs launched new magazines such as the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Country Gentleman*, to market brand-name consumer items offered by mass retailers. Between 1888 and 1928, the number of pages in monthly magazines devoted to advertising space doubled, as publishers increasingly viewed their subscribers “less as readers than as consumables to be delivered to merchandisers.”

The “Reported Circulation of Specified Groups of Periodicals, 1900 – 1930” table presented in *Recent Social Trends* shows a marked increase in circulation figures in the early twentieth century. Popular scientific journals increased more than ten-fold in 15 years, from 57,000 subscribers in 1900 to 580,000 in 1915. Women’s magazines grew from 3,037,000 in 1900 to 13,706,000 subscribers in 1930. News and opinion magazines, business and industrial

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80 “National People’s Party Platform,” hosted on *The Omaha Platform: Launching the People’s Party* by History Matters, [http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5361/](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5361/).

periodicals, and social science publications all increased over the same time span. The growing demand for printed periodicals correlated with an increase in high school and college enrollments in the same time period.\textsuperscript{82}

Village merchants, concerned about future income, feared the competition RFD brought to the doors of local farmers in the form of mail-order catalogs, advertisement-rich newspapers and magazines, and small parcels.\textsuperscript{83} Merchants in several small towns organized legislative lobbies to protest mail-order businesses; some went so far as to hold catalog burning parties and ostracize those who purchased goods through the mail. From 1905 to 1916, mail-order companies shipped their goods to consumers in plain paper wrappings, allowing recipients the opportunity, if questioned, to pretend their parcels were gifts from relatives. Some village newspaper publishers instituted policies against publishing advertisements for national mail-order houses to avoid alienating local advertisers.\textsuperscript{84}

Mail-order businesses thrived in spite of this antagonism, growing from a $31 million industry in 1899 to $543 million in 1919. The largest firm, Sears, Roebuck, & Co., saw mail-order sales volume increases from $10.6 million in 1900 to $51.0 million in 1909. By 1919, Sears, Roebuck, & Co.’s mail-order sales volume reached $234.0 million. The second largest mail-order store, Montgomery Ward, reached a mail-order sales volume of $99.3 million in 1919, while the third largest, National Cloak & Suit, sold $39.4 million. Other active mail-order firms included the Larkin Company of Buffalo, Chicago Millinery and Mail Order Company,

\textsuperscript{82} Recent Social Trends, 388 – 389.
\textsuperscript{83} Prior to the advent of Parcel Post (1913), the USPS adhered to a weight limit of four pounds per piece.
and the large department stores that had mail-order divisions: Wanamaker, R. H. Macy, Filene, and Spiegel-Cooper.  

Marketing professor Malcolm Taylor criticized village store owners, stating, “If small-town merchants had been progressive and up to date, mail-order houses would never have been of much importance.” Taylor praised the efficient methods of operation employed by mail-order houses, emphasizing their advantage in selling merchandise purchased in bulk at lower prices, their money-back guarantees, and the convenience they afforded the rural consumer who could leisurely browse a catalog at home. Other historians make the assertion that farmers chose to shop via mail-order not only due to convenience, low prices, and guarantees, but also because some independent farmers felt indifference or even antagonism toward local communities.

Rural women bought paper dress patterns through mail-order as early as 1867 from Ebenezer Butterick. Economic historian Margaret Walsh explained that the efforts of Butterick and his competitors, the Demerests, in the late 1860s and 1870s to market paper patterns to women regardless of geographic location provided a means for farm wives who made their own clothing to emulate fashionable styles. Problems arose later in the nineteenth century, when some women opted to purchase finished clothing and home furnishings instead of making their own. Educator Mary Meek Atkeson said that rural women lacked experience in window-shopping as well as the leisure time to compare prices, stating: “Few people realize what a

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87 Smalley, “Market Entry and Economic Adaptation: Spiegel’s First Decade in Mail Order,” 384. Paul H. Nystrom, *The Economics of Retailing*, (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1920), 292. Nystrom, a contributor to *Recent Social Trends*, asserted that the mail-order industry in the US grew much larger than that of any other nation due in part to the American farmer living out on the farm instead of in a village house like his European contemporaries. Nystrom stated that the farmer’s independent spirit coupled with the proliferation of advertising enticed him toward a higher standard of living which he could purchase through mail-order.
difficult job it is for the woman on the farm to have a tasteful and harmonious home, unless she has the time and money for a protracted stay in the city.” Atkeson believed that rural women desired the fashionable clothing and furnishings they saw advertised in magazines and mail-order catalogs, but their inexperience with retail shopping resulted in poor decision-making, leaving the buyer feeling “cheated and ill-dressed.” Historian Susan Strasser tied the dissatisfaction some consumers felt after purchasing misrepresented products with the reform campaigns described in *Ladies’ Home Journal, McClure’s*, and *Collier’s*, which focused on standardizing products and guaranteeing pure food and drugs. Strasser stated that the proliferation of mail-order houses and the increase in consumption in the Progressive Era led to complex changes as new purchasing methods mingled with the old, and “Farmers both ordered from Sears and bartered eggs with country storekeepers.”

Coupled with the proliferation of mail order catalogs and mass media, Rural Free Delivery and, later on, Parcel Post, transformed rural Americans from independent, isolated subsistence farmers to mainstream consumers. The shift away from local, individualized goods to mass-produced items represents the homogenization of Americans, as suppliers to companies like Sears, Roebuck, & Company, as well as Montgomery Ward, mass produced sameness that could be delivered anywhere. While Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck & Co. preceded RFD, both companies’ sales volume rose dramatically once rural consumers started receiving mail to their homes. Ladies’ magazines and the popular press proliferated, filling the minds of consumers nationwide with identical recipes, ideas, and advertisements. Retailers made it as easy as possible for rural residents to order via mail; by 1905 the Sears catalogue included, in the

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ordering directions, “If you live on a rural route just give the money to the mail carrier and he will get the money order at the post office and mail it in the letter for you.”

A headline in the October 9, 1896, *Batavia Daily News* stated, “… One Delivery Every Day, With A Collection At The Same Time – No Houses To Be Ratered.” This meant that, prior to the first time a carrier set out to deliver rural mail, the determination was made that all correspondence sent from a rural address would be treated as first class mail. Therefore, all mail was treated equally, all postage rates were the same, and all rural postal customers received the same service, creating a level playing field for populations previously subjected to discrimination in the post office. Black Americans, for example, could access goods and literature through the mail that might be difficult to access under Jim Crow, such as the guitars sharecroppers in the Mississippi delta purchased via mail-order from Sears, Roebuck, & Co., with which they developed the Delta blues genre. The University of Alabama’s Bobby Wilson states, “[RFD] provided blacks some anonymity in exchange and consumption because they did not have to

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92 *Batavia Daily News*, October 9, 1896. “Ratered” refers to pieces of mail re-classified from first-class to second- or third-class by postmasters; the ratered status was determined by an estimate of the news-to-advertisements ratio, occasionally determined arbitrarily at the discretion of the postmaster.

travel to town to pick up mail and packages. Orders of goods could be treated without writing ‘col’ in the margin of store ledgers and without asking blacks to go to the back door.”

While small town retailers feared national mail-order houses encroaching on their incomes, an examination of census data from Elba, New York, reveals that the craftsmen were the ones who vanished from public record, not the merchants. Shoemakers in particular dwindled, from twelve in 1860 to two in 1905 - one listed as a 79-year-old shoemaker and one 17-year-old listed as working in a shoe factory, indicating that the local cobblers were replaced by industrialized production. In that same timespan the Elba community also saw a marked decrease in milliners (from 4 to 0), weavers (from 2 to 0), and basket makers (also from 2 to 0). The number of Elba merchants fluctuated from five in 1860 down to one in 1870, rebounding to three in 1905. The 1905 figure does not include previously unrecorded retail activities such as grocer (4), and salesman (2), which bring the retail total in 1905 to nine.

One Elba merchant, William A. Hundredmark, changed his retail business over time to compete with merchants near and far. Hundredmark’s advertisements in the Batavia Daily News epitomize the changes. A December, 1896, advertisement reads “The Largest Assortment of Holiday Goods at Lowest Prices ever shown in this town.” Two years later, on December 17, 1898, Hundredmark’s ad touted, “The best Handkerchiefs in Genesee County for 5¢.” By November, 1901, the department store’s advertisement stated:

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95 Census Records of Elba, New York, 1860, 1870, from US Federal Census Bureau and 1905 New York State. This parallels Margaret Purser’s findings in “Consumption as Communication in Nineteenth-Century Paradise Valley, Nevada,” Society for Historical Archaeology, Vol. 26, No. 3, 1992. In describing a specific shift in consumerism, Purser states, “By the first decade of the 20th century, Paradise residents had to buy coffins instead of coffin hinges, boards, and bunting, because the town no longer supported a carpenter.” Purser further states, “storekeepers replaced processing services with already-processed goods. They replaced maintenance and repair services with mass-produced goods, agricultural equipment, household articles, and other items manufactured with replaceable, catalogue-order component parts.” [111-112.]
Occasionally we hear about the Catalog Houses. Just here we have to say that we will meet any of them. Bring us your New York, Baltimore, or Chicago catalogues and we will furnish you anything you desire just as low, and in many instances lower than it will cost you from the catalogue house, and on the same terms. Respectfully, Wm. A. Hundredmark, Elba, N.Y.  

Hundredmark’s perception of who his competitors were changed from town to county to nation in tandem with the increase in mail-order sales volume enjoyed by Sears, Roebuck, & Co., Montgomery Ward, and others, yet his business thrived until a fire destroyed it in 1933. A clothing store in the late 1870s, Hundredmark added groceries in 1879, wallpaper, jewelry, tobacco, and organs in 1888, and suits and overcoats in 1891. Throughout the 1890s Hundredmark’s housed the post office and added furniture and crockery to the inventory. By 1906, not only did Hundredmark’s deliver vegetables by wagon, the clerks also offered trading stamps for customers to collect and redeem for merchandise. Responding to outside market share threats with customer service and innovation kept the business flourishing. The “Rural Life” report in *Recent Social Trends* indicates that Elba was not alone; figures comparing “Retail Stores for 140 Agricultural Villages, 1910 – 1930” show the average number of retail shops per village increased from 29.1 in 1910 to 38.8 in 1930. Automobile accessories, grocery stores, and restaurants fueled the increase while others – apparel, furniture, and feed and farm supply stores – held steady. The initial threat shopkeepers and merchants perceived from the implementation of rural free delivery ultimately spurred innovative business practices while the general increase in consumption made room in the marketplace for village shops, mail-order houses, and department stores to coexist.  

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96 *Batavia Daily News*, December 22, 1896; December 17, 1898; November 19, 1901.  
Conclusion

Rural Free Delivery empowered farmers as consumers. Such empowerment relies on infrastructure including sleighs, roads, and people. The increase in federal involvement in everyday life via funding for roads, route inspectors, and carriers meant that farmers’ cultural niche was penetrated in a give-and-take relationship granting independent country dwellers the means to balance agrarian lifestyles with consumerism.

Rural Free Delivery forever altered the cultural landscape of the US, converting the farmers’ lifestyle from one of isolation to one of access. As Theodore Dreiser stated in 1901, “The men who, every winter previously, had been cut off for weeks by snow and the impassable condition of the roads, now received their correspondence and daily papers the same as if they were in the heart of the most populous community.”98 The 1903 Review of Reviews extolled rural delivery as the instigator of “a social evolution which will enlighten and elevate the farm home, making its life something more than the isolated existence which thousands of families are compelled by necessity to endure.”99

By 1912, the nation had internalized Rural Free Delivery, and the remaining fourth class postmasters joined the ranks of civil service employees. The next chapter in the struggle for universal access to services involved the implementation of Parcel Post into the USPS, with regular fees and delivery schedules, to relieve consumers of their reliance on independent delivery services for parcels weighing more than four pounds. The next phase for Elba, New York’s development was the systematic draining of swamplands to create mucklands, ushering in the age of the onion farmer. Since then, Russell Crosby’s name has fallen out of public

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98 Dreiser, “Rural Free Mail Delivery,” 238.
consciousness, relegated to the historian’s office and commemorative brochures, but his sleigh stands on display as a testament to the enduring legacy of Rural Free Delivery.

Image Appendix

2 Elba NY Delivery Sleigh, circa 1900, color. 82” x 38” x 48”  © J M Littlejohn 2103
5 Batavia Daily News, October 1, 1912


Snap Shots from Elba.

Fine Medallion Pictures, size 13½x11¼ inches, 50c.
The best Handkerchiefs in Genesee county for 5c.
Great line Cloth Bound Books at 10c.
Klondike Sewing Machine, 4 drawers, full set of attachments, fully guaranteed. Cash or installment plan, at $17.50.
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Handsome Dressed Dolls, 5c to 50c.
Painting and Drawing Books, 5c and 10c.
Great big line pocket Knives, 5c to $1.25c kind and higher warranted.
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WM. A. HUNDREDMARK,
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Respectfully,

Wm. A. Hundredmark,
ELBA, N. Y.
Elba Resident Among the First
Rural Mail Carriers in Nation

When the Postoffice Department in Washington started experimenting with rural mail service during the second term of President Grover Cleveland, Russell Crosby of Elba was chosen as the first carrier in the state and one of the first in the country.

Mr. Crosby, who died in April, 1917, at the age of 81 years, was appointed letter carrier at Elba on October 11, 1906, serving until a few years before his death. It was believed, for many years, that he was the first rural carrier in the country, but it was learned that the service was first tried out in West Virginia shortly before the Elba route was established.

Because of poor roads and slow travel forty years ago, Mr. Crosby’s original route was much shorter than those of the present rural letter carriers. The success of the Elba experiment resulted in establishment of the rural mail system throughout the state.

Two Batavians were connected with the Postoffice Department at the time and it was through their efforts that Genesee County was chosen for the rural delivery test. They were Robert Maxwell, an assistant postmaster general, and William Ryon, who was a postoffice inspector.

Before his appointment, Mr. Crosby carried mail for several years between Batavia and Elba using a horse and buggy. This trip was similar to the “star routes” now used to deliver mail to the post offices in the various communities without train service.

A resident of Elba for 78 of his 81 years, Mr. Crosby was born in Onondaga County. At the outbreak of the Civil War he enlisted in Company H of the Eighth Heavy Artillery commanded by Colonel Peter A. Porter, whose regiment will hold its annual reunion at the Hotel Richmond August 31st. He was a sergeant when discharged from the Union Army at the close of the war.

Mr. Crosby’s widow, who was Mrs. Catherine Crosby, Elba correspondent for The News for forty years, died August 14, 1936, at the age of 94. Their nearest relative is a nephew residing in Buffalo.

Russell Crosby.

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