The tumultuous history of the U.S. Postal Service—and its constant fight for survival

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In 1914, John and Sarah Pierstorff didn't want to pay for a pricy train ticket to send their daughter across Idaho. Instead they affixed 53 cents in stamps to her winter coat. Charlotte May Pierstorff, who was five years old, rode in the train's mail compartment, and was handed off to her grandmother by a postal clerk.

Americans had just embraced the latest innovation from what was then called The United States Post Office Department: for the first time, letter carriers were carrying packages too. Several families apparently decided this was a good way to transport children. The Postmaster General received a letter in 1913 inquiring about the appropriate way to wrap a baby; the customer noted that the Post Office was more trustworthy than the privately owned companies it competed against, which would be too "rough in handling."

Over the course of more than 250 years, the U.S. Postal Service has gone through many shifts to keep up with technology and culture—including switching its focus from newspapers to letters to package delivery service. That flexibility has kept the institution relevant and solvent in the face of change.

Now the postal service faces what may be an existential crisis: The coronavirus has sent the nation's already-declining mail volume into a new nadir. The U.S. House of Representatives Oversight committee recently warned the service might have to cease operations by June. In a joint statement, committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney and Representative Gerry Connolly, who chairs the subcommittee that oversees the Postal Service, urged their colleagues to intervene. "Every community in America relies on the Postal Service to deliver vital goods and services, including life-saving medications," they said. "The Postal Service needs America's help, and we must answer this call."

There are ideas to save the Postal Service. Some suggest it could turn to banking or providing rural broadband internet connections. Others think mail carriers could offer essential government services to the people who live along their routes—a role they say mail carriers are uniquely suited to fill. After all, even if they're no longer sending their children through the mail, Americans still trust the U.S. Postal Service, which consistently ranks as their favorite government agency in both Pew and Gallup polls.

But will that be enough? That may depend on whether the Postal Service is given the opportunity to reinvent itself again.

Building a nation through its postal service

In the 1830s, French aristocrat, historian, and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville chronicled our new country in part by riding in a mail coach into Michigan Territory. "From time to time, we came to a hut in the midst of the forest; this was a post-office," he wrote. The carriers dropped off the mail and sped on into the night. De Tocqueville admired the system's efficiency: "It is difficult to imagine the incredible rapidity with which thought circulates in the midst of these deserts," he wrote.

This was exactly the point: In forming the Post Office, the Founding Fathers had wanted a service that would bind together the scattered populous of the new United States. It was, in other words, a tool of nationalism. Over the course of two centuries, the agency would drive the expansion of roads and transit, strengthen the nation's connections with its rural communities, and brave all conditions to bring packages to citizens' front doors.

The Post Office helped build an empire, quite literally. Though postal routes had been established in the colonial era—most notably under Benjamin Franklin, who had been a royal postmaster and later became the first U.S. Postmaster General during the American Revolution—the system expanded under the new nation. The Constitution granted the federal government the power to establish "post roads," which by 1823 spanned more than 80,000 miles. By 1860, these roads linked 28,000 post offices, where people sometimes waited in long lines to pick up their mail in an era before home delivery.

The growing need for contractors who could carry the mail across all those roads also spurred the growth of private businesses, including cross-country travel lines. The Post Office often gave mail contracts to stagecoach lines, rather than to faster and cheaper horseback riders, in order to promote the nascent passenger transportation network for the new nation. Later, the Post Office did the same for private steamboats and railroads, even airlines—a practice that continues today. "If you ever look out the window of a jet you're on, you often see them loading the first-class mail into the cargo hold," notes Richard Kielbowicz, a communications scholar at the University of Washington.

President George Washington also saw the Post Office as a way to cultivate committed American citizens. In its early years, the Post Office focused on delivering newspapers to keep Americans informed and connected. To keep newspaper subscriptions cheap and accessible, the Post Office subsidized their distribution by charging exorbitant prices for letter postage—as much as a full-day's wages, which meant the cost of mail was largely supported by merchants.

By the late 1830s, though, all those steamboats and railroads had created a problem. Private "express" companies used them to carry mail at cheaper rates—cutting into the Post Office's letter deliveries by as much as half. Suddenly, the Post Office was staring down an out-of-date business model and crippling finances.

The Post Office evolves

In the 1840s, the nation decided to bail out its Post Office. After all, the nation was still expanding into the southern and western territories, and sustaining connections was critical.

A wave of laws between 1845 and 1851 dismantled the Post Office's private rivals by establishing the agency's monopoly over letter-carrying. Helped by lowered rates, letters soon became the bulk of postal business. Congress also set aside an annual appropriation in 1851 to support what it knew would be an operation in the red.

The service was not done evolving. In 1863, postmasters began to experiment with home delivery, instead of just carrying letters from post office to post office. By the dawn of the 20th century, far-flung farmers convinced the government that they deserved home delivery, too—and so letters were dropped into old cigar boxes and lard pails down country roads.

Though rural deliveries were costly—and even led to a staggering $40 million deficit in 1914—they were defrayed by profits from urban delivery. Congress kicked in taxpayer money, too. Leaders had embraced what is now called the "universal service obligation," the idea that there are certain services that every American deserves to receive at a low price.

The next frontier was parcel post. By the early 20th century, the Post Office had established a four-pound limit on mail; anything heavier was supposed to be left to private companies. But the four largest private carriers had effectively formed a cartel, setting confusing and often exploitative rates.

In 1913, after decades of fierce debate, Congress busted the price-fixing racket and made parcel service an official Post Office product. With three hundred million packages sent in the first six months the service was an immediate hit. The Post Office as we know it emerged.

A trusted institution

The year after parcel delivery began, a new post office was built in Manhattan. One of the architects, an amateur classicist named William Mitchell Kendall, borrowed a line from an ancient Greek historian to have chiseled over the entrance: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

This has become an unofficial motto, a tribute to mail carriers and routes that became legendary for their perils. In south Florida in the late 19th century, the "barefoot route" sent carriers 56 miles by sailboat and rowboat and 80 miles by foot over sand beaches, a six-day round trip to get the mail from Palm Beach to Miami. In Alaska, letter carriers rode on dogsleds until the 1960s; even now, mail is dropped into some towns by parachute. Down the Grand Canyon, where a Native American tribe lives, mail carriers still deliver the post by mule.

The hard work of sorting and carrying our scrawled missives across the landscape has provided steady, mostly middle-class, jobs to many Americans—in 2019, the agency employed more than 600,000 people. That's another reason the postal service has long been a trusted institution.

"It serves communities and at the same time it provides useful, civic-minded career opportunities—government jobs," says Philip Rubio, a historian and former letter carrier whose book, *Undelivered*, tracks the role of labor in the birth of the modern Postal Service. Rubio notes that these jobs have been particularly important to communities of color, who were historically shunted into lower-paying roles in private industry.

They are jobs, too, that do more than just carry messages. The Postal Service has assisted after disasters, thanks to employees' knowledge of the landscape. Its website offers near-daily updates on mail carrier heroics: finding missing children, reporting fires, administering emergency first aid.

This work has not always been well-rewarded. Letter carriers began to unionize in the 1860s, almost as soon as home delivery began, and fought for better pay and work conditions. But even a hundred years later, some letter carriers were still paid so little that they lived off food stamps and welfare. The agency, too, struggled under cost-cutting measures that reduced overtime, leaving some post offices so overstuffed with mail that, in 1964, some Christmas gifts were still being delivered on Valentine's Day. In 1968, a presidential commission concluded that mail service would be improved if it were run as a business, a proposal that postal unions opposed.

Things hit a breaking point in 1970, when New York City carriers launched a strike that spread across the nation. The eight-day mail shutdown was dubbed by news magazines "the Revolt of the Good Guys," and earned widespread public support.

The post-strike negotiations changed the face of the institution yet again. In exchange for a pay increase and collective bargaining rights, the unions agreed to support the agency's reorganization. In 1971, an act of Congress turned the Post Office Department into the United States Postal Service, a government-owned company expected to generate enough revenue to pay for itself. For nearly two centuries, taxpayers had funded the Post Office to help build a nation. Now, the nation was deemed built.

Confronting the challenges of a new era

For decades since then, the new U.S. Postal Service worked just fine, and by the 1990s, the agency was steadily turning a profit. All that came to a screeching halt with the arrival of email at the end of the 20th century.

Faster, and free, this new service chewed into demand for the Postal Service's products. First-class and marketing mail is dwindling—dropping by 34 percent since 2007. What's left is mostly junk.

The Postal Service's only growing source of revenue is packages—the same service some Americans once used to mail toddlers now feeds their online-shopping addictions. Because it has a legal obligation to visit every household six days a week, the Postal Service can offer cheap rates to private carriers like Amazon and FedEx, bringing deliveries on the last step of the journey to our doorsteps. Though President Donald Trump has complained that the Postal Service is losing money in the deal, the agency itself has stated that its costs are covered. Details of the deal are not public, but the agency is required by law to ensure such deals are profitable. An independent body, the Postal Regulatory Commission, oversees these deals.

Lately, though, even this revenue has begun to plateau. And, this time, the Postal Service doesn't have as much room to innovate as it did in the past. In 2006, Congress passed a new law, the agency's first overhaul since 1971, that strictly defines "postal services" as letters and packages alone. The law also included an unusual requirement, instructing the agency to pay advance for future employee retirement benefits. The Postal Service's leadership did not expect this to be a problem. Then came the Great Recession that hit in December 2007. It has not turned a profit since.

In 2012, the Postal Service began to default on those retirement benefit payments—its only option, it says, if it wants to keep paying its suppliers and employees. Now, with mail volume plummeting further due to the coronavirus, there are concerns that within months, the Postal Service will lack the funds it needs to continue full operation.

Stakeholders and pundits are debating what comes next. The Postal Service has examined the potential of turning rural post offices into broadband hubs that would reach households through existing telephone lines. Politicians have talked about having the Postal Service return to banking, a service it provided for half of the last century, to reach remote communities not served by commercial financial institutions. The National Association of Letter Carriers envisions reinventing the Postal Service as a roving band of government helpers "with keypad and Internet connection at the ready," allowing every American to connect to governmental services—a rare human presence in a world where stores are closing and life is migrating online.

But any of these changes would require overturning the 2006 law. A task force convened by President Trump in 2018 suggested that instead of moving into new sectors, the Postal Service should focus on its essential tasks as shipping pharmaceutical shipments, personal letters, bills, government communications, and packages from one individual to another. These, the commission recommended, would be protected from competition and kept cheap. For everything else—like shipping packages for online retailers—the task force suggested removing price caps and charging higher prices based on the market.

Some advocates for privatization want to go even further and eliminate federal postal service entirely, which they see as an untaxed business distorting the marketplace.

But Rubio wonders if there are some elements of a mail carrier job that cannot be so easily outsourced. Postal Service employees take an oath to protect the Constitution, he notes. The job comes with a clear, if unspoken, duty. "You're looking in on people," he says. "You are representing the United States." That's why the Postal Service has often gone beyond the mail, to serve communities—even, of course, carting children safely across the countryside.

A hundred years later, the world has changed in fundamental ways. The Postal Service's business has mostly narrowed. Now, if it's going to survive, it may have to convince Americans its employees still retain a function that is too essential—and too delicate—to be entrusted to anyone else.