

# THE GREATEST POST OFFICE IN THE WORLD



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This article has been revised and officially corrected by the courtesy of  
Charles Emory Smith, Postmaster-General



HE postal service is a marvelously planned and elaborated piece of machinery for the carrying of messages and other letters. Fairy tales tell of the mystic power of magic paper to bring countless servants to do the will of the holder. To-day a tiny piece of paper called a postage stamp can summon to do its bidding an army of over 105,000 people in the pay of the United States alone. The fact has become so commonplace by repetition that we may have closed our eyes to its wonder side. A study of our own postal system may show how great is the marvel of this process of carrying a letter.

## TWELVE THOUSAND LETTERS A MINUTE

Uncle Sam has the greatest post-office in the world. Every minute, day and night, during the entire year, 12,000 letters and packages are dropped into the mails. The average American sends more pieces of mail and receives more than the average inhabitant of any other country on earth. In 1897 the number of pieces of matter of all kinds mailed in this country was about 17,000,000 for every day in the year.

## THE FORTUNES CARRIED BY THE MAIL

There are now 23,421 money-order post-offices in the United States, as compared with 419 in 1865, when the system went into operation. The number of domestic money-orders issued in 1898 was 289,652,000; the amount was the enormous sum of \$191,354,000. When to this is added the millions of dollars sent by ordinary mail and registered letter, and the immense sums sent by checks and drafts, the wealth carried by the mails is estimated to be over a million dollars a day. When a postmaster has not sufficient money-order funds on hand to pay orders drawn on his office, he is expected to use all available postal funds in his possession. Should this not prove to be enough, he makes a draft on the postmaster at New York. So careful is the payment of money-orders, and so safe the medium, that there is less than one error in every 250,000 payments.

## WHERE PENNSYLVANIA LEADS THE NATION

The United States has 73,570 post-offices; nearly 50,000 of these have been established since the close of the Civil War. Pennsylvania leads the line of States with 5155; next comes New York with 3724; Alaska, the last on the line, has thirty-eight. The greatest gain in new post-offices in the fiscal year ending June 30, 1898, was recorded by Kentucky, with 164. Nearly 6500 of our post-offices are in charge of women. No nation in the world can compare with the United States in the energy, quickness and working capacity of its citizens. While we have nearly as many post-offices as Germany, Great Britain, France and Russia combined, the working force of postal clerks is less than one-half.

## THE POPULARITY OF THE POSTAL CARD

When postal cards were first issued, in 1873, they were treated disdainfully, they were accused of being vulgar, and only 31,000,000 were sold. This is really the issue for two months only. In 1898 the number rose to 556,380,000. They are made by contract, and cost the Government about thirty-three cents a thousand. The contract requires that 20,000,000 be always on hand, but the number available is greater. In one day the manufacturers received and filled an order from St. Louis for 10,000,000 and one from Chicago for 25,000,000. It required four freight cars to carry them.

## AS SAFE AS A REGISTERED LETTER

Registered letters are treated with great consideration. They are confided only to the care of sworn employees of the department. Each person handling a registered letter gives a receipt for it; when he parts with it he receives a receipt. When a number of registered letters are shut in one pouch they are treated as one article. They are officially counted, and tell-tale locks on the pouches cannot be opened without changing the number on the dial of the lock. Receipts are given and taken for the whole pouch. Registration was begun, in 1855, with 629,332 pieces. In 1898 about 15,600,000 registered

articles passed through the mails. The loss was only 643 articles, or one in 24,262. This includes loss caused by burning and wrecking of post-offices, postal cars and steamboats, and minor unavoidable accidents. Excluding Government letters, there was a loss to the public of but one piece in 37,500. Only 344 complaints of carelessness by postal employees were proven.

## THE SPECIAL DELIVERY LETTERS

A special delivery stamp crowns an ordinary letter and ensures it royal care. It travels first-class; the clerks pass it rapidly on its way; on reaching its destination all schedules are disregarded; it is honored by being sent by a special messenger. This service was begun in 1886 in 1898 the number of these stamps issued was over 5,000,000. New York City delivered the greatest number of these letters,—about 693,000. Boston came next, with 275,000. The average time, throughout the nation, for delivery from post-office to addressee was seventeen minutes.

## CIRCLING THE GLOBE IN AN HOUR

Uncle Sam paid the railways for 1898 nearly \$29,000,000 for transporting his mail. Sixty years ago 974 miles of railway carried all our mail; at the close of the Civil War there were 23,401 miles; in 1896 the 2560 separate routes aggregated 174,777 miles. Compared with this the railway postal service of all other nations dwindles into insignificance. Germany, the nearest approach to a rival, has only 27,243 miles; France follows close with 25,665 miles. Our postal cars, during the year 1898, ran a distance of 281,586,000 miles. This means that every hour one of our mail trains traveled a distance equal to one and one-fifth times round the globe. The amount paid to railways is based on the average weight of daily mail per mile on a weighing for thirty successive days.

## WHAT A MINUTE'S LOSS OF TIME MEANS

The railway mail coaches are really working post-offices, rushing along at lightning speed, whizzing through towns, swirling round curves, and rumbling over bridges, while the railway clerks, men with prodigious memories of lives, offices, stations, routes and time-tables, distribute, classify and tie up tons of papers and letters. Not a second must be lost, not a motion of the hand must be wasted. One minute's loss of time may pulsate across the continent and delay mail for many hours on numberless connections. Yet so accurate is the work of the 8000 railway postal clerks that during last year there was but one error in the handling of every 11,960 pieces. Each clerk sorting mail averaged 1,560,800 pieces.

## SUPPLYING STATIONERY BY THE TON

The supply department of the postal service is an immense business in itself. Over six tons of stationery, blanks, books, twine, scales, etc., are mailed every day from the Department at Washington. Facing-slips put around letters and packages numbered 550,000,000 last year; blanks, over 90,000,000; lead pencils, 200,000; pens, 13,700 gross; sealing wax, over five tons. The wrapping-paper cost as much as the President's salary. Despite rigid economy, \$90,000 worth of twine was called for. Paper by the ton, blanks by the thousand, ink by the barrel,—till figures grow weak and unsatisfying. The Division of Supplies occupies a building formerly used as a skating-rink. One room contains supplies of every blank used in every post-office in the country, another room is filled with wrapping-paper and twine, another great room has thousands of the 217 different articles of stationery for first and second class offices.

## MYSTERIES OF THE DEAD-LETTER OFFICE

The Dead-Letter Office at Washington received, last year, nearly 6,000,000 letters and parcels, nearly half of which were returned to the owners. These letters contained money, drafts and notes amounting to nearly one million dollars. There were 44,500 letters and parcels without any address. About 17,000 articles are found in the mails every year without wrappers. Over 23,000 photographs were found in letters opened in the Dead-Letter Office

during the year. The letters of this office are "live" and "dead." "Live" letters are those posted at various offices and unmailable for lack of necessary postage, misdirection, or insufficient addresses. "Dead" letters are those that are duly stamped and properly addressed, but unclaimed at office of destination. The ingenuity of the best "readers," sustained by a host of directories and reference books, is taxed to the utmost to decipher puzzling addresses before the Government permits a letter to be opened. The sacredness of correspondence is respected. Every day 17,000 pass under the knife.

## THE WORLD'S LARGEST ACCOUNTING-ROOM

Uncle Sam has the largest accounting-room in the world. It is the office of the Sixth Auditor at Washington, where every single transaction of the entire postal service finds final examination. The magnitude of the work, the infinity of detail, the mastery of system is appalling. Five hundred clerks constitute the working corps. In 1898 they passed accounts and claims involving \$500,000,000, or over \$1,500,000 for each working day. Every one of the 73,570 postmasters submits a quarterly report. Every item, every figure, every memorandum in each of these accounts must be subjected to microscopic scrutiny; every report passes through the hands of nine sets of clerks. Letters by the thousand and vouchers by the million must be checked and classified.

## WHEN LETTERS WERE SENT C. O. D.

Free delivery by carriers was begun in 1863. Before that date the postmen used to collect a cent on each letter for delivering it. In 1863 free delivery was put into operation at sixty-six offices, with 450 carriers, at an annual pay-roll of \$317,000. To-day we have 627 free delivery offices, 12,931 carriers, and it costs Uncle Sam \$13,000,000. Any place having a population of 10,000, or a revenue of \$10,000 a year from its post-office, can demand free delivery. Nearly one-third of the people of the United States have their mail brought to their doors; the other two-thirds have to go to the post-office. Carriers are paid from \$600 to \$1000 a year, and have fifteen days' vacation, with full pay. They must be citizens of the United States.

## LOSING MONEY ON TWO-THIRDS OF OUR MAIL

The United States lost, in 1897, about \$26,000,000 in carrying second-class matter. This consists of magazines, newspapers and serial libraries, carried at one cent a pound, and copies of papers forwarded free to subscribers in the country. The cost to the Government of transporting second-class matter is eight cents a pound; the revenue from it was but eight and a half mills. From two-thirds of the mail matter handled in 1897 the revenue was less than one-thirtieth of the cost of the mail service. No stamps appear on second-class matter. The money for postage is paid to the postmaster, and he gives a receipt for the amount to the publisher. The use of "newspaper stamps" has been discontinued. There are 9378 post-offices sending second-class matter, and for 1898 there were sent 395,000,000 pounds; over fifty-five per cent. of this bulk was sent from six centres,—New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati.

## UNCLE SAM'S ANNUAL BLINDFOLD AUCTION

Dead letters which contain money, and which cannot be restored to owners, are kept for three months, when they are turned over to the Third Assistant Postmaster-General. The letter and money may be reclaimed at any time within four years. The faithfulness of the records kept, and the thoroughness of the system of tracing lost letters and packages is wonderful. About 80,000 parcels are constantly on file in the department storerooms. All addressed matter remaining in storage for two years, and all unaddressed matter on file over six months, is sold annually. The auction is held every December just before the holidays. A regular catalogue is printed and the sale lasts a week. The contents of many packages or letters may make up a single sales parcel. The average price is sixty cents a parcel; the total amount sometimes

exceeds \$3000. All unclaimed magazines, papers, miscellaneous publications and picture cards are sent to the charitable institutions of the District of Columbia.

## THE FASTEST VESSEL CARRIES THE MAIL

Uncle Sam's foreign mail cost over \$1,760,000 for 1898. The rule under which mails for transatlantic destinations have for many years been assigned is that the fastest vessel available be chosen. The choice is based on the time made on three successive trips. Other conditions being equal, preference is given to vessels flying the United States flag. Vessels of United States register not under contract receive \$1.60 a pound for letters and postals and eight cents a pound for other articles. Vessels of foreign register receive about forty-four cents a pound for letters and four and a half cents a pound for other articles. Vessels under contract carry the mail at a compensation of four dollars a mile from New York to Southampton, without regard to weight. Mails are now received from incoming steamers at quarantine, and thence are taken directly to the railway depots for transportation, instead of passing through the New York office. It saves from ten to twelve hours in forwarding mail to Chicago and St. Louis.

## BILLIONS OF PIECES OF STAMPED PAPER

Figures give no real idea of the magnitude of our postal service. During the year ending June 30, 1898, the number of pieces of stamped paper aggregated over 4,600,000,000. This includes stamps, postal cards, stamped envelopes, etc. This number is so great that a clock ticking once a second would require over 146 years, for 1898, to equal the number. The ordinary stamps issued were about 3,370,000,000, of which over two-thirds were two-cent stamps. It costs the Government five cents a thousand for making and printing ordinary stamps.

## MAKING ARCTIC EXPLORATION SEEM TAME

The immense distances to which mail matter is carried, and the terrible danger in delivering mail in some quarters, particularly in Alaska, is astonishing. In hundreds of cases it costs over fifty cents to carry a full-paid letter bearing but a two-cent stamp. Last year the contractor who makes annually six round trips in Alaska, from Juneau to Circle City, a distance of 900 miles, encountered dangers, hardships and privation that makes Arctic exploration seem tame. On one of his return trips he had to travel 6500 miles (or quarter-way round the globe) more than the regular route distance to make schedule time for starting on his next trip.

## WHY OUR POSTAL SYSTEM DOES NOT PAY

The United States is the only great nation in the world whose post-office does not pay a profit to the Government. In 1896 the total receipts of the postal service from all sources were less than \$83,000,000; the total expenditures were over \$94,000,000. The deficiency was in excess of \$11,000,000. The chief reason for the deficiency is the liberal attitude taken by the nation toward second-class matter. But as this is construed as an educative power, the deficiency may be justified. Many students of political questions declare there is no real reason why the Postal Department, serving the needs of the people, should be expected to pay, any more than should other branches of the service.

The immense domain of the United States is a factor that makes this invidious comparison in expense with other nations unjust. Uncle Sam carries letters for two cents over an area larger than all Europe. Great Britain's post-office pays over \$13,000,000 a year, but England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales could fit into one of our States,—New Mexico. Germany makes nearly \$6,000,000, but the Empire is only three-quarters the size of Texas. The profit of the French post-office is nearly \$10,000,000; Uncle Sam could surpass this if he could reduce his domain to his two States, Arizona and Wyoming. Italy's comes out about even by carrying the mails poorly in a nation the size of Montana. Considering the immensity of the amount of mail carried, the magnificence of the distances, and the comparative smallness of the force, the showing of the postal service of America is marvelous.