Postmarks: The Life and Legacy of the United States Postal Service

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Introduction

This thesis is a conglomerate of methods and ideas that have been swirling around in my head since the spring of 2018 when I realized that I actually didn't know what I wanted to do with my life or my education. After many meetings with advisors, conversations with friends, and hours of self-reflection, I settled on an independent concentration in data journalism. Data journalism combines data science, journalistic writing, and graphic design with the goal of informing and empowering the public by providing accessible, data-driven insights.

When choosing the topic for my thesis, I had many criteria by which I needed to abide. First, as with all journalism, my topic needed to be newsworthy. I wanted to explore something that would be important to people and attract a variety of readers. Second, though newsworthiness added value, I also had to ensure that my topic was robust enough to warrant a year-long investigation. Picking only one event or a very narrow question might not provide enough content for such an extended project and could quickly "go out of style" in the news cycle. Third, there had to be data involved. Data comes in many forms—text documents, images, financial information, online interactions—and my topic needed to encompass a variety.

With the controversy surrounding the United States Postal Service (USPS) ignited by the 2020 U.S. presidential election, postal topics quickly became newsworthy. Suddenly, everyone was talking about the USPS, its financial struggles, its ability to handle high volumes of mail, and its trustworthiness. These questions about the USPS reach far beyond the outcome of the 2020 election and their answers could impact U.S. society for years to come. Furthermore, as a government institution, the USPS must make all of its financial and operations data available to the general public, making it the perfect topic for this project.

The following chapters are the culmination of my four years of study at Brown University and a year of targeted investigation into the history, operations, and implications of the USPS. The goal of this piece is to demystify the USPS so that readers can understand how it has evolved and its complexity and importance as an American institution. Of course, this is not a comprehensive or all-encompassing analysis, but it provides enough background, breadth, and detail to inform readers about the overall life and legacy of the USPS.

History of the USPS

"A brief origin story for the history of the Post Office in the U.S. It's a 240 year history," Lynn Heidelbugh said with a laugh. She's a curator at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C. and she specializes in the history of the Postal Service. Though the history of postal systems is vast, Heidelbaugh marked the beginning of the USPS around 1639, when America was still part of the British colonies.

"In Boston… Richard Fairbanks' tavern [was named] as the official repository for mail that was coming overseas. That was when most mail was overseas mail; there was not much communication going between the colonies. The business and government operations were really from a colony back to Great Britain," Heidelbaugh explained.

For years after the establishment of an official mail collection location in the colonies, the primary purpose of letters was to communicate with Britain. To formalize this system, in 1710 the Queen Anne Act established a Postmaster General for the colonies in British North America. But the British-owned Crown Mail wasn't the same system that turned into today's USPS. Instead, the American postal system was created explicitly to subvert its royal counterpart.

"The Crown Mail declared that it had the right to read the letters," explained Heidelbaugh. This meant that any information written in a letter that was handled by the Crown Mail could be shared with the British government. Unlike the governmental restrictions stipulated in modern U.S. laws, the British monarchy didn't need a warrant or even probable cause to open others' letters, which made it impossible for revolutionaries to communicate through the official Crown Mail system. Another issue with the Crown Mail was its expense.

"The purpose of that postal service with the British colonies was to generate revenues," Heidelbaugh said. Since the colonists in the Americas had no representation in the British government, mail rates rose to extortionary levels. Legislation like the Stamp Act of 1765 contributed to the massive revenues that Britain milked from the American colonies. Eventually, the colonists became so angry that they began a revolution, but they couldn't do it without an effective communication system.

"By the time that American revolutionaries are really starting to gain energy and traction in the 1770s," said Heidelbaugh, "one printer from Connecticut by the name of William Goddard began a postal system with principles that were against what the British Post had been."

William Goddard was born on October 20, 1740 in New London, Connecticut. His father was a wealthy doctor and postmaster, and in 1755 Goddard followed in his father's postal footsteps by starting an apprenticeship in the New Haven shop of James Parker. Parker was one of the most successful printers in the colonies and comptroller and general secretary of all the post offices in British North America. Three years later, Goddard started working for the *New-York Weekly Post-Boy*, another Parker paper. In New York he learned the finer points of printing books and almanacs as well as postal administration before he eventually became a postmaster in Providence, Rhode Island in 1764.

Around the beginning of the American revolution against Britain, Goddard had been having trouble getting the information he needed to run his newspaper. The Philadelphia Postmaster General had been holding back out-of-town newspapers, which Goddard relied upon to write his own articles and sell his paper. To save his livelihood, Goddard had to take action.

He petitioned the Second Continental Congress with ideas for a new postal service. By July 1775, the members of the Second Continental Congress adopted those ideas and instated

Benjamin Franklin as the first Postmaster General, which is why Franklin is often considered the father of the USPS. However, Goddard's petition included much of the foundation that continues to support the USPS today.

"[Goddard's petition] declared that there should be a principle of open communication, that it should be free from government interference, and that they should guarantee a free exchange of ideas," described Heidelbaugh. "And much of those ideas were in reaction to him trying to operate his own news business and being a printer."

Though Goddard's ideas turned into Franklin's institution, the American postal system still wasn't well-defined. What was dubbed the "constitutional post" is included in the Articles of Confederation in 1781. The government itself was in charge of running the mail and incorporating Goddard's ideas, such as mail privacy. After more than 10 years of operation, the American postal system was mandated in Article I, Section 8, Clause 7 of the U.S. Constitution, which stated that, "Congress shall have the power to establish the post office and post roads."

That very broad and open definition is what allows such a wide variety of interpretations of the USPS' operations today. Nowhere in the Constitution do the founders establish definitions for post offices or post roads. There is no instruction manual for how the postal system should be regulated, funded, or managed. The modern USPS has manifested entirely based on just 13 words in the Constitution, but they were crucial to the success of the American revolutionaries.

"It's the only way that a revolution can really operate," said Heidelbaugh. "To be able to establish communication that's working outside of the system that you are rebelling against, you're going to need to be able to communicate with your compatriots and do that securely. So rather than doing that purely as sort of an espionage and military, they are establishing their own form of government." As that government matured, so did its postal network.

Before the USPS became the USPS, it was the U.S. Post Office Department. This government agency was partially defined in the Postal Service Act of 1792, which gave the Post Office a monopoly on letter mail by prohibiting private postal carriers from using post roads. At the time, these "post roads" were any road built by the Post Office. The law also put the operations of the Post Office under the jurisdiction of Congress, allowing the system to be standardized as young America grew and changed. Finally, the Postal Service Act ensured the privacy of the mail and gave newspapers lower postage rates to encourage the free exchange of ideas, emulating the original wishes of William Goddard.

Privacy from prying government eyes was one of the main reasons the American colonists created their own postal system; however, it's not as simple as it seems. In 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society wanted to reach a broader audience, and it wanted to use the mail to do it. Taking advantage of the Post Office's bureaucracy, the American Anti-Slavery Society mailed its content as a newspaper, qualifying it for reduced postage rates. At the time, sending a newspaper only cost a few pennies, but sending a personal letter was 25 cents, which would be more than $7 today. On top of that, the papers were being delivered to southern slave owners who had not requested them. They included both text and imagery, allowing anyone to decipher the visual language, even if they were illiterate.

"Therein are some of the concerns of the southerners, if enslaved people see such imagery and read that imagery," Heidelbaugh explained. "So you had violent reactions in the south, [which] probably come to a head in Charleston, South Carolina, where mobs are attacking the post office."

These protests caused the Charleston postmaster to contact the Postmaster General, Amos Kendall, and ask whether he could refuse to deliver the abolitionist materials, stating that none of

his constituents wanted the information, it was arriving unsolicited, and its presence posed a threat to the safety of other mailed items. Kendall gave permission to local postmasters to refuse delivery if they deem any mailed materials unfit or dangerous, which was a nod to the separation of federal, state, and local government powers. But being barred from having its materials delivered by mail didn't stop the American Anti-Slavery Society from pursuing its abolitionist goals.

"What happens is the abolitionists reframe their efforts and arguments and take it outside of the mail and bring it really towards petitions to Congress," explained Heidelbaugh. "They seek another political avenue for intervention and they just create a whole new way to go about their campaign."

The allowance that the Post Office Department made for local postmasters to decide what was appropriate to send along to their constituents seems contradictory to some of the privacy concerns upon which the postal network was founded; however, postal workers to this day cannot open sealed letters. They are instead allowed to read anything that is exposed and to make a determination about its content. Just a couple of generations after the efforts of the American Anti-Slavery Society, these postal censorship abilities were taken even further.

"Some intervention in terms of the content of the mail comes about in 1873 [with] what has become known as the Comstock Laws," Heidelbaugh explained. "They're really anti-obscenity laws, and they were a set of laws that strengthened laws that were in place in 1865."

These anti-obscenity laws were named after Anthony Comstock, a moral crusader who was a strong proponent for regulating the content of the mail. He was a Union Army veteran from the Civil War and a devout Christian, and he founded the New York Society for the

Suppression of Vice in 1873. That same year, he lobbied Congress to pass the "Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use," better known as the Comstock Law.

Comstock was a Postal Inspector for more than 40 years, overseeing and implementing policies that confiscated any mailed items he deemed obscene until he died in 1915. According to Heidelbaugh, these included but were not limited to literature, contraception, and sexual health information. Though most items could get through the mail eventually, the Comstock Laws forced certain materials like sexual health periodicals or books that discussed "obscene" topics to be sent as more expensive personal mail instead of being eligible for reduced postage rates that were offered to newspapers. This censorship allowed the Post Office Department to in many ways control which magazines, newspapers, and books were widely distributed, limiting access to information. When asked whether the Comstock Laws, which are still technically in effect today, contradict the original intent for the American postal system to allow for privacy, Heidelbaugh said that the issue was very ambiguous.

"Many times the interpretation of these laws was for the protection of people. There are laws that come about at the same time for protecting people from mail fraud and, therefore, things like medical quackery devices that are being sold through the mail," she explained. "Then there are places where the Post Office, the federal government, really does delineate, such as mail fraud laws: the Post Office is not able to open the mail. So to look for those devices, that is still restricted to warrant. There's a fine line of where the content control comes in and where the federal law enforcement agents have the ability to intervene."

Especially from a modern-day standpoint, these strict anti-obscenity measures and the morals of the Post Office Department seem stuck in the past; however, the department was constantly trying to keep up with the newest technological innovations.

“Throughout most of its history, if there was some new change in transportation [or] technology, the Postal Service was often at the forefront of that—in some cases basically funding that,” said Devin Leonard, journalist at *Bloomberg News* and author of *Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service*. In his book, there is an emphasis on the progress that the Postal Service has spearheaded throughout its tenure.

“The whole passenger rail system in the United States was all paid for by mail contracts because all of those passenger lines carry the mail,” Leonard explained, “and then the whole infrastructure for commercial aviation was created by the Postal Service for Air Mail.” After a certain point, the Postal Service transferred its airplanes and other aviation infrastructure to the private sector due to significant financial loss, but America’s private airlines wouldn't have existed without the Postal Service’s initial work.

“Private companies didn't want to take the risk,” said Leonard. “They didn't want to do that until the Postal Service showed it could be done.” Though the Postal Service was often at the forefront of transportation and other technologies, like mail sorting machines and computers that could read handwriting, they didn’t always stay on the cutting edge.

“The one place where it didn't happen was the Internet,” expressed Leonard. “The Postal Service wanted to do a lot of things on the internet, but at that point the Postal Service wasn't in the President's Cabinet anymore. It was a sort of quasi-government, government corporation and the private sector wouldn’t let them do it.”

In fact, the Postal Service had tried to expand into email, allowing anyone who could receive physical mail to get an email that ended in ".us" based on their name and mailing address. But other email providers like AOL, Yahoo, and Google lobbied against it because it would have encroached on their standing as the giants of the budding digital age. In addition to lagging behind in communication technology, the Post Office Department wasn't always a leader in social change either.

"Under Thomas Jefferson, Gideon Granger was his Postmaster General," Leonard said. "He was worried about a slave insurrection, so they banned Black people from carrying their mail because they didn't want Black people going around to different plantations, networking with people, and possibly organizing something. And that basically didn't end until the Civil War."

In fact, the 1802 law that banned Blacks from being employed by the Post Office was later updated, stating that any Black person handling mail or operating postal equipment had to be supervised by a white counterpart. The first known Black employee of the Post Office was in 1863, and laws stating that people of all races should be considered equally as employees didn't get passed until 1865; however, this didn't mean that Blacks and whites were working side by side. In 1913 under President Woodrow Wilson, the Post Office became officially segregated. It would be more than a decade before those rules were changed as well. Despite these injustices, the Post Office was sometimes a beacon of hope for people of color.

"On the other hand, it did become this place where Black and Hispanic people could find work. This is later on, post-Civil War, when it was harder and harder in the private sector." Leonard went on to explain, "and that's still the argument, that people of color have been able to

move up in the middle class through the Postal Service. I don't know how intentional that was, but that's something that's been true for probably more than a century."

Similar to The U.S. Post Office Department's indecisiveness surrounding racial equality issues, postal system rules about women in the workforce went back and forth. These changes were especially present during transitions between wartime and peace.

"There have been different times that some of the laws have been interpreted that the statements about employment did not bar women from holding a position as postmaster because it did not specify a man," said Heidelbaugh. "But as many people are familiar with how women's labor changes during World War I and World War II, [it] similarly happens within the Post Office as well. There's women who enter the workforce, enter the Federal workforce definitely for the Post Office, but are asked to leave to return those jobs to the men afterwards."

The postal era from 1781 to 1970 encompassed the entire lifetime of the U.S. Post Office Department. During this 90-year stretch, the Post Office Department was a government agency, complete with a Presidential Cabinet seat for the Postmaster General. But in 1970, an unprecedented storm was brewing.

On March 18, 1970, U.S. postal workers went on strike to protest Congress' decision to raise their salaries by only five percent. Looking at Congress' pay raise of 41 percent, postal workers had had enough, despite strikes being illegal for federal employees. The strike effectively shut down mail operations across the country for multiple days, which forced the federal government to declare a national emergency and send in National Guard troops as substitutes.

"It's the rise of organized labor within the Postal Service," Leonard explained. "You had rank and file people who were against their leaders. James Rademacher, who was the head of the

National Letter Carriers Association, was trying to straddle both sides and negotiate with Nixon, while his members were burning him in effigy."

James Rademacher originally opposed the idea of a postal workers strike, fearing that insurrection would make it impossible to bargain for better wages and benefits. He had been working for the Post Office for decades and had seen some progress already; however, when the vote resulted in favor of a strike, Rademacher backed his fellow postal workers and convinced other union leaders to follow suit. After the National Letter Carriers Association was successful in bargaining with the federal government, many other organizations followed suit.

"The unions in the Postal Service [are] really based on crafts: clerks, transportation, letter carriers, supervisors, postmasters, contract services," Heidelbaugh said. "The Star Route Association is a professional association of contractors who are the transportation contracts with the Postal Service and somewhat of a lobbying group in terms of those private businesses that are involved in moving the mail."

Based on the extensive list of unions and professional organizations that the USPS deals with, it's clear that the Postal Service is incredibly complex. Any entity with many moving parts must also have many points where something can go wrong. In the late 1960s, there were a deluge of mail backups. A few backed-up letters might seem like a tiny problem, but literal mountains of mail were stacked ceiling-high in mail sorting facilities, just waiting to be processed.

"That comes with years and decades of need of modernizing the Post Office Department and the demands of a growing population and a growing economy, particularly after World War II and the growth of the economy and the population," Heidelbaugh explained. "What caught the attention of Americans was mail being backed up in major cities, particularly in Chicago."

The federal government knew that the Post Office was in need of modernization, so in January 1967, it mandated that everyone start using zip codes on their mail. This was seen by most mail customers as a nuisance at best and an Orwellian death knell ushering in communism at worst. In order to avoid the dreaded zip code, individuals and companies rushed to send as much mail as possible right before the deadline, overloading the system and causing massive backups. President Lyndon B. Johnson had already called a commission to investigate the postal system, but this was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"The equipment is outdated. The facilities are overcrowded. The employees are underpaid in comparison to other industry workers and other federal payment structures. There are questions about the management structure and postage rates," enumerated Heidelbaugh. "So, the commission in 1968 says [the Post Office Department] needs to be overhauled."

After several years of discussion, the Postal Reorganization Act was passed in 1970. It redefined what had been the Post Office Department, a federal agency, into today's U.S. Postal Service. As stated by this legislation, the USPS is a government agency without Cabinet representation, governed by Congress and a board of directors, and run like a private business expected to make a profit.

In the early 2000s, postal business peaked and then began to fall. With the advent of the Internet and email, people began to wonder whether the USPS would need to exist in the future. With that financial uncertainty came a new impetus for reform, despite a complete overhaul just 30 years before.

"That was important because of collective bargaining," said Leonard. "The postal worker unions have been able to negotiate these really generous pensions and retirement health benefits.

And so if the Postal Service went out of business, who would pay for all that stuff? So basically Congress said, 'we need to start paying for that now while we still have the volume.'"

The solution to Congress' fear of the USPS' fall was the 2006 Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, or PAEA. Not only did PAEA require the USPS to prepay retirement and health benefits for employees that didn't even exist yet, but it also capped USPS prices and strictly defined what kinds of mail the USPS still had a monopoly on, like letters. These reforms made it harder for the USPS to compete with private companies, like FedEx and UPS, leaving it vulnerable to the whims of America's capitalistic markets.

"There's a big opening for the private sector to come in and reassert itself, and they've been doing that ever since—very skillfully restricting what the Postal Service can do through lobbying," said Leonard. "They've all been very, very, very good at keeping the Postal Service in its own little lane. They've really had to just stick primarily to hard copy delivery and the package market."

Not many people send letters on a regular basis anymore, but the package market has grown by leaps and bounds since the advent of online shopping. For most of postal history, packages have been for special occasions: birthdays, holidays, or wedding anniversaries. But as the Internet has grown, so have its uses. Today, you can buy almost anything online and have it delivered right to your door. More often than not, your packages are delivered by the USPS.

"Amazon was one instance where the Postal Service sort of surprised everybody by being able to innovate," remarked Leonard. "Essentially what they did was they started delivering packages on Sundays for the first time in almost a century. And they were able to do that I think in part because Amazon has a lot of clout, and I think people in Congress wanted the Postal Service to be able to do this. They wanted the Postal Service able to grow its business in a time

when letter volume was dropping, so they were able to sort of help Amazon. They were kind of the backbone for this nationwide delivery."

In a nutshell, Amazon didn't have a network of physical stores to start from, like Walmart or other retail stores have. Instead, Amazon looked at the market and realized that the USPS already had, and has, the infrastructure that they need—distribution centers, trucks, stores, and a mandate to deliver to every home in America. The USPS profits from its contracts with Amazon, so it has welcomed the collaboration with open arms. For now, Amazon's delivery volume is a boon for the USPS, but such a competitive company like Amazonwill always try to increase reliability and cut costs.

"Amazon has actually been sort of pulling out and building its delivery network more in recent years, so it can have these little private contractors that deliver the mail directly," Leonard explained. "Part of that is because of all the uncertainty that Trump's created criticizing the contract and criticizing Amazon and I think Amazon was worried: 'What's going to happen here? Can we count on the Postal Service?' So they don't rely on it as much as they did."

Though the USPS' current financial situation is uncertain, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on how important the USPS is to the livelihood of America. Package delivery rates have soared as people spend more time at home, and some groups of people are even picking up letter writing as a way to connect with people from a distance.

"People are seeing the importance of the Postal Service like they haven't in a long time because they're ordering these packages, and I don't know about you, but when you're staying at home every day, the prospect of the mail arriving is a much bigger deal than it would be otherwise," Leonard said with a laugh. "So I think right now people are reassessing the Postal Service and how important it is, in a way they haven't in a long, long time."

Lifetime of a Letter

Building on the historical foundations explored in the previous chapter, modern operational questions come into view. How does the system really work? What kind of mail gets sent through the USPS pipeline, and what needs to happen for it to get from point A to point B? How has all of that changed throughout the Postal Service's history? To explore these inquiries, one must first know what makes up most of the Postal Service's mail volume.

Most people think junk mail is a nuisance—credit card offers, advertisements, and catalogs seem to pile up on kitchen counters. However, what most might consider junk mail is the livelihood of the Postal Service. In talking with Devin Leonard, journalist at *Bloomberg News*, about postal history, he mentioned the importance of junk mail to the USPS, which is elaborated on throughout his book, *Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service*.

"The thing that the Postal Service delivers more than anything these days is junk. Junk mail surpassed first class mail back in the aughts," explained Leonard. "So really it's a service to the private sector, to businesses, now really more than anything, because when's the last time you sent a letter? If you ask that question to a lot of people, they probably couldn't tell you. It's all kind of mail that's being pumped into the system at you, as opposed to say you or I sending mail in the other direction."

In recent years, personal mail volume has declined, in large part due to the ease of communicating with people via the internet. "Snail mail," as letter mail is often called, doesn't provide the instant gratification that our technology-steeped world encourages. But before email,

text messages, and other instantaneous communication, the mail was the fastest and most reliable way to send information.

“In the antebellum era, there were these abolitionists who sent all of these anti-slavery newspapers [and] sort of deluged people in the South with all this mail that they didn't want,” mentioned Leonard. “That became a whole thing, but people have always used the Postal Service for advertising. Maybe you look in your mailbox or go to the post office and get some weird things that you didn't actually ask for.”

According to Leonard, junk mail volume has skyrocketed in the last 50 years, and that rise was no accident. Consistent mass mail volume provides a reliable source of income for the Postal Service.

“I think the Postal Service really sort of encouraged this more so than a lot of other countries and saw this as sort of a big growth area, for better for worse,” he explained. “They helped create this kind of ecosystem where companies could do all this pre-sorting, making it easier for them to send you these mass mailings.”

Though Leonard pointed to the reliability of mass mail-related income, he also said that the cultural shift in attitudes towards mail almost forced the USPS to embrace junk mail, despite its flaws.

“It speaks to the decline of letter mail,” said Leonard. “People at the Postal Service, they hate the term junk mail because that's their bread and butter now, and letter carriers don’t like it either, because that's mainly what they're carrying around in their mailbags. And helps them pay the bills.”

Despite some obvious advantages to carrying massive amounts of junk mail, some concerns have been raised by customers of the Postal Service throughout the years. In fact, in

2002, a talk show called Focus 580 explored the risk of identity theft through junk mail, among other forms of communication.

An anonymous caller phoned in to ask how safe receiving junk mail really is. They were concerned that the identifying information included on envelopes, like their name and home address, could leave them vulnerable to identity theft. Steven Baker, who at the time was the Director of the Midwest Region of the Federal Trade Commission, answered:

"I've never heard of identity thieves getting information from a catalog that you receive in the mail. So I would think you're probably safe enough to throw those away or put them in your recycle bin, and the one thing I guess I'm more concerned about is like credit card offers."

Often, credit card offers contain personal information, like middle names, or they are already partially filled out. Doing some work for the consumer often helps credit card companies turn a profit, but this makes it easier for an identity thief to fill out such forms and to open a card in someone else's name. Baker also mentioned some resources provided by the Direct Marketing Association to reduce junk mail volume for consumers.

"They've got a mail Preference Service and a Telephone Preference Service, and if you give them your name you can get [off] most mailing lists and most telemarketing operations by at least legitimate telemarketers," Baker explained. "They are anxious to do this because it's also something that costs them money to send to this junk mail and, if you don't want to, if you're going to throw it away, they just as soon save the money."

Yet despite many people's complaints about the excessive junk mail that they receive, consumers seem to like having it around anyway. They may find it interesting, funny, or even comforting. That mail-inclined audience proves advantageous to businesses because it generates revenue.

“As a former Postmaster General of the United States said to me, you can say, ‘Oh, I don't like this,’” Leonard said. “You open up the mailbox and you're like, ‘Oh, you know, I don't want this... Whoa! That catalog—I want to buy that parka!’ Which is obviously like an LL Bean reference. So there is stuff that people want.”

Leonard went on and explained that not only does junk mail advertising still work, but it adds value to the Postal Service in ways that electronic communications like email cannot.

“As much as people don't like it, it demonstrates the viability and importance of the Postal Service because you would think in 2020 that there wouldn't be any business in sending people random things through the mail or sending people catalogs, but there is,” he said. “When you go to the mailbox, you look at your mail. These people have your attention in a way that probably when you open up your email inbox and look at your phone, you're going to actually look at those five or ten things you get. They've got your attention in a way that a lot of other mediums don't. So even in 2020, junk mail is still a viable way of selling people things.”

Part of what makes these mass mailing advertisements so effective is their low cost. The cost of sending prepaid cards through the mail is kept low for two reasons. First, companies can lower the cost of mailing items by presorting them. This reduces the labor that the Postal Service has to put into mailing the cards, so they give the company a discount. Second, since the addresses on mass mail are often printed instead of handwritten, it’s easier for machines to read the zip codes, which eases the sorting process. In 1978, Postmaster General William Bolger was featured on *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report* to talk about zip codes. When asked why it was so important to add four more numbers to the preexisting zip codes, Bolger responded:

“Basically it's the easiest and fastest way to get to automation, and we need this to handle the volume mail that we get from business mailers. Like the present ZIP code, it will not be

mandatory for everyone to use, but if we can get this in the volume mails for commercial mailers—and I think we can—we'll be successful in getting to automation much faster."

Throughout the interview, the host Jim Lehrer asks Bolger to justify adding four numbers to the zip code for mass mail, and Bolger provides a variety of answers, but Lehrer always seems to emphasize how much of a nuisance the additional digits are to businesses. In the end, Bolger answers with this:

"It's a major thing. We've just about explored our capacity in mechanization; we have a little further to go with it, but we have to get to automation. We're still a very highly labor-sensitive industry, and we have to get to the way we can handle our mail much cheaper. And automation is the route. To get to automation, we need to add on to our ZIP code. It`ll help us improve the service, too."

The automation that Bolger referred to is connected to the way that mail is sorted, whether by machine or by hand. Before technology allowed for computers to read alphanumeric characters, every piece of mail had to be placed in location-specific bins by individual postal workers. It's tiring, tedious work and has proven both expensive and slow; however, with more modern technology have come a faster and more cost-effective sorting process. This process is one with which Gail Gibbons, author of *The Post Office Book: Mail and How It Moves*, is intimately familiar.

"I just wanted to go through the whole major deal, and what's amazing to me is this book was done in 1982. And if I go back to White River Junction, they use a lot of the same equipment," Gibbons explained. "You know, it's all been updated, but the process is still the same."

The Post Office Book is a children's book about the process of sorting and transporting the mail. When Gibbons wrote the book in 1982, postal modernization was in full swing, but it hadn't trickled down to most small post offices.

"Mail sorting is complicated. I mean, first of all, the people pick up the mail, or they bring it to the post office; however, it starts with a person making a package or making a letter," explained Gibbons. "Then they have to put a stamp on it, the zip code, and the address and all of that. Then there's stages of sorting the mail locally and other situations where the mail is put into the distribution centers because everything is going far away."

Based on *The Post Office Book*, resources from the Postal Service itself, and articles from the National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C., the mail sorting process starts with masses of mail being dropped off at local post offices to be divided into local and out-of-town mail. Next, the out-of-town mail is transported to a large area post office or distribution plant. At such a plant, mailed items are fed through a slew of different machines to sort mail automatically. First is a culling machine, which separates items by size. According to the National Postal Museum's "Mail Processing Machines" article:

"The culling machine was able to save space, make more sanitary conditions to work in, and increase overall productivity… In 1960 a culling machine was designed that had 'a series of inclined belts and rotating horizontal cylinders to remove the oversize pieces.' This design was able to cull approximately 60,000 pieces of letter mail every hour. A further machine was made that would separate letter mail from other various small items sent in the mail, such as hotel keys. This helped save subsequent machines from getting damaged by such small items of mail."

Once the extra large, extra small, and irregular mail is culled from the rest of the mail, letters and other small, flat mail are fed into a cancelling machine. According to the "USPS

Postal Facts 2020 Companion Newspaper Insert," the Advanced Facer Canceller System positions letter mail and postmarks stamps at 36,000 pieces per hour; however, earlier versions of this technology were far less efficient. As the first machine to be introduced into the postal process, cancelling machines have a long history, briefly delineated by the National Postal Museum.

"The first patented cancelling machine was created in 1875 by Thomas and Martin Leavitt. It was followed by improved machines through the 1870s. The first cancelling machine was hand-cranked and hand-fed and could only cancel items of the same size and shape. Various inventors worked on broadening the scope of cancelling machines' use, in acknowledgement of the large percentage of letter mail. The basic model for this machine was created by inventors in the early 1900s but was not tested until the 1920s. The letters were separated by hand and had to be positioned all in the same direction, with different sized letters separated, in preparation for the cancelling machine. The letters were then 'fed through an old-style, hand-fed cancelling machine, which canceled the stamps and postmarked the letters.' There was thus still a lot of manual labor that had to be done before the cancelling machine could even be useful."

After being positioned and postmarked by a facer canceller machine, letter mail is sorted by zip code. At one time, postal workers would do this by hand, tossing letters into bins depending on their intended destination, but this was labor intensive work and left plenty of room for human error. At first, sorting machines utilized a combination of automatic and human labor, as described by the National Postal Museum: "There were essentially two different types of mechanized sorting machines. The first was a keysort machine. An operator would read an address and sort the letter by pressing a memorized key pattern for the address. The second was

the codesort machine. At these machines, operators would not have to memorize a pattern, but would key in codes based on addresses."

As technology progressed, sorting machines were eventually outfitted with optical character recognition systems, or OCR. OCR can "read" an address and sort the mail into its proper bin automatically. Initially, OCR could only process typewritten addresses, as the variance in human handwriting styles is vast. Despite these hurdles, research teams persisted, and now the most modern machines can sort mail more than 15 times as fast as the most skilled postal worker. As the National Postal Museum notes:

"The first machine that was used for live mail started on November 30, 1965 in the Detroit post office, and could sort letters that had ZIP Codes on them at rates of 36,000 per hour. The Department saw OCR machines as the future of post office sorting and processing. The Director of Research and Development in 1968, Dr. Edward Reilley, predicted that by 1978 mail processing would be done almost all automatically. The benefits from using OCR over hand-sorting were that money and time were saved in processing mail. It was "estimated that over 50 percent of the total labor involved in mail processing within a post office can be attributed to sorting operations where visual recognition of letter addresses is necessary. With OCR this would thus almost reduce the labor needed for mail processing in half."

No matter how much technology changes, the Post Office has made it clear that embracing technology is the key to success. As Postmaster General William Bolger said on *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, "I want to make one thing clear, if I may: we cannot stop progress, nor should we. This progress has to go on, and we recognize that."

After going through all of the machines and sorting processes discussed above, mail items have already travelled most of their journey; however, the last leg from the distribution

center to a customer's door is arguably the most important; however, as Gail Gibbons points out in her book, "All mail isn't loaded on trucks."

When the Post Office was first established, mail was carried on foot, horseback, or sometimes in wheeled carts. Eventually mail carriers graduated to bicycles and even public transportation. Yet as mail volume continued to increase in the 1950s, mail carriers needed to move even faster. "Transporting the Mail," an article by the National Postal Museum explains that, "The Post Office Department needed a vehicle that could be mass produced at low cost and help increase efficiency in delivering the mail. That vehicle was the 'mailster.' Mailsters were essentially large, three-wheeled scooters that resembled small cars. The Department wanted to experiment with electric tractors, light motor vehicles for urban areas, and various models of vehicles for mail delivery."

The use of mailsters allowed carriers to move faster with a greater cargo load, so they didn't have to continually return to the post office to get more items. Sometimes mail carriers would have to return to the post office four or five times a day to complete their routes. In larger cities, there were postal pick-up stations where mail carriers could load up with more items without having to return to the larger post office to save time. The National Postal Museum points out in "Transporting the Mail" that the increased capacity for cargo provided by the mailsters was especially important as the booming American economy allowed people to spread out more.

"A key drive in the shift to mechanizing mail delivery routes was the spread of suburban areas away from city centers. Purely manual delivery of the mail for many routes became inadequate and unable to handle the suburban growth. Another problem for manual delivery of mail was the lack of sidewalks in areas. The Department thus concluded that letter carriers would

have to, on some routes, start using motor vehicles. The benefits of such mechanization were that, 'through using functional vehicles and revised methods of collecting and delivering mail, consolidation of routes and reduction of nonproductive time could produce savings of $40 million or more a year.'"

Mailsters, with their small frames and tricycle-like structure, were cheap to manufacture. Their testing began in Florida, but the tiny vehicles quickly spread across the country, outshining new bicycle models by far. Mail carriers hailed them as a savior, saving them from overprotective guard dogs and aching feet. Even more exciting according to the National Postal Museum, carrying packages was now just as easy as carrying letters: "Mailsters enabled the letter carriers to carry more mail on their routes, including parcel post, while also covering more areas with no increased effort or time needed." Moreover, the "carriers [benefited] by having the mail load removed from their shoulders, by the reduced amount of walking required, and by protection from inclement weather. The patrons [benefited] by having parcel post delivered at the same time as their regular mail."

The design and capabilities of the mailsters expanded during the 1950s and 60s. Eventually, they were outfitted with multiple-cylinder motors, windshield defrosters, snow tires, and much more. But the history of the mailster wasn't all sunshine and roses. Based on the "Transporting the Mail" by the National Postal Museum, there was some pushback from mail carriers because they believed that the tiny vehicles were more of a hindrance than a help. Urban carriers found the mailsters clunky because the houses in the city were often so close together. One carrier expressed, "My houses are close together in a row. I used to be able to walk right down the line, across the front yards. Now I have to keep returning to the mailster, moving it along with me."

In addition to the functional concerns that arose from the use of mailsters, there were many concerns about the safety of these compact vehicles. Nearly every company that was contracted to build mailsters for the Post Office was not a recognized vehicle manufacturer, so most companies had no experience building road-worthy vehicles in the past. According to "Transporting the Mail" by the National Postal Museum, "By 1967 the Department had found serious flaws with mailsters. Such flaws included defective front axles, defective and inferior shaft linkage, defective drive couplings, defective universal joints, defective door locks, defective fuel pumps, and defective brake pedal mountings. It was concluded that 'a reasonable probability of purchasing reliable, safe, and road-worthy vehicles of this design does not exist.'"

Today, most domestic mail handled by the Postal Service is transported between distribution centers and destinations by its extensive ground fleet. The Postal Service operates thousands of trucks, from smaller mail carrier vehicles to 18-wheel semis that move mail across the country. But wheeled vehicles aren't the only options for moving the mail.

"In fact, one thing I thought was really interesting was George Washington was the first president who wrote the letter to be sent by airmail by balloon," mentioned Gibbons. "I thought that was really cool."

Gail Gibbons, like many others, is fascinated by the unusual ways that the Postal Service finds to transport the mail. The traditional planes, trains, and automobiles have been joined by boats, horses, camels, dogsleds, and other more exotic means of transport throughout postal history. *Backstory*, a weekly podcast that explores history behind the scenes, invited Nancy Pope, an historian and curator for the National Postal Museum, to discuss some of the Postal Service's more unusual endeavors, such as pneumatic tube systems that ran underground in large cities.

“They had a series of canisters, and each canister would carry about 600 letters, and then they fired these canisters off through the tubes, and they really went to almost about 27 miles per hour,” said Pope on *Backstory*. “They were pretty swift little things. The Chicago post office had the most intriguing test of a pneumatic tube; most of the test they would bring in the Mayor and the postmaster and a few celebrities, and they had a reporter, and they would show how this works. Well, in Chicago, they wanted to prove that the mail would not be harmed by these tubes, so for the test, instead of putting in mail, they put in a live kitten.”

Luckily, the kitten came out the other side safe and sound, though more than a little disoriented. These tubes allowed people to correspond with others in their city multiple times a day, perhaps planning what to have for dinner or inviting someone over for tea the following day. But the invention of the Postal Service didn’t stop there, as Pope explained:“The Post Office has this tradition of using anything and everything that moved, to move the mail. Nothing was moving faster in the 1950s than missiles. So Arthur Summerfield, who is the Postmaster General at the time, a great lover of everything modern and futuristic, said, ‘Why don't we take these missiles and use them to carry mail? They've got these areas where you're putting the nuclear warhead; we'll just empty out that space and put in letters.’”

Summerfield convinced the Navy and Defense Department to go with missile delivery, and in June of 1959, 3,000 letters were shoved into the space where the nuclear warhead would have fit into the Regulus missile on the USS *Barbero*. The *Barbero* sailed about 100 miles into the ocean, turned around, and fired its missiles, sending the letters safely to shore.

“Well, the missile worked fabulous, and really the Defense Department loved the idea because they liked any sort of public showing of how well the missiles worked. This was of course the Cold War era. And anytime we can say to the Russians, ‘Our missiles are so good, that

we can use them to carry mail. We can use them to land wherever we want them to. They're guided well.' So the Defense Department loved that aspect of it," mused Pope. "But that was really all they cared about. Summerfield, on the other hand, had in his press release said, 'This is a great day for the future of mail and soon we'll be using missiles to carry it to Europe and everywhere.' Of course they didn't. This was the one and only shot."

Finances of the USPS

It's evident from the extensive news coverage about the USPS' debt, mail slowdowns, and other postal issues that the world of mail isn't all sunshine and roses. With the anatomy of the USPS' operations in mind, it's time to break down some of the infrastructure and finance issues that the Postal Service is currently facing. David Trimble, Managing Director of the Physical Infrastructure team for the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), provided some clarity surrounding the Postal Service's current equipment. The GAO is responsible for reviewing the physical and financial efficiency of federal government entities. He says if you want to understand Post Office efficiency, look no further than your local postal mail truck.

"We've looked at their capital planning process. We've looked at their plans to acquire new postal vehicles," started Trimble. "We've issued reports on their plans to acquire new vehicles, which are all well past their expected service lives. And this has been a highlighted need for many years by the Post Office."

As highlighted previously, the Postal Service relies heavily on its ground transportation fleet to deliver mail in a timely fashion. But for decades, those vehicles have been aging, and the Postal Service hasn't kept up with newer, more efficient technology, making its fleet slower and more prone to breaking down. When asked why, Trimble had a relatively simple answer.

"Their financial situation is such that they have not been able to spare the cash to make those investments," he said. "We're talking multiple billions of dollars. I think the postal fleet is one of the largest civilian fleets of vehicles in the world. They have lots and lots of vehicles. So they are desperately in need of capital investment to improve their operations, but then you know

it's a catch-22. They don't have the cash to make those investments, which would reduce their costs, which would improve their financial situation."

Not only has the cash-strapped Postal Service fleet been running on fumes, but the USPS' building infrastructure is also lacking. After wildfires in California, a deep freeze in Texas, and more hurricanes every year, pretty much any organization needs to be planning for climate change. But the Postal Service is one of the only organizations with offices all over the country, including in vulnerable remote areas, and it's the only government organization that has a responsibility to physically serve every household, whether that is direct delivery to the doorstep or to a community delivery point. Post Offices take money to maintain, and with the climate changing so quickly, many are concerned that older post office buildings are especially vulnerable to natural disasters.

"We have an ongoing review, looking at the Postal Service's planning for climate change and adaptation to climate change. You have post offices everywhere, and so they're planning for adapting to the more extreme weather events that we see across the country," explained Trimble. "So we have an ongoing review in that, and that's consistent with another high-risk area that was identified in the federal government's response: financial exposure to extreme weather events brought out by climate change."

But just like it's less of a hassle to keep the same vehicles on the road year after year, keeping post office buildings as they are is the path of least resistance, even if it costs more money in the long run. Though new post offices may be a long way off, Trimble delineated some of the points that the GAO encourages agencies to consider: "When you're choosing your location for that post office, what factors are you considering? Are you doing a remodel? Do you

know the strength of the windows? Generators? You know, basic things that are being done now across the spectrum to mitigate damages from these events."

Big-ticket items like vehicles and buildings are costly, but the USPS' smaller equipment is hard to replace, too. Janice Nembhard-McLean was able to weigh in on this. She's the president of the Virginia Beach Area Local for the American Postal Workers Union as well as the president of the Virginia Postal Workers Union for the state of Virginia.

"The private sector, they can invest in new equipment or better things a lot easier than we can at the Postal Service," said Nembhard-McLean. "So some of the things that we utilize, like our trucks and the scanners for when we deliver things so that you can know when things were delivered, those things have taken us longer to replace and to upgrade than maybe in the private sector. So yeah, it's definitely challenging right now."

Beyond the financial costs of infrastructure, the Postal Service seems to have another enemy when it comes to having the equipment it needs: postal leadership. Beginning during the summer of 2020, there was a sharp outcry from postal workers when reports surfaced of fully operational mail sorting machines being removed from distribution center floors.

"Yeah, we had reports," Nembhard-McLean admitted. "This whole year is like almost a separate thing because it's got so many political issues with it, but we were aware that there was a direct order to take out almost 700 machines across the country from our new Postmaster General. The union of course right away [looked at] that law because any changes like that they have to contact the Union. There has to be communication, and so we were able to, of course, bring that to the public, our Congress, and our Senators and let them know and try to stop that to stop them from actually physically taking out the machines."

The new Postmaster General that Nembhard-McLean referred to is Louis DeJoy. DeJoy was tapped by the Trump administration to take over as Postmaster General in May 2020 and has been scrutinized for rumors that he was and is intentionally sabotaging postal operations.

“I think that in some places, some machines did end up coming out beforehand, and he was asked about putting them back, and he said no. So there's probably some plants in our country that are physically missing some machines,” Nembhard-McLean said. “Let's put it this way: we're not operating at the fullest capacity that we possibly could. If we had used the machines that we have and had the staffing, then we could be much more efficient with delivering the mail. I mean, we do a great job as it is. I mean, think about it. Put a letter in the mail. Put a 55 cent stamp on it, it can go from one coast to the other in a couple of days. Pretty good. But there's some places where we have been faster in the past when they come, especially when it comes to Priority Mail.”

Amongst the hubbub about sorting machines, a less prominent issue has been bubbling beneath the surface. A shortage of postal workers has caused the USPS’s efficiency to drop, and its financial situation certainly doesn’t help. As president of both local and state-level branches of the American Postal Workers Union, Nembhard-McLean gave some insight: “There's like some machines that require two people: one person will load the mail at one end and then the machine will sort it and put it in buckets. There will be another person to take it off and put it in the appropriate equipment to go on the truck. They don't operate with just one person.” As she noted, “That's a safety concern for us because that means you're rushing over here to put it one down to the other end and grab it and in one basket. So we as a union have fought for two people on this machine. So, to me, the staffing plays into what? We're not going to hire more people, so we'll just unplug it.”

The shortage of staff to run machines, operate post offices, and deliver the mail is also not entirely unintentional. Due to financial stress, the USPS has had to cut hours of operation and close locations. Though this avoids having to pay workers and maintenance costs, it also comes with a blow to efficiency and service.

“They've reduced to office hours. They've expanded the use of kiosks. They had extensive plans to close many retail locations as well as their distribution network, but they only realized a fraction of their plans because of a lot of stakeholder resistance both from the unions and customers, but also from Congress because no Congressman wants post offices closed in their districts,” Trimble said. “I think what's notable is, compared to the mid-2000s, their total employment is down. I think they have about 130,000 fewer employees than they did back then. So they have taken quite a few steps, so their compensation costs are about $9 billion less than they were 10 years ago.”

A contributing factor to that $9 billion cut in compensation costs is an increase in the proportion of non-career employees in the postal workforce. In a typical job, you might think about part-time and full-time employees, but the USPS labels them differently. Non-career employees are like part-time employees: they can be hired and fired relatively easily and do not receive retirement benefits. This makes them less expensive, but also often less skilled. Career employees are like full-time employees: they receive benefits from the Postal Service and are eligible for overtime pay. Though they do cost more to maintain, career employees are the bread and butter of the Postal Service. They train new recruits, move up through the ranks, and are able to gain both broad and specialized knowledge that makes them invaluable to the postal system.

“They can hire up to about 20% of the workforce to be non-career workforce. That move alone saved them about $8 million,” mentioned Trimble.

Hiring more non-career employees may seem like a win-win from the outside; however, Nembhard-McLean points out that it's not quite so simple.

"The idea of these non-career employees was for them to be part-time, but they're never part-time. For the most part they are working full-time plus," she said. "So when that happens, we have to say to the employer, 'hey, you said you only needed these 10 full-time employees, and then you needed some part-time employees because you needed flexibility and you maybe didn't really need them all day.' So we just want a certain amount of part-time people but then when you hire those part-time people, they work just as much as the full-time people, so really you need more than 10 full-time people."

The tug-of-war between flexibility and adequate staff has caused major issues within the postal employee ranks. Nebhard-McLean detailed how frustrated employees often become when they either can't get on a reliable schedule or are cut off from working more overtime and have to let the mail wait, slowing it down.

"I think that our biggest challenge right now is the disconnect between how many employees we need to process and move the mail from, you know, entry point to delivery point and what our top leadership think that we need. And of course that's influenced by federal guidelines as well through Congress. What our delivery service standards are, are dictated by Congress."

Having fewer people on staff also means that each individual employee must have training in a wider variety of postal skills. Though this is helpful to a point, it also causes postal workers to be less specialized and makes it harder to track the origin of a problem when someone makes a mistake.

“So say something wasn't done. That's your job. Now I can come to you directly and say, ‘Hey, what happened with this?’” Nembhard-McLean explained. “Whereas now I say, ‘does anybody know what happened to this?’ ‘Oh, I didn't do it.’ ‘Yeah, we had that route.’ You know, like, ‘hey, you handle this, you handle that.’ We just can't possibly cover every single thing that should be done.”

The lack of accountability has taken a toll on both the postal workforce and its ability to complete its mission, which creates a vicious cycle that perpetuates apathy.

“You know, we have lots of medicines and essential goods that we are delivering, and so having the volume of people that's necessary to move that efficiently is probably one of our biggest challenges right there,” confided Nembhard-McLean.

After discussing all of the issues with career employee costs, one has to ask: what makes them so expensive to maintain? There are plenty of other government entities that are able to fund retirement and health benefits without much issue, but the Postal Service seems to struggle uniquely. James O’Rourke, an American rhetorician and Teaching Professor of Management at University of Notre Dame, has been tracking the finances of the USPS for more than 15 years because he was interested in how the rise of electronic communications would impact its operations.

“First of all,” began O’Rourke, “letter carriers and Postal Service workers have a retirement system of their own, and the Postal Service contributes to that Federal retirement system. But further—most unusual—is the notion that they have their own healthcare system. Only the Department of Veterans Affairs provides GIs who have service-connected disabilities with their own healthcare system.”

These independent retirement and healthcare systems are a product of one very specific piece of legislation, which O'Rourke detailed.

"If I can take you back to 2006 and introduce you to Senator Susan Collins of Maine," he said. "She introduced the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act. Now everyone, of course, is in favor of both accountability and enhancement, but this act became law and required the post office to pay retirement health care benefits for workers 75 years into the future. No other federal agency or private corporation has ever been saddled with a massive pre-funding mandate… These workers who will benefit from it, many of them haven't yet been hired. Some of them haven't yet been born."

The Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA) was enacted in part because lawmakers feared that the Postal Service would go out of business. By requiring such stringent pre-payment plans, they hoped to ensure that there would be enough cash to cover benefits for all of the postal employees who had already retired or would be forced to retire should the Postal Service fail. PAEA required the Postal Service to pay 12 to 16 billion dollars a year into a trust fund. The law expired after 10 years in 2017, but the Postal Service has continued to budget payments out of habit and a fear of getting behind on retirement benefits. And that's only one impact of PAEA.

"This is the first major postal reform legislation since 1970, and one of the key elements of that was to define, really for the first time, postal products," Trimble added. "And they define them into market-dominant products, where the Post Office has monopoly control—so, for example, first-class mail—and then competitive products. And those are like package delivery where the Post Office is competing with UPS or FedEx, that kind of thing. For the

market-dominant products. Your first-class mail, your commercial mail, the rate increases that the Post Office could charge could not exceed the rate of inflation under the law."

This means that though the Postal Service can increase the prices of competitive products in order to participate in the free market, it is not at liberty to increase the prices of market-dominant products, like stamps, without federal approval. Once again, since PAEA was supposed to last just a decade, this law was supposed to be updated in 2017. But that has yet to happen.

"The regulatory body that oversees the Post Office, which is the Postal Regulatory Commission—PRC—[was] supposed to revisit how those rates were set," Trimble explained. "One of the concerns of the Post Office has been that the PRC has not revisited the method by which rates are set. So they were to have issued a report after 10 years. They have a draft report, but they have to issue a final one, so that remains, and you'll see in congressional testimony from [the] Postmaster General, he's noticed this concern. They need to modernize how they are setting rates for the purpose of increasing revenues, because they definitely need the revenue."

After unpacking all of the infrastructure, staff, and legislation problems that the Postal Service is up against, it's no wonder the organization is struggling to operate. The cards are stacked against the Postal Service, and that's causing a big ruckus, especially with their accounting.

"So the high-risk list that [the] GAO puts out is meant to identify federal programs and agencies that are at increased risk of sort of broadly fraud, mismanagement, or that are generally a need of broad-based transformation for them to achieve their mission," Trimble said. "So in the case of the Postal Service, the concern was their financial situation threatened their ability to carry out their mission of serving the public and also being a self-financing operation."

Long before the 2006 PAEA legislation, the GAO had its eye on the Postal Service. They've been on the high-risk list since 1998. PAEA was meant to be a step towards getting the Postal Service off the GAO's high-risk list, but it's had the opposite effect. The Postal Service has been sinking further and further into debt for decades. It's easy to see why, according to Drew Desilver, Senior Writer at Pew Research Center.

"It's an interesting mix of things," said Desilver. "The most profitable thing that the Postal Service does is deliver first-class mail. That has always been its most profitable product line and continues to be its most profitable product line. The problem is that people are sending fewer letters."

Desilver has been tracking USPS operations and financial data for some time and had some insight about how exactly the Postal Service had been faring as of October 2020.

"I ran numbers for the last 11 months of the current fiscal year, and compared it to the 11 months of the last fiscal year, and first-class mail is down 5% in terms of just number of pieces of mail," said Desilver. "I went back as far as 2000, and it looks like it's peaking in 2001. It's been going down ever since. So, when your most profitable product line has been on this long-term decline, that's a problem for you."

Remember those 12 to 16 billion dollar benefits pre-payments? It turns out that the Post Office has not only been losing mail volume, but also missing those payments for years because it simply doesn't have the profits.

"The Post Office for financial reasons paid those pre-funded liabilities only up until about 2012 and because their finances are so tight. So year after year, they've been racking up a very large and increasing liability for those expenses," Trimble explained. "Just to give you a scale, right now the Postal Service has about $161 billion in liabilities, debts, and other obligations. I

think one of the most shocking numbers out there is really that around 2007 their debt to revenue ratio was 1-to-1, meaning that their total debt equaled about a year's worth of revenues. Today it's well over double. So today, their debt is more than double what they take in any given year."

Some statistics provided by Desilver and O'Rourke tell the part of the story about who the Postal Service owes.

"So as of June 30 the Postal Service owes $11 billion to the U.S. Treasury. It is behind on its required contributions to its pension fund and its retiree health to the tune of $61.4 billion. It has not made a profit since 2006, and it has racked up at $5.3 billion of cumulative losses," delineated Desilver.

"Last year they ended the year with about 11 billion in debt," said O'Rourke. "There are some who say it may be slightly larger than that depending on certain interest calculations, but for the last year, they've reported they had a net loss of about $8.8 billion. And that was up from about 4.9 billion, the year before."

But O'Rourke says that though the debt figures are alarming, there are other measures that give even more clarity to the Postal Service's financial situation.

"So the thing to remember about the Postal Service is not so much the debt. It isn't the debt that is doing them in. It is a decline in operating revenue and an increase in operating costs," he explained. "Those two lines by my best calculation will cross or meet in the summer of 2021. I'm thinking it's going to be probably in July, and it means that they have no retained earnings or financial reserves. It means that they have revenues insufficient to support operation by next summer, then they'll be unable to meet payroll. They'll be unable to pay vendors for essential supplies. They'll be unable to purchase motor gas."

So the Postal Service is in dire straits. Now what? How does a financially-ravaged organization go from the red to the black using just the resources it has right now? David Trimble sees a path.

“Controlling costs. We had to figure that, yeah, just because a post office, postal facility is unprofitable, that is not enough for them to justify closing that facility; they have to go through other hoops. I think the Post Office estimated at one time that about 36% of their facilities don't cover costs. So we're talking a large, large chunk of that. That goes to the point: the mission is to serve all Americans and all locations, right? So you have that public service mission. So that explains why they're still operating. The issue of how long they can go on, obviously, [the] GAO felt that there was a need for immediate action. I mean, for at least the last 10 years. We still feel that that is the case, that there is an urgent need for Congress and the Post Office to take action on these things.”

In addition to simply cutting costs, which is only feasible to a point, there may be other ways for the Postal Service to make more money without causing too much fuss with the rest of their operations.

“One of the things the Postal Service has tried to do is diversify into, and put more emphasis, on package shipping,” Desilver mentioned optimistically. “Packages and shipping ha[ve] been one of the few bright spots for the Postal Service, particularly as most of its other product lines have been declining in volume. Shipping has been rising, and, particularly, it's been rising during the pandemic. Just in terms of pieces mailed, shipping is up 21%, which is great if they make a decent amount of money on shipping, at least the part that they are allowed to charge market rates.”

Desilver also says that charging more for postage could be a boon for the Postal Service, but much of that is regulated by the government because letter mail is a market-dominant product. So what about raising package shipping prices instead?

“The Post Office could make money, could make more money, but if they raise prices on their shipping services too much—I mean, they compete with FedEx and UPS, increasingly Amazon. I don’t know about your neighborhood—I see Amazon delivery trucks all over the place in my neighborhood. And Amazon started delivering its own stuff to your door, which is in direct competition with the Postal Service, and Amazon is also one of the Postal Service’s biggest customers. So that's kind of a constraint on the Postal Service, because if they raise their prices too much, Amazon will just go out and buy more vans, and they'll start delivering stuff itself. So it's a tough situation to find themselves in.”

Once again, raising the price of postage and package delivery can help to a point, but to get to the root of the problem, O’Rourke has some big ideas that would help eliminate certain costs entirely, including those billion-dollar pre-payments.

“I've had a very close look at this one. They could easily, by act of Congress, admit postal workers and letter carriers to Medicare. There is a fairly serious penalty for not joining Medicare when you turn 65, and you have to turn it down, and that's just what postal workers have done. They said, ‘No, no, we have our own system.’ So some people are 10, 12, 15 years out. The penalty would be unbearable for them to join Medicare at this point. And that's the point of the penalty. They don't want people to sort of join 15 years later when their health declines and [they] require full-time care. But if Congress were to waive the penalty and admit postal workers to Medicare, that would solve one of the problems.”

If postal workers were integrated into Medicare for their health insurance instead of using the current system, it would allow the USPS to stop owing 12 to 16 billion dollars per year in healthcare costs. Without those payments and the separate postal healthcare system, all of the collected funds for that system could be repurposed and the debt expunged.

“There is a trust fund that I now calculate at about $32.5 billion. And that could be used in a number of ways,” O’Rourke said. “One of them is to clean up some debt. Another is to fund benefits that the Postal Service is paying for—for its retirees. So that money exists in the trust fund; it's there. I think the benefits would be number one. You would quit putting money into the fund, if you don't use it anymore. The second is that postal workers would be guaranteed healthcare.”

And from O’Rourke’s personal experience, Medicare is so good that it may potentially be an improvement upon the current postal healthcare system.

“I've had this conversation with letter carriers. I'm a United States Air Force officer retired. I spent 20 years on active duty throwing up in the back seats of some of this nation's finest frontline fighter aircraft. And I will tell you I'm on Medicare,” he said. “I got a letter from the Department of Defense when I turned 65 and they said, ‘Congratulations, your records have been transferred to Medicare social security.’ And I gotta tell you, it's seamless. It's absolutely seamless. It’s as good a system as I could ever have dreamt of. No postal worker has ever posed an objection, other than the penalty for joining on, so we're past that time. We’ve got to get that done.”

What is the USPS anyway?

Today's U.S. Postal Service is not the same postal system that existed at the outset of the United States. This begs the question: how has the USPS' structure changed over time? What does that mean in the context of its current crisis? It starts with the U.S. Post Office Department, which was the original government agency in charge of mail delivery. Daniel Piazza, Assistant Curator of Philately at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, gave some historical insight about the structure of the U.S. Post Office Department.

"Until the early 1970s, the old Post Office Department was really a patronage machine for the sitting president," Piazza explained. "So, having just won a national election, you have supporters and donors and all kinds of other people around the country who are now expecting to be rewarded because they backed the right horse and their man is now sitting in the White House. One of the main ways that the sitting president had to reward supporters was with post office jobs, and so there were a number of jobs in the Post Office Department that were decidedly political—not just postmasters, but even at the regional and local level, there were a number of postal employees who were political appointees."

Essentially, the Post Office Department was a government agency, just like the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Justice, and a multitude of others today. This meant that the Postmaster General sat on the President's Cabinet and that all postal operations were funded by the government using taxpayer dollars. Usually, the President would appoint his campaign manager to be the Postmaster General, which gave the administration a wide political reach.

“That gave the Postmaster General—the campaign manager—an opportunity to basically go anywhere in the country that he needed to at any given time,” said Piazza. “So if there was an election that needed to be dealt with here or a candidate that had to be seen in this part of the country or that part of the country, well then, it's time to go on an inspection to the post offices in that particular state or that county and also do some political business on the side.”

Obviously, this isn’t how the current U.S. Postal Service operates. After the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 passed, the U.S. Post Office Department converted into the existing U.S. Postal Service, exchanging the government agency for something called a government corporation. Instead of the Postmaster General being appointed by the President, the position is filled by a Board of Governors, which is a group of nine individuals appointed by Presidents that are subject to congressional approval. The President also no longer has the ability to just award jobs at the Postal Service to loyal aides. According to David Trimble, Managing Director of the Physical Infrastructure team for the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), the move from the Post Office Department to the Postal Service also marked a substantial change in how the postal system was funded.

“In 1970 when the Postal Reorganization Act passed, that's really when the nature of the funding for the Postal Service changed,” Trimble delineated. “Prior to that, they did get a regular appropriation of around 18-22% to offset some of their operating costs. After that, under the 1970 law, they were supposed to be financially self-sufficient. They would receive funds from the taxpayer and Congress, but they were largely very marginal in size, meant to cover the costs of Congressional mail or mail for the blind.”

After laying out the basics of what the Post Office Department was like, we can get into the nitty-gritty of the Postal Service's organization. James O'Rourke, Teaching Professor of Management at University of Notre Dame and retoritician, broke it down.

"There are two bodies you need to know about," said O'Rourke. "One is the Regulatory Commission, and the other is the Board of Governors. The Board of Governors is much smaller and is appointed by the President of the United States. They then in turn appoint the Deputy Postmaster General and the Postmaster General. It isn't a direct appointment by the President—though, if the President has a majority, he has control over that. It's like the Supreme Court or an appellate court, it's a five-four decision, and you can write your minority dissent, but it's not going to make a difference."

It helps to think of the Board of Governors and the Postmaster General like the executive branch of the federal government. They make a wide variety of decisions about the everyday operations of the Postal Service and how new laws and regulations get implemented; however, the Regulatory Commission is more like the legislative branch.

"The Regulatory Commission sets routes and rates and those sorts of things," continued O'Rourke. "So if the Postmaster General wanted to quadruple the cost of a stamp, he couldn't do it. He would need their authority."

Not only do the Board of Governors and the Postmaster General have to rely on the Regulatory Commission to make more systemic changes, but according to O'Rourke, the Regulatory Commission is also somewhat beholden to Congress.

"In general, the Post Office is not completely free," he said. "It is not in general directed on a day-to-day basis by the Congress of the United States, though the Congress makes the laws; they can weigh in as they see fit."

Another important aspect of the U.S. Postal Service that has carried over from its previous life as the Post Office Department is its mandate to deliver to every address in the country, no matter what.

“They are a very mission-focused organization. They take their mission very seriously, and they go to extraordinary lengths to make that mission,” praised Trimble.

How seriously? O’Rourke says the proof is in the private sector. Private carriers like FedEx and UPS serve just a fraction of the US population.

“Here’s the problem. They [FedEx, USPS, and other private carriers] only serve about 60 to 65% of the market. Let's be generous and say two-thirds,” he explained. “Those are people who can afford it. Businesses roll those costs of a FedEx package into their budget. The upper class, of course, tell their people to go mail things for them. The middle class do it and wince and say, ‘wow, that's okay, I can still do this.’ The lower middle class and the working class don't have the money, and as a result, they don't send things to people very often—maybe at Christmas—but it's a financial hardship. If you take that 11x14 envelope into the Post Office and say, ‘here, send this to my nephew in San Diego,’ it may be $1.85. Go over to the FedEx office, and the opening bid is likely to be nearly $19.”

Not only is it incredibly expensive to send mail through a private carrier, but there’s also a good chance that if you’re trying to send a package to any of the vast swaths of rural America where delivery points are few and far between, those private carriers won’t even be the ones to finish the delivery.

“People who say, ‘oh, well, the private sector can handle it,’ if I send things via FedEx or UPS and they don't happen to deliver to that address, they don't deliver it. Simple as that. Why not? Costs too much,” said O’Rourke. “What do they do? They give it to the Post Office. The

Post Office has a mandate to deliver to those addresses. My own postmaster here in South Bend, Indiana said to me, 'You know, we deliver first-class mail to the floor of the Grand Canyon on a mule.' And she paused and said, 'Last time I was there, I didn't see any FedEx trucks.' The point really is that the Post Office happily delivers to every part of the country, to the last house down that dirt road in western Montana where I grew up. And it does it without complaint, but of course the Postal Service will tell you that they depend on the upper 20% of their parcel post and first-class deliveries, on which they make a profit to cover the 20% at the bottom on which they're losing money."

With the Postal Service's financial troubles piling up as discussed previously, Drew Desilver, a Senior Writer at Pew Research Center, says it might be time to take a critical look at the problem at hand.

"It raises a larger question," Desilver said, "which is, should the Postal Service be considered a business or a service? No one expects the Department of State to make money. No one expects the National Park Service to make money. It's considered government services. No one expects the Agriculture Department to make money; they spend money, and for most of this country's history, the Post Office was exactly the same way. It was a government agency straight up: headed by a cabinet official and the Congress to spend billions of dollars every year, making sure that the mail got delivered. There were post offices at every crossroads and wide spot in the road in the country. The Post Office Department was only reorganized into the Postal Service a half century ago, roughly, and it's only since then that it's been expected to fund its own operations without any taxpayer dollars to fund ongoing delivery services."

Desilver's sentiment echoes throughout many conversations about postal leadership, operations, and finances. Though there are a variety of outcomes that individuals foresee, they're

all asking the same question: what does the United States need the Postal Service to do? And how can that mission be sustained? But in order to work toward a solution, one must first examine the problems.

"The basic message that we have had is that the current business model for the Post Office is no longer sustainable," said Trimble about the GAO's work on the USPS's operations. "You have a broad base mission that is largely driven by statutory requirements to serve every part of this country, at the same time you have costs that are mandated. Costs that the Post Office can't control."

According to Trimble's analysis, the Postal Service is at a crossroads. It wants to continue completing its mission to deliver to every address in America, but there are limitations on its cash flow because of costs required by the 2006 Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act.

"For example, certain benefit programs—retiree health benefits, pension benefits, service level requirements that drive their costs," listed Trimble. "At the same time, the Post Office is not free to raise rates on their primary product line for first-class mail. They're limited in terms of how much they can increase the revenues. So you're sort of in between a rock and a hard place. You have fixed levels of service; you have costs that are largely driven by Congress; and your ability to reduce costs are also restricted. So the structure of the whole operation is what needs to be reexamined."

Part of how the Postal Service is limited is by having its products categorized by law depending on how much autonomy the USPS has with pricing.

"They have their products split into their market-dominant products, which are essentially the stuff they have a monopoly on doing, like first-class mail and postcards and letters and stuff. Those things they cannot raise rates on without getting permission from the Postal Regulatory

Commission," explained Desilver. "Their competitive products, which are most of their shipping and packages, have much more flexibility to raise rates without getting permission, but the constraint there is competition."

It might be wise to think that expanding the number of competitive products would be useful for the Postal Service. After all, more products might lead to an increase in profits. But Desilver says there are roadblocks to that, too.

"If the Postal Service really tried to expand its mandate into some different line of work," he said, "sooner or later, Congress would probably get involved, and that's another hurdle they would have to clear in order to get into anything."

From a more employee-centered standpoint, Janice Nembhard-McLean had some insight. She's the president of the Virginia Beach Area Local for the American Postal Workers Union as well as the president of the Virginia Postal Workers Union for the state of Virginia.

"Organizational commitment wanes when the employer is not as committed to the employee as the employee should be committed to the employer. And when the culture produces a climate that is not positive, then people kind of disengage," Nembhard-McLean said. "In the Post Office, it's not a climate that's conducive to having employees be engaged."

Furthermore, Nembhard-McLean explained that trying to address the problem of employee morale and engagement is made worse by management.

"So we as a union do double duty," she said. "We represent you [the postal worker]. We've fought for you with the employer, but we also want to see positive working environments. I want to be able to communicate with management. Like, I went back and forth with my postmaster yesterday. He was like, 'well, you know, they look at the union as the enemy, so it's hard to get the working relationship.' It's a little bit challenging because it is held within their

mind that the union is just coming after them because they've violated a contract, you know? And for me, I'm coming to [management] like, 'let's try to get things right, so that we don't have to come to you.' I'd rather get things right so the employees don't suffer and they can do a better job so the public is happy with our service."

With these problems confronting the Postal Service, it's time to look toward solutions. As with any problem, the potential fixes are vast in number, but David Trimble says it should always start with asking the right questions.

"A lot of the things that need to be addressed are not within the Postal Service's control. These are not things they can sort of simply manage themselves and get out of it. You really need to examine, what is the level of postal services the nation needs? What do we need the Post Office to do today and into the future? Does this organization need to be financially self-sustaining, or is there some level of public funding that's appropriate given the mission you've identified for the organization?"

According to Trimble, this is just the beginning of the list. He went on to pose more questions.

"Once you figure out what you want it to do, what you need it to be, and how it will be paid, then you can figure out the organizational structure. Is it independent? Is it semi-independent? Is it a government agency, like a [Tennessee Valley Association], Fannie Mae, etc.? That sort of third-level question falls out of the first two—what do you need it to do, how's it going to finance itself, and then what's the most appropriate structure," he noted. "There's prior work [the GAO has] done on smaller-level issues that are important, but the elephant in the room are those three. What do we need the Post Office to be? What do we need it to be in the future? How should it be paid for? And at their heart, these are all public policy

questions. These are policy questions that are appropriate for the Congress to address. They're not questions that an audit agency can answer."

In other words, the GAO points out what needs addressed, but in the end, Trimble and his team can only make suggestions. If Congress decides not to pass legislation to amend the structure of the Postal Service, then the Postal Service has no choice but to continue doing the best it can with what it has. Looking at a more granular level, Nembhard-McLean said she thinks the Postal Service's disorganization might come from the top down.

"I would say that it's really about the way that it's run. You know, in the private sector, leaders have vision. A good leader is going to have a vision and be able to effectively communicate that vision to his employees, and if he or she is charismatic, then they're going to get those employees engaged, buying into their vision, and working to meet those ends," she said. "I feel that's all the Post Office lacks. We have a duty. We have an assignment. We have a goal. We need the tools. We need the empowerment."

But despite the leadership issues that she sees, Nembhard-McLean believes that the foundations of the Postal Service are still strong.

"I don't think that we need to do a total overhaul for just total overhaul sake, because this is in place," she assured. "We deliver to over 160 million addresses every day. It doesn't need to be picked up, thrown out, and put a whole new thing down. It just needs to be fixed."

Beyond the capability of the current postal system, Nembhard-McLean made it clear that privatization of the Postal Service should be out of the question.

"We do want to make it clear that the Post Office does belong to the public, and it should stay that way. There's no private company that could do what we do at the costs that we do. And case in point is UPS and FedEx. We do have partnerships with these companies. So you might

order something, and you think UPS is delivering it, and then they drop it off to us because they figured out, 'they're going there anyway. Like, why should I take this big truck from house to house. The mailman is going anyway; let's give it to them.'"

On a more revolutionary scale, Desilver mentioned a phenomena that isn't new to the Postal Service, but would definitely shake up the system.

"The Postal Service used to be a bank," he said. "For decades, they ran something called the postal savings system where essentially every post office could operate like a bank. It could take deposits, and you'd have an account at the Postal Service bank, and it was intended to serve people who didn't make enough money to have accounts at regular banks."

Simply put, many banks require a minimum deposit of some kind in order to start an account, but for people who live paycheck to paycheck, setting aside enough money for that deposit, even if it's just $50, is next to impossible. In addition, to deposit cash, one has to go to a physical bank. For Americans living in rural areas, the closest bank could be dozens of miles away and only open during the hours of the day when most people are at work. These citizens don't have access to banking services, which means they can't earn interest on savings, invest in stocks and bonds, or even get a credit card.

"There's a lot of talk about the people being unbanked and financial services not wanting to serve people in low-income areas, and there's been some calls for the Postal Service to get back into the postal banking business, but they would need approval to do that," Desilver said. "I don't know if they'd make money at it, but it's something else they could be doing, because one of the strengths that they have as a business is they have this vast nationwide infrastructure of places. They have a network of locations that would be the envy of any fast food chain in terms of comprehensiveness, but it's trying to figure out how to leverage that in some way that could

both pay for itself and also not stray too far from their core mission that would be a real challenge."

O'Rourke has a vast wish list of ways he'd improve the Postal Service if given the opportunity, including replacing inefficient sorting machines, allowing for more flexibility in when mail delivery trucks begin their routes, and double-checking that retired employees get replaced in a timely fashion. But his big dream is exactly what Desilver mentioned: postal banking.

"The commercial banks have said, 'we don't want the banking that the Postal Service would take on because it's the bottom of the pyramid,'" he explained. "These are small accounts. They're expensive to run, and they don't provide us with fees. Nobody's making money on the spread. That's the difference between interest that you earn and interest that you pay out. Nobody's making money on that because money is almost free. The Federal Reserve Bank's Open Market Committee lowered the interbank discount rate to about 25 basis points: you're getting about a quarter of 1% if you're in the prime rate category. Go to your local bank—my local bank here in South Bend, Indiana generously is paying me eight tenths of 1% on my money. All I'm asking them is just keep it in a box somewhere and give it back to me. I don't need any interest at this point because I know that's not an offer."

If the commercial banks don't want these accounts because they don't make any money, what's the point of the Postal Service having them?

"How could the Postal Service make money? Small accounts. Let's say $500 limit," said O'Rourke. "They could sell money orders through that account. They could have savings. They could have checking. They could cash payday checks. And you say, 'who gets a check anymore?' Well, roughly a third of all employed Americans receive a paper check of some kind.

The Postal Service could indeed take direct deposits for those for whom they are available. Those who work occasionally and are paid by check go to payday lenders, and payday lenders charge them a whopping percentage justification check. What else could you do? You could get into loans: short-term loans, very low interest as a percentage of your deposits and based on a formula showing your credit worthiness."

In the end, O'Rourke says that the Postal Service would make money on Postal Banking and be able to increase its cash flow, allowing it to be more agile than it is currently. And in the end, it is the Postal *Service*, and banking is a service that America desperately needs.

"I think it's a scandal in first-world, 21st-century America that about one third of adult Americans are unbanked," mentioned O'Rourke. "They have no banking facilities of any kind. They can't walk in and cash a check. Many of them can't even get a credit card. And of course, a Postal Service bank could give you a Visa card or MasterCard pre-loaded with enough funds for you to get by. It's that important. You can't check into a hotel in this country without a credit card. You can't rent a car without a credit card. There are a lot of other things you can't do. For some people it may be the difference between buying food this weekend. So indeed training Americans to manage their credit, to manage their cash flow, would be one of the easy things that the Postal Service could do."

Stamps: Meaning and Money

When people think about the USPS, one thing immediately comes to mind: stamps. These prepaid postage markers vary widely in design, which catches the attention of enthusiasts everywhere who call themselves philatelists, or stamp collectors. Before examining the stamp design process as well as stamps' role in politics and culture, we should begin at the beginning. Cheryl Ganz, an American philatelist and former Chief Curator of Philately at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, told the story of the origin of postage stamps in the U.S.

"Before we had postage stamps, people sent letters, of course. What happened was the recipient had to pay the fee," Ganz explained. "And people found ways to get out of paying, so they would have codes on the outside of the envelope. The person would look at the envelope when it was delivered and say, 'Well, I'm going to refuse this and not pay for it,' because they could see, 'Ope, my brother arrived, where he was going.' There's a code on the outside."

Ganz said that these refused letters would simply pile up at the Dead Letter Office. England started the trend of requiring prepaid postage in 1840 with the black penny stamp, and the United States followed just seven years later. Stamps started as just a way to ensure that the postage for mail was paid because of how many people were essentially sending mail for free. The move wasn't the most popular with U.S. residents at first, but Ganz said the idea caught on quickly.

"It was a transition period, where you could go either way. I must say it didn't take but a few years. People started using stamps fairly well, and part of the reason is because as more and more people started to use stamps on letters and the Post Office was making more money, they could lower the rates."

Lower postage rates meant that not only could people send letters more frequently, but also those who were part of the working class could afford to write, and business found ways of taking advantage, too.

“This coincided with a time when American literacy was going up. More people, including women, were being educated and could read and write,” Ganz said, “so sending letters and having them at an affordable price, the democratization of the postage and letter writing and communications, all came together to really make this a positive thing. And this is when people started mailing valentines and finding new creative ways. They started using it for advertising their business—traveling salesmen would send a card and say, ‘I'm coming next week, you know, be ready for me.’”

In fact, Ganz said that letter writing became so popular and accessible that some wouldn’t even leave the house without a postage stamp on their person.

“Women even wore a locket around their neck, and in that locket, they would have their postage stamp. So when they went to visit friends or relatives and stay overnight and write letters, because there was so much more time in our lives to write back then, they would carry their postage stamps. Mailing letters was such an important part of their life, as well as receiving the news and sharing this news with everyone they knew.”

Within the world of modern-day stamp creation, Ethel Kessler has been one of four contracted art directors for the U.S. Postal Service for the last 25 years.

“You know, I don't think anybody aspired to the position of stamp art director, because I think that it was an unknown thing for a very long time,” said Kessler.

Kessler talked through the process of designing a stamp, starting with where the subjects of the art originate.

“There is a Citizen Stamp Advisory Committee, and that Committee is made up of people from all over the country with expertise in their fields. They as a collective come together four times a year, and what they do helps to advise the Postmaster General about what should be stamp ideas,” said Kessler. “In addition to that, the Postal Service receives 30,000 suggestions a year on what the public thinks that the stamps should be. So somebody has to go through those and say, ‘oh, that's such a good idea,’ or, ‘we did that last year—they didn't even do their homework?’ You know it's the whole range. The art directors, I like to say, serve the Committee. In other words, the committee makes its decisions, and the U.S. Postal Service staff clears that.”

Once a stamp topic is approved, it gets sent to the art directors so they can choose who will work on the project. At any given time, each art director is working on about 10 stamp projects, each of which takes an average of three years to complete before the final stamp is printed and released to the public. This process takes so long because of the rigorous research and design steps that must be taken to ensure it comes out perfectly.

“Sometimes that subject is not easy to interpret,” Kessler admitted, “how that subject would be on a one inch by one and a half inch tiny, microscopic piece of paper. So if I get the assignment I might come back and say, ‘could we do it this way? Could we do it that way? Can we re-frame the subject?’ And I might have to show them some reasons that my direction might prove to be a visually better product actually.”

But despite some of the bureaucratic red tape that comes with getting every detail just right, Kessler said that the Citizen Stamp Advisory Committee, or CSAC, is a valuable partner in producing quality stamps that everyone will enjoy.

“Sometimes they come up with these wonderfully crazy ideas, and you figure it's never going to work. And then you get into it, and it's like, ‘Oh, this was a good idea,’ you know? So I

would say that we have a great deal of respect for each other and try to make them look good in a way. Also, we all have this very subtle side of ourselves that we would like the stamps to be educational in some way."

The educational aspect of stamps plays a large role in much of the design process. For any given stamp, the art directors employ three or more consultants to weigh in on the subject and do both historical and visual research for them before they even begin to contact artists to contribute work.

"Let's say they give me a subject that I know nothing about," posited Kessler. "First of all, I want to learn something. Now, if it's about a writer, I need to read some of the writer's work. Not just read a couple of lines in a newspaper about the writer, but read some of the work so that I get to be familiar with that. And then, what kind of visual would be the right direction to pursue? Different writers have different grit in their writing, and so do you want an illustration on a stamp that's gritty? Do you want one that is just perfection and beautiful? Or do you want the image to say something about the typical writing that they do?"

No matter the subject, Kessler sees the art director's job as one of a synthesizer. She brings together factual research and visual appeal to recruit and collaborate with American artists to create a one-of-a-kind stamp. Throughout her career, Kessler has been responsible for the design of about 400 individual stamps, but her first is still her favorite: a breast cancer research stamp featuring Diana the Huntress.

"It was the first time that the U.S. ever came out with a stamp that would raise money for a cause, in addition to paying for the postage cost. So, when asked, the Postal Service said, 'no we're not going to do that, we've never done it. Actually, it would take an act of Congress—you're not going to get Congress to agree.'" recounted Kessler. "So the Postal Service

went to Congress and knocked on everybody's door, and they wrote a bill, and the idea of the semi-postal was approved for breast cancer research. And it got approved, I think, September ’97 and it had to be issued July ’98. They weren't fooling around. And I hadn't done a lot of stamps, and of course it has to be approved by the Citizen Stamp Advisory Committee, and I think everybody was holding their breath. Can she do it? Is it going to be what we want?”

Under all the pressure to get the “semi-postal” fundraising stamp approved by Congress, Kessler was in conversation with her boss at the U.S. Postal Service, Terry McCaffrey, who knew that this project was special for Kessler.

“Terry said, ‘No mammography machines, and don't embarrass us.’ At that point, I had had breast cancer, so it was a very important subject for me.”

In the end, Kessler’s breast cancer research stamp was one of the most successful in Postal Service history. Since its release in July 1998, 1,250,000,000 of the stamps have been sold. The secret?

“Something that touches you. Something that touches the heart,” Kessler said.

Stamps can touch the heart, but they can also touch the mind, and the voter. This is a concept that was not lost on some politicians, according to Daniel Piazza, Assistant Curator of Philately at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. It was typical of the sitting President to work closely with the Postmaster General to distribute political messages prior to the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act—that is, when the U.S. Postal Service was still the U.S. Post Office Department. But Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a particularly unique relationship with the Post Office.

“FDR was a stamp collector from childhood, and one of the things he was famous for during his Presidency was getting all of the incoming mail from the federal

government—basically [he] got all the agencies to save their mail. Particularly the State Department mail, because it had these stamps from all over the world that they'd save," Piazza explained. "The first head of the OSS told a story that he was having difficulty getting in to see President Roosevelt. Some of Roosevelt's advisors were trying to actually keep them away from the President, because they didn't like 'Wild' Bill Donovan, the first Head of the OSS, and some of Roosevelt's advisors didn't care for the advice that Donovan was giving Roosevelt. They tried to keep them at arm's length. And so Donovan knew that one way he could get an appointment to see the President was if he told the President he had a big bag of stamps to deliver to him, and so he did this on occasion to kind of circumvent the President's advisors and get in and see him directly."

Though FDR's passion for philately could be a weakness, it also made him especially astute at using the institution for his own political ends.

"Because FDR had this lifelong interest in stamps," said Piazza, "he was really one of the only U.S. presidents to grasp the power that stamps could have to convey his vision of what recovery during the Great Depression would look like. So he used—very successfully—postage stamp design during his administration to project messages of hope and solidarity and better days to come during the Depression. So he was kind of unique in those respects."

According to Ganz, FDR not only leveraged the visual propaganda afforded by stamp design, but was also a master of timing.

"Suddenly, you have a National Parks series. At the same time, you have young men workers going into the Civilian Conservation Corps to work in the National Parks," she said. "So it's a way that people were reinforcing the positive imagery of the importance of these National

Parks, and yet at the same time, they go, 'yeah, Roosevelt sent all those guys, so they could make money and eat, and those are my relatives.'"

FDR took this philatelic mission so seriously that he even became involved with the exact design of stamps, sometimes sketching them on napkins and passing them along to his Postmaster General. Once the power of the stamp was proven, lobbyists wanted to get in on the action, so for a period of time in the 1940s and 50s, unlikely stamps featuring everything from freight trucks to chickens began popping up, prompting the formation of CSAC to vet stamp ideas. No other President came close to FDR's exceptional success at capturing the attention of Americans through the mail, but President John F. Kennedy made one exceptional attempt.

"In 1962, the Kennedy administration decided that one of the ways they wanted to celebrate Project Mercury and putting John Glenn in space was to issue a commemorative postage stamp," Piazza said, "but they were very concerned that, if some sort of a disaster befell the mission, that these stamps would then become an embarrassment, right? [They were] commemorating the great triumph of spaceflight and [instead] the whole thing turned out to be a disaster. So as a result, the Project Mercury postage stamps were engraved and printed and shipped to post offices all around the country in absolute secrecy."

Top secret stamps aren't exactly a run-of-the-mill story, so the Kennedy administration took the distribution very seriously and made sure everyone who handled the packages of stamps was given strict instructions.

"Once the stamps left Washington and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, they left in wrapped and sealed packets, and were sent in complete secrecy to post offices around the country," continued Piazza, "and postmasters were instructed absolutely not to open these packages until they received word from Washington, D.C. that they were authorized so to do.

And the whole point was that if the Project Mercury mission ended in disaster, these stamps could be recalled and destroyed without anyone knowing what they had commemorated or maybe even what they look[ed] like."

Luckily, the mission was successful, and as soon as John Glenn was safely recovered, the order was sent to all the postmasters to open the packages and distribute the stamps. Though the stakes of the Space Race might seem a bit antiquated today, the American public viewed this as a victory over the Soviet Union at the time. The stamps became wildly popular, drawing media attention and plenty of sales.

Yet the question arises: what does all this have to do with the current Postal Service? How do everyday Americans interact with these tiny artistic messages on stamps? As previously discussed, the Postal Service's current finances are in poor condition. But Piazza says that the hobby of stamp collecting may help the Postal Service in a unique way.

"Postage stamps really represent a form of stored value in a sense. They're an IOU that you purchase from the postal service and, in return, the postal service promises to redeem future mail delivery services when you cash in that stamp," he delineated. "So they're a form of an IOU or stored value. And for that reason, the Postal Service really likes stamp collectors because stamp collectors buy that stored value—they buy that IOU—without any intention of redeeming it for postage. So in a sense, that's pure profit that the Postal Service makes when they're able to sell postage stamps to collectors."

But like all good things, it's important to weigh the pros and cons. Though stamps bought for their collective value are pure profit for the Postal Service, they're still not the most expensive of products.

“The Postal Service is enormous. It's an independent agency of the government, but if it were to be considered as a corporation or a business, it's one of the biggest businesses in the country—something like the third or fourth largest employer in the United States,” remarked Piazza. “So, even though we may be talking about millions of dollars in revenue that the Postal Service makes from selling postage stamps to collectors, even those millions of dollars are a drop in the bucket when you look at the huge annual budget and costs of running something as vast as the Postal Service. So we have to keep that in a little bit of perspective.”

Again, it’s all about taking the good with the bad. Though stamps don’t necessarily bring in the greatest revenue, their low cost and accessibility have made them a popular collector’s item. Indeed, millions of people around the world participate in the hobby of philately.

“There is evidence that some people began collecting with the very first postage stamp in 1840 in Great Britain. But I would say it didn't become popular to be a collector until the middle to late 1800s,” said Ganz. “People saw themselves as amateur scientists at that point. This was a time when we were learning to classify animals and other things, so if you are a postage stamp collector, you were collecting the world and classifying the stamps in order, very much like someone who collected rocks or looked for new discoveries and bugs or butterflies. So it was, in the beginning, mostly a male, middle-class endeavor, where it would be their hobby aside from their job.”

In its early days, philately was a status symbol of sorts, showing off the luxuries of knowledge and free time. And as with any hobby, those who collected stamps wanted to engage with each other, especially as the community grew.

“They formed societies, just like you would have science societies for those who are doing sciences, and it developed from there, growing more popular. By 1893, the Post Office

started putting out stamps that told stories," Ganz said. "So they put out a set of stamps that told the story of Columbus discovering America. Today we know that story is wildly slanted to one side, but at the time, for people to see this set of stamps telling stories like paintings on the wall in a museum or something, it was really surprising and wonderful. And those kinds of things caught on very quickly so that by the early 1900s, the United States was even using postage stamps as a way to teach Americans and its immigrant population about the history and culture of the country."

The American Philatelic Society (APS) was founded in 1886, and it is the largest, non-profit organization for stamp collectors in the world. The APS has members in more than 110 countries, and its website, stamps.org, reflects just how ubiquitous the APS is in the stamp-collecting community. Scott English is the Executive Director of the APS, and he had some insight about how philately has changed since its inception in the 1800s.

"I think the image to an outsider is always very similar. You get this perspective of someone who operates on a solo basis, probably older, tends to keep to themselves. And their sole objective is to fill spaces in an album. And you know they have the stamps; they look at them under a magnifying glass," said English. "What I have learned, and I think is really important, is it's much more than that. There is an element of the hobby where you have people who have a need to fill spaces. That is, they have a blank page in front of them in albums, and they have images of the stamps that they need to collect, and they will pursue that. And, in all probability, because there are certain stamps that will cost a lot of money or are incredibly rare, they will spend their entire lives doing that. So the fun thing is that it's really the journey, never the destination."

In addition, according to English, the community has expanded far beyond its male, middle-class origins.

“We have a diverse community that is very young. It’s diverse in its racial makeup, diverse in its socioeconomic status. The great thing about stamp collecting, is it only costs as much as you want to spend, and it has no philosophical hardware built into it. It's really about what your passion is. I often say that stamp collecting is one of the greatest forms of self-expression for people who have no artistic talent.”

When English became the Executive Director of the APS, he was not a stamp collector himself; however, he was a history major in college and loved the depth of study he was able to achieve during his undergraduate career. Instead of just memorizing important figures or monumental events, English loved to look at the everyday minutiae that were more relatable. He says that mentality is part of what drew him to philately.

“For us, you know, we're not going to be titanic figures, most of us in life,” he explained, “so we do appreciate the stories of our Presidents, we do appreciate the historical figures that we study, but what we really want to understand is what was the average American like? What was the average citizen like? What did they go through? How are they influenced by the larger events that we've studied? Getting a little deeper into that lifestyle. And I think, because the Postal Service and mail was the most significant means of communication, it's the most telling as well. Now, we'll lose that in the 20th and 21st century, but there's a lot of history there that we need to preserve and understand, and I think that's the value stamp collecting brings to the table.”

Something else that stamp collecting brings to the table is a tangible human connection that doesn’t rely on technology.

“If you recall, early on in the pandemic, suddenly you started hearing more and more about how people were gardening, and they were learning how to knit, or they were working on stamp collections, coin collections, jigsaw puzzles—some non-digital way of challenging your brain, because we all know the amount of screen time that we all spend is so important because you do need that break,” recounted English. “You do need to be able to engage people in a human way. And stamp collecting is one way of doing that. I obviously have a bias and think it's the most important way of doing that, but you've got to still be able to connect with people in a human way. No matter how important technology is to your world, no matter how much it makes your life easier, you still have to take those breaks and remember that we are all connected together. And the postal service and stamp collecting have done that the most effectively for so long that it's easy to fall back into that habit and say, ‘this is something that is a rich tradition for our country,’ really over the last thousand years.”

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues and everyone is still trying to find ways to stay connected, there’s another tradition that English hopes comes back.

“There was a time before now where we had what I call the ‘mail moment,’” he said, “and it was that you've had a long day. You had to go to the grocery store on your way home from work. You walk in the door, and you open it up and you've got all of these bags in your hands and you have a million different things running through your mind and all of a sudden, you see sitting on the counter, or on the floor depending if you get a mail slot or something like that, you see your stack of mail and at that point everything stopped. You put down the bags, you started looking through the mail, and, of course, you get your fair share of junk mail, but in those days, there was also personal correspondence. There were critical pieces of information that were going to affect your life, and so all of those things made it through the mail. So that moment was

a unified, shared moment that any individual person in our country got to experience, and it was the same no matter who you were. You dropped everything and checked your mail."

Despite a partial loss of the "mail moment," people of all kinds continue to be fascinated by stamps, and, during non-pandemic times, the Smithsonian National Postal Museum was always bustling with visitors. Cheryl Ganz said she loved being a curator prior to retirement and shared answers to frequently asked questions.

"Two questions were our most popular questions. Number one: why do people collect? And for that we have so many reasons," she noted. "Usually I can sum it up by saying we're talking about lifelong learners who don't want to just sit and watch TV. They want to be doing something themselves so that they learn. But also, it can be a very creative process to collect all these different things and organize them in a way that's meaningful. So everyone can say they have a different reason to collect, but often it's an educational reason. And the second most popular question we would get is: I inherited my grandfather's collection. What do I do with it? Then I would say, if you go to stamps.org, which is the site for the American Philatelic Society, the largest stamp organization in the United States, they have a whole section on what to do with an inherited stamp collection. We all hope if we inherit a stamp collection that there's a quarter million dollar stamp inside, and you know, 99% of the cases, it's an educational value collection with not a huge financial value. But you want to be sure, because you never know. My rule of thumb is if you've never spent $5 for a stamp for a collection, you probably don't have a stamp worth $5. But it's still worth having someone who knows about stamps take a look, just to be sure. You can sell collections to dealers in auctions or you can donate them to organizations that use them."

And no matter what, Ethel Kessler says that the stamps will always be there, continuing to ground the nation with tiny windows into history.

“There's the world crashing, rattling us, and yet the team is very dedicated to doing an excellent job. There's a tagline that has been used—it's not official. ‘Telling America’s story to the world.’ So that's what stamps are, and that's what we're doing. And we want to make sure we get it right and that we've got a lot of good stories to talk about.”

The USPS, Trump, and Mail-in Ballots

We've explored various issues and controversies that have plagued the Postal Service for the past two decades, but the elephant in the room must be addressed: what happened between the USPS and the Trump administration? How did that play out in the 2020 Presidential election? To begin answering those questions, recall some of the background from previous chapters. Financially, the Postal Service is underwater, but that red ink is mostly caused by Congressional restrictions and requirements, like fixed prices and prepaid employee benefits. Additionally, first-class mail volume has been falling since the turn of the century, bringing less income and a cash shortage. These are characteristics of the Postal Service that Donald Trump inherited, which hasn't changed much since George W. Bush's administration. Matthew Titolo is a Professor of Law at West Virginia University and began researching USPS issues when the headlines about its institutional organization ballooned.

"When Trump takes office, he puts together another commission to study the Post Office, just like Bush did," said Titolo, "and it advocates at least partial privatization, if you look at the report. He talks favorably about some other private postal systems and how the U.S. can move in that direction. At the same time, you get a kind of media war with President Trump tweeting about some very bizarre stuff—about how the Post Office was a scam and a pyramid scheme, very hostile."

The negative publicity that Trump brought to the Postal Service was both unprecedented and unfounded. Kevin Kosar, Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute who specializes in USPS issues and legislation, points out just a few of the inaccuracies that Trump propagated.

“He accused it of delivering packages, particularly for Amazon, at inadequate rates that claimed that they were losing money on every box they took from Amazon,” Kosar explained. “You know, some people saw that as an allegation based on Trump's antipathy to *The Washington Post*, which is owned by Jeff Bezos of Amazon, but you know the allegation was put out there, and so we had a big debate about parcel pricing in this country.”

Not only were the Postal Service’s package delivery methods targeted, but Trump wrapped in his international vendettas as well.

“Trump also had this broader claim about other nations, in particular China, were ripping off the United States through bad trade deals,” continued Kosar. “Well, he also mapped that over to the postal argument, claiming that the Postal Service was being forced to take inadequate levels of payment due to bad international treaties for mail that it was handling from overseas. Trump also said that we were basically subsidizing China to put Americans out of work by pushing low-price goods through the U.S. mail into the United States. And also mapped it over to the opioid crisis, that China was a great vehicle for all sorts of synthetic narcotics and that these narcotics were being delivered through the U.S. Postal Service. So, three ways right there that Trump kind of turned the Postal Service into a high salience issue, and that's not even to speak of the election and voting by mail, wherein the President said many things that were not always entirely accurate.”

Amid this swirling storm of misinformation, Jacob Bogage says there was a purpose. He’s the USPS reporter at *The Washington Post* and has been following the Trump-USPS beef since the beginning.

“In propagating that lie, he pursued policy objectives of the Postal Service that would raise package prices without any rationale,” said Bogage. “In fact, in a way that would hurt the

Postal Service by driving away business because they would jack up the prices so much. He proposed a 400% package increase and then said, 'I won't give the Postal Service emergency pandemic funding if they don't do it.' That was at the tail end of like 18 months of a consistent assault on the Postal Service. Congress in the CARES Act—which was one of the first bailouts of ordinary people worth $2.2 trillion—there was supposed to be $13 billion for the Postal Service. Trump threatened to veto the entire thing if there was any money for the Postal Service in the package, so instead they turned that $13 billion grant into a loan."

Bogage said that the CARES Act funding being revoked was a wakeup call for discussion and reporting about the USPS, sparking immediate controversy and attention.

"That was kind of the first story I covered on the Postal Service front," he recalled. "Immediately, it was kind of, 'what is behind this? Where is Donald Trump's animus toward the Postal Service coming from? Where's the animus to Amazon coming from? What does that mean for the Postal Service in the long term?' It's an agency that is specifically insulated by law from lawmakers, so it can't tinker with your mail for personal and political gain. Donald Trump's Presidency was so norm-breaking, and this one really seemed to hit home with a lot of people, because people love them. They love them to hell. Man, they remember collecting stamps when we were kids, you know? If you order something and it doesn't show up on time, but your merchant you order from tells you it went out on time, you know who you're going to blame there. So that made the Postal Service really fertile ground for this political battle. And that's what we saw in the run-up to the election, when Donald Trump's attacks on the Postal Service intensified again and again about mail-in balloting, which was ultimately the mechanism that led a lot of voters to remove him from office."

Beyond the withholding of funding and the general political warfare that Trump waged against the USPS, Kosar says the administration didn't make very many lasting changes to the Postal Service's operations. But there is one concrete vestige of the Trump presidency that is still present: the Postmaster General that his administration suggested to the Board of Governors.

"They picked Louis DeJoy. And DeJoy was a Republican fundraiser, but a logistics industry executive. And he was the one who stepped into the job in June of 2020. It's the pandemic, when people were placing more demands on the Postal Service to bring them packages and to carry ballots, and Mr. DeJoy had a rough start and was accused of being a Trump stooge who was helping Trump plot to steal the election by disrupting the delivery of American ballots."

Louis DeJoy is the former CEO of XPO Logistics, which gave him plenty of experience with the types of operations that the USPS deals with; however, because of his involvement with the private sector, it was seen as a potential conflict of interest. Nevertheless, he was approved by the Board of Governors in the summer of 2020.

"When Louis DeJoy takes office in June, the postal service has done, to that point, an excellent job maintaining service, and it shoots to deliver first-class mail on time 96% of the time. It never hit that mark, but it's always around 90 to 93%, and that's where it was in June 2020," said Bogage. "Louis DeJoy takes office and on the week of July 10 unilaterally rolls out this change to how mail is going to be processed and mail is going to be handled, and that involves what I like to say, 'delivering today's mail tomorrow.' If mail came in the morning, it would normally get out the door by that afternoon. Instead it would sit on the dock, and it would go out the next day. So you're literally delivering today's mail tomorrow."

DeJoy later defended these changes, saying that they were made in order to maintain a strict delivery schedule. In addition to changing some of the delivery policies almost immediately after taking office, DeJoy modified the amount of overtime that postal employees could take, which caused huge problems, according to Bogage.

“Overtime is immensely important to the Postal Service. 644,000 employees: believe it or not, that is understaffed,” Bogage said. “So about 10-15% of all Postal Service work hours is overtime now. If you're in the middle of a pandemic and you're having staffing shortages and you need more hours and that number doesn't increase substantially, that should tell you something is artificially holding down hours. Especially because package volume, which is a super time-intensive process, is through the roof.”

Under normal circumstances, this probably wouldn’t have made headlines. But the summer of 2020 was not normal circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic was raging on, and something even more important was on the horizon.

“[Delaying deliveries and cutting overtime] are two huge changes that over the next five weeks delay more than 7% of the nation's mail,” Bogage emphasized. “That on its own, we haven't even had a spike in the coronavirus cases. When we get to election season, resources get diverted from regular mail processing to ballot mail processing.”

These massive slowdowns caused massive panic throughout the summer. Some accused DeJoy of purposely delaying the mail in order to make the Postal Service seem incompetent and justify calls to privatize the mail completely. Others claimed that he was a pawn of Trump, trying to rig the election in the former President’s favor.

“By the end of the summer, there's litigation by states, especially because now everybody's concerned during COVID about the mail-in ballots,” said Titolo. “This became the

defining issue of late summer, early autumn: whether the U.S. was going to be able to have a free and fair election. If you had a massive spike in the number of people—millions and millions more people are now voting with paper ballots and mail-in ballots. So the concern was, with the slowdown to the Post Office, would the elections go off? Would they be free and fair? And how would that work?"

It turns out, this is exactly the kind of sentiment that Trump had been sowing months before. And Jacob Bogage sees exactly which Americans most relied on mail-in voting and who were most fearful of having their votes excluded.

"They don't look like me and you," he said. "They're Black and brown. They're older. They're working middle class. Folks for whom voting has historically been difficult and purposefully so. This was a dramatic expansion of the franchise, and I think that should not be lost on anyone. And, in fact, that is why there are a number of states with a history of voter disenfranchisement who are pushing through laws as we speak to try to limit folks' access to mail-in ballots."

When examining the Postal Service's performance during the election, Bogage went straight to the source.

"The Postal Service's Inspector General, Tammy Whitcomb, said this around the House panel in late February: 'the Postal Service did an effective job prioritizing ballots in their system.' What does effective mean? Okay, that they were able to do the things that they said they would do. What did they say they were going to do? That we're going to prioritize ballots. So they were going to speed [mail-in ballots] up in processing. They were going to pull them out midstream by hand and deliver them instead of sending them through machines. They were

going to sweep their facilities beyond the day to make sure they didn't lose them. So they were effective in prioritizing ballots."

What's more, Bogage believes that the litigation that Titolo mentioned was absolutely necessary for the success of the 2020 presidential election.

"Why were they effective? Because four separate federal courts ordered them to. So it is hard to suggest the Postal Service would have done these things on their own. And that there was constant pressure from the federal courts, specifically from Judge Emmet Sullivan in the District Court of D.C., who held daily status conferences with the Postal Service and voting rights groups, including the NAACP, to make sure the Postal Service was complying. And, in fact, on election day, [the Postal Service] did not comply. And it's relevant on election day, [the federal courts] ordered the Postal Service to expedite some of the steps that they do to make sure the ballots can be delivered to vote counters by cutoff times for [the] books. The Postal Service wrote back to them and said, 'we have our own schedule, and we will do it as we please.' And Sullivan went berserk the next day and threatened to hold Louis DeJoy in contempt of court."

Just to drive the point home, Bogage said, "'effectively prioritizing ballots in the system' is different than doing a good job. The Postal Service processed more ballots the day after election day than [it] did on election day. That should be mind blowing to people. Did the election go off well? Was it successful? Yes, it was successful. Was it successful because of the Postal Service? Absolutely not. So that's the thing that I can't stress enough. There's a difference between, 'we effectively prioritize ballots (because we were forced to do so by four federal courts, and then we didn't even listen, but then we did it when we got ordered to do it, a second time),' and, 'we did a good job.'"

The million-dollar question: did DeJoy intend to slow down the election process? Kevin Kosar thinks not.

“DeJoy continues to be dogged by the sort of bad image he got last year,” he said. “Some of it depicted him as outright malevolent. He was a Trump tool. He was trying to destroy the Postal Service’s ability to deliver mail. He's got secret plans to financially wreck it, so he can sell off the valuable pieces to his private sector cronies, or maybe buy it himself; I mean, there are a lot of nasty images put around this guy that he has to shake off. He also has to show that he really is up to the job of making the Postal Service network run well.”

But Matthew Titolo sees the situation in a slightly more sinister hue, questioning DeJoy’s political judgment.

“Even if it did make sense in some way, the timing tended to cast serious doubt on the credibility of the institution,” said Titolo. “I think that was the issue that a lot of American people had, and that was what the fears were—that this was a partisan attack. And if these were good faith changes, then the smart thing to do would be just to push it off till after the election and say, ‘well, we can wait six months and do this down the road,’ which is what wound up happening anyway, essentially.”

And Bogage thinks that, “somebody could have told [DeJoy], based on the actions that he took, that things would not go well. And he could have asked the Postal Service’s Board of Governors, ‘What do you think of this plan?’ and members of the Board of Governors have testified to the effect that he never consulted them.”

Now that the 2020 Presidential election is over and that Joe Biden has been sworn in, it’s easy to feel that the problems created by the Trump administration have simply gone away;

however, Louis DeJoy is still the Postmaster General, and the USPS can't mend its reputation overnight. Let's talk about where the Postal Service stands with the American public.

"This gets back to the point I made in a white paper I wrote for American Enterprise Institute back in September, which was: the Postal Service tends to operate pretty well, and the Postal Service unfortunately does not tend to communicate that fact particularly well with the public," explained Kosar. "It tends to limit communications to talking to its main customers—that is, the big mailers who pay for all the postage—and it doesn't tell the public a whole lot."

That lack of communication is the root cause of the growing distrust of the Postal Service and its leadership, according to Kosar, because even if some actions are standard procedure, outsiders suddenly noticing it makes the actions appear suspicious.

"When Trump started lighting fire bombs with his rhetoric about the Postal Service, all of a sudden everybody started paying attention to it, but nobody really knows a whole lot," he said. "You know, when somebody saw blue mail collection boxes being removed off the street, they realize that, yeah, they take them and then they clean them up and they paint them and they put them back on the street or they locate them to some other place where there's been shifting consumer demand. That's what they're supposed to do under the law. People didn't realize that and instead started going, 'oh my God, they're stealing the post office boxes, they want to stop us voting by mail.'"

James O'Rourke, a rhetorician and Teaching Professor of Management at University of Notre Dame, also sees transparency as one of the main ways that the Postal Service can regain the trust of the public.

“Arthur Page, who was a vice president at AT&T between 1926 and 1947, had seven principles for ethical communication that are followed by the Page Society today, named in his honor,” O’Rourke said. “One is, tell the truth. Number two, prove it with action. Number three, listen to the customer. So I would pass those along. Try it. Tell the truth, right? You don't have quite so much to write down or remember. Number two, prove it with action. You can say that you have a plan for this or a plan for that for four years. But if you haven't put it on offer and let people examine it then, let's see it. We'd like to look at the numbers; we'd like to have an independent, nonpartisan look at the revenues and the costs, and I'd be happy to serve on that commission. I have no dog in this hunt. I've never worked for the Post Office. No one I know has worked for the Post Office, other than the wonderful woman who delivers our mail each day. I really don't know anyone there, but I am rather fond of the fact that I can depend on them.”

But O’Rourke says that whether or not the Postal Service and the federal government start being more open about their inner workings, Americans need to start demanding it.

“It's important for Americans to care about their government and to care about the services and structures that have been put in place to serve them. Don't assume someone else is going to take care of this or do it on your behalf.”

Jacob Bogage agreed that transparency would help, but as he continues to report on these issues, he sees a wider picture unfolding.

“Over the holiday season, when people are really paying attention to their mail, I have people who every week will email me and say, ‘I just got my Christmas card, and it's three weeks after Christmas or five weeks after Christmas.’ I had someone email me—and they gave me the tracking number so I could check it out for myself—that said, ‘I mailed Christmas presents to my

grandchildren; they went back and forth across the country eight times. They traveled 22,000 miles. I live in Indiana. I was trying to send them to Florida.'"

It's not just Christmas presents and Amazon packages, though. The mail is a vital service in America that provides many people with basic information that they need to survive.

"One of the things that I'm hearing about more and more is folks whose bills are linked, and so they're getting late fees for their credit scores or they're worried their electricity is going to get shut off," said Bogage, "and the cumulative effect of all of that is it drives the mail volume away. The vast, vast, vast majority of first-class mail we send in this country is businesses to individuals. If a business pulls its mail out of the system—say it's your bank and they write to you and say, 'we're going to start charging you to get paper statements in the mail now,' or they start bombarding you with that saying, 'sign up for our APP, sign up for our APP,' or they start sending you messages saying, 'your statements might not be coming on time because we can't trust the mail anymore,' and giving you incentives to leave the Postal Service, that means the big mailers that prop up this nationwide infrastructure of sorting facilities and post offices all over the country is only going to be held up by you and me sending letters to each other, which is nowhere near enough to support that infrastructure, logistically or financially. Which inevitably means we're going to either have to pay more, where a bunch of people are going to lose their jobs or service is going to be degraded."

The problem if big mailers stop adding volume to the Postal Service is that the USPS may not be able to afford to operate at its current level of service. Right now, the Postal Service delivers standard letter mail six days a week and delivers packages seven days a week. If there's less revenue coming in, then there must be fewer employees and less service, but that doesn't

necessarily fulfill the universal service mandate written into the law. Beyond that, Postal Service shrinkage would directly impact millions of Americans.

“This is a great big story about not just the workforce and who supports it, but about how our society is changing and who was on the front end, who's on the back end of that change, and who's vulnerable and has been left behind,” Bogage stated. “The Postal Service by law is supposed to bind the nation together. In the law that constitutes the Postal Service. And if you are leaving people behind, definitionally you are not binding.”

So what’s next for the Postal Service? Joe Biden is the president of the United States, but the two houses of Congress are still divided. And Louis DeJoy is still Postmaster General. At Congressional hearings in February, DeJoy was called to speak, and during those hearings, he refused to commit to resigning from his position for any reason, even if a review committee found a direct conflict of interest. When asked whether he thinks DeJoy will keep his job much longer, Matthew Titolo said this:

“You know, it's hard to say. It really will depend on how Biden himself and the administration respond to his claim that he can stay as long as he wants. I thought that was bizarre, and I think he maybe doesn't understand the way it works, but if the board decides you're gone, you're gone. And that's the way it works. If the board votes you out, then you're out; you don't get to just stay until you decide the mission that you have is complete.”

On the other hand, Kevin Kosar sees DeJoy as a figure who wants to stick around to help the Postal Service, even if his manner is a little gruff.

“I think he wants to help the Postal Service’s financial bottom line. You know, there have been headlines for years and years and years about how the Postal Service is running deficits, and he wants to fix that. Now, the approach that President Biden and the Democratic Party

appear to be choosing is not to try to reimagine the Postal Service for the 21st century in some significant way and to make the operating costs and revenues line up. Rather, it's to take the Postal Service as it is and to focus on its [employee] compensation costs."

But the biggest, most tangible change that has happened to the Postal Service since President Biden took office was the nomination of three new members of the USPS Board of Governors, explained by Bogage.

"Ron Stroman, who was the former deputy Postmaster General. Amber McReynolds, who is the CEO of the Vote at Home Institute. And Anton Hajjar, who's the former General Counsel to the American Postal Workers Union, which represents what we call clerk craft employees, which are folks that process the mail or folks at the counter of your local post offices."

The addition of these three individuals to the Board of Governors shifts the balance of power from a generally Republican or right-leaning majority to a more Democratic or left-leaning majority. Furthermore, Biden's three nominees add immensely to the gender and racial diversity present on the Board, making it more representative of postal workers as a whole, who are disproportionately female and people of color compared to the overall American workforce. With these new members of the Board of Governors, Titolo foresees a strengthening of postal services rather than a push for privatization.

"Have it do its package deliveries, but allow it to do other things as well," he said, "so this would be things like what it used to do between the early 20th century. In the middle of the 20th century, [the USPS] used to [do] postal banking, so the Post Office was actually able to serve as sort of a bank of last resort for folks, and this is big. This is actually a bigger issue than many people realize."

Beyond postal banking, suggestions like expanding broadband internet across the country or creating an accessible power grid for electric cars using the Postal Service's existing infrastructure have been floated. But Titolo's big takeaway is that the Postal Service isn't inherently broken.

"The immediate budget crisis could be fixed with the stroke of a pen by Congress, without any taxpayer money," Titolo emphasized. "We can then talk about other issues the Post Office would have to address, but I want people to come away from listening to these kinds of talks understanding that the Post Office works. It does what it's supposed to do."

And Jacob Bogage adds to that an emphasis about what might be at stake if the immediate problems aren't amended soon.

"It is immensely notable to think that Joe Biden nominated three people to the Postal Service's Board of Governors before his Attorney General was confirmed, right? He doesn't even have a full cabinet and he's saying, 'yeah, but we're going to fill the Postal Service Board of Governors.' There's a recognition that for every step the Postal Service takes where its Board of Governors is not holding itself accountable, that the agency's problems just get worse. That service will get worse. Finances will get worse. The public's confidence will get worse. And you reach a critical point, you reach a tipping point somewhere down the line where big mailers pull their volume out of the Postal Service or service gets cut to a really barebones level and there's no coming back from that. So there are, at the same time, so many crises to tackle, but also a recognition of a race against time to solve these problems before the Postal Service gets too far in the weeds and it is unintelligible. That's not a question of just democracy's survival, but it is a question of a yawning wealth gap and social inequality gap that will only get bigger if you can't do something."

USPS in the Public Eye

Throughout the last six chapters, the focus has been on big-picture issues that reveal the broad strokes of the Postal Service's workings; however, it's time to dive into some of the ways in which the Postal Service impacts everyday people's lives. As the only government entity to physically visit every address in America, six days a week, the USPS binds the country together in a way that no other institution does. From community-building to life-sustaining, the Postal Service plays an integral role in each of our lives. For instance, Logan Meek creates mail art in his free time.

"I've been writing letters for many years, but my first mail art was probably back in 2016," said Meek. "I actually didn't have any envelopes or letters to send stuff with, and I wanted to send my great aunt a birthday card. So I took an index card, I drew a little picture in front, wrote the address and the message on the back, and tried to send it. It got rejected by the Post Office because it was too small, but I was able to put it in an envelope. And that's where I decided to see what I could get away with mailing."

Meek is a student at Diablo Valley College in California who studies library technology and computer information systems. He experiments with sending odd letters and packages to family and friends and uses it as a form of self-expression.

"A lot of people in my family are very art-oriented. I was never one of those. I never took up music or painting, as many people in my family did," explained Meek, "but I feel like doing this as a way for me to tap into that more artistic side of my personality. In addition, letter writing is unfortunately a dying art, but I know how much it means to people to get a birthday

card or to get Christmas letters, and I just wanted to bring that back, you know, to friends and family. It's a bygone era."

Beyond the connections he forges with the people he loves, Meek says that creating mail art is a relatively inexpensive hobby, especially because of his focus on using found objects for his creations. Often he'll take items that people would usually throw in the trash, like cardboard boxes, soda cans, and scrap paper, and transform them into messages for his loved ones.

"It's pretty cheap," he admitted. "Not all the things I sent are cheap because sometimes I have to send them as packages, but a lot of times, using stuff I have around the house saves me from having to buy cards, envelopes, if I can just make it myself."

Hearing him describe his work, it's easy to get a sense of what Meek means by seeing what he could "get away with mailing."

"I've sent a clay tablet that I wrote on and attached postage to. I ended up putting it in a plastic bag because I figured if it broke apart in transit, it would be better to have it still in a plastic bag and arrive to my great aunt. It did end up breaking in transit, but it was my fault. I sent a clay tablet from the mail. I don't know what I expected. And then are—you know those poster boards? They're like five feet by three feet? I turned one of those into a giant postcard. So I drew this logo of the United States Postal Service on the front of it and I made the back, just how you would do a normal postcard, you have your message, you have your stamps. You have your address."

Meek said his inspiration comes in part from more traditional art that he sees, but also from his everyday life and from other mail artists that he's encountered.

"Years ago there was an article on postal experiments where this group sent a whole bunch of things through the mail," Meek recalled, "including a bottle of water, a helium balloon,

a rose with a tag tied to the stem, to see what would go through, and I ended up doing something similar. I sent a fake flower with postage and tracking label addresses attached to an envelope that I tied to the stem of a fake flower. And it somehow made it, which was pretty surprising. Made it in a couple days and in one piece. And then also, I'll take soda cans that I'm done using, I'll rinse them out, and then I'll take a hammer to it—smash into a flat piece. I'll make sure that it doesn't have any sharp edges, and it basically acts like a postcard in that manner."

Sometimes his pieces are more planned and conceptual, especially if they're intended for a special occasion.

"One of my favorites was probably a play on the message in a bottle type thing," he said. "So I took a soda bottle, filled it with Jolly Ranchers, rolled up a message, tied it with a ribbon, and sent it off. I had to fill out a customs form for it and I wasn't exactly sure what to put down. So I just put, "message, Jolly Ranchers." You could see the message and Jolly Ranchers. I decorated some Christmas stuff because it was Christmas, and it cost about $13 and 50 cents to send to the UK."

For each piece of mail art he sends, Meek not only has to ensure that the addresses are visible and legible, but he also must place the correct amount of postage on the piece so that it doesn't get rejected or worse, that the recipient has to pay the rest of the fee. To familiarize himself with postage rates, Meek has read both the Domestic and International Mail Manuals from the USPS cover to cover.

"So usually anything that's under an ounce and is about the shape of the letter, I can send as a non-machine double letter, which is just the regular letter rate plus 15 cents," Meek explained. "Currently, they sell stamps to make up the postage, or you can buy the butterfly stamps. You might have seen him at the post office—they're for non-machine double postage.

It's all bundled in there. Anything that's really odd shaped or heavy or not a letter—like I've sent wooden planks—I send them as actual packages. And the benefit of that is that tracking is included. I know that they are actually being delivered before I get confirmation from friends and family."

So in order to make sure he uses exactly the right amount of postage, how many stamps does Meek keep around?

"Dozens," he admitted. "The main ones I have are a bunch of normal postage stamps for decoration purposes, like dragons, U.S. flag, Plymouth Harbor, space mission. I also have denominations of one cent, two cent, five cent, 10 cent, the additional ounce, which is currently 15 cents. You can buy old postage online for a discount, most of the time, because people don't end up wanting to add all those little postage increments together to make a full letter. So I can usually get like a 10% discount or so. As for larger value stamps, I have the earlier mentioned non-machine double—the butterfly square ones. I don't have a bunch of them anymore, but international stamps, which can be used to send mail internationally, but they're also usable domestically as $1.10 cent stamps. Occasionally I'll have $1, $2, [or] more stamps. But those are expensive, since you have to buy them in sets of 10 or five, and I don't end up using them that much."

Meek said there is a mail art community that exists, but he hasn't ventured into sharing his art publicly yet. He has considered creating a website to display some of his favorite pieces, but for now he finds fulfillment in bringing joy to his friends and family through his creations.

"It is a very personal thing to me. But at the same time that doesn't exclude it from being art. Like, I don't consider myself really an artist. I'm just a person who does art."

Caroline Cunfer has also used the Postal Service to foster personal reflection and connection. She's a Ph.D. student in the American Studies Department at Brown University and an oral historian. In October 2020, she curated a virtual tiny exhibit at the Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University called *Pandemic Post*, which displayed a selection of the more than 100 letters she had sent or received during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"What I find so interesting about the practice of letter writing, especially at this moment in time, and especially in the spring when things began, is that I felt like I was developing this archive in two ways," said Cunfer of her letter writing practice. "I was receiving this archive of fragments of people's independent experiences—not that every letter I received was fully about the pandemic—but especially towards the beginning it really did serve as this historical record or cultural, historical artifact of, in real time, how people were experiencing this massive life transition. And then I also was generating an archive that I kind of disseminated all over the country, and the world really, of my own experiences and what I was thinking, what I was living."

Cunfer says that writing letters to friends throughout the pandemic was an instinctual move for her because of her experiences going to summer camp every year as a child. She would be without technology for seven weeks and only communicate with her family via letter writing. As a result, she feels that her view of letter writing is more modern than the average person, though she hadn't maintained consistent correspondence until the pandemic began.

"Over the years I sent sporadic letters and postcards to certain friends, a lot of them from the summer camp who I have more of a letter-writing or postcard-sending relationship with than others," she explained. "I haven't had like, that I can think of until the pandemic, like a full-on correspondence sort of relationship, but I think, probably more than the average person, to send a

letter or to send a postcard. And also attracted aesthetically to like stationery and postcards. When I go somewhere and I think of certain friends who would like to receive this postcard or what have you."

In addition to the transitions inherent in the pandemic experience, like staying at home more, wearing masks, and social distancing, Cunfer made another huge transition—moving from New York City to New Hampshire to live with her relatives.

"When the pandemic started, I was living in New York. Very split-second made this decision to go to my relatives in New Hampshire," Cunfer recalled. "They drove down to pick me up, and I think that it was impulsive, but I was really resistant to this new Zoom world. I was really not having it, and in part, I also didn't have real Wi-Fi. So even if I had wanted to participate in this Zoom world, it was more challenging being in New Hampshire. And I put out this call on Instagram and was like, 'I would love to be your pen pal. Let me know if you want to write letters,' and just started sending them to people whose addresses I knew who I thought would be interested. And over the next six months, just accumulated maybe like 15 to 20 people who I was writing letters to."

Because of the unreliable internet connection she had access to in New Hampshire, Cunfer used letter writing as a way to maintain connections with her friends despite the distance they were experiencing. She said her impulse came from wanting to seek humanity as an antidote to the crisis we were all enduring. As an added bonus, sending letters also gave her something to look forward to each day.

"There's always been something exciting about waiting by the mailbox, and especially in the pandemic where, aside from knowing that I was going to start a Ph.D. and that I was going to be moving to Providence, I felt like for so long I had nothing to look forward to," remembered

Cunfer. “And I'm sure a lot of people have this very disorienting experience of feeling like they had nothing ahead of them. And I think it’s such a human experience to anticipate things and that anticipation is half the fun most of the time, and to not have anything to anticipate was really difficult. So having this little sense of daily anticipation of mail in the mailbox was huge, and I really think got me through a lot of the first few months, if not the first six months, of the pandemic.”

During a time when people couldn’t see each other to socialize in the same physical space, Cunfer found sending tangible items to be an inadequate but helpful proxy.

“I think there's something about the materiality of a letter that you can't have in email or a text or even a phone call,” she said. “Like, you don't have a trace of a phone call. And you have a trace of what people have sent to you; you might not have a trace of what you've sent out to the world, but there was something also really exciting about just amassing these letters in this box. And when I was in New Hampshire, I just had a pile of them. I tried to slice the envelope in a way that I could keep the envelope pretty intact, and I just loved looking through and touching and looking at people's handwriting. I think handwriting is so intimate and something that we're seeing less and less. I think it's probably not abnormal in this day and age to not know what your friends’ handwriting looks like, which is a travesty in my opinion. But so many things are digital [when] you're in the classroom. You’re on your laptop, whatever. And so to engage with someone, through their handwriting, just felt very special, and seeing just the way that the envelopes look different and the stamps and where it came from was also very exciting to me to have these things to hold and to keep. Especially in this historic moment, that I have all of these, these pieces of correspondence that really speak to what we collectively are experiencing right now.”

Cunfer explained that she has always felt an appreciation for the Postal Service because of her deep connection to letter writing, but that she saw the Postal Service rise to the forefront of people's minds as the pandemic set in, especially since everyone was relying more heavily on mail correspondence and package delivery.

"You know, before the pandemic, people weren't feeling or weren't at least acknowledging that their lives were reliant on it," reflected Cunfer. "I think that's probably the biggest thing is like the acknowledgement of, 'Oh, wow. So many aspects of my life depend on the functioning of this system,' and having multiple moments of reckoning this year where people actually realized the reality of that."

Elaborating on that sentiment, Cunfer recalls her initial reactions to events over the summer that seemed to put the USPS' survival in danger.

"I certainly remember feeling a little bit of like superiority complex and like, 'oh yeah, I knew that the USPS was super critical and important. Of course I don't want it to be defunded. I thought this before they were being threatened,'" she admitted. "You know, we were worried about the election and whatnot. And I want everybody to feel that because I really think that there's probably not a single person whose life in some way is not dependent on the Postal Service and really in ways that we don't think of. You know, sending letters is frivolous to an extent, it was like for fun. That wasn't like a life or death situation or, you know, democracy or not situation, but [the Postal Service is] much more. Imagining a world where it was defunded—I can't imagine a world where it doesn't exist."

No matter when the COVID-19 pandemic ends, Cunfer said she hopes to continue her letter writing practice in a more intentional way throughout her life, both to preserve this mode

of connection and to uphold the tradition of letter writing. But she knows that her individual practice won't be enough to save the whole system.

"I hope that, especially after this year, that the Postal Service is more alive in people's consciousness as a critical and alive system that really supports and sustains us and keeps us connected."

Meek and Cunfer both use the Postal Service to express themselves to a wider community of people. But sending mail isn't just a pastime for many people. Millions of Americans rely on the Postal Service's dependable delivery to sustain their businesses, transport their bill payments on time, and even provide life-saving medications.

"My grocery store contains everything from fresh milk to frozen meats to makeup, toilet paper—we carry everything," said Heidi Varga, owner of Golovin Bay Trading Company in Golovin, Alaska. "And 99% of that comes in through the USPS bypass mail program. We have no roads that come into my village. So everything that we receive here, well again 90% of that, is through air cargo only. There are a few months in the summer where they unfreeze the ice and we can get barges, but that's not used for grocery type items. The distance and the time that it takes to get here is just too long, so airfreight is the only way. And with the bypass program, we're able to offer our items at a decent price. It's still pretty crazy expensive, but at a decent price as opposed to having to pay for it per pound commercially on their carriers. So, it plays a huge significant role."

Due to the remote nature of Alaskan living, the USPS runs a program called bypass mail, which is defined on their website as "Parcel Post® mail that is prepared so as not to require handling by Postal Service personnel or in a Postal Service facility. The bypass mail process was established to alleviate congestion of mail in processing centers by creating bypass mail

acceptance points." Essentially, instead of Postal Service workers themselves delivering bulk orders of 1,000 pounds or more to people in remote areas of Alaska, the USPS partners with commercial airlines to deliver the orders for them, as the Postal Service does not operate its own fleet of planes. The program is subsidized by the Postal Service, making products cheaper to send to Alaska than they would be otherwise. But because of the expense of the program, lawmakers periodically call for it to be shut down. Varga said that would make it impossible for Alaskans to get fresh products, like dairy and eggs.

"It would be unavailable; we wouldn't be able to do it," said Varga. "You know the cost of living, not just groceries, but the cost of fuel, everything that people need to survive on out here, is expensive in general. Being able to provide some salads or some fresh milk or some butter and eggs, you know, all of those perishable items would be… I don't know how they did it in the old days, quite honestly. Mama told me a story that the mail used to come with the dog teams and then in the summer came on the ships."

As it stands with the bypass mail system in place, a half a gallon of milk will cost you nearly $10 at Golovin Bay Trading Company. Varga explained that this is the least she's able to charge without losing money on the product. If the bypass mail system were to be cut, Varga thinks that the price would double or even triple, making it entirely inaccessible to her customers. She tries to get a new shipment of goods every week to keep her shelves stocked, but sometimes other factors get in the way.

"That depends on the weather sometimes," explained Varga. "We're expecting a storm tonight, and I'm waiting on a shipment of over 2,000 pounds, so I'm hoping it gets here today because the next arrival time will be Saturday. I am currently out of milk. So, you know, the weather is a hindrance. We're constantly watching the weather. Every week we try to get

something in, and the customers like that too, because then they're always coming in to see what we got. We are just a tiny little village, and a big part of everyone's day, besides going to work, is going to the store, especially in these times."

Golovin is a small town, with just 142 residents, according to alaska-demographics.com. Varga's store used to be her grandmother's house, but then it was passed on to her uncle, and Varga bought it from him. The entire building is about 20 feet by 40 feet, but the space is enough to provide a variety of groceries for the town. When asked what she thinks the overall consequences of the USPS slashing the bypass mail program would be, Varga was at a bit of a loss.

"You know, I just... if everything had to go through the Post Office on that timeline—which, you know, I'm in the bush anyway—I think we would do away with anything fresh or refrigerated, and we'd be on canned and dried foods. And of course the price would be hard to imagine."

Not only does Golovin depend heavily on goods that are mailed to the town in order to have food, fuel, medicines, and other essential supplies, but the Post Office is also an essential employer.

"The number of jobs in the village are scarce—good paying jobs," she said. "I think people would have to leave if the prices became so outrageous that they couldn't afford to feed themselves with store-bought. And living off the land has become more and more difficult. You know, our tradition was to live off the land. And then when you have regulations that say you can't fish after this time, or you can't hunt after this time, and your supermarket from the natural world is only open on certain days and then you can't afford what's being offered in the stores due to the prices, people wouldn't be able to scrape by."

Though mail with the bypass program is much better than it would be without, Varga said that issues still arise due to some consolidation that the Postal Service has done in the last few decades.

“You know, our post office is a main hub, just like going to the grocery store. For people, that's the one highlight of the day,” she noted. “I feel like maybe I shouldn't speak for everyone, but mine is to go in and check the mail. They have tracking systems for, you know, you order something, and you can track it and it'll say delivered, but we still won't see it here in the village for sometimes a week later or two weeks later. Or sometimes it gets lost. My village shares the same zip code as Nome and as Diomede, a little tiny place I mentioned earlier that can only be accessed by helicopter. We all share the same zip code because we are so small. Sometimes my mail will go up to Diomede, and then I have to wait for it to come back here.”

In short, because there are so many small villages in Alaska, not every village gets its own zip code. As a result, they get lumped together. And if a piece of mail is sorted into the incorrect village, it can be shipped hundreds of miles off course. Another repercussion of this system is that not every village gets a federally run post office.

“We’re a contract post office because of our zip code,” she explained. “So our employees here are not paid federally; they are paid by the city, who holds the contract with the Post Office. And that in itself has led to a not-so-great employment history lately, and because so many people rely on the post office for their incoming mail—for checks that they will use for bills they need to send out or money orders are still a big process here, that's what I use to move my cash to the bank—when we don't have an employee filling that position, that kind of puts our whole community on hold. So, the post office is still a very vital lifeline for us in our community.”

These employees at the contract post office in Golovin aren't official federal employees, which means that they aren't guaranteed benefits in the same way that unionized postal workers do. But Varga said it's a give and take. Having a contract post office ensures that it won't close due to federal government budget cuts, protecting the village from going without a post office entirely. In the end, Varga says she's hopeful that the bypass mail program will continue to thrive in Alaska.

"I think, you know, the more people understand, it might change their mind or sway it a little bit to not be so quick to say, 'get rid of that,' because there are people out here that really highly depend on the program," said Varga. "And if it comes up to the chopping block again, I would sincerely hope that, and I believe there will be, senators and representatives out there fighting for it. I wish I had a solution to offer other than just saying, 'don't take it away.' You know, I wish there was an easy solution for this. Our little villages have become pretty dependent on the western way of the world. I grew up like this, and so I don't think it would be fair to say, 'this is how it's going to live,' and then take it away and say, 'now figure it out.'"

Drew Desilver, a Senior Writer at Pew Research Center, has a soft spot for the Postal Service and he says Americans do, too.

"You can't go anywhere in this country without seeing an outpost of the Postal Service, and I always think about that," he said.

Without fail, Pew's yearly survey of American's satisfaction with various government entity reveals that people are more pleased with the USPS's service than any other governmental institution.

"I always think about this great sci-fi novel that came out some time ago called *The Postman*," recalled Desilver. "It's a post-apocalyptic novel, where a guy wandering around finds

an old Postal Service uniform and a mailbag and puts it on, and he sort of becomes the living embodiment of the authority of the United States government and tries to give hope to the survivors. And that's kind of what the Postal Service has been for most of its life. It has been one of the few government entities that basically touches everybody where they live. Almost every day. It's a constant reminder of the fact that we are knit together as a single nation, more so than McDonald's or Starbucks or, you know, a private company."

A policy proposal that arises every few years is the privatization of the Postal Service. In other words, changing the USPS from a government corporation, like it is right now, into a private mail delivery business, like FedEx or UPS. With this model, the government would have no control over who gets mail delivered, when it gets delivered, or how much it costs.

"To bring the Postal Service more aligned with being a business would involve shutting down a lot of those offices," explained Desilver. "It would involve probably laying off a lot of employees. That would involve cutting back on delivery. It might involve paying different rates of postage depending on where you're sending stuff. That's one of the hallmarks of the Postal Service...that no matter whether you're sending a letter across town or across the country, you paid the same first-class rate. That has been one of the defining features of Postal Service since it began and no for-profit business would ever operate that way."

Matthew Titolo, a Professor of Law at West Virginia University, researches the impact of the Postal Service and has written extensively on privatization policies. One thing he realized during his research was that the Postal Service impacts many more aspects of American society than he originally thought.

"A lot of people depend on it for their prescriptions," explained Titolo, "older folks, rural folks depend on it. So suddenly if that kind of dependable continuous service gets interrupted,

and people are noticing that, they are going to put pressure on; they write letters to their representative. One of the things that's inspiring these calls for reform is that people are getting tons and tons of emails and letters from their constituents saying, 'what is going on? Why am I not getting my medications on time?' Turns out that the postal infrastructure is also part of the U.S. medical infrastructure, which is something I learned when I was researching this last year. A lot of people depend on it for routine delivery of prescriptions and things like this in rural areas."

Many legislators and advocates in favor of a private postal system point out other countries that have privatized their mail and been successful, like Germany, Portugal, and Japan. However, it's a difficult comparison to make according to Titolo, because of how big the U.S. is. Additionally, though privatizing the USPS would take it off the federal government's to-do list, Titolo said that the pros and cons just don't balance out.

"In terms of privatizing the postal service, it's not clear to me what advantage that would bring that wouldn't also lead to serious service cuts and would also compromise the universal service obligation," he noted. "There is a trade-off between a universal service obligation and privatization, by default, by definition."

The goal of a private company is always going to be to help its bottom line. To do this, it must be discerning in its target audience. No private company can adequately serve every single individual in the same way the Postal Service with a government mandate can.

"One of the things that private firms can do better than public entities is to discriminate essentially, to pick and choose who they want to serve," Titolo said. "If you can pick and choose who you want to serve, then you can essentially pick the low-hanging fruit. You can do the easy deliveries, shorter routes; you have a lot more choice. When you have a universal service

obligation, that doesn't allow you to say, ‘well sorry, Alaska, you can't send mail to West Virginia. That's going to cost you $28.’ I mean, you could do that, but ultimately that's what we're talking about. We're talking about a massive spike in pricing, and we'd have to make it efficient.”

Titolo adds that, “you'd have to bring in stakeholders; this is going to be something that private equity wants to get into. They're going to expect high rates of return, which is going to mean low cost, and it's going to mean low overhead. So privatization might mean cutting jobs. And that is 600,000 people working at the Post Office at a time of high unemployment.”

Conclusion

Over the last seven chapters, I hope the complexity and importance of the Postal Service in the greater scheme of American society is clearer. From the very foundations of our democracy to the everyday pace of each American's life, the USPS permeates everything. A world without the Postal Service would be apocalyptic. Regular mail deliveries would only be affordable for the rich, and essential items like food, fuel, and medications would be astronomically more expensive due to transportation costs. Birthday cards, anniversary notes, and Christmas packages could very well become a thing of the past for vast swaths of Americans because postage prices would no longer be government regulated. Though some of these impacts might be mitigated by the prevalence of electronic communications, it cannot be understated that the Postal Service provides an essential service to the country and its citizens.

The details of the USPS are compelling, but the most critical takeaway is this: without the USPS, the U.S. would no longer thrive, even compared to the struggle the country is enduring during the COVID-19 pandemic. Universal mail service is one of the great equalizers of this country, allowing every address to be reached without fail. There are struggles still ahead of the USPS as it approaches a financial reckoning that will force it to reevaluate its goals and purposes, but one hopes that it comes out on the other side a stronger, more equitable institution.

Methods Appendix

Contents

Journalistic Methods

This project relied heavily on research and reporting skills that I have learned throughout my undergraduate career. The two most important skills I used were sourcing and interviewing. Most of the sourcing for this project was done through research on the Internet. I looked for experts in the field of USPS history and operations and approached both current and former employees of the organization. I also read the news extensively, as the vast majority of the content of this project is contemporary. In fact, many of the events I reference throughout the work had not even happened when I chose my topic. Those interviewees that were not sourced directly from my own research were found through referrals by other journalists, by other interviewees, or by the contact reaching out directly to me.

The other skill that was most integral to the execution of this project was interviewing. Though it was made somewhat more difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic, I directly interviewed every single individual quoted in this work. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone call and were recorded live to ensure the utmost accuracy. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, totaling more than 20 hours of recordings. The best, most illuminating parts of these conversations were included in the above chapters.

Data Introduction

With the United States Postal Service (USPS) constantly in the news for its financial hardships in recent years, it seems logical to explore potential solutions to its growing deficit. The analysis below analyzes data from the USPS in an attempt to pinpoint variables that are correlated with USPS profits and therefore might be leveraged to alleviate their financial concerns. The data is given in multiple datasets and contains annual:

- Domestic letter rates, 1792—Present
- Pieces of mail handled, 1789—Present
- Income, 1789—Present
- Expenses, 1789—Present
- Stamped card/postcard rates, 1873—Present
- First class mail volume, 1926—Present
- Number of stamped cards/postcards sent via first class mail, 1926—Present
- Number of postal employees, 1926—Present

In order to ensure the relevance of this analysis, only the data for years after the USPS was reformed from the U.S. Post Office Department into the USPS will be used, which is 1971-2019. All of the data can be found through the USPS directly at the USPS website. (https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/rates-historical-statistics.htm) The preliminary questions are as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between the number of pieces of mail handled, the number of post offices, and/or number of employees?
2. Is there a relationship between USPS income and the amount of mail that they process?

3. Is there a relationship between USPS profit (income-expenses) and mail rates?
4. What variables have the strongest correlation with profit (income-expenses)?

All of these questions build to a greater guiding question: what can the USPS do, given its current financial crisis, to increase profits?

In the following sections, each of the four preliminary questions are addressed individually. After looking at the results from the smaller questions, the findings are synthesized to determine possible areas where the USPS might look to increase its profits.

Pre-analysis: Data Cleaning

The data is in seven separate files. To complete the analysis, all of the data must be synthesized into one cohesive dataset that has values for each variable by year. But first, the individual datasets need to be cleaned.[1]

First, check the datasets to ensure they imported properly.[2] According to the summaries, most of the numeric data is being processed as factors because it contains commas. To fix this, replace the commas with nothing (no character) and cast the values as numerics. Since this is done over and over, write a new function to complete the repetitive task. The function factor.to.numeric() takes in a dataframe and a numeric vector of columns to convert and outputs the same dataframe with the given columns converted to numerics.[3] With the help of this function, once can easily clean all of the datasets and convert the factors to numerics.[4]

The next datasets to clean are the rates for stamped cards, postcards, and domestic letters. The data is given in a format where only the years when the rates were changed are listed. It's easy to see that there are years for which the postage rate data is not listed.[5]

To fill in the data so that every year has a postage rate, the most recent postage rate from previous years must be used. For example, if 1929 doesn't have a value given, but in 1928 the postage rate was 1 cent, assume that the postage rate from 1928 carried over into 1929. This is called imputation. In order to complete this task, write a function called rate.fill(). The function takes in a dataset and a vector of years and output a dataframe with all the years from the vector and the corresponding postage rate.[6]

Now that there is a function to fill in the rates, apply it to the datasets of the rates for stamped cards, postcards, and domestic letters.[7]

Next, calculate the USPS' profit. This is done by creating a new column in the dataset that contains income and expenses. Since profit is the surplus money after operating costs, calculate profit by subtracting expenses from income.[8]

Currently, the data for the number of stamped cards and postcards sent is in two datasets: one that has data up to 1996 and one that has data after 1996. This is because prior to 1996, the USPS recorded the number of stamped cards and postcards separately, but after 1996 they started combining the data. For this analysis, create a dataset for all years with combined data.[9]

Finally, all of the data can be combined into one dataset. Since only data from 1971-2019 is needed, filter out any years prior to 1971. The final dataset contains[10]:

- Year
- Pieces of first class mail to the nearest million
- Number of stamped cards and postcards sent via first class mail
- Number of presorted postcards sent via first class mail
- Pieces of mail handled
- Number of post offices
- Number of employees
- Income
- Expenses
- Profit
- Domestic letter rates in cents per ounce
- Stamped card and postcard rates in cents

Question 1: Is there a relationship between the number of pieces of mail handled and the number of number of employees?

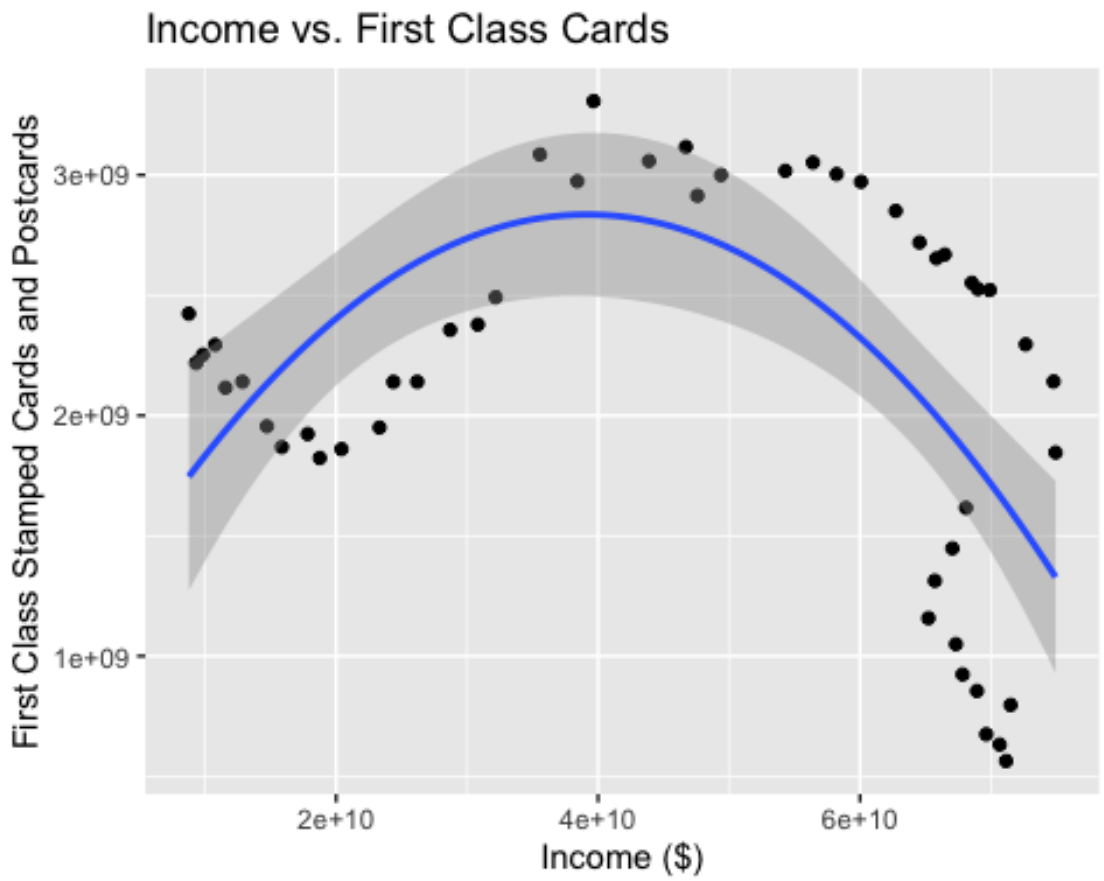
One of the best ways to explore relationships in data is to visualize it. Here, see a plot of number of postal employees and first class mail volume.[11]

When looking at the graph that plots postal employees against first class mail volume, the relationship appears linear. As mail volume increases, so too do the number of USPS employees.

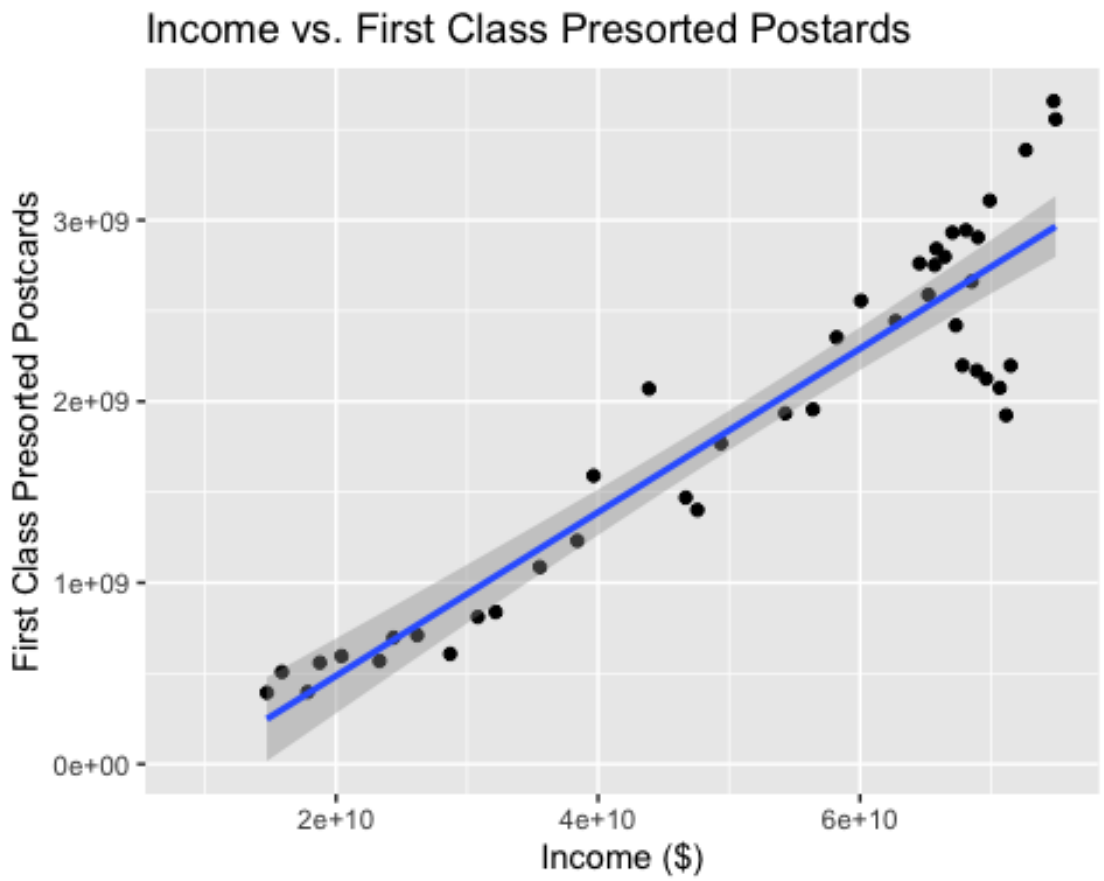
Question 2: Is there a relationship between USPS income and the amount of mail that they process?

In theory, the more mail that the USPS processes, the more people are paying the USPS to send items. More paying customers should equate to more income. However, as evidenced by the following charts, that's only true to a point. First, examine the volume of first class mail, which is the most expensive type of letter mail. Most stamps are "first-class" stamps, so if someone sends a personal letter, it's probably via first-class mail.

Once again, there is a vaguely quadratic relationship between income and first class mail volume.[12] Although more first class mail can be helpful in producing more income for the USPS, it's not a perfect predictor.



The number of first class stamped cards and postcards is even less associated with income than overall first class mail volume.[13] However, there is a very strong linear relationship between income and the number of presorted postcards.[14] These cards are usually sent by businesses and are often what people call "junk mail." They contain advertisements, event notifications, and other mass-mail content.

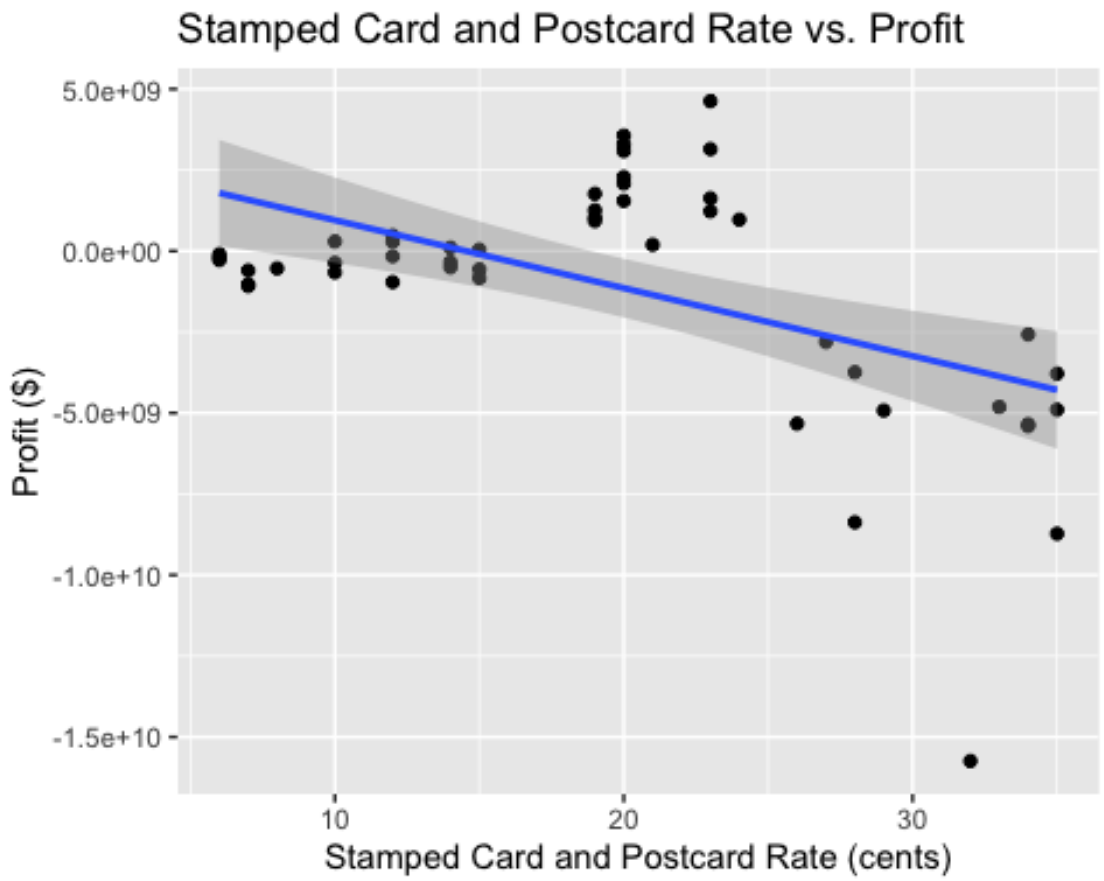


Combining all of the mail categories previously graphed with all other mail types, such as parcels, yields the total pieces of mail handled by the USPS. Overall, looking at the interaction between total mail volume and income, they have a slightly weaker linear relationship than first class presorted postcards and income.[15]


Income vs. Total Mail Handled
Pieces of Mail Handled
2.0e+11
1.6e+11
1.2e+11
8.0e+10
2e+10
4e+10
6e+10
Income ($)

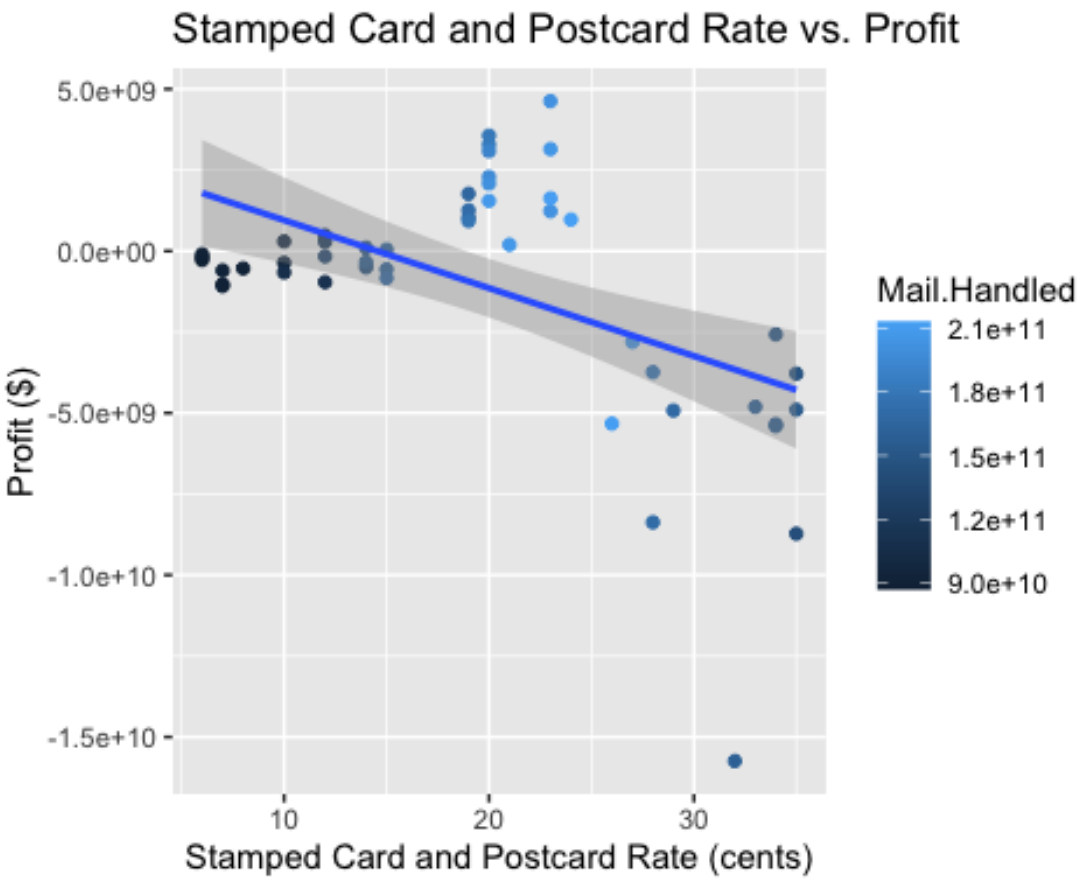
Question 3: Is there a relationship between USPS profit (income-expenses) and mail rates?

One way that businesses can increase profits is by increasing their prices. If a good or service becomes more expensive despite no change in operating costs, the business should also make more money. Yet, as evidenced by the following two graphs of profit versus domestic letter rates[16] and stamped card and postcard rates[17], profits actually decrease as postage rates have increased. This seems counterintuitive, so it's prudent to look for a confounding variable.



Below are the same two graphs comparing profit versus domestic letter rates[18] and stamped card and postcard rates[19], but the color of the points now corresponds to the volume of mail handled by the USPS, which we explored in the last section. The lighter colors show years when more mail was handles and darker colors show when less mail was handled. Nearly all of the years when the USPS turned a profit (profit > 0) are a lighter color, showing that mail volume may be more important than postage rates.


Domestic Letter Rate vs. Profit
5.0e+09
0.0e+00
-5.0e+09
-1.0e+10
-1.5e+10
Profit ($)
10
20
30
40
50
Domestic Letter Rate (cents per ounce)
Mail.Handled
2.1e+11
1.8e+11
1.5e+11
1.2e+11
9.0e+10


Stamped Card and Postcard Rate vs. Profit
5.0e+09
0.0e+00
-5.0e+09
-1.0e+10
-1.5e+10
Profit ($)
10
20
30
Stamped Card and Postcard Rate (cents)
Mail.Handled
2.1e+11
1.8e+11
1.5e+11
1.2e+11
9.0e+10

Question 4: What variables have the strongest correlation with profit (income-expenses)?

Visualizations can be very helpful in determining general trends, but exact numbers are also valuable. In order to quantify numeric relationships, correlation is the best tool. Since this analysis requires computing many correlations from the same dataset, write a function to reduce the possibility of error. The corr.pairs() function takes in a dataframe and outputs a dataframe of all possible pairs of numeric vectors and their correlation.[20]

Using the corr.pairs() function evaluates all correlations between numeric variables in our USPS data. Since only variables correlated with profits are interesting for this analysis, filter the output of our function and then sort it in descending order by correlation to see the strongest relationships first.[21] The top five variables that are most strongly correlated with profits are:

Variable	Correlation
First-class stamped cards and postcards	0.7468398
Employees	0.5874839
Stamped Card and Postcard Rate	-0.5184321
Domestic Letter Rate	-0.4633234
Year	-0.4599717

Since the year is not something that the USPS can control, exclude that correlation, which changes the top five variables to:

Variable	Correlation
First-class stamped cards and postcards	0.7468398
Employees	0.5874839
Stamped Card and Postcard Rate	-0.5184321
Domestic Letter Rate	-0.4633234
Total first class mail volume	0.4156819

It appears that a greater number of first class stamped cards and postcards, employees, and overall pieces of first-class mail increase profits, while higher letter and postcard rates decrease profits. By far, the variable with the strongest correlation to profit is the number of first-class stamped cards and postcards.

Post-analysis: What can the USPS do, given its current financial crisis, to increase profits?

According to all of the above analysis, the most helpful thing for the USPS to do to increase profits is to increase the amount of mail that they handle. Any business is good business, but given its strong correlation with increased profits, focusing on boosting sales of first-class stamped cards and postcards will be most beneficial to the USPS' bottom line.

Though some may assume that increasing prices will increase profits as well, the analyses conducted above reveal the opposite. As postage rates of all kinds increase, the USPS' profits actually decrease, plunging them further into the red. The USPS should focus on increasing customers' use of their services in order to help them overcome their deficits.

Appendix

This is a code appendix that contains all the code used to complete the analysis, but is not shown in the above sections. The numbered sections here correspond to the superscripted numbers above.

1

```
# Import packages
library(tidyverse)
library(ggplot2)

# Import data
First.Class.Mail.Volume.Pieces.to.Nearest.Million <-
  read.csv("~/PHP2560/First-Class Mail Volume Since 1926 (Number of Pieces
Mailed, to the Nearest Million) - Sheet1.csv")
Postal.Employees <- read.csv("~/PHP2560/Number of Postal Employees -
Sheet1.csv")
Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses <-
  read.csv("~/PHP2560/Pieces of Mail Handled, Number of Post Offices, Income,
and Expenses - Sheet1.csv")
Rates.Stamped.Cards.Postcards <-
  read.csv("~/PHP2560/Rates for Stamped Cards and Postcards - Sheet1.csv")
Rates.Domestic.Letters <- read.csv("~/PHP2560/Rates for Domestic Letters -
Sheet1.csv")
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.after.1996 <-
  read.csv("~/PHP2560/Number of Stamped Cards and Postcards Sent via
First-Class Mail - after 1996.csv")
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996 <-
  read.csv("~/PHP2560/Number of Stamped Cards and Postcards Sent via
First-Class Mail - up to 1996.csv")
```

2

```
summary(First.Class.Mail.Volume.Pieces.to.Nearest.Million)
summary(Postal.Employees)
summary(Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses)
summary(Rates.Stamped.Cards.Postcards)
summary(Rates.Domestic.Letters)
summary(Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.after.1996)
summary(Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996)
```

3

```
factor.to.numeric <- function(data, cols)
                      {
                        #' Converts given columns from numbers with commas to
numbers without
                        #'@param data dataframe
                        #'@param cols numerical vector
                        #'@return data dataframe

                        # Loop through cols to convert
                        for(i in 1:length(cols))
                        {
                          data[,cols[i]] <- as.numeric(gsub(",", "",
data[,cols[i]]))
                        }

                        # Returns fixed dataframe
                        return(data)
                      }
```

4

```
First.Class.Mail.Volume.Pieces.to.Nearest.Million <-
  factor.to.numeric(First.Class.Mail.Volume.Pieces.to.Nearest.Million, 2)
Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses <-
  factor.to.numeric(Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses, 2:5)
Postal.Employees <- factor.to.numeric(Postal.Employees, 2)
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.after.1996 <-
  factor.to.numeric(Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.after.1996,
2:3)
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996 <-
  factor.to.numeric(Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996,
2:4)
```

5

```
head(Rates.Stamped.Cards.Postcards)
head(Rates.Domestic.Letters)
```

6

```
rate.fill <- function(data, years)
                {
```

```
                  #' Fills in missing postage rates based on most recent year
prior
                  #'@param data dataframe
                  #'@param years numerical vector
                  #'@return complete dataframe

                  # Declare relevant variables
                  n <- length(years)
                  rates <- rep(NA, n)

                  # Loop through data to create data with all years and
missing values
                  # where rates are not given
                  for(i in 1:n)
                  {
                    if (years[i] %in% data[,1])
                    {
                      rates[i] <- data[which(data[,1]==years[i]),2]
                    }
                  }

                  # Make complete dataframe and fill in missing values
                  complete <- data.frame(years, rates)
                  complete <- fill(complete, rates)
                  return(complete)
                }
```

7

```
Rates.Domestic.Letters <- rate.fill(Rates.Domestic.Letters, 1885:2019)
Rates.Stamped.Cards.Postcards <- rate.fill(Rates.Stamped.Cards.Postcards,
1928:2019)
```

8

```
Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses <-
  Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses %>%
  mutate(Profit = Income-Expenses)
```

9

```
# Combine values for stamped cards and postcards up to 1996
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996 <-
  data.frame(Fiscal.Year =
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996$Fiscal.Year,
             Stamped.Cards.and.Postcards =
```

```
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996$Stamped.Cards +

Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996$Postcards,
             Presorted.Postcards =

Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996$Presorted.Postcards)

# Combine the datasets
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class <-
  rbind(Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.up.to.1996,
        Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class.Mail.after.1996)
```

10

```
Year <- 1971:2019
First.Class.Mil.Pieces <-
First.Class.Mail.Volume.Pieces.to.Nearest.Million$Pieces[46:94]
First.Class.Cards <-
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class$Stamped.Cards.and.Postcards[46:94]
First.Class.Presort <-
Stamped.Cards.Postcards.Sent.First.Class$Presorted.Postcards[46:94]
Mail.Handled <-
Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses$Pieces.of.Mail.Handled[182:2
30]
Post.Offices <-
Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses$Number.of.Post.Offices[182:2
30]
Employees <- Postal.Employees$Number.of.Employees[46:94]
Income <- Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses$Income[182:230]
Expenses <-
Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses$Expenses[182:230]
Profit <- Pieces.Mail.Handled.Post.Offices.Income.Expenses$Profit[182:230]
Letter.Rate.Cent.Per.Ounce <- Rates.Domestic.Letters$rates[87:135]
Card.Rate.Cent <- Rates.Stamped.Cards.Postcards$rates[44:92]

USPSData <- data.frame(Year, First.Class.Mil.Pieces, First.Class.Cards,
First.Class.Presort,
                       Mail.Handled, Post.Offices, Employees, Income,
Expenses, Profit,
                       Letter.Rate.Cent.Per.Ounce, Card.Rate.Cent)
head(USPSData, 10)
```

11

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Employees, y = First.Class.Mil.Pieces)) +
geom_point() +
```

```
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x, size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Employees vs. First Class Mail Volume", x = "Number of Postal
Employees",
       y = "First Class Mail Volume (nearest million pieces)")
```

12

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Income, y = First.Class.Mil.Pieces)) + geom_point()
+
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x + I(x^2), size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Income vs. First Class Mail Volume", x = "Income ($)",
       y = "First Class Mail Volume (nearest million pieces)")
```

13

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Income, y = First.Class.Cards)) + geom_point() +
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x + I(x^2), size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Income vs. First Class Cards", x = "Income ($)",
       y = "First Class Stamped Cards and Postcards")
```

14

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Income, y = First.Class.Presort)) + geom_point() +
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x, size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Income vs. First Class Presorted Postards", x = "Income ($)",
       y = "First Class Presorted Postcards")
```

15

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Income, y = Mail.Handled)) + geom_point() +
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x, size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Income vs. Total Mail Handled", x = "Income ($)", y = "Pieces
of Mail Handled")
```

16

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Letter.Rate.Cent.Per.Ounce, y = Profit)) +
geom_point() +
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x, size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Domestic Letter Rate vs. Profit", x = "Domestic Letter Rate
(cents per ounce)",
       y = "Profit ($)")
```

17

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Card.Rate.Cent, y = Profit)) + geom_point() +
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x, size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Stamped Card and Postcard Rate vs. Profit",
       x = "Stamped Card and Postcard Rate (cents)", y = "Profit ($)")
```

18

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Letter.Rate.Cent.Per.Ounce, y = Profit, color =
Mail.Handled)) +
  geom_point() + stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x, size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Domestic Letter Rate vs. Profit", x = "Domestic Letter Rate
(cents per ounce)",
       y = "Profit ($)")
```

19

```
ggplot(USPSData, aes(x = Card.Rate.Cent, y = Profit, color = Mail.Handled)) +
geom_point() +
  stat_smooth(method = "lm", formula = y ~ x, size = 1) +
  labs(title = "Stamped Card and Postcard Rate vs. Profit",
       x = "Stamped Card and Postcard Rate (cents)", y = "Profit ($)")
```

20

```
corr.pairs <- function(data)
                {
                    #'Takes in a dataframe with multiple numeric columns
                    #'Outputs pairs of numeric columns with correlation
                    #'@param data dataframe
                    #'@return pairs dataframe

                    # Select/create relevant data
                    num <- data %>% select_if(is.numeric)
                    first.col <- c()
                    second.col <- c()
                    r <- c()

                    # Calculate correlation between each pair of numerical
columns, exclude NA values
                    for(col1 in 1:dim(num)[2])
                    {
                        for(col2 in col1:dim(num)[2])
                        {
                            first.col <- c(first.col, colnames(num)[col1])
```

```
                            second.col <- c(second.col, colnames(num)[col2])
                            r <- c(r, cor(num[which(!is.na(data[,col1]) &
!is.na(data[,col2])), col1],
                                          num[which(!is.na(data[,col1]) &
!is.na(data[,col2])), col2]))
                          }
                    }

                    # Return the pairs and correlations
                    pairs <- data.frame(first.col, second.col, r)
                    return(pairs)
                }
```

21

```
USPS.corr <- corr.pairs(USPSData) %>% filter(first.col != second.col,
                                             first.col == "Profit" |
second.col == "Profit")
USPS.corr <- USPS.corr[order(abs(USPS.corr$r), decreasing = TRUE),]
print(USPS.corr)
```

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisors, Peggy Chang, Leslie Welch, Jonathan Readey, and Linda Clark, for believing in and supporting this project from the beginning. You have each been integral in my success by talking me through problems, calming me when I'm stressed, and being my cheerleaders when I hit a rough patch. I cannot express how grateful I am to have worked with you all for the last year (or more) and hope that this project is everything I promised it would be.

Next, I'd like to thank my family. You've lived with me through this entire process and endured countless postal-related discussions, most of which probably bored you to death. I appreciate your patience when I'm high-strung and your consolation when I feel stuck.

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Lastly, I'd like to thank you, the reader, for exploring the Postal Service with me. I hope you've enjoyed engaging with this content as much as I've enjoyed uncovering it. If you are getting to the end of this thesis and now searching for a pen pal, please visit emiliaruzicka.com, where you can find my current contact information.