

This Day in History... August 28, 1864

Start of Railway Mail Service

On August 28, 1864, the US Post Office Department created the Railway Mail Service. It revolutionized mail delivery for a century.

In 1838 Congress approved an act designating all United States railroad routes as postal routes. A significant improvement over the traditional method of delivering mail by horse-drawn coaches, the railway service signaled the end of one era and the beginning of another.

For nearly 30 years, trains were used to transport mail between post offices. The mailbags were loaded onto the trains and delivered to the post office where they were sorted. However, while some of the mail was delivered, many letters

were returned to the bags and placed back on the trains to be sorted later. This inefficiency led American postal officials to consider other options.

Soon the idea emerged to have mail clerks on the trains to sort the mail as it traveled between towns. In 1862, the idea was briefly tested on the Hannibal and St. Joseph line in Missouri. Then two years later, Chicago's assistant postmaster George B. Armstrong pushed for the widespread use of a railway post office and succeeded. The first mail car, a renovated baggage car, ran on the Chicago and North Western Railroad line



Pictures a railway postal clerk preparing to pick up and drop off mail at a station.

between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa, on August 28, 1864.

Clerks aboard the train sorted mail not just for routes along the line, but also for those beyond the end of the line. This new railway mail service proved a great success. More mail cars were added to travel between New York and Washington, New York and Erie, Pennsylvania, as well as between Chicago and Burlington, Illinois, and Chicago and Rock Island, Illinois.

These trains didn't always stop at every station, but those smaller stations still had mail. Early on, the trains had to slow down so the clerks could grab the mailbags, which was both inefficient and dangerous. Eventually, they developed mail cranes. Mailbags were hung on a crane at stations that were too small for the train to stop. The clerk extended a bar that grabbed the bag as the train passed going between 30 and 70 miles per hour.

By 1867, there were 18 railway mail routes that crossed over 4,435 miles of track with 160 clerks hard at work. They were so efficient that dozens of clerks at stationary post offices were fired or moved to other jobs because they were no longer needed to sort the mail. The clerks took great pride in their work and could sort up to 600 pieces of mail an hour, and up until the mid-1900's, Railway Mail Service dominated the movement of the mail.

However, as airplanes and highways expanded and improved, the need for railway mail began to decline. Postal officials also began to move toward mechanical processing. On June 30, 1977, the very last railway mail car ended its final run when it pulled into Washington's Union Station.



Pictures a railroad mail car.



Pictures a mail train along with the crane holding mail to be picked up.



Stamp pictures US mail milestones, including a railway mail car.



Hudson's General carried an East Division Railway Post Office.

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