# What is Postal History?

Discussion published by Susan Smith on Wednesday, September 26, 2018

**Richard R. John, professor of history and communications**

**Columbia University**

For those of us who are intrigued by the character and significance of postal networks, the launch of H-POSTAL HISTORY is auspicious.  Historians, cultural critics, sociologists, and political scientists have all turned to this topic in recent years, creating a rich and ever-growing scholarly literature on the significance of postal networks for business, politics, culture, and public life.

What are postal networks and how are they best studied?  Postal networks are organizations that facilitate the time-specific circulation of information, and sometimes also of people and goods.  Some are government operated; others are commercial.  Synonyms include the post and the mail. Whatever these networks are called, public-ness is the key. For thousands of years, courier networks linked the powers-that-be.  Courier networks, however, were not postal networks—since they remained closed to the public. Postal networks need not be government monopolies:  the aristocratic Thurn and Taxis family, for example, operated for several centuries a large postal network in central Europe.  While postal networks remain important today, their significance in the pre-digital age was far greater. In the nineteenth century, for example, the primary medium for long-distance communications was not the telegraph but the mail—making the nineteenth-century postal network the true "Victorian Internet." The recent publication of a seven-hundred-and-fifty-two-page *Edinburgh Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Letters and Letter Writing*(2016), testifies to the depth of recent scholarship for this period on the production, distribution, and reception of the mail.

While many scholars have focused on the kinds of information that circulated in the mail, philatelists who exhibit and study physical items related to the history of the post know a great deal about how letters, newspapers, and periodicals circulated from place to place. These groups of researchers generally use very different source materials and approaches, and have very different audiences. This has meant that the insights of one group have not often reached the other group.  Bridging these divides will make postal history a much richer field.

Moreover, the field of postal history must also embrace a wider range of topics, including the study of postal organizations.  Topics worthy of further study include postal administration (e.g. staffing, scheduling, and accounting); postal finance; postal transportation; postal technology; postal censorship; postal privacy; postal policy; postal reform; and inter-network postal coordination via organizations such as the Universal Postal Union. Many topics in pre-First World War postal networks remain unexplored, while surprisingly little has been written on the post for the more recent past. Exemplary recent books on selected topics include Andrew Pettegree's *Invention of News* (2014), which casts the spotlight on the key role of early modern European postal networks in the circulation of public information and David M. Henkin's *Postal Age* (2006), a cultural history of the popularization of letter-writing in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.

It is hoped that H-Postal History can become a platform through which insights and methods can be shared. H-Postal History has the potential to open up a wide range of inquiries on topics that, while vitally important, remain too little-known. Let the discussions begin!