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From the Transport to the Delivery of Mail: The Transformation of the French Postal Network in the Nineteenth Century

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The nineteenth century constituted a period of extensive structural evolution for the French Post Office. Until 1830, "postal service" denoted exclusively the transport of mail and people. Through a "rural postal service" law in 1830, the French Post Office extended its field of operations to include the collection and delivery of mail throughout the country, taking responsibility for the mail service from beginning to end. The most important transformation occurred in the adaptation of the human and administrative networks of the postal service: the role of rural postal worker was created; the post offices, whose numbers greatly increased, were spread throughout the country, set up in proximity to the post houses that had been established earlier. Nearly twenty years before the introduction of the postage stamp, the "rural postal service" put France on a road to early modernity.

The nineteenth century constituted a period of great development and significant modernization of both administrative and industrial activities. At the intersection of these two kinds of endeavors, the French Postal Service also underwent a major transformation, as radical at the time as that of any other enterprise. The changes included an extraordinary acceleration in the speed of mail-routing, based on the adoption of new means of transport (the railroad supplanting the horse-drawn mail coach); a commitment to providing an increasing breadth of service, in particular expanded financial services (money orders, the Post Office Savings Bank, postal checks); and an institutional evolution from a body under the Ministry of Finance to a separate ministry of Postal and Telegraph Service.

In examining some of these developments, we will emphasize how the essential task of the Post Office—its treatment of the mail—led to the transformation of the postal network. If the Postal Service changed from being almost exclusively a conveyor of the mail (and of people) to that of "owning" the mail chain from beginning to end, including transport,

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collection, and delivery, it reached that point as a result of the transformation of its primary physical and human resources.[1]

This significant aspect of postal operations has received relatively little emphasis within French historiography. The institutional evolution of the Post Office has been well researched, primarily by Eugène Vaillé.[2] A great deal of progress has also been made by Dominique Bertinotti, Odile Join-Lambert, and Marie Cartier in the study of the social history of various ranks of Post Office employees.[3] Economic historians such as Benoît Oger have given increasing attention to financial services.[4] However, the "product" of the Post Office—the mail—has remained in the shadows; although we know the broad outlines of the history of mail handlng, less is known about the details that drove reforms.

To make clear the interaction between the evolution of postal activities and the adaptation of the French Postal Service network, I examine three main periods during the nineteenth century. Before the 1830s, the organization of the network reflected the Post Office's principal concern: the transport of letters and people, with the delivery of letters occupying only a marginal place. During the years 1830-1870, the Postal Service structured its network to establish a synergy between the transport of letters and the transport of people. At the end of the nineteenth century, rail and courier company transport made horse coach service obsolete; that was the era of network optimization.

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[1] Sébastien Richez, "Le développement des Postes au XIX^{e} siècle: acculturation des Français, implantation et mutation des infrastructures et des personnels par l'illustration de la Normandie: 1830-1914" (Ph.D. diss., University of Caen, 2002).

[2] For the nineteenth century, Eugène Vaillé, *Histoire des Postes françaises*, vol. 2: "Depuis la Révolution jusqu'à 1945" (Paris, 1947); for the *Ancien Régime*, Eugène Vaillé, *Histoire générale des Postes françaises* (Paris, 1947-1955), vol. 1: "Des origines à la fin du Moyen-Age" (1947); vol. 2: "De Louis XI à la création de la surintendance générale des Postes (1477-1630)" (1949); vol. 3: "De la réforme de Louis XIII à la nomination de Louvois à la surintendance générale des Postes (1630-1668)" (1950); vol. 4: "Louvois, surintendant général des Postes (1668-1691)" (1951); vol. 5: "La Ferme générale et le groupe Pajot-Rouillé (1691-1738)" (1951); vol. 6: "La Ferme générale et le groupe Grimod-Thiroux (1738-1789)" (1955).

[3] Dominique Bertinotti-Autaa, "Recherches sur la naissance et le développement du secteur tertiaire en France: les employés des PTT sous la Troisième République" (Ph.D. diss., University of Paris I, 1984); Bertinotti-Autaa, "Carrières féminines dans l'administration des Postes," *Annales E.S.C* 3 (May-June 1985): 625-40. Odile Join-Lambert, *Le receveur des Postes, entre l'Etat et l'usager* (Paris, 2001); Join-Lambert, "Le receveur des PTT dans la société française, 1946-1973" (Ph.D. diss., Paris I, 2000); Marie Cartier, *Les facteurs et leurs tournées: Un service public au quotidien* (Paris, 2002).

[4] Benoît Oger, "La Caisse Nationale d'Epargne: Origines, enjeux, développements (1861-1914)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Paris VIII, 2002).

The Essential Mission until 1830: Transporting the Mail

Characterizing the French Postal Service at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a transport service is not too far from reality.

The Cohabitation of Two Entities. The early nineteenth-century French Postal Service was heir to the structure set up at its founding by King Louis XI in the sixteenth century: it was initially an organization dedicated to the transport of correspondence relating to state affairs between Paris and the large cities of the kingdom, the traditional seats of the *intendances*. Beginning with the reign of Henri IV, this organization gradually began to assume responsibility for the most sensitive private correspondence as well.[5]

To ensure this transport, the French Postal Service used the road network, in particular the royal, imperial, or national roads (depending on the terminology used by the political regime in place). Post houses were established on these roads, run by postmasters who were members of the administration and who worked under the terms of a patent they bought giving them that authority. They were positioned at regular intervals along the main roads, so that their locations formed a star centered on Paris.[6]

What distinguished a post house from a post office? The post house initially had the appearance of an inn or farm, where the horses drawing the mail coaches were changed and where travelers could be discharged and picked up. Post houses were not in charge of the mail itself; that work was reserved for the post office. The post office was an administrative room in a house where one dealt only with the mail and money orders. Before 1830, the French Postal Service's management structures perfectly mirrored its activity. In 1820, the number of post offices (1,775) barely exceeded the number of post houses (1,352).

How were these two entities, both necessary to the circulation of letters, connected? There were two alternatives. The most frequent was the establishment of both a post house and a post office in the same town, generally on the same road. Thus, when the mail coach passed through, it stopped for only a few moments to deposit and pick up dispatches at the post office before arriving at the post house. In most cases, post houses preceded the establishment of post offices, whose numbers nevertheless grew more rapidly. When a new post office was located in a town lacking a post house, and if it was located off the route of the mail coach, a person was paid to bring dispatches back and forth between the post office and the mail coach on foot, to save the expense of building a specific road to allow the coach to reach the new post office.

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[5] Eugène Vaillé, *Histoire des Postes françaises jusqu'à la Révolution* (Paris, 1957).

[6] See Patrick Marchand, "Les maîtres de poste et le transport public en France, 1700-1850" (Ph.D. diss., University of Paris I, 2004).

A Marginal Delivery of Letters. The primary aim of this double structure was to transport the mail between cities equipped with post offices. The delivery of the mail to intended recipients was a secondary task, one that took several forms. Initially, mail delivery occurred only in the cities, although residential delivery of letters was envisaged for all towns where there was a post office. There were, however, issues concerning the size of the work force available on March 31, 1830, the day before the startup of the rural service.[7] With approximately 1,300 post offices in the entire country at the time, the administration attached only 443 postal workers to rural delivery service. The total staff of the postal service did not permit greater commitment to the delivery of letters; in 1820, there were 3,519 postal workers, and in 1829, 4,051 employees. Thus, not only was there no systematic delivery of letters in all towns with a post office, but there were also serious inequities among the levels of service provided; the differences reflected budgetary inequalities. Not all office directors were allocated appropriations for a letter carrier. Directors who did not receive these funds were not required to provide mail delivery.[8] Consequently, those holding the mail had to use all means at their disposal, employing great ingenuity, to attract recipients to the post office to pick up their mail. It was what one could call "a sedentary delivery of letters," rather than an itinerant distribution, which could be organized only when financing became available.

Delivery of administrative letters to state officials and representatives (mayors, sub-prefects, prefects, and men of the Church) was assured everywhere in France, but it was carried on by a completely separate organizational structure.[9] It was managed by the sub-prefectures and based on the network of town halls. The establishment of pedestrian messengers (*messagers-piétons*), who were organized on December 25, 1796, testified to the determination of the state to insure reliable communications with its local subordinates.[10] Towns without a post office made a contribution to finance the use of one pedestrian messenger per *canton* (administrative subdivision), who, two to three times a week, served the entire local administration. The messenger distributed correspondence and brought back mail addressed to the prefect and the sub-prefect.

Thus city postal workers handled the intra-urban correspondence and pedestrian messengers took care of the correspondence of

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[7] Numbers given by Jeanne Bouvier, *Les dames employées dans les P.T.T. 1714-1929* (Paris, 1930), 247.

[8] Musée de La Poste de Paris [hereafter, MP Paris], "distribution des lettres," in *Instruction générale sur le service des Postes aux lettres*, 1792, section XX: 54.

[9] Sébastien Richez, "Les messagers-piétons en Normandie," *Etudes Normandes* 3 (Sept. 2001): 33-45.

[10] Jean-Baptiste Duvergier, *Lois, décrets, ordonnances, règlements et avis du conseil d'Etat* . . . [Arrêté du Directoire exécutif, n°924, 4 nivôse an 5], 283.

administrative personnel, but the mail of the inhabitants of the 36,000 rural villages was not delivered. The nobility and large landowners sent a servant to retrieve mail. Until April 1830, this anarchistic and uneven system, in contrast to the well-oiled organization of administrative correspondence, was the only way for ordinary people to receive mail. In some localities, the inhabitants joined together to organize a common transport; in many others, those handling the mail simply waited for some fortuitous occasion to hand recipients the letters that were aging in the office racks. Even the sub-prefecture pedestrian messengers endorsed the temporary use of private messengers, although they also dealt initially with administrative correspondence. Thus, the campaign for mail delivery began in part with impromptu human networks.[11]

The operation of the French Postal Service before 1830 was minimalist; the mail was transported on the main roads to principal points in the country and to the large cities; in some cities with a post office, letters were delivered. Operations radiated from Paris at the center of the system toward the provinces: correspondence between Bordeaux and Marseille, for example, went first to Paris before being redirected toward the Gironde.

From the July Monarchy to the End of the Second Empire: The Structuring of the Postal Network

If 1830 did not mark a complete revolution in the history of mail delivery in France, as some have said, it at least signified a large step in the metamorphosis of the postal network toward serving new roles.[12]

A New Mission. A June 1829 law radically modified the treatment of the mail in France. Beginning on April 1, 1830, the French Postal Service undertook to distribute and collect the mail in all rural towns, even in those without a post office (nearly 36,000 in 1830) on one out of every two days. Daily service was mandated in 1832, but did not actually go into effect everywhere in France until 1864. How did this large-scale organization come about? To create the rural service, the administration started with the organization of pedestrian messengers, which was gradually dismantled after 1830. The majority of its employees transferred to become rural postal workers, and the system of periodic rounds was copied from the old methods. It is important to note that the rural service was not an *ex nihilo* invention, but was in fact born from the ruins of the pedestrian messengers' organization.

Mail collection was included in the definition of rural service. This was made possible by the installation of almost 36,000 mailboxes in rural

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[11] MP Paris, D 3073 (carton 20-9), anonymus, "Pétition adressée aux nobles membres de la chambre des Pairs" (1828-1829).

[12] On this subject, see Dominique Piotet, *Histoire des grands débats économiques et politiques de la Poste aux XIX^e^-XX^e^ siècles* (Paris, 1997).

towns, at a rate of one per village. Their arrival transformed the daily lives of the French. These mailboxes constituted a new network, a physical structure of the first importance, and their monitoring and maintenance created increasing responsibilities. The new Post Office initiatives had three consequences for the design of the French postal network: diversified office organizations; a wide network of postal workers; and a modernization of the transport system.

A Network of Diversified Offices. The pedestrian messengers had radiated through the *cantons*, departing from the main towns to serve the surrounding villages. For rural service, only a post office could serve as a base for postal workers. Thus, the assumption of responsibility for daily mail delivery thoughout the country produced a significant increase in the number of postal establishments. In 1830, there were 1,975 post offices; by 1852 their numbers almost doubled (to 3,715), and by 1875 there were 5,243 units. Offices were distributed to cover the territory equally. Normandy, which provided the case study for my thesis, illustrates the process. All the chief towns of Eure were equipped by 1848, those of Orne by 1857, those of Seine-Maritime by 1870. By 1881 in all of France only 45 (1.25 percent) of the 3,600 chief *canton* towns lacked a post office.

The typology of post office structures provides a roadmap of the network transformations. Around 1830, there were three types of offices. In order of ascending importance, these were "distribution offices," "simple offices," and "composite offices." In "distribution offices" (*bureau de distribution*), a single employee distributed the mail via counter service (in 1820 there were 486 such establishments; the maximum of 1,313 was reached in 1867). In "simple offices" (*bureau simple*), a director supervised several postal workers and a counter clerk. This was the most frequent office type within the network, with approximately 2,400 locations in 1850 and 5,000 by 1875. The "composite offices" (*bureau composé*) were established in the large cities and had a more extensive work force; their numbers grew more slowly, with 239 units in 1850 and only 319 by 1878.

The Second Empire brought innovative changes. In the mid-1850s, the role of "postal carrier-receiver" (*facteur-receveur*) was established to lower costs for towns requesting a post office. This single agent carried out a morning round of deliveries and provided counter service in the afternoon. With a modest beginning of 71 units in 1855, the numbers did not increase substantially until the arrival of the Third Republic; there were 443 units by 1879. In 1864, the offices were reorganized such that "simple" and "composite" offices were placed on equal footing; "distribution" offices were subsumed within the larger hierarchy. Financial conditions were clearly right for a strong increase in postal network activity.

A Wide Human Network. Implementing uniform mail service throughout the country required a significant increase in postal employees. The

French Postal Service quickly grew from 4,000 agents in 1829 before the reforms, to nearly 34,000 Post Office employees in 1879, before the fusion of the postal and telegraph services. It is important to examine the evolution of employees by rank to confirm the structural transformation. The numbers of rural postal workers, a category created in 1830, experienced strong development, in keeping with its monumental task (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
The Growth of Rural Postal Workers before 1850

Time Period	Stage of Evolution	Rural Postal Workers
1828	First project	4,700
1828-1829	Anonymous petition	5,000
April 1829	Commission's analyses	3,558
May 1829		4,000
1 April 1830	Staff at work	5,000
1836		7,900
1839		8,100
1849		9,000

Source: *Le Moniteur Universel* (1er semestre 1829, séance du mardi 14 avril), 542; Achille Piron, *Du service des Postes et de la taxation des lettres au moyen d'un timbre* (Paris, 1838), 40; Marcel Pinet, *Histoire de la fonction publique* (Paris, 1993), 3: 25; Henri Issanchou, *Le livre d'or des Postes* (Paris, 1885), 60-61.

As the expansion of cities increased the need for communication, the ranks of urban postal carriers experienced similarly rapid growth, from 800 in 1829 to 4,000 in 1879. The human postal network became so dense that many cities enjoyed an average of at least two deliveries a day (see Table 2). Paris even reached seven daily deliveries!

TABLE 2
Daily Deliveries in Towns with a Post Office, 1881

Distributions per Day	Number of Towns
1	615
2	3,665
3	1,066
4	277
5	24
6	4

Source: Musée de la Poste de Paris, *Rapport au budget des P&T*, 1881.

The number and type of postal establishments grew to support as well as possible the dispersal of postal workers throughout the territory. It is not surprising to note that the number of postmasters (directors) and mail distributors similarly increased during this period: the number of directors grew from 1,443 in 1835 to 5,379 in 1878; distributors increased from 720 in 1835 to a maximum of 1,280 in 1864, the year the post was discontinued.

A Transport Network in Process of Modernization. The role of transport also had to be adapted to feed the organization built to achieve the French Postal Service's new mission. The role of road transport decreased dramatically in the face of rapidly developing rail service (see Table 3). Road service was maintained in only two cases: where rail service did not yet exist, and to connect offices with train stations. In 1849, the number of post houses in France reached its maximum of 2,254 establishments; the ensuing decline was proof of the intent to transfer their previous role to train service. Most of the connections among multiple offices were made by negotiation with the haulage companies for deliveries on foot, by horseback, or by vehicle.

TABLE 3
Growth of Rail in French Postal Transport, 1860-1875

	Kilometers by Railroad	%	Kilometers by Road (coach and horse)	%	Kilometers on foot	%	Total
1860	6,006,440	10	46,016,280	76	8,348,180	13	60,370,901
1865	15,181,080	23	42,938,922	64	8,761,070	13	66,881,072
1870	31,031,570	38	37,760,345	47	1,905,205	15	80,697,120
1875	41,691,030	46	35,933,010	40	1,250,230	14	90,874,272

Source: Alexis Belloc, *Les Postes Françaises* (Paris, 1886), 755.

Thus, the landscape of mail transport in France at the time included three networks—rail, mail coaches, and haulage companies. Rail transport had doubled since 1872, the year that the French Postal Service decided to dismantle the post house network, made obsolete by the technological conflict brought by the use of rail. From then on, the French Postal Service concentrated on serving the large railroad lines, negotiating with the railway companies for special wagons and subcontracting the small road links with dispatch companies.

The Opportunist Republic: The Optimization of the Network

Network optimization occurred through the methods available to the Postal Service for improving its presence and services without increasing its expenditures.

More Offices at Shared Cost. A quick overview from the European perspective shows that, despite its efforts to extend its infrastructure, in particular through new offices, the French Postal Service lagged behind its two large neighbors (Great Britain and Germany) in this respect (see Table 4). Yet this undeniable fact obscures the fundamental differences among the structures of the three networks. Whereas Germany and England multiplied small-size establishments (postal annexes), and reduced their spending by insisting on financial support from the municipalities, France had up to that point privileged state financing and the creation of full-service post offices.

TABLE 4
French Post Office Distribution Compared with Its Neighbors

	Offices			Inhabitants Served per Office		
	1877	**1878**	**1885**	**1877**	**1878**	**1885**
Great-Britain	13,763	13,881	16,805	2,427	2,435	2,162
Germany	8,626	8,886	17,452	4,953	4,808	2,684
France	5,570	5,672	6,747	6,615	6,510	5,583

Source: MP Paris, *Rapport au budget des P&T* (Paris, 1881), 16; ibid., (Paris, 1888), 31.

Confronted with budgetary problems, the French Post Office made the choice in the 1880s to adopts aspects of the German and English models in establishing post offices. They turned to the municipalities to share the costs of post office installations. After 1879 the towns had to provide the buildings for any type of office rent-free for eighteen years. Moreover, the French Postal Service invented the label of "municipal" postal establishment to be used when a commune committed to providing the total cost of operating a post office.

Finally, the French Postal Service created urban and rural auxiliary services. In the urban case, their job was to supplement the main post offices in the big cities; they served as district branches. There were 329 of them in January 1900, and their number more than doubled (602) by 1905. Since January 1903, attempts to establish offices in the biggest railway stations had met with only weak success: installed close to the

waiting rooms of railway stations, managed by the coffee-shop owners, these auxiliary bureaus served both travelers and local inhabitants.[13] In the large cities, the offices were placed with tradesmen, stationers, or grocers. Their situation limited their customer base, however, eliminating large-scale business; indeed, they dealt primarily with money orders and certified mail, and did not really handle mail in bulk.

In the rural case, the auxiliary services were appropriate for boroughs requesting minimal postal service. A postal bureau offering full counter services was possible only if the towns bore the expenses.[14] Lesser offices could be installed in a shop, a small business, or the town hall, with activities supervised by a manager designated by the municipality. On average, less than 500 francs per year paid for the establishment, the materials, and the manager's allowance, as well as the premiums for delivering, forwarding, or exceptional transport of correspondence. During the first eleven years of this opportunity, only 411 such offices opened their doors; by 1905, there were 599. This initiative was unsucccessful because they rendered too little service to the population.[15]

The Postal Service expanded this model by proposing auxiliary distribution establishments. To the function of rural auxiliary services, it added the task of letter distribution. In 1905, there were only 250 agencies of this type in the country.[16]

When localities were forced to pay all costs, the Postal Service tried to offer the option of establishing small offices with low operating costs. These offices did not provide complete postal services, however. This was definitely the case for the postmaster-receivers, whose share of French postal establishments strongly increased (see Table 5).

A Multitude 0f Mailboxes. The mailbox proved to be the ideal tool for improving mail collection, whatever the locality. But the French Postal Service had a rule, certainly obsolete because it had been in effect since 1830, that rural communities could be equiopped with only one box: thus if towns grew and merged, the number of mailboxes actually decreased. The concept of "supplemental" boxes was devised to deal with the problem and to allow additional urban and rural letterboxes, but the localities had to pay for them. Beginning in 1899, it became possibile for private individuals (often hotels, renovators, or contractors) to install, at their own expense, a box that would be used by their customers or employees.

In order to put mailboxes everywhere, the French Postal Service also showed ingenuity (see Table 6). The box followed the movements of the population as much as possible. Some were hung on train coaches;

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[13] MP Paris, *Bulletin mensuel des Postes* (May 1912), 175.
[14] Ibid. (July 1887), 165-166.
[15] MP Paris, *Rapport au budget des P&T* (1901), 36.
[16] Ibid. (1907), 22.

others were placed on the haulage company vehicles that traveled the roads.

The period before the war was characterized by the Postal Service's financial disengagement from the expanding networks of post offices and mailboxes, a decision that in part accounts for the French delay in expanding the number of mailboxes. The state left the financing of these tools to the towns that had the means to establish them. Such towns were in the minority, however, making the French deficit in mailboxes at the beginning of the twentieth century inevitable, even though France had been a pioneer in the middle of the nineteenth century (see Table 7).

TABLE 5
Number of "Postal-Receiver" Offices in France, 1888-1908

Year	Postal-Receivers	%	Year	Postal-Receivers	%
1888	300	4.3	1895	985	/
1889	316	/	1896	1110	/
1890	332	/	1897	1182	/
1891	342	/	1898	1421	/
1892	334	/	1899	1728	/
1893	552	/	1905	2772	19
1894	778	/	1908	3316	27

Source: MP Paris, *Rapport au budget des P&T* (1901), 28; ibid. (1908), 22.

TABLE 6
Types of Mailboxes in France, 1877 and 1887

Type	1877	1887
Mailboxes in Offices	5,576	6,755
Urban Supplementary Mailboxes	5,694	9,675
Rural Mailboxes	30,657	29,495
Rural Supplemenary Mailboxes	3,578	6,243
Mobile Mailboxes in Stations	1,834	3,113
Mobile Mailboxes on Haulage Company Vehicles	1,824	2,583
Total	49,163	57,864

Source: MP Paris, *Rapport au budget des P&T* (1888), 240.

TABLE 7
Mailboxes in Europe, 1878 and1901

	1878			1901		
	Number	Density		Number	Density	
France	50,121	1 / 736 inhab.	1 / 10.5 km²	67,230	1 / 579 inhab.	1 / 8 km²
Germany	52,612	1 / 812 inhab.	1 / 10.2 km²	123,000	1 / 458 inhab.	1 / 4.5 km²
Great Britain	25,767	1 / 1311 inhab.	1 / 12 km²	57,082	1 / 729 inhab.	1 / 5.5 km²

Source: MP Paris, *Rapport au budget des P&T* (1881), 18; (1904), 272-75.

An Adjusted and Accelerated Network. Not only did the density of the postal network increase, but internal connections were also also refined and speeded up. For routing of the mail between offices, and from the stations to the offices, three systems co-existed. The Postal Service directly assured railway transport by signing conventions with railroad companies for the provision or inclusion of specific coaches and precise schedules. Transport by conveyances (vehicles or horses), and that by pedestrians, was entrusted to haulage companies. The principal postal junctions along the service roads were divided between these two methods according to their utility and financial considerations. The French Postal Service optimized their costs and connections by using the most suitable means of transport (see Table 8).

TABLE 8
Modes of Mail Transport in France

	Post by Rail		Post by Vehicles and by Horse		Post by Foot	
Year	Number	Km/year (000)	Number	Km/year (000)	Number	Km a year (000)
1875	667	41,691	2,078	35,933	2,867	13,250
1880	1,000	53,303	2,098	34,413	3,524	14,497
1885	1,387	70,693	2,288	35,943	4,298	16,667
1898	/	/	3,113	54,855	4,960	19,057

Source: Alexis Belloc, *Les Postes Françaises* (Paris, 1886), 755; MP Paris, "Rapport adressé au président de la République par le ministre du commerce, de l'Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes sur les conditions de fonctionnement de l'administration des Postes et des Télégraphes," *Bulletin mensuel des Postes* (May 1900), 177-78.

Speed was also important in the collection and delivery of the mail. Accordingly, in the search for optimization, we cannot forget the importance of the gradual introduction of bicycles into the process. Beginning in 1893, bicycles were used on rounds longer than 32 kilometers, but the administration did not envisage any national regulation; this came about only after Leon Mougeot became the under-secretary of state for Postal Service. By 1903, bicycles were used on 878 of the 1,238 rounds exceeding 32 kilometers. Nevertheless, bicycle use remained restricted. Of the 25,000 rural and local postal workers at the end of the century, on January 1, 1897, 2,203 used bicycles more or less regularly; by January 1, 1899, the number using bicycles had increased only to 3,511.[17]

To be thorough we must also address the French Postal Service's pioneering attempts to introduce the car into the postal system. Two modes of car use were tested after 1903.[18] The first, called "the motor car mail" (*l'automobile-courrier*), involved transporting dispatches between the train station and the post office, when the office was not served by rail. The French Postal Service also considered substituting motorized for animal-drawn vehicles generally, but at the contractors' initiative. In Normandy in April 1903, for example, a contractor's transport of the dispatches between Vernon and Gisors in the Eure by car saved two hours in the handling of the mail from Paris. In the Calvados department, two routes (in particular that of Caen with Creuilly by the coast) had adopted the use of the car. The second, called "the motor car postman" (*l'automobile facteur*), consisted of dropping off rural postal workers at the midpoint of their route and picking them up on their return. This operation could be repeated several times during the day. Although one could not yet speak of motorized delivery, its application to the transport of the mail and of postal workers was clearly considered. Did this represent a return to the origins of the French Postal Service to some extent?

Conclusion

The French Post Office's mail coach service constituted the first transport-related macro-system, paralleling that created by the building of the road network and occurring well before that of the railroad. Through the growth and development of post office branches and the complementary addition of mail coach service, the French Postal Service formed the basis of the accomplished and modern entity that endures today as a public company.

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[17] MP Paris, "Rapport adressé au président de la République par le ministre du Commerce, de l'Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes sur les conditions du fonctionnement de l'administration des Postes et des Télégraphes," *Bulletin mensuel des Postes* (May 1900), 165.

[18] MP Paris, *Rapport au budget des P&T* (1903), 43-52.

The year 1830 was doubly significant: it marked the death of a mono-focused Postal Service and the birth of a general-purpose administration. Giving up its oiginal responsibility for transport, the Postal Service turned to providing services centered on the delivery of correspondence and the support of financial transactions. Decisions at the beginning of the Second Empire confirmed this emphasis.

This analysis of the postal network—we could even say networks, given the extent to which the French Postal Service superimposed technical, material, and human organizations—testifies to the complex activity involved in dealing with the mail: collection, transport, and delivery. Clearly, a radical transformation of the network concept occurred within the French Postal Service during the nineteenth century.