

Julien MAILLET, “Late 18th-c. Postmasters in the Guyenne, 1770-1789” (“Les maîtres de poste en Guyenne à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, 1770-1789”), master’s thesis in modern history directed by François Cadilhon, Bordeaux 3, 2001, 2 volumes, 101 p. + 63 p.

Having made steady progress since its origin, the postal service was opened to the public throughout the 18th century. Broadening epistolary ties as well as the flourishing business of transporting travelers largely explain the resurgence of the equestrian mail. As the nuclei of this system, post-stations interwove regular mail, passenger, horse, and coach service. Although there were fewer than 800 such stations France in 1708, the official count had risen to 1,440 in 1789, of which 80 were located in the Guyenne region.

The “post master” was the chief manager of the relay or post-station and so the effectiveness with which it operated, ensuring continuous circulation, depended on his efficiency.

“No modern State can exist in the absence of a dense and well-maintained network of communications.” Early on the State understood the importance of the equestrian mail system and lavished attention on the post houses as cogwheels of that system. Granting numerous advantages to postmasters, it also lent its support to maintaining the post-stations in good working order. In exchange for their work, most postmasters received economic and social benefits that allowed them to invest in new real estate assets.

Socially, the operations manager of a post-station received recognition through his work and even enjoyed a certain amount of notoriety in his rural community.

Postmasters in the Guyenne were constantly confronted by material difficulties that impeded their activities. What I found most impressive in the administrative documents at my disposal was the frequency of complaints due to the loss of horses from an epidemic, or the lack of fodder or oats. Despite these challenges, only a few post-stations were abandoned and those that had been were soon rehabilitated.

This longevity is symbolized by the different family dynasties that held the position of postmaster.

When the Revolution of 1789 abolished most of their privileges, the postmasters’ situation abruptly deteriorated. Indeed, once the crown realized the fiscal advantage that postmasters reaped from their duties, their allowance was drastically reduced. To remedy this situation, on 25 April 1790 the *Assemblée Constituante* voted them an annual retribution of thirty livres for each horse who was maintained for use of the postal service. Furthermore, the animals provided of drawing mail-coaches were taxed at the rate of 15 sols per journey.

The postmasters were dissatisfied with this proposal, deeming it insufficient. But the assembly overrode them, voting compensatory credits in March 1791. This measure applied to 21,470 horses.

During the next phase, postmasters generally had a hard time keeping their businesses alive. They were challenged by the lack of horses and fodder, due to political and military ups and downs. In 1797 an attempt was made to restore the equestrian mail. The postmasters’ monopoly over post-stations was re-affirmed and their allowance increased.

Despite these measures, the situation deteriorated once again during the Consulate: times had changed, and the rich travelers of the Ancien Régime had disappeared; courier companies used their own relay horses which they fed and maintained themselves. This of course was completely

illegal. Faced with this predicament, Napoleon decided to support a public service that found itself threatened by a rapidly expanding private sector. On 6 March 1805 he instated a tax on all vehicles of public transportation that was principally payable by the courier companies.

This measure, which forced any individual or courier who passed by a post-station without using its horses to pay the postmaster a compensation of 25 centimes per post and per horse, proved effective.

During the Empire, the royal blue informs of the equestrian mail carriers were replaced by green ones that better befit imperial decorum. In Aquitaine, the war with Spain made it necessary to improve the road between Bordeaux and Bayonne that went through Mont-de-Marsan. After Napoleon's downfall, Bourienne, the emperor's former secretary, temporarily replaced Lavalette and had an order at relay stations prohibiting the allied armies from requisitioning post horses. Forced to flee upon his former superior's return to power, Bourienne owed his salvation to the postal system: as he waited in vain for fresh horses at a relay station, the postmaster recognized him and had two horses harnessed to his carriage.

For centuries until the advent of the railroad, the fastest mode of transportation was on horseback before the animal tired. This phenomenon was of course in the postmasters' best interests. Thanks to their service, the kingdom presented an image of itself as a model of the conquest of space. The equestrian mail was not brutally forced into oblivion; its death rattle at the hand of the steam engine lasted over thirty years.

When the railroad arrived in 1850, over 2,000 interconnected post-stations were aligned along French roads. The very last ones were not closed until 1873.