

Clémence RAINE, “The equestrian mail and letter mail in the Bordeaux region from the end of the Ancien Régime to the mid-19th century” (“La Poste aux chevaux et la Poste aux lettres en Bordelais, de la fin de l’Ancien Régime au milieu du XIX^e siècle”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Jean-Paul Jourdan, Bordeaux 3, 2003, 176 p.

Two major facts characterize the history of the Post Office from 1789 to 1855: the gradual decline of the equestrian mail and the rapid rise of letter mail. These events were complemented by the creation of a genuine public service. The equestrian mail, used by those who could afford it, was dominant at the end of the 18th century. At the time it was the fastest mode of transportation, using strong horses and mail-coaches that were regularly improved in the course of the 19th century until 1850. Postmasters enjoyed many privileges and many of them were well off. The organization of the service was complex but well structured: mail-coaches circulated in the national network that was punctuated at intervals by post-stations. These structures required a significant amount of staff that was highly diversified and hierarchically arranged. Each infrastructure has a specific purpose. For instance, the postmaster and the postillion were attached to the relay station, and the courier was associated with the roads. This was how the equestrian mail operated until the mid-19th century.

The history of the equestrian mail in the first half of the 19th century, however, was not so harmonious, with the revolutionary period marking a genuine rupture in service. New reforms that were instituted in hopes of moving forward from the conditions of the Ancien Régime turned the organization of the service inside out: more than any other measure, the abolition of the postmasters’ privileges led to the abandonment of most relay stations. The economic and political situation that successive governments had to surmount distracted these regimes from postal demands, so much so that services were neglected and communications within the country were drastically reduced. The coherence of the equestrian mail in the Gironde gradually became disintegrated. The complete disorganization of this service that brought the circulation of information to a halt led the State to take steps in an attempt to remedy the situation: postmasters received allowances but these were not enough to restore the equestrian mail in any lasting fashion. Overall financial difficulties ultimately rendered all these measures ineffective.

It was not until the Consulate and the First Empire that improvements were made to road conditions and post-stations were durably renovated. The military context undoubtedly contributed to the State’s efforts to restore mail service. Napoleon was well aware of the important role of the equestrian mail in circulating information to France’s borders. Consequently the Spanish War favored the restoration of the equestrian mail in the Gironde. The emperor saved the interconnections between post-stations and undertook reforms to protect it durably. The Restoration was a propitious time for the business affairs of Girondin merchants which amplified traffic on the highways. There was a wave of activity that set up more post-stations until the mid-1840s in tandem with increased density in the network of post offices. Although the equestrian mail suffered from the torments of the Revolution, it managed to survive until the 1840s, thanks to successive governments.

We have also observed that letter mail service was only in its infancy at the end of the 18th century. Unlike the equestrian mail, this institution was still underdeveloped, to the extent that the network of post offices and system of distribution were limited to urban settings. The

practical use of correspondence in France, and notably in the Gironde was confined to the rich, educated population of cities like Bordeaux that had their own postal infrastructure called “la Petite Poste,” used by merchants to send letters to the colonies. The revenue that letter mail could provide for the State was a motive for transforming the mail into a strictly monitored national service. In the Directoire period, postal service was transformed into the Postal Tax Farm that was controlled by the State. The foundation for a new type of public service had been laid.

There was a renewal of interest in the letter mail at the beginning of the 19th century when postal activity continuously increased until the 1830s. Correspondence between civil servants burgeoned with the administrative reorganization at the beginning of the century, and postal service had to adapt to the increasing amount of mail. Mail distribution was extended to rural areas. Administrative authorities and especially townships had the privilege of their own corps of foot messengers responsible for delivering administrative mail several days a week.

It was not until the reform of 1829 that the development of rural mail delivery actually met the needs of the population. Rural service was set up, consisting of home delivery of the mail to everyone in France. Daily mail service was also part of this reform. As a result, connections between even the most isolated segments of the population were guaranteed. Postal service contributed to opening up the rural world, made possible by the implementation of a dense, interconnected chain of postal infrastructures.

When the reform of 1830 came on the scene, it caused a veritable revolution in postal history. Not only did it bring about the geographic integration of rural areas in the Gironde with the rest of France but it also generate a democratic integration that was reinforced by the decrease in postal rates in 1848. As both the cause and consequence of the reforms undertaken by the postal administration, the flow of mail increased astronomically during the rest of the 19th century. A large number of new employees were hired to accommodate this circulation of the letter mail. In order to do so, personnel had to be hierarchically organized. From office manager to assistant, occupational tracks became more diversified. Above all, this period was characterized by the creation of the rural mail deliverer’s job, incorporating the link between the Post Office and the people at the apex of the latter mail’s activity.

Despite the obvious differences between the equestrian and the letter mail, these two services not only served the same purpose but also complemented each other. The letter and equestrian mail were services that existed for transporting and distributing letters and parcels. Their attributes complemented each other and they shared the same tools used for routing the mail. During the first half of the 19th century, evolutions in postal techniques and regulations allowed for progress to be made in a service that was becoming available to the public at large.

More than a simple collaboration, there was a genuine complementarity between the two postal services. Since the post office needed the post-stations in order to transport the mail, there was a connection between the two postal services. But many problems of coordination arose from this close tie. Until the middle of the 19th century, the incomplete symbiosis of the two services made the goal of daily rural mail service difficult to achieve and threatened the existence of the equestrian mail.

In the mid-19th century the two types of mail service seriously began to confront modern times and new technologies. After 1840, the operations of the equestrian mail had begun to deteriorate. Problems with delays caused by the slowness of means of transportation led the letter mail gradually to bypass use of the mail-coach. The postal service institution was shaken by the appearance of the locomotive as a new means of transportation. The equestrian mail fell by the wayside as the letter mail adapted to the new, more rapid modes of transportation. The equestrian mail network in the Gironde had considerably disintegrated. Whereas it had reached national proportions during the Ancien Régime, the few segments that remained reduced it to a local network. As the expansion of the railway grew, the equestrian mail was further and further dissolved. When the Dotézacs, an influential family in the local postal sphere, withdrew their participation, a mortal blow was dealt to the equestrian mail in the Gironde.

As for the letter mail it benefited from the advantages offered by the steamship and the railroad, entrusting them with transporting the mail. The reorganization of the postal network promoted a considerable savings of time. The letter mail no longer depended in any way on the equestrian mail and became the only entity comprising postal service and providing a public service.

The history of the Post Office in this period shows that the Post Office was constantly adapting to societal changes and the most modern techniques. Saving time, confronting the obstacles of difficult terrain, and guaranteeing mail delivery were the ongoing imperatives of the Post Office in the first half of the 19th century, allowing public service to flourish in the direction of the letter mail to the detriment of the equestrian mail.

According to Mattelard, however, there was still a lack of wherewithal in the mid-19th century. For instance, there was an insufficient number of post offices in France in proportion to its size as a country. Mattelard also underscores the dilapidated offices, the weakness of the postal staff's workforce and infrastructures, and customers' complaints about the postal administration's inability to take remedial action. Above all, as we have seen, the State's failure to take action in 1852 concerning the equestrian mail was decried and compared to the action of revolutionary governments.

Our study of postal service in France in the first half of the 19th century has revealed that the postal situation in the Gironde was a very special case. This was because of the importance that commerce and its primary exponents in the region gave to postal activity. The role of merchants in the Médoc often comes to mind. All the complaints, inquiries, and arguments that arose from the administrations that represented the Girondin population revolved around commercial needs. With its well-organized postal service, the city of Bordeaux carried considerable weight when it came to postal integration. This PLAQUE TOUNANTE contributed to the development of commercial exchanges, especially the volume of correspondence, in the department. From 1830 onward, the mail reached rural areas in the Gironde. Opening the department to others in France and abroad supported economic activity in the region. According to Mattelard, "after having contributed to administrative organization, the postal service maintained the links it had created between regions and between people, as befit its vocation."