

**Mathieu ROUX, “Marseille and the Post, Telephone, and Telegraph service 1852-1914” (“Marseille et les Postes, Télégraphes, Téléphones : étude historique des origines d’un réseau de communication, 1852-1914”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Jean Domenichino, Université de Provence, 2003, 353 p.**

As one of many other modern technological networks, the Post, Telephone, and Telegraph service has contributed to the way urban space is constructed and how it works. This observation is particularly acute when the urban space is being constructed, expanding, and changing. This evolution of the urban landscape, when the city changed size, demanded that a network of communications be set up that matched the changes in urbanization. Understanding the ways in which this network was developed in the city of Marseille is a highly relevant way of reading the history of this urbanization. What were the issues that led to its installation? What were the political, economic, social, or cultural elements to which it responded and upon which it depended? The answers to all these questions are worth pursuing.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of profound transformation of urban space in Marseille. After the Marseille canal was opened in 1849, finally bringing great quantities of the waters of the Durance to its broad shared area, the suburbs were developed, providing a place for industry to develop and connecting the suburbs with the urban conglomerate around Lacydon. Activity in the port was overwhelmed by the construction of a gigantic industrial port in the northern part of the city. It was Marseille’s turn to become “Haussonian” as monuments sprang up everywhere and the surface area of the city expanded fourfold. The flow of correspondence increased, economic proportions were transformed, and the population doubled. These fifty years were a decisive time for urbanism in Marseille.

During the same period, the postal network was reorganized (1852), the electric telegraph arrived in the city (1852), and the number of post offices in the area increased eightfold. In 1877 a pneumatic mail network was installed and from 1880 onward telephone service was developed, either through private municipal networks, private lines, or a network of subscribers. Finally, on the eve of World War One, Marseille discovered the T.S.F (wireless telegraph). The city was totally affected by these transformations in communications services and provides a fertile ground for our study.

We sought a better understanding of the connections that united these two evolutions. In order to be as thorough as possible, we aligned our critical thinking and research with the chronological development of a request. It all begins with the appearance of a request. An administrative process is then set in motion, and finally the requested service is installed. In this fashion, either promptly or by waves of activity, a network is built. By piecing together each of these requests, common features are revealed, significant differences appear, and in short, an understanding of the development of the network is reached.

The first stage of our approach involved an examination of the needs that were connected to these infrastructures. What were they based on, how did they manifest themselves, what actually were they? These questions regarding the origin of the PTT network in Marseille and its apparent needs constitute the subject of this master’s thesis.

We have isolated three different categories of needs that arose from different factors: the administrations that were present in the city, those who participated in the city's economic life, and the urban population as a group.

### **Administrations**

The State's attitude toward the telegraph must be seen in the context of the changes to its structures and practices that were introduced by the rise of political and economic liberalism. The French government became more and more centralized over time, and the State's use of instruments of long-distance communication was guided by its takeover of these instruments. Just before the introduction of the telegraph, its access by the first post offices was strictly controlled by the local prefecture and the installation of the main exchange was guided by this volition. Mastery of the telegraph was strategically important to the city, connecting the military barracks that surrounded the city. The wireless post at the St. Charles railroad station, from which outgoing messages could be sent, was the scene of violent struggles during the Commune. The State gradually recognized the importance of economic and financial communications and regulated its own use to facilitate these exchanges. Urbanization, liberalization, and democratization demanded a different way of managing municipal services that was more rational, efficient, and interactive. The municipality of Marseille used the telephone for two basic purposes: the telephone allowed it to manage an extensive communal area better, by developing, for instance, a fire alarm network (1882) and one for the police (1888-1891); the telephone was also a useful tool for bureaucratizing and professionalizing city services. Use of the phone really took off in the 1890s and fell into three main waves: a greater subscription rate on the part of Marseillais society, the overall modernization of French municipal administrations, and the arrival in Marseille of municipal socialism.

### **Economic Participation**

Needs related to the economy occupied a considerable place in the development of the network. There was a growing number of exchanges of information and it became more and more difficult to manage them as Marseille became connected to other places, far and wide. Communications techniques, especially the telegraph, were indispensable tools for supporting these changes. Stock market activity was increasing and the need to communicate with other economic locations on the continent reinforced Marseille's centrality with its commercial Stock Exchange and those who promoted the consolidation of postal, telegraph and telephone services there. The business of its port and industries had a profound effect on the organization of production and the urban environment in Marseille. Industries that were geographically concentrated and areas of the city that were industrially concentrated sought the presence of post and telegraph offices, while industries that were more spread out preferred the telephone. The chamber of commerce and local unions mobilized to improve the quality of the network.

### **The urban population**

The people of Marseille organized themselves to get the services they wanted. Their methods were different depending on location: those who lived in the suburbs went through influential local figures or neighborhood committees, while those in town preferred petitions or the mediation of their local tobacconist. Their requests were intrinsically linked to the way they used the city and its form. Needs were different, depending on whether the individuals lived within the city or farther out. They systematically tried to adapt services to the public places they frequented and utilized. The needs of the Marseillais population were especially dependent on the urbanization of the environment in

which they lived. The municipality played a role in interpreting the needs of a city that was experiencing growing pains on two significant occasions. The first time, it insisted that its population be better served after the upheavals of the Second Empire. The second time, under the aegis of municipal socialism, it fitted out the suburbs of Marseille with the infrastructures it so badly needed.

### **The impact on the networks**

There were many requests for new post and telegraph offices as well as auxiliary offices. Each story is complex and demands multiple explanations. Furthermore, we could always determine the provenance of each request or how the office came to be set up. The installation of these offices, which were expected to become profitable, often corresponded to the needs of local industries. The auxiliary office occupied a special position, due to the way it was financed as well as its location in the urban setting, serving the needs of a population that was hoping to benefit from its service.

The overwhelming majority of residents in Marseille requested more mailboxes in the city. Their network was created based on petition and all form of solicitations.

Requests for setting up telephone booths in the area came from pockets of the population in eastern Marseille that were still considered rural or at least removed from the city center.

The network of telephone subscribers was shaped by those who actively participated in the economic life of the city. It served their professional needs and business practices in the city. The creation of private telephone lines was marginal; it was mainly those who were already subscribers who wanted such lines, either to enhance their social prestige or else because of a real or perceived flaw in the general network.

The pneumatic mail network was first built according to the geography of the city and the presence of two significant terminus points: a police prefecture in the heart of a middle-class neighborhood and the Stock Exchange in the northern part of the city. It was developed during the course of the century to serve the need for faster and more efficient communications on the part of those who were most involved in the economic life of the city.

Two distinct realities substantiate the need for communications services among the population of Marseille.

The people of Marseille underwent many changes in the urban landscape and PTT services supported the social mutations of a populace confronted by economic, social or political upheavals that generated new standards. Freer exchanges, democratization, and individualization led to new forms of human and business relations, as well as the relationship between administrations and those they administrated and a new way of looking at oneself and the world. These changes in the way people perceived each other and the outside world explain the needs that supported new infrastructures of communication sanctioning higher speed, more frequent oral and written exchanges, and stronger connections.

On the other hand, there was the relationship between communicational needs and the various ways that inhabitants used the city space. First of all, an understanding of the urban area where the population expressed its needs is necessary in the study of a city where many aspects of the urban environment, including a real and perceived centrality, ruptures and continuities of space, and general and local ways of shaping urban spaces, all affected the requests of urban dwellers who actively used their city. The central location of the middle-class neighborhoods south of the Cannebière, the fluctuations of the very notion of Marseille's centrality between these neighborhoods and the new, more northern ports, and the dichotomy of the city split between an immense surface area and the most densely inhabited portion around the old port, or the importance

of methods of constructing urban dwellings and the effects of local urban morphologies on service requests are all proof of the influence of these aspects of the city on its citizens' communicational needs.

Once these needs were articulated, an administrative process was set in motion. Studies needed to be done, decisions had to be made, and financing had to be arranged. The analysis of this stage of urban development would be the logical sequel to our study, showing how people worked together to build such a network of services, its verbal documentation, and the various approaches taken by participants. This analysis would complement our understanding of the construction of a communications network that was vital to a city space in the process of becoming totally transformed by urbanization.