

Christophe TRETSCHE, “Life at the “hôtel des Postes” 1802-1830” (“La vie à l’hôtel des Postes de 1802 à 1830”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Jean Tulard, Paris IV - Sorbonne, 1999, 138 p.

As a descriptive term, “life” can encompass many of the “realities” of the post office and its employees in the 19th century: it is especially useful in exploring areas that have been of little interest until now, such as the living conditions of postal employees and “mentalities” or representations, as they are called by historians. The decision to focus my thesis topic on a period bracketed by two arbitrarily chosen dates of historical significance meant returning to primary sources and the origin of modern administration. In this sense, “life” may be understood as the movement that gave rise to modern administration, speeding its transformation toward modernity. The real boundaries of my subject were the walls of the “Hôtel des Postes” the former private town house whose existence many postal workers today are unaware of, since it was destroyed over 120 years ago when it was known as the Hôtel d’Armenonville on the rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

First of all, it was important to situate the building historically within Paris. The history of this group of buildings - old town houses each with its own courtyard and fountain – is long and complex. Each of these town houses belonging to nobility had a long history. One should know that the Hôtel d’Armenonville was purchased for Louis XV in 1757 by Laurent Destouches, with the purpose of setting up the postal administration there; the building was formerly the hôtel d’Eperon until 1660, and later the hôtel d’Hervart until 1705. Destouches was the king’s architect, general superintendent, controller, and building inspector for Paris. The post office enjoyed a ripe, old history within the walls of the precinct of buildings that became known as the Hôtel des Postes located between the rue Coq-Héron, rue Vedelet, rue Coquillière, and the rue Platrière until its demolition in 1880 and the building of a new Hôtel des Postes by Julien Guadet near where it stood on the site we know today, the main Paris-Louvre post office. From 1757 to 1880, the Hôtel des Postes witnessed many transformations, particularly between 1801 and 1830: nearby houses were purchased in 1815 and either destroyed or attached to former buildings whose offices were almost completely remodeled; large-scale restorations were undertaken after 1826. The administration preferred renovation to a full-scale move of the postal headquarters to another location, which had been one of Napoleon’s projects from 1811 onward.

Why were such costly and invasive physical changes undertaken in a building where postal functions and operations could never be interrupted or slowed? Why was a move projected (even if it was aborted), and why was the building ultimately demolished when the Saint-Eustache area was completely remodeled? Contemporary authors, like Maxime Du Camp writing in 1867, provide the answer; every architect’s report, all sources that refer to the Hôtel are unanimous and unequivocal in their support of Du Camp’s virulent description: the hôtel des Postes was unhealthy and its interior so dark that “one had to work by the light of a lamp even in broad daylight.” Air did not circulate freely within the building. Most of all, the administration that was growing by leaps and bounds had to put up with the increasingly tight quarters on a daily basis, to the point where it could no longer subdivide existing offices to make new ones, and tables blocked passage in the hallways. We must also remember that it became more and more difficult every day simply to approach the hôtel because of the narrow streets that adjoined it and the

incessant activity of the neighborhood. Our description would be incomplete if we neglected to mention that the Hôtel d'Armenonville also housed works of art, in the glorious tradition of a private Parisian town house, as evinced by the wood paneling in the council chamber.

How was life organized at the Hôtel des Postes? In other words, who worked there, what were their tasks and occupations, how were they arranged, which offices were shared? Employees were diversified, and some performed unexpected duties, such as the postal doctor, pharmacist, and clockmaker. Hiring practices also reveal interesting details: preferential hiring was given to those who were recommended by a family from which a postal agent had already been recruited, and almost all new hires systematically went through a phase where they were supernumeraries. Some were lodged in the living quarters of the Hôtel. The insalubrity and trying living conditions are excellent indicators of the quality of life at the Hôtel des Postes in Paris, including the employees' health, which we can gauge by the figures for reimbursement for medications issued by the postal pharmacy found in the Council's meeting registers and through the requests for leaves of absence that were regulated more and more strictly by the Ministry of Finance that held the post office under its financial thumb. The mail carrier's uniform and the changes made to its appearance as well as to mail vehicles were all part of the daily landscape and life at the Hôtel.

Finally, is it possible to poll early 19th-c. Parisians' opinions of the Hôtel des Postes: a place that provided them with so many services? The slight improvements that did occur during the period, leading to the fundamental change in postal life in 1830 when rural service was instated (a topic not covered in this thesis) demonstrate that the Hôtel des Postes was a decision-making center at the core of the evolution of the postal establishment.

Beyond that context, the Hôtel des Postes was at the center of most of the events that disrupted life in France from 1801 to 1830. The documents that governed the history of the institution were drafted at the Hôtel des Postes, like the Council's meeting registers whose diversity offers us insights into a variety of topics, and the Instructions Générales from 1808 to 1832, whose final installment stands as the product of the slow evolution that took place during the preceding years. Oaths of allegiance, operational details such as disbursements, the Cabinet Noir (censorship office), the economic equilibrium of the post office – nothing concerning the institution and its headquarters was fixed or went unchanged in the course of this period that is described as one of “few changes and difficult to study:” this thesis proves that the situation was quite to the contrary! Despite the imperfections of its conversion to postal operations, the Hôtel des Postes – as a workplace and a locale that bubbled with life, the all too often forgotten symbol of equality of communications among all men and women – was the birthplace of the modern post office, a public service where the common good is routed through the precision of its employees and the satisfaction of the public, where the search for speed and efficiency make the Hôtel des Postes, with its men, women, and institutions, a crucible of constant transformation.