

Raphaël TUTOY, “Postmasters in the Calvados region 1750-1830. Social mobility and agricultural innovation” (“Les maîtres de poste dans le Calvados entre 1750 et 1830. Ascension sociale et innovation agricole”), thesis in modern history directed by Jean-Marc Moriceau, Caen / Basse-Normandie, 2001, 168 p.

Postmasters have traditionally been considered as a separate social entity; the analysis of their social and familial praxis confirms this aspect of the group. Wherever there was a postal presence, dynasties of local “cocks of the roost” existed whose formation we analyze. Honorary duties and local prestige are the strongest distinctive characteristics of the group; alliances with local businesses, finance, or the judiciary are prized and entrée to higher social circles are also critical factors.

Being directly involved with postal management most certainly did facilitate all these aspects of upward mobility, since new ideas and progress – another undeniable aspect of the group – were fomented along axes of communication.

For Gabriel Désert, “postal history is part of our cultural and economic patrimony.” This assertion is undoubtedly true and attested to by our collective cultural memory of the equestrian mail.

As primary “motivators of agriculture in France,” postmasters bear witness to their business sense and spirit of innovation. Other farmers had difficulty following in the footsteps of postmasters’ agricultural experiences. But agronomy was not the only area into which postmasters led their neighbors, distinguishing themselves in other areas like the production of butter in Isigny or activities related to using horses. Thanks to the postmaster’s occupation, which required unflagging energy and intelligence, progress in these areas was maintained throughout the channels of communication that emanated from postal routes.

Ties with agricultural associations, more limited in the 18th century, then less and less in the 19th century, also facilitated the march of progress. These ties gave members access to the highest and most enlightened social strata. Although they were first and foremost simple farmers who almost without exception led the agronomists’ movement in their areas through the example of their “model farms,” they were content to be known as practical men of action and not “gentlemen farmers” who sat at their desks.

With strong local influence, these men’s importance was also recognized by the postal administration. Occasionally called upon to act as agents of political power, postmasters were protected under the Ancien Régime before falling on harder times.

1789 introduced the suppression of the postmasters’ prized and valuable privileges. In the aftermath of the Revolution, how could they continue to prosper with an allowance of only 30 livres per year and per horse that was proved to be inadequate and contemptible? Once again answers are to be found in the area of agriculture: postmasters sought compensation through farming for the annual deficits created by the night of 4 August. Is it wrong to believe that the progress, that was made especially in the area of agriculture and correctly attributed to the postmaster, was largely due to this course of action among others. More simply put, if this progress is collectively more noticeable in the 19th century, it is because the arrangements having to do with privileges made on the night of 4 August forced the postmasters to devote more time

and energy to agriculture in order to compensate for financial shortfalls in other areas and break even. Without making a fundamental distinction between the 18th and the 19th centuries, we must recognize that 1789 represents an irrefutable split with the past, at least in this area. The major consequence of this incipient and sometimes well-advanced social mobility that is traceable throughout the 18th century and after 1789 was to reinforce the agenda of a specific socio-economic group.

The advent of the railroad around 1840 was the other significant historical moment that considerably damaged the well-oiled machinery of the equestrian mail as well as the postmasters' upwardly mobile progress toward social success. The appearance of the railroad made short work of an institution that receded into the background of its formidable opponent, since the transportation of travelers was the postmasters' main source of revenue. From then on, the post office could only support those who were fortunate enough to find themselves on the major postal routes where railroad tracks were laid. Postal relay stations were gradually closed, with the exception of those that were adjacent to or crossed railroad lines and still brought in temporary revenue. Most critics would agree that by this time the system of equestrian mail had become fossilized on its way to extinction. Even as late as the 1840s and 1850s some individuals tried in vain to protect the interests of the postmasters which had declined considerably.