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[Archival Chronicle Index](#) | [CAC Homepage](#)

History through the Mail: Postmarks, Postcards, and the US Postal Service



Mail carrier Alton Drinkwater photographed road conditions on Rural Route #7 near Tiffin in the early 1900s. The Rural Free Delivery system revolutionized postal service for farm families, but thousands of tiny villages faded away when their post offices closed. CAC general photograph collection. Gift of Arlene Dunkelberger.

Historians have at their disposal a variety of resources for learning about the past: objects passed down through generations with an oral history accompanying them, archaeological digs revealing the relationships between objects by their physical location, and newspapers and formal books or essays which set down the public version of events. By far the most revealing, however, are the diaries and letters of the people who lived during the time the events were taking place. Through these documents, we can share the thoughts, hopes, opinions, and concerns of people separated from us by time and space—and all in their own words.

Researchers must rely on the diarist to record such crucial information as date and place, but correspondence often comes conveniently with its own identification. The address tells where the writer expected the recipient to be. By taking clues from postmarks, stamps, and the physical appearance of the correspondence, Center for Archival Collections staff and other researchers have been able to identify a great deal of background information about the time the letter or postcard was written, as well as the place it came from and where it went. All these clues are crucial in helping to develop an historical context for an individual document or determining the relationship between items in a manuscript collection.

Until the mid-1800s, letters were not enclosed in envelopes, but merely folded over and sealed with wax. Although they were postmarked (a system first invented in England to track the speed that mail was moving), there were no postage stamps affixed, and in fact, it was often the addressee who paid for the letter. The postage due was determined at the post office from which the letter was mailed and fixed according to the number of pages and the distance to be traveled. To save space, people often filled both sides of the page to the edges and sometimes wrote up and down as well as across. Historic Lyme Village in Bellevue, Ohio is the home of the Margie Pfund Memorial Postmark Museum, housing the world's largest collection of postmarks and a library devoted to the subject.

In 1847, postage stamps were first issued in five and ten-cent denominations. Faced with large numbers of unclaimed (and thus, unpaid-for) letters, the Post Office made prepayment of postage mandatory in 1855. Envelopes also came into use by mid-century, protecting the privacy of the correspondence as well as the physical contents of the letter.

Picture postcards first made their appearance to mark the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Illustrating scenes from the fair, the government-printed cards could be mailed for one penny, while postage for privately-printed cards was two cents. Messages had to be squeezed beneath the pictures so that the address appeared alone on the back. Souvenir postcards became immensely popular and many printed before 1945 can be dated by their style. Vacation resorts and business districts, schools and churches, parks, and historical sites all were subjects of postcards and often provide our only pictorial record of such places. Even personal photographs were often printed onto postcard stock well into the 1920s.



▶ *The Carrier Division of Toledo, Ohio sorts mail for city delivery in 1909. Crowded working conditions at post offices were a reason many workers unionized. CAC general photograph collection. Gift of Ruth Tucker Fitkin.*

Since the days of earliest settlement, nearly 6,000 named post offices have operated in Ohio. By the early 1900s, Rural Free Delivery was established, thanks to improvements in transportation and distribution, allowing delivery of "every man's mail to every man's door." Thousands of rural post offices were no longer needed and the communities which had gathered around them often faded from existence. Thanks to books such as *The Post Offices of Ohio*, by John S. Gallagher and Alan H. Patera (1979), researchers can still determine the county in which a small settlement was once located.

The twentieth century has seen a revolution in our ability to communicate quickly and cheaply. Today, nearly every American home has a telephone, and we rely on radio and television to bring us our news. Electronic mail is rapidly becoming an important medium for private correspondence. Very little of this communication is stored in a permanent form. Thanks to the postal service with its stamps and postmarks, the correspondence of the late nineteenth century may be more accessible to future historians than the speedy electronic communications of today.

—Lee N. McLaird

THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ISSUE illustrate our postal system at work during the early years of the twentieth century.
