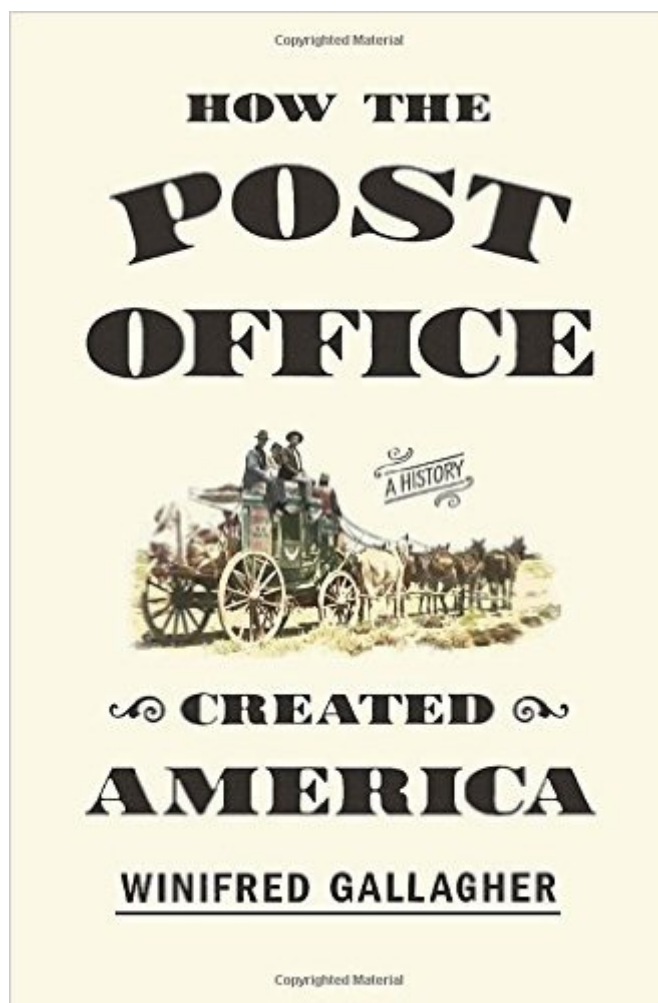


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How The Post Office Created America: A History



Synopsis

A masterful history of a long underappreciated institution, *How the Post Office Created America* examines the surprising role of the postal service in our nation's political, social, economic, and physical development. The founders established the post office before they had even signed the Declaration of Independence, and for a very long time, it was the U.S. government's largest and most important endeavor "indeed, it was the government for most citizens. This was no conventional mail network but the central nervous system of the new body politic, designed to bind thirteen quarrelsome colonies into the United States by delivering news about public affairs to every citizen "a radical idea that appalled Europe's great powers. America's uniquely democratic post powerfully shaped its lively, argumentative culture of uncensored ideas and opinions and made it the world's information and communications superpower with astonishing speed. Winifred Gallagher presents the history of the post office as America's own story, told from a fresh perspective over more than two centuries. The mandate to deliver the mail "then the media "imposed the federal footprint on vast, often contested parts of the continent and transformed a wilderness into a social landscape of post roads and villages centered on post offices. The post was the catalyst of the nation's transportation grid, from the stagecoach lines to the airlines, and the lifeline of the great migration from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It enabled America to shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy and to develop the publishing industry, the consumer culture, and the political party system. Still one of the country's two major civilian employers, the post was the first to hire women, African Americans, and other minorities for positions in public life. Starved by two world wars and the Great Depression, confronted with the country's increasingly anti-institutional mind-set, and struggling with its doubled mail volume, the post stumbled badly in the turbulent 1960s. Distracted by the ensuing modernization of its traditional services, however, it failed to transition from paper mail to email, which prescient observers saw as its logical next step. Now the post office is at a crossroads. Before deciding its future, Americans should understand what this grand yet overlooked institution has accomplished since 1775 and consider what it should and could contribute in the twenty-first century. Gallagher argues that now, more than ever before, the imperiled post office deserves this effort, because just as the founders anticipated, it created forward-looking, communication-oriented, idea-driven America.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Essential reading if you want to understand American innovation and exceptionalism. This book is a fun and informative read. It is not just a comprehensive and fascinating study of the post office, but also of American democracy and cultural change. The post office was a foundational institution and its crucial role in the development of the country as we know it has been forgotten over the last several decades.

I was interested in learning more about the post office, and instead found a wonderful way to learn about American history. Packed with details, but still entertaining. Highly recommend to anyone who wants to learn about the history of the post office, and from that filter - an emerging American culture.

Fascinating story, but somewhat pedestrian prose. Gallagher correctly points out how central the Post Office was for unifying the country and how the Post Office both supported and was supported by internal improvements to the country's infrastructure. The main problem I had with the book was its somewhat breezy and colloquial style. Worth reading for the story, however.

The subject matter is important, and the author has done well to bring it to the public's attention. The writing approach is anecdotal, which requires an author to provide sure segues and to always keep the flow of the larger narrative in mind. Shelby Foote is the supreme example of this kind of approach well executed. This book not so much. I was hoping for some discussion of censorship in the early years of the mail - specifically, I wanted to know how the Southern states managed to ban abolitionist tracts and anti-slavery novels like "Uncle Tom's Cabin" from the mail.

Unfortunately, the subject is not addressed. I was also disappointed by little manipulations to add "interest" to the story, like the author's implication that the speedy transportation of Lincoln's first inaugural address somehow saved California for the Union. It didn't. 17,000 California Volunteers did, along with the impassioned oratory of Thomas Starr King and the hard work of politicians like Edward Baker and Leland Stanford. The author also accepts at face value ancient rumors that General Albert Sidney Johnston intended to betray his officer's oath and hand the Pacific arsenal over to the Secesh. This erroneous notion arose in the heat of wartime passions and was proven false more than a hundred years ago. The testimony of John Downey, California's governor at the start of the war, and a host of Union officers "friends of Johnston's from the old Army" flatly contradict the idea, as does Johnston's personal correspondence. All point to the fact that Johnston served faithfully as head of the Department of the Pacific until his resignation was accepted and his replacement arrived. There was no dramatic, last-minute role played by the Post Office in quelling a spectacular betrayal, and I cannot for the life of me imagine how the author came to believe that there was. This careless error shook my faith in the rest of the book. The story of the role of the US Post Office in building the nation is indeed overlooked, and the author's accomplishment lies in recognizing this fact and presenting a sketch of what that role was. I learned much from this book, but it was like reading a series of short magazine sketches that needed the ministrations of a stern editor.

Delightful and interesting take on the PO, now being demolished by the new unifiers: the internet and the mass communication devices that use it.

This sounds boring, but how many pony express riders were there? How were stamps developed? How do post offices come around? I enjoyed this!

Loved it!!

It's a darn good read.

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