My deliverer is coming (but only on weekdays)

By Nicole C. Kirk
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With no white smoke to herald its decision, the United States Postal Service announced in early February that beginning in August, American homes would no longer receive mail delivery on Saturdays. Several weeks later, the House passed a funding bill requiring that Saturday mail delivery continue.

Through the off-again, on-again plans for the Saturday mail, religious leaders and organizations remained quiet. Perhaps they had too many other pressing concerns. What was missed was any discussion of the postal service's importance in American religious history, a history that has been marked by religious frustration and innovation.

As historian Richard R. John has shown, in its first decades after the American Revolution the post office was an "agent of change" that brought together the villages and towns through the consistent and reliable transmission of newspapers and other materials. It continued to shape Americans' lives even after the telegraph and then the telephone reoriented communications. At times the post office was a tool for evangelical and liberal churches—though at other times it was a profound irritation for evangelical Protestants.

What was especially galling was Sunday mail delivery. Time and again throughout the 19th century, there were protests against the federal government's requiring some employees to work on the Sabbath: church members who worked for the post office were forced to neglect their Christian duty of worship attendance. In the early 20th century, post offices and mail delivery closed down on Sunday—although this decision had as much to do with labor challenges as religious ones.

But while some evangelicals protested elements of the postal service, others recognized its potential. It was known for its ingenuity and adaptability as it imagined new ways to serve the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing American

landscape.

One postmaster general in particular was not only a visionary but also one who brought his religious sentiments to the job: John Wanamaker, a friend of revivalist Dwight Lyman Moody, a leading Presbyterian and a Philadelphia merchant prince. As a businessman, Wanamaker knew the importance of reliable postal service. With his growing department store in Philadelphia and plans for the development of a mail-order business, the success and growth of the post office was crucial.

Wanamaker made numerous suggestions to raise funds for the post office and to extend service. He successfully introduced the collector's stamp (the first for the 1893 Columbian Exposition). He also pitched the ideas of rural free delivery and parcel post, although they were not implemented until after he left office. During his four years as postmaster general—from 1889 to 1893—many of Wanamaker's suggestions were criticized for aiding his own financial interests. But for Wanamaker, selling goods was not necessarily separate from spreading the good news.

An avid booster of many of the most popular evangelical movements of his day, Wanamaker recognized the power of the postal service in bolstering Protestant Christianity. Extending service in rural areas could expand the reach of the church. As the publisher of the *Sunday School Times* and a variety of other religious periodicals, Wanamaker saw how communication through the post office cultivated connections among far-flung communities. Small religious communities were fanning across the rural countryside through new settlements and the dogged work of itinerant preachers. Churches and their national organizations creatively embraced the post office, employing it to ferry Sunday school lessons and advertisements for revivals and to bring Christians together.

During these days of high-tech glitz and glamour, we may want to remember the post office. The news about Saturday delivery caused only a ripple in the news cycle, and it probably went unmentioned in most (if not all) sermons. But the post office has had an important place in American religious history. Delivery changes may seem small today, but for much of our nation's history, the post office has been a vital part of how we communicate and an important means through which faith has been disseminated in America.

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