

Stations and Branches: A Brief History

Post Office stations and branches are facilities subordinate to a local Post Office that provide a range of postal services. Until 1908, the terms "station" and "branch" were used interchangeably. (See "Glossary" on page 7.)

Post Offices Branch Out by 1837 to Serve Growing Cities

The earliest known Post Office branch was established in New York City on January 1, 1837, at the corner of William Street and Exchange Place. The branch opened after bankers and merchants complained that the main Post Office had been relocated "too far up-town."¹ In 1843 the branch was staffed by about a dozen clerks. By 1845 the William Street branch had closed and another one opened at Chatham Square — again, to satisfy citizens inconvenienced by the removal of the main Post Office to yet another location. By order of the postmaster general, the Chatham Square branch of the New York City Post Office closed on December 31, 1846.

Although on March 3, 1847, Congress specifically authorized the postmaster general to "establish one or more branch post offices ... in any city ... for the convenience of the inhabitants," from 1847 to 1857 no Post Office branches operated in New York City.² In 1853, the *New-York Daily Times* made the following comparison to illustrate the inadequacy of having only one Post Office in a city of "some six hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants":

If the Croton Company were to deliver the water through one pipe only, it would cause the City no little inconvenience, and it seems to us that New-York is placed in a very similar predicament in possessing but one Post-Office. ...

*It is absolutely necessary that we should have branch Post-offices distributed over the City, and vitally connected with the General Post-office in Nassau-street.*³

The *Times* considered the numerous "illegal" private posts to be highly unreliable, stating that "a letter once committed to their care is about as certain of reaching its destination as a balloon committed to the four winds of Heaven."⁴

By mid-1857, the New York Post Office more fully served the city's growing population with "six stations, or sub-offices" located between 1½ to 3 miles from the main Post Office.⁵ By the early 1860s, Post Office stations had opened in other cities as well.

Stations Created in Conjunction with Free City Delivery

Stations were established not only to keep pace with cities' population growth but also when formerly independent Post Offices were discontinued and converted to stations of a larger nearby Post Office. Sometimes this was done to provide free mail delivery to customers, since initially residents of only the most populous cities were eligible for free delivery. On July 1, 1863, when free city delivery began, six Post Offices were discontinued and converted to stations of the New York Post Office. Around the same time, six Post Offices were consolidated with the Philadelphia Post Office. In the 1870s, more than a dozen Boston-area Post Offices were discontinued and converted to stations "within delivery of that office."⁶ Postmasters of the discontinued Post Offices were given the option of becoming station superintendents. In his 1874 *Annual Report*, Postmaster General Marshall Jewell noted that Post Offices near Brooklyn and Saint Louis had also been discontinued and converted to stations. He explained that:

*Consolidating deliveries into postal centers, and distributing the carriers between the main office and its branches, shortens the routes and expedites the deliveries and collections, and insures a more harmonious service than could be secured by several independent offices within the same territory.*⁷



Employees of Station S, Brooklyn, New York, Post Office, in 1888
Station S, established in 1885, was renamed Bushwick in 1947. It still serves Brooklyn residents.

In the 1890s the Post Office Department favored consolidating smaller, suburban Post Offices with larger ones to provide more customers with free delivery, to streamline and modernize management, and to bring more employees into the classified civil service.⁸ In July 1894, the delivery area of the Chicago Post Office almost doubled — providing service to nearly 97 percent of the city's inhabitants — when 59 independent Post Offices "within the confines of Chicago" were consolidated with the Chicago Post Office.⁹ Most of the discontinued Post Offices were converted to stations, often superintended by their former postmasters. The stations provided identical service to customers but were administratively subordinate to the Chicago Post Office.



Washington Heights Station, Chicago, Illinois, circa 1900
In 1894 the Washington Heights Post Office was discontinued and replaced by "sub-station No. 48" of the Chicago Post Office, a contract station. In 1898 the contract station was replaced by the Washington Heights Station, a classified station providing carrier delivery.

Consolidating Post Offices also helped put a slight dent in the yearly increase in the number of Post Offices. In 1895 there were 70,064 Post Offices and the number continued to rise, creating bureaucratic bottlenecks. All postmasters reported directly to Washington, so that

*If the Postmaster at a hamlet in the far West desires a ball of twine, he is obliged to make a requisition upon the department at Washington, and the request has to take the course followed by others of vastly greater importance.*¹⁰

In 1896 Postmaster General William Wilson told Congress that the primary benefit of consolidating smaller offices with nearby free-delivery offices was the introduction of "competent local supervision."¹¹ He reported:

*It is clearly impossible to manage 70,000 offices in so large a country as this from one central office so as to enforce diligence and accuracy in their management. ... It is, in some respects, as if each private soldier in a great and growing army reported directly to their commanding general, received orders from him and had little other supervision than what was possible from army headquarters.*¹²

The consolidation of Post Offices was opposed by some members of Congress, who wanted to preserve postmaster (patronage) positions and preserve Post Offices as community centers for rural customers. In April 1896, Senator Joseph Hawley of Connecticut decried consolidations as "going against the feeling, the old-fashioned feeling, of what the post-office ought to be," describing a rural Post Office as "a place of resort ... a fountain of news ... a clubhouse, in a certain way."¹³ To curb the discontinuance of local Post Offices, an act of Congress of June 9, 1896, prohibited the discontinuance of Post Offices located at county seats and also prohibited the Post Office Department from establishing stations, substations, or branches more than five miles beyond the corporate limits of a city. The five-mile restriction remained in place until 1958.¹⁴

Stations Created in Conjunction with Rural Free Delivery

Rural stations were established in conjunction with the first county-wide rural free delivery service, which began on December 20, 1899, in Carroll County, Maryland. Sixty-three independent Post Offices, which farmers previously had to visit to get their mail, were discontinued when county residents received free home delivery. Four of the discontinued Post Offices, which served villages of 500 to 700 inhabitants, were converted to stations of the Westminster Post Office. Initially called "rural free delivery stations," by 1902 they were referred to simply as "rural stations."¹⁵ The 1901 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* explained:

*In county service may be found what are known as rural free-delivery postal stations. They are established at points where it is desired to provide special money-order and registry facilities for patrons residing in a village or hamlet, and to secure a meeting point for rural carriers for the supply and exchange of mails of routes distant from the main distributing offices. A rural station is invariably established in lieu of a post-office.*¹⁶

On September 20, 1960, the first self-service or "non-personnel" rural station was established experimentally at English Lake, Indiana. The station provided individual mailboxes and large boxes for receiving parcels, a stamp vending machine, and a letter drop for outgoing mail, and was briefly staffed by a rural carrier while on his or her route. By 1966, non-personnel rural stations and branches were made a permanent service. These units provided for the collection and delivery of ordinary mail and the sale of stamps. Special services such as certified and registered mail were provided by a rural carrier, who remained at the unit for at least 15 minutes per day.

Naming Classified Stations and Branches

Initially, Post Office stations were designated by letters or local names. Beginning in 1897 stations were designated as "independent" if they received and dispatched registered mail directly, bypassing the main Post Office. In May 1908, to help preserve the identity of communities that lost their Post Office, Postmaster General George Meyer ordered that all stations located outside of city limits be called "branches" and that they be separately listed in the *United States Official Postal Guide*. At the same time, the name of the main Post Office was removed from the branch's postmarking stamp, so that, for example, the postmark would read "Cambridge, Mass.," instead of

"Boston, Mass., Cambridge Station." Beginning in 1981, postal guidelines specified that the names of new branches and classified stations should indicate their locations. For example, in 1987 the station established in the East Bay neighborhood of Provo, Utah, was named East Bay Station.

Contract Stations:

"Drug Store Post Offices: Mr. Wanamaker Wants an Office on Every Corner . . ." ¹⁷

Although contract stations were apparently established on a small scale by the early 1880s, Postmaster General John Wanamaker could "claim originality for . . . making a large number of drug stores branch offices."¹⁸ Wanamaker wanted to put Post Office branches in corner drug stores and other businesses both as a public convenience and to relieve overburdened postal facilities. Storekeepers bid for annual contracts, whereby they received a lump sum to provide space in their store and the services of a store clerk who would sell money orders, register letters, and receive letters and parcels for mailing. The public benefited by having more convenient postal facilities. The Post Office Department benefited because contracting out services was cheaper than hiring more clerks to work at already-crowded Post Offices, and increased facilities generated more business. And the storekeepers benefited. Although they usually did not profit directly from providing the services, a Post Office branch attracted increased foot traffic.

In January 1890, 16 contract stations opened in New York City. All but two of these stations were in drug stores, and most of the store clerks that oversaw the postal business were young women. By December 1892, contract stations, called "sub-stations," outnumbered regular stations in New York City.¹⁹

Although in the early 1890s contract stations in some cities were called substations and were designated by numbers, the nomenclature was inconsistent until 1897, with the terms "station," "substation," and "branch" sometimes used interchangeably.²⁰ On November 12, 1897, Postmaster General James Gary issued Order Number 595:

The following classification of stations and substations is hereby adopted:

All stations or sub-stations, as now designated, that receive and dispatch mail, either by carriers or through boxes and general delivery, will be known as stations and will be designated by letters or local names.

Sub-stations issue and pay money orders, register letters and parcels, sell postal supplies, but do not deliver mail, and will be designated by numbers.²¹

An article in the December 24, 1901, issue of *The Washington Post*, describing the Christmas mailing rush, lauded the utility of that city's substations:

It is noticeable that most of the packages, as most of the letters during ordinary times, are mailed at the substations, of which there are fifty-six. The custom of maintaining substations in the department stores, drug stores, &c., is a great time-saving device for the public, as the purchaser now can buy his presents and mail them in the same building.

Most of the thousands of dollars' worth of stamps sold daily are also disposed of at the substations in small quantities. At regular intervals all day and until late at night collections are made from the substations, so that practically no time is lost by mailing there.

In 1902, use of the term "substation" was officially discontinued. Contract stations were to be designated by number only, for example, "Station No. 1." Classified stations (staffed by postal employees and providing delivery) were to be designated by letters or local names, for example, "Station A," or "Austin Station." The first known postal use of the term "contract station" was in 1906.

The 1913 *Postal Laws and Regulations* clarified that contract stations could be located outside of the city limits, and provided the following description:

*Stations and branch post offices shall be divided into the following classes: (a) Classified ... (b) Contract, those usually located in drug stores or other places of business and operated under control of persons not in the classified service who shall be required to furnish quarters and equipment, heat, light, and the necessary clerical assistance.*²²

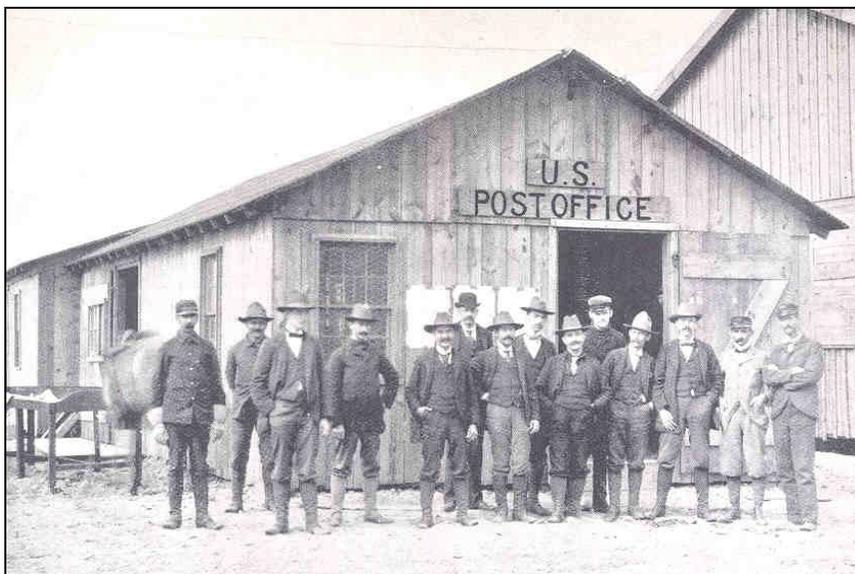
In 1916, an act of Congress permitted the postmaster general to enter into contracts for two years, rather than one, as previously. In 1958, contract terms increased to three years. Since 1974, contract agreements have been for indefinite periods of time.

Since at least the 1960s the more general term "unit" has sometimes been used instead of "station" or "branch." Contract stations and branches have been referred to variously as contract units, contract post office units, and contract postal units.²³ In 1973, newly-created contract stations and branches in rural areas were called Community Post Offices (CPOs), and by 1975 the term was used to refer to all rural stations and rural branches. Community Post Offices retained the ZIP Code and distinct address of the former Post Office, making them more acceptable to rural patrons concerned about the loss of community identity.

Temporary Stations and Branches Established for Special Occasions by 1876

The earliest known temporary station operated at the U.S. Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. The station, staffed by six clerks and ten letter carriers, offered general delivery, PO Box, money order, and registered letter services to the fair's nearly nine million visitors. The letter carriers hourly collected letters from lamp-post mounted letter boxes scattered throughout the 285-acre site.²⁴

Temporary stations to handle soldiers' mail were first established in June 1898, during the Spanish-American War. Stations were established at military camps both at home and abroad. The station at Camp Thomas, near Chattanooga, Tennessee, handled as many as 75,000 pieces of First-Class Mail in a single day, with its "general aggregate of business" rivaling that "at many cities with a population of a quarter of a million persons."²⁵



Camp Wikoff Branch of the New York Post Office, 1898

Temporary military stations were first established during the Spanish-American War of 1898. This photograph, from the 1898 Annual Report of the Postmaster General, shows the branch of the New York City Post Office located at Camp Wikoff on Long Island. Up to 17 postal clerks worked at the branch from August to October 1898, sorting mail for troops.

Following the introduction of Parcel Post in 1913, temporary stations to help handle holiday mail were established in some cities. By December 1913, the weight limit for some parcels had been increased from 11 to 20 pounds; the next month, the limit was raised to 50 pounds. Larger and heavier packages in the mail threatened to overwhelm Post Offices each holiday season. In December 1913, the postmaster of Los Angeles, California, established a

temporary station in an old warehouse in his city with “150 men ... toiling night and day to keep from being swamped in the flood of Christmas gifts.”²⁶ Postmasters in other cities soon followed suit.

Temporary stations have been established at stamp shows since 1926, beginning with the International Stamp Exhibition held in New York City from October 16 to 23, 1926. Temporary philatelic stations have their own special postmarking stamp, giving the station name and the date the mail is cancelled. The 1926 International Philatelic Exhibition Station also served as a venue for the release of the two-cent Alexander Hamilton's Battery stamp on October 18. Since that time, temporary stations have often served as venues for "First Day of Issue" stamp-release events, with temporary stations sometimes established specifically for such events.

Since the 1970s, postmasters have sometimes set up temporary stations at state fairs, conventions, parades, and other locations, to provide customers with pictorial cancellations commemorating significant events.



American Freedom Train pictorial postmarks, 1975–1976

In 1975–1976 the American Freedom Train toured the U.S. in celebration of the American Bicentennial. The train visited cities throughout the lower 48 states, sharing American history in 10 exhibit cars. Many postmasters set up temporary stations near the train and offered a special pictorial cancellation like the ones shown above.

Increasing Access to Retail Services since Postal Reorganization

The *Postal Reorganization Act of 1970* challenged the Postal Service to continue to serve the entire nation using largely its own revenue. In the following decades, the Postal Service provided access to postal products and services in a variety of new ways.

To help bring the Post Office to the customer, in 1986 the Postal Service opened "satellite retail units" — small retail spaces provided rent-free in suitable buildings, staffed by postal clerks. A similar concept, "Post Office Express," was tested beginning in 1995. "Post Office Express" units were full-service retail units staffed by postal employees, located primarily in large chain retail stores and open during store hours, including evenings and weekends.²⁷

In a year-long experiment beginning on October 7, 1988, 11 contract units operated in Sears stores in the Midwest, the first contract units in major department stores. Although successful, Sears did not renew the year-long contracts after postal workers, concerned about future possible job cuts, threatened a boycott. In 2013, the Postal Service launched a similar pilot program with Staples, with retail counters in Staples stores, staffed by Staples employees, offering postal products and services. The partnership was discontinued in 2017 following a 3-year protest led by the American Postal Workers Union, which opposed outsourcing postal work.

In 2011, the Postal Service introduced Village Post Offices (VPOs) to increase access to postal products and services in rural communities. Located within local businesses like convenience stores and gas stations, or in local agencies or organizations, VPOs were operated by the management of those locations and were subordinate to a local Post Office. VPOs were typically open longer hours than regular Post Offices, but their offerings were limited

to stamps, Flat-Rate packaging and envelopes, and PO Boxes.²⁸ The first VPO opened in Malone, Washington, in August 2011.²⁹

In the 21st century, although many retail transactions had shifted to digital channels, like *usps.com*, the Postal Service continued to operate the largest retail network in the United States. In 2023, more than 31,000 Post Offices, stations, and branches, and more than 2,500 CPUs, VPOs, and CPOs operated nationwide, with more than 95 percent of the American population having a Post Office, station, or branch within five miles of their residence.³⁰

Glossary

Branch	A postal unit administered by a Post Office. Beginning in May 1908 it referred specifically to units located <i>outside</i> of city limits (or the city carrier delivery area of the city or town in which the Post Office was located).
Classified Unit	Classified units are stations and branches operated by Postal Service employees in quarters owned or leased by the Postal Service.
Community Post Office (CPO)	Community Post Offices are contract units which provide service in small communities where an independent Post Office had been discontinued. Prior to 1973 they were known as rural stations and rural branches.
Contract Unit	Contract units are operated by private businesses under contract with the Postal Service. The term "contract" was used in this context by 1906.
Contract Postal Unit (CPU)	Since the 1960s, contract stations and branches have also been called contract post office units, contract postal units, and simply contract units.
Independent	Independent units receive and dispatch registered and other mail directly, bypassing the main Post Office. The term appears in Post Office directories from 1897 to 1965.
Non-personnel Rural Unit (also "Non-Personnel Unit")	Self-service unit providing collection and delivery of ordinary mail and sale of stamps. Special services (sale of money orders, stationery, and acceptance and delivery of certified, insured, registered, and COD mail) are provided by a non-city carrier when he or she services the unit. Carriers are required to remain at the unit a minimum of 15 minutes each day. Non-personnel units were first established experimentally in 1960.
Post Office	Originally, a facility which provided postal services to a community and was headed by a postmaster. Beginning in 2012 some Post Offices were converted to "Remotely Managed Post Offices" (RMPOs), which had reduced hours and were staffed by postal employees under the direction of a postmaster at a nearby "Administrative Post Office."
Post Office Express	Retail units located in large chain retail stores and open during store hours, staffed by postal employees. Tested in select locations beginning in 1995. Few operated; as of October 2023 only six Post Office Express units operated nationwide.
Rural (Station or Branch)	See "Community Post Office."
Station	A postal unit administered by a Post Office. Beginning in May 1908 it referred specifically to units located <i>inside</i> city limits (or the city carrier delivery area of the city or town in which the Post Office was located).
Substation	Early term for a postal unit administered by a Post Office. From 1895 to 1902 it referred specifically to contract stations, which were not delivery offices but provided money order and registry service and sold postal supplies. Use of the term was officially discontinued in 1902.
Unit	General term denoting station, branch, or Community Post Office — postal facilities subordinate to a Post Office.
Village Post Office (VPO)	A unit that is located within and operated by a local business or community organization and is subordinate to a local Post Office; its products and services are limited to stamps, Flat-Rate packaging and envelopes, and PO Boxes. First established in 2011. Due to their limited postal offerings, VPOs are not considered to be a subset of CPUs.

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¹ "The New York Post-Office," *Appleton's Journal: a Monthly Miscellany of Popular Literature*, September 1878, 193. See letters of July 18, October 10, and November 14, 1836, from Postmaster General Amos Kendall to Jonathan Coddington, postmaster of New York, and Robert Lenox, President of the New York Chamber of Commerce (National Archives Microfilm Publication 601, *Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, 1789-1836*, Roll 50).

² *The Statutes at Large and Treaties of the United States of America, from December 1, 1845, to March 3, 1851*, Volume IX (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 201. Post Office stations and branches were recognized by Congress as early as May 18, 1842. On that day, Congress ordered that "Postmasters at New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Orleans, and the other several cities of the Union," be required to submit financial receipts from any branch post office in their city [*The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America, from the Organization of the Government in 1789, to March 3, 1845*, Volume V (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), 487].

³ *New-York Daily Times*, June 2, 1853, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.* Private posts were largely abolished by an act of 1861, which essentially gave the postmaster general, at his discretion, the exclusive right to deliver mail within cities.

⁵ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1857, 14.

⁶ *The Boston Daily Globe*, June 27, 1873, 5.

⁷ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1874, 21.

⁸ The Civil Service Act of 1883 brought employees of Post Offices with 50 or more employees under Civil Service rules; in 1893 employees at all free-delivery Post Offices were brought into the Civil Service. (Postmaster positions were not included in the classified service until 1908, when postmasters of some small offices became classified.) Employees of discontinued Post Offices were not automatically transferred to classified positions at the larger offices but were eligible to compete for them. Classified employees received and kept their positions based on merit, not the "spoils" system of political patronage, whereby experienced postal employees were regularly replaced with political favorites.

⁹ *The Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1894, 24.

¹⁰ *The New-York Times*, April 7, 1896, 3.

¹¹ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1896, 15. For years, postmasters general had unsuccessfully asked Congress for the authority to divide the country into districts, headed by district supervisors who could supervise local offices and work to improve service in their localities. See, for example, the annual reports for 1890 (41-42), 1891 (39-42), and 1892 (33; 83-85).

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Congressional Record* (54th Congress, 1st Session), April 2, 1896, vol. 27, part 4, 3488.

¹⁴ See, for example, the 1909 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, page 111. On September 2, 1958, the limit was increased to 10 miles (*Postal Bulletin*, October 16, 1958, 4), and on December 21, 1963, it was increased to 20 miles (*Postal Bulletin*, January 30, 1964, 2).

¹⁵ The December 1901 *United States Official Postal Guide* listed the "East Richmond R.F.D. Station;" in 1902 it was called the "East Richmond Rural Station" (*United States Official Postal Guide*, vol. 28 and vol. 29).

¹⁶ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1901, 114.

¹⁷ *The New-York Times*, September 1, 1889, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* By the 1860s "receiving stations" were located in drug stores in some cities, where citizens could deposit mail for pick-up and sometimes buy stamps. (For example, see the list of drug store "receiving stations" in *Edwards' Annual Director* [sic] ... in the City of St. Louis, for 1864, page 72.) By the 1880s there were also some stations in drug stores (see *The Washington Post*, August 31, 1882; January 13, 1883; and January 5, 1887), but it is unclear what services were provided or what the arrangement was between the Post Office Department and the business owners. Dennis H. Pack, in his article "Those Elusive Postal Sub-Stations" (*La Posta*, September 1999), discusses the possibility that a station established in a drug store in Washington, D.C., in 1882, and at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1884, operated on a contract basis. *The New-York Times* of September 1, 1889, noted that "Mr. Wanamaker can claim originality for the project of making a large number of drug stores branch offices."

¹⁹ *United States Official Postal Guide*, 1892, 413. In December 1892 the New York Post Office had 19 stations and 23 substations.

²⁰ The 1879 *Postal Laws and Regulations* (page 432) defined "Branch Post-Office" as synonymous with "Station" and "Sub-Post-Office." "Substations" that provided carrier service were referenced in *The New-York Times* (December 10, 1880, 3), and *Chicago Daily Tribune* (September 1, 1889, 13). In 1890 a Post Office "branch station" opened in Washington, D.C. (*The Washington Post*, December 5, 1890, 6), and in 1894 the postmaster of New York provided detailed statistics on the numerous "branch stations" in his city (*The New-York Times*, January 17, 1894, 8). For further discussion of early nomenclature, see Dennis H. Pack's article "Those Elusive Postal Sub-Stations," Parts 1 and 2 (*La Posta*, September and November 1999).

²¹ *Postal Bulletin*, November 15, 1897.

²² *Postal Laws and Regulations*, 1913, 123-124.

²³ The July 1966 *Directory of Post Offices* (page 5) references "contract units" and "postal units." "Contract postal unit" is referenced in a May 22, 1975, *Los Angeles Times* article, and "contract unit" is mentioned in the Postal Service's 1979 *Postal Operations Manual*. The Postal Service's *Glossary of Postal Terms* refers to "contract post office unit" in 1981 and "contract postal unit" beginning in 1988.

²⁴ See *The New-York Times*, March 29, 1876, 1; *Ibid.*, July 9, 1876, 2; and William J. Bomar, *Postal Markings of United States Expositions*, Second Edition (Tampa, FL: BJB Philatelics, 1996), 11-19.

²⁵ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1898, 128. Camp Thomas was located at Chickamauga in Georgia — part of the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park. Up to 70,000 troops trained there during the summer of 1898.

²⁶ *Los Angeles Evening Post-Record*, December 19, 1913, 1.

²⁷ Few Post Office Express units ever operated; as of October 2023 there were six nationwide.

²⁸ Because of their limited postal offerings, the Postal Service did not consider VPOs to be a subset of CPUs.

²⁹ The number of VPOs increased to 877 by 2016 then gradually fell, reaching 590 in 2020.

³⁰ U.S. Postal Service, *Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Report to Congress*, 28, and *Delivering for America: Second-Year Progress Report*, 2023, 24.