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Transnational Influence: Development of United States Parcel Post, 1887-1984

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Transnational Influence on the Development of United States Parcel Post

Abstract

While the United States was an early advocate for international postal reform, it lagged in implementing some of those reforms. The U.S. first offered domestic parcel post service 1913—decades after it was widely adopted in other nations—and did not join the Universal Postal Union agreement on international parcels. The U.S. negotiated bilateral agreements before joining the Pan-American Postal Union in 1921. After World War II, the UPU sought to unite all members under one parcel post agreement. This paper shows how transnational factors played an important role in the development of parcel post in the U.S. and led to its signing of the UPU Postal Parcels Agreement in 1984.

Introduction

In November 1887, Nicholas Bell, superintendent of foreign mails for the United States Post Office Department, made a personal delivery to the White House. The package was addressed to the young bride of President Grover Cleveland, First Lady Frances Folsom Cleveland. Contained inside the package was a lady's fan made from native Jamaican woods, ferns, and flowers. It was made by the Women's Self-Help Society of Jamaica.¹

The sender was Frederick Sullivan, postmaster at Kingston, Jamaica. In a letter accompanying the fan, Sullivan wrote, "It is not intended as a present, but as a first offering of what Jamaica has to give in return for the great boon of a parcel-post exchange between the United States and Jamaica, recently approved."² While there is no record of what Mrs. Cleveland thought of the fan, her package was the very first piece of parcel post delivered in the United States.

Over the next quarter century, thousands more parcels were mailed between the United States and scores of other nations. Yet during that time, not a single piece of parcel post could be sent from one U.S. address to another. On January 1, 1913, after 25 years of exchanging packages with distant lands, U.S. citizens could finally send parcel post to one another.

Ninety-seven years elapsed between the United States Post Office Department delivering its first international parcel post in 1887 and when it joined the Universal Postal Union (UPU) Postal Parcels Agreement in 1984. In the interim, many factors went into shaping U.S. policy on parcel post. Many of those factors stemmed from internal ideologies and domestic politics. Less obvious is how transnational influences shaped U.S. parcel post policy.

A transnational influence is any activity or event originating from outside a nation's border that produces some effect within that nation. In the business world this generally refers to any commercial activity conducted internationally. This paper uses a broad definition of transnational influence that includes a range of human activities including competition, technological innovation, migration, economic depression, and war. While not caused by humans, pandemics

¹ The Women's Self-Help Society was founded in 1879 to provide employment to poor women. The sale rooms of the society contained a large assortment of Jamaican curiosities, baskets, jippi-jappa hats, drawn-thread work, and embroidery, as well as preserves, chutney, and pickles. Joseph Ford, Frank Cundall, *The Handbook of Jamaica*, (Kingston: Jamaica Government Printing Office, 1908) 478.

² *Monmouth Democrat*, (Freehold, New Jersey) November 10, 1887, 2.

and natural disasters can also be considered transnational influences due to their macroeconomic impact.³

Since international parcel post depends on reaching an agreement with foreign nations, one might naturally assume it is implicitly susceptible to external influence. In fact, the U.S. exercised a high degree of restraint in choosing which nations it exchanged parcels with. Yet even when refraining from such agreements, the U.S. was not immune to transnational influences that manifested in more diverse and subtle forms. In his paper “Global commerce in small boxes,” Léonard Laborie described how the simple act of sending parcels from one country to another produced a “transnational dynamic” that contributed to the long-awaited establishment of domestic parcel post in the U.S.⁴

This paper examines the transnational forces that shaped U.S. parcel post, from the first parcel in 1887 until joining the UPU Postal Parcels Agreement in 1984. It demonstrates that the U.S. was a latecomer to parcel post primarily due to internal political and economic forces. Domestic and transnational factors challenged these internal forces, resulting in the gradual expansion of international parcel post. Major transnational events caused the U.S. parcel post to further integrate with the rest of the world and ultimately join the UPU agreement.

The source materials are primarily from the *Acts of Universal Postal Union*, the *Annual Reports of the Postmaster General*, historic newspaper archives, and the files of the U.S. Postal Service historian. Statistics were compiled from the annual reports using the most recent figures. Dollar amounts are shown as reported and have not been adjusted for inflation.

Origins of International Parcel Post

For much of the 19th century, the exchange of mail between the world’s nations was governed by a complex and confusing jumble of agreements. Order began to emerge at the Paris Conference of 1863 and continued in 1874 with the Treaty of Bern. This marked the creation of the Universal Postal Union which was originally called the General Postal Union. The objective of the treaty was to create “a single postal territory” in which mail could travel under uniform

³ “Natural disasters directly impact public postal services by causing damage to infrastructure, vehicles and equipment, loss of postal items and customer data and even loss of lives. As a result, an important trade and communication channel is halted or impeded.” Universal Postal Union, “Natural Disasters & the Postal Sector,” Disaster Risk Management, accessed December 24, 2023, <https://www.upu.int/en/Universal-Postal-Union/Activities/Sustainable-Development/Disaster-Risk-Management>.

⁴ Léonard Laborie, “Global Commerce in Small Boxes: Parcel Post, 1878-1913.” *Journal of Global History* 10, no. 2 (July 2015): 235–58.

rules and rates of postage. In this goal the UPU was successful, so successful that other nations soon joined the union. From 21 countries at its founding, the UPU grew to 71 by 1906.

While primarily focused on letter post, the treaty recognized other categories of mail such as books, newspapers and other printed matter, samples of merchandise, and commercial papers.⁵ Between 1874 and the first World War, the UPU negotiated agreements for a multitude of new services: international postcards, insured letters, international money orders, postal identity cards, special delivery, international subscriptions to newspapers and periodicals, international reply coupons and postal banking.

Although parcel post was not contemplated in the original treaty, at the 1880 meeting in Paris, the UPU concluded a parcel postal convention that was signed by 19 nations. That convention was amended at Lisbon in 1885 when ten more nations joined. Conspicuously absent were the signatures of two of the UPU's largest members. The United States and Great Britain declined to join the UPU parcel convention. The main obstacle to their participation was that the maximum weight of a parcel increased to 11 pounds (5 kilograms).⁶ Neither the U.S. nor Britain had yet established a domestic parcel post and were ill-equipped to introduce heavier parcels into their domestic mail streams. In both nations, the railways or private express companies filled this lucrative delivery niche.⁷

Nevertheless, the United States was poised to enter the international parcel post market. Superintendent of Foreign Mails Nicholas Bell was optimistic that the U.S. might soon join the convention. "The usefulness of the International parcel-post service having been practically tested, there has been a general desire to have the system still further extended," he wrote in 1886, "so that eventually all of the countries comprised within the Universal Postal Union may enjoy its benefits."⁸ Although Bell's vision was prescient, it did not come to pass until nearly a century later. For the shorter term, he narrowed the scope of that vision from the entire globe to just the western half.

⁵ George A. Coddington, Jr., *The Universal Postal Union: Coordinator of the International Mails* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 28.

⁶ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, 1886, 825.

⁷ Britain moved quickly to commence its inland parcel post in 1883 and began dispatching foreign and colonial parcels in 1885. J.C. Hemmeon, *The History of the British Post Office* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 70.

⁸ *Annual Report*, 1886, 825.

U.S. Agrees to Exchange Parcels in the Americas

The United States entered the international parcel post arena on September 15, 1887, when President Grover Cleveland signed a bilateral agreement with Jamaica. Bilateral agreements with Barbados, Bahamas, British Honduras, and Mexico soon followed. Bell wrote, “Parcel-post conventions are now pending with all the Central and South American States, and it is hoped that the time is not far distant when the ‘Three Americas’ will be embraced in one grand parcel-post mission, viz, to control the markets of this hemisphere and become the leader in its industrial and commercial progress.”⁹

Postal policy, especially towards parcel post, reflected the principle that guided U.S. foreign relations for much of the 19th century. The Monroe Doctrine held that the Western Hemisphere was solely the United States’ domain, and “The American continents ... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.”¹⁰ Conversely, the United States pledged to avoid involvement in the political affairs of Europe. In prioritizing parcel post conventions within the ‘Three Americas’ the United States was asserting its claim in order to “control the markets” of the hemisphere.

Postmaster General William Vilas wrote, “The parcel-post system will be an important avenue for the extension of the commerce of the United States, and its use will be the cause of bringing to our merchants an acquaintance hitherto unknown to them, and by that acquaintance larger transactions will follow; and further, the kind of merchandise that will be purchased and conveyed in this way from our markets to the states of Central and South America is now largely purchased from European states.”¹¹

While Vilas saw international parcel post as beneficial for American exporters, he also saw it as a source of additional revenue for the Post Office Department. Vilas insisted that the U.S. keep its parcel post rates in line with European states and believed that U.S. proximity to Latin America offered a competitive advantage. “The competition of our foreign parcel trade will come from nearly all of the European states, as most of them have an established parcel-post

⁹ The Three Americas were North America, South America, and Central America, including the islands of the West Indies. *Annual Report*, 1888, 829.

¹⁰ James Monroe, “Seventh Annual Message to Congress, December 2, 1823”, in the *Annals of Congress*, (Senate), 18th Congress, 1st Session, pages 14, 22–23.

¹¹ *Annual Report*, 1887, 1016.

system with some of the South American states; in some cases we have an advantage in the time required for the completion of a merchandise order through the parcel post, while they have the advantage in many cases of a cheaper cost.”¹² The Latin American agreements adopted the same 11-pound (5kg) weight limit as the UPU. Postage for international parcels was set at 12 cents per pound. By 1891 the U.S. had signed 11 parcel post agreements, and during that year the weight of parcels dispatched abroad was 27,605 pounds.

A Curious Anomaly

When he became postmaster general in 1889, John Wanamaker noted a “curious anomaly in our postal system.”¹³ Unlike most of his predecessors, Wanamaker was not a career politician. He made his fortune in business—John Wanamaker & Company was among the most successful and innovative department stores in the United States. As postmaster general, he viewed the postal service not just as a public service but also as a tremendous business enterprise. He proposed numerous postal innovations whenever they made good business sense. Among these was a call for domestic parcel post.¹⁴

Wanamaker attributed the lack of domestic parcel post service to the political power of the railroads and express companies that controlled the delivery business. Congress resisted the idea of bringing the federal government into direct competition with private business. “There are four insuperable obstacles to the establishment of a parcels post in our country,” said Wanamaker. “The first is the United States Express company. The second is the Adams Express company. The third is the Wells Fargo Express company. The fourth is the American Express company.”¹⁵ He added, “Nearly every country in Europe has established a parcels post and managed it successfully to the great satisfaction of the people.... It can only be a question of time before it will be undertaken in some better form in this country.”¹⁶

Aside from parcels, more than 60 percent of transatlantic mails departing the U.S. in 1891 were destined for Britain and Germany. These two nations naturally sought parcel post agreements with the U.S., but Wanamaker declined because a full parcel post could not be

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Annual Report*, 1889, 32.

¹⁴ U.S. Postal Service, “John Wanamaker, Postmaster General, March 5, 1889, to March 1893,” *Postal History*, March 2005, <https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/pdf/pmg-wanamaker.pdf>.

¹⁵ James A. Edgerton, “At Last We Are to Have a System of Parcels Post,” *Springville Journal* (New York), Sept. 12, 1912.

¹⁶ *Annual Report*, 1890, 24.

instituted under existing legislation. “While only a limited and unsatisfactory parcels post existed in this country,” he wrote, “it would be impossible to expect legislation to provide a proper parcels post with foreign nations.”¹⁷ Despite the growing market in foreign parcel post, the Post Office Department was prohibited from accepting domestic packages weighing more than 4 pounds. Moreover, domestic parcels up to 4 pounds were charged 16 cents per pound—one-third more than shipments abroad.

The combination of a financial panic in 1893 and the election of a more conservative president dampened calls from within the Post Office Department for expanding postal services. Second Assistant Postmaster General J. Lowrie Bell opposed expanding parcel post. Bell warned that the Department would need “some years advance notice” to prepare its equipment, arrange additional railcars, and inform mail contractors of new requirements.¹⁸ He agreed that the current postage rates were unfair, citing the inequity of a one-pound package from Europe traveling anywhere in the U.S. for only 12 cents, while the same service cost Americans 16 cents. “Enlargement of the foreign system,” he wrote, “would make it advisable to favor a corresponding enlargement and rate reduction in the domestic parcels system.”¹⁹

While U.S. officials shied away from an expanded parcel post, the demand from abroad grew stronger. John Henniker-Heaton was a member of the British Parliament and a staunch advocate for international postal reform. In 1895 he wrote, “It is intolerable, while we have a parcel post to nearly every part of the world, including Samoa, the Cameroons, and the wilds of Bechuanaland, we have none to or from the United States.”²⁰

The Annual Report of the Postmaster General for 1897 called attention “to the fact that applications from the Postal administrations of Germany, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Norway, Italy, and New Zealand for the establishment of the Parcels-Post service between those countries and the United States have been on file in this Department for several years and have recently been renewed.”²¹

¹⁷ *Annual Report*, 1891, 113-114.

¹⁸ *Annual Report*, 1893, 145.

¹⁹ *Annual Report*, 1893, 154-155.

²⁰ J. Henniker Heaton, “Ten Years’ Postal Progress: An Imperial Plan”, *Contemporary Review*, 68, July 1895, 8.

²¹ *Annual Report*, 1897, 564.

U.S. Agreements with European Nations

The U.S. concluded a parcel post convention with Germany in 1899, “the first arrangement of the kind which has been made with any European country.”²² After a three-year trial, it was found that the volume of parcels sent from Germany to the U.S. was five times greater than those sent from the U.S. to Germany. The U.S. was obliged to transport them over a much larger territory, and the cost of delivering German parcels far exceeded the postage collected. In 1903 the convention with Germany was modified to lower the maximum weight from 11 pounds to match the domestic limit of 4 pounds. The 11-pound limit was retained for Western Hemisphere countries because they received many more parcels from the U.S. than they sent, resulting in a net profit.²³

“Other countries in Europe seek parcel-post conventions with us,” wrote Postmaster General Charles Emory Smith, “but it may be a question of how far a foreign service of this character should be extended before a domestic parcel post shall be inaugurated.”²⁴ While the service with Germany ebbed and flowed, there was still no parcel post convention with Great Britain.

In 1903, newly appointed Postmaster General George Cortelyou explained that the U.S. did not join the UPU parcel convention “because the minute details to be observed by senders and postal officials in handling the parcels would require the opening of new books and accounts and an increase in clerical force.” Cortelyou stated, “Our own conventions are less complicated in operation and seem to give satisfactory results.”²⁵ In 1906, Cortelyou’s assistant Edward Madden warned against “unwholesome conditions and apparent discrimination in favor of the foreign as against the domestic service.”²⁶ He noted that parcels could be shipped to, and from, foreign lands for 4 cents a pound less than domestic parcels.

“It is difficult for the public to understand when such differences exist that we are not favoring the foreign at the expense of our domestic service,” Madden wrote.²⁷ “We are moving in the direction of favors to foreign mail matter,” he argued, “and the degree of our being

²² *Annual Report*, 1899, 25.

²³ The United States received postage on 77,174 pounds sent to Germany, while Germany collected postage on 400,289 pounds sent to the U.S. *Annual Report*, 1903, 18.

²⁴ *Annual Report*, 1901, 31.

²⁵ *Annual Report*, 1905, 70.

²⁶ *Annual Report*, 1906, 312.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

governed from abroad is illustrated by the action of the Universal Postal Union sitting in Rome.”²⁸ The implication was that negotiating with European powers would entail compromises the administration was unwilling to make. On the other hand, the U.S. could control bilateral negotiations with individual nations.

Germany remained the only European nation to have a parcel post convention with the U.S. until 1905 when conventions were signed with Great Britain, Norway, and Belgium. In 1907, the U.S. had conventions with 33 foreign countries including those recently concluded with Sweden and Denmark. Conventions with Netherlands, Italy, France, and Austria were concluded in 1908. U.S.-European agreements excluded parcels more than \$50 in value, while there was generally no limit within the Western Hemisphere. This restriction supported U.S. protectionist foreign trade policies, which were designed to maximize U.S. exports and minimize imports.

The \$50 limitation on European parcels was a form of customs restriction. Tariffs and customs duties were set by the U.S. Congress, not the Post Office Department. Postmaster General George Meyer warned that such restrictions on value were “out of harmony with parcel-post facilities in other countries” and hampered service. He called international parcel post a “necessary convenience” and said its operation should be freed “from every possible hindrance.”²⁹ To mitigate the disparities between foreign and domestic parcel post, Meyer advocated lowering domestic postage to 12 cents per pound. He also proposed a limited domestic parcel post on rural delivery routes with an 11-pound limit.³⁰

Domestic Parcel Post at Last

As the United States cautiously expanded its international parcel post, the push for domestic parcel service gathered steam. Several forces converged that made the adoption of domestic parcel post seem inevitable. Public opinion towards railroad companies and private delivery firms soured after government investigators uncovered abuses that included price fixing, overcharging, and collusion. Much of the credit for the creation of domestic parcel post may be given to one man in particular, James L. Cowles, who made domestic parcel post his mission.³¹

²⁸ The specific objection was not about parcel post, but because the UPU had “decreed that this country shall...accept ‘postcards’ with written messages on the left half of the face thereof,” Ibid.

²⁹ *Annual Report*, 1908, 52-53.

³⁰ *Annual Report*, 1907, 9-10.

³¹“J. L. Cowles, ‘Father of Parcel Post, Dies.” *The Evening Star* (Washington, DC), Oct. 23, 1922, 12.

After earning a law degree, Cowles grew interested in ways the postal service could improve the quality of people's lives. While traveling through Europe he studied the workings of the British and German railroads and parcel post. In 1896, he wrote that the greatest advance in the British Post Office was the addition of parcel post. "Although there has been a considerable extension of the postal service in [the U.S.] in the last half century," Cowles argued, "the Old World has gone far beyond us."³² In 1902 in Boston, he founded the Postal Progress League to advocate for domestic parcel post and other reforms.

In 1903, Cowles stated, "the United States is far behind Europe and is going backward."³³ Cowles and his allies poured considerable energy into pushing Congress to reform postal laws. They also challenged its opponents. When President Theodore Roosevelt appointed former Congressman Eugene Loud as a delegate to the UPU congress in Rome, the Postal Progress League denounced Loud as "an avowed antagonist" of domestic parcel post.³⁴ Cowles and the Postal Progress League had built a powerful coalition that included consumers, publishers, mail order companies, agrarian organizations, and labor unions.³⁵ Rural free delivery, which had rapidly grown since it began in 1896, "expanded the constituency of parcel post and proved ... that the government could offer a viable parcel delivery service."³⁶

As voters unseated some opponents of parcel post and others retired, the make-up of the U.S. Congress grew more progressive, most notably, chairman of the House Post Office Committee Jesse Overstreet, suffered a stunning loss in his 1908 bid for reelection.³⁷ In the Senate, Post Office Committee Jonathan Bourne, Jr. held extensive hearings and ordered a thorough study of foreign parcel posts, intending to adopt best practices.³⁸

Postal officials, who had been mute on the subject since Wanamaker, were again openly calling for parcel post. Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock wrote in 1911, "It is hoped that

³² Cowles, James Lewis. *A General Freight and Passenger Post; a Practical Solution of the Railroad Problem*. 4th ed. New York; London: G.P. Putnam, 1905, 12.

³³ "Backward Parcels Post," *New-York Tribune*, July 14, 1903, 8.

³⁴ *The New York Times*, January 14, 1904, 14.

³⁵ Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 147.

³⁶ Richard B. Kielbowicz, "Government Goes into Business: Parcel Post in the Nation's Political Economy, 1880-1915," *Studies in American Political Development* 8, no. 1 (1994): 150-72.

³⁷ The Postal Progress League described Overstreet as "practically dictator of postal legislation... His ears seem to be open only to the express companies and the railroads. In their interest he at once refuses to allow the American people a reasonable parcels post." "Postal League to Fight Overstreet," *The Indianapolis Star*; July 26, 1906, 3.

³⁸ Jonathan Bourne, Jr., *Parcel Post in Foreign Countries* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1912).

Congress will promptly authorize the establishment of a parcel post. The benefits of this service are widely enjoyed by the people of foreign countries and should be provided in the United States.”³⁹ The act authorizing parcel post was signed into law on August 24, 1912.⁴⁰ The service began on January 1, 1913, and was an immediate success.

Postmaster General Albert Burleson commented, “The popularity of parcel post cannot be doubted. Its facilities are better and its rates are generally lower than those of the private companies, whose exorbitant charges and unsatisfactory service finally provoked an agitation so insistent as to overcome the legislative inertia behind which the express monopoly lay entrenched.”⁴¹ Domestic parcels were initially limited to the UPU standard of 11 pounds. In 1914 the limit was increased to 20 pounds for distant destinations and 50 pounds for nearby deliveries.

Reaction from abroad was immediate. “It is strange to us Englishmen that the American Post Office should only at this late date be inaugurating a parcels post,” a contributor in Liverpool wrote. “Thirty years ago, this facility was established in England. It has grown rapidly in public favour, until now it has become a part of the very structure of our social life.”⁴²

“Four days from now, the new United States parcels post comes into force, and Canada will be about the last civilized country in the world without a cheap parcels post,” lamented *The Ottawa Journal*. “No doubt the Dominion Post Office Department is weighing the merits of the United States proposition, but there is no need to wait to see how it works out. What practically every other country has, need not be considered an experiment.”⁴³ Canada launched its own parcel post one year after the U.S. in January 1914.⁴⁴

The lack of domestic parcel post was long cited as one reason why the U.S. could not join the UPU parcel convention. Once the domestic service was established, there still was no rush for the U.S. to join the UPU parcel post agreement. The existing patchwork of bilateral agreements suited the U.S. objective of limiting trade with Europe while maximizing Pan-American trade.

³⁹ *Annual Report*, 1911, 7.

⁴⁰ 37 Stat. 539.

⁴¹ *Annual Report*, 1913, 16.

⁴² “American Parcels Post,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, May 9, 1913, 9.

⁴³ “Wanted Parcels Post,” *The Ottawa Journal*, December 28, 1912, 8.

⁴⁴ “Parcel Post for Canada, A New Departure,” *The Daily Telegraph* (London, UK), Sept. 10, 1913, 8.

Bilateral Agreements and the Pan-American Postal Union

The inauguration of domestic parcel post may have indirectly led to more international parcels. In 1913, the volume of international parcels dispatched increased by 25 percent. New bilateral agreements with Panama, Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, and Martinique brought the total number to 47 and showed a continued predilection for Pan-Americanism.⁴⁵ In 1914 the Post Office Department approached the postal administrations in the Western Hemisphere, with which it did not have a parcel agreement, proposing a limited postal convention embracing all the Americas. The U.S. reached a parcel post agreement with Argentina in 1915.

War in Europe caused suspension of parcel post to belligerent nations. European parcel service disrupted by World War I was resumed in 1919 and the maximum weight for parcels exchanged with some Latin American countries was increased to 22 pounds (10 kg). The volume of international parcel post sent from the U.S. in 1920 increased a remarkable 108 percent over the prior year. Postmaster General Burleson reported, “At this time there is practically a parcel-post service to every part of the world.”⁴⁶ With parcel post able to reach almost every country, the Post Office Department sought agreements for standardized customs declarations and uniform methods of packing. In 1921, the U.S. had parcel post agreements with 93 countries and “95 points tributary thereto.”⁴⁷

The 1874 Treaty of Bern provided for originating countries to keep all postage revenue, without compensating the destination country for delivery.⁴⁸ This became known as the principle of “reciprocity.” Although the original treaty did not include parcels, the countries of origin continued to retain the postage paid on international parcels. The assumption was that over time the amount of mail exchanged between nations would balance out. As it turned out, the volume of parcels exchanged between nations was anything but balanced. Destinating countries often incurred significant costs in transporting parcels for which they received no revenue. This was

⁴⁵ Pan-Americanism is a movement that seeks to create, encourage, and organize relationships, an association, and cooperation among the states of the Americas, through diplomatic, political, economic, and social means. *Annual Report*, 1913, 173.

⁴⁶ *Annual Report*, 1920, 100-101.

⁴⁷ *Annual Report*, 1921, 81.

⁴⁸ “Each Administration shall keep the whole of the sums which it collects by virtue of the foregoing Articles 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Consequently, there will be no necessity on this head for any accounts between the several Administrations of the Union.” *General Postal Union*, Article 9 (1874).

the prime reason given when the U.S. lowered the weight limit on parcels from Germany in 1903.

Historically the U.S. dispatched considerably more parcels than it received from abroad. By 1920 some countries complained that the volume of parcels from the U.S. was so great that the parcel post had become a “one-sided arrangement.” To offset this imbalance, the United States agreed “with a few countries” to pay “a designated sum per pound” for the excess weight. Without such an arrangement for the division of postage, some of the existing agreements might have been cancelled with likely disruption of parcel service.⁴⁹ Such arrangements for dividing postage on parcels were later known as “inward land rates.”⁵⁰

Year	Pounds of Parcel Post Dispatched by U.S.	Pounds of Parcel Post Received by U.S.
1912	2,270,215	1,967,779
1913	2,831,512	2,399,317
1914	3,362,780	3,081,867
1915	3,347,899	1,973,040
1916	6,269,093	2,720,100
1917	8,579,485	1,667,148

In October 1920 the UPU Congress met in Madrid—four years later than originally planned. Though normally held at five-year intervals, World War I necessitated postponement. Fourteen years had elapsed since the 1906 congress in Rome. Given the long interval and the many changes caused by the war, the delegates had a full agenda. There was a sharp divide between the Eastern and Western Hemispheres over whether to raise international postage rates. A vocal minority of European nations supported raising rates to cover their wartime losses due to currency depreciation and “the payment of reconstruction costs and reparations.”⁵¹ The U.S. and Latin American countries opposed any increase, asserting that a rate hike would “injure commercial interests greatly and was unnecessary for revenue purposes.”⁵²

⁴⁹ *Annual Report*, 1920, 100-1.

⁵⁰ Universal Postal Union, “UPU Remuneration Systems,” About UPU remuneration, n.d., <https://www.upu.int/en/Postal-Solutions/Programmes-Services/Remuneration/About-UPU-remuneration>.

⁵¹ Coddling, *The Universal Postal Union: Coordinator of the International Mails*, 51.

⁵² “Proposed Changes in Postal Rates,” *The Des Moines Register*, October 11, 1920.

Meeting separately, delegates from the U.S. and the Philippines, Spain, and 20 Latin American countries proposed forming a “restricted postal union” of Pan-American states.⁵³ The UPU allowed the Western Hemisphere nations to fix their own postage rates if they were no higher than the maximum eventually adopted by the UPU. British observers viewed the Pan-American postal union ominously. It disadvantaged British merchants doing business in South America and Spain, causing British firms to pay “higher rates for correspondence, catalogs, and samples than firms in the United States.”⁵⁴

In 1921, the nations of the Americas sent delegates to the first Pan-American Postal Congress in Buenos Aires. This congress resulted in a new convention that adopted the U.S. dollar as its monetary standard and permitted domestic rates and the free movement of mails within the union. Most significantly, it marked the first time the U.S. joined an international parcel post convention. This convention provided for consistent rates and reduced delivery charges on parcels. *The Boston Globe* cited one case of a parcel from the U.S. to Argentina. Contents of the parcel were worth just 30 cents. When it was delivered, it “cost the addressee more than \$6, as a result of various charges.”⁵⁵ The new convention replaced variable fees with a single charge of 10 cents. The second Pan-American Congress was held at Mexico City in 1926 where Spain was invited to join the organization. It was thereafter called the American Spanish Postal Union.⁵⁶

The U.S. continued to seek bilateral agreements with countries that were not a party to the Pan-American Convention. In 1922, U.S. and Canadian officials held a conference in Ottawa. They concluded a bilateral convention that included parcel post service on packages weighing up to 11 pounds. Efforts to arrange a parcel post convention with Cuba were thwarted because of U.S. customs restrictions on the importation of Cuban cigars. An agreement with Cuba was eventually reached in 1930.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Restricted unions* were formed to promote further cooperation among Posts within a specific region. They are governed by Article 9 of the UPU Constitution and have an important role in coordinating and facilitating the functioning of postal services at the regional level. As of January 2024, there were 19 restricted unions, covering most of the world's regions. Countries belonging to a restricted union may conclude agreements among themselves regarding international postal services. “Restricted Unions,” About UPU, n.d., <https://www.upu.int/en/universal-postal-union/about-upu/restricted-unions>.

⁵⁴ “The Pan-American Postal,” *The London Times*, December 2, 1920.

⁵⁵ “Pan-American Postal Union to Take in the United States,” *The Boston Globe*, Sept. 13, 1921, 7.

⁵⁶ The name was changed to “Postal Union of the Americas and Spain” in 1966, and with the addition of Portugal in 1990, it became the Postal Union of the Americas, Spain, and Portugal. La Unión Postal de las Américas, España y Portugal, “Reseña Histórica,” UPAEP, <https://www.upaep.int/upaep/la-organizacion>.

⁵⁷ In 1926, Cuba agreed to a temporary convention with the hope that the U.S. Congress would repeal the cigar ban, thereby allowing U.S. exports to be sent to Cuba. After two years with the ban still in place, Cuba ended the agreement. Not until

In 1928 the maximum weight for international parcels, generally 22 pounds, was increased to 44 pounds (20 kg) for some countries. The Great Depression triggered a downturn in worldwide economic activity, which was reflected in the diminished volume of parcels dispatched in the early 1930s. The weight of parcels dispatched fell by 24 percent in 1932 and 23 percent less in 1933. Starting in 1936, international senders were required to indicate how their parcels should be handled in the event they became undeliverable as addressed. This was expected to save the Post Office Department the cost of returning unwanted items that might otherwise be forwarded or abandoned.

Also in 1936, the American Spanish Postal Union met in Panama, where it adopted a new parcel post convention. This agreement included a new provision for the registration of parcels and created new weight classes with a maximum of 44 pounds. Parcels that could not be delivered were now held for 90 days instead of 30 before being returned or disposed of. A parcel post agreement with Japan took effect in 1938. It included “terminal charges” paid to the country of destination for the additional costs of delivery. It was expected that the agreement would net a yearly balance in favor of the U.S.

World War II and its Aftermath

Beginning in 1939, war in Europe again disrupted parcel postal service. In some cases, newly ratified agreements were discontinued almost as soon as they were signed.⁵⁸ Due to the global nature of the conflict and its effect on shipping, nations in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia were impacted as well. Parcel post service was suspended to 32 countries in 1940, and 20 more the next year. In 1941, the only European nations still receiving parcel post from the U.S. were Great Britain, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland.

The volume of international parcels dispatched from the U.S. dropped during 1940 and 1941. After the U.S. entered the war in December 1941, the volume of parcels skyrocketed— up 36 percent in 1942 and 365 percent in 1944. The volume continued to grow after the war and peaked in 1948 with more than 511 million pounds of parcels sent abroad.⁵⁹ In 1948, the U.S.

1930, when Congress repealed the “obnoxious and archaic legislation,” was a parcel agreement with Cuba signed. *Annual Report*, 1928, 46.

⁵⁸ The agreement between the U.S. and Lithuania took effect in January 1940 but was suspended in June. *Annual Report*, 1940, 24,

⁵⁹ This was the highest amount during the period for which records are available, which ended in 1970.

Congress authorized a new service called air parcel post. Because air parcels traveled on aircraft rather than ships, they reached their destinations in days rather than weeks. In the first year, 92,704 pounds of air parcel post was dispatched. Demand for air parcel post grew quickly, with over 1 million pounds dispatched in 1954.

After World War II, international parcel post played an important part in the European Recovery Plan, also known as the Marshall Plan. Over four years, starting in 1948, the United States provided \$13.3 billion in aid to help prevent starvation in war-torn areas, repair the devastation of those areas as quickly as possible, and begin economic reconstruction. The U.S. Congress established the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) in April 1948 to administer the Marshall Plan.

To encourage ordinary Americans to voluntarily send relief packages, ECA subsidized international parcel post rates.⁶⁰ *The Waco Times-Herald* reported that the government was making it easier “for private individuals to conduct their own foreign aid program.”⁶¹ Postage rates on relief parcels sent to European countries and China were cut by 4 cents per pound. To be eligible for reduced postage, the parcels had to contain food, clothing, medical supplies, household goods, and other relief items, and be clearly marked “U.S.A. Gift Parcel.”

In 1949 roughly 14 million gift parcels were dispatched to countries in Europe and Asia. The volume of relief parcels was 31 percent less the following year, due to improving conditions in the countries concerned. Parcel post subsidies for gift packages to the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Netherlands ended in 1950, and concluded altogether in 1951.

The U.S. worked through the Postal Union of America and Spain (PUAS) to make the exchange of parcels simpler and more equitable. At its 1955 Postal Congress in Bogota, Colombia, the United States proposed that the free-transit provision be made optional for member states. The free-transit provision required each country to furnish postal transportation and maritime shipping services free of charge to other member countries. The U.S. handled more mail and provided disproportionate services for other countries, resulting in expenses of \$1.2

⁶⁰ In addition to postage, ECA subsidized ocean freight shipments sent overseas by relief agencies. ECA was abolished in October 1951 and its functions transferred to the Mutual Security Agency. Economic Cooperation Administration. United States, *Report to Congress of the Economic Cooperation Administration* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1951), 20.

⁶¹ “Gift Parcels Postage Cut,” *The Waco Times-Herald* (Texas), June 30, 1948, 5.

million annually.⁶² The proposal was disapproved; instead, a reservation was formulated for the U.S., relieving the expense of transporting mail for other PUAS members.

The 1955 PUAS Congress adopted a proposal to allow bulk billing of parcel post, instead of listing each parcel separately.⁶³ Bilateral agreements to allow bulk billing were reached shortly thereafter with Mexico, Great Britain, and Germany. Expanded use of bulk billing helped streamline accounting between countries of terminal charges on international parcel post.⁶⁴ During the 1960s the U.S. expanded its international parcel post network by establishing new bilateral agreements and by adding bulk billing and air service to existing agreements. By 1968, 70 percent of international mail was sent by air.

The containerization of international surface mail, which began experimentally in 1965, successfully reduced costs and minimized damage and theft.⁶⁵ Before shipping containers, parcels and mailbags had to be manually loaded, unloaded, and reloaded at each transfer point. This required excessive handling, caused delays, and increased costs.

A Single Postal Territory for Parcels

Meanwhile, the UPU was seeking ways to improve and simplify its parcel post provisions. The 1957 Ottawa Congress instructed the Executive Liaison Committee to consolidate parcel post regulations.⁶⁶ At the time there were two separate documents governing postal parcels: the Parcels Agreement and the Detailed Regulations. The committee proposed a more logical distribution of the provisions by regrouping the articles according to the nature of their content.⁶⁷ These proposals were adopted at the 1964 Congress in Vienna. By that time the principle of reciprocity was being challenged by “a growing number of countries” because they received far

⁶² *Annual Report*, 1955, 21.

⁶³ Bulk billing required only a dispatch bill listing total parcels and sacks, total weight, and consecutive numbers on the parcels. Previously, parcels were descriptively listed with the name of the sender, the post office of origin, the name of addressee, and the office of destination. In addition, the parcels had to be segregated into six separate weight categories. *Annual Report*, 1956, 34-35.

⁶⁴ *Annual Report*, 1959, 38.

⁶⁵ The first standard shipping container in the U.S. was patented in 1956 by Malcolm McLean. *Annual Report*, 1968, 27.

⁶⁶ The Executive Liaison Committee was formed in 1947 to manage the affairs of the UPU between congresses. It was renamed the Executive Council in 1964. Universal Postal Union, *Postal Parcels Agreement Revised at Hamburg 1984 and Annotated by the International Bureau*, vol. 3 (Berne: International Bureau of the Universal Postal Union, 1985), 5.

⁶⁷ For example: charges and fees; conditions of admission, delivery and redirection; liability; etc. Any reference to the Detailed Regulations was to be deleted from the Agreement.

more international mail than they dispatched.⁶⁸ They contended that they should be compensated for their additional costs.

Reciprocity was not the only problematic issue at the Vienna Congress. Member nations wanted to know why some countries refused to sign the UPU postal parcel agreement:

A number of member countries do not sign the UPU Agreements relating to certain optional services even though they operate such services. Instead, they conclude bilateral Agreements to regulate the service at international level with other member countries. This results in regulations differing from those of the UPU and a slowing down in the performance of postal operations. Congress therefore recommends member countries uniformly to sign all the Acts of the Union concerning branches of the postal service operated by them.⁶⁹

Though not explicitly named, the U.S. and Canada were the most conspicuous of the unsigned nations. The Vienna Congress instructed the Executive Council (formerly the Executive Liaison Committee) “to investigate the reasons preventing some countries from acceding to the Postal Parcels Agreement and to seek a solution enabling all countries operating the parcel post service on the basis of bilateral agreements to accede to the agreement.” At the 1969 Tokyo Congress the Executive Council reported the primary obstacles to accession were “regulations and rate structures.”⁷⁰

The Tokyo Congress considered ways to make parcel post rates and regulations simpler and fairer, and to better align rates with actual costs. Some charges and surcharges were abolished. Countries were also granted greater flexibility in choosing the system that best fit their needs. Regulations were adjusted to bring air parcel post more into line with ordinary parcels. Inward and outward land rates and sea rates were adjusted to account for differences in density between parcels and letter post. Pound for pound, parcel post was estimated to take up 50 percent more space than letter post.⁷¹

Perhaps the most urgent matter addressed in Tokyo was remuneration. Initially, international mail was transferred between UPU member nations without compensation under the principle of

⁶⁸ Universal Postal Union, *Terminal Dues-New Frontiers for a Changing World*, (Berne: 2021, UPU International Bureau), 110.

⁶⁹ Universal Postal Union, *Postal Parcels Agreement Revised at Hamburg 1984 and Annotated by the International Bureau*, vol. 3 (Berne: International Bureau of the Universal Postal Union, 1985), 5.

⁷⁰ Universal Postal Union, *Comprehensive Report on the Work of the Executive Committee, 1964-1969*, para 89.

⁷¹ Universal Postal Union, *Acts of the Universal Postal Union Revised at Tokyo in 1969 and Annotated by the International Bureau*, (London: 1973, UPU), 58-220.

reciprocity. At the 1906 Congress, the idea of compensating some countries for additional expenses was discussed but ultimately rejected.⁷² The question continued to resurface at UPU congresses. When a proposal for remuneration came up in Tokyo in 1969, terminal dues for letter post, was finally adopted.⁷³

Similar arrangements had long been a feature of bilateral and multilateral parcel post agreements. When applied to international parcel post such arrangements were called “inward land rates.” The changes to the parcel post agreement signaled that the UPU was willing to take the difficult steps needed to improve service, simplify regulations, and make rates more equitable. Despite the changes, the United States was not ready to join the UPU parcel post agreement. Moreover, the U.S. was having trouble collecting payments from some foreign postal administrations.

In 1969 the U.S. Comptroller General reported that 13 foreign countries were in arrears to the POD some \$9.8 million. Twelve of the nations were in Latin America, and in some cases, the debt dated back nearly 20 years. The debts arose from international postal services such as transit fees, airmail, parcel post, international reply coupons, and indemnity claims. These services were performed in accordance with bilateral agreements or under the auspices of PUAS or UPU.⁷⁴ The report recommended the POD work with the State Department to collect the debts, but existing agreements all but assured that the debts would continue to mount.

While changes were impacting the postal sphere worldwide, the United States POD was undergoing massive changes of its own. In 1970 the *Postal Reorganization Act* transformed the cabinet-level Post Office Department into a newly independent establishment of the executive branch called the United States Postal Service (USPS). The USPS had a clear mandate to operate on a break-even basis without ongoing appropriations.

After the Tokyo Congress, the search for a fair and equitable system of terminal dues continued over the next decade. The interim system was based on a payment per kilogram for excess mail between two countries and did not reflect actual costs. The gap between payments

⁷² Universal Postal Union, *Terminal Dues-New Frontiers for a Changing World*, (Berne: 2021, UPU International Bureau), 107.

⁷³ The UPU remuneration system for letters and small packets, known as terminal dues, ensured that the designated operator of the destination country is compensated for the costs associated with the handling, transporting, and delivering of the postal items it receives from the sending designated operator. Proposal 2212.

⁷⁴ United States General Accounting Office, *Efforts to Collect International Postal Debts and to Pay Postal Amounts Owed in Excess Foreign Currencies*, (Washington: 1969) 1.

and actual costs “invited arbitrage and market distortions” with some countries incurring substantial losses.⁷⁵ The lack of a workable solution between the world’s postal administrations left an opening for competition from the private sector. Advances in aviation, telecommunications, and computer technology made it possible for private couriers and express companies to gain a foothold in the marketplace. These companies initially specialized in urgent documents and small parcels.

By the late 1970s, DHL had become the leading international courier.⁷⁶ As their business expanded, they inevitably came into conflict with laws designed to protect state-run postal monopolies. DHL’s attorney Altamiro Boscoli quipped, “You fellows have discovered a business that is illegal in every country in the world—no wonder no one ever thought of that before!”⁷⁷ As more private couriers entered the marketplace, they challenged the USPS monopoly through litigation and by proposing legislation. In 1979, the USPS modified its regulations to permit “the carriage by private couriers of extremely urgent letters and international ocean carrier documents.”⁷⁸

The threat of private competition to UPU members was first mentioned after the 1974 Lausanne Congress recommended a study of outward and inward land rates. The Executive Committee recognized the difficulty was setting rates high enough to meet the needs of all members but not so high “that the parcel-post service cannot hold its own against competition.”⁷⁹ When the UPU met in Rio de Janeiro in 1979, members faced unprecedented external competition and internal discord.

And still, the U.S. had not signed the UPU parcel post agreement. A 1981 letter from the Office of the Postmaster General explained this was “primarily because of the complexity of requirements relating to forms and charges.”⁸⁰ At the time, the USPS had bilateral agreements with 80 countries for the exchange of insured parcels, and with 18 countries to link domestic

⁷⁵ Universal Postal Union, *Terminal Dues-New Frontiers for a Changing World*, (Berne: 2021, UPU International Bureau) 120.

⁷⁶ DHL was founded in 1969 by Adrian Dalsey, Larry Hillblom and Robert Lynn in San Francisco, with the letters of their last names forming the initials DHL. It was the first international air express service, specializing in the rapid transport of documents and cargo papers by plane. In 2002 DHL became a wholly owned subsidiary of Deutsche Post.

⁷⁷ James I. Campbell, Jr., *The Rise of Global Delivery Service* (Washington, 1983: JCampbell Press), 1.

⁷⁸ *Postal Bulletin* 21220, November 22, 1979, 3.

⁷⁹ Universal Postal Union, *Postal Parcels Agreement Revised by the 1989 Washington Congress and Annotated by the International Bureau*, vol. 3 (Berne: International Bureau of the Universal Postal Union, 1991), 60.

⁸⁰ “From Gerald F. Merna to Timothy L. Jenkins, July 22, 1981,” From the International Mail files of the Historian, United States Postal Service, Washington, DC.

express mail service with corresponding services in those countries. The bilateral agreements that had served the U.S. so well since 1887 now placed the USPS at a competitive disadvantage.

At the 1984 Hamburg Congress, the Parcel Post Committee approved long-awaited revisions to transit charges, as well as land and sea rates.⁸¹ Canada and the U.S. stated they would participate in the work of the parcel post committee. Canada announced at the outset that it planned to accede to the agreement, which “would provide it with a valuable tool for improving its international parcel service and make them more competitive.”⁸² Chairman M. Rajasingham of Malaysia expressed satisfaction and hoped the U.S. would follow Canada’s example. At the committee’s eighth meeting he got his wish when the U.S. delegation informed the committee of its desire to accede to the agreement. Ninety-seven years after initiating international parcel post, the United States joined the UPU agreement.

For the first time, U.S. international parcel post was harmonized with the rest of the world. This simplified international shipping for both U.S. mailers and for those sending parcels to the U.S. For its part the USPS was now spared the onerous task of negotiating scores of bilateral agreements, each of which could take two or three years to draft.⁸³ U.S. accession to the parcel post agreement was not the end of disagreement and debate. New technologies, globalization, and private competition continued to challenge the world’s postal administrations. During ensuing congresses, the UPU Parcel Post Committee took up many contentious issues.⁸⁴ A key difference was that those discussions took place within the UPU, with the U.S. as a full participant. As far as parcels were concerned the world had become “a single postal territory.”

⁸¹ *Union Postale*, 5/1984, 114.

⁸² Universal Postal Union, *Documents of the 1984 Hamburg Congress* v. 2, 513.

⁸³ “Bilateral agreements between postal administrations take sometimes two or three years to draft. Once complete, they are translated at the Post Office Department. Certified copies approved by the Postmaster General and then sent to the Department of State. Postal negotiations can be interrupted by changes in a country’s government. Some agreements are informal and operate on an interim basis until a suitable agreement can be written. Mr. Armand J. Rioux, who is responsible for drafting bilateral postal agreements, said on March 29, 1965, that seven or eight agreements were then pending. He tries to keep an agreement as standard and as simple as possible.” Charles Barber Turner, “Effect of U.S. Foreign Policy on the Post Office Department” (Thesis, Washington, DC, American University, 1965), 37-38.

⁸⁴ Because the Post’s competitors in the transport of light goods field were making major inroads in the Post’s traditional markets, the 1989 Washington Congress adopted resolution C 27/1989 instructing the CCPS to undertake a study to identify and develop a range of new postal parcel products/services suited to the demands of the international market. *Postal Parcels Agreement Revised by the 1989 Washington Congress*, 9.

Summary

The United States was one of the world's last major nations to establish a domestic parcel post and among the last to accede to the UPU parcel post agreement. Long after most of the world's nations signed the UPU parcel agreement, the U.S. maintained an array of bilateral and multilateral agreements. The development of U.S. parcel post policy can be understood in terms of the technological, political, and economic forces that were at play. The U.S. Congress responded to those forces by passing new laws that governed the operation of the Post Office Department. When the UPU concluded its first international parcel post convention in 1880, the U.S. had no domestic parcel post. The barriers to domestic parcel post in the U.S. were geographic, technological, and political.

The United States faced a geographic challenge not shared by smaller nations. The vast size of the country meant that a single parcel rate would be unworkable. While the U.S. Post Office Department already had extensive transportation in place, it was primarily geared toward letter mail, newspapers, and small parcels. It had neither the facilities nor the equipment to handle bulkier items.

The political impediments to domestic parcel post were rooted in the economic philosophy of *laissez-faire*, summed up by the view “the government that governs least, governs best.”⁸⁵ Congress held the view that the government should not compete with private business. A government-run parcel post service would compete with private carriers. Small retailers also opposed parcel post, believing that their customers would buy merchandise via mail order, and not from them. The opponents of domestic parcel post delayed its establishment for three decades.

While the U.S. initiated international parcel post in the 1880s, it was highly selective about which nations it partnered with. For much of the 19th century, U.S. foreign policy was focused on the Americas. In contrast with domestic parcel post, geography worked in favor of international service within the Western Hemisphere. Interamerican shipping lanes traversed mostly coastal waters, which were less perilous than transatlantic crossings.

⁸⁵ Author unknown; often erroneously attributed to Thomas Jefferson. <https://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/government-best-which-governs-least-spurious-quotation/>

A significant factor in the development of U.S. international parcel post was the economic policy of protectionism. Congress placed tariffs and other barriers on imported goods to favor domestic production. At the time Great Britain, with an empire that spanned the globe, was the world's preeminent economic power. The U.S. saw Britain and other European powers as economic rivals. Establishing parcel post with European rivals would have invited more imports, which might have suppressed domestic production.

In the 1880s, the United States established bilateral parcel post agreements with many postal administrations in the Western Hemisphere while avoiding agreements with European nations. Even after the U.S. gradually entered European agreements, they were more limited than the agreements with other American nations.

U.S. policies on international parcel post changed dramatically after World War II. These changes resulted from new economic realities, political realignments, and technological advances. The economies of most European and Asian nations were in ruins after the war. Former U.S. competitors were suddenly partners in the mutual project of rebuilding. U.S. policy on international parcels adjusted accordingly. Though still based on bilateral agreements, protectionism took a back seat to easing the flow of parcels to war-torn regions.

Wartime advances in transportation facilitated the postwar movement of goods. Improvements in shipbuilding and navigation made transoceanic shipping highly reliable and cost-effective. Breakthroughs in aviation made air freight and global shipping a reality. With air parcel post, packages traveled the globe at speeds unimaginable a decade before. Containerization streamlined the handling of parcels on the land, air, and sea. As computer technology grew from its infancy, it was adapted to collecting data on international parcels. This allowed for faster and easier processing of customs and other charges, as well as the transmission of data electronically. As more countries offered enhanced services like insurance, registry, and C.O.D., international parcel post became more useful for businesses and consumers worldwide.

New technologies increased the demand for goods from every corner of the earth and increased the demand for faster delivery. Throughout several World Congresses, the UPU refined rates and regulations and devised uniform methods so that parcels could travel and clear customs as quickly as possible. But new technologies also created opportunities for competition from the private sector. Reorganization of the postal administrations in many countries, including the

USPS, required them to be self-funded. With added urgency, the world’s postal administrations came to grips with the complexities of an increasingly competitive global parcel post network. In 1984 these factors came to a head and led the U.S. to join the UPU parcel post agreement.

Afterword

In 2007, the USPS realigned its international mail products to make them “clear-cut and easy to use.”⁸⁶ The term “parcel post” was dropped and replaced with domestic product names that were familiar to U.S. mailers. For parcels up to four pounds, First-Class Package International Service was an option. For heavier parcels and printed matter, the new options were Priority Mail International, Express Mail International, Airmail M-Bags, and Global Express Guaranteed.

Effective January 27, 2013, the USPS changed the name of its domestic parcel post service to Standard Post.⁸⁷ In 2016, the name changed again from Standard Post to USPS Retail Ground.⁸⁸ In 2023, as part of its *Delivering For America* plan, USPS combined several services. USPS Retail Ground was consolidated into a new service called USPS Ground Advantage. Described as “a simple, reliable, and more affordable way to ship packages in two-to-five business days across the continental United States,” USPS Ground Advantage is the most recent descendant of domestic parcel post that began in 1913.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ *Postal Bulletin*, April 6, 2007, 59.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, January 24, 2013, 10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, December 10, 2015, 5.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, June 29, 2023, 3.

UNITED STATES INTERNATIONAL PARCEL POST DISPATCHED, 1890 TO 1970

Year	Surface Pounds	Air Pounds	Total	% Change
1890	10,863		10,863	
1891	27,605		27,605	154.12%
1892	40,250		40,250	45.81%
1893	48,966		48,966	21.65%
1894	51,254		51,254	4.67%
1895	57,328		57,328	11.85%
1896	79,802		79,802	39.20%
1897	109,737		109,737	37.51%
1898	106,723		106,723	-2.75%
1899	107,529		107,529	0.76%
1900	138,198		138,198	28.52%
1901	252,791		252,791	82.92%
1902	322,615		322,615	27.62%
1903	346,317		346,317	7.35%
1904	464,697		464,697	34.18%
1905	560,238		560,238	20.56%
1906	721,164		721,164	28.72%
1907	876,346		876,346	21.52%
1908	968,513		968,513	10.52%
1909	1,136,690		1,136,690	17.36%
1910	1,490,718		1,490,718	31.15%
1911	1,824,623		1,824,623	22.40%
1912	2,270,215		2,270,215	24.42%
1913	2,831,512		2,831,512	24.72%
1914	3,362,780		3,362,780	18.76%
1915	3,347,899		3,347,899	-0.44%
1916	6,269,093		6,269,093	87.25%
1917	8,579,485		8,579,485	36.85%
1918	14,674,574		14,674,574	71.04%
1919	17,102,131		17,102,131	16.54%
1920	35,572,433		35,572,433	108.00%
1921	36,716,396		36,716,396	3.22%
1922	30,980,485		30,980,485	-15.62%
1923	33,888,600		33,888,600	9.39%
1924	43,779,512		43,779,512	29.19%
1925	43,609,954		43,609,954	-0.39%
1926	38,943,635		38,943,635	-10.70%
1927	43,197,688		43,197,688	10.92%
1928	47,273,749		47,273,749	9.44%
1929	33,282,657		33,282,657	-29.60%

1930	32,934,986		32,934,986	-1.04%
1931	38,707,790		38,707,790	17.53%
1932	29,470,619		29,470,619	-23.86%
1933	22,576,972		22,576,972	-23.39%
1934	21,809,268		21,809,268	-3.40%
1935	23,568,982		23,568,982	8.07%
1936	26,031,144		26,031,144	10.45%
1937	26,981,756		26,981,756	3.65%
1938	28,173,744		28,173,744	4.42%
1939	29,242,080		29,242,080	3.79%
1940	27,462,910		27,462,910	-6.08%
1941	21,196,432		21,196,432	-22.82%
1942	28,895,986		28,895,986	36.32%
1943	26,038,303		26,038,303	-9.89%
1944	121,054,674		121,054,674	364.91%
1945	327,874,327		327,874,327	170.85%
1946	249,690,402		249,690,402	-23.85%
1947	401,941,067		401,941,067	60.98%
1948	511,091,097	92,704	511,183,801	27.18%
1949	385,756,215	611,746	386,367,961	-24.42%
1950	290,799,207	715,614	291,514,821	-24.55%
1951	216,208,027	805,777	217,013,804	-25.56%
1952	194,347,629	924,526	195,272,155	-10.02%
1953	160,597,379	901,254	161,498,633	-17.30%
1954	112,383,177	1,017,189	113,400,366	-29.78%
1955	89,579,218	1,172,241	90,751,459	-19.97%
1956	88,186,688	1,424,376	89,611,064	-1.26%
1957	99,032,334	1,749,399	100,781,733	12.47%
1958	99,677,982	1,851,801	101,529,783	0.74%
1959	100,099,199	2,015,274	102,114,473	0.58%
1960	100,032,559	2,197,010	102,229,569	0.11%
1961	78,802,505	2,408,987	81,211,492	-20.56%
1962	66,451,640	2,765,428	69,217,068	-14.77%
1963	63,650,173	3,530,349	67,180,522	-2.94%
1964	64,831,962	3,733,883	68,565,845	2.06%
1965	69,399,621	3,931,135	73,330,756	6.95%
1966	65,837,390	4,458,744	70,296,134	-4.14%
1967	65,315,461	4,435,530	69,750,991	-0.78%
1968	64,481,711	5,702,074	70,183,785	0.62%
1969	59,500,057	7,725,614	67,225,671	-4.21%
1970	61,399,245	6,907,876	68,307,121	1.61%

*Numbers for some years were revised in later years; the most recent figures are shown.
1948 Air Parcel figures are for a partial year: March 16 to June 30.*

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