Constant Motion:
The Job of Railway Post Office Clerks
Teaching Ideas

Teaching with Primary Sources
Eastern Illinois University

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Table of Contents

Primary Sources are powerful tools that can be used in a variety of ways to engage students and promote inquiry. This booklet shares some of our ideas for teaching about Railway Post Office clerks and their job. Following the introduction, this booklet is separated into sections representing parts of the Constant Motion project.

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What are Primary Sources?

Most families have a box of keepsakes gathering dust in an attic or basement that have a special meaning. When we have authentic objects that link to memories from the past we cherish those items. These items can rekindle emotions from the past and families keep them to share with family and friends as time goes on. It is devastating when families lose irreplaceable items from the past. The Library of Congress has a “memory box” as well, filled with items that are shared electronically with the world. Some are personal, like a letter shared within a family or a photo passed through generations. Sharing these primary sources offers a glimpse into our daily lives and local events that may not be preserved in other places. Some items are of historical significance, while others only hold special meaning for certain individuals.

What are primary sources? Primary sources are original items that have survived from the past. These items can be written or typed documents, letters, photographs, sheet music, audio or video clips and more. These artifacts were part of a direct personal experience of a specific time or event. Each primary source has a creator and each creator has a unique perspective. Sharing primary sources connects others to our personal histories. Teaching with primary sources is an initiative of the Library of Congress that celebrates the power of teaching by engaging students and showing them that history is REAL and the people, places and events of the past impact us today. Primary sources offer insight into who we are and the communities we live in today.

Why teach with primary sources? Examining primary sources in the classroom gives students a powerful sense of history and the complexity of the past. Helping students analyze primary sources guides them toward higher-order thinking and better critical thinking and analysis skills. Diverse sources offer multiple perspectives on various issues of the past and present. History, after all, deals with matters often debated by participants. Interpretations of the past are discussed among historians, policy makers, politicians, and ordinary citizens. By working with primary sources, students may become better informed and involved in these debates.

Primary sources are snippets of history, often incomplete and without context. They require students to be analytical, to look at sources purposefully and determine what else they need to know to make inferences about the materials. Primary sources help students relate in a personal way to events of the past, coming away with a deeper understanding of history as a series of human events within and from the family to national level. In analyzing primary sources, students move from concrete observations and facts to synthesizing information and considering point of view. What is the intent of the speaker, of the photographer, of the musician? How does that influence interpretation or understanding of the evidence?

It may be difficult for students to understand that we all participate in making history every day, that each of us in the course of our lives leave behind primary sources that family or scholars may examine as a record of “the past.”
History of the Railway Post Office

When thinking of mail trains, we may imagine black and white film showing gun toting bandits or gnarled piles of wreckage. These images reflect early days. This project studies mail by rail in the mid-1900s, a time of growth and change. Long before cell phones, texts and email the U.S. Mail connected the nation.

In the 1800s, the United States Post Office realized the potential of using the railroad to not only transport mail, but also sort it along the route. Mailbags once untouched for days, were now opened and sorted as the train sped towards its destination. This idea proved so successful that an Act of Congress on July 7, 1838, declared all railroads postal routes. By the 1900s, railroads were an essential tool for postal service success. The first railroad cars used by the postal service were wooden and equipped only to sort and distribute letter mail. These cars could be dangerous because they were vulnerable to fire from wood stoves and oil lamps or total destruction upon impact from jumping the tracks or a collision. As railroads began to push west, schedules became increasingly important to reach every destination. Trains traveled at higher speeds and the number of casualties began to rise. The RPO had more than 6,000 accidents between 1890-1900, killing over 80 mail clerks and injuring 2,072.

Accidents and unsafe cars were not the only concerns of a railway post office clerk. In the 1920s, train robberies increased as criminals realized mails trains often carried large amounts of money or gold. This was the reason Railway Post Office clerks were required to carry .38 caliber pistols. When exchanging mail, trains slowed down so clerks could transfer mail by hand, which was inefficient and dangerous. This system was replaced by a mail crane, a simple steel hook and crane. Mailbags were hung from the crane and attached at the bottom with the hook. As the train sped by, a mail clerk would raise the train’s catcher arm to grab the mailbag. “Mail-on-the-fly”, was not easy to master. Clerks had to carefully pay attention and raise the catcher arm from the train at the precise moment. If raised late, the exchange was missed and the clerk received demerits. Mail cranes could be on either side of the train and numerous cranes within seconds of each other. The mail catch was only half of the process, the clerk also had to throw that destinations sorted mail from the train. If the bag was not thrown far enough, a “snowstorm” could occur, meaning the mailbag was ripped under the train mail scattered.
Railway Post Office clerks were considered the elite of the postal service’s employees. The exhausting and dangerous job required passing challenging entrance exams. A passing score on the civil service exam was 97% or higher, requiring a clerk to sort 600 pieces of mail an hour. This was not a test only taken once, RPO clerks were tested over and over to ensure their skills remained sharp. The memorization abilities clerks possessed were remarkable. A single route was not the extent of testing, multiple routes for individual home states had to be learned, plus the routes of any other worked states. If a clerk was a substitute, which was how most started, he had to know countless routes with staggering numbers of towns with post offices that received mail. Clerks finally had to know where connecting trains met, so mail going either north/south or east/west could be delivered to the correct train. This intense, high pressure work environment elicited strong relationships and interactions.

Railway Post Office clerks developed a strong sense of camaraderie. No clerk rested until all work was completed and every piece of mail was sorted. It was a “one for all and all for one” atmosphere in which each took pride in his job and the responsibility of ensuring the mail was delivered. For 140 years the Railway Post Office carried the mail to be delivered across America. As highways were built and air travel increased, the U.S. Post Office began to fade out mail trains. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail, by 1970, no first class mail was carried on the railroad. The last Railway Post Office, which operated between New York and Washington, D.C., made a final run on June 30, 1977.

Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Mail by Rail, accessed 6.5.12
RPO clerks took great pride in their jobs and to this day will speak fondly of the men they worked with and the sense of pride that they felt for delivering the U.S. Mail. Although email and text messages offer easy access to family and friends - there is still nothing that makes us feel special like receiving a card or letter from someone in the mailbox.

There were many reasons RPO clerks loved their job. The work schedule was attractive. A clerk would work a set number of days on with days off to rest and study. A typical work schedule would be six days on and eight days off. This along with earning sick days and vacation days lured many into the Railway Post Office. Another benefit was job security.

Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerk

Visit the Love this Job Theme Collection for links to more information and primary sources. You can also look for additional items within Individual Clerk Collections.

From the website, click the image below to watch a brief video of interviews with former RPO clerks discussing how they felt about their jobs.
Love this Job: Teaching with Primary Sources

The Primary Sources:
Title: Advertisement for Railway Postal Clerks
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/cm017x.jpg
Description: Poster
Source: Mr. C. Mitchell Collection

The Ideas and Tools:
This poster entices job seekers to become Railway Postal Clerks by boasting a salary of $1900.00 for the first year. Was this a generous salary compared to other jobs? At that time, most families lived on one income. Is this amount enough to provide for a family?

- Do you think this poster works? Use a poster analysis sheet to study the use of symbolism, contemplate the message and rate the effectiveness. Are any of these techniques similar to practices used for recruiting and advertising today? Show similarities and differences using a modern advertisement or poster.

- Imagine that you are the breadwinner for your family. Choose a home city and then use research and math skills to study the cost of providing for a family. Create an annual budget and explain how you managed to live within the budget and how you feel about this lifestyle. Look at other professions or communities and compare lifestyles.

- Compare the cost of items in 1960 to the same items today. Then compare salaries of similar jobs. Which item costs have changed the most? Did anything surprise you?
SPECIAL NOTICE

TRAVEL - SEE YOUR - COUNTRY

RAILWAY POSTAL CLERKS
$1900.00 First Year on Regular

ACT NOW

Consider These Important Facts

(1) Railway Clerks average 40 hours a week. Those assigned to runs are also allowed liberal time off from this 40 hours for study of mail schedules, etc.
(2) Railway Postal Clerks travel continually and have an opportunity to see the country, being furnished with a railroad pass, to be used when on business.
(3) Railway Postal Clerks are appointed to run on a railroad as near their own home as possible, so that they can be at home between trips.
(4) When away from home more than ten hours, they are paid extra to cover hotel expenses.
(5) This position is a convenient stepping stone to higher positions. Many former Railway Postal Clerks are now Postal Inspectors, Superintendents and higher with pay as high as $4500 a year.

REMEMBER = = We Prepare You UNTIL YOU ARE APPOINTED

No Additional Charges are made either before or after appointment
# POSTER ANALYSIS

## First Glance
Looking at the poster, identify

**The title**
- What emotions did you feel when you first saw the poster?

## Symbolism

### People
- **Person or character used**  
  *What might they symbolize?*

### Objects
- **Items used**  
  *What do they symbolize?*

### Colors
- **Colors Used**  
  *What do they symbolize?*

## The Message
Are the messages in the poster primarily visual, verbal or both? How?

Who do you think was the intended audience for this poster?

What do you think the creator hoped that people would do after seeing this poster?

## After Viewing
The most effective posters use symbols that are simple, attract your attention and are direct. Is this an effective poster? Why or why not?

List three things that you infer from this poster.
1. 
2. 
3.
Railway Post Office (RPO) clerks were considered the elite of the mail service. RPO clerks were held to the highest level of accountability and took great pride in their work. This level of performance meant spending time off studying schemes to learn exact locations of thousands of towns, villages and connecting communities.

Entrance and regularly scheduled exams called for clerks to sort 100 cards by route and location in two to three minutes demanding 95% - 97% accuracy.

Some clerks sorted over 600 pieces of mail per hour into pigeon holes on a speeding train. RPO clerks memorized the names and locations of 5,000 – 10,000 post offices; this was before zip codes were established in 1963. Working in ever-changing roles, RPO clerks developed superior memorization, learning techniques and skills. Mastering the intellectual facet of the job equipped RPO clerks for the physical demands on the train.

**Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerk**

Visit the Prep, Schemes and Exams Theme Collection for links to more information and primary sources. You can also look for additional items within Individual Clerk Collections.

From the website, click the image below to watch a brief video of interviews with former RPO clerks explaining how they prepared for the job.
The Primary Sources

Title: Trip Report
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/ww041.jpg
Description: Document
Source: Mr. W. Waldman Collection

Title: Galbraith’s railway mail service maps, Illinois
Creator of Source: Galbraith, Frank H.
Date of Creation: 1897
URL: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field(NUMBER+@band(g4101p+rr002060))
Collection: Library of Congress, Maps

Title: Practice Case and Card Set
URL: http://eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/ww037.jpg
Collection: Mr. W. Waldman Collection

Title: Mississippi map
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/jg004.jpg
Description: Map
Source: Mr. J. Glasco Collection

Title: Railroad commissioner’s map of Mississippi
Creator of Source: Rand McNally and Company
Date of Creation: 1888
URL: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field(NUMBER+@band(g3981p+rr002430))
Collection: Maps Collection
The Ideas and Tools:
In 1887, Frank H. Galbraith, a Chicago railway mail clerk, created railway maps of the mid-western states. These maps were not published but instead were rented out to RPO clerks as a study guide. These maps have creative art work to help the clerks in memorizing cities, towns and routes.

- Clerks used practice cases and cards at home between runs to learn their routes. Choose a route on the Galbraith map and create cards to represent communities that would receive mail on that trip. Can you memorize the towns in the proper order?

- Use a trip report to study the route and activities at each stop. Figure out the distance between each stop and how long it took the train to get there. How much mail was processed on the trip? Do you think this was hard work while standing on a moving train?

Maps were very important to Railway Post Office clerks. They used maps to study routes, cities and railroad connections. Each clerk had their own unique way of studying for exams and maps were useful tools. A clerk knew the exact route their mail train was taking and where they picked up and dropped off mail. There was no time for mistakes and errors resulted in demerits.

- Analyze the two maps of Mississippi from different centuries. Study the look of the map and then look closely at what the map is telling you. How do the maps reflect changes in this geographical area? What stayed the same?
MAP ANALYSIS
Physical Qualities of the Map

Title of Map
Check the circle(s) besides the type of map that describes the map you have.

- Raised relief map
- Topographic map
- Natural resource map
- Other
- Political map
- Contour-line map
- Artifact map
- Weather map
- Military map
- Birds-eye view
- Satellite photograph/mosaic
- Pictograph

Check the circle(s) besides the map parts that are visible on the map you have.

- Compass
- Handwritten
- Other
- Date
- Notations
- Legend (key)
- Scale
- Name of mapmaker
- Title

Date of the Map
Creator of the Map
Where was the Map produced?

Map Information
What natural landmarks and things do you notice on this map?

What man-made landmarks and things do you notice on this map?

List three things on this map that you think are important.

1.
2.
3.

Why do you think this map was created?

What evidence on the map suggests this?

What new information did you learn from this Map?

Write a question to the mapmaker that is left unanswered by this map.
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Tools of the Trade

Railway Post Offices rolled over thousands of route miles every day with onboard clerks sorting, bundling and sometimes catching and delivering mail "on the fly" without ever slowing down. Accuracy mattered! Facing slips were attached to each bundle of letters that told the name of the sorting clerk. An error would result in demerits and a delay in delivery. RPO clerks took great pride in their jobs and performance.

Each RPO clerk carried a case holding both personal and work items. They packed a change of clothes for overnight trips and meals to be eaten on the train. Required supplies included items like facing slips and labels stamped at home with their name and train number for accountability, stamps, finger knife, badge, revolver and more.

Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerk

Visit the Tools of the Trade Theme Collection for links to more information and primary sources. You can also look for additional items within Individual Clerk Collections.

From the website you can watch Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerks or other videos of interviews with former RPO clerks explaining how they did their job.

http://eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/029.php
Tools of the Trade: Teaching with Primary Sources

The Primary Sources:

Title: RPO Badge
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/jg024.jpg
Description: Photograph
Source: Mr. Jerry Glasco Collection

Title: Use and Care of Revolvers
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/hh016.jpg
Description: Photograph
Source: Mr. Harley Hight Collection

Title: Locks
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/ww020.jpg
Description: Photograph
Source: Mr. Wally Waldman Collection

Title: Regulation Bullets
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/jg007.jpg
Description: Photograph
Source: Mr. Jerry Glasco Collection

Title: Marines standing with rifles guarding U.S. mail car
Creator of Source: Chicago Daily News, inc. photographer
Date of Creation: 1921
URL: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cdn:@field(NUMBER+@band(ichicdn+n073646))
Collection: Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933
The Ideas and Tools:
Security was a major issue for Railway Post Office clerks. The mail train would sometimes carry large amounts of money or securities, clerks had to be prepared to protect the mail. In 1920 alone there were over a dozen robberies resulting in theft of over $6.3 million. This is one reason clerks were required to carry a .38-caliber pistol.

Analyze a photo of a crew inside of a mail car that includes Marines guarding the mail. We will discuss why mail trains needed security and will look at other security equipment RPO clerks used.

Students will look at other primary source images that represent tools used by RPO clerks. They will then create a scenario to explain why this scene may have occurred and why someone would capture it in a photograph.
THE MORE YOU LOOK, THE MORE YOU SEE PHOTO ANALYSIS

What I See (observe)
Describe exactly what you see in the photo. What people and objects are shown? How are they arranged? What is the physical setting? What other details can you see?

What I Infer (deduction)
Summarize what you already know about the situation and time period shown and people and objects that appear. I see ___ and I think ___

Interpretation
Write what you conclude from what you see. What is going on in the picture? Who are the people and what are they doing? What might be the function of the objects? What can we conclude about the time period?

Why do you believe the photo was taken?

Why do you believe this photo was saved?

What I Need to Investigate
What are three questions you have about the photo?
1.
2.
3.
Where can you research the answers to your questions?
Lingo

Sorting mail on a train moving 60 to 80 mph was difficult and noisy. There was little time to communicate instructions before the next stop so RPO clerks had a language all their own. From bums (empty serviceable equipment) to tie out (to stop sorting letters and tie up the separate packages made) the language of the Railway Post Office clerk would sound like gibberish to any other person. But with time not on their side, RPO clerks had to make the most of each moment to make sure the mail was delivered correctly.

**Apartment Car** – A railway car, a part of which is used for mail distribution.

**Bin** – A movable box which is a part of the standard equipment of a full RPO car and used for a supplemental separation.

**Blank Slip** – A slip of paper placed on the bottom of all direct packages of letters and circulars. Shows only name or sub number, section, date and organization.

**Bums** – Empty serviceable equipment (pouches and sacks).

**Catcher Arm** – The movable iron bar which issued to hook the catcher pouch from the mail crane at the nonstop station.

**Catcher Pouch** – A type of mailbag used exclusively for exchanging mail by means of mail cranes and catcher arms.

**Department** – The Post Office Department is often referred to as “the department”.

**Dump Up** – To empty mail from sacks and pouches on work table for sorting.

**Jackpot** – Mail for distant separations which the clerk does not immediately have room for on his case or rack and which he masses together in one box or sack to be distributed subsequently.

**Massing** – Combining mail for various separations because of insufficient quantity, lack of time for proper distribution, or insufficient space for proper separation

**Nixie** – Mail so incorrectly, illegibly, indefinitely, or insufficiently addressed that it cannot be transmitted.

**Red** – Pieces of registered mail. The term “red” is an idiom of the postal service, originating from the practice of issuing a red striped pouch for registered mails.

**Scheme** – The official printed guide showing the correct supply or dispatch of mails.

**Sleeper** – A letter which has been overlooked in the letter case after tying out.

**Slugs** – Heavy sacks of magazines or catalogs.

**Tie Out** – To stop sorting letters and tie up the separate packages made.

**Working Mail** – Mail that must be sorted or distributed.
Camaraderie & Good Times

RPO clerks ranged in age and came from a variety of backgrounds and communities, but they all worked together to get the job done properly. If one clerk finished working their mail they would go help the next clerk. It was truly a one for all and all for one atmosphere. They spent hours working side by side in a small area, so they learned the value of teamwork and cooperation. When they had time off away from home they would socialize together by dining out and taking part in local activities.

Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerk

Visit the Camaraderie & Good Times Theme Collection for links to more information and primary sources. You can also look for additional items within Individual Clerk Collections.

From the website, click the image below to watch a brief video of interviews with former RPO clerks sharing stories of how they spent time with co-workers both on and off of the train.
Camaraderie & Good Times: Teaching with Primary Sources

The Primary Sources:

Title: Crew Photo
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/ww045.jpg
Description: Photograph
Source: Mr. W. Waldman Collection

The Ideas and Tools:
Students will analyze a photo of clerks using background knowledge and context clues to figure out where and when the photo was taken. They will then take on the role of one of the clerks and write a postcard home to their family about their experiences.

Analyze the photograph paying close attention to the surroundings and what the crew might be feeling. What time of day was this photo taken after the RPO clerks had finished their shift or was it just before the shift began? Which RPO clerk do you think has worked on the RPO the longest, guess the ages of these clerks.

Imagine yourself in this picture. Do you think you could perform the job of the RPO clerk? What would be the pros and cons of working for the Railway Post Office? Pick one of the clerks and write their resume.
ABC PHOTO ANALYSIS

Examine the image provided. Choose words or phrases beginning with each letter of the alphabet that come to mind as you study the image. The descriptions can be objective (what you see in the image) or subjective (feelings, associations or judgments about the image).

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In 1930, more than 10,000 trains moved mail. Following passage of the Transportation Act of 1958, which allowed the discontinuance of money-losing passenger trains, mail-carrying passenger trains began to decline rapidly. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail, and by 1970, the railroads carried virtually no First-Class Mail.


**Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerk**

Visit the Final Run Theme Collection for links to more information and primary sources. You can also look for additional items within Individual Clerk Collections.

From the website, click the image below to watch a brief video of interviews with former RPO clerks describing their last days on the mail trains and what they did when their job no longer existed.
Final Run: Teaching with Primary Sources

The Primary Sources:

Title: Discontinued Service Letter, 1967
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/cm003.jpg
Description: Document
Source: Mr. Carl Mitchell Collection

Title: Equipment Returned Form
URL: http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks/cm004.jpg
Description: Document
Source: Mr. Carl Mitchell Collection

The Ideas and Tools:
In 1930, more than 10,000 trains moved the mail but railroads began losing passengers to highways and airplanes. With the Transportation Act of 1958, mail trains began their decline. By 1965, only 190 trains carried the mail, clerks began receiving letters informing them their jobs had been eliminated. On June 30, 1977, the mail train made its last run. This lesson focuses on the end of the Railway Post Office and has students consider other extinct jobs, why they became extinct and what the individuals with that particular skill set did for a career next. Students will analyze a letter sent to a clerk announcing the end of RPO jobs.

- Examine the memo as a primary source. Practice the process of historical inquiry. Understand the processes of supply and demand concerning the way mail was delivered.

- As RPO Clerks left the railroad and either retired or moved to local post offices how do you think this change in position affected them with their job and family life? Do you think they missed the travel or prefer a job where they would be home every night?
September 23, 1967

Mr. Frank M. Smith
Carbondale, Illinois 62901

Dear Sir:

As a result of the discontinuance of service on the Chicago & Memphis RPO, and the redesignation of the remaining service on this line as the Chicago & Carbondale RPO, your position of Substitute Distribution Clerk RPO/RPO will be reverted and you will be placed under the jurisdiction of the Carbondale, Illinois Mobile Station effective September 23, 1967.

In the event that you become excess to the Carbondale Mobile Station, you will be advised by that mobile station of what alternatives are available to you.

It is therefore requested that you return all equipment issued to you by the Chicago Mobile Unit, Room 415, Main Post Office Building, Chicago, Illinois 60607, at the close of your tour of duty.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Henry W. McGehee
Postmaster
LETTER ANALYSIS

First Reading
On your copy of the letter:
Circle the date the letter was written.
Underline words you don’t recognize or can’t read.

Look at the letter:
Who was the letter written to?
Who wrote the letter?
From the salutation, do they appear to know each other?

Read the letter.
Go back and write in words that you think make sense for those that you underlined.

Choose one sentence from the letter and rewrite it here:

What about this sentence attracted your attention?

What do you think this letter is about?

After reading a transcript or listening to a reading of the Letter
What new information do you have about the letter?

How accurate was the sentence you wrote?

Why do you think the author wrote this letter?

Why do you think someone saved this letter?

What questions do you have about this letter?

How can you learn the answers to your questions?
UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

2-Way Memo

Subject:

From: Carl Mitchell
Carbondale, IL 62901

DATE OF MESSAGE
4-3-72

DATE OF REPLY

INSTRUCTIONS
Use routing symbols whenever possible.

SENDER:
Forward original and one copy.

RECEIVER:
Reply below the message, keep
one copy, return one copy.

USE BRIEF, INFORMAL LANGUAGE

Received from Carl Mitchell the following equipment:
1 - Firearm #62173
1 - Badge #55765
1 - LA Key #251117
5 - Rounds Ammo
1 - Rotary Ring, Key #6501/8
1 - Holster
1 - Belt
1 - Key Chain

[Signature]
Marion Searcy
Supt of Mails
Carbondale, IL 62901

To:

5027 - 161

OPTIONAL FORM 37
OCTOBER 1952
OSA FBMR (4) CFR 104 - 11-4
WRITTEN DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

First Look
Type of Document (Check):
- Newspaper
- Map
- Report
- Congressional Record
- Letter
- Telegram
- Memorandum
- Census Report
- Patent
- Press Release
- Advertisement
- Other ________________

Unique Physical Characteristics of the Document (check one or more):
- Interesting Letterhead
- Handwritten
- Typewritten
- Seals
- Notations
- Other Received stamp
- Other __________________

Date(s) of the Document:

Author (or Creator) of the Document:

   Position (Title):

For what audience was the document written?

Document Content Information

List three phrases or statements that caught your attention or you think are important.
1.
2.
3.

Why do you think this document was written?

What in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

Why do you think this document was saved?

Was the document meant to be viewed by the public or a specific person or group?

List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.
1.
2.

Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document.
1832: Stage coach contractors were given $400 allowance per year to carry the mail on the railroad.

1838: Act of Congress declares all railroads postal routes.

May 1, 1889: The Railway Post Office became part of the classified civil service requiring clerks to pass a competitive entrance exam.

July 7, 1838: Act of Congress declares all railroads postal routes.

July 7, 1862: Postmaster General Montgomery Blair called for the establishment of the nation’s first Railway Post Office car.

1869: The Ward mail bag catcher was first used creating mail-on-the-fly.

April 12, 1861: The Civil War begins.

August 28, 1864: First U.S. Railway Post Office route was established between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa.

1868: The first recorded schemes showing maps of a state which helped clerks understand the distribution of the mail were implemented.

1875: The first five car train was introduced. It carried more than 33 tons of mail.

September 30, 1927: Babe Ruth makes home run record with his 60th home run.

1891: National Association of Railway Postal Clerks was formed.

1848: Gold is discovered in California.


November 9, 1967: The first issue of Rolling Stone magazine featuring John Lennon on the cover.

May 9, 1959: The Barbie doll premieres at the American Toy Fair in New York.

June 20, 1975: The movie Jaws premiered making over 100 million.

1930: Over 10,000 trains carried RPO clerks sorting the mail.

1912: Steel RPO cars begin replacing wooden cars that were very dangerous.

June 14, 1920: The Newton brothers stole 3 million in cash, jewelry and negotiable securities from the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul mail train.

1910: Steel RPO cars begin replacing wooden cars that were very dangerous.

February 10, 1941: U.S. Post Office introduced the first Highway Post Office bus.

April 30, 1971: The Post Office terminates seven of the eight remaining RPO routes.

June 29, 1956: President Eisenhower signs the Federal Highway Act creating the interstate system.

November 9, 1967: The first issue of Rolling Stone magazine featuring John Lennon on the cover.

October 29, 1969: First email message sent from UCLA to Stanford University.


June 20, 1977: The Railway Post Office made its final run. The last RPO delivered the mail between Washington D.C. and New York.

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1912: Steel RPO cars begin replacing wooden cars that were very dangerous.

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Timeline Activity

The Railway Post Office transported the mail for over 140 years starting out by just carrying the mail and evolving into a working post office with clerks who would sort the mail as the train moved down the track. It is a time that is long gone but has a rich history for students to discover. In those 140 years many events happened. America moved into each decade with new inventions, important events, new music and new technologies. In this activity, students will study a timeline of RPO history and will add pop culture and other items.

Objectives: After completing this activity, students will be able to
Examine a document as a primary source.
Practice the process of historical inquiry.
Determine different time periods through primary sources.

The Ideas and Tools:
Students will examine the timeline items and place them in correct order on the timeline. They will research the time period and add new findings to the timeline. Students can research how the mail was moved after 1977.

- Divide the timeline into sections, RPO Items and Pop Culture items. Research other areas such as science and technology, sports and the arts to add items to the timeline.

- Do a family history, ask family members what important events happened to them during the timeline.
American Memory Collections:

**Railroad Maps 1828-1900**
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/rrhtml/rrhome.html
The railway mail service is represented in this collection by the Galbraith maps. Frank H. Galbraith, a Chicago railway mail clerk, designed these maps to assist clerks in memorizing post office routes in several states. The maps were designed in 1897 and were not published but could be rented to prospective postal workers as a study guide. These maps are nothing like ordinary maps, they are truly a work of art. Like a typical map there are names of towns but the maps also have intricate artwork. The artwork gives a clue or hint to remembering the town. Frank Galbraith created maps for Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri, all are found in this collection. Unfortunately today some of the towns on these maps no longer exist and like the railway postal service they are just a fond memory.

**America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945**
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html
This collection captures life in America between 1935 to 1944. The Railway Postal Service was at its peak during this time with over 10,000 trains moving the mail. The images in this collection show the postal clerks at work. Loading the mail cars, emptying mail bags and sorting mail were all part of the day for postal clerks.

**America at Work, America at Leisure Motion Pictures from 1894 – 1915**
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awlhtml/awlhome.html
A series of films taken of the U.S. Post Office operations in 1903 is a special highlight of this collection. Most of the postal films were taken in Washington, D.C., quite possibly at the Washington City Post Office (first occupied in 1898 and still standing today, known as the Old Post Office Pavilion. The motion pictures of rural free delivery service (instituted in 1896) were filmed in adjacent areas of Maryland. These films cover almost every aspect of the post office. One of the most unique films shows how mail trains used the catcher arm to collect mail while the train continues to speed ahead.
Exhibitions:

Postal Memory Maps
http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr153.html
Frank H. Galbraith, a clerk with the Railway Mail Service, developed training maps in the late 1800s to assist company clerks sorting mail on the railroads in learning complex railway mail distribution networks for civil service examinations required by the Post Office Department. His hand-drawn pictorial maps were based on the premise of associating easily recognized cultural, historical and regional icons with post office names in order to create strong first impressions when memorizing spatial relationships along various rail lines. Galbraith focused on the mid-western railroad expansion, preparing maps for eight states, including this portion of Nebraska.

Galbraith Railway Mail Service Map
http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr168.html
Designed by Chicago railway mail clerk Frank H. Galbraith these eight large scale maps helped employees of the Railway Mail Service quickly locate counties and post offices. The mail service numbered more than 6,000 employees, who traveled more than a million miles a year on the rails sorting mail. A printed title cartouche accompanied by a list of counties for each of the states by McEwen Map Company of Chicago is pasted on the maps.

Teacher’s Page Collection Connections:

Railroad Maps, 1828-1900
http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/railroad-maps/history5.html
After nearly 4,000 years of delivery by foot, horse, or boat, in the early 19th century the speed of mail delivery was greatly improved with the use of steamships and railroads. The first American railway post office was created in 1864. Where trains did not run, stagecoaches continued to deliver mail. Students can use this collection to study the impact of railroads on the postal service and its impact on the American lifestyle.

Prints and Photographs:
The Prints and Photograph Division does not have a collection specifically for the Railway Post Office but a search for mail car will have more than 50 results.
Image Sources

Library of Congress

U.S. Mail, railroad car
Prints and Photographs

The fast mail
Prints and Photographs

Emptying a sack of mail on board a mail car
Prints and Photographs

U.S. Mail, railroad car & mail truck
Prints and Photographs

Letter to papa
Prints and Photographs

Galbraith’s railway mail service maps, Illinois
American Memory
Railroad Maps, 1828-1900

Railroad commissioner’s map of Mississippi
American Memory
Maps Collection

Marines standing with rifles guarding U.S. mail car
American Memory
Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933

On Poncha Pass
American Memory
History of the American West. 1860-1920: Photographs from the Collection of the Denver Public Library

U.S. Mail, interior of R.R. car
Prints and Photographs
Railway Post Office clerks were required to carry a small .38-caliber pistol.

Smithsonian National Postal Museum

Catcher arm
Mail by Rail
Exhibits

Teaching with Primary Sources - Eastern Illinois University

Railway Postal Clerks
Mr. L. Collins Collection

Advertisement for Railway Postal Clerks
Mr. C. Mitchell Collection

Practice Case and Card Set
Mr. W. Waldman Collection

Trip Report
Mr. W. Waldman Collection

Mississippi map
Mr. J. Glasco Collection

Trip Report, April 12, 1965
Mr. W. Waldman Collection
RPO Badge
Mr. J. Glasco Collection

Use and Care of Revolvers
Mr. H. Hight Collection

Locks
Mr. W. Waldman Collection

Regulation Bullets
Mr. J. Glasco Collection

CHI & MEM Crew 1962
Mr. H. Hight Collection

Crew Photo
Mr. W. Waldman Collection

Discontinued Service Letter, 1967
Mr. C. Mitchell Collection

Equipment Returned Form
Mr. C. Mitchell Collection