**Ep 77 – The United States Post Office**

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**Virginia Prescott:** I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. One of the founding institutions of America's government is one of the most overlooked and surprising: The Postal Service. A listener wrote to us asking why was the postal service was removed from the cabinet and how much control does the government have over it today. Here to help us answer the question is Winifred Gallagher, author of How the Post Office Created America. Winnifred, welcome to Civics 101.

**Winnifred Gallagher:** I'm delighted to be here.

**Virginia Prescott:** So before we get to the title of your book and the case that the post office created America, when and why was the post office created?.

**Winnifred Gallagher:** Our post office was actually a creation of the British who colonized America. The original 13 colonies. That was basically for the use of the elite until our post office was invented much later. Postal Services really served imperial powers, their government officials and very wealthy people. Because of course at that time it wasn't just people sending each other letters if you wanted to send anything over distance for example money or a will you more or less had to do it by putting it on a boat or give it to a man on a horse.But interestingly for 20 years at least before he became America's first postmaster Benjamin Franklin worked for the British as the deputy postmaster general for the North American colonies. He regularly went to London. It involved traveling he was one of the very few people at the time who would have been to all 13 colonies because travel was so difficult. Most people didn't do it. It was easier to read for someone in Boston to travel to London than to drive to Virginia for example. So in the course of working for the crown Franklin went around and visited all these colonies and he began to think you know gee they have something more in common with each other than they do with Great Britain. And this was at a time that the colonies were very disputatious. They were like jealous siblings they had very little interest in each other they were always fighting with each other for a poor mother Britain's attention. So he was really the first person who saw there's some common interest here and he actually presented a plan of union that was very much like of a digital American government so well before the Declaration of Independence Franklin saw that the colonies could be united. And one of the major ways to do that would be through information.

**Virginia Prescott:** The postal service is one of few government agencies that's actually specifically mentioned in the Constitution. What role did it play in shaping early America?

The relationship really kicked in after we weren't colonies anymore, we were states. So you mentioned the Constitution, after the Constitution was written the founding fathers did a remarkably radical thing. They decided that if all these very disparate former colonies now states were going to pull together in some kind of a union they would have to be on the same page. And the way to do that was to give them all information and they made the decision that our post office would deliver newspapers to everybody in the new nation. This was a phenomenal decision at a time when in Europe no European country would ever want an informed public. They wanted the opposite. They told the people what they were allowed to know. Our government supplied newspapers with all political views that made a commitment to get them to deliver to everybody in America and this was at a time when other than a little string of cities along the East Coast it was really very rural, like beyond rural, a lot of it was wilderness. So once you decide that you're going to get the newspapers to the people you have to have a way to get the newspapers there and a very very very important aspect of our post office is that it subsidized our transportation grid right from the very beginning when it was when it was a post-ride or a man on a horse very soon thereafter it became much more practical to deliver mail by stagecoach you could you could get much more mail delivered. That meant the stagecoaches had to have some sort of road. The post office was forbidden by the government to build the roads but they could subsidize transportation contractors stagecoach owners later railroads later airplanes. They subsidize the transportation industry to carry the mail.

**Virginia Prescott:** So there we have the title of your book, How the Post Office Created America. How did it keep up as the nation expanded further through this forest through this rural land to the west?

**Winnifred Gallagher:** Well this was actually how I decided to write the book. I live in New York City and like 20 years ago my husband and I started spending a lot of our time in Wyoming near Yellowstone National Park. And we drove back and forth a number of times. And on one of those drives I said it's a huge country.The terrain is various. The cultures are very different. What held this whole thing back together in the in the 19th century, what stitched the East Coast and the West Coast? And I realized it was really the post office, the whole development the expansion of America into the West would have been impossible had there been no way to communicate information business documents money all of that depended on some sort of reliable transportation information superstructure which the post office supplied.

**Virginia Prescott:** In your book you write about some defining moments in the history of the postal service among them the Civil War. How did that transform the post.?

**Winnifred Gallagher:** Well certainly the Civil War was helpful in developing the post office because suddenly the federal government didn't have to pay for the South because the South seceded itself. And Abraham Lincoln is extremely brilliant. Postmaster General Montgomery Blair decided to take this terrible blow, the civil war, and turned it into some sort of a gift as best he could and he made a lot of changes in the post office he accelerated railway mail service which was phenomenal. Mail was not only just delivered on trains it was sorted on trains so that when it went it was deposited at City A. By the time it got to City B it was already sorted and laid out for the mailman to deliver it. The efficiency was so great that there are people who if you lived in a place that had good railway service you could invite a friend for dinner at eight o'clock in the morning, send a little card, he could get the card and reply to you by 3 o'clock that afternoon and you could serve dinner. It was the email of the day, railway mail service was phenomenal. It lasted all the way into the 1930s. He also made a huge advance originally for the convenience of Union soldiers. They had no way to send their salaries back to their families except put it in an envelope and mail it cash. There were no banking services for average people they didn't have checking accounts. He instituted postal money orders which took off and were like just a phenomenal business.

**Virginia Prescott:** How about that listener question, why was the postal service removed from the cabinet and how much control does the government have over it today?

Andrew Jackson back in well he was first elected in 1828, so shortly thereafter he decided to bring the postmaster general who up until that time had just been a federal administrative executive. He made the postmaster general part of his cabinet. Very important. One reason he did that was because he was recognising how important the post office had become. Into World War II, sorry WWI, it was the federal government's most important activity, biggest activity, and it was really the thing that put America on the map. Alexis de Tocqueville came here in 1831 and he was flabbergasted by American mail service. We already at that date had five times more post-offices than France and twice as many as England. These are great imperial powers and we were just a little you know a little hick country still wet behind the ears. So one reason why Jackson made the postmaster general part of the cabinet was to recognize the fact that this was a very important position indeed. The other thing he established this tradition that was maintained through Nixon that the postmaster general was the president's political fixer whichever party won the White House could fire regardless of ability. Tens of thousands of postmaster's all over the country and put in their own partisans. This is hard to believe but that's exactly how it was done until 1970. So this gave a huge amount of clout whether it was the Republicans or the Democrats they were equally vigorous in wielding this clout. It gave them an enormous amount of power. They could reward their you know their troops with juicy jobs.

**Virginia Prescott:** Now we're at a point where the post-office has survived two global wars a great depression and political crises. Biohazards and bombs sent through the mail. Now were in the electronic communication revolution and the Post Office is deeply in debt. Offices have been closed. It's been an argument that the U.S. has outgrown its need for the USPS. You know, that it's a money pit. It's obsolete. Is it?

**Winnifred Gallagher:** The post office. Of the still one of the biggest businesses in the country. It still delivers 40 percent of the entire world's mail. It's totally essential to many many businesses. The parcel industry is growing by leaps and bounds. It's absolutely central for rural Americans if you live in a big city maybe you're not as reliant on it but country people sure I know I'm in Wyoming I'm 75 miles from a pharmacy. It's still the only way we have to deliver hard copy. There are certain things that you need documents for. It's a part of life that most Americans even though they don't realize the fact that the post office doesn't receive any tax dollars, which it doesn't, it just is a part of life that they don't see why they should have to give it up if they don't have to and they don't have to, it's not costing them anything. It's an amenity that we've always had. We have 33000 post offices they're very in many places their community centers as well as just a place where you get stamps. I think it's a big part of American life. And you know these are uncertain times.

**Virginia Prescott:** Does it deliver everywhere?

**Winnifred Gallagher:** Yes it delivers to every address including the bottom of the Grand Canyon. It doesn't go there too often which would be very expensive.I'm guessing once a week.

**Virginia Prescott:** What should the role of the USPS be in the 21st century?

**Winnifred Gallagher:** Well back in the 1980s the post office could have gone digital and it didn't.There were people who saw that this obvious segue to letter mail was going to be electronic mail the internet was invented by the government. The post office should give us a digital address the same way they gave us a street address for letters for political reasons Congress was apprehensive about the shift. The post office lost nerve again once again, private industries were in there saying we want that business the post office can't do it. So you know we have to save it for Google and AOL and so they dropped the ball which was a real tragedy. Could that change? Yes. Could you retrofit the postal service for the digital age and give us all broadband access and hack proof mailboxes and verification authentication for legal and business documents? Yes you could. But is that going to happen in this political climate. What I think will happen is if Congress will let postal management do it they'll pare back to a delivery system for profitable services such as parcels; that business rose by 50 percent just between 2010 and 2015. That would preserve our national hardcopy delivery which is also very important because a lot of states especially the western states are already voting by mail. So I think that's the likeliest thing to happen. A leaner meaner system but it will still exist.