# USPS Transcript

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**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:09] Alright, Nick, I got a good one for you.

[00:00:12] We are gazing at North America from the stratosphere. OK, ya with me. Music swells and suddenly we zoom in on a newspaper in front of a suburban house. The homeowner steps out to pick it up on her way to the mailbox. But wait. Who's that coming down the street?

[00:00:30] It's her mail carrier coming to hand off some letters to her in person in the front yard of her house.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:40] I feel like you're pitching me the least dramatic movie that anyone has ever seen.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:44] It might seem that way at first, but it is dramatic. This is actually from a video that the Postal Service produced to show how it works, because when you really stop to think about it. A remarkable confluence of events had to occur [00:01:00] for that postal worker to be handing off a bunch of mail from various parts of the country, maybe even the world, to that lady in front of her very own house. It is a huge operation. And by the way, it's a government operation.

**Archival:** [00:01:18] When someone sends a letter, it enters a system already at work.

[00:01:23] But most people never get to see.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:01:29] I was interested in how does this government agencies deal with millions of letters and parcels every day and get them to the right person, you know, across a vast network.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:46] This is Allison Marsh.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:01:48] And I'm a history professor at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, South Carolina. And I was a former curator at the National Postal Museum.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:58] The United States Postal Service [00:02:00] is getting a lot of attention lately for being in financial jeopardy and tussling with a president who thinks that it should pull itself up by its own bootstraps. In order to understand how the USPS got to this point and to this kind of a relationship with the government, I needed to understand how and why this institution came to be, how it's even possible that there is a service that can and will deliver objects to every home in this country.

[00:02:28] So let's jump in. I'm Hannah McCarthy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:02:31] I'm Nick Capodice.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:02:32] And this is Civics 101, a show about the basics of how our democracy works.

[00:02:37] And today...

**Archival:** [00:02:38] Let's go behind this wall and see some of the work the post office does.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:02:42] We're figuring out the mammoth creature that is the U.S. Postal Service, which, as it turns out, is a service that helps to make our democracy work.

[00:02:53] It's from the Constitution.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:02:58] This was something [00:03:00] that was written into our founding documents that you have the right to this service, that you have a trust. They guarantee your privacy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:11] Right.The Constitution gives this power to Congress. Right, to establish post offices and post roads like a literal road designed to deliver mail.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:20] Yes, that is how important mail delivery was to the framers. They wrote it into the supreme law of the land.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:03:28] They also focused on the idea that you needed to have a network to move information for for the sake of democracy, that you were to be able to get the news to people up and down the East Coast.

[00:03:44] The idea that we need to have a functioning postal network to have a functioning democracy.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:50] And it was about more than just moving mail around. Our Postal Service had this key feature. It wasn't going to open your mail.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:03:59] A postal [00:04:00] network existed in colonial North America prior to the establishment of the United States. But there were problems with it. And one of the key problem was the fact that the British Postal Service could open your letters and read them. And, you know, look for things like, I don't know, revolutionary materials.

[00:04:23] And so the idea of having a postal service that you could trust to maintain your privacy, it was something that the founding fathers really focused on.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:35] Wait hold on.

[00:04:37] The British government could just open your mail willy nilly?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:40] That they could in the U.S. first class mail that is mail for personal and business correspondence is pretty soundly protected, with very few exceptions. The government needs a warrant to open your mail.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:55] So our mail system kind of represents one of our earliest tenets of American democracy. [00:05:00] You have a right to information and privacy.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:04] And these days it also means equity of access. The USPS is the only delivery service committed to reaching every home in America.

**Archival:** [00:05:13] The mail man knows everybody in the neighborhood and everybody knows the mail man.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:17] But it wasn't always that way. Initially, mail was only delivered from post office to post office. If you wanted to get your mail, you had to go to the local office and there was no residential delivery.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:05:29] This changed actually in the mid 19th century where they started having city free delivery.

[00:05:36] So that's when you have the first letter carriers where people would bring the mail directly to your house. And that was great. If you happen to live in a city was great. If you lived in rural America and in the mid 19th century, the majority of Americans lived in rural rural lifestyles. So we didn't get rural free delivery until [00:06:00] the beginning of the 20th century.

**Archival:** [00:06:02] Country delivery is called rural delivery. So the rural mail man's route is called an R d, route R and D are the first letters of rural delivery.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:06:15] Allison says that even when we did get rural delivery, it could be pretty uneven it was all about geography and terrain. In Manhattan, you might get your mail four times a day. But in rural Alaska. Maybe once a week or a month. But over time, the institution expanded wildly in order to provide greater convenience in connection to a nation's citizens, which I think is pretty radical.

[00:06:43] And it took a lot of innovation, like the postage stamp, for example.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:06:48] Initially, you would go to the post office and you would ask if you had any mail and you had to pay on delivery. So you could pay to pick up your mail. So [00:07:00] the invention of the stamp is the idea that you can prepay and your letter will get there.

**Archival:** [00:07:05] Meanwhile, Jimmy is buying a stamp for the letter. The money the post office gets for stamps helps pay for the people who work in the post office and for other costs of sending the mail.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:07:15] So before the stamp, the receiver had to pay to get their mail.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:07:19] Yeah. So the stamp was this incredibly simple but kind of ingenious way to pay for the mail.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:07:25] Quick aside, who designs stamps? By the way, as I was looking them up on the Web site and I saw they have a series on voices of the Harlem Renaissance and Arnold Palmer and a silver coffeepot.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:07:38] Yeah. So the Postal Service works with various art directors who work with professional artists. They design about 35 stamps each year. And the guidelines are basically the art has to be about positive stuff in American life and history. But that could be anything from like a positive event to a pretty flower. And if it's going to commemorate somebody, [00:08:00] that person needs to be deceased. OK. Moving on, another simple, clever thing.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:08:05] The invention of the mailbox is another thing. Mailboxes weren't required until 1960. Before that, you know, the letter carrier would actually knock on your door and say, hey, you have mail. And an efficiency study said that they there are losing up to two hours a day just knocking on people, stalkers. And so they're like, wow, we need to fix this.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:08:31] I love to imagine this room is full of post office executives that are brainstorming, like, what are we gonna do about this door-knocking problem? And suddenly someone stands up and like, he might sound a little crazy, but so crazy it just might work. Would if everyone put a little box outside of their house. And that's like how everyone in America gets a mailbox.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:08:53] Also, Nick, zip codes. Those are fairly new. They were invented by the USPS in the 1960s [00:09:00] to make delivery more efficient. Delivery by air was largely figured out by the post office. They also helped to pioneer optical character recognition. That is where it computer scams writing, including handwriting in order to sort the mail.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:09:17] So the answer to how the post office became an institution that delivers to every doorstep is that they spent about 200 years inventing clever ways to do it.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:09:26] Right.

[00:09:26] The post office is a giant system that has enormous needs.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:09:33] Hey, something that you take for granted that you on the person to person basis, it seems, you know, a pen and a piece of paper that you hand to a person that then gets delivered. They don't realize how much technology is built into post office. And so it's a great combination of both the personal [00:10:00] and the individual person to person. Embedded in a highly complex technological system.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:10:15] All right. You mentioned at the top of the episode that the post office is having somewhat of a hard time these days, and you're describing what sounds like an institution that costs a lot of money to operate. So where does the money come from?

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:10:29] Yeah, the Postal Service is one of a handful of independent establishment of the executive branch, and it's one of perhaps a couple dozen government agencies that is self-funding.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:10:46] This is Kevin Kosar. He's vice president for research partnerships at the R Street Institute, which is a think tank in Washington, D.C. You might recognize him from our episode on the Federal Register. Welcome back, Kevin. So Kevin says the United States [00:11:00] Postal Service is part of the executive branch and that it is self funding. Right. But what does that mean?

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:11:07] That is, instead of each year Congress reaching into the Treasury and saying, here's your money, government agency, use it to do what we tell you to do. Instead, the Postal Service covers or is supposed to cover its operating costs through the sales of postage.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:11:21] Didn't you say earlier that Congress is in charge of establishing offices and roads for the USPS?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:11:26] I did. And to be clear, Congress does still have power over the post office, even though it's an independent agency of the executive branch.

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:11:35] Oh, yeah. If they wanted to pass a law saying the Postal Service is abolished, they could do it. The Constitution, as you note, Article one, Section eight says that Congress has the authority to establish post office roads. It says nothing more than that. So Congress has a really free hand to design the mail system. And if Congress decided one day we just don't need a mail system, it could just zero it out.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:12:00] But [00:12:00] it wasn't always this way. The United States post office is less than 50 years old. And by that I mean the independent office. It used to simply be the post office department of the executive branch.

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:12:12] It used to be just a standard government department, like a Department of Health and Human Services in 1970. That changed and it changed because the post office was breaking down. It was losing money. Its functionality was not good. It had terrible management, worker relations. There was a wildcat strike that actually shut down parts of the Postal Service while Nixon was president. And so they decided they needed a new model.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:12:43] A wildcat strike. By the way, means that unionized workers go on strike without authorization or approval from union leadership. And when that happened in 1970, Nixon deputized the National Guard to deliver the mail. It didn't work very well. And [00:13:00] the whole system was crippled, which was a major catalyst for Congress passing the Postal Reorganization Act. This struck the post office department from the president's cabinet, made it an independent agency like NASA or the CIA and took away the red tape and regulations, but also said that now had to cover its own costs.

[00:13:23] The hope there was that it would force the Postal Service to operate more efficiently.

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:13:26] And it did model work pretty darn well from 1970 until about 10 years ago. So when our economy took a huge hit in 2008. Mail volume plunged.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:13:37] Now, historically, drops in mail are temporary in recessions. But this time, things didn't really bounce back. More people and businesses moved to electronic communication.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:13:50] Right. It's much harder to self-fund if you've got less mail.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:13:53] And there's one more thing that is putting a strain on the USPS.

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:13:58] Our country, we have [00:14:00] more and more people with each passing year.

[00:14:02] And those people live in different places. And more addresses. And that just by its very nature, means that the Postal Service has a bigger and bigger job to do each year.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:14:14] So even though there's less mail, more packages, of course, but less mail, there's also more places to deliver to.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:14:21] Right. And the thing that says the U.S. Postal Service, apart from other delivery operations, is that they actually deliver to everybody. Companies like DHL, Amazon, FedEx, they contract with the Postal Service in order to make sure packages can get to areas where they don't deliver. Now, consider what that means when it comes to a time of crisis.

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:14:46] Remember back after the 9/11 attacks, we then had a series of packages with anthrax sent through the mails. That triggered a policy change and the Postal [00:15:00] Service. Under an agreement with a few other executive agencies like the Department of Defense, have an agreement that in the event of a national biohazard type attack at the Postal Service would be the vehicle for getting people the medicines they need to stay safe.

[00:15:23] They have that network.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:15:26] So the Postal Service is a kind of frontline responder when people across the nation need things.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:15:31] Yeah. And they deliver to every home. So in some cases, a postal carrier could be the only contact that an individual has. Especially in rural areas. So the USPS facing big financial trouble is a problem for everyone.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:15:46] With so many people and so many businesses who rely on them, what would happen theoretically if it went away?

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:16:01] There's [00:16:00] a lot of societies built on the post office, as we already mentioned. Private parcel delivery companies, they don't want to go to every single address and they hand off parcels and pay the postal service to carry them the final mile. There's a lot of people who to be cut off from the economy and face very formidable prices if they live in remote areas. Second reason, voting by mail. More than 20 million people got election materials and voted by mail. And we know in an age of COVID, that number is going to skyrocket.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:16:37] Right. Yes.

[00:16:38] I've been reading a lot about this in the news lately. During a pandemic, the presidential election could be completely dependent on the postal service, not to mention census documents, stimulus checks.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:16:50] Yeah. Which brings us back, I think, to the ways in which the Postal Service upholds this democratic system. There's been talk of privatizing the post office, [00:17:00] for example, you know, having it go fully independent, not a government agency at all. I asked Allison about this.

**Allison Marsh:** [00:17:07] Right now, the USPS is mandated that every single citizen pays these same rates.

[00:17:18] So it does not matter if you are in rural, you know, Montana or the Dakotas or Wyoming, you will pay the same price that someone in one of the big cities either killer will pay. Now, it does no cost the same for mail to be delivered in highly dense urban areas that it does in rural areas. So right now, the system is set up to subsidize the rural areas. And if we privatize that, will those Americans still have the same [00:18:00] access because it costs a lot more to go that last mile than it does to do the sort of nice city block?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:18:10] Here's the deal. Kevin says that it's really unlikely that the post office is going to be fully privatized.

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:18:17] And I can't remember finding a member of Congress who really believed we could privatize the Postal Service. Not all of our parts are on the same continent.

[00:18:30] You know? We have Hawaii out there. We have Puerto Rico. We have the Virgin Islands.

[00:18:34] And then nevermind trying to get mail up to Alaska and all the logistical challenges there. The idea that is somehow going to be easily handed over to the private sector and you're going to do it and turn a profit, I think is pretty fanciful.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:18:47] Well, what do you do then when you've got an essential government agency that is in serious trouble?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:18:51] This is where we stumble into another essential component of a functioning democracy. Compromise.

**Kevin Kosar:** [00:19:02] There's [00:19:00] going to have to be a conversation about how do you reform the Postal Service? They're going to have to cut a deal and it's going to have to do something to address the fact that the Postal Service's costs outstrip its revenues year after year.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:19:17] And I figure that the post office is going to see some major changes one way or another. Right.

[00:19:23] I just read that a new postmaster general was appointed by the USPS governing board, a supporter of President Trump, the first postmaster general in decades. That was not a career postal employee.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:19:34] Right. And also, of course, we are in a time when the president is questioning the future of the USPS.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:19:40] There's also a many billion dollar bailout filtering its way through Congress. So it's probably not going to come to a crashing halt or anything, but it seems like it may experience some serious growing pains in the coming years.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:19:54] Yeah, I think that's probably true. And I guess the important thing to remember amidst all of this [00:20:00] change and chaos is that the USPS is, if nothing else, an innovator. Right. It's figured out a lot of massive, impossible seeming situations. And importantly, it has managed to remain a beloved institution despite lots of setbacks. This is another thing I asked Alison about. Why if we send so much less mail, if we're all pretty much addicted to digital technologies, if this agency is struggling so much, why is this nation so committed to it? What is it about the mail?

**Allison Marsh:** [00:20:36] Throughout history, there has been both a love for the post office department as well as for the people who work for the postal system. And if you think about it, um, letter carrier is most likely the person that You [00:21:00] in the federal government that you have the most intimate relationship with in that you can see your letter carrier every single day. You might know his or her name. They might know, you know, your dog. They might check in on you. From the very beginning, the post office was likely the first federal building in any given town. And it was your link to the federal government. So it is what kept you in, you know, in touch not only with your friends and your family members, but with your is the only contact you may have had with the government. So I feel like that commitment is built on centuries of this trust and duty that works.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:21:53] The United States Postal Service is, despite massive shifts in organization and operation, an entity that is [00:22:00] as old as the country itself. It might have problems, but it's always been a problem solver, too.

[00:22:08] So what the USPS will be in the coming years remains to be seen, but it is probably going to figure out a way to be.

**Archival:** [00:22:31] So with our ever increasing volume of mail, we have some very serious problem that we are solving. We are making real progress. Welcome to your United States post office department.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:22:52] Today's episode was produced by me, Hannah McCarthy with Nick Capodice. Our staff includes Jackie Fulton. Erica Janik communicates exclusively [00:23:00] through letters written in an indecipherable shorthand, but we are going to figure it out one of these days. Maureen McMurray is the one who started the whole snail mail chain letter thing. Thanks a lot, Maureen. Music in this episode by Uncan, Asher Fulero, The Great North Sound Society, Jesse Gallagher, James Pants, Patrick Patrickios and you know you missed me. Chris Zabriskie. Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and is a production of NHPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.