

The Cover Story

Star Route Truck?

What's a Star Route, anyway? By Josh Furman

Let's start with the details: A 5.5-cent Transportation Series coil definitive, both in precanceled and non-precanceled form, was issued on November 1st, 1986 by the U.S. Postal Service **Figure 1 [on front cover]**. The pen-and-ink design shows a composite of a "star route" truck with the hard rubber tires used in the early 1900s. The denomination is the rate for nonprofit third-class mail that is presorted for carrier routes.

The stamp was printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing on the B press in maroon ink in coils of 500 and 3,000 stamps with a plate number every fifty-two stamps. The "CAR-RT Sort / Non-profit Org." inscription was printed in black ink from the same plate that printed the maroon vignette. The service-inscribed version is untagged. It was printed by plates 1 and 2 in coils of five hundred and 3,000 stamps. The collectors' version, without the service inscription, was issued only in coils of five hundred with block tagging.

The stamp was designed by David K. Stone of Port Washington, New York. Joseph Creamer engraved the vignette, and Dennis Brown engraved the lettering. Both worked for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Many different cachè printers issued First Day Covers. **Figure 2 [on front cover]** is an example of one such cover.

Since the then-current first class postage rate was 22¢, four of these stamps were needed to make the rate.

But why did we need to make this stamp, anyway. What did it signify?

A little history is required.

Post riders on horseback were the first contractors to carry mail between Post Offices. In 1773, post road surveyor Hugh Finlay noted that a stagecoach driver held a contract to carry semi-weekly mail between Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Boston, Massachusetts. In 1785, the Continental Congress authorized the Postmaster General to award mail transportation contracts to stagecoach operators, in effect subsidizing public travel and commerce with postal funds. Despite their higher costs and sometimes lower efficiency, stagecoach proposals were preferred over horseback. In fact, up until 1845, transportation of inland mail, other than by railroad or steamboat, was given to bidders who offered steam or coach service.

In 1845, more than two-thirds of the Post Office Department's budget was for transportation. An Act of March 3, 1845, took steps to reduce mail transportation costs. Congress abandoned its preference for stagecoaches, with contracts to be awarded to the lowest bidder for what "may be necessary to provide for the due celerity, certainty and security of such transportation." These were known as "celerity, certainty and security" bids. Postal clerks shortened the phrase to three asterisks or stars (***). The bids became known as star bids, and the routes became known as star routes.

By 1849, the Department had cut transportation costs on all routes — horseback, stage, steamboat and railroad — by 17 percent, from \$2,938,551 in 1844 to \$2,428,515. Route distances rose 20 percent for the same years, from 35.4 million miles to 42.5 million miles in 1849. Star routes were largely responsible for the savings as contractors switched to horseback, cutting per-mile costs 38 percent, from 7.2 cents to 4.5 cents.

Still, throughout the 1850s, the Department continued to favor stagecoaches over horses on certain routes. In 1852, Postmaster General Samuel D. Hubbard instructed contract bidders to state the type of conveyance "if a higher mode than horseback be intended," noting that stagecoaches were preferred on certain routes.

Postmaster General Joseph Holt's 1859 Annual Report criticized the "enormous sums" paid to stagecoach companies to transport mails, "some of which [were] so light as scarcely to yield a revenue sufficient to defray the expense of carrying them on horseback." He declared, "In advertising for the new lettings, 'Star Bids' ... will alone be invited ... without any designation of modes of conveyance." The 1860 Annual Report is the last to discriminate between "coach" and "inferior" modes of service.

By the end of the nineteenth century more than 17,000 Star Routes crossed America, with contractors traveling over 230,000 miles of postal routes in carts, buckboards and even dog sleds. See **Figure 3 [on front cover]** for a list of Star Route changes taken from the Postal Bulletin of June 10, 1899.

From 1802 to 1859, postal laws required carriers to be free white persons. Violators were fined. The typical four-year contract did not provide payment for missed trips, regardless of weather conditions. Unexcused service failures could result in fines up to three times the trip's price.

Contractors had to be at least 16 years old until 1902, when the age limit was raised to 21. Subcontractors or carriers could be 16. Contractors were bonded and took an oath of office; subcontractors and carriers also took the oath.

Regular schedules made carriers easy targets for thieves. Criminal punishment was harsh. Anyone found guilty of robbing carriers could receive five to ten years of hard labor for the first offense and death for the second. Meanwhile, some carriers faced the hazards of snow, avalanches, ice packs, cliff-hugging roads, seas of mud, and dangerous waters.

Contractors provided their own equipment. A 1930s-era Post Office Department memo quotes Harry Elfers, who transported mail ten miles from Sandusky, Ohio, to Kelleys Island in Lake Erie. In bad weather, he would sail from the island to Marblehead, the closest mainland point, only four miles away. That could take 20 minutes or 8 hours, depending on the weather. Either way, his pay was the same. Elfers recalled the specialized equipment he used: "When I was a youngster I was out in a boat about all the time. Now I don't care for ordinary sailing but battling with the ice has a fascination for me. As soon as the ice begins to form, I feel eager to get out one of the 'ironclads' and fight my way across. An 'ironclad' is a flat-bottomed skiff. There's a sail in the bow to carry us through the water or over the ice when conditions are right. There are two iron-shod runners on the bottom so the boat may be used as a sled. The sides are sheathed with galvanized iron. This is very important, because thin ice will cut a boat like a knife."

Most star route carriers traveled by horse or horse-drawn vehicle until the early 20th century. Boats, sleds, snowshoes, and skis also were used. Today's contractors use trucks, tractor trailers, and automobiles or whatever it takes — mule trains into the Grand Canyon, flat-bottomed pole boats in the Louisiana bayous, and airplanes and hovercraft in Alaska. Dog sleds were used in Alaska until 1963. Today, mail is dropped by parachute on some Alaskan routes. During the winter, snowmobiles carry mail in the highlands of Utah, Colorado, and Montana.

In *The Story of Our Post Office*, Marshall Cushing writes about Mrs. Clara Carter, who, while carrying mail between Maine's West Ellsworth and Ellsworth Post Offices around 1892, also delivered mail to customers on the route. Such unofficial arrangements were formalized beginning July 1, 1900, when some contracts provided for delivery to and collection from rural mail boxes erected along the routes. By 1918, some contracts also permitted the sale of stamps, money orders, and registered mail along routes.

From 1900 onward, the use of trucks to haul inter-city freight began to grow in popularity. At first, the lack of paved roadway made trucking mail expensive, but by the time the Ford Motor Company set up its first truck assembly plant in Dearborn, Michigan, road conditions had dramatically improved. Trucks soon became the favored means of freighting, and by World War I, America was the premier truck building country in the world. Today, trucks are still used to haul large quantities of the United States Postal Service's inter-city mail. Today, the term "highway contract route" is used to refer to contractor-supplied transportation services -- the modern day Star Routes.

But let's back up a bit. In the earlier days of the Star Route, things did not go so smoothly. The Star Route Frauds scandal involved a lucrative 19th century scheme whereby United States postal officials received bribes in exchange for awarding postal delivery contracts in southern and western areas.

An investigation into the Star Routes corruption took place under President James A. Garfield in 1881. Two previous congressional investigations into the Star Route frauds had occurred in 1872 and 1876 during the Grant Administration. The 1872 investigation results had been tainted by bribery, while the 1876 investigation managed to shut down the Star Route frauds temporarily. A resurgence of graft took place in 1878 in the Hayes Administration, continuing into the Garfield Administration. Among the major players involved were some of the large contractors, the ex-US Representative Bradley Barlow of Vermont, the Second Assistant Postmaster-General, some of the subordinates in the department, and Arkansas Senator Stephen W. Dorsey, who became Secretary of the Republican National Committee during James A. Garfield's 1880 presidential campaign. After Garfield's death by assassination, President Chester A. Arthur pursued the investigation. A federal prosecution and trial took place in 1882 that was finally able to shut down the postal ring.

Although the fraudulent scheme was widespread, there were few convictions. So what's new? Many of the defendants in the Star Routes trials were successfully defended by noted lawyer and orator, Robert Ingersoll. Public disgust over the Star Routes graft served as an impetus for civil service reform and the passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act in 1883.

For collectors of Star Route material, there is little available that is clearly identified as carried on a Star Route. **Figures 4a and 4b [on front cover]** are examples of Star Route covers found on eBay. I have tweaked **Figure 4a** so that the hand-written Star Route designation is just about readable in the scan. **Figure 4b** indicates Star Route in the caché. These covers are not common, but searching for them would be great fun for postal history buffs.

So there you have it. Looking behind the scenes at a simple five-and-a-half-cent stamp one finds a wonderful story and a whole new adventure in philately.

Notes: The research for this article found information in several sources, including Wikipedia, PhillyDotCom, Arago, and several U. S. Postal Service publications.