



The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America

David M. Henkin

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Americans commonly recognize television, e-mail, and instant messaging as agents of pervasive cultural change. But many of us may not realize that what we now call snail mail was once just as revolutionary. As David M. Henkin argues in *The Postal Age*, a burgeoning postal network initiated major cultural shifts during the nineteenth century, laying the foundation for the interconnectedness that now defines our ever-evolving world of telecommunications.

This fascinating history traces these shifts from their beginnings in the mid-1800s, when cheaper postage, mass literacy, and migration combined to make the long-established postal service a more integral and viable part of everyday life. With such dramatic events as the Civil War and the gold rush underscoring the importance and necessity of the post, a surprisingly broad range of Americans—male and female, black and white, native-born and immigrant—joined this postal network, regularly interacting with distant locales before the existence of telephones or even the widespread use of telegraphy. Drawing on original letters and diaries from the period, as well as public discussions of the expanding postal system, Henkin tells the story of how these Americans adjusted to a new world of long-distance correspondence, crowded post offices, junk mail, valentines, and dead letters.

The Postal Age paints a vibrant picture of a society where possibilities proliferated for the kinds of personal and impersonal communications that we often associate with more recent historical periods. In doing so, it significantly increases our understanding of both antebellum America and our own chapter in the history of communications.

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