

THREE

PLAYING POST OFFICE MAIL IN URBAN SPACE

Peering across the Atlantic in 1867, the editors of Edinburgh's *Blackwood's Magazine* sounded the alarm. Relations between the sexes and between the generations were in disarray once again in the young republic—but this time the culprit was the post office. Of course, from the perspective of contemporary British observers, almost any social institution in the United States during the nineteenth century could serve as a dangerous source, a telling index, or an apt symbol of democratic and egalitarian excess. But in many respects the particular target was surprising. The post was not exactly an American innovation, and the British, on average, posted mail far more frequently during this time period than the Americans. To *Blackwood's*, though, whose views were reprinted with qualified approval in an American journal, it was not so much the post itself that underwrote the unique freedom enjoyed by young women in the United States. It was, more specifically, what the author called the “post-office system.”

Postal service, as *Blackwood's* understood, involved more than just mail routes and transmission schedules. The impact and significance of the post depended on the forms of access the new users had to their mail. And on that score, the American system stood out. “The unmarried girl of nineteen or twenty,” the article noted, “has the privilege, if she chooses to exercise it, of her own private box or pigeon-hole at the post-office of the town where she resides, where she can have her letters addressed.” While her European counterpart depended on the “confidence of a third party” (perhaps the neighborhood pastry chef or stationer, the author supposed) to transmit secret letters, “the post-office system offers a facility for clandestine correspondence which no respectable father or mother on the European side of the Atlantic would think of without a shudder.”¹

Concern over unsupervised female correspondence had become commonplace by the middle of the nineteenth century, inspiring reams of conduct manuals, epistolary guides, and sentimental literature on both

sides of the ocean. But here was a novel (and in some respects counter-intuitive) suggestion. What gave the post subversive force in the United States at this moment in history, *Blackwood's* argued, had to do less with the ostensible privacy of the sealed letter and more with the potential secrecy of the anonymous post office. Though this anxiety (or fantasy) about clandestine pigeon holes provides a partial and misleading image of the relationship that ordinary American women had to the mail, *Blackwood's* was astute in highlighting the role of the physical space of the post office in America's growing communications network. Alongside the named postal user, the other basic unit of exchange in this network was the post office, which was of course a building as well as a bureaucratic entity. By mid-century there were close to twenty thousand post offices in tiny towns and large cities, and all mail exchanges passed through these buildings.² Popular understanding of the post was in many respects inseparable from popular understanding of the remarkable places where letters, correspondents, and expectant users of the network all came into contact.

Post offices were, above all, paradigmatic sites of public life. This was true not only in small towns, where the post might be the only point of regular contact with the outside world and the only visible embodiment of government authority, but also in the nation's growing cities. Prior to mid-century, however, post offices were not conspicuous, purpose-built structures. In smaller communities, postmasters discharged their responsibilities in general stores or private residences. The history of the post in antebellum Brimfield, Massachusetts, for example, tracks the movement of the office from the home or business of one postmaster to that of another. In Guilford, Connecticut, around mid-century, postmaster Elisha Hutchinson made a small addition to the north side of his home to accommodate the town's mail. In rural communities in the antebellum South, one chronicler later recalled, neighborhood life was oriented around "a store where everything of a miscellaneous character was kept, and at the same place was the post office." In what would later become the most famous post office in small-town America during the antebellum period, residents of New Salem, Illinois, collected their mail at the grocery store, where a young postmaster named Abe Lincoln (not the store's proprietor) kept receipts in an old blue sock and carried letters in his hat. An 1846 story published in Hudson, New York, began with the observation that "amusing incidents often occur by persons mistaking" local stores and businesses for the post office.³ Even in metropolitan centers, postal spaces were distinguished

less by their stately architecture than by their function and location. Post offices in cities were typically housed in converted buildings of varying types, ordinarily on principal business streets, often abutting, adjoining, or inhabiting a merchants' exchange. The office in New York, to take the most populous example, occupied a two-story wooden house in Lower Manhattan in 1825 that was known as the Academy Building. Two years later, the post office moved to the merchants' exchange, then to the rotunda near City Hall, and from there in 1845 to a Dutch Reformed Church, where it remained until after the Civil War. Baltimore's post office occupied rooms in a hotel in 1830, and as late as the mid-1850s the government was renting space for the post from the Exchange Company. During the 1830s and '40s, the city post office in Washington, D.C., resided in a Masonic hall, a former bank, and a saloon. Urban post offices moved frequently in the antebellum era; the Detroit office, for instance, switched locations half a dozen times between 1831 and 1849 and did not occupy a building specifically designed or constructed for its use until 1860.⁴ But unlike their equally itinerant small-town counterparts, city post office spaces, however temporary, were centers of urban sociability, in large part because they were frequently the sole location for collecting or depositing mail in a densely populated metropolitan area. They were central post offices in an important sense, and their use, if not their architecture, reflected this fact. The Salt Lake City office, for example, housed city council meetings and served as that community's unofficial lost and found. Advertisements for missing objects, ranging from white handkerchiefs to red steers, would direct readers back to the civic space of the post. According to one observer in 1853, the post office in that city was "the most important place in the Mormon territory, not excepting the Tabernacle."⁵

Throughout the nineteenth century, the public nature of the post office rested on more than the presence of the federal government. During the first half of the century, urban post offices were privileged locations within a mercantile public sphere organized around the newspaper. Serving primarily as central depots for the arrival of the news and secondarily as a service center for the commercial users whose high postage fees subsidized newspaper transmission, the public spaces of the post bore the distinctive cultural imprint of the mercantile and partisan journals that filled the mails. For this reason, the contiguities and affinities between post offices and merchant exchanges were quite natural. The *Mobile Register* complained in 1841 about the "want of a place of general resort and re-union for gentlemen engaged in commercial and professional business." In the absence of a building specially designed for such people and

purposes, “the post office corner, or the bar-rooms of the hotels” offered “the only places approaching to the character of a business ‘Exchange.’”⁶ After the great fire of 1835 destroyed the Merchants’ Exchange, which had housed the post office in New York, the business community fought hard to prevent the office from remaining uptown in City Hall Park, even though the population center (though not the commercial center) had already drifted north by that point. Merchants were sufficiently anxious to preserve the proximity between downtown and the post that they donated \$50,000 to enable the government to acquire the church building on Nassau Street. Before the 1840s, post office buildings had not yet acquired their status as sites of popular gathering and use. Instead, they joined merchants’ exchanges, reading rooms, hotels, and coffee houses as centers of a particular kind of bourgeois society.⁷

By the middle decades of the century, the public character of the post office had begun to shift. Already in the 1830s, the link between newspapers and the post was attenuated by the arrival of cheap dailies in large cities that circumvented the mail altogether. Then the 1845 postage reform radically diminished the proportion of newspapers in the mail and helped to transform the post from a broadcast medium to an interactive communications network. This of course had a dramatic impact on the character of postal spaces. Post offices became places where ordinary people congregated in order to participate in the increasingly inclusive practice of circulating mail. This was especially true before the Civil War, when the post office did not offer free home delivery and (with limited exceptions late in the antebellum period) did not collect letters from alternate deposit locations. In mid-century New York, to take the most dramatic illustration, a single post office building (not counting a branch office that charged additional fees) served 750,000 city residents and countless more visitors, who together posted close to 62,000 letters every day. (By 1878 the New York post office would be processing 679,094 letters daily.) The sheer popularity of the postal network, as well as its implicitly inclusive claims on the attention of most Americans, made urban post offices unusually crowded and newly public arenas.⁸

As cities grew in the antebellum period, their post offices came to resemble congested and heterogeneous streets rather than gentlemanly merchant exchanges. At post offices, both strangers and acquaintances were more likely than elsewhere to encounter one another as they went about their daily business; they were places of high visibility and broad access within an increasingly diffuse urban environment. They were also noisy and bustling. In essence, the post office provided an extreme instance of the crowded thoroughfare, with all of the dangers associated with the dense concentration of bodies. Pickpockets, for example, haunt

antebellum descriptions of the city, and the post office appears as a particular point of vulnerability in cautionary tales about urban life. Already in the early 1840s, the *New Orleans Picayune* published numerous such accounts, warning readers on one occasion that “several pockets were picked yesterday at the post office and other places,” symptomatic of what the newspaper characterized as a vast and organized threat against the city’s population.⁹ Not coincidentally, perhaps, this particular warning appeared the day after the publication of a dead letter list, when higher volumes of customers might be expected to collect mail—perhaps many of them unaccustomed to life in the big post office. At a time when money was routinely transmitted by letter, a crowded post office could pose a major temptation to an urban thief. Mail robbery looms large in our image of the nineteenth century, but we often overlook the susceptibility of individual postal patrons (as well as bags, stagecoaches, and train cars) to such depredations. Bigger cities and broader participation in the postal network meant that post offices became worlds of strangers, intense microcosms of the urban settings in which they were prominently situated.

This crucial shift in the character of urban post offices in the United States coincided with the most important development in post office architecture during the nineteenth century. Before the 1850s, the federal government had constructed few buildings outside of the nation’s capital (and not many more in Washington, for that matter), and the design features of local post offices had not been a matter of bureaucratic policy. Consequently, there was no such thing as a characteristic (let alone standard) post office space, architecturally speaking, in the United States during the inaugural years of cheap postage. But in the early 1850s, the new construction branch of the Treasury Department initiated a systematic redesign of the nation’s custom houses, and in the process revolutionized the design and construction of urban post offices as well. Overseen by Alexander Bowman and implemented by Ammi Burnham Young, an architect who had joined the department in 1850, the new system of architectural supervision would produce forty-six new custom houses between 1853 and 1856, tripling the number of buildings under the control of the Treasury. And in a single fiscal year ending in September of 1858, twenty-one new buildings were opened.¹⁰ Although initially identified with the Treasury Department’s responsibility to administer and collect tariffs, most of the custom houses created by Young during this period were also designed to serve as post offices, and their postal function was typically foregrounded. The edifice constructed by the Treasury in Milwaukee during the 1850s, for example, was officially designated as a custom house, but the façade bore the prominent inscription POST OFFICE

above the entrance.¹¹ From the perspective of local residents and visitors, the primary purpose and identity of the new buildings was clear enough. Within a few years, the postal system suddenly had its first set of spaces specifically designed for the collection and distribution of mail.

Perhaps more important to postal users, these new post offices were designed to resemble one another. The custom house/post office projects of the 1850s employed standard building types and were tightly controlled, down to the smallest detail, by a central bureaucracy. In several cases identical blueprints for different sites were produced from the same lithographic image. The Young post offices appearing just after mid-century in large and small cities all across the country, from Portland, Maine, to Galveston, Texas, and from Richmond to Cleveland, were all remarkably similar in appearance, which was not true for any other period of post office design in the nineteenth century. Some of the plans, such as the ones for Chicago, New Haven, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and others, are essentially indistinguishable.¹² All of these post office buildings were built in the Italianate palazzo style (see fig. 1), which marked a clear departure from the neoclassical designs that had dominated both federal architecture (such as existed) and other prominent civic structures in the first half of the century. Typically, the city's central post office occupied the main entrance floor of these two- or three-story buildings. After the Civil War, the Office of the Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury shifted course, abandoning the Italian style that Young had favored (Supervising Architect Alfred B. Mullett, who took over in 1866, preferred more elaborate buildings in the French Second Empire fashion) and, more significantly, rejected the policies of centralized control and standardized design that Bowman and Young had pioneered. There was no retreat, however, from the practice of designing large and conspicuous buildings for the purpose of housing a post office, and, as the century wore on, post offices disentangled themselves from the other spaces of federal activity (courthouses and custom houses) with which they typically shared a roof in the mid-century plans. Post offices built in the late 1860s and the 1870s tended to be more striking in appearance and more spacious inside. New York's new post office on Broadway at Park Row (occupied in 1875), perhaps the most famous post office from the Alfred Mullett era, was a stately and imposing structure that briefly dominated the Manhattan skyline during the 1870s (see fig. 2).¹³ Despite the changes that took place after 1865, however, the legacy of the Ammi Young period was profound and enduring. During the ten years before the Civil War, a generation of similar urban post offices appeared throughout the United States at the same time as the



— FIGURE I —

U.S. CUSTOM HOUSE BUILDING, WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA; 1860 PHOTOGRAPH.

post was becoming an inclusive and interactive network. Going to the post office, especially in America's growing and proliferating cities, was becoming a recognizable mass activity with a distinctive character.

But how did Americans relate to their evolving postal spaces? Most commonly, antebellum observers were fond of emphasizing the density and heterogeneity of life at the post. Post offices appear in sources from the 1840s as among the public spaces where miscellaneous men ("groups of idlers" in the phraseology of one short story) might congregate. Reverend William Taylor noted that the post office in Gold Rush San Francisco was "the greatest local attraction of the heterogeneous masses," and postal clerk James Rees wrote in the 1860s of the "motley crew" that gathered at the windows of the Philadelphia office.¹⁴ Paintings of urban post offices from the 1850s and '60s also emphasize the disorderly character of these spaces. In contrast to the celebrated images of John Lewis Krimmel (1814) and Richard Caton Woodville (1848), which portray quiet scenes of absorbed citizens gathering political news from afar, artistic renderings of the post office from the third quarter of the century often focus on cities and feature crowds, bustle, and a multiplicity of social purposes and pursuits.¹⁵ David Blythe's amusing *Post Office* (see



— FIGURE 2 —

VIEW OF MANHATTAN IN 1876, PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOSHUA BEAL DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE. ALFRED B. MULLETT'S POST OFFICE IS THE LARGE BUILDING ON THE LEFT.

fig. 3), which he produced during the Civil War, presents the newly opened Pittsburgh office as a congested site of urban dangers and bawdy pleasures. While a mixed-sex group of six or seven patrons cram competitively into the small opening at the general delivery window, a young pickpocket plies his trade in the foreground. The dominant character, centered in the canvas but seen only from the rear, is a woman whose large, billowing skirt is rendered with shades of rose that stand out against the rest of the painting. Blythe's other post office painting, from the same period, presents a calmer view of the office interior, but here too a crowd of mutually indifferent patrons are gathered in the vicinity of a collection window, and the floor is strewn with envelopes—the ephemeral detritus of a busy exchange. Perhaps the most carnivalesque image of the urban post office, Thomas Prichard Rossiter's *Post-Office: In the City*, was one of three post office scenes produced in 1857 (during a crucial period of growth and transition in postal history) by the famous Hudson River School artist. Even his rendering of a *Rural Post Office* emphasized a striking degree of congestion and variegated postal activity.¹⁶

More popular representations of post offices reinforced many of these same themes. The drawing of the post office lobby shown in Figure 4, which ran across the width of a page in the popular weekly, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, in 1857, is relatively reverent, but shows the



— FIGURE 3 —

DAVID GILMOUR BLYTHE PAINTING, *POST OFFICE*, CA. 1859–63. (COURTESY OF THE CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART, PITTSBURGH.)

New York post office as a place of diverse and promiscuous interaction. Exterior views of urban post offices in pictorial magazines routinely foregrounded the crowds and activity in front of the buildings.¹⁷ Lithographs on letter sheets from Gold Rush San Francisco picture long lines of expectant postal users spilling out into the streets while jubilant forty-niners read their mail in public view.¹⁸

In many published expressions, fascination with the way that mail jumbled together America's disparate elements focuses on the correspondence itself. In an 1857 novel set in Philadelphia, a visit to the post office



— FIGURE 4 —

VIEW OF THE NEW YORK POST OFFICE. FROM *FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER*, 1857. (COURTESY OF AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.)

occasions a lengthy, melancholy reflection on the diverse mass of letters that entered the deposit box every day. Both the commercial and the personal, the narrator observes, love letters and bills, congratulations as well as condolences, all entered the same space, “jostl[ing] each other as they slid down the brass throat” of the post.¹⁹ Postal agent James Holbrook described the letter bag in 1855 as a social microcosm, “an epitome of human life,” a mixed multitude of emotions and peoples, a leveler of human difference “as great as the grave,” and a “confusion of tongues . . . worthy of the last stages of the tower of Babel, or of a Woman’s Rights convention.”²⁰ But however struck Holbrook and others may have been by the poetic capacity of personified pieces of mail to dramatize social contrasts and juxtapositions, it was potentially far more unsettling to imagine the congregation of all of the actual people who sent and received that mail.

Holbrook’s humorous and trivializing reference to women’s rights betrayed some of the larger stakes of postal intermingling. Like feminist conventions, mail bags and post offices threatened to collapse, if only for a fantastic moment, divisions of gender. While many cultural commentators worried about the privacy of the letter as a source of disorder between the sexes, others worried about the publicity of the post office. In mid-century America, as *Blackwood’s* had observed, the post office box allowed all women to receive and send mail beyond the regulatory reaches of friends and family; but to enjoy such privacy, women had to enter an intensely public space. Not coincidentally, that space was marked in many respects as a male preserve.

Visiting the post office was, in this period, a normatively masculine activity, its role in the division of sexual labor inculcated from a young age. Child-rearing advice from the 1860s listed going to the post office among the light daily duties to which boys ought to be habituated around age eight or nine, while girls were being introduced to the responsibilities of dressing smaller children or helping their mothers set the table. Anecdotal evidence suggests that trips to the post office would be assigned in many cases to young boys, male servants, and male slaves, but far less commonly to women.²¹ Part of what marked the deposit and collection of mail as a male task was that it frequently necessitated a trip to the center of town or a venture down crowded thoroughfares or congested business districts. Unexpected encounters and disturbing scenes took place on the way to and from the post office. On election day in Washington, D.C., in 1857, Benjamin Brown French recorded in his diary the spectacle of “an organized body of scoundrels, calling themselves ‘Plug Uglies’ . . . [who] came on from Baltimore to *regulate* our elections.” Though the display of force at the polls had apparently begun a bit earlier, French noted that the “first I knew of it was at 11, when I was on my way to the P.O.”²² Both en route and upon arrival, an errand to the post might entail contact with the more rugged and boisterous elements of town and city life. Many observers worried about the effect of this journey on young men as well. Postal reformer Pliny Miles pointed to court records to support his contention in the 1850s “that there are a large number of errand boys, clerks, and servants corrupted and convicted of crime every year through the temptation thrown before them in carrying letters to and from the Post Office,” and though his concern may have been more with the temptation of carrying money, the postal errand seemed to pose a special threat of corruption, even for clerks who were generally exposed to large amounts of currency. At any rate, such perils were normatively subsumed under the expanding category of dangers facing young men in the city.²³

Throughout the period, men dominated the life of the post office. To some extent, this may reflect the preponderance of men as users of the postal network. But it is also true that the physical presence of women in post offices introduced particular problems and triggered particular anxieties. By mid-century, postal spaces were designed to regulate and mitigate the forced heterosocial intermingling that Blythe’s images of the post office accentuated. Separate windows and entrances for men and women, which *Blackwood’s Magazine* saw as contributing to the dangerous secrecy of the American post office system, were intended primarily to protect women from the inconveniences and discomforts

associated with entering a social space that was, in the apt phrase of Richard R. John, “aggressively masculine [in] character.”²⁴

Perhaps the most striking common feature of the standard post office designs of Ammi Burnham Young was their nearly universal commitment to segregating men and women as they sent and received letters. Some of Young’s plans called for gender-specific windows, some created distinct waiting areas or “ladies’ vestibules,” and several set aside separate entrances. At the Philadelphia office, designed in 1861 and arguably Young’s crowning achievement, the ladies’ vestibule was divided from the general lobby by a wrought-iron screen. In addition to a ladies’ delivery window, a separate counter was established for men collecting letters addressed to women, an innovation that had appeared earlier in San Francisco, in postal spaces not designed by the Treasury Department. Segregated counters, waiting areas, and entrances were institutionalized as standard features of urban post office design as early as there was even such a thing as standard post office design.²⁵

In providing special spaces for female postal patrons, federal architects were making a significant and underrecognized contribution to what Mary P. Ryan has characterized as a “major civic project during the latter half of the nineteenth century”: the clear and deliberate demarcation of public spaces for women in U.S. cities. There were precedents, to be sure, for the kind of spatial compartmentalization featured in mid-century post offices. Distinct parlors for women had appeared on steamboats as early as the 1820s, and twenty years later women would occupy special sections of railroad cars or, in some cases, cars reserved exclusively for their use. By that time, special parlors and dining areas for women or for families were common in major urban hotels as well. But none of these spaces was created by the government, and none constituted the same sort of fixed, public space as the mid-century urban post office. In some ways the closest analogues to the ladies’ areas and facilities at the post may have been separate reading rooms for women in libraries. Before the 1850s, however, urban libraries were typically private, elite institutions, and the provision of women’s rooms and counters in public libraries was not common until well after the Civil War.²⁶ For men and women using the new post office buildings, the more obvious comparison might have been to the federal courtrooms, which frequently occupied the floor immediately (or in some cases two stories) above the post. In Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Dubuque, Richmond, and several other cities, plans for separate entrances and waiting areas for women using the mail contrasted with plans for gallery seating in the

courtrooms without reference to gender. At the post office, urban Americans encountered an early attempt on the part of designers to come to terms with shifting attitudes toward the presence of women in public space and evolving dilemmas about the dangers and pleasures of city life.

Segregated counters and lobbies had the (presumably deliberate) effect of marginalizing women's participation in this arena of postal life and reaffirming the masculinity of the larger space. Separate entrances promised the further benefit of concealing the presence of women in the post altogether. An 1869 article about the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C., where numerous women were employed, pointed out that "strangers visiting Washington, and admiring the style and architecture of the General Post Office building, would never know that there are numbers of ladies seated behind the plate-glass of the second-story windows. Indeed, few people residing in the Capital are really aware in what part of the building these women are stowed away."²⁷

At the same time, architectural attempts to keep the movements of women out of general view inevitably called attention, at the very least, to the threats of heterosocial contact they sought to minimize. And as much as spatial segregation marginalized the female postal user, ladies' windows became sites of popular interest in the post office.²⁸ Moreover, it is by no means clear that separate facilities always served to keep the sexes apart. Descriptions of the San Francisco post office cast some doubt on whether segregation at the counters restricted the access that men and women had to one another. At the ladies' window, one witness bragged, men waiting to collect letters for "their wife, or sister, or perhaps sweetheart, or other lady friend," gallantly offer their places to the women behind them. Another account, appearing originally in the daily newspaper in 1855, confirmed this chivalrous practice, expressing satisfaction that the addition of a second clerk to handle "the call of gentlemen for ladies' letters" was now expediting the distribution of mail. Before the change, at least, the ladies' window was clearly not a space of strict segregation, and it presumably facilitated various interactions, chivalrous and otherwise.²⁹

Still, the message emanating from all of these attempts at spatial regulation may have confirmed public perceptions that the post office would be used primarily by men. How accessible and congenial these spaces were to various classes and groups of American women is open to question, but it is clear that for many women, both urban and rural, a postal system that required regular trips to a central post office may have reinforced dependence upon husbands, fathers, and male associates, instead

of undermining such dependence. As increasing numbers of women relied upon men to pick up and deliver their letters, participation in the postal system occasioned complex domestic negotiations. Fanny Fern, the best-selling novelist, was fond of calling attention to these conjugal conflicts in her popular newspaper sketches. An 1856 tirade against negligent husbands excoriates the man “who carries a letter, intended for his wife, in his pocket for six weeks.” Three years later, Fern’s advice to engaged women includes the following prenuptial test: “Give him a letter to drop in the post-office, and find out if it ever leaves that grave—his pocket.”³⁰

“Annie Heaton,” a short story published in the *Ladies Repository* in 1851, the year of the second major postal reform, dramatizes the dependence produced by the post office system quite elaborately. The young title character, who lives under the reign of a joyless, workaholic patriarch, falls in love with her father’s apprentice. After he leaves her father’s employ, Annie hopes desperately for a letter, but must summon up all her courage to ask her father to inquire at the post office on her behalf. When he repeatedly ignores her requests, she and her sister engage in elaborate ruses to induce him to go, eventually emptying the family larder of various household staples to force him into town. Upon his return, the sisters sit in impatient silence while the father indicates nothing about a letter. When one of them asks whether he visited the post office, he replies that he did but says nothing further. They continue to wait, watching with disappointment as he fumbles in the pockets of his coat and removes only the groceries he has purchased. Only at the end of the evening does Annie’s sister finally break into the patriarchal coat and, sure enough, find the desired letter.³¹ The postal system may, in theory, have allowed women the privilege of their own private box, but for many the mail box was inside the coat pockets of men.

Women’s letters were thus contested objects to which men often staked an initial claim. Men would request letters addressed to women, even those to whom they were not related, as the earlier reports of the San Francisco post attest. The creation of a special window for men collecting women’s letters acknowledged and encouraged such practices, glossing over any potential conflicts that might arise. One female postal clerk who worked at the ladies’ window in New York complained that “men would come to the window and insist on her getting the letters of their lady friends for them.” The Chicago post office in 1835 issued a directive requiring that “any person calling for letters for their friends, to prevent mistake, will please bring written orders for them,” but such strictures do not appear to have been commonly enforced in mid-century America.³²

In many instances, especially if she was married, a woman's correspondence was expected to pass through an intermediary who would save her a trip to the post. A poetic address on an 1856 letter from one Indiana woman to another, for example, presumed that the recipient's husband would pick it up.

To Columbus go,
 In Bartholomew Co.
 To Mary J. Bass,
 I have come at last;
 And without any doubt;
 You may please take me out.
 —Care T. Bass State Indiana

In a more unusual case brought to the attention of the postmaster general in 1859, a man asserted his right to all letters addressed to his estranged wife. The Post Office denied his claim, charging that it violated the proprietary rights of the sender, but the husband's presumption emerged within a postal culture in which husbands frequently handled and monitored their wives' personal correspondence.³³

In both popular fiction and in the diaries and letters of real women, the post office appears frequently as a place to which women (especially those confined to the home) had only partial and impeded access. In *The Hidden Hand*, the highly successful 1859 novel by E. D. E. N. Southworth, Clara Day desires to communicate with her betrothed and his mother but is discouraged by the realization that "it was perfectly useless to write and send the letter to the post-office by any servant at the Hidden House," since the letter would be diverted into the hands of her enemy. Similar dilemmas confront the heroines of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter*.³⁴ The wartime letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee express frequent frustration at her dependence upon men to deliver letters from her husband. Writing in 1861, she complains that seven letters that had been waiting for her in the Atlantic City Post Office were belatedly forwarded to her in Philadelphia. "Mr. Dick went to the Post Office & I daily reminded to enquire for me—& he did for Mr. Phillips Lee—but not for Mrs. S. P. or E. B. Lee." Mary Boykin Chesnut complained in 1863 that her "letters always come from the P.O. open." For Emily Hawley, a twenty-two-year-old woman living with her family in rural Iowa, indirect access to the post meant that her parents could monitor her correspondence. After her younger brother brought a "good letter" to her from a young man, Hawley's mother took the opportunity to share her disapproval of "letters from strangers."³⁵

Faced with such constraints, many women did of course venture to the post office, where they encountered numerous obstacles and nuisances. Mary Jane Megquier, living in San Francisco without her physician husband in 1856, described to her daughter back in Maine an incident that sheds some light, despite the particularity of her circumstances, on dilemmas that many women faced when seeking to receive mail. Mail steamers from the East Coast arrived only twice a month, so on this particular steamer day, Megquier was eager to inquire for letters as soon as the mails would open at 10:00 p.m., about six hours after the ship docked. She announced to those assembled at her house that she intended to go down to the post office that night, but no one responded to what she had intended as a cue for an offer to accompany her or to run the errand on her behalf. When the hour for the opening of the post office arrived, Megquier was playing euchre with several men. Dropping her cards and gathering her hat and shawl, she “asked if any of the gentlemen were going into town,” but they just “looked at each other,” so Megquier “turned on [her] heel and was off.” In recounting her journey to the post office, she complained of having to travel “such an outlandish street that is not lighted for three quarters of a mile alone, in such a place as this.” Once inside, the line at the ladies’ counter was sufficiently shorter than the numerous lines of men (divided in San Francisco by section of the alphabet) to allow her to pass quickly in front of “a crowd of hundreds, a privilege a lady has,” and return home with her letters in hand, the whole trip having consumed only twenty-five minutes. Still, she was “cross as a bear.” Resentful at having to traverse the city in darkness, appreciative of not having to stand in line, and unwilling (even in retrospect, when charged with having left in excessive haste) to wait for her mail, Mary Jane Megquier understood well some of the difficult choices women encountered under the post office system.³⁶

What Megquier did not register was an awareness of how her presence in public space appeared to onlookers. Despite attempts to regulate or conceal the intermingling of men and women, post offices remained dangerous and transgressive places in the eyes of many contemporaries at a time when women, especially those in the middle class, were enjoined to avoid public self-presentation. The inevitable interactions among strangers, especially in urban areas, reinforced the aura of anonymity and promiscuity that *Blackwood’s* identified as fundamental to the post office system. Women who entered these public spaces came under suspicion of being public women. Virginia Penny’s 1863 survey of women’s employment opportunities counted as one of the hazards of working in the

post office the troubling phenomenon that “the class of women who go to the general post office constantly for letters, are of a kind a respectable woman would not like to come in contact with. The majority receive letters under fictitious names.”³⁷ Penny alluded in part to the well-known fact that prostitutes used post office boxes in order to contact clients, a practice made known to those who had never even been to an urban post office by the late 1840s when the *National Police Gazette* published the correspondence of Helen Jewett, the famous New York prostitute who had been murdered in 1836. Jewett’s correspondence, as Patricia Cline Cohen has underscored, highlights the role of drop letters—letters that entered and exited the same post office—in a certain branch of the sex trade.³⁸

Post offices figured as well in the sex lives of amateurs. “The stations are the favorites of intriguers of both sexes,” observed Junius Browne in his sensational 1869 guide to New York, “and are frequently made rendezvous for interdicted communication and illicit pleasures.” Post offices were places where adulterous couples could simply run into each other by concealed prearrangement, or where strangers might initiate and develop relationships. Even if a couple did not meet in the post office, drop letters facilitated the conduct of secret affairs. In the waning days of his relationship with his mistress, Madaline Edwards, in 1847, for example, New Orleans insurance agent Charles Bradbury wrote her a letter in an attempt to arrange a date. After crossing out a suggestion (still legible) that he would “call to morrow night between 7 & 8 o’clock and if the gate is open I will enter and if it is locked I will pass,” Bradbury instead offered to visit her at home “any night which you choose to designate, by a note to me through the Post Office.”³⁹ The emerging urban practice of soliciting strangers through personal ads in the daily newspapers typically involved postal addresses as well. “Will the lady in Brooklyn who addressed a note to a gentleman in New York please write again,” the classified section of one New York daily advertised, “as her letter was not received until Saturday?” Some notices referred to boxes, others simply invoked standard practices of inquiry, but either way the daily spectacle of miscellaneous individuals connecting, reconnecting, misconnecting, and communicating obliquely reinforced the association between the public space of the post office and the most promiscuous features of modern urban life.⁴⁰

Beyond the popular associations between the post office system and sexual promiscuity, what was transgressive or unsettling about the appearance of women at the urban post office was that central post office

buildings were not simply places where people quietly deposited and collected mail. They were special places to see and be seen—sites of self—presentation and confrontation. For most users who did not rent private boxes, a trip to the post office typically entailed a public encounter with a postal clerk that did not always go as planned. For one thing, inquiries for mail were frequently unsuccessful—a New York postal clerk was quoted in 1863 as estimating that “nine out of ten of all callers at the ‘general delivery’ window fail to receive a letter.”⁴¹ But even when letters lay waiting, the process of collection was not always simple or straightforward. Americans with distinctive accents or limited facility in English struggled hard to make themselves understood. Martin Weitz, a German immigrant living in Rockville, Connecticut, in 1856, explained to his family the problems that he experienced at his small-town post office. After three unsuccessful visits to the post, Weitz finally received a letter from home after he saw it listed in the local “*Nusbeber*” (in Weitz’s transliteration) as uncollected mail. “I had been there a few times before and asked if there was a letter, he always said no, this is how you ask in English (*Gat ju Lether vor mi dies Män telt mi Nasser*).” Weitz’s annoyance at having his letter delayed several weeks may suggest the larger frustrations of non-English speakers at the post office, to the extent that his formulaic inquiry for mail (“got you letter for me, this man tells me nothing”) incorporates as a standard expectation some prior failure to communicate with the clerk.⁴²

Some patrons blamed the incompetence (or malice) of post office employees for such breakdowns and lapses in the mail system. “Post-office clerks are models of unconcern if not rudeness, all the country over,” observed Junius Browne, who found postal workers as a group more difficult than any other class of employee encountered in everyday life. “I have often believed they were born only to have their noses pulled; and it is a great pity they so often miss their destiny. It is wonderful how such dull fellows can be so ingeniously offensive. All the capacity they have is directed to disobligation.”⁴³ Other accounts and anecdotes of postal life emphasize the outrageous demands and unreasonable behavior of postal patrons. Kate Harrington’s humorous (and presumably imaginative) description of “A Half-Hour in the Post-Office,” which appeared in a Cincinnati literary magazine in 1854, lampoons the diverse collection of needy and unsophisticated customers (most of them, interestingly, female) who approach the postal counter with blundering pronunciations, thick accents, laughable requests for discounts on stamps, or humble entreaties for an amanuensis.⁴⁴ Whether seen from the perspective of

long-suffering clerks or inconvenienced and mistreated patrons, though, the post office was the site of fraught and potentially adversarial interactions.

Especially in larger communities, these ordinary encounters took place in large public gatherings. Naive or inexperienced users might face the derision of more than just an ornery clerk. A “tall Missourian” walked into the San Francisco office in 1853 and inquired among the long line of people waiting for the general delivery to open whether this was “*whar they got letters?*” Striding past the line and rapping on a closed window at the counter, “he poked his head in as far as possible, and inquired if there was a letter ‘*thar for Eph. Shinner?*’” The bemused clerk answered that there was and then slammed the window shut. “[B]efore Eph. could recover from his astonishment,” the newspaper account of this event noted with some satisfaction, “he was rapidly hurried to the door, amid the jests and hoots of the crowd.” On the other hand, a successful visit to the post could provide an occasion for a proud public display. Having mailed a letter of his own composition, Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick enjoys the (characteristic) fortune of being seen emerging from the post office by a former colleague in the bootblack trade who did not know that Dick could write.⁴⁵

In multiple ways, the post office was a force for public exposure, transforming the ostensibly intimate epistolary contact into a broadly visible event. “Did you ever watch the faces of those whose eyes devour letters just received?” asked Junius Browne. “If you be a skilled physiognomist, you can learn the contents by the reflections above them.” The privacy of the sealed letter evaporated under the gaze of the savvy frequenter of the post office. “Glance at the ladies’ window,” a sensational guide to the Philadelphia post office exhorted readers, so that they might “see that tall female upon whose face you can trace the dark lines of sorrow. . . .” “Watch the politician,” the tour of the postal lobby continued, “by his looks you can read the secret of his heart.”⁴⁶ William Taylor the minister took special care to “mark the countenances and conduct of men as they turned away from the delivery windows” in San Francisco, sharing with his readers such images as that of a forty-niner breaking open a letter, “trembling till black with agonized emotion.”⁴⁷ Descriptions of public displays of intense emotion recur with such frequency, especially in portraits of the San Francisco Post Office during the Gold Rush, as to form something of a postal trope in antebellum American culture. In one typical example appearing in *Harper’s Monthly* in 1857, a postal clerk narrates the story of Mary Martin, a middle-aged woman with an

“honest look” whose daily disappointment at not receiving a letter was so clearly imprinted on her face that the clerk took special notice of her and found her missive, misplaced in a pile of dead letters.

I gave it to her, and she tore it open, read a few lines, screamed, and fell to the floor. I stepped out and aided her to rise, and soon learned the brief, sad story. Her only son had gone West to get work; a letter from him a few weeks ago had told her that he had found a place, and should send her money soon. This letter was in another hand, and to say that her son had sickened and died—in his last hours talking of his mother, and wishing that he might die on her breast. . . . Such scenes as these in the Post-office, in the midst of the business of every-day life and a heartless world, strike on the soul as if there is indeed another world than this of business, and there is but a step out of one into the other; indeed, they often come into contact, as when a mother weeps for a dead son on the floor where cent. per cent. and the price of flour are more thought of than death or love.⁴⁸

The juxtaposition of the mundane and the tragic, filthy lucre and maternal love, on the literal floor of the post office parallels and encodes, of course, the uncomfortable contiguity of men and women.

Popular perceptions and widespread discussions of the urban post office as a site of publicity, promiscuity, and exposure formed part of the crucial cultural context for a remarkable set of changes that took place in America’s post office system during the Civil War period. Highlighted by the introduction in 1863 of free home delivery in America’s largest cities, these changes amounted to nothing less than a radical re-orientation of the place of the urban post office within the growing mail network and a gradual but fundamental transformation of the relationship between postal space and public space.

Already at mid-century, critics of the postal system began to wonder why Americans needed to go to a central post office to send or receive mail. In 1849 Representative John G. Palfrey of Massachusetts questioned the efficiency of such a system, calling his colleagues’ attention to the spectacle of so much wasted “time daily spent . . . in going backwards and forwards on errands to the Post Office.”⁴⁹ For Palfrey and like-minded observers, the call for a broader distribution of mail services was part of the larger project of reforming the post by standardizing its operations, lowering users’ costs, and increasing its use. In this particular cause, as in all the other postal reform initiatives of mid-century, the most tireless and visible advocate was Pliny Miles, America’s counterpart to the famous British postal reformer Rowland Hill. Throughout the

mid-1850s, Miles argued against what he regarded as an antiquated post office system that poorly served the needs of urban users and stunted the growth of the mail network. "Except by the labor of private parties," Miles pointed out in 1857, "we have hardly an improvement or facility for distributing letters in cities to-day that did not exist seventy years ago." In big cities, he maintained, the "legitimate wants of people" require multiple mail deliveries every day and stations for buying stamps or posting letters located "at every one or two hundred yards." Finally, letters ought to arrive at the homes of their intended recipients.⁵⁰

In many respects, Miles's position extended the themes and arguments of the campaign for cheap, uniform postage that he had championed during the previous decade. As he did in the earlier cause, Miles encouraged his countrymen to look to the British example, where intricacy mail was delivered frequently, and users did not have to pay extra to avoid traveling to a central post office. The most striking disparity between American and British use of the mails, Miles noted, lay in the volume of local letters posted in cities. Postal participation was disproportionately urban, but in American cities a relatively small portion of the urban mail was local. As late as 1850, the number of letters posted within London amounted to more than half the total correspondence of the entire United States. Even after the explosive increase in mail use in America in the early 1850s, London's annual output of local letters for 1856 was forty times greater than that of New York, and the difference accounted almost single-handedly for the statistic that the British sent more letters per capita than their American cousins.⁵¹ Just as Americans had followed the British lead in establishing low, uniform rates of postage, reformers argued, adopting such British innovations as outdoor mailboxes and home delivery would improve the post and stimulate greater correspondence.

Numerous continuities linked the new push for postal reform with its predecessor. Both positions relied on the economic rationale that the high fixed costs of postal delivery warranted efforts to increase the volume of mail delivered, and both positions assumed that high or complex postage costs were the principal obstacle to greater participation. As with postage reform, the campaign for home delivery affirmed the benefits of both rate uniformity (patrons should not have to pay additional fees for delivery services or for the private boxes that expedited receipt of one's mail) and government monopoly (the post office should not cede business to private carriers or service providers).⁵² Finally, this next phase of postal reform proved most popular in the Northeast and was clearly identified with urban, commercial interests.

At the same time, Miles's attack on the central post office system introduced a conceptual innovation in postal reform. In arguing for more frequent delivery within cities, Miles sought to break the familiar identity between a city as a community of postal users and its central post office as a single, irreducible unit of postal exchange. Only user demand and letter volume should determine delivery schedules, he maintained. If mail traveled three times a day between New York and Boston and once a day between New Orleans and Charleston, then within large cities the rate of frequency should be six to twelve times every day. The post should connect users, in Miles's view, not incorporated localities.⁵³

The significance of this paradigm shift was not trivial. Whereas the United States postal system had been initially designed to facilitate long-distance news transmission among a dispersed populace—in part to encourage popular involvement with politics while avoiding urbanization—by mid-century reformers were arguing for a postal system in which distance was irrelevant and a dispersed citizenry was not essential for the survival of a republic. Home delivery appealed to Miles for the same reasons he favored frequent intracity mail runs. Post offices should serve as final delivery points only in rural societies; a truly modern post ought to be adaptable to metropolitan conditions. Labeling the British system *free* home delivery was misleading, he insisted, since it was entirely consistent with the principle of uniform postage to deliver letters without additional charges. A single rate should be assessed for transporting mail from its origin to its terminus, and in “cities and towns [this] means to the door of the person addressed.”⁵⁴ Post offices appear in this model as processing stations rather than as integral sites in a network.

Over a period of several years, the implementation of this alternative vision of the urban post office unfolded somewhat unevenly. During the late 1850s, letter boxes began appearing in city streets in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, supplementing the smattering of tin containers that were placed in bars, hotels, and public buildings. In 1858, Albert Potts received a patent for a mailbox built into a lamppost (see fig. 5), and within the year more than three hundred boxes were attached to lampposts throughout the city of Philadelphia, a development lauded by *Scientific American* for “bringing the Post-office to everyone's door.” Not everyone shared the magazine's enthusiasm for the new boxes. “There is great complaint” about mail security, asserted the *New York Times* in 1860, after that city began adopting the Philadelphia lamppost box. “The lid can be raised, and with pincers letters can be caught and withdrawn,” the paper observed, adding that several individuals had been apprehended for just such a crime.⁵⁵ Boxes were not immediately and



— FIGURE 5 —

ALBERT POTTS LITHOGRAPH OF THE LAMP-POST MAIL BOX.

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, CA. 1859.

universally adopted, and no American city would boast a network of official mail receptacles in the 1860s comparable to London's pillar-box system, which had been in place for years and was probably familiar to many American readers.⁵⁶ Still, a new system was spreading: 574 lamp-post boxes were in place in New York (all below 55th Street) as of 1860, and their contents were emptied and delivered (for a fee of one cent) to the post office or to one of six substations recently established, all within three miles of the central post office. Back in the city of their birth, the boxes were growing in popularity. During a particular quarter in 1864, Philadelphians posted close to three-quarters of a million letters in lampposts. By the 1870s, a guide to life in San Francisco would

declare that “the system of iron postal boxes, placed at convenient intervals throughout the city, is greatly appreciated by the citizens, and is conducted efficiently.”⁵⁷

Outdoor mailboxes on the European model were part of the dismantling of the other box system that foreign observers identified with the American post office: the grids of pigeon holes and locked boxes inside the post office building, which individual patrons rented for their private use. Such boxes were most popular in large cities, but even there only a small percentage of patrons rented them. In the late 1850s approximately 4,200 private boxes were rented at the New York Post Office at a rate of six dollars per year. An average of three persons were served by every rented box, which could be shared (and were often leased by private companies who would then deliver the contents to their clients), but in a city of more than 750,000 inhabitants, this amounted to small though active minority of those who used the post office. The box system came under attack during the 1850s for high rents, excessive restrictions, or preferential treatment, but postmasters had come to rely upon the income they generated and defended private boxes as integral to the post office system. “[T]he box system . . . has been so long in use that it could not be discontinued without great discontent,” New York postmaster John Dix insisted somewhat defensively in 1860, “even if its discontinuance were desirable.”⁵⁸

Throughout the antebellum period, the Post Office had also sponsored letter-carrier service in large cities, charging two cents in additional postage (later reduced to one cent) for patrons who wanted their letters delivered to them.⁵⁹ Coexisting uneasily with the box system, the carrier system never achieved its goal of putting private companies out of the business of delivering mail within cities (in the 1850s, two private firms operating in New York delivered nine times as many letters as the city carriers) and, more importantly, failed to satisfy the complaints of those who bemoaned popular dependence on the central post office building. The vast majority of letters sent and received in America’s largest city were still being deposited and collected at the post office at the time of the Civil War, and a leading congressional critic maintained that the current state of delivery service “furnishes little accommodation to the public.”⁶⁰ Not until 1863 did postal reformers achieve significant progress in their battle against the post office system. In 1863, the Post Office extended Cleveland’s model of home delivery for all patrons, free of charge, in close to fifty large American cities, reducing congestion in the busiest post offices and striking a decisive blow against many of the

private delivery firms that had served businesses and well-to-do patrons for decades.

Congressional sponsors of the new legislative initiative justified the move with many of the same financial and administrative rationales that Pliny Miles had advanced several years earlier, and by 1863 the wartime composition of Congress had muffled the resistance of those who were indifferent to the needs of urbanites and suspicious of the growth of a government bureaucracy. In this sense, free home delivery was in line with other important extensions and standardizations of the role of the federal government that took place during the Civil War, when Democrats from the South were conveniently not serving in Congress. By a vote of 73 to 35 in the House of Representatives, urban Americans were to begin receiving their mail at their homes and offices.⁶¹

Outdoor mailboxes and free delivery expedited the transmission of mail within cities, though not enough for many critics. Outraged complaints about the relative irregularity of intracity mail persisted through the 1860s. “The City mails are particularly deranged,” Junius Browne charged. “You can send a letter to Boston, or Albany, or Chicago, with a tolerable certainty of its reaching its destination some time. But if you mail a missive from your office in Pine or William street to your friend in Grammercy park, or Lexington avenue, or direct a note to your cousin round the corner, the chances of its ever being heard from are slight.” The Reverend L. W. Bacon lodged similar charges in 1868, and even conducted an experiment to demonstrate the inefficiency of postal service within New York. The letters Bacon posted from various post offices and mailboxes in Manhattan and Brooklyn to a downtown address fared better than Browne’s remark suggested (all arrived at their destinations), but several took more than twenty-four hours, an intolerable lag by the author’s standards—and by those of the London post, to which the American system was invariably and invidiously compared.⁶² But if the innovations did not instantly meet the demands of commerce, they certainly reoriented urban mail use away from the central post office and from all that the post office represented and evoked.

From its inception, the appeal of home delivery transcended issues of federal power, administrative uniformity, and postal finance. Supporters of the new reform understood that they were addressing problems of gender relations in urban life as well. In his presentation before the House, Representative John Hutchins of Ohio quoted John Palfrey’s earlier speech in support of delivery, which had cited the needs of “the female of humble condition, [who] is compelled to go to a public place

for the letter she is expecting, and await her turn to inquire for it, amidst the annoyance of a crowd.”⁶³ Such concerns resonated beyond the halls of Congress. For more than a decade, numerous observers had linked the problems of the antebellum post office system to issues of gender. Discussions of post office site selection, for example, frequently reminded readers of the presence of women in public space. A Buffalo site commission argued in 1854 for choosing a location protected from lake winds, out of special concern for “females & children as all must visit the Post office frequently.” A magazine review of the proposed Boston post office in 1858 singled out the convenience of its location for “the ladies, whose accommodation ought to be provided for in establishing a post office.” Business interests might argue for a site closer to the current location in the Merchants’ Exchange, the article conceded, but women “pay a large part of the postal revenue, and have a right to be considered.”⁶⁴

From an alternative perspective, of course, female patrons would be better served by not having to visit the central post office at all. When lamppost mailboxes were introduced, admirers pointed to their particular utility for “the gentler sex,” and a lithograph promoting the new invention features a well-dressed woman depositing mail (see fig. 5). By 1868, when the site for the new Alfred Mullett post office in New York was being debated, *Putnam’s Magazine* pointed out that questions of accessibility were no longer as important. “[S]o long as the Post-Office is not inaccessible,” *Putnam’s* observed, “it cannot long matter whether it is especially convenient of access or not.” The magazine approved of what it accurately saw as an attempt by the postal authorities “to bring about, what ought long ago to have been established, such a system of collection and delivery of mail-matter as will make it unnecessary for any body to go to the Post-Office in New York for his letters and newspapers, as it is, to-day, in London or Paris. In fact, he means to break up the system of box-delivery altogether—has already begun to break it up.”⁶⁵ What was breaking up, or what was being dismantled, was not only a distinctive inconvenience of American postal communication, but also one of the most intensely promiscuous public spaces in nineteenth-century America.

Home delivery helped to allay particular concerns about the kind of public space that men and women entered when they used the mail. Standard recent explanations of the 1863 reform emphasize the centrality of gender troubles at the post office. James Bruns, founding director of the National Postal Museum, argues that private delivery was a “humane reaction” to the “emotional trauma” suffered by women who received

news of the death of loved ones during the Civil War. Rather than subject female patrons and male postal clerks to this discomfiting scene, Bruns implies, the department turned to home delivery.⁶⁶ Though such an interpretation might seem to reconfigure and displace the problem that many male observers had with the promiscuous space of the post office, the importance attributed to intimate war correspondence, to the display of emotions, and to the exposure of women to male scrutiny reflects larger preoccupations in American postal culture during the 1850s and 60s.

To be sure, by switching the site of mail collection from the crowded post office building to the private residence, home delivery raised other concerns about heteroerotic relations that have become familiar subjects of popular humor over the past century. An early expression of anxiety about the entrance of mailmen into domestic spaces appeared on the minstrel stage in a blackface farce published in the mid-1870s but performed earlier. Charles White's *The United States Mail* features Post Office Sam, a black letter carrier wearing a dandyish outfit including "Jockey cap, Yankee trousers, and fancy coat." The plot revolves around a young white woman named Lucy who is anticipating mail from her beau announcing an intended visit. Lucy is concerned that his letter might have been delayed, "as there is no regularity with the carriers now they are all such a stupid set of black apes," and when Post Office Sam arrives with his mailbag, he confirms her worst suspicions, as he turns out to be an illiterate carrier prone to opening letters and stealing their contents. The beau's letter appears from the mailbag, but when the woman reads the note aloud it is loaded with racist mockery of black speech and Sam vows revenge. First he tries to overcharge her for postage due, but is interrupted by the arrival of the letter's author in the flesh. Panicking, she hides Sam in his own mailbag to avoid discovery. When the beau, who trades suspicious accusations with Lucy about having spotted her with another man about town, turns on some music, Sam begins involuntarily to dance inside the bag. He is discovered, a group dance ensues, and in the mix Sam manages to exact some physical revenge on the pompous beau. While feeding northern white audiences the minstrel stage's familiar menu of racist stereotypes, physical comedy, and bawdy burlesque of social norms and pretensions, *The United States Mail* also served up a cautionary reminder that the delivery system could undermine the intimacy and confidentiality of an epistolary overture by inadvertently sending a sexual rival into the home of the addressee.⁶⁷

Concerns about contact between carriers and patrons do not appear to have tempered the enthusiasm of postal reformers for the changes

that were taking place in the urban post office system. Within a year of the 1863 legislation, free home delivery had spread to a total of sixty-six different American cities, and over the next quarter century the total would approach five hundred. By the end of the nineteenth century, free delivery would extend to rural postal users as well, thus completing the slow but steady transformation of the post into a communications network in which the home served as a constitutive address and a primary site of exchange for a majority of users.⁶⁸ In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, however, the growing, bustling post office building was a far more comprehensive metonym for the U.S. mail. It also stood as a monument to a modern, centrifugal, and potentially disorderly world.

By the time of its penetration into the daily experience of most men and women living in the United States, the postal network presented two strikingly different images of human connection. On the one hand, mail communication brought together friends, family, and acquaintances who were physically separated. On the other hand, the system also brought people (often strangers) into physical proximity. These contrasting models of postal contact suggested some of the conflicting implications of the mail for social relations, implications that would be worked out in the new postal culture.