

# Postal cutbacks are not all that new

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The U.S. Postal Service has announced cutbacks in service in order to reduce costs. Most post offices, if not all, will be closed to the public at least part of a day each week, the particular day varying from town to town.

However, this is not the first time the local postmasters have heard from the Federal government in regard to working hours. One such instance occurred nearly a century ago in 1893, motivated then, not by costs but the working hours of letter carriers.

It is unlikely that Chelmsford had any letter carriers in 1893, but the Postmaster General's ruling applied to all post office's that did, and the Lowell Postmaster came under fire from Washington for not complying with regulations.

According to an article in the *Lowell Morning Mail* of Saturday, April 15, 1893, Postmaster Burbank was rebuked for not limiting carrier's to 48 hours per week, with a maximum of eight hours per day as affirmed by the Supreme Court in a test case of the 1888 law brought before the court by a postal employee.

In his own defense, the Lowell postmaster stated that "Our carrier routes were rearranged on August 1, 1892, on a basis of one carrier to every 2500 people. We guaranteed the department at that time that the carriers

## The way It was

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would perform the necessary duties inside the 56 hour (previous) law, as they have done, and in so doing the carriers have been obliged to perform a hard day's work.

"No disposition to shirk their work has been shown by the carriers in the office and it will be impossible for them to cover the territory they now cover in a shorter space of time."

He cited the fact that the Lowell office showed "an immense profit" for the post office department. Additional carriers were requested. He added that, if it becomes necessary to curtail any of the free delivery routes, there would be great dissatisfaction among the residents of the localities.

Dissatisfaction was already in the wind. The same edition of the paper carried a letter to the editor from a customer right down town near where Lowell High School is today. The writer suggested that the "immense profit" of the Lowell post office

might "be explained by the fact that our free delivery is one of the poorest in the country."

"Kirk Street, within three minutes walk of the post office (then located in the Hildreth Building in what is now Kearney Square), has only two deliveries a day — at 10 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. During the afternoon and early morning eight Boston mails arrive..."

"It is a serious inconvenience to wait until 10 a.m. for yesterday's mail, and as affairs are now administered only box holders and merchants on the principal streets profit by the advantage of the many daily Boston mails.

"It is evident that the long suffering public should receive some benefit from the phenomenal profits of the Lowell post office."

The present cutback in service quite conceivably could prompt a translation of the above to modern context as: It is evident that the long suffering public can expect improved service, not cutbacks, from the ever increasing postal rates. At least carriers don't work 56 hours a week.

But that's the way it was back when there were only two mail deliveries a day.

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