

Washington

Route Agent and Railway Post Office Mail

Purpose: This postal history exhibit illustrates the postal markings and routes of United States Post Office mail services via Route Agents (AGT) and Railway Post Offices (RPO). Route agents and RPO clerks were USPO employees in charge of mail on contracted steamboat, railroad, and streetcar routes.

Scope: In the 1850's Olympia was the only "formal" American town on Puget Sound and the first Post Office. Private companies sailing various sized vessels in the freight and passenger business, including small skiffs and sometimes Native American canoes, carried the mail. Every town, village and waterfront float or wharf received service by one or more steamboats. This flotilla of steamboats flourished into the 1930s, known as the "mosquito fleet." As railroads developed, they began carrying the mail across Washington. Railway Post Offices flourished into the mid-1900s. Steamships carried mail from Seattle to Alaska Territory until air freight services were available.

Included are covers and illustrations from the first Route Agent contract of August 7, 1869, through the last day of Railway Post Office service in Washington State, April 30, 1971. Routes are in the order (nominally) of their establishment.

Although Route Agent and RPO mail were a small amount of the total mail nationwide, only the smaller branch line covers are rare. Here the Olympia W.T. to Victoria V.I. and Sehome and Seattle agent routes are rare. Covers from routes connecting larger cities are common; short-lived routes connecting smaller towns are scarcer.

Plan:

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