Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Your freedom is in the mail

On Tuesday February 8, 1825, in New Haven, Conn., a grief-stricken father sat down to write a heartbreaking letter to his son, Samuel Morse, future inventor of Morse code. The letter opened:

"My affectionately beloved son, Mysterious are the ways of Providence. My heart is in pain and deeply sorrowful while I announce to you the sudden and unexpected death of your dear and deservedly loved wife. Her disease proved to be an affection of the heart, incurable had it been known. The shock to the whole family is far beyond, in point of severity, that of any we have ever before felt."

In closing, Morse's father hazarded a guess: "I expect this [letter] will reach you on Saturday, the day after the one we have appointed for the funeral, when you are in Washington a week." But Morse did not learn about his wife's death for two weeks. The painful memory of this experience drove Morse to develop his new system for rapid "far-writing" (telegraphy).

Ten years earlier, the inability to convey information quickly had dire consequences for more than one man and his family. On Dec. 24, 1814, British and American commissioners met in Ghent, Belgium and signed a peace treaty ending the War of 1812. Unaware of this, armies continued fighting in Louisiana. Fifteen days later, Major General Andrew Jackson won a decisive victory in the final battle at New Orleans. The British suffered the loss of two generals and more than 2,000 casualties; 71 American soldiers died.

Reactions to the U.S. postal rate increase that went into effect this week make me wonder if we can ever recover our historical perspective. What wouldn't Samuel Morse and his family or any of those 2,000 men who died needlessly on the Chalmette battleground have given for overnight express mail service or the normal delivery of a regular letter by today's U.S. Postal Service? And ask any American military veteran what letters meant to him or her while overseas. I know. I've read the letters my father kept from World War II and studied letters home from Vietnam.

It now costs 37 cents for any citizen or non-citizen of the United States, of any race, creed or color, under God or not, to send a secure, private letter to anyone else in our vast country. Drop it in a mailbox in Hamshire, and it will be delivered to a mailbox in Anchorage in three to five days for 37 cents. To send the same letter across Germany would cost 55 cents. The democratic efficiency of our system is mind-boggling. Its workings would surely tickle the inventive fancy of the first postmaster appointed by the Continental Congress on July 26, 1775, Benjamin Franklin.

One of the first questions taken up by the 13 American colonies when they contemplated their war of independence was how to deliver the mail. The delegates to the Continental Congress knew what Cesare Marchetti stresses in "Cities and Their Vital Systems" (1988): "Ancient empires never became larger than an area allowing 15-day mail service from the capital." Herodotus explains that the sprawling Persian empire in the 5th century B.C. required a secure infrastructure for rapid communication of official correspondence. The Persian messenger service stretched along a specially built road network from modern Iran to the western coast of Turkey: "Along the road a day apart are stationed men and horses, whom neither snow nor rain nor heat nor night prevents from covering their route as quickly as they can."

The Persian and other ancient imperial systems were reserved for official or elite correspondence. The common man was left out. But Franklin's democratic vision is still true for all of us. For 37 cents, we can securely and privately convey our personal thoughts and emotions to anyone in this great land in our very own handwriting. This is a true marvel that might even strike Herodotus speechless.

When you see your mail carrier or talk to your mail clerk, give them your three cents worth. Thank them on behalf of Ben Franklin.

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