

County Wide R.F.D. Began in 1899"

Carroll County Times article for 19 December 1999

By Jay A. Graybeal

Tomorrow will be the Centennial of the nation's first county wide rural free delivery system. Carroll County was selected due to the efforts of Westminster Post Office employee Edwin W. Shriver. Not surprisingly, the experiment drew a number of dignitaries and received extensive coverage in the local press. Since then R.F.D. has been a popular local history topic. Historical Society member Howard Lawton Knight wrote about the beginnings in 1954:

"FIRST R. F. D.

Carroll County is justly proud of its early association with Rural Free Delivery. Most of us know something of its history. However, there is much about it that is not so generally understood, and many do not realize how early R. F. D. really began to operate in this county.

Everyone visiting the [former] Post-Office or passing along [Westminster's] Main street has probably seen the marker on the corner at Longwell Avenue. As this marker states, 'the first complete county Rural Free Delivery Service in the United States was inaugurated by the Post-Office Department on December 20, 1899, covering the whole of Carroll county and small parts of adjacent county and small parts of adjacent counties with Westminster as the central distribution point.'

Readers of the Carroll Record for February 11 also know of a second claim to distinction. This was the conception and construction locally of the special U.S. Postal Wagon. This went into use on Easter Monday, April 3, 1899, and operated for over eight months before three other wagons and about forty other carriers were added and the system became county-wide. Although its unique service of a 'post office on wheels' was eventually taken over by the regular carriers, it was a most spectacular development and attracted widespread attention. These happenings on 1899 are still relatively familiar, but they do not constitute the beginnings of R. F. D. in Carroll county. It had already been in operation for over two years. Back in 1896 funds appropriated by Congress became available, and the Post Office Department selected 44 localities in 29 States as experimental 'guinea pigs.' The first three of these were in West Virginia, established on October 1st, 1896, but only fourteen days later a second group was set up. This included two localities in Indiana, four in Ohio, and one each in Missouri and Maryland. The Maryland route was in Carroll county and operated from Westminster.

In view of the pioneer aspects of the venture and the wide publicity deservedly given to later developments, it seems strange that so little is known about what went on between 1896 and 1899. Available files of the Democratic Advocate and the American Sentinel, the two Westminster weeklies of the period, give no indication of any local fanfare or even of much interest. No mention on the matter was found in either journal until July 3, 1897, when the Advocate stated that Postmaster Boyle, of Westminster had been notified that the R.F.D. system, 'which had been in operation for several months' would be continued. 'The farmers are much pleased with the free delivery.'

In March 1898, the Sentinel referred to a report to Congress by the Postmaster General on the experimental R.F.D., including the service in the county adjacent to Westminster, still the only locality in the State being tried. Four carriers at the annual compensation of \$250; each were employed with an area covered of 16 miles. The number of pieces of mail delivered for the previous year was 6,831.

A September note in the same journal reported that 'inspection of the RFD section revealed great satisfaction in the district of Carroll county where it has been in operation, and that other districts are anxious to have the service.' Eventually, of course, these desires found fruition in the great expansion on 1899.

The limited references to the project are perhaps explainable by the small area affected and its slight impact on Westminster and the county as a whole. Possibly an examination of other county and outside publications would bring more details. Personal recollections should also still be obtainable. In view of the scarcity of available material, the Historical Society of Carroll county would appreciate further data for the 1896-1899 period.

One angle which excites curiosity is as to why Maryland and Carroll county received such early priority for the experiment. A letter written in 1939 by the Taneytown resident attributes the original R. F. D. concept to Mr. A. W. Machen, subsequently Superintendent of R. F. D. for many years, and states that Mr. Machen whose wife was a Miss Baumgartner of Westminster, had spent much time in the county and had become familiar with its many advantages.

Another theory as to the selection of Maryland rest on the idea that some restiveness was developing within the State over the action of the Post Office Department in consolidating some small post offices with those of nearby large cities to the alleged detriment of the service. It may have been thought that a free delivery service to rural areas would be a possible alleviation. This is purely speculation, but it is a fact that Senator Gorman, Maryland had just vigorously criticized the Department for its consolidations, particularly one that reduced the office at Elicott City to a substation of Baltimore.

Some apprehension of what was going on was felt in Carroll county, and on May 2, 1896, the Advocate, came out with an editorial 'Don't Touch Westminster.' In this the expansive activities of the Baltimore post-master were described. 'He may', it was said, 'Reach for Westminster next and make it a substation with an \$600 clerk in charge. That is not desired. Westminster, a live progressive town, that has excellent water-works, electric light and gas system, an ice factory, the best in the State, the best and most complete telephone system, the best College, a Theological Seminary, the prettiest summer resort on the line of the Western Maryland Railway, handsome churches and fine residences, with a good post office and a private rapid-carrier system, cannot afford to be made a substation of a city that fiddle-faddled for two years over an international exposition, then ignominiously abandoned the project. If Westminster is to be made a substation, hitch us to Atlanta, Georgia, or some other live town.'

Needless to say, these forebodings never materialized. On the contrary Westminster soon became the distributing point for delivery system which resulted in the closing of many fourth-class offices. The direct service which R.F.D. provided, however, also brought compensations and eventual acceptance."

Despite misgivings and some downright hostility, Rural Free Delivery caught on in Carroll. Later research revealed the leading role that Edwin Shriver had played and that he had later helped design routes in other states.

Photo caption: R.F.D. carrier Philetus R. Haight posed with his decorated mail wagon in December 1899. Mr. Haight carried the mail from Sykesville on the first day of county wide delivery, December 20, 1899. Historical Society of Carroll County, gift of Anna Haight Brown.