

Isaiah Thomas – Patriot Printer

Historic Transportation and Communication

Introduction

Life in Isaiah Thomas's time was vastly different from today. The ways in which people traveled from place to place and the way that they communicated with one another had remained the same for hundreds, even thousands of years. The most common form of transportation was walking. Everyone walked almost everywhere they wanted to go. If you had to travel a longer distance you might go by horseback or by a wagon pulled by horses or cattle, or by canoe or boat to cross a lake or navigate a river.

Travel was very time-consuming, but people lived a less hurried lifestyle in the late eighteenth century. Part of the adventure of travel included meeting people along your route. You could visit with your neighbor as you walked by his house, stop to inquire from strangers you would meet along the way about the condition of the road ahead, or perhaps hitch a ride from a farmer who was delivering a wagon of hay to the farm down the road. Usually this was done in an unhurried way as you traveled from one destination to another.

Communication was also unhurried. Talking face to face was the primary means of communication. There was no telegraph, telephone, television, or internet. News was gathered from neighbors, the merchant who owned the shop in town, the tavern keeper and the guests at the tavern, travelers passing through town, the minister, and a variety of other personal sources. Letters were sent and received, but there was no FedEx and certainly no email. Newspapers and broadsides were two of the major forms of communication during colonial times. People also relied on pamphlets and books for information.

Transportation - Land

During Thomas's lifetime there were no train stations, superhighways, or airports. The transportation system consisted of a network of roads that, by today's standards, would be considered "poor" – hardly more than broad paths through the forest. In wet areas they were deeply rutted with large muddy holes, and in dry areas the surface was often covered by a deep powder of fine dust.¹ In areas prone to mud and swampy conditions logs were laid across the road surface to create "corduroy roads", since the roads looked like the fabric of

the same name. The corduroy roads provided a very rough ride as a wagon or coach passed across the uneven logs. One traveler commented that passengers riding in a coach were rattled around “like peas in a gourd,” but even this was an improvement over muddy roads and cart paths.²

Road building in the early days was the responsibility of the community. The citizens gathered in a carnival atmosphere to clear trees, broaden paths, and smooth the land to create what would become a well-traveled road. Often these roads followed the pathways originally created years earlier by the Indians. The Indians’ network of paths and trails was highly developed and consisted of an intricate web that connected villages, hunting areas, and trading centers. These overland roads also incorporated streams and rivers, creating a massive transportation network that existed years before colonists began constructing roads.

After the roads were built, a debate would begin over who was responsible for their upkeep. The states did not see road maintenance as their responsibility. In fact, in many regions of the country people felt that the federal government should take care of the roads. In 1806 the federal government recognized the need for improved roads in the expanding nation, and approved funding for the National Road. This road originally stretched from Cumberland, Maryland to Wheeling in western Virginia. The road was so successful that it was continued through Ohio and Indiana, and into Illinois where it was completed in 1838. The National Road made it much easier for settlers to move westward and for goods to be transported in both directions. Because of the improved quality of this route, the National Road was well traveled.

Most Americans realized the need for improved transportation systems if the country was to continue to grow and develop economically. One way this was achieved was through building turnpikes, which were financed almost entirely by corporations. Companies were granted charters and then sold stock in order to raise money to pay for building the roads. Like many merchant capitalists of his day, Isaiah Thomas was a leader in organizing and financing such new ventures. He bought stock in many turnpike corporations, including the Boston-Worcester Turnpike Company, and he was elected to serve on the company’s board

1. George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution: 1815-1860*, vol. 4, *The Economic History of the United States* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1951), 15.

2. J.L. Ringwalt, *Development of Transportation Systems in the United States* (Philadelphia: J.L. Ringwalt, Railroad World Offices, 1888), 26.

of directors.³ He realized the important role these new roads would play in the distribution of goods, including his newspapers, books, and other printed materials.

The most active period of turnpike building in New England came in the early 1800s. Typically, turnpikes were built over routes where water transportation was not available, so the roads usually ran in an east-west direction. Turnpikes were generally built on a bed of gravel topped by smooth stones. This construction allowed water to easily drain off of the road's surface, minimizing the mud and muck that would slow a wagon or coach. Every few miles along the road a pike (pole) would block the road. The traveler who wished to pass would pay the pike keeper a toll, and the pole would be turned aside so the traveler could pass. Hence, the term "turnpike".

This system worked well during daylight hours when the pikes were attended by keepers, but sometimes teamsters (men driving the teams of horses and wagons) would wait until the evening when the pikes were unmanned, and sneak through without paying the toll. Many "shunpikes", which were roads that led around the turnpikes, also developed allowing travelers to bypass the tolls.

A wide variety of travelers used the new roads and turnpikes. In addition to the teamsters who were transporting goods to market, there were many people on horseback and many more who traveled by stagecoach. Stagecoaches were considered a vast improvement over the modes of transportation previously used. The structure of a stagecoach was lighter than that of a wagon, and provided an enclosed compartment for the passengers. Stagecoaches were also equipped with springs that made for a more comfortable ride for the passengers, as well as the driver. One of the most popular styles of coach was manufactured at the Concord Coach Company, located in Concord, Massachusetts.

Stagecoaches averaged about 6 to 8 miles an hour traveling over a good road. In 1800, a trip from Boston to New York would take approximately 74 hours and would include overnight stops in three cities, including Worcester. In 1825, owing to improvements in the roads, the same trip would take only 41 hours and would include just one overnight stop. In the years between 1815 and 1819, travel via stagecoach cost around seven cents a mile.

3. Isaiah Thomas Papers, American Antiquarian Society Collection, Boston-Worcester Turnpike certificates, folder 2, box 14.

By the early 1830s, stagecoach rates on the Boston-Worcester Turnpike were five cents a mile.⁴ Stagecoaches also carried letters and were an integral part of the postal system.

Transportation – Water

The Indians had long recognized the importance of water routes for transportation and communication. They used the rivers and streams to convey people, goods, and information from place to place. It was natural for the colonists to also rely on water, whether oceans or rivers, for transportation and communication. In the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, life in America was oriented toward the sea. This is illustrated by the fact that every primary seaport of that time published a newspaper. The papers printed in Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans all contained news of foreign markets, shipping concerns, and political events.⁵ The colonists continued to maintain connections to England and other European destinations during their fight for independence, and afterwards. News from foreign ports continued to capture the interest of Americans, for personal as well as economic reasons.

Naturally, water remained vital to the transportation of both goods and people. Shipping in both directions across the Atlantic continued to flourish. As the country grew and people continued to move westward, southbound river routes became more important in the scheme of transportation. Rivers were a vital link between cities and towns in the east and those developing in the south and west. River travel was cheap, comfortable, and relatively fast. Flatboats and rafts were used to float cargoes downstream. However, since they could not make the trip back upriver against the current, once the goods were delivered the rafts were often destroyed and sold for firewood at the port. Keelboats had the capacity to travel against the current using a rudder, but even they lacked the speed necessary to transport goods quickly against a strong current. People sensed the need to introduce new ways to use

4. Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution*, 146.

5. *Ibid.*, 10.

rivers to get goods to market.

In the late 1780s, John Fitch invented a boat that used steam power to propel it through the water. In 1807, Robert Fulton launched the *Clermont*, a steamboat that carried passengers as well as cargo along the Hudson River. This steam power revolutionized transportation because it allowed large quantities of people and cargo to travel efficiently on rivers. Improvements in design, including the introduction of a long shallow hull, made steamboats more effective as they could travel in lower water levels during the summer months and could navigate shallow rivers more easily. Steamboat travel could be dangerous though, and fires and explosions disrupted service along the rivers. But these threats did not hamper the traveling public's enthusiasm for steamboats and the popularity of this mode of transportation continued to grow.

America's fascination with water transportation also led to the development of the canal system. Canals were built by digging large, interconnected ditches and then filling them with water. These manmade waterways utilized many new tools and machines that made the job of digging easier. The first canals in America were only a few miles long. These consisted of a waterway with a towpath alongside it for draft animals, such as horses, donkeys, mules, cows, or oxen, to pull barges and boats through the canal.

The Erie Canal was designed to connect the Great Lakes with the Mohawk and Hudson rivers. It was financed in part by the state of New York. Construction of the Erie Canal began in 1817 and was completed in 1825. It ran between the eastern city of Albany, located on the Hudson, and the city of Buffalo, on Lake Erie. This canal would allow farmers in the Midwest to transport their goods all the way to the port of New York City, thus providing them with a more economical route to ship their goods than the alternative of hauling overland.

The people of Worcester were attracted to this economical way to transport goods for many of the same reasons as folks in New York state and beyond. One writer noted that the "area around Worcester, Massachusetts, though comprising good farming land, failed to develop rapidly because produce had to bear the heavy expense of overland haul to the Boston market."⁶ To correct this situation, a plan was devised to build a waterway

6. Ibid., 37.

linking Worcester to Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. A charter was granted by the state of Massachusetts for the Blackstone Canal Company in March of 1823. Rhode Island followed with its own charter a month later.

Excavation of the canal began in Rhode Island in 1824, and at the northern terminal point at Thomas Street in Worcester in 1826. Much of the work on the Blackstone Canal was done by Irish laborers, who came to the United States in search of work on various canal and railroad projects. The first boat to arrive in Worcester via the Blackstone Canal was named the *Lady Carrington*. She arrived in the city on October 7, 1828 and carried a cargo of slate and grain.⁷ Isaiah Thomas was among the crowd that greeted the boat at the Thomas Street terminal.⁸

The Blackstone Canal was successful in providing Worcester with an economical alternative to shipping overland into the port of Boston. For several years the canal prospered, allowing farmers and manufacturers to ship goods quickly and cheaply (canal boats averaged between two to five miles an hour).⁹ But even this new form of transportation had its drawbacks. Ice formed on the canal in the winter, making passage almost impossible, while water levels frequently dropped in the summer, causing service to stop. Canal companies were also notorious for not maintaining their canals, so many fell into disrepair. The Blackstone Canal, suffering from all of these problems, was finally forced to close. The last toll was collected in November 1848, and the next year the property was sold at auction.¹⁰

Transportation – Railroad

As the canals were declining, another form of transportation was quickly growing in popularity. Railroads had been introduced in England early in the 1800s. These early railroads consisted of cars pulled by mules or horses (hence, the automotive term “horsepower”) along wooden rails topped with iron strips. The trend gained momentum in

7. Charles Nutt, *History of Worcester and Its People*, vol., 1 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1919) 981.

8. Thomas diary, 7 October 1828, Isaiah Thomas Papers, AAS collection.

9. Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution*, 142.

10 Nutt, *History of Worcester*, 981.

this country in the early 1820s with the introduction of “iron horses.” These steam-operated engines clamored through the towns and countryside at a speed of almost 30 miles an hour. The United States could invest in railroads because land was plentiful and cheap. Funding came from private companies as well as state governments. Improvements in the engines and rails led to a boom in the building and usage of railroads. More goods could be shipped quickly and economically. “Landlocked” cities depended on the railroads to open up markets and provide access to new areas of the country that were previously inaccessible. The residents of Worcester wanted to take advantage of this new form of transportation and chartered the first railroad from Boston to Worcester in 1831.

Communication - Water

In addition to witnessing the many changes in the transportation systems of the United States during his lifetime, Isaiah Thomas also saw many changes in the ways people communicate with one another. Primarily, people communicated over long distances by letter. Ship captains would hang up a bag in a town’s tavern prior to setting sail for Europe, and folks would deposit letters that they wished to send into the bag. The same process was followed in Europe as shipmasters sailing for America would also transport letters across the ocean. The customary fee was a penny per letter, and twopence for a parcel. When ships came into port, people would go on board to inquire about any mail they were expecting. All the letters not collected onboard the ship would then be deposited on the table of a coffeehouse near the wharf where anyone was free to examine or take them. If someone was going into town, he would pick up not only his mail but that of his neighbor as well. If a letter was not claimed within a few days, it was often left at the house of the town’s minister or magistrate, who would be responsible for locating the addressee and delivering the letter.¹¹

Communication – Land

Messengers also carried mail. This service continued long after post offices were established because sending correspondence via personal messengers was often less costly

11. Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Post Bags: The Story of the Sending of a Letter in Ancient and Modern Times* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1928) 226.

than the government postal system. Friendly Indians and Indian servants were often the best personal messengers because they knew the land, had speed and endurance, and were intelligent and faithful.¹²

Parliament attempted to regulate the postal system in all of its dominions by passing a Post Office Act in 1711. But this had little effect on the delivery of mail in the colonies, where service was expensive, slow, and unreliable. For example, mail going eastbound from Philadelphia left early Friday morning and went through Burlington, New Jersey, and Perth Amboy before reaching New York City on Saturday evening. There the letters destined for New England remained, until the post rider headed for Boston on Monday morning.¹³

A town's post office became the clearinghouse for many types of information. The postmaster held a respected and powerful place in the community. People reported lost and found items to him, including runaway slaves and stolen livestock. It is not surprising that the post offices and the press had such a strong relationship in the early days. Many printers were also postmasters. The post office provided information that the printers used in their newspapers, and in turn, the post office provided distribution of the newspapers to the public. This "intimate association" of the post and the press was noted in symbolic ways as well as tangible means of expression. Often the newspapers' nameplates would include a woodcut of a post rider and the word "post" would be incorporated in the title of the newspaper. Hence, the names of newspapers such as "The Washington Post".¹⁴

Post riders were an important component of the postal system. They were the mail carriers of the day, and often delivered the mail directly to the addressee rather than taking it to the post office. The post rider was a picturesque and often romanticized figure in colonial life. He spent his days on horseback riding over lonely and often perilous roads through all kind of weather. As he entered a village at a hard gallop, he would note his arrival with a blast from a brass trumpet that hung over his saddle horn. This hailed the arrival of the long expected mail, an event of great importance.¹⁵

12. Ibid, 232.

13. Ibid., 244.

14. Richard B. Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700-1860s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 16.

15. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan, tenth edition, 1972), 61.

The riders also performed errands for their clients as they passed along their route, charging a fee for their services. The riders considered this their due, as their small postal salaries were “decidedly insufficient as a means of livelihood.”¹⁶ Many times other people would ride along with the post riders for protection or for company. Sometimes this would slow the progress of the riders, yet they remained dedicated to delivering the mail, no matter how long the journey would take. In 1717, it was reported that a letter would travel from Boston to Williamsburg, Virginia, in four weeks, except in the winter months when it would take twice as long.¹⁷ We can be sure that postal service was appreciated, no matter how long delivery would take.

In 1743, Benjamin Franklin, who was also a printer, was appointed Postmaster-General. He made many improvements in the system, including the laying out of new and shorter routes. He set milestones along the routes to aid riders and the general public, and he increased the number of riders on busy routes. Another of his mandates was the admittance of newspapers to the mail service, which had heretofore been illegal. Under Franklin’s watch, the fee for shipping newspapers through the mail was set at ninepence a year for distances of less than fifty miles, or one shilling sixpence for up to one hundred miles. Greater distances were charged proportional rates.¹⁸

Accurate communication was vital at both the battlefield and the home front. The patriots in Massachusetts set up committees of correspondence prior to the beginning of the war to keep citizens informed. Each community appointed people who were responsible for relaying information to, and exchanging information with, others loyal to the patriots’ cause. These committees of correspondence were so effective that the practice spread throughout the colonies. During the Revolution, military communications were carried through independent teams of post riders established by commanders Green and Washington.¹⁹

Other changes occurred in the postal system over the next forty years. In 1785, post offices began contracting with stagecoach proprietors to carry mail on certain north-south postal routes. The Post Office Act of 1792 shaped the United States postal service in

16. Harlow, *Old Post Bags*, 247.

17. *Ibid.*, 248.

18. *Ibid.*, 256.

19. Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System From Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 27.

three ways:

1. The act allowed newspapers to be delivered by mail under a favorable status, hastening the rapid expansion of the press.
2. The act prohibited public officers from using their control over the means of communication as a surveillance technique.
3. The act established a set of procedures that sped the rapid growth of the postal network, from the Atlantic to the trans-Appalachian west.²⁰

The Postal Act of 1792 also allowed printers to continue a practice called “exchanging papers” that predated the Revolution. This permitted printers to send copies of newspapers through the mail to one another, which provided them with additional information from other sources that they were free to include in their own papers. News was, after all, a perishable commodity, one that must travel quickly to stay fresh. A one-penny fee was charged if the paper traveled fewer than one hundred miles, and 1½ cents for greater distances.²¹ Printers could continue printing the local news of their community, and could also inform their readers of events happening in the next county, the next state, or in Europe.

Post riders were the perfect mode of transportation for the news. In addition to the saddlebags used to carry their personal items, they traveled with a special satchel mounted on their horse’s rump called the “official portmanteau”, a locked bag that could only be opened by an official of the postal service. This feature was added in response to the flood of complaints from people whose mail had been opened and read prior to reaching the addressee.

In addition to newspapers, the postal system carried magazines and public documents that described the proceedings of Congress and the central government. Congressmen could send newspapers through the mail in order to keep their constituencies informed. The American public was hungry for news concerning their new government and the country at large. Lacking telegraph, radio, and television communication, the newspapers and magazines were the primary means of informing the people of its progress as a new and expanding nation.

20. *Ibid.*, 31.

21. *Ibid.*, 38.

Isaiah Thomas must have greeted the Post Office Act of 1792 with satisfaction. He had been appointed postmaster for Worcester by the Provincial Congress in May of 1775. His association with the printing business no doubt made him the perfect candidate for that office. In November 1775, the *Spy* announced the establishment of the United States postal route, consisting of one mail eastbound and one mail westbound each week.²² Thomas was once again witnessing historic times in the life of the nation. He would hold the office of postmaster until the Jefferson administration replaced him with one of its own supporters.

Isaiah Thomas lived during one of the most exciting eras of this country's history. Some of the dramatic social changes he witnessed were the development of new modes of transportation and communication. From boyhood, he watched as the nation pushed westward with new and improved roads, turnpikes, and a broad system of canals. As he matured he saw steam harnessed to power engines, enabling steamboats and the railroads to move goods and passengers at unbelievable speeds across a growing nation. He utilized these new transportation systems to move his newspapers, books, and other printed materials to markets in other areas of the new nation.

Thomas was part of the new communication explosion as he printed and sold newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, sheet music, Bibles, books, and more. He recognized the power of the printed word to persuade, praise and publicize. Working with other community and national leaders, he propelled Worcester into the new marketplace, and helped to launch the city on a path of economic and cultural growth that was unparalleled in its history.

22. Clifford K. Shipton, *Isaiah Thomas, printer, Patriot, and Philanthropist, 1749-1831* (Rochester, NY: The Printing House of Leo Hart, 1948), 35-36.