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Chapter 1: Introduction

A hallmark of the modern society is continuous technological advances. The positive influences of a technology based society are numerous; the ease of communication, access to information, more simplistic ways of performing previously difficult tasks, and more methods of entertainment are all examples of this. However, despite those positive effects, the technological era has brought about a number of more negative implications. Of all of the negative implications, few are greater than the effects that technology has had on the United States Postal Service. The advent of modern technology has led to a crisis in the Postal Service (USPS). The USPS website indicates that between the years 2006 and 2012 the amount of regular mail that was sent out dropped by 53.1 million pieces. First class mail has dropped in half, and in person customer visits have dropped by nearly 300,000. This significant decrease in the most typical of USPS service has had a devastating effect on their profits. Americans are finding alternative solutions for the services that they previously had relied on the USPS to perform.¹

Why are people not using the postal service in the same manner that they had previously? Primarily, contemporary society is much more likely to send a text or an e-mail than a handwritten letter. Technology has made communication much simpler and has added a sense of instance gratification that was previously unavailable. Cell phones have been in

existence for quite some time, but only recently have they become largely universal for nearly all segments of society. In fact, in 2011 it was estimated that there were 327.6 million active mobile devices in the United States. This number is more than the entire population of the country. These devices include tablets, smart phones, and wireless cards. In 2010, 1.138 trillion texts were sent in the United States. In addition to that, bills, which used to be exclusively sent through the postal service, are now typically paid online or through direct deposit. Very few people get their newspapers and magazines in the mail when the information within these publication is so easily accessed on the Internet.²

With decidedly less revenue being brought in, the Postal Service has begun to make adjustments to compensate for the loss in income. Primarily, the Postal Service has attempted to adjust their costs and their services to reflect the decrease in revenue. Stamp prices have risen nearly ten cents over the past two years. Office hours have been shortened, the cost of certain services have increased, and other services, such as Priority Mail boxes, have been enacted to pull in potential customers. These efforts have helped in some circumstances, but they have not completely alleviated the problem. In the past six years over 1,500 post offices have closed.

This then begs the question, why is this the fact that historic post office buildings are being threatened an issue that preservationists should advocate for? To begin with, the Postal Service played a huge and crucial role in the development of the United States. Chapter 1

discusses this fact in much greater detail. In the days of the early Republic, during the foundation of the country, the Postal Service served as a hub for information. Without the Postal Service it is arguable that the country would have developed in a drastically different manner. Prior to Samuel Morse’s invention of the telegraph in the late eighteenth century it was often the fastest and the most reliable method of communication. Even in recent years post office buildings are significant places of interaction for towns. This especially true in rural areas. The historic nature of these buildings is only confirmed by the approximately 998 post offices listed on the Department of the Interior’s National Register of Historic Places.³

Another reason for the preservation of historic post office buildings is what they meant for the town in which they were located. Not only were they places of significant interaction, but they were also a physical representation of the government in local communities. They are the most common form of Federal government buildings in the nation.⁴ Also, post offices are frequently the most significant examples of an architectural style in their respective town. This is especially true when the post offices are located in more rural locations. Some were designed in the classical style to signify the dominance of democracy and the authority of the government. Others were designed in the popular style of the time.⁵

⁵ Ibid.
In 2012 the National Trust for Historic Preservation named America’s post office buildings to their list of the country’s most endangered historic buildings. Reality is that the post office cannot sustain their current level of operation. Unless it can find a way to keep up with current technology more post offices will have to close to keep up with the steady loss in income and ballooning USPS debt. It should be a priority of preservationists to find creative solutions for these newly abandoned, historic post office buildings that will keep them from demolition. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the effects that the postal crisis has had on historic post office buildings, and then to investigate and offer suggestions for appropriate new uses for struggling or abandoned historic post offices.  

This was done through three primary ways. First, the historic significance of the postal service was established. Why was the postal service founded, and what long lasting effects did it have on America? Once the significance was established then several successful rehabilitated post offices were chosen and examined as case studies. What did these adaptive reuse projects have in common? Why were they successful? Would these projects have been successful elsewhere, or was their success contingent upon their community? What could have been done to make this project even more successful? Finally, when looking at these case studies, what were some specific guidelines and suggestions that will help in future post office rehabilitation projects?

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6 Ibid.
Chapter 2: A History of the Postal Service

A postal service has been the hallmark of a civilized society throughout written history. In order to establish the significance of the United States postal service it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of the historic background of the rise and decline of the system. History has shown us that civilizations tend to develop some form of a postal service to correspond with those at a distance. Most civilizations had a very basic method of delivering correspondence. The only places that were capable of producing something more complex were the larger, more powerful empires such as Persia or Rome. This was because they had the financial capabilities and manpower necessary to accomplish this daunting task. There was also a greater demand for a postal service in the larger empires because they had a much greater population to serve, and a greater percentage of their population was literate. Their cultures depended upon a reliable form of communication to thrive.7

Like with Persia and Rome, the United States certainly had the means and the necessary consumers for a more elaborate postal services. Prior to the start of the Revolutionary War the postal service in the colonies was an extension of the British Royal Postal Service. Throughout the early years of the British occupation of the colonies the system worked fairly well, but as more discontent spread the quality of the items mail contained more items that reflected negatively on the crown. This caused the British Postal Service to become more fastidious in the items that they chose to transport. To make up for this gap in service, private businesses

sprung up to transport communications; these private businesses were especially used to transport those items that were anti-British in nature.\textsuperscript{8}

On July 26, 1775 the Second Continental Congress seized control of the postal service. The legislative branch of the federal government retained the power to create post offices with the adoption of the Constitution in 1787. This can be found in Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution. Article 1 discusses the powers of the Legislature.\textsuperscript{9} “Congress shall have the power to establish post offices and post-roads.” This also gave the Postmaster General a position in the Presidential Cabinet.\textsuperscript{10}

The Second Continental Congress decided to appoint Benjamin Franklin as the first Postmaster General. Prior to the discontent in the colonies the British postal service worked fairly well, so in its beginnings the American postal system was modeled after it. Prior to 1970 the United States Postal Services was known as the Post Office Department. The biggest difference between the pre-Revolution postal service, the postal service during the Revolution, and the post-Revolution Post Office Department were the segments of the population for which their services were targeted.\textsuperscript{11}

Before the Revolution the primarily consumers of the postal service were merchants who specialized in overseas trade. Understandably, overseas trade died down significantly during the Revolutionary War; this was primarily because much of their business was with

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Scheele, 10-25.
Britain or other British colonies.\textsuperscript{12} During the war the primary task of the postal service became official military communications. Their task was to maintain a steady stream of reliable and efficient communications between Congress and those on the battle field. Civilian communications became secondary to this important task. After the Revolution it became the task of the United States Postal Department to serve the American people.

One of the most impressive feats of the Post Office Department was its rapid rate of expansion. In 1788, just one year after the ratification on the Constitution, there were only sixty-nine post offices. These post offices were exclusively located in major urban areas along the East Coast. This did little to serve the American people at large. During the Revolution the goal was to obtain liberty from Great Britain, but once that was achieved what was the country left with? The founding fathers knew that in order to preserve the freedom that they had fought for they would have to have a hand in shaping the identity of the new nation. The must help form the “principals, morals, and manners of our citizens to our republican forms of government.”\textsuperscript{13}

The drafters of the Constitution had declared that the federal government was to recognize the sovereignty of the American people. They were to have a say in the way that the government was run. The question was how to best accomplish this. Many believed that this could be accomplished and liberty could be preserved only if the people had the most up to date information. Elbridge Gerry, American statesman and vice president, was perhaps one of

\textsuperscript{12} John, ibid.  
\textsuperscript{13} John, 15-30.
the most stanch proponents to this theory.\textsuperscript{14} Very few opposed this opinion. Those who did oppose it did so because they believed that this would make it fairly simple for the government to spread propaganda or censor the mail, like Great Britain had begun to do just prior to the start of the Revolution. Despite some reservations, it was largely agreed upon that the United States Postal Department needed to expand.\textsuperscript{15}

This expansion was rapid. The Postal Department quickly covered nearly every part of the country. Between 1788 and 1845 the number of post offices in the United States grew from sixty-nine to over fourteen thousand.\textsuperscript{16} The Postal Department also grew as a business. 1790 was the Department’s first year of operation under the Constitution; the revenue brought in by the Postal Department in 1790 was roughly $37,000. Just fifty five years later, in 1845, that revenue had swollen to $4,289,842. One thing that greatly aided this task was continuous technological advancements. On July 3, 1788 construction began for the first major east-west postal route. Before this routes traveled north-south along the Atlantic Ocean. This east-west postal route was a two hundred and fifty mile line between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{17}

During this period of rapid growth Post Office Department policy began to change. As stated in a previous paragraph, it was now that goal of the department to meet the needs of the public. The end of the war meant that it was no longer needed to serve the military or to be solely a source of revenue. The people were the most crucial consumers in regards to the postal service. This rapid growth occurred because there was a greater demand for the postal

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 15-50.
\textsuperscript{16} Scheele, ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} John, ibid.
service. This rapid growth does not only refer to the growth of the postal service, but also to the growth of the county. In 1803 President Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory, more than doubling the size of the country. The postal service had to grow rapidly to take into account this dramatic increase in territory to cover.\textsuperscript{18}

This growth led to a need for increased service and greater innovation to make possible the continuation of the Post Office Department. The invention and popularization of the steamboat and railroad made the delivery of mail much simpler and easier to make widespread. There were other small inventions that made the letter process simpler. One invention were postmarking hand stampers. These hand stampers made post marks much more legible. They were also an incredible time saver. Using a stamp greatly simplified the task of marking letters for delivery.\textsuperscript{19}

As the Post Office Department expanded new services were added to ease the process of using the post office. In 1847 the first adhesive stamps were introduced to the Post Office Department. These stamps were important because they allowed for less corruption. It was much easier to fake an ink stamp than an adhesive stamp.

Then on March 3, 1863 the Uniform Postage and Free City Delivery act was introduced. This act created uniform letter postage for all. The uniform rate was three cents per ounce. This

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Scheele, 20-35.
rate was the same no matter the distance that the letter traveled before delivery. This rate was paid by the individual sending the letter. It also set a rate for the delivery of newspapers at five cents. This act also set up free delivery in forty-nine of the most densely populated cities in the country.20

The Post Office Department saw that the free city delivery was performing relatively well. The next logical step was to implement some form of free delivery for the entire country. This would be especially beneficial in rural communities where one may have to travel many miles to reach the closest post office. In 1896 a program for free delivery in rural areas was enacted. Before it was expanded to the entire country it was tested in a remote West Virginia town.21 In 1913 the services of the Post Office Department were once again expanded to include a parcel service. Private enterprises had previously offered this service, but in 1913 the Post Office Department was expanded to provide it as well.22

During World War I the Post Office Department once again changed. Its purpose reverted to one that was much like the Department’s service during the American Revolution. One of the primary focuses of the Post Office Department was to provide service to the military. This certainly included official mail, but it also included letters and packages to soldiers. There were also increases in postage and certain cost saving devices put into place. These were allowed by the War Revenue Act and were used to make up for some of the funds lost by the war. Finally, any military correspondence was censored under an executive order by

20 John, ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
President Woodrow Wilson. This is worth mentioning because it is a drastic change from the previous era that was solely focused on the expansion of the Post Office Department.

Now, with an understanding of the rise of the Post Office Department it is necessary to thoroughly analyze the significance that it had in regards to the development of the country. First, it is important to note that the Post Office Department spread more than gossip. It spread the legitimate news. A large majority of what was sent out included newspapers, pamphlets, and other public documents that made it a priority to share news and information. Without this service information would have traveled by word of mouth with makes it very easy for it to become distorted or slanted to a particular point of view.

The Post Office Department was the one agency that was readily present in the lives of nearly every citizen. It took some time, but before long post offices had reached most towns. It was the visible and tangible portion of the government for those who may have never gotten the opportunity to travel to Washington D.C. It was the accessible portion of the largely intangible federal government. According to Catherine Sedgwick, the Post Office Department was “the oracle to announce the voice of the divinities at Washington- the herald of all news, foreign and domestic, and the medium of all the good and evil tidings.”

Secondly, it helped people to feel as though they were a part of the democratic process. Before the United States gained their independence much of went on in Parliament and the Continental Congress was not made known to the people. During the early years of the Post

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24 John, ibid.  
25 Ibid.
Office Department it was decided that since the Constitution declares the people the sovereign power of the United States. This sovereignty made the American people deserving of any and all information. The Post Office Department allowed the people to get this information. They were, on an unprecedented level, what their representatives were up to. This was crucial for the democratic process. The people had to know what was going on in Washington D.C. in order to make more informed decisions. This freedom of information had an impact on the people as well. On a visit to the United States, French political thinker and historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted this fact. He claimed that the American people were “aware of the past, curious about the future, and ready to argue about the present.”

Another significant impact that the Post Office Department had on the development of America was that it connected the country in an unparalleled manner. It connected families and friends who were separated due to employment or other uncontrollable circumstances. For example, the period of the most significant growth for the Post Office Department was also at the height of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny being the push for the United States to expand westward. Families were separated as they moved away from their homes to seek further opportunities out west. Another circumstance were the men who left seeking employment during the California Gold Rush c. 1849. Thousands of men left their families, and without the Post Office Department these men may have gone months, maybe even years, without hearing from their families. In both of these circumstances the Post Office Department helped to keep people connected.

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
The Post Office Department enjoyed numerous years of incredible success, but eventually the success began to wane. Most experts argue that the decline began c. 1970. This decline is credited to a number of different sources. Perhaps the earliest noted reason for decline was the fact that the Post Office Department was under Congressional control. Much of the early failure came from Congress’s inability to decide the proper function of the department. Was it to be “a costly public service that meets a wide assortment of political demands or a lean and cost-effective mail delivery system operated in a businesslike fashion?”

28 Congress ran the Post Office Department as though it could be both, but something cannot function as both a public service and a business. They are fundamental opposites. 29 It is also important to note that the Post Office Department had a multitude of people in which they needed to satisfy. Their services needed to satisfy the general public, residents of rural areas, city dwellers, their own workforce, businesses, etc. Most of these groups had very different needs, and it was nearly impossible for them to properly satisfy everyone. 30

To help reform the Post Office Department Congress enacted legislation called the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. This act directly caused the most thorough reorganization and reconstruction of the Post Office Department in nearly two hundred years. A number of significant features came out of this legislation. Perhaps the most important was that in 1971 the United States Postal Service was created out of the old Post Office Department. The Postmaster General was made a part of the presidential cabinet by Andrew Jackson in 1829. 31

29 Ibid, 2-10
30 Ibid.
31 Boland, ibid.
The Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 removed this position from the cabinet. This act also ended Congress’s ability to set postal rates and wages for postal workers. This was an important development for those who believed that Congress had too large a part in the Post Office Department. The United States Postal Service granted those in charge of the department a greater sense of autonomy. This was arguably the most comprehensive change to a government agency in the history of the United States.\(^\text{32}\)

The Post Office Reorganization Act of 1970 made some improvements that were desperately needed. However, the act only fixed what was wrong with the organization of the Postal Service. It did not take into account changes within society. For example, contemporary time brought about a rise in privatized mail and package carrier services. These services included businesses such as FedEx and UPS. This services are often cheaper, easier, and more convenient than using the United States Postal Service. There has also been a dramatic increase in means of instantaneous communications. Logically, it makes sense. Many would prefer to send an email or a text than to purchase stamps and take the time to write and handwritten letter. Bills are being sent and paid electronically. Magazines are readily available to download onto tablets or e-readers.\(^\text{33}\)

Why is this an issue? Why not let the market decide whether or not the United States Postal Service survives? There are numerous reasons for this, but the most relevant for the follow research paper is the fact that this postal crisis has a profound impact on historic post office buildings and the communities in which they were located. Approximately 998 Post

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 10-50.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
Offices are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In order to reconcile their significant deficit the Postal Service has begun to sell their buildings, but because the United States Postal Service is still an agency of the government, they cannot simply sell their buildings without review. This review includes the process outlined in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The sale of a post office constitutes a federal undertaking, as defined by Section 106 of the act. To mitigate the potential adverse effect, a covenant or easement is often put on the property to ensure that any future rehabilitation projects are done in accordance to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards; these standards are further elaborated upon in Chapter 4. The process for selling post offices remains confusing and undefined. This has left many who would be willing to rehabilitation former post office buildings frustrated, and ready to give up. The remaining sections will detail specific case studies of appropriate post office adaptive reuse and guidelines for the process.34

Chapter 3: Case Studies

With the uncertain status of historic post office buildings it is crucial to look toward the future. What is to be done with abandoned, historic post office buildings? Many cities throughout the country have had a moderate degree of success with different adaptive reuse projects. Adaptive reuse refers to the process of rehabilitating a building for a purpose other than what the building was originally used for. The following section will outline three successful projects in regards to the adaptive reuse of historic post office buildings.

The first case study is located in La Porte, Indiana. La Porte is a town located in Northwest Indiana. La Porte is the county seat of LaPorte County. The post office was constructed in 1912, and it is located on the southeast corner of Main Street and Jackson Street. The post office was large for 1912’s standards. It originally employed twenty-five individuals to serve a ten thousand person population. The structure is in the Italian Renaissance architectural style, and is defined by its large arched windows on the front façade. The structure was designed by James Knox Taylor of Washington D.C. The exterior of the building is brick, and the color scheme was tan and white. When it was in use as a post office the building was one story with a seventy-four foot high ceiling.

Figure 2:1: Location of LaPorte, IN, city-data.com/city/la-porte-indiana.html, (accessed March 15, 2014).

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36 Thomas Gruber, “City Hall Open House Set for LaPorte,” The Herald-Argus, (LaPorte, IN), March 1, 1970.
In 1962 the city of LaPorte constructed a new post office building. The initial plans were to tear down the 1912 building to make room for parking in the downtown. These plans quickly changed when in 1964 both the city and the county expressed interest in obtaining the building. The city wanted to use it as a new City Hall, and the county wanted to use it as the historical society and county museum. At this time the city was doing their business out of rented offices in LaPorte’s Masonic Temple, and the historic society was located in a cramped corner of the basement of the courthouse. Clearly both parties had significant interest in acquiring the building.  

As of June 19, 1965 the county was no longer vying for the building, which left the purchase of the historic structure open to the City of LaPorte. The city paid $30,000 for the acquisition of the property. The mayor called this a local urban renewal project. The project was finally completed in the spring of 1970. The total cost of rehabilitation was $250,000,  

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including the cost of acquisition. All government offices were moved to this building. To better serve this, the large one story building was converted into a two story building. The exterior was largely left to its original appearance.\textsuperscript{39}

This adaptive reuse project was successful for a number of reasons. First, today the building is still LaPorte’s City Hall. It has gone through a recent renovation where it was appropriately modernized, but overall the building is used for the same purpose in 2014 that it was used for in 1970. It was clearly a well-thought out rehabilitation, and it was clearly something that was needed by the community. They did not have to search for a use for the building. They knew that a City Hall was necessary, and that is part of what made the project so successful. A second success is in that it is still used for a public purpose. A large part of the significance of post office buildings is that they are open to the public. For many, this was the closest that they would get to the federal government. While this is no longer a federal government building, it is still a government building open to the public.

While they did a great deal well, there were some things that could have been done better. The interior of the structure was changed significantly. This building is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but it is still historic. The extensive interior changes are minimal when considering the success of the adaptive reuse. It would not have been possible to use this building as City Hall had they not transformed the one story building into two stories. If it were not made into City Hall then saving the building may not have been possible.\textsuperscript{40}

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\textsuperscript{39} Gruber, ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
A second case study is the Old Post Office in St. Louis, Missouri. This post office was opened in 1884. The building is very large as it was also used as a Federal Building and a mail distribution center. This was one of five post office federal buildings that were commissioned after the completion of the Civil War. The other four buildings were located in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati. These five cities were chosen because they were the fastest growing cities in America. They were built in these cities to accommodate expanding Federal offices that were burdened by post-war Reconstruction. Because of the time period, it is interesting to note that four of these five cities are located in northern states. St. Louis is located in Missouri, which was a border state. The building was designed by Alfred B. Mullet in 1872. It was built in the French 2nd Empire Style to pay homage to the grand architecture of France.

This building served a twofold purpose. Primarily, it was the main source of correspondence to and from all points west of Missouri. Hundreds of millions of pieces of mail were handled by this post office in the first year alone. The building also served a psychological purpose. The construction of a grand, new government building helped to instill confidence

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and pride in the federal government. This was especially important while the country was reuniting in the aftermath of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{42} In addition to being a post office, the building’s upper floors were home to the Federal 8\textsuperscript{th} Circuit Court. This court covered ten states and four territories.\textsuperscript{43}

As of 1960, this building was the only one remaining of the original five. There was talk of demolishing the structure, but it was saved by preservationists. Despite this victory the building maintained a rocky future until 1998. In 1998 an organization called Downtown NOW began the process to revitalize the area known as Post Office Square. This collaboration was between both the public and the private sectors. The first thought was to make the area a downtown university campus. Webster University immediately responded with interest. In 2001 the Missouri Court of Appeals Eastern District leased the 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} floors. Other tenants include the St. Louis Public Library and the Teach for American organization. Before the building opened on March 15, 2006 the building was 100% leased.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{old_post_office_st_louis}
\caption{A view clearly showing the architectural style of the Old Post Office in St. Louis, The Old Post Office, http://www.oldpostofficestl.com/, (accessed March 14, 2014).}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
There were two main challenges in regards to the rehabilitation of St. Louis’s Old Post Office. Perhaps the greatest was the fact that it was an extremely large, completely vacant space in the heart of downtown St. Louis. The neighborhood was not the greatest, but the developers realized that if they could redevelop this then they could do work in the rest of the neighborhood. This would start a chain reaction of revitalization in the city. A second problem corresponds with the first, in that the downtown location made it difficult to find adequate parking. This was rectified by the construction of a parking garage.\textsuperscript{45}

The positives in regards to this adaptive reuse project are very similar to the positive outcomes for the LaPorte City Hall. First, this building still has public access, which was what was originally intended upon by those who constructed it. The architecture remains largely intact. Another positive outcome is that they were able to fill this building with tenants. A large, vibrant business is always a better choice for a downtown region than a vacant structure or another parking lot. The long term effects of this revitalization were beyond the scope of this research paper, but it is safe to assume that they were more positive than were the building to remain vacant. They were also able to maintain most of their tenants, which suggests a certain degree of success.\textsuperscript{46}

The final case study is significantly different than the previous two. This post office is much smaller, and it served the 5,000 person population of Paintsville, Kentucky. A local moved back home after completing her degree, and she desired to find a house with character. While searching for an appropriate house she fell in love with the former post office, which was

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
currently on the market. With the help of her family and friends she carefully renovated this local landmark into her private home.

The post office was built in the Colonial Revival architectural style. The exterior is brick, the interior walls are concrete, and the walls are supported by steel bars. The former post office building was purchased by the new owner for $162,000.47

In order to convert a public building, such as this post office, into a private home, extensive interior changes were necessary. Minimal changes were made, because the owner wanted to do everything that she could to preserve the character of the building. Over the years the interior had been changed and modernized, but there were several period details left to preserve. These details included terra cotta floors, marble baseboard, and pink granite wall slabs. The original ceilings were sixteen feet tall, but they were lowered two feet. This was more economical for heating and cooling purposes. The postmaster’s office was preserved as it originally appeared, and was used as an office for the current occupants. The post office’s money order office contained a very large safe, which was not removed during the rehabilitation.48

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48 Ibid.
As stated above, the owner was very concerned with keeping the character of the building. This was evidenced by numerous precautions and careful choices that were made. When the post office was sold the post office boxes were sold to a salvage dealer, but in order to preserve the impact that they had on the room cabinets and a fireplace were added in their place. A fireplace was also added in place of the, now impractical, stamp window. The fireplace was built from limestone so that the materials matched the historic materials. The kitchen provided a unique challenge. The fridge and stove are wrapped in cabinets so that the appliances are not too harsh for the space. There were spaces that were no longer appropriate for the significant change of use in the structure. An example of a now useless space is the old post office loading dock. This dock was rehabilitated to becoming a veranda.49

Several things were done well in regards to this rehabilitation project. As with all of the other case studies, if this building had not found a tenant it would have been demolished. In regards to preservation, the adaptive reuse of a building is nearly always preferable to demolition. Another well done aspect was the careful attention to detail placed upon the interior. Spaces were divided the same. When something drastic was changed, such as the

Figure 2.6: The living room with the wall to mimic the location where the former PO Boxes were located. Michael Luppino, “U.S. Post Office Becomes a First Class Home,” http://realestate.msn.com/us-post-office-becomes-first-class-home#1, (accessed March 14, 2014).

49 Ibid.
addition of the kitchen, pains were taken to mask the changes so that they did not distract from the historic nature of the space.\(^5^0\) One possible issues is in that this may not follow the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. Standard One speaks of the need to find a compatible use for the space. “A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.” This is up to interpretation. Some would call this a compatible use, but others may not, which results in this potential issue being necessary to mention.\(^5^1\)

An analysis of the three provided case studies is the next step in better understanding appropriate new uses for historic post office buildings. What do all three of these case studies have in common? First, the adaptive reuse project was all that saved the structure from demolition. All of the buildings were historic, and from a preservation standpoint, adaptive reuse is nearly always preferable to demolition. A second thing that the case studies have in common is that each of the new uses provided a vital service for the community in which they were built. In 1964 LaPorte’s vital city offices were house in rented offices in the Masonic

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

Temple. After rehabilitating this post office the offices were all together, easily accessible, and there were meeting spaces throughout the building.52 The Old Post Office in St. Louis provided an appropriate downtown location for the tenants, and it helped to revitalize a struggling community.53 The Post Office to private home adaptive reuse project was a less significant vital service than the other two, but it was still significant. Housing is always a necessary service for a town.54

It is also significant to mention that two out of the three rehabilitations left the former post office as a public building. That was the original intent of the postal service. The buildings were built in high architectural styles, and they were the representation of the federal government in local communities. Not everyone would be able to take a pilgrimage to Washington D.C., but it was a strong likelihood that each citizen lived within traveling distance of a post office. Keeping the post office public was significant because it allowed people to still see the power of the government, the beautiful architecture, and the grand spaces. The post office in Paintsville, KY may have not been kept as a public building, but it was minimally changed. It is still obvious that it used to be a post office. If it was necessary for it to go in to private ownership, this was the best way for it to go.55

It is fairly clear that each of these adaptive reuse projects were not contingent upon the community in which that were done in. They were rehabilitated this way because that was the service that was necessary for the people involved. If a City Hall were necessary in St. Louis

52 Schultz, ibid.
53 “The Old Post Office- St. Louis,” ibid.
54 D’Agnese, ibid.
55 Ibid.
than their post office could have easily served that function. The Post Office in LaPorte may have been a bit large for a house, but for the right owner it could be renovated to a private residence. These uses were not contingent upon location. They could be used anywhere.
Chapter 4: Suggestions and Guidelines for Rehabilitation

The next step in deciding upon appropriate new uses for struggling or abandoned historic post offices is to provide a set of guidelines and advice on how to go about finding a new use for the building. There are also a number of standards that are accepted by the preservation profession that are helpful when employing any adaptive reuse project.

Preliminary Work

When rehabilitating historic post office buildings it is important not to begin without doing a certain amount of leg work. There are numerous questions to consider. Is the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places? Should it be listed on the National Register? Is it a local landmark or in a local historic district? Is it subject to any kind of design review? What are the financial constraints? Are there any incentive programs available for the project?

The National Register of Historic Places was authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The National Register is the country’s official list of places that are deemed worthy of preserving. It is a part of an ongoing effort to nationally identify and support the preservation movement.\textsuperscript{56} If the structure is not listed on the National Register, but during the course of the rehabilitation project it is determined to be eligible, the National Park Service has published a bulletin on the application of the National Register criteria specifically to post office buildings. They suggest first contacting the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for the state in which the post office is located. The SHPO can assist in determining eligibility, and

they may also be able to assist with the application process and provide information that they already have. The National Historic Preservation Act required that each state perform an inventory or survey of the historic resources in each state. In Indiana these are called the Interim Reports, and the reports will give very basic information about the property, assuming that it is considered historically significant. They may also have additional information or means of assistance, which is why it is so important to contact them as a first step.

Once the SHPO is contacted the next step is to begin gathering information. This step is useful whether or not the structure is listed or eligible for the National Register. An informed and ethical reuse project is only possible if as much information as possible is obtained on the structure. Information that should be sought are things like construction date, architect or developer, how it has changed over the years, architectural style, character defining features, etc. These pieces of information provide a better sense of understanding for the building as a whole. A new use is certainly an appropriate path for these historic post office buildings; it is perhaps even a necessary step. However, this new use should not completely reinvent the building. There must be a nod to the past. The new use should be a new layer upon the story of the building. This information is also helpful for the National Register nomination or if any type of historic preservation funding is sought after.

Another important preliminary step is to investigate whether the property’s specific location is an issue. Is it a historic structure that is physically situated in a local historic district or is it a local landmark? Being listed on the National Register does little in regards to protection via design review, but local designation may subject a structure to certain restrictions. Many local historic districts and local landmarks require a form of design review
that requires that permission of the local Historic Preservation Commission before making changes to a structure. Some design review is very strict, carefully regulating everything from paint color to building materials. Others are less stringent, only wanting to ensure the integrity of the structure. This varies from community to community, and can greatly impact a rehabilitation project.

Next, specific information about the post office must be determined. Was it always a post office? Was a post office the only business that operated out of the building? In the early years of the postal service it was very rare to find a building that was solely a post office. Like with the Old St. Louis Post Office mentioned in the case studies, many early post offices buildings were used for a multitude of purposes. Most were federal buildings, which included post offices, courts, government offices, etc. This was both for financial purposes and for the ease of access. Before the automobile era, even a short trip to the post office was a time consuming ordeal. Is it still a post office? If not, when did that change? By looking at the history of both the building and the building’s use one can obtain a fairly accurate picture of the building’s story. Only then can an appropriate reuse project be undertaken. This information can be found in numerous primary and secondary sources. The county courthouse, local historical societies, archives, and the public library are all places to begin when looking for information about the building’s history as a post office.57

The next step that should be taken is a specific architectural survey of the structure. This is necessary for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Part of the application

57 Boland, ibid.
process includes an architectural description. If the post office is already listed on the National
Register then this information would be fairly simple to acquire on the nomination form. If
such a description does not exist one should be carefully made prior to any rehabilitation
project. A careful description of the interior, exterior, and any character-defining features
should be noted. If at all possible, one should also determine original features versus
alterations. This can be determined in a number of ways. For example, the materials
themselves may tell the story, historic photographs, or even old receipts or records. This keeps
an accurate account of what the building looked like, and it makes for a more responsible
rehabilitation process. Also, it provides an accurate description of significant features that
should not be changed throughout the course of the rehabilitation. During this process the
integrity of the post office should also be evaluated. Are its most significant features still
intact? Is it still in its original location? Is the setting the same? Is the structure still used for its
original purpose? If the answer to all of these questions is yes, then the integrity of the
structure is remarkably intact. If not then the integrity must be further evaluated. 58

Financials

There are also a number of financial constraints to consider. Primarily, will this
rehabilitation project be funded by any incentive programs? Many communities have local
incentive programs available such as grants. These grants will often covered a portion of the
repair, but certain guidelines must be followed. Before beginning any kind of post office
rehabilitation project the presence of local funding should be confirmed. There are also state

58 Ibid.
and national funding sources. These are primarily in the form of tax credits. State tax credits vary from state to state and should be confirmed with the State Historic Preservation Office.

Federal Tax Credits are funded through the National Park Service. Two different programs are available. There is a ten percent program is for the rehabilitation of non-historic buildings, meaning buildings that are not listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, that were put into service before 1936. This tax credit is only applicable for non-residential, income producing properties. There are no design review guidelines. There is also a twenty percent tax credit application that is much more difficult to obtain. This tax credit is only for certified historic structures, meaning structures that are listed on the National Register, eligible for the National Register, or listed as contributing in a National Register historic district. This tax credit is for income producing properties, which may include residential uses. The process is a three part application, and the rehabilitation project must follow the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.59

Following the Standards

As just briefly mentioned, a project that is employing the use of twenty percent federal historic preservation tax credits must follow the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. What exactly are these standards, and how can we apply them to the adaptive reuse of historic post office buildings? When examining new uses for historic buildings it is always beneficial to begin with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. These Standards were also briefly mentioned in Chapter 2. They are a list of ten guidelines to

59 Boland, ibid.
be kept in mind when performing rehabilitation projects on historic structures. The introduction to the standards discusses how they are not technical, but they are intended to be guidelines for the practice of responsible preservation. While they are not necessary to follow unless one is applying for historic tax credits, they are still the accepted guidelines for rehabilitation. They should be followed if at all possible. This becomes especially important if the property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.\\(^{60}\)

Standard one discusses finding a compatible use for historic buildings undergoing rehabilitation. “A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.”\\(^{61}\) When rehabilitating a historic post office, particular care should be made to ensure that a compatible use is proposed. A compatible use is one that requires minimal changes to the historic character-defining features of a building. If the new, suggested use requires extensive changes, especially in regards to the exterior of the structure, then perhaps alternatives should be considered. For example, many may have considered the transformation of the Paintsville, Kentucky post office from a public post office to a private residence to not be a compatible use. This is subjective, but many would not find that to be the case. The owner took obvious and painstaking care to ensure that the integrity of the structure was kept intact throughout the course of the rehabilitation.

The second standard discusses the preservation of character-defining features. “The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive

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\(^{60}\) “Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation,” ibid.  
\(^{61}\) Ibid.
materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.” Character-defining features, as defined by the standard, are features that characterize the property as a whole. Taking an example from the case studies, the distinctive arched windows of LaPorte’s City Hall are significant in defining the character of a space. During an adaptive reuse project significant care should be taken to document and preserve the character defining features of the structure. This will ensure that the character, integrity, and significance of the structure are preserved for years to come. An exception to this would be if the post office has been so extensively altered that it no longer has any semblance of integrity remaining. If this is the case then the preservation of character defining features is a pointless endeavor, because the significant character defining features had already been altered.

Standard three warns against giving a sense of false history. “Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.” False history needs to be avoided. If new additions are added or significant changes are made then it is necessary that they are differentiated from what was there originally. Changes are fine as they add a new layer to the story of the building, but it should be clear that they are not original. This differentiation between the new and the historic could be done in a number of ways. They architecture could be clearly differentiated, or signage and plaques could be employed to inform visitors of the structure’s entire story. If new materials are used then the old materials could be put on display. If the interior or exterior

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
are significantly altered then perhaps a display could lay out what the structure looked like originally or during its peak of significance.

Standard four discusses how changes that have become historic in their own right should be considered historic themselves. “Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.”

The National Register of Historic Places defines historic as being over fifty years old. By this criteria, in six years the LaPorte City Hall will be historic as a city hall, and not just as a post office. The post office issue is a contemporary problem. Now that this is becoming a greater issue, and post office buildings are being adaptively reused, this standard should be kept in mind and followed. If, in six years, the city of LaPorte wants to rehabilitate their City Hall back into a post office then they should do their best to leave some reminders of its time as their City Hall. The rehabilitation of historic post office buildings should always put forth a distinct effort to tell the entire story of the structure and not just pieces.

Standard five discusses the preservation of character-defining features. “Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.” Character-defining features, as described above, are features that are intrinsic in preserving the character of the structure. Most commonly, these include windows, doors, building materials, and other distinctive features. For example, from our case studies this includes the arched windows of the LaPorte City Hall, the distinctive French Second Empire Style of the Old Post Office in St. Louis, and the interior marble in the

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
Post Office in Paintsville, Kentucky. These character-defining features should be carefully preserved during any adaptive reuse project of historic post office buildings. Without these features the structure loses some of its significance and its integrity.

In standard six, the Department of the Interior suggests that historic features and material be repaired before they are replaced. “Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match... Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.”66 This is fairly straightforward, but when rehabilitating historic post office buildings it is important to preserve the historic materials. For example, historic wood windows should not be replaces with vinyl windows. They should be preserved if at all possible. If the preservation of the historic material is not possible, then it should be replaced with a similar material. The deteriorated wood window should be replaced with a replacement wood window, or at the very least a material that looks similar. Like should be replaced with like. A vinyl window does not give the same feel that a historic wood window does. It changes the look of the space.

Standard seven talks about treatments. “Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.”67 If treatments are needed to clean or repair the post office structure than the most gentle treatment should be used as a starting place. If it is not potent enough than something more abrasive can be used. Something stronger can

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
always used, but once damage has been obtained from a treatment that is too harsh that damage is not reversible. By starting gently one ensures that they do not damage the significant historic materials.

In standard eight they discuss the importance of not harming archeological remains. “Archeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.”68 This may not be not be a frequent issue, but it is something that may come up. If archeological resources are effected by the rehabilitation of a historic post office building than particular care should be taken to preserve them in place. If that is not possible then those involved must find an appropriate alternative through mitigation between all effected parties. This mitigation will vary from case to case depending upon what was found on the site. If preservationists expect mitigation in regards to historic resources then the same respect must be provided to the various disciplines involved in the project.

Standard nine talks about the importance of keeping the integrity of what is historic though new construction was added. “New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property...”69 All three of the case studies do a wonderful job of this, and it is something that should always be kept in mind. New construction should not destroy the integrity or overshadow what is historic. It should also be clearly differentiated. New construction is fine as long as the historic structure’s integrity remains intact. This is very

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid
similar to standard three, which warns against false history. Both standards require a degree of
differentiation upon what is historic. Both standards allow for the historic to shine in the
rehabilitation.

The final standard discusses reversibility. “New additions and adjacent or related new
construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential
form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.” This
standard can be difficult to follow, because sometimes significant changes are necessary in
order to fully modernize a historic building. For example, in the LaPorte City Hall it was
necessary to make the building into two floors. This is not easily reversed. Also, in the
Paintsville, Kentucky post office the ceiling was lowered so that it was more easily cooled and
heated. These changes are not easily reversible, but they were necessary for the new use and
for the modern building. Without these changes the rehabilitation may have not been feasible,
and the building may have been lost. Changes are nearly always a better option than the
demolition of the building. 71

Guidelines for Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of historic post offices, as mentioned in a previous paragraph, is a
largely contemporary issue. Prior to the 1970s the postal service was on the rise. It is only into
the past forty years that their business has declined, causing the future of the buildings to come
into question. There are many unique circumstances when it comes to the rehabilitation of
these buildings, and because of the contemporary nature of this there are few guidelines when

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
it comes to these rehabilitation projects. Should these buildings remain public? What should be done with the public art? What special considerations must be taken in regards to the new use of the building?

The significance of post office buildings has been clearly outlined in previous chapters. People valued these buildings not only for the information and their significant architecture, but they also valued them because they were the tangible face of the federal government in local communities. As the nation grew after the Louisiana Purchase, this became increasingly important. The large size of country increased the difficulty of governing from remote Washington D.C. The construction of a post office in each community reminded the American citizens of the government’s presence and their power. The fact that these buildings were public was one of their most significant features. If at all possible this should continue. The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards speak of physical character-defining features, but it could be argued that the public nature of historic post office buildings are a less tangible character-defining feature of the structure. Part of the significance of the building was the public nature and the fact that they were physical manifestation of the federal government in local communities. To maintain an equal or similar level of significance the post office should remain a public building.\textsuperscript{72}

In regards to post offices it is especially important to consider the presence of any public art. During the New Deal public art, primarily in the form of murals, were added to many post offices. This public art was used to signify important events, customs, and scenarios for the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{72}John, ibid.}
community, boost public moral, and to put unemployed artists back to work. The subject matter of these murals or art were almost exclusively of a situation or scenario that was shared by the entire community. It was a special thing for everyone who viewed it. These pieces of art were called public art because they were meant to be enjoyed by the public at large. This is something that should be considered. Is the art an intrinsic part of the post office? If the post office building is to go into private ownership, as was the case for the Paintsville, Kentucky post office, what should be done with the murals or art? They were originally intended to be enjoyed by the public, and if at all possible that should continue. Whether that is through moving the art to a new location, allowing for certain viewing days, or another solution; this should be a priority.\footnote{John, ibid.}

A third criteria is that the new use should be compatible to the space. This was briefly mentioned in the discussion of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, but it bears mentioning for a second time. What is a compatible use? A compatible use is one that requires minimal changes to the space. It is widely accepted that many post office buildings are typically among the most architecturally significant of the community. They are also most frequently in predominant, visible locations in town. Post office buildings are pillars of their respective communities, and pieces are architecture that are celebrated by all who view them. During the course of any building’s life there is a strong possibility that adaptive reuse may become necessary to prolong its existence. This is an appropriate course of action, but when adaptive reuse becomes necessary specific pains must be taken to safeguard the integrity of these
significant buildings. The protection of both the interiors and exteriors are necessary because, as mentioned above, the public nature of these buildings is also of distinct importance. If the building remains public then the interior will be as visible as the exterior, making the preservation of it of equal importance.

Finally, the proposed new use is something that should be extensively considered. Is the new use something that is crucial for the community in which it is being built? Is it a service that the market is able to handle? In all of our case studies this was the case. LaPorte was in desperate need of a City Hall. Without this rehabilitation their city offices would still be located in rented offices in the Masonic Temple. The city of St. Louis desired to rejuvenate the section of town that the Old Post Office was located in. The rehabilitation of this building was the stepping stone toward this rejuvenation. Paintsville, Kentucky was in need of more housing with character, and that need was met through the rehabilitation of their old post office. If the post office rehabilitation does not meet a necessary function for the town then this situation will only repeat itself in an undetermined number of years. One of the reasons that the postal service is declining is because the service is no longer as needed as it was in the past due to technology and privatized mail delivery services. In order to protect these buildings long term it is necessary to choose a rehabilitation that will serve the community long term.

Conclusion

The suggestions and guidelines mentioned in this chapter are not meant to be an all-inclusive list. Depending upon the project other guidelines may be necessary, and some of the suggestions may not be applicable; because post offices vary so greatly that also means that the
preservation of said buildings will vary. Much of the work must be done on a case by case basis. However, if one follows the suggestions and guidelines given than it will facilitate both a simpler and more responsible adaptive reuse project.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The twenty-first century has brought about a number of challenges for the United States Postal Service. The significance of the institution is undeniable. If it were not for the postal service the country would have developed in an entirely different manner. Circa the foundation of the country the United States was a largely agrarian society with cities that were few and far between. The postal service spread information that was necessary for every citizen, from the smallest town to the biggest city, to feel as though they were a part of the democratic process. It helped connect families together in an unprecedented manner. It was useful in both times of war and in times of peace. The postal service was the physical manifestation of the federal government in nearly every town and city throughout the country.

In contemporary times the need for the postal service is waning. There are privatized mail courier services and technology that do the job more quickly and sometimes more efficiently. The slowly lessening need for the institution does not lessen the significance that it had; because of this it is necessary to find ways to encourage the preservation of these buildings, and perhaps the best method of preservation is through adaptive reuse. This is something that has been done in the past, and it is something that must continue in order to appropriately preserve these post offices.

As evidenced by a careful analysis of several adaptive reuse projects there is a right way to do this and a wrong way. The process should begin with a preliminary information gathering period. This information should be both on the structure and on the history of the structure. If the structure is not already on the National Register of Historic Places and is eligible then this
information will be helpful in filling out the nomination form. If it is listed on the National Register than this information is readily available already. Financial constraints should be considered; for example, the potential eligibility of the property for federal tax credit programs. It should also be determined whether or not it is necessary or appropriate to follow the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. Finally, specific guidelines for rehabilitating a post office should be considered; guidelines that include what to do with public art, the public nature of the building, and the importance of the new use.

The significance of these buildings is undeniable; as is the effect that the technological era has had on the buildings. However, with a responsible approach to rehabilitation, these buildings can survive and be enjoyed for years to come.
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