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The Postal West

My project examines one of the defining spatial transformations in US history: the integration of the American West between the close of the US Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century. How did the United States incorporate such a massive area of territory in the span of a single generation? I argue that the speed and success of western integration depended on the underlying spatial circuitry of the US Post, the nation's largest and most expansive communications network. By the end of the century, more than 75,000 post offices stretched from Alabama to Alaska—nearly three times the number in operation today. The Post Office Department employed more people than the rest of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches combined. This workforce helped transport billions of pieces of mail each year across the country to a staggering number of places, including remote locales in the western United States. The dizzying size and reach of the US Post has been hiding in plain sight. Until now.

The Postal West uses digital technology to uncover and map the expansive geography of the nineteenth-century postal network, the mechanisms by which it operated, and the flows of information that stitched the western United States together. The US Post was a far cry from its modern public successor. Instead, the Post Office Department used a payment system of contracts, fees, and commissions to graft public mail service onto the private operations of tens of thousands of private businesses. This led to what I've termed a "gossamer network"—a concept that holds the key to understanding how the Post operated within the sparsely settled and economically unstable environment of the American West. Digital analysis reveals the shocking speed with which the Post both expanded *and* contracted in the West—a finding that leads to a new interpretation about regional development and the nature of state power during the nineteenth century.
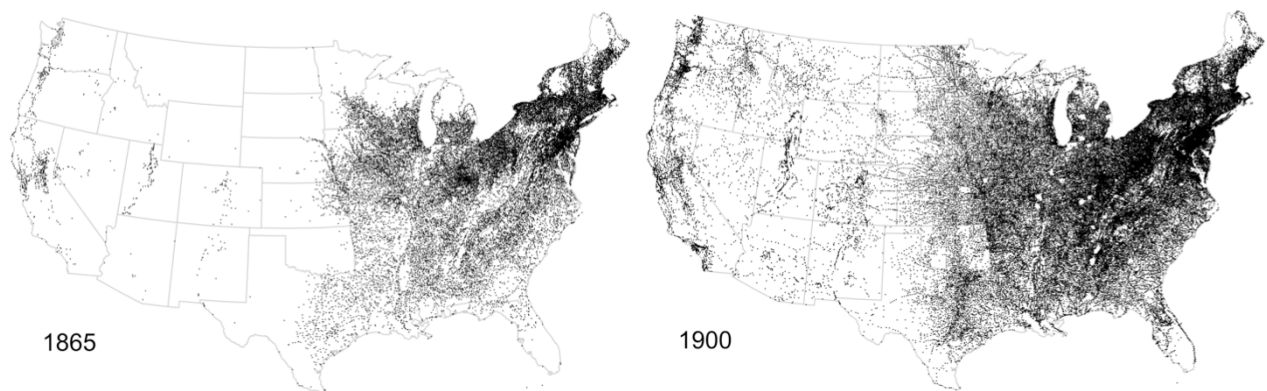
Figure 1. US Post Offices, 1865 and 1900