The Purloined Letters: A Collection of Mail Robbery Reports from Ohio Papers, 1841–1850

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In 1841, Edgar Allan Poe's detective C. Auguste Dupin induces that the culprit in the double murder central to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was an orangutan wielding a barber's razor. Then in 1842, Dupin surmises in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" that in order for the Parisian police to track down the killer of the titular victim, they must find the boat that dumped her body in the Seine. But it wasn't until 1844 that Poe described the greatest mystery of Dupin's investigative career.

Stolen mail.

Yes, in "The Purloined Letter," Dupin goes from a murderous orangutan and a case inspired by a real-life slaying to trying to track down a single letter.

 Nineteenth-Century Ohio Literature pairs forgotten readings with new essays that explain them. In this installment, Marc Cibella's essay introduces and explains why nineteenth-century Americans got excited about newspaper reports of mail robbery. *Nineteenth-Century Ohio Literature* is edited by Jon Miller at The Unviersity of Akron. For more information, visit http://ideaexchange.uakron .edu/nineteenthcenturyohioliterature/

The story, set in Paris, ends rather benignly for a Poe tale: Dupin, the detective hero, produces the letter and collects his reward, giving him the opportunity to dazzle the audience with his reveal of how he snatched the letter back from the Minister D—, a man so nefarious that Poe doesn't even give him a full name.

Had Poe wished to liven up "The Purloined Letter," perhaps he would have let Dupin take a journey abroad to America and star in a mail caper with a little bit more excitement, greater danger, and higher stakes. As evidenced by the newspaper articles following this introduction, all of which were published in Ohio between 1841 and 1850, reports and comments on real-life mail robberies were often characterized by thrills and intrigue.

In 1838, mail was on the move across the United States. Stagecoach lines delivered mail to 12,553 post offices across twenty million miles annually, and Congress expanded and expedited mail delivery by declaring all rail lines to be routes for carrying mail (Fuller 40).

At this point, however, Congress's declaration was merely a formality. With the Erie Canal connecting New York City to the West through Lake Erie, and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad's establishment ten years prior, steamboats and railroads were already carrying mail 2,500,000 miles a year (Fuller 40).

Two improvements to the postal system sent the amount of letters being mailed skyrocketing. The Postal Act of 1845 lowered postal rates, making mailing a letter financially feasible for all American families, and the introduction of postage stamps in 1847 made the whole process simpler (Straight 56). These changes, along with fast methods of delivery, meant a substantial growth in the United States postal service.

Nameplate of The Democratic Standard. *Library of Congress.*

But what were Americans sending in the mail? Letters, of course. After all, the nation was growing, expanding, and heading West. But what could Americans be sending in those letters to prompt the attention of thieves and scoundrels? An account from British traveler John M. Duncan explains: "Remittances from one part of the Union to another, even large sums, are generally made by transmitting banknotes in letters by the post office; scarcely a letter bag is made up for any of the larger cities, which does not contain in this way large sums of money" (John 54–55).

That's right: Americans used cheap stamps and the train-and-steamboat-powered postal system to move mass amounts of money across the country.

A Philadelphia merchant in 1833 claimed that he sent three million dollars in banknotes, checks, and drafts between his home city, Cincinnati, and New Orleans. Postal journalist Pliny Miles estimated that around a hundred million dollars passed through the postal system in 1855, which was almost double the federal budget for that year. The practice of sending money through the mail had become common, as if there was no risk in it, reported Lexington, Kentucky postmaster Benjamin Ficklin (John 54–55).

However, the system was not perfect, as observed again by British traveler Duncan, who said: "Robbery of the mail is very frequent in the United States. The mail

is totally unprotected; there is no guard, and the driver carries no arms" (John 54–55). For a solid estimate on how much money was possibly lost through mail robbery during this time, look no further than postal journalist Pliny Miles. Of his own money he entrusted to the mail system, Miles estimated that one-third had miscarried. When looking at the country as a whole, he speculated that no more than one percent had miscarried; however, that one percent equaled somewhere between five hundred thousand and one million dollars, no small sum of money in 1855 or today (John 55).

With so much money traveling unprotected across the country, it's easy to see why the robbers featured in these Ohio newspaper articles endeavored on such high-stakes heists, robbing stagecoaches, steamboats, and trains, making off with mailbags chock full of letters potentially containing money from all over the country. However, it's important to keep in mind that these articles come from a time when newspapers sought not only to inform, but also to push biased goals.

Unbiased journalism in the United States didn't develop overnight. The first American newspaper, *Publick Occurrences*, surfaced in Boston in 1690, while the first push for ethical standards in journalism wouldn't arrive until 1880, as the nineteenth century started to wind down (Vaughn 155).

During this time period, each paper had its own goals, and most stories were opinionated or biased (Vaughn 156). In partisan papers, these biases stemmed from whatever political party backed the newspaper. An example of this can be found in the *Democratic Standard* article "The Uniontown Mail Robbers" featured below. In the piece, the writer takes a swipe at a rival news-

paper for being against Democrats: "The persons, (or *gentlemen* as our neighbor of the Chronicle would say, provided they had murdered a democrat)." The same article also features a rambling last paragraph where the writer advocates for jail time for the mail thieves.

Many more partisan papers were started in the 1830s in the form of penny presses. These papers were cheaper, making them available to a wider audience, and printed sensational stories that were more in line with entertainment than informative articles (Vaughn 156). "The Great Mail Robbery" from *The Portage Sentinenl*, included below, may fall in this category; although small, it spends a few lines theorizing how the robbers were able to make off with a box full of mail on a steamboat: "More than likely, the villain approached the mail boat in a skiff, shipping their booty, and took down the Ohio and buried it in some lone spot" (*The Portage Sentinel* 2).

Another article, entitled "Southern Mail" by *The Portsmouth Inquirer*, is easily the most sensationalized of the bunch. A much longer piece than the others, the writer spends an entire paragraph setting up the environment of the robbery and how it may have contributed to the crime: "The moon was shining, yet the sky was darkened by clouds of dust, created by the high wind that prevailed, and this may have blinded the eyes of the foremost passenger car, so as to have prevented him from seeing what was going on at the hind part of the mail car directly ahead of him" (*The Portsmouth Inquirer* 2). Articles such as this, where the information is presented more as a story than as a typical news story, are most likely why early journalism was referred to as "'the poor white' brother of literature" by George

Henry Payne in his book *History of Journalism in the United States* (Vaughn 156).

These pieces are rooted in historical fact, yet represent a time in American journalism when objectivity was fluid and in flux. They lend themselves to fascinating observation in two different lights: historical accounts of mail robberies in the mid-nineteenth century and intent in journalism during the time period. The articles appear below in chronological order, from 1841 to 1850, in their original forms with no corrections.

The Democratic Standard *(January 26, 1841)*

Published in *The Democratic Standard* out of Georgetown, Ohio, "Great Mail Robbery" recounts a mail robbery in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, and how an agent of the Post Office Department uncovered the scheme and recovered the mail. It includes a brief send up to Dr. Kennedy, the agent who foiled the plot, as well as a letter from a member from the House of Representatives, where the information originated.

GREAT MAIL ROBBERY.

The numerous mails missing between this and New York, turn out to have been stolen at Uniontown, Pennsylvania, and the robbers detected. Several were concerned in the robbery, headed by a Dr. Bradee, of Uniontown. A stage driver concerned in the robbery, by the name of Corman, has turned States' evidence, Bradee and Purnell, his clerk, and Strayer have been

taken, and the stage driver is in custody. A letter states that Dr. Bradee's house has for years been the head quarters for a host of Blacklegs and Counterfeiters.

Dr. Kennedy, the Agent of the Post Office Department, deserves great credit for his vigilance and untiring zeal in ferreting out the robbers of the United States Mail. He is hard to escape. His retirement would be a serious loss to the public service. A large amount of money has been recovered. The mail-bags were found in Dr. Bradee's privy.

The following extract of a letter was handed us by a membre of the House of Representatives:

> Hillsborough, Washington Co.,
> January 8, 1841.

"Dear Sir! Yesterday a mail stage driver was arrested in Washington, on suspicion of being concerned in certain robberies which have recently been committed on our road. Simultaneously with the arrest at Washington, a Dr. Bradee of Uniontown, Fayette county, his clerk and another individual, were arrested. The driver at Washington has turned State's evidence. I had proceeded thus far when I received the news that a stage agent has just arrived from Uniontown. I dropped my pen and away to get the facts, and obtained what follows. In the search which was had today, in the vault of Dr. Bradee's privy were found five mail bags, the remains of broken fragments of two trunks, with some other matter. Money to the amount of *thirty thousand dollars*, in the shape of Treasury Drafts, Bank bills, &c., were found in his hay mow, tied in a silk handkerchief. The above is the statement of the agent, who assisted in the arrest, search, &c."

The Democratic Standard *(January 26, 1841)*

A follow-up to the "Great Mail Robbery" article published in the same issue, this article offers a biased look at the mail robbery at Uniontown. The writer alleges that the men who stole the mail were active Whig party members and advocates for them to be imprisoned in the penitentiary. It also takes a political swipe at a neighboring newspaper, referred to as "the Chronicle."

THE UNIONTOWN MAIL ROBBERS.

The hard cider Tippecanoe head quarters are breaking up in all directions. Robberies, arson and murders are as common since the coon skin camps are broken, as hard cider kegs were before the election:

The persons, (or *gentlemen* as our neighbor of the Chronicle would say, provided they had murdered a democrat.) who robbed the Mail near Uniontown, Pa., were active in the whig ranks, during the last election; the Washington Examiner says: "For the benefit of all honest feds, we will mention that whole gang are thorough going Harrison men. And during the last canvas shouted lustily for "Tippecanoe and Tyler too," and complained most piteously at the dishonesty, aye, downright *rascality* of Van Buren and his office holders."

Those wicked priests that headed these hard cider debauches, can never atone for the disgrace they have brought upon their calling, for justly answer for the crimes they have encouraged, and the reproach they have brought upon the name of religion. A temperance man with a keg of hard cider on his back, hurraing for

old Tip, was a beautiful sight, and the debased mortals who by such examples, became bold in inquiry, must now atone for their crimes in the walls of a Penitentiary.

The Portage Sentinel *(June 17, 1846)*

Not to be confused with the previous article of the same name published by *The Democratic Standard* in 1841, a story of stolen mail in Cincinnati, mail that was on route to Louisville, Kentucky, was covered by *The Portage Sentinel*, out of Ravenna, Ohio. The writer spends some time contemplating how the thieves managed to steal the mail from the deck of the boat and speculates as to where they may have hidden it.

THE GREAT MAIL ROBBERY.

U. S. Mail Stolen.—The Cincinnati Commercial of Saturday, 6th inst., contains the following: "The great Southern letter mail bag was stolen from the box on the mail boat at our landing, after two o'clock yesterday morning. Up to the time of writing, no trace of it has been found! The mail bags between this city and Louisville, are carried in a large box, which is made fast to the deck of the boat, and kept locked. The lock was opened—the bag taken out and carried away between 2 o'clock and 4—the boat having come in at the former time, and people were stirring at, and after the latter hour. This is doubtless a heavy robbery, as the bag contained all the great Southern mail—the letters alone being a load for two men! How many thousands of dollars are lost, no one can tell at present; every exertion is

being made to trace the robbers. More than likely, the villains approached the mail boat in a skiff, shipping their booty, and took down the Ohio and buried it in some lone spot. Strenuous exertions should be made in that quarter, as well as in others, to ferret out the bold perpetrators."

The Portsmouth Inquirer *(October 21, 1850)*

Out of the four articles in this collection, "Southern Mail," published by *The Portsmouth Inquirer* of Portsmouth, Ohio in 1850, is the longest. The piece covers a Philadelphia mail robbery in detail, including the destinations of the mail bags, the order of the train cars, the conditions the night of the robbery, and more.

SOUTHERN MAIL.

THE GREAT MAIL ROBBERY.—The Philadelphia papers of to-day bring us the particulars of the great robbery of the mails at Philadelphia. From these it appears, that about past 10 o'clock, as the Baltimore train was on its way from the depot, corner of Eleventh and Market streets, to Gray's Ferry, the mail car was entered and robbed of three pouches, containing valuable southern and western matter. The bags were from the New York Post Office, and were destined, one to Richmond, Va., another to Raleigh, N.C., and the third to Wheeling, Va.

The mail car was coupled to the express car, which was ahead, and the two were drawn by one team. These were followed by teams with the passenger and baggage cars. To show the boldness of the robbery, at the

time it must have taken place, the foremost passenger car was scarcely more than one hundred and fifty feet in the rear of the mail car.

The moon was shining, yet the sky was darkened by clouds of dust, created by the high wind that prevailed, and this may have blinded the eyes of the foremost passenger car, so as to have prevented him from seeing what was going on at the hind part of the mail car directly ahead of him.

At Gray's Ferry, the driver of the mail car discovered that the back door was open, and the brakeman of the train entered the car with a light to see whether any one was in there. Discovering nothing to excite his suspicion, he came out under the impression that all was right, and the door was locked. It seems that these two persons then had not suspected anything wrong, they doubtless attributing the circumstance of the door being open to accident or forgetfulness.

The robbery is believed to have been committed at or near the curve, corner of Broad and Prime streets, in the District of Moyamensing. It is supposed that the mail car was entered from behind, by the door, with a false key.

The first information of the robbery was received about breakfast time yesterday morning, by Robert Huddell, Agent of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad Company. A person came to his house, and informed him that the stolen pouches, rifled of their contents, had been accidentally found, at an early hour in the morning, in the bushes of Remenier's farm, about a square west of Broad street, and two squares south of Prime street.

The great Southern mail is now put in canvass bags, which are sealed and put into leather pouches, which

are locked. The robbers cut the pouches, drew out the bags, and opened these by cutting the strings that tied them. The contents of the bags were then emptied out, and the letters, packages, &c., broken open.

All the money in the letters was taken, but promissory notes, checks payable to order, sight drafts, &c., were thrown away. There were strewed over the ground about two bushels and a half of letters, &c. The letters numbering about one thousand, were gathered up, and Mr. White, Post Master of this city, yesterday, had them, with the checks, drafts, &c., returned to the Post Office at New York, where they are by this time, and where they can be examined by the Post Master of that city, at his leisure, so as to ascertain the names of the losers, and the amount of the loss.

No idea could be formed by the Post Master of Philadelphia of the extent of the loss. The supposition is that the most valuable matter was in the Richmond pouch. Mr. White examined one letter (from Carpenter & Vermilea, of this city, to J. W. Mowry, of Richmond,) that had contained $750. An empty box, which had been filled with jewelry, was picked from among the scattered letters; there was nothing to indicate how much was in it, or to whom it belonged.

The train was delayed at Gray's Ferry from 11 o'clock on Saturday night until 3 o'clock Sunday morning in consequence of the burning of a small trussel bridge over a gulley, crossing the road, about three miles below that place. This may have had something to do with the plan of the robbery; but the officers of the road think that the bridge was set fire by the sparks from the locomotive of the train that came up about half-past seven o'clock in the evening.

Mr. Anderson was the mail agent on the train, when the robbery occurred. No information in relation to the robbery had been received from south up to a late hour last evening. It is most probable that the agent, conductors, and other officers and employees on the train, had no intimation of the robbery until they got to Baltimore, and perhaps not then. Mr. White, Postmaster, promptly communicated with the Postmaster General at Washington, for instructions.

The mail bags stolen had arrived by the mail pilot line, and were put into the mail car, which came down for them on the city railway, at the Post Office. They were thrown through the side door into the middle of the car. The robbers must have known their exact position in the car. They had to walk over a number of other bags in order to reach therein. The bags contained the richest treasure of the whole mail, and of this the robbers must have been aware.

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