*Paper Trails: The US Post and the Making of the American West*, by Cameron Blevins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. x, 232. Note on methods, index, bibliography, maps, charts. $34.95 hardcover.

> Reviewer Rebecca Brenner Graham is a PhD candidate at American University and History Teacher at the Madeira School in Northern Virginia. Her dissertation analyzes American nineteenth-century religion-state relations through the lens of Sunday mail delivery.

Postal history is entering a new era, and historian Cameron Blevins's *Paper Trails: The US Post and the Making of the American West* epitomizes the new postal history. Blevins characterizes post offices as political institutions and social gathering spaces and then innovatively uses them to map American settler colonialism across the continent. Spanning 1860 to 1912, *Paper Trails* asks: "How was a government official able to send an utterly inconsequential letter hundreds of miles through occupied territory, in the middle of winter, and at the height of the Civil War?" (2). Blevins finds his answer by mapping post offices and mail routes, which formed a network that connected the West to a national communications system that facilitated an imperial state and settler-colonial project. Through letters, newspapers, and numerous other forms of communication carried by federal postal workers, settlers connected with national politics, culture, and social movements and the family, friends, and communities that they had left behind them. In this way, crucially, Blevins argues, the "US post was the underlying spatial circuitry of westward expansion" (3).

Blevins divides *Paper Trails* chronologically—with concurrent attention to themes—into seven chapters that fuse digital methods, political analysis, and social implications. For example, a spatial map in the chapter titled "Rural Free Delivery, 1896–1913" displays new RFD routes established from 1896 to 1904, locating each route by its original post office. On the following page, Blevins notes that reliably Republican-voting Iowa had 1,484 new routes (149–50). He explains that Iowa received a high ratio of RFD routes per capita because of its influential representation among the Republican majority on Capitol Hill. The social effect here was that Iowans communicated across distances more efficiently than, for example, Georgians, who lived in a dependably Democratic state with a similar number of residents but fewer than 500 RFD routes (150). In 1896, Iowa had been a state for fifty years, and these strong federal communication networks, championed by elected officials, had played a critical role in settling white migrants.

Blevins impressively uses coding and digital history methods, most notably resulting in a map of post offices called the "gossamer network." Even on its own, this map will greatly benefit subsequent postal

histories. To build this map, Blevins relies on a preexisting dataset of US post offices, which records information about 166,140 post offices from 1639 to 2000. He uses the Geographic Names Information System to geocode each post office and locate it on his map. Pivotally, Blevins integrates these results with shapefiles of Indigenous land cessions and government reservations. By overlaying these datasets, viewers can see federal post offices replace Indigenous communities—literally watching the dots move thanks to his geocoding. This dynamic map is freely available on gossamernetwork.com, and the code that Blevins wrote to accomplish this remarkable feat is available on Github. Overall, this methodological innovation illustrates how the expansion of a powerful American state contributed to the dispossession of Indigenous communities in the West.

   *Paper Trails* transforms postal historiography geographically, methodologically, and—I argue—irrevocably. Blevins builds on a quarter century of postal scholarship that has transitioned from institutional histories like Richard John's *Spreading the News* (1995) and David Henkin's *The Postal Age* (2006), which synthesized early and mid-nineteenth century American postal history to illuminate the rise of a modern state. More recently, Winifred Gallagher's *How the Post Office Created America* (2016) reiterated that the Post Office matters, and Joseph Adelman's *Revolutionary Networks* (2019) inaugurated the "new postal history." Now Blevins transforms the new postal history geographically by centering the story on the West and Indigenous communities, methodologically through digital techniques such as coding and maps, which he makes accessible on his website, and irrevocably by altering what is possible in the study of US post offices. And following an election year and pandemic that elevated USPS discourse, broad audiences seem eager to consume postal history.

*A Mighty Fine Road: A History of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad Company,* by H. Roger Grant. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020. xiii, 325 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. $30.00 hardcover.

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The Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific, known as the Rock Island or "the Rock" for short was a major midwestern railroad from the mid-1800s to its final bankruptcy and dismemberment in 1980. While it never reached