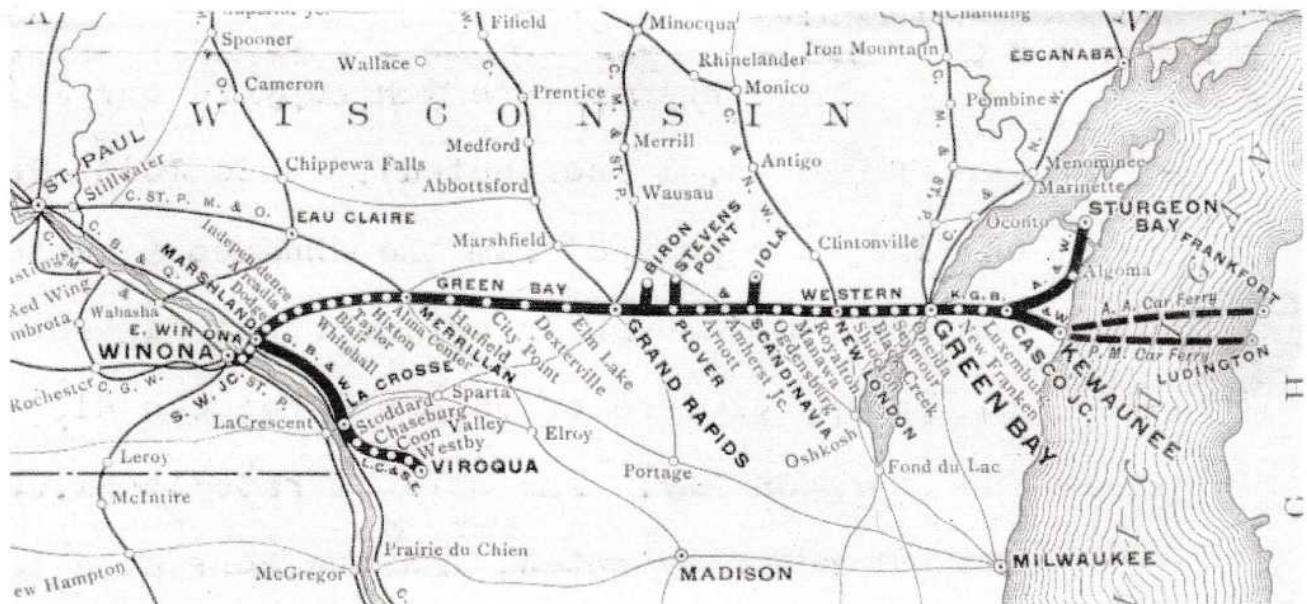


# RAILWAY POST OFFICE SERVICE on the GREEN BAY & WESTERN RAILROAD

The Green Bay & Lake Pepin Railroad was chartered in 1866 to serve the region's timber and agriculture shippers. The line between Green Bay and Winona was completed in 1873, and the name was changed to the Green Bay & Minnesota Railroad. Receivership and bankruptcy over the next several years resulted in several name changes, eventually becoming the Green Bay & Western Railroad in 1896. Acquisition of the Kewaunee, Green Bay & Western Railroad (KGB&W RR) in 1891 gained the road access to the Lake Michigan car ferries, and for the next 99 years the railroad served as a bridge between the Midwest and the East Coast via the ferries. The railroad also took control of the Ahnapee & Western Railroad, which connected the KGB&W with Sturgeon Bay, in 1906.

This exhibit presents RPO service of the Green Bay & Western throughout its history, and displays RPO markings that were used from the first trains in the 1870s through the final runs in 1946. Only the main line and the A&W line to Sturgeon Bay had RPO service. All passenger trains were discontinued in 1949.



Green Bay & Western Railroad map from 1906, showing the main line and related branches.



GREEN BAY & MINNESOTA R.R.

5/21/(1870s)

From the earliest days of the Green Bay & Minnesota Railroad, this letter was sent to Marshall, WI, near Madison.

## SYNOPSIS

# RAILWAY POST OFFICE SERVICE on the GREEN BAY & WESTERN RAILROAD

### PURPOSE AND SCOPE:

The purpose of this exhibit is to present the history of Railway Post Office (RPO) service on The Green Bay & Western Railroad and its predecessors. This is done primarily through covers that display the various RPO postmarks from this line, supplemented by maps, a brief history and an RPO "family tree" that shows how the designations changed over the years. The scope of these markings ranges from the 1870s, when route agents picked up, escorted and delivered bundles of mail to post offices along the route, to the full RPO cars that sorted and processed mail *en route* and which were eventually discontinued on the GB&W in 1946.

### BACKGROUND:

The Green Bay & Lake Pepin Railroad was chartered in 1866 to serve the region's timber and agriculture shippers. The line between Green Bay and Winona was completed in 1873, and the name was changed to the Green Bay & Minnesota Railroad. Receivership and bankruptcy over the next several years resulted in several name changes, eventually becoming the Green Bay & Western Railroad in 1896. Acquisition of the Kewaunee, Green Bay & Western Railroad (KGB&W RR) in 1891 gained the road access to the Lake Michigan car ferries, and for the next 99 years the railroad served as a bridge between the Midwest and the East Coast via the ferries. The railroad also took control of the Ahnapee & Western Railroad, which connected the KGB&W with Sturgeon Bay, in 1906.

### TREATMENT AND ORGANIZATION:

The title page of this exhibit presents a brief history and a map of the Green Bay & Western route, which ran mainly in Wisconsin with a connection to Winona, Minnesota. RPO markings are shown in roughly chronological order in two groups: The main line to Winona, and the Kewaunee/Sturgeon Bay line.

### IMPORTANCE:

In the United States, before there was a reliable network of roads and long before airplanes, the railroads were the only effective means of moving people and goods across the country. Contracting with the railroads, the Railway Mail Service was the primary means of distributing mail in the United States from its inception in 1864 until final discontinuance in 1977. The importance of this service in the development of the United States, especially with the growth of the industrial age and rapid westward expansion, cannot be overstated. This exhibit presents one small slice of the vast network of railway post offices that helped to build this nation.

**KNOWLEDGE, STUDY AND RESEARCH:**

As an amateur railroad historian with an interest in midwestern roads, along with a prior interest in philately, the study of RPOs and their postmarks is a natural combination of these two subjects for me. I have been a member of the Mobile Post Office Society (MPOS) and several regional railroad historical societies for over 40 years. Much of my research on Green Bay & Western RPO service was through publications of the MPOS, as noted in the "References" section below.

**CHALLENGE:**

RPO postmarks are relatively scarce when compared to other forms of postal history. Although the bulk of mail in the U.S. was handled and sorted by the clerks working in the RPO cars, most pieces of mail received postmarks at their originating post offices. Letters that were picked up at station platform mailboxes, handed to RPO clerks at station stops, or were found to be missing postmarks during the sorting process received RPO postmarks which showed the route, date and train number or direction. As a result, a tiny fraction of postal history bears these markings.

Many of the more common RPO markings can be found on postcards produced during the "Golden Age" of the early 1900s. Antique shops and postcard shows are a good source for these, but since the RPO markings are so scarce, and very few postcard dealers sort them separately, one can spend many hours searching through postcard boxes looking for these elusive markings. Earlier material, especially 19<sup>th</sup> century postmarks, can be found through postal history auctions and dealers. eBay has also become a good source for these covers.

For some of the earlier route designations that lasted only a short time, particularly on smaller branch lines, RPO markings have never been found. It is also possible that postmarking hammers for the new routes were never made, and clerks continued using the old hammers after the change.

**VALUATION:**

Like most postal history, the values of the covers are highly dependent on the age and duration of the marking, as well as the overall condition of the piece. The MPOS catalogs assign a subjective value to the various markings, ranging from 1 (most common) to 10 (one of a kind). Most of the pieces presented here have valuations of 2-5.

**OTHER NOTES:**

The Mobile Post Office Society publications have assigned catalog numbers to all known RPO postmarks. To keep this exhibit focused on the operation and evolution of RPO service on the GB&W, and to avoid cluttering it with minutia, I have not listed these catalog numbers in the exhibit.

## REFERENCES:

The Mobile Post Office Society (APS affiliate 64) has produced many catalogs and reference works that are invaluable for the study and collection of RPO markings. MPOS and other publications used in the preparation of this exhibit are:

John Kay, "Directory of Railway Post Offices," MPOS, 1997.

John Kay, "Directory of U.S. Route Agent Lines," MPOS, 2000

John Kay & Fred MacDonald, "Mail Travel Guide: State Guide to Agent and RPO Routes," MPOS, published serially 1992-2007

Rick Kunz, President, Mobile Post Office Society, personal correspondence.

Frank Scheer, curator of the Railway Mail Service Library in Boyce, VA, personal correspondence.

William Schwietz, "Minnesota Railroads," Northstar Chapter NRHS, 1985.

Charles Towle & Fred MacDonald, "The United States Railway Post Office Postmark Catalog, 1864 to 1977," Volumes I – IV, MPOS, 2001.

Charles Towle, "U.S. Route and Station Agent Postmarks," MPOS, 1986

U.S. Post Office Department, "Daily Postal Bulletin," various dates. Many of these have been digitized and are in a searchable database at <http://www.uspostalbulletins.com/>

"Green Bay & Western Lines" web site, <https://www.greenbayroute.com/>