

U.S. Mail

Often modelers overlook the action that priority (first class / passenger) trains can impart. "Mail.scarm" suggests a manner that U.S. Mail service can be incorporated into a layout, while still using only traditional toy-train accessories.

The U.S. postal service has a mission to deliver letters on a timely basis. This is why bags of collected mail are transported to their distribution stations (Post Offices) on airplanes and priority trains. Collected mail is first given a rough sorting at the local post office in order to separate out locally deliverable mail from mail needing transport to other cities. Physically smaller post offices will only bag mail for transport to one of several wide geographic zone distribution hubs. Physically larger post offices may assist these hubs by further sorting the mail in-house into bags destined for specific zones within the distribution hubs domain.

Most mail traffic on trains will be bagged mail destined for a distribution hub. To reduce transport time, not only are mail transport cars given high movement priority by the railroads, but the railroads take special steps to reduce loading and unloading time (the postal service will pay more for quicker delivery). Because, although dedicated mail trains are sometimes run, mail cars are usually incorporated into regular passenger train consists; mail is typically loaded and unloaded on passenger train platforms. There are many exceptions however, especially when Railway Post Offices are operated.

A Railway Post Office (RPO) is a way to speedup mail service, and were particularly popular in the days when mail was mostly sorted by hand. Why spend time sorting mail at a fixed location, when you can use the idle time during mail transport to sort the mail? Bags of mail destined for a hub the RPO is heading for are loaded onto the RPO, and while traveling, several postmen will further sort the contents of these bags.

Model Scenario

This model will provide a source and destination for mail train service. Although we are assuming the associated post office to be a main office, physically the office will be smaller in size than would be typical, because most of the sorting will be done on a RPO, and there is no need to accommodate a large sorting staff or bulky sorting equipment.

A stub track capable of holding at least two full sized baggage cars will branch from the main line. Typical equipment arriving here will be baggage cars, RPO's, and mail carrying boxcars. To make the postmen feel safer, a spring-loaded bumper is installed at the end of the stub, such as the Lionel Bumper #260. Out of service rolling stock, rolling stock awaiting later additional loading, rolling stock that will be performing direct transfers, or specialty rolling stock (the U.S. Postal Service also transports certain categories of packages), will typically be moved to the end of the stub track.

On the end of the stub track near the curve that leads to the turnout will be located a platform for loading and unloading bags of mail under roof cover (to keep the bags dry). Both sealed mail cars (baggage cars, mail boxcars, etc.) and RPO's will use the platform to load / unload mail bags. Trucks will also back against the end of the platform to transfer mail bags. There must also be a lockable storage room for bags awaiting their transport vehicle. The Lionel Operating Freight Station #356 is a good choice for the platform, although a non-operating freight Station such as the #256 can be substituted. The freight station should be situated so that the open platform side is closer to the bumper and the storage room side is closer to the turnout.

The space opened by the curved lead to the turnout, and the fact that the post office building does not have to abut a track (the postal service relies heavily on baggage carts), gives us a unique modeling opportunity. We can situate our post office sideways, so that we can see both the front and rear sides of the building from our regular vantage point at the front of the layout.

The Plasticville U.S. Post Office is a good choice for our office building. The public side of the building, with its entrance to the public P.O. boxes and service counter, will face a patron parking lot farthest away from the bumper. The employee side of the building, with its door to the postman lounge and large door to the sorting area, will face a postal van unloading area, which will lie between this building and the track platform.

The spot next to the start of the turnout, between the main line and the patron parking, is a great location for the Lionel Mail Pickup Set #161. A caboose, RPO, or other manned car passing the post office that is going in the direction required, will grab the occasional sack of mail hung from this pickup, while its train continues in motion.

For even more fun, you can optionally install an "uncoupling magnet" track on the main line just past the turnout split, to activate one of the operating Lionel boxcars (such as the United States Mail Car #3428) which can toss a mailbag towards the observer.

This model also provides space to display toy cars. One or two passenger cars will look nice parked in the Patron Parking area. A mail jeep can be parked with its back to the post office in the Van Unloading area. Even a big-rig truck trailer can be parked parallel to the track spur, with its rear butting up against the short edge of the track platform.