

*Representative Mason S. Peters.*

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# “Of Great Benefit”: The Origin of Postal Services for Blind Americans

*by Christopher W. Shaw*

**A**t the opening of the Fifty-Fifth United States Congress in 1897, a newly elected member from Kansas entered the House chamber for the first time. Two congressional pages observing this freshman congressman’s bearded visage curiously appraised his brand of politics. One of the boys bet the other a dollar that he could discover the answer to this question. “But how are you going to prove it?” challenged his fellow page. “Oh that will be easy enough,” he replied confidently, and then proceeded to relate a foolproof method for resolving the issue. “You stand down the aisle,” he instructed, “in front of him and I’ll get behind and give him a push. If a jackrabbit jumps out of his whiskers he’s a Pop[ulist].” Unbeknownst to the two pages, the subject of this exchange—Representative Mason S. Peters Sr.—had overheard what they said. Amused by the incident, he related it to a fellow congressman, and within days colleagues affectionately referred to Peters as the “Jackrabbit Statesman,” a nickname that he embraced.<sup>1</sup>

The pages’ impression of Peters’s partisan allegiance was correct. The voters of the second district had narrowly elected the fusionist Democrat-Populist candidate over his Republican banker opponent by fewer than four hundred votes.<sup>2</sup> Peters was born near Kearney, Missouri, in 1844. Prior to moving to Kansas in 1886, he had been a schoolteacher, served as clerk of a county court, and engaged in the livestock business. Once in Kansas, Peters established a successful livestock commission firm before entering politics.<sup>3</sup> His arrival in the nation’s capital occurred toward the end of a period that featured a number of frequently caricatured Populist

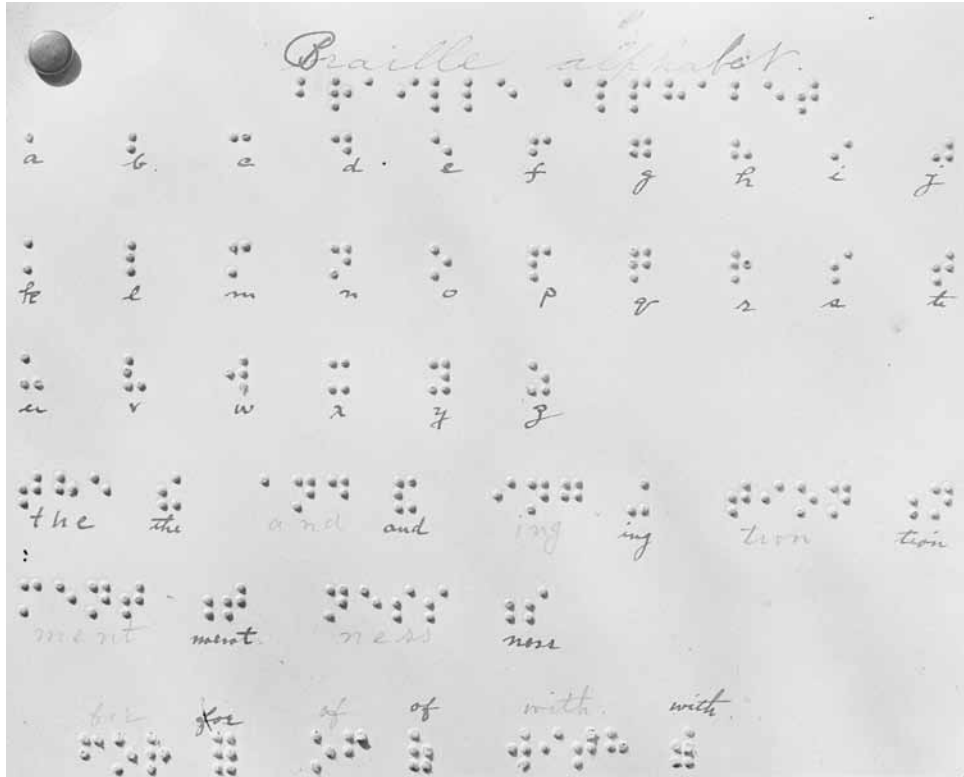
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1. “The Jack Rabbit Statesman,” *Kansas City Star*, March 12, 1899.

2. The second district comprised nine counties: Allen, Anderson, Bourbon, Douglas, Franklin, Johnson, Linn, Miami, and Wyandotte. On Peters’s opponent John P. Harris, see *Portrait and Biographical Record of Leavenworth, Douglas, and Franklin Counties, Kansas* (Chicago: Chapman Publishing Company, 1899), 168–69.

3. A. J. Halford, ed., *Official Congressional Directory, Fifty-Fifth Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), 47; James L. Harrison, comp., *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774–1949*, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1950, H. Doc. 607, 1672; Cuthbert Powell, *Twenty Years of Kansas City’s Live Stock Trade and Traders* (Kansas City, Mo.: Pearl Printing Company, 1893), 271–72. On Populism in Kansas, see Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880–1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Scott G. McNall, *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Peter H. Argersinger, *Populism and Politics: William Alfred Pepper and the People’s Party* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974); O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969); Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).



Braille, the tactile writing system invented by French educator Louis Braille in the 1820s, uses a series of six raised dots to represent language. Embossing techniques required thick, heavy paper in the nineteenth century, compelling blind Americans to pay higher postage. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Congress members from Kansas, including William A. “Whiskers” Peffer and “Sockless” Jerry Simpson. The pages’ conception of Populists reflected the influence of the nation’s political, cultural, and economic elite, who trivialized elected People’s Party officials by dismissing them as country bumpkins.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to such characterizations, however, and like his party’s members generally, Peters had an unremarkable personal appearance, was politically astute, and aspired to forward-thinking reform. He arrived with a cogent pet project in mind that had national implications, rather than a live specimen of authentic prairie fauna concealed on his person. Peters wanted to

4. For an examination of Populist caricature, see Roger A. Fischer, “Rustic Rasputin: William A. Peffer in Color Cartoon Art, 1891–1899,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 11 (Winter 1988): 222–39. For an overview of the actual personal characteristics of Populists in Congress, see O. Gene Clanton, *Congressional Populism and the Crisis of the 1890s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 7–18.

reduce postage rates on letters written by blind Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Mailing a letter was more expensive for blind people relative to other Americans. Systems of embossed writing—such as Braille and New York Point—required sheets of paper that were thicker and heavier than standard writing paper.<sup>6</sup> Postage for such letters consequently was higher due to their additional bulk and weight. Peters hoped to secure a reduced postage rate for letters written by blind people. He sought to permit blind people to send first-class mail at a discounted rate of one cent per ounce rather than the regular two cents assessed for first-class letters. His proposal provided an opportunity for government to better serve over fifty thousand Americans. A few bills addressing postage rates for blind people had been introduced previously, but they failed to

advance.<sup>7</sup> Peters would succeed.

Establishment of the principle in 1899 that blind Americans should receive preferential provision of postal services was an outgrowth of the waning

5. “What They Will Do,” *Kansas Semi-Weekly Capital*, December 17, 1897. On additional categories of preferential postage rates, see Richard B. Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700–1860s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989); Linda Lawson and Richard B. Kielbowicz, “Library Materials in the Mail: A Policy History,” *Library Quarterly* 58 (January 1988): 29–51; Richard B. Kielbowicz, “Mere Merchandise or Vessels of Culture?: Books in the Mail, 1792–1942,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 82 (June 1988): 169–200; Richard B. Kielbowicz and Linda Lawson, “Reduced-Rate Postage for Nonprofit Organizations: A Policy History, Critique, and Proposal,” *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 11 (Spring 1988): 347–406.

6. On embossed writing systems, see Frances A. Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in the United States* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976), 91–114.

7. Isabel Worrell Ball, “Kansas Contingent,” *Kansas Semi-Weekly Capital*, December 14, 1897; Post Office Department, *United States Domestic Postage Rates, 1789 to 1956* (Washington, D.C.: Post Office Department, 1956), 22; Department of the Interior, *Eleventh Census of the United States*,

Populist moment. The Kansan's interest in using government to further social welfare in this particular way expressed Populist reform ideas more broadly. Populism contended that government action had an important role to play in advancing social progress and the general welfare. Populists accordingly advocated using government programs to promote the public interest. They endeavored to overcome the power of bankers, railroad executives, commodity traders, and other formidable private interests. Leading Populists maintained that government had a special responsibility to care for society's more vulnerable members. "It is the duty of government to protect the weak," declared Populist Governor of Kansas Lorenzo D. Lewelling.<sup>8</sup> Support for worker protections in such areas as child labor, occupational safety, and wage payment regulations manifested Populist belief in the moral obligation of government to combat abuse and exploitation. Populists serving in Congress sought to augment social welfare programs by providing unemployment relief and establishing old age pensions.<sup>9</sup>



Lorenzo Lewelling became Kansas's first Populist governor in 1893. Like Mason S. Peters, Lewelling believed that government should serve the public interest, or as he once declared, "It is the duty of government to protect the weak."

25 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 3: 127; 46 Cong. Rec. 110 (1879), 52 Cong. Rec. 993 (1892), 53 Cong. Rec. 1272 (1893). On political controversy over classes of mail during the later nineteenth century, see Wayne E. Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 148–66; Wayne E. Fuller, "The Populists and the Post Office," *Agricultural History* 65 (Winter 1991): 1–16; Richard B. Kielbowicz, "Origins of the Second-Class Mail Category and the Business of Policymaking, 1863–1879," *Journalism Monographs* 96 (April 1986): 1–26; Jane Kennedy, "Development of Postal Rates: 1845–1955," *Land Economics* 33 (May 1957): 93–112.

8. Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Lawrence C. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931). For Lewelling's statement, see Pollack, *Populist Response*, 18.

9. Populist advocacy of labor protections was widespread. See, for example, in the Midwest, R. Alton Lee, *Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860–1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 65–68; Michael C. Pierce, *Striking With the Ballot: Ohio Labor and the Populist Party* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 46, 170; in the South, Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 58; Alicia E. Rodriguez, "Urban Populism: Challenges to Democratic Party Control in Dallas, Texas: 1887–1900" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa

Barbara, 1998), 135, 194, 290; in the West, Thomas A. Clinch, *Urban Populism and Free Silver in Montana: A Narrative of Ideology in Political Action* (Missoula: University of Montana Press, 1970), 154–55, 173; David B. Griffiths, "Far Western Populism: The Case of Utah, 1893–1900," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 37 (Fall 1969): 402–3. On Populist congressional advocacy for social welfare programs, see O. Gene Clanton, *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890–1900* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 128–29.

10. Scott M. Gelber, *The University and the People: Envisioning American Higher Education in an Era of Populist Protest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Theodore R. Mitchell, *Political Education in the Southern Farmers' Alliance, 1887–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

informative dialogues, and open-ended debates. That postal policy was such a priority to Peters is hardly surprising given Populist esteem for the Post Office. The postal system presented a prominent example of government in action, and this institution consequently occupied a notable place in Populist reform efforts.<sup>11</sup>

Peters's success in guiding the legislation through Congress was bolstered by his gregarious personality. He was popular with his colleagues in the House and enlisted an ally to sponsor the measure in the upper chamber: fellow Populist and Kansan William Alexander Harris Jr. Inauguration of this new postal service was one part of the Post Office's expanded role during these years. More sweeping contemporaneous postal innovations—such as Rural Free Delivery (RFD) and Parcel Post—confronted intense resistance from vested interest groups.<sup>12</sup> Proponents of favorable postage for blind people did not face this obstacle. However, they did meet with ideological opposition to augmenting the obligation of government for social welfare. A fortuitous circumstance helped Peters surmount this obstacle. He was aided by Chaplain of the House of Representatives Henry N. Couden, whose behind-the-scenes support reflected growing political advocacy among blind citizens.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period when numerous interest groups organized themselves to exert pressure on government. For blind Americans this was a moment of political emergence.<sup>13</sup> In 1895

approximately forty blind people met in St. Louis to advocate “a national college to which worthy graduates from our various State schools of the blind and other eligible blind persons may be admitted for a course of collegiate and normal instruction.”<sup>14</sup> This conference marked the founding of a pioneering blind persons' self-advocacy group—the American Blind People's Higher Education and General Improvement Association—that questioned prevailing assumptions favoring segregation and institutionalization. Its initial focus was enlarging opportunities for higher education to allow blind adults a more self-determined existence. “The promoters had a single thought,” the organization's official publication later recounted, “and this was to secure the higher education of the Blind.” Members of the group engaged in a spirited debate among themselves over the best strategy to pursue this aim. Proposals included a college focusing exclusively on blind education, study alongside other students at existing institutions of higher education with the benefit of government scholarships, and the establishment of a special facility on these campuses to aid blind students. Favorable postage was an idea that expressed the concern this organization was voicing about the particular educational challenges blind Americans faced.<sup>15</sup>

11. Postel, *Populist Vision*, 18, 143–46; Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 183.

12. Wayne E. Fuller, *RFD: The Changing Face Of Rural America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964); Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 123–42, 163–68; Samuel Kernell and Michael P. McDonald, “Congress and America's Political Development: The Transformation of the Post Office from Patronage to Service,” *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (July 1999): 792–811; Richard B. Kielbowicz, “Government Goes Into Business: Parcel Post in the Nation's Political Economy, 1880–1915,” *Studies in American Political Development* 8 (Spring 1994): 150–72; Anthony H. Smith, “The Battle for Parcel Post: The Western Farmer vs. The Eastern Mercantile Interests,” *Journal of the West* 13 (October 1974): 79–89; Rae E. Rips, “An Introductory Study of the Role of the Mail Order Business in American History, 1872–1914” (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1938), 92–111.

13. Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); Catherine J. Kudlick, “The Outlook of *The Problem* and the Problem with the *Outlook*: Two Advocacy Journals Reinvent Blind People in Turn-of-the-Century America,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New

York: New York University Press, 2001), 187–213; Harry Best, *Blindness and the Blind in the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), 549–53. On the developing field of disability history, see Paul K. Longmore, “Making Disability an Essential Part of American History,” *OAH Magazine of History* 23 (July 2009): 11–15; Kim E. Nielsen, “Historical Thinking and Disability History,” *Disabilities Studies Quarterly* 28 (Summer 2008), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/107/107>; Catherine J. Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” *American Historical Review* 108 (June 2003): 763–93; Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, “Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” in *New Disability History*, 1–29. For a synthetic study that incorporates this growing body of research, see Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2012).

14. “Want Higher Education,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, September 26, 1895; “For Higher Education,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 25, 1895; Edward J. Nolan, “Historical Sketch,” *Outlook for the Blind* 1 (April 1907): 17. Establishment of a national college for blind people was proposed regularly during the late nineteenth century. See Best, *Blindness and the Blind*, 348–49.

15. Richard Slayton French, *From Homer to Helen Keller: A Social and Educational Study of the Blind* (New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1932), 248–50; “Education for the Blind,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 8, 1896; “Policy of the American Association Relative to Higher Education For The Blind,” *Problem* 1 (January 1900): 10–13; Norman M. Yoder, “American Association of Workers for the Blind, 1895–1964,” in *Blindness Annual*, 1964, American Association of Workers for the Blind (Washington, D.C.: AAWB, 1964), 151–52. Shortly after the organization's establishment it welcomed “sighted members” willing to “pay their fees and work for our interests.” See “Want An Alphabet,”

Efforts to secure a postage rate for blind people coincided with a signal moment of expansion for the postal system. President Benjamin Harrison's appointment of department store magnate John Wanamaker as postmaster general in 1889 brought energetic leadership to the Post Office Department. Philadelphia's "Merchant Prince" promoted a host of new postal services for the American people, including free delivery of mail in rural areas, a parcel delivery system, a post office savings bank, and government ownership of the telegraph and telephone.<sup>16</sup> Wanamaker advocated all of these proposed services on the grounds that they would benefit the American people. Reduced postage rates for blind people arose from the same spirit that animated this larger push for postal reform.

Peters introduced his bill on December 8, 1897. It was referred to the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads under the chairmanship of Representative Eugene F. Loud. This California Republican was a veteran of the Civil War. His service as a young man in the Union army included the Battle of Gettysburg and General Philip H. Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley campaign. Following the war, he spent fifteen years as a foreman in California's largest shoe factory. Loud's early political career included acting as cashier and tax collector of San Francisco, a position that may have fostered the actuarial preoccupation so evident during his time in Congress. He first won election to the House in 1890. Loud's political sympathies aligned him with his close friend William McKinley. He was an Old Guard Republican who staunchly supported big business and upheld gold during the decade's Battle of the Standards.<sup>17</sup>



*Peters's bill reducing postage for the blind languished for months in the House Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, chaired by Eugene F. Loud (pictured above). Loud, a Republican, strongly opposed expanding postal services for Americans as long as the Post Office Department remained under the purview of the federal government, an arrangement he called "the most serious menace to our republican institutions." Courtesy of the HathiTrust Digital Library.*

Loud was opposed to Peters's legislation. The specter of postal deficits haunted him. "Some of our Socialistic friends, and even a few conservative men," Loud protested, "assume that the Post-Office Department . . . is a necessity for the whole people, and should be supported by general taxation."<sup>18</sup> Congress regularly appropriated funds from the U.S. Treasury to cover the gap between Post Office Department revenues and expenditures. Loud thought this practice posed calamitous consequences. "The deficit in the Post-Office Department has constantly been increasing," he warned in 1896, "and I believe the fact that the Post-Office Department to-day is run by the Government is the most serious menace to our republican institutions."<sup>19</sup> The following year,

*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 6, 1898; *Problem* 1 (January 1900): 4. The author has found no direct link between Peters and the American Blind People's Higher Education and General Improvement Association (or other activists) prior to his election to Congress. However, such a connection is plausible, especially given the involvement of Kansans in this organization.

16. Herbert Adams Gibbons, *John Wanamaker* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1926), 1:278-93. In addition to the vision that Wanamaker brought to the Post Office Department, his administration of the enterprise also receives high marks. See Fuller, *American Mail*, 315; Gerald Cullinan, *The Post Office Department* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 112.

17. 55 Cong. Rec. 43 (1897); "Eugene Francis Loud," *New York Tribune Illustrated Supplement*, February 6, 1898; "E. F. Loud is Renominated For Congress," *San Francisco Call*, September 13, 1898; Halford, ed., *Official Congressional Directory*, 22; "Death Summons Eugene F. Loud," *San Francisco Call*, December 20, 1908.

18. E. F. Loud, "A Step Toward Economy in the Postal Service," *Forum* 24 (1897): 471; "Kansas Teachers," *Kansas Semi-Weekly Capital*, July 8, 1898.

19. 54 Cong. Rec. 2567 (1896). From 1866 through 1910, there were only two years when postal revenues exceeded expenditures. During the entire period between 1851 and 1968, the Post Office Department ran a surplus only thirteen times. See Pao Hsun Chu, "The Post Office of the United States" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1932), 127; Fuller, *American Mail*, 66.



*Rural Free Delivery was a Populist innovation, guaranteeing that postal carriers would deliver mail directly to rural homes instead of requiring families to pick up mail at the nearest post office. Peters took office in 1897, when many farmers were just beginning to benefit from the new service, and their outpouring of appreciation prompted Representative Eugene Loud to protest that Americans “had run free-delivery mad.”*

he again observed that the postal deficit “has been steadily and constantly increasing; and, unless some radical change be made, it threatens in the future to become worse instead of better.”<sup>20</sup> Loud accordingly sought to hold the line against the introduction of new postal services and to cut existing costs. “If I had my way,” he declared, “the post-office would give no more facilities than it gives today—it would give fewer.”<sup>21</sup> His attitude toward those who opposed this agenda was belligerent. When a delegation of prominent Brooklynites—including a former congressman—called on Loud to protest service reductions

he contemptuously dismissed their concerns. “You men are a pack of damned asses,” Loud scoffed.<sup>22</sup>

The stance on postal policy championed by such deficit hawks as Loud recoiled from the recent expansion of the Post Office’s role. Loud had seen the influence Populist politicians were exerting over the postal system. Representative Thomas E. Watson—the Populist firebrand from Georgia—secured the initial appropriation for RFD. This new service’s extension was proceeding apace, and during the summer of 1897 letters expressing farmers’ enthusiasm for RFD began flooding the capital. Feeling exasperation over appropriations for mail delivery, Loud testily exclaimed that the “country had run free-delivery mad.”<sup>23</sup> The tendency of innovative new services to encourage greater disregard for postal expenditures provided additional fodder for his opposition. “I want this service [RFD] to cost more each year,” acknowledged one Indiana congressman, “for I know that it is increasing and spreading its blessings in a wider circle.”<sup>24</sup> Support for expanding postal services did not entail indifference to deficits. This perspective, however, could elicit a different approach to the question of how expenditures should be reduced. Populist Senator Marion Butler of North Carolina recommended addressing the issue by reining in the exorbitant sums paid to railroad corporations for transporting mail. “Why,” he pointedly asked, “do not those who are so much concerned about the deficit

20. Loud, “Step Toward Economy,” 472.

21. M. G. Cunniff, “The Post-Office and the People,” *World’s Work* 7 (December 1903): 4246. Loud’s expenditure-cutting offensive also entailed opposition to wage increases for postal workers, a stand that led to his electoral defeat when organized labor campaigned against him in 1902. See Sterling Denhard Spero, *The Labor Movement in a Government Industry: A Study of Employee Organization in the Postal Service* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), 96–100.

22. “Brooklyn Committee Insulted By Loud,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 28, 1898. Loud subsequently denied uttering the phrase “damned asses” (“Platt May Throw Quigg Overboard,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 30, 1898).

23. 54 Cong. Rec. 2620 (1896); C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1955), 244–46; Amy Chambliss, “Tom Watson’s R.F.D.,” *Georgia Review* 17 (Spring 1963): 76–84; James H. Bruns and Donald J. Bruns, *Reaching Rural America: The Evolution of Rural Free Delivery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 10–15. On farmers writing Congress in support of RFD, see Fuller, *RFD*, 41.

24. Fuller, *RFD*, 54.

in the Post-Office Department turn their attention to these big leakages and gross abuses?"<sup>25</sup>

Proponents of the Post Office's public service role rejected the notion that its mission should be determined simply by the impulse to avoid deficits. They saw unmet public needs and sought to address them. Wanamaker recognized that government was particularly adapted to this role. "It is for the interest of a private company to extend its business only so fast and so far as it is profitable; it is the aim of the Government to extend its service wherever it is actually needed."<sup>26</sup> Loud stood in opposition to this broad conception of the public sector. He regarded the role of government in narrow terms. "Government is not constituted to do business other than such as it must do for national protection and defense."<sup>27</sup> Loud's belief in the unsuitability of public institutions for purposes other than national defense led him to insist that for-profit businesses provided the model for conducting postal functions. Only if the Post Office followed this approach, he contended, could it address persistent deficits. "If the Government would once accustom itself to do business in a businesslike way, the savings all along the line would be enormous."<sup>28</sup> Loud's conviction that the postal system should operate like a private business revolved around questions of revenue and expense. This perspective made no provision for the social welfare considerations that motivated Peters's proposal.

There was no Loud to reckon with in the Senate. Peters's ally William Alexander Harris Jr. introduced a companion measure to his bill on January 19, 1898.<sup>29</sup> A veteran of the Confederate army, Harris had moved to the Sunflower State to work as a civil engineer for the

Kansas Pacific Railway. He subsequently developed a prosperous ranch noted for its Scottish shorthorn cattle and was involved with the Grange and the Farmers' Alliance. After joining the People's Party in 1890, Harris served a single term in the House, before being defeated for reelection. He subsequently won a Senate seat in 1896. Harris became known in Congress as a watchdog of railroad corporations. His engagement with postal issues included support for making the telegraph a service of the Post Office.<sup>30</sup> Unlike his counterpart in the House, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Post Office and Post Roads was sympathetic to the idea of reduced postage rates for blind people. Colorado Republican Edward O. Wolcott was not an outspoken campaigner against postal deficits, and he did not obstruct the legislation.

The Peters bill received further support from an unlikely congressional source that operated outside of the legislative branch's established political structure. The Reverend Henry N. Couden served as chaplain of the House for a quarter century. The issue Peters sought to address was a personal one for Couden. He had been born in Marshall County, Indiana, in 1842 and was raised on a farm near Cincinnati. At eighteen, he enlisted in the Union army. Couden was the first man in his county to answer the initial call President Abraham Lincoln issued for volunteers. He served over two years, surviving a number of battles including Shiloh, but was blinded by buckshot during an engagement at Beaver Dam Lake in Mississippi. Following his military discharge for permanent disability, Couden entered a seven-year course of instruction at the Ohio State School for the Blind. He then enrolled in St. Lawrence University and trained to become a Universalist minister. Couden served as pastor to congregations in New York, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Michigan, before being selected as House chaplain in 1895.<sup>31</sup>

25. 54 Cong. Rec. 2097, 2407 (1897). On the issue of railroad compensation for transporting mail, Wayne E. Fuller concludes, "the subject was complex. . . . But it did appear . . . that the Post Office was helping the railroads defray the cost of carrying passengers" (*American Mail*, 184). On Butler's congressional postal activity, see James L. Hunt, *Marion Butler and American Populism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 89, 134–35.

26. Post Office Department, *Report of the Postmaster General, 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1890), 9.

27. E. F. Loud, "The Postal Service," *North American Review* 178 (February 1904): 225.

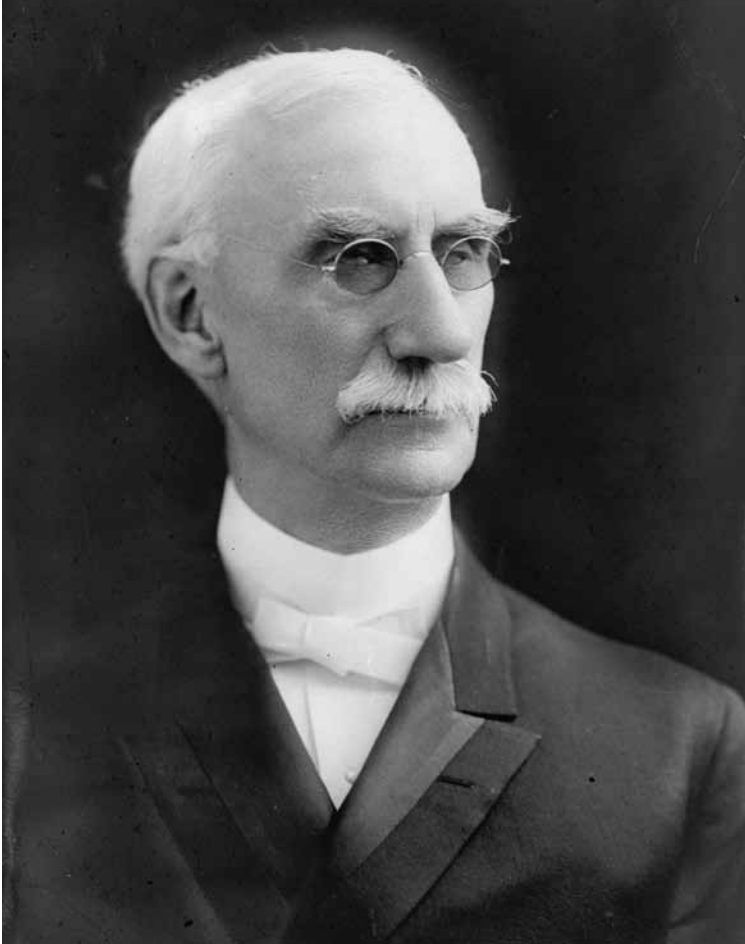
28. Loud, "Step Toward Economy," 475. On the struggle over whether the Post Office should operate like a private business or a public service, see Fuller, *American Mail*, 148–89; M. Clyde Kelly, *United States Postal Policy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1931), 62–87; Christopher W. Shaw, *Preserving the People's Post Office* (Washington, D.C.: Essential Books, 2006), 7–18.

29. 55 Cong. Rec. 748 (1898).

30. Robert S. La Forte, "William Alexander Harris," in *American National Biography*, eds. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10:194–95; Kermit E. Opperman, "The Political Career of Senator William Alexander Harris" (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1938).

31. "At Work Again," *Detroit Free Press*, December 3, 1895; Warren D. Crandall and Isaac D. Newell, *History of the Ram Fleet and the Mississippi Marine Brigade in the War for the Union on the Mississippi and Its Tributaries* (St. Louis, Mo.: Press of Buschart Brothers, 1907), 457–58; "Hoosier Chaplain of House Retired," *Indianapolis Star*, January 7, 1921; "Death Claims Rev. Dr. H. N. Couden," *Washington Post*, August 23, 1922.





Reverend Henry N. Couden, a Universalist minister who lost his sight during the Civil War, served as the chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives for a quarter century. Couden also acted as an unexpected ally to Peters, not only offering a rare public endorsement of his bill, but also distracting the notoriously oppositional Loud during the final House vote to secure its passage. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division, Washington, D.C.

Couden's position was something of a sinecure. His primary responsibility was to offer a short prayer at noon on days when Congress was in session. A Republican, Couden became such a fixture of the House that he retained his chaplaincy even after Democrats won a majority in the chamber. The "Blind Chaplain" was far removed from the political concerns that preoccupied members of Congress. As a rule, he left the chamber immediately after offering the daily prayer.<sup>32</sup> During the first decade of the twentieth

32. "Chaplain Couden Will Be Retained," *Detroit Free Press*, January 12, 1911; Theodore Tiller, "Committee Of House Attends Funeral Of Blind Chaplain," *Sun* (Baltimore), August 27, 1922.

century, the domineering Illinois Republican Speaker Joseph G. "Uncle Joe" Cannon closely monitored all congressional activity. But Couden once escaped his notice entirely. Cannon had opened yet another House session by noting that it was time for the chaplain to "offer prayer." While Couden prayed, Cannon's mind evidently was engrossed in other concerns. "Amen," the chaplain concluded. "The hour of 12 o'clock noon having arrived, the Chaplain will offer prayer," Cannon mechanically stated again. He was hastily advised that Couden had already discharged his duty. Bemused, the speaker good-naturedly swore to a man of the cloth. "Oh, hell! Chaplain, the joke's on me."<sup>33</sup>

While Couden customarily isolated himself from the political life of the House, Peters's bill prompted the chaplain to take an exceptional stand by supporting the measure. The chaplain's position provided the bill with a notable endorsement. And its author's charm facilitated the cause in Congress. The *Kansas City Star* identified Peters to be "something of a mixer," and observed that he possessed a "breezy and jovial nature."<sup>34</sup> This sociable Kansan's likeable personality helped win favor for his idea among fellow legislators, which was vital because Populist congressmen attempting to advance legislation faced significant institutional obstacles. The House operated under rules introduced in 1890 by Speaker Thomas B. Reed of Maine that gave the Republican majority control over the legislative agenda. Representatives who were not Republicans were marginalized, which made Peters's

ability to cultivate personal relationships with his colleagues an especially valuable skill. The convivial Kansan even managed to strike up a friendship with Reed.<sup>35</sup> Comments that Peters made shortly after the

33. On Cannonism, see Blair Bolles, *Tyrant From Illinois: Uncle Joe Cannon's Experiment with Personal Power* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951); Kenneth W. Hechler, *Insurgency: Personalities and Politics of the Taft Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940); William Rea Gwinn, *Uncle Joe Cannon: Archfoe of Insurgency* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957). For Cannon's exchange with Couden, see "Cannon's Apology to the Chaplain," *New York World*, March 13, 1906.

34. Ball, "Kansas Contingent"; "The Jack Rabbit Statesman"; "Mason Peters Dies At 69," *Kansas City Star*, February 14, 1914.

35. Peter H. Argersinger, "No Rights on this Floor: Third Parties and the Institutionalization of Congress," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22

conclusion of his service in Congress attest to the good rapport existing between the two men. He noted that the speaker was “cordially hated by Democratic and Populist members,” yet “paid a fine tribute” to Reed by describing him as a statesman of such “intellect and ability [that] he towers above every other member [of the House].”<sup>36</sup>

The group of people Peters intended to benefit also aided his cause. His idea kindled a sympathetic response because it sought to help remedy the unique challenges confronting blind people. Unlike many reforms proposed by Populist congressmen, governmental action to assist blind Americans did not directly challenge established beliefs about the role of government. This group traditionally was understood to merit help and support from society. Blind people were considered worthy of public assistance because they were not deemed personally responsible for their circumstances.<sup>37</sup>

Additional developments further aided the measure’s progress through Congress. The legitimacy of opposition to Peters’s idea on the grounds of expense was undercut by the Post Office Department’s favorable appraisal of his proposal. “I am inclined to think that the measure is one that should be adopted,” allowed John A. Merritt, third assistant postmaster general. “It seems a hardship that the blind, who can not use the ordinary appliances for writing their letters, should be unduly taxed on that account.” Merritt included an important addendum to this endorsement that directly spoke to concerns over cost. “The quantity of matter . . . that is sent in the mails [by blind people] is not excessive, and therefore the passage of the bill will not result in any appreciable loss of postal revenue.”

(Spring 1992): 655–90; Ronald M. Peters Jr., *The American Speakership: The Office in Historical Perspective* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 62–75; George Rothwell Brown, *The Leadership of Congress* (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1922), 81–109. On Peters’s friendship with Reed, see Henry Clay McDougal, *Recollections, 1844–1909* (Kansas City, Mo.: Franklin Hudson Publishing Co., 1910), 144.

36. “Reception to M. S. Peters,” *Kansas City Star*, March 21, 1899.

37. Best, *Blindness and the Blind*, 259–65. Distinguishing the “undeserving” from those adjudged deserving of assistance has deep roots in Anglo-American social welfare policy. See Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America’s Enduring Confrontation with Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–7; John K. Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760–1800* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 116–21; William I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: Free Press, 1974), 46–55; Christopher Hill, “Puritans

He also suggested a modification that surely made the measure still more acceptable to those who feared adding to the postal deficit: he proposed that all such letters remain unsealed to reduce any possibility of fraud. Merritt further proposed that rather than establishing a separate postage rate for blind people within first-class mail, their letters be made eligible for third-class mail, which was assessed a lower rate of one cent per two ounces.<sup>38</sup>

Peters’s bill was not treated with any sense of urgency by Loud’s committee. Even after the Post Office Department endorsed the idea in April 1898, the measure continued to languish in committee. Members of the broader Congress generally had approved of the idea from its initial introduction, however, and nothing during the intervening months occurred to alter their opinions. The statement made by a Republican member of the committee demonstrates support for the idea within this body as well. “That the most unfortunate of mankind,” he submitted, “should have a higher rate of postage to pay than the capable and the strong seems an undue hardship.”<sup>39</sup> The combination of widespread congressional support and the Post Office’s official sanction eventually produced a favorable report from the committee. The bill was sent back to the House with Merritt’s suggested amendments in June.<sup>40</sup>

In spite of the committee having assented to his legislation, Peters was not taking any chances. He remained wary of the habitually contentious Loud. The freshman congressman handled this precarious situation with an adept maneuver that revealed the calculations of a shrewd legislator. On July 7, Peters enlisted the help of Couden to ensure that there would be no last minute obstructionism. The chaplain paid a call on Loud, and while they were speaking with one another Peters seized the floor and swiftly secured the measure’s passage. It was all over before Loud knew what had happened.<sup>41</sup>

and the Poor,” *Past & Present* 2 (November 1952): 32–50; R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), 260–70.

38. S. M. Clark, Report Amending H. 4304, Regulating Postage on Letters by the Blind, H.R. Rep. No. 1545 (1898). Third-class mail included circular letters, advertising matter, and books, as well as periodicals not qualifying for the second-class mail privilege that aided the dissemination of journalism.

39. *Ibid.*

40. 55 Cong. Rec. 5796 (1898).

41. “Kansas Teachers”; 55 Cong. Rec. 6757 (1898).

A Bust of Mason S. Peters.

John A. Shaunessy of Kansas City Kan., who has done some excellent work in sculpture, has just finished an alto relieve bust of Mason S. Peters, former congressman in the Kansas City, Kas., district, which is considered a fine specimen of the sculptor's art. Mr. Peters, while in Congress, secured a modification of the postal laws by which the postage was reduced on letters written in the point system by the blind, and the bust which Mr. Shaunessy has made is intended to be placed in the Kansas institution for the blind in Kansas City, Kas. It was modeled from life by Mr. Shaunessy and is for the purpose of giving the sightless an opportunity to "see" with their finger tips the features of one who had their welfare at heart and who accomplished much for them during his first term in Congress. The inscription on the base, below the name, is in the characters of the blind and reads: "Hon. Mason S. Peters, through whose efforts Congress reduced letter postage for the blind."

There are about 200 public and private institutions of this character in the United States and it is likely some of them will want a replica of the work, but for the present the artist is content with having the pleasure and gratification of presenting the first one to the home institute.—K. C. Star.

On October 16, 1900, the *Jeffersonian Gazette*, of Lawrence, Kansas, reported that a local sculptor had created a bust of Congressman Peters for the Kansas State Institution for the Education of the Blind. The institution intended to give "the sightless an opportunity to 'see' with their finger tips the features of one who had their welfare at heart and who accomplished much for them during his first term in Congress."

Passage in the Senate that winter during the lame-duck session lacked similar intrigue, but it did include a minor complication. The House version of the bill was reported to the Senate without amendment in early February 1899.<sup>42</sup> On the final day of the month, Harris called for a vote on the measure. At this point, an unforeseen debate ensued when the veteran Massachusetts Republican George Frisbie Hoar identified a discrepancy between the text of the legislation and its title. He stated his preference that "the acts of Congress [be] exact in title," and noted that the mail involved was not necessarily "written by the blind" as stated. "In the first place, nobody knows who wrote it," Hoar observed. "In the next place, it is not a correct description, because it is not a letter written when prepared in this mode." Wolcott intervened to avert any delay by insisting that he would "not like to have the bill go back to the House." Hoar acceded to his appeal. "It is not very important whether the title be correct or incorrect," he allowed. The bill was then passed without further debate.<sup>43</sup>

"An act Regulating the postage on letters written by the blind" was signed into law by President McKinley on March 2, 1899, shortly before the Fifty-Fifth Congress adjourned, and Peters returned to Kansas. His reelection campaign had met with defeat in a landslide election for the state's Republicans.<sup>44</sup> But Peters departed the national political stage having achieved enactment of the law he had diligently pursued from the outset. Late that summer, Peters attended the annual convention of the American Blind People's Higher Education and General Improvement Association in Kansas City, Kansas. He advised its members on strategies for advancing their policy agenda in Congress. The organization concluded its

42. 55 Cong. Rec. 1479 (1899).

43. 55 Cong. Rec. 2538 (1899).

44. *Statutes at Large* 30 (1899): 984; "Kansas Is Republican," *Kansas City Star*, November 9, 1898. The demise of Populism in Kansas following the 1898 election reflected its broader fate nationally. See R. Alton Lee, *Principle Over Party: The Farmers' Alliance and Populism in South Dakota, 1880-1900* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2011), 161-72; James M. Beeby, *Revolt of the Tar Heels: The North Carolina Populist Movement, 1890-1901* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 189-214; William J. Gaboury, *Dissension in the Rockies: A History of Idaho Populism* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), 359-423; Barton C. Shaw, *The Wool-Hat Boys: Georgia's Populist Party* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 196-214; Robert W. Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885-1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 119-21; Lindley S. Allen, "The Breakup of the Populist Party" (master's thesis, Leland Stanford Junior University, 1950), 69-101.

proceedings by adopting a resolution thanking the former congressman for his legislative efforts on behalf of blind people.<sup>45</sup> A bust of Peters was sculpted the following year for installation at the Kansas Institution for the Education of the Blind. The likeness provided a tactile means for blind people to apprehend the former congressman's countenance. Its inscription appreciatively read: "Hon. Mason S. Peters through whose efforts Congress reduced letter postage for the blind."<sup>46</sup>

Displaying the same entrepreneurial spirit in private life that characterized his brief time in Congress, Peters went on to pioneer the manufacture and sale of hog cholera vaccine. Revenues from this business venture amounted to \$1 million per year at the time of his death in 1914.<sup>47</sup> The "Jackrabbit Statesman's" compatriot Harris continued to serve in Congress until 1903, when he was the lone remaining Populist senator. After leaving Washington, D.C., Harris resumed an active role in livestock circles until suffering a fatal heart attack six years later. Peters's ally Couden served as chaplain of the House for two more decades before resigning in 1921. He passed away the following year and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.<sup>48</sup>

The postal reform Peters shepherded through Congress stands as a concrete manifestation of Populist concern for social welfare. It was the first postal law to specifically benefit blind Americans. Mere days after its enactment, the *Washington Post* recognized that this reform would be "of great benefit to many blind people in his district and to blind people all over the country."<sup>49</sup> The principle of government aid



*The Kansas State Institution for the Education of the Blind was founded in 1867 in Wyandotte, Kansas, and is still in operation today. A year after Peters's bill became law the institution installed a bust of the Kansas congressman in honor of his advocacy.*

for blind persons would find expression in expanded preferential postal services over the following years, culminating with the 1967 enactment of "Free Matter for the Blind and Handicapped." This law granted blind people the right to mail letters, recordings, educational materials, and even typewriters, free of postage.<sup>50</sup> The Post Office was in a position to introduce special services for blind Americans because of its status as a branch of government. Absent the profit imperative that motivates private business, there was space for the postal system's operations to be shaped by the principle of public service. [KH]

45. "Blind Colleges," *Kansas City Journal*, August 31, 1899; "Blind People Are Grateful," *Kansas City Star*, August 31, 1899.

46. "A Bust of Mason S. Peters," *Kansas City Star*, October 12, 1900.

47. "Mason Peters Dies At 69"; Mason S. Peters, *How to Make and Use Anti-Hog Cholera Serum* (Kansas City, Mo.: Kellogg-Baxter Ptg. Co., 1911).

48. "Ex-Senator Harris Dies Here," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 21, 1909; Opperman, "William Alexander Harris," 5; "Hoosier Chaplain of House Retired"; "Death Claims Rev. Dr. H. N. Couden."

49. "Ex-Members of House," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1899.

50. Judith M. Dixon and Alfred D. Hagle, "Free Matter: Nearly a Century of Change," in *That All May Read: Library Service for Blind and Physically Handicapped People*, National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), 425-29; *Statutes at Large* 81 (1967): 621-22.