

DOCUMENT RESUME

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Report to Sen. John C. Danforth; by Victor L. Lowe, Director, General Government Div.

Contact: General Government Div.

Budget Function: Commerce and Transportation: Postal Service (402).

Organization Concerned: Postal Service.

Congressional Relevance: Sen. John C. Danforth.

An evaluation was performed of the quality of mail service in Missouri and the consolidation of mail processing operations to the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility. Mail service in Missouri was generally good. First-class mail came close to meeting the Postal Service's 95% ontime delivery goal, and mail committed to 2-day and 3-day delivery times compared favorably with regional and national averages for ontime delivery performance. While only about 7% of the mail was delivered late during fiscal year 1977 (usually only by about 1 or 2 days), this amounted to a volume of 74 million. An analysis of customer complaints showed no indications of long-term or unusual problems except for complaints received just after the consolidation. There were serious problems associated with the consolidation for a few weeks. Although many of the problems were resolved, the Postal Service has been unable to achieve reduced operating costs and improve mail service to the preconsolidation level. The consolidation should eventually result in savings of about \$205,000 annually, and mail service should reach its preconsolidation level. (HTW)



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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

RELEASED
6/20/78
JUN 15 1978

GENERAL GOVERNMENT
DIVISION

B-114874

The Honorable John C. Danforth
United States Senate

Dear Senator Danforth:

In response to your November 11, 1977, request, we have evaluated the quality of mail service in Missouri and the consolidation of mail processing operations to the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility.

Generally, the quality of mail service in Missouri is good. Postal Service statistics show that first-class mail committed to be delivered overnight comes close to meeting the Service's 95 percent ontime delivery goal. Although delivery performance for mail committed to be delivered in 2- and 3-days is not as good, it compares favorably with regional and national averages for ontime delivery performance.

While only about 7 percent of Missouri's mail was delivered late during the fiscal year 1977, this still amounted to 74 million of the total mail volume of about 1.05 billion pieces. Most delayed letters are only a day or two late; a small number, however, can be excessively late, lost, mutilated, or destroyed. Our examination of customer complaints showed that except for a rash of mail service complaints just after the consolidation of mail processing at the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility, there were no indications of unusual problems with the mail service in Missouri.

The consolidation of mail processing operations at the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility had serious problems for a few weeks immediately after the consolidation occurred. While many of these problems have been resolved and mail service has shown improvement, the Postal Service has been unable to achieve reduced operating costs and improve mail service to the pre-consolidation level.

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We believe that the consolidation should eventually result in savings of about \$205,000 annually and mail service should reach its pre-consolidation level. A detailed discussion of each of these matters is contained in the enclosure.

At your office's request we did not obtain written agency comments on matters discussed in this report, however, we discussed them in detail with Service officials in Missouri and their comments have been incorporated in this report. No further distribution of this report will be made until 5 days from the date of this letter unless you publicly release its contents earlier.

We will be pleased to meet with you or your staff to discuss these matters further if you so desire.

Sincerely yours,


Victor L. Lowe
Director

Enclosure

EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF MAIL SERVICE
IN MISSOURI AND CONSOLIDATION OF MAIL PROCESSING
AT MID-MISSOURI GENERAL MAIL FACILITY

INTRODUCTION

Missouri is one of the 13 midwestern States in the Postal Service's Central Region. Postal operations in Missouri are administered by two district offices--Gateway District Office in St. Louis, and Mid-America District Office in Prairie Village, Kansas. The Gateway District Office administers most postal operations in Missouri through 12 sectional center facilities^{1/} and 692 post offices. The Mid-America District Office administers the remainder of the State's postal operations through 5 sectional center facilities and 265 post offices. As appendix I shows, its jurisdiction extends only into the western part of the State. About 17,000 postal workers are employed in Missouri.

The Kansas City and St. Louis sectional center facilities are the largest postal facilities in Missouri. Combined they process about 68 percent of the 1.05 billion pieces of first-class stamped mail processed in the State each year. These facilities also function as state distribution centers, processing most out-of-State mail destined for delivery in Missouri.

On September 15, 1977, mail processing at the Jefferson City and Columbia sectional center facilities was consolidated to the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility at the Columbia Regional Airport. The new facility is the third largest facility in the State in terms of mail volume. From October 8, 1977, through February 24, 1978, the facility processed about 36 million pieces of mail.

Delivery Standards

The Postal Service has established the following standards for delivery of first-class mail:

- 1 day (overnight) within designated areas (generally within sectional center areas and between adjoining sectional centers);
- 2 days for mail within a 600-mile radius; and
- 3 days for all remaining areas.

^{1/}A mail handling facility for processing incoming and outgoing mail for peripheral local post offices in a designated service area.

These standards apply to all first-class mail having the proper ZIP Code and mailed by the last pick-up time--generally 5 p.m. The Service's goal is to deliver 95 percent of first-class mail within these standards.

The Service's Origin-Destination Information System (ODIS) collects and analyzes statistics showing whether the Service achieved its goals. Under this system, delivery time is measured from the date mail is postmarked to the date it reaches the last delivery unit before being placed in the addressee's mailbox. Delays, which would not be recognized by the system, can occur before postmarking and in delivery.

Our evaluation of the quality of mail service in Missouri and the consolidation of mail processing at the Mid-Missouri facility was conducted primarily at the Postal Service's Gateway District Office in St. Louis, and the Mid-America District Office in Prairie Village, Kansas. We also obtained information at the St. Louis and Kansas City sectional center facilities and the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility.

QUALITY OF MAIL SERVICE IN MISSOURI IS GENERALLY GOOD

Mail service in Missouri is comparable to that throughout the Central Region and the Nation. ODIS statistics for Missouri show that overnight delivery performance for first-class stamped mail was generally close to the Service's 95 percent ontime delivery goal. For the last 2-1/2 years it has averaged 94 percent. Delivery performances for 2- and 3-day areas were about 91 and 92 percent, respectively. While these do not meet Service goals, they compare favorably with regional and national averages.

It should be recognized that even if all Postal Service ontime delivery goals were met, many millions of pieces of mail would still be delivered late in Missouri each year. Problems that cause delays most often relate to mail processing, including transportation foul-ups and mail sent to the wrong destination. While our analysis of mail service complaints in Missouri showed no indications of long-term problems, still the majority of complaints filed with the Postal Service concerned delivery service.

Delivery performance statistics depict good mail service

Missouri's average delivery performance was below the Service's 95 percent ontime delivery goal for the period from June 1975 to February 1978, but compared favorably with regional and national averages as shown in the following table.

Percentage of mail delivered on time

	<u>Origination</u>			<u>Destination</u>		
	<u>Missouri</u>	<u>a/ Region</u>	<u>Nation</u>	<u>Missouri</u>	<u>a/ Region</u>	<u>Nation</u>
Overnight	94	94	95	94	94	95
2-day	90	90	91	92	90	91
3-day	91	90	90	93	91	90

a/The percentages used for Missouri are a composite of the performance percentages of the 17 sectional center facilities in the State.

Average delivery performance statistics depict good overall mail service in Missouri, and some individual sectional center facilities provide better service than others. The following table shows the delivery performances for each of the 17 sectional center facilities in Missouri for overnight, 2- and 3-day areas for the period June 1975 to February 1978.

<u>Area</u>	<u>Overnight</u>		<u>2-day</u>		<u>3-day</u>	
	<u>Origin</u>	<u>Destination</u>	<u>Origin</u>	<u>Destination</u>	<u>Origin</u>	<u>Destination</u>
St. Louis	92	92	91	91	92	92
Hannibal	96	96	91	91	91	89
Kirksville	98	97	91	90	91	92
Flat River	96	93	92	92	88	91
Cape Girardeau	96	97	92	91	89	89
Sikeston	97	97	92	92	91	91
Poplar Bluff	94	98	87	95	91	90
Joplin	97	94	89	88	87	94
Jefferson City	94	94	89	95	86	93
Columbia <u>a/</u>	93	96	86	94	88	92
Rolla	94	92	90	86	89	91
Springfield	96	94	89	89	89	91
Kansas City	94	95	91	92	92	95
St. Joseph	95	97	91	92	86	92
Harrisonville	94	93	92	92	88	93
Sedalia	94	93	89	84	90	91
Chillicothe	94	95	91	90	88	90

a/The Jefferson City and Columbia sectional center facilities were consolidated into the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility on September 15, 1977.

While the delivery performance for the 17 sectional center areas may depict reasonably good mail service, this may not be true for all areas served by each center. For example, recent

4-week accounting period reports show that ontime overnight delivery performance for mail originating in the Poplar Bluff Sectional Center Facility area averaged 97 percent. However, the performance statistics ranged from a high of 100 percent ontime delivery for mail going to St. Louis, a distance of about 150 miles, to a low of 65 percent for mail destined for the Rolla Sectional Center Facility area adjacent to the Poplar Bluff area.

Because of the small mail volume going from Poplar Bluff to Rolla, the impact of the poor delivery service is not evident in Poplar Bluff's overall statistics. However, it is evident to Rolla postal patrons whose mail arrives late from Poplar Bluff.

Delayed mail--a continuing problem

Although only a small percentage of first-class mail is delayed, it represents a sizable amount of letters. For instance, only 7 percent of Missouri's mail was delivered late during fiscal year 1977. However, this amounted to 74 million of a total mail volume of about 1.05 billion pieces. Most of these letters will be a day or two late; a small number, however, can be excessively delayed, lost, mutilated or destroyed.

What causes these delays? For the most part delays in Missouri were caused by

--mail improperly sorted and sent to the wrong destination, and

--failure to meet operating schedules because of mechanical failures and transportation foul-ups.

Properly addressed mail sent to the wrong destination is termed missent mail and is usually delayed because it must be rehandled at another facility. Because missent mail is a major contributor to delays, the Service has established a nationwide goal to keep missent mail rates to 2 percent or less. It also instituted a program to monitor missent rates among major facilities.

The St. Louis Sectional Center Facility is the only Missouri facility included in this national program. Service statistics show that for postal fiscal years 1976, 1977, and 1978 (through February 1978), the missent mail rates for mail sent from St. Louis to the other offices in the national program

were 3.6, 2.7 and 2.5 percent, respectively. The unfavorable rates for the three periods exceeded the national rates of 3.2, 2.6, and 2.4 percent, respectively, and the 2 percent goal.

The Service's Central Region also has a program for monitoring missent mail rates for facilities in the Region. Both St. Louis and Kansas City sectional center facilities are among the facilities for which missent mail rates are calculated. Missent mail rates for St. Louis and Kansas City for postal fiscal years 1977 and 1978 (through February 1978) are shown in the following schedule. Also shown for comparison purposes are the average missent rates for all facilities included in the regional program.

	<u>Fiscal year 1977</u>	<u>Fiscal year 1978 a/</u>
St. Louis	1.6	1.9
Kansas City	2.6	2.1
Region	2.0	2.1

a/Through February 1978

We discussed St. Louis missent mail rates with the Gateway District Manager. He told us that the quality control people in the St. Louis Sectional Center Facility are concentrating on reducing missent mail rates and that this effort should improve St. Louis' rates. He could not, however, explain why there is a disparity between missent rates for St. Louis in the regional and national statistics.

We discussed Kansas City missent mail rates with an official of the Mid-America District Office. He told us that the relatively high rate in postal fiscal year 1977 resulted from the use of inexperienced personnel due to a high turnover of letter sorting machine operators. He said the reduction in fiscal year 1978 resulted from increased emphasis on early error detection and a continuing program of increased operator awareness.

The Service also monitors the causes of delays other than missent mail. For large sectional center facilities such as those in St. Louis and Kansas City, reports are filed daily with the district and regional offices detailing the amount of mail not meeting operating plans, e.g., mail not sorted in time to meet dispatch schedules. Mail not meeting operating plans may result in late delivery.

For the period July 16, 1977, to February 24, 1978, about 42 million pieces of mail in St. Louis and 5 million in Kansas City did not meet operating plans primarily because of delayed transportation due to bad weather and problems with mechanically sorting the mail. However, the Gateway District Manager told us that some mail failing to meet the operating plan and reported as delayed will, in fact, not adversely impact on timely delivery. That is, mail will be reported as delayed if it misses the scheduled dispatch even though a later dispatch will enable this mail to be delivered on time.

Complaints relating to
quality of mail service

Obviously, late mail delivery causes customer dissatisfaction. On October 1, 1975, the Service implemented a nationwide program to provide customers with a means to lodge complaints and offer suggestions. Under this program, a postal patron completes a two-part consumer service card; one part for the local post office and the other for postal headquarters. Upon receipt of a complaint, the local postmaster is responsible for resolving the problem and reporting the action taken to postal headquarters, where all complaints are analyzed.

During the period October 9, 1976, through January 27, 1978, 12,066 consumer service cards were filed on Missouri postal activities. Of the 12,066 cards filed pertaining to Missouri, 11,452 were complaints and the remainder were informational requests, suggestions, or other comments.

About 68 percent or 7,742 of the complaints concerned delivery services and most of these concerned late deliveries or non-receipt of mail. Most of the 3,710 other complaints from Missourians concerned self-service postal units, money orders, and Postal Service personnel.

The following table gives a breakdown of delivery services complaints by the class of mail affected.

Patron complaints concerning delivery services

<u>Type of mail affected</u>	<u>Number of complaints</u>	<u>Percent of total complaints</u>
Letters	5,054	65
Parcel post	1,482	19
Newspapers/magazines	1,118	15
Advertisements	<u>88</u>	<u>1</u>
TOTAL	<u>7,742</u>	<u>100</u>

Service statistics show that the complaints by type of mail were about the same in Missouri as in the Central Region and the Nation.

Our analysis of the customer complaint card information for Missouri showed no indications of long-term problems except those complaints received during the consolidation to the Mid-Missouri facility.

WHAT CAN POSTAL PATRONS EXPECT?

Barring technological breakthroughs or administrative decisions changing delivery standards, postal patrons in Missouri should expect about the same level of service they are now receiving. A high percentage of mail will be delivered on time, however, some mail service--especially 2- and 3-day delivery commitments--will not measure up to Postal Service goals.

The Gateway District Manager told us that the Central Region has begun studying the causes of delays in order to identify ways of improving mail service. He said that one outcome may be to downgrade some 2-day commitments that sectional center facilities cannot make consistently.

Revising delivery commitments should help Missouri's delivery performance statistics and provide postal patrons with a better idea of how long it will take for their letters to be delivered. It will not improve delivery service, however.

PROBLEMS WITH THE MID-MISSOURI CONSOLIDATION HAVE NOT BEEN OVERCOME

Any consolidation of mail processing facilities is likely to have start-up problems. The consolidation of mail processing functions from the Jefferson City and Columbia sectional center facilities to the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility was no exception.

The problems in this consolidation, however, seem greater than other consolidations we have examined. The consolidation was predicated on reduced operating costs and improved service. However, 6 months after the consolidation, costs had risen and mail service had not improved.

Postal Service officials attribute the unusual problems to the fact that two independent operations were consolidated into one new facility. Most consolidations involve a small operation being merged into an existing large mail processing operation. Postal officials estimate that it may take a year for a consolidation such as this to realize its full potential.

We believe that the consolidation should in time result in savings of about \$205,000 a year, mostly as a result of increased productivity from using letter sorting machines. While the quality of mail service in the Mid-Missouri area deteriorated just after the consolidation, it has improved since then and should continue to improve to the pre-consolidation level.

Start-up problems created confusion

Mail processing functions were consolidated at the Mid-Missouri General Mail Facility on September 15-16, 1977. Postal officials acknowledged that serious problems existed at the facility for three weeks immediately following the consolidation. During this 3-week period, the facility was unable to process all the mail it received and, as a result, mail deliveries were delayed.

When postal employees got to the new facility on the day the consolidation was to occur, they found that furniture and equipment needed for processing mail had not been properly arranged by the movers. It took two days for postal employees to arrange the equipment and furniture into the proper configuration for processing mail. Service officials said that as a result of the time spent on these modifications mail became backlogged.

Ten days after the consolidation a team of postal experts were sent to the Mid-Missouri facility to help with its mail processing problems. At their suggestion, postal officials began diverting up to 30,000 pieces of mail daily to the St. Louis Post Office for processing to give the Mid-Missouri facility time to eliminate the backlog of mail. This continued for at least three days.

According to the team of experts, the single factor contributing most to delaying mail and increasing costs was the lack of an operating plan for scheduling employees' work hours to coincide with the workload. According to the Gateway District Manager, the problem was compounded by the unwillingness of supervisors to change the working hours employees had at the facilities they were transferred from. Employees were scheduled to start work when the volume of mail to be processed was relatively small at the Mid-Missouri facility and scheduled to stop work when there was still mail to be processed. Overtime and the use of temporary employees were required to process this mail.

The root of the staffing and scheduling problems seemed to be that the letter sorting machine--the key to cost reduction for the new operation--had not been installed. It was not installed until November 28, 1977.

Another problem identified by the team was the absence of priorities for working the mail. Usually outgoing mail is worked first so it can be dispatched to its destination to meet delivery schedules. Apparently this was not done at the Mid-Missouri facility.

Cost reduction has not materialized

Cost reductions ranging from \$274,000 to \$356,000 annually were projected for the consolidation, but as of March 1978, no reductions had been achieved. Because the consolidation is based on a sound concept, cost reductions should materialize but they will probably be less than the Service projected. An analysis of the savings projections for the Mid-Missouri consolidation showed that the Service did not consider all the costs associated with the consolidation and erroneously claimed some savings. More importantly, six months after the consolidation occurred work hours have not been reduced and therefore no cost reductions have materialized.

Before the consolidation the Service made three studies to determine the cost of the change. All three studies projected that the consolidation would produce savings. Two of the studies projected annual savings of \$274,000 and \$356,000. One of the studies--a cash flow analysis--did not annualize the savings, but projected a 24 percent rate-of-return on investment. Service officials told us that the cash flow analysis was the most important cost study because it was used to justify the new building and the consolidation before the Central Region Capital Investment Committee.

When the Capital Investment Committee originally approved the project on February 18, 1975, it was estimated that \$1,385,100 would be needed for construction of the new building. On May 22, 1975, the Committee approved an increase

in the building cost to \$1,940,000. Even with the increase in the building costs, the rate-of-return on investment was to be 24 percent. We analyzed the study and determined that it did not consider the cost of the two letter sorting machines originally planned for the facility and erroneously included \$212,000 for transportation and letter carrier operation savings. We discussed this with a Central Region official who agreed that the omissions and errors had occurred and that the rate-of-return on investment should have been about 14 percent.

We cannot speculate what the Central Region's Capital Investment Committee decision would have been had the proposal shown a 14 percent rate-of-return. Service criteria requires consolidations to have a rate-of-return of at least 10 percent--this proposal obviously met this criteria. Whether, the higher rate-of-return (24 percent) had been the deciding factor in favor of this proposal over others being considered at the time is unknown.

Despite what the Service projected it could save by the consolidation, all indications are that it has not realized any savings yet. In fact, rather than reducing costs, expenditures in the Columbia-Jefferson City area grew following the consolidation. The Service spent about \$72,000 more in the 4-week period from September 10, 1977 to October 7, 1977, than it did during the 4-week period from August 13, 1977, to September 9, 1977. Most of the increased costs resulted from the need for overtime hours and part-time employees to process the mail.

The Service has had to continue to use overtime hours and unexpected temporary and casual employees to process mail. As of February 24, 1978, the Service had spent about \$390,000 over its budget for the Columbia-Jefferson City area.

On January 30, 1978--more than 4 months after the consolidation--a scheduling and staffing study was begun at the new facility and at the Columbia and Jefferson City post offices to match staffing with workload and to identify methods for making improvements. The preliminary results of the study show that with changes in scheduling and staffing in the Mid-Missouri area, \$568,522 could be saved annually.

This cost savings is broken into two components. First, savings from mechanically sorting mail at the new facility as opposed to manually sorting it at Jefferson City and Columbia--\$285,129. Second, savings in manual operations--\$283,393.

The scheduling and staffing study was reviewed by the Gateway District Office and it made adjustments to the \$568,522 savings projections. It claimed that additional savings of \$52,045 could be realized from mail clerk hours, supervisory hours, and transportation. It also claimed that the consolidation was going to cost the Service \$130,104 for maintenance which had not been considered in the study. Everything considered, the Gateway District Office estimated that the consolidation could save \$490,464.

What does GAO think the potential savings should be as a result of the consolidation? Conservatively, we think the Service should save about \$205,000 annually, computed as follows.

Savings

Mechanical processing of mail	\$285,129	
Reduced mail handler hours	26,208	
Reduced supervision	25,837	
Transportation	<u>15,697</u>	
Total		\$352,871

Costs

Additional maintenance costs	\$130,104	
Annualized cost of the letter sorting machine	<u>18,000</u>	
Total		<u>148,104</u>

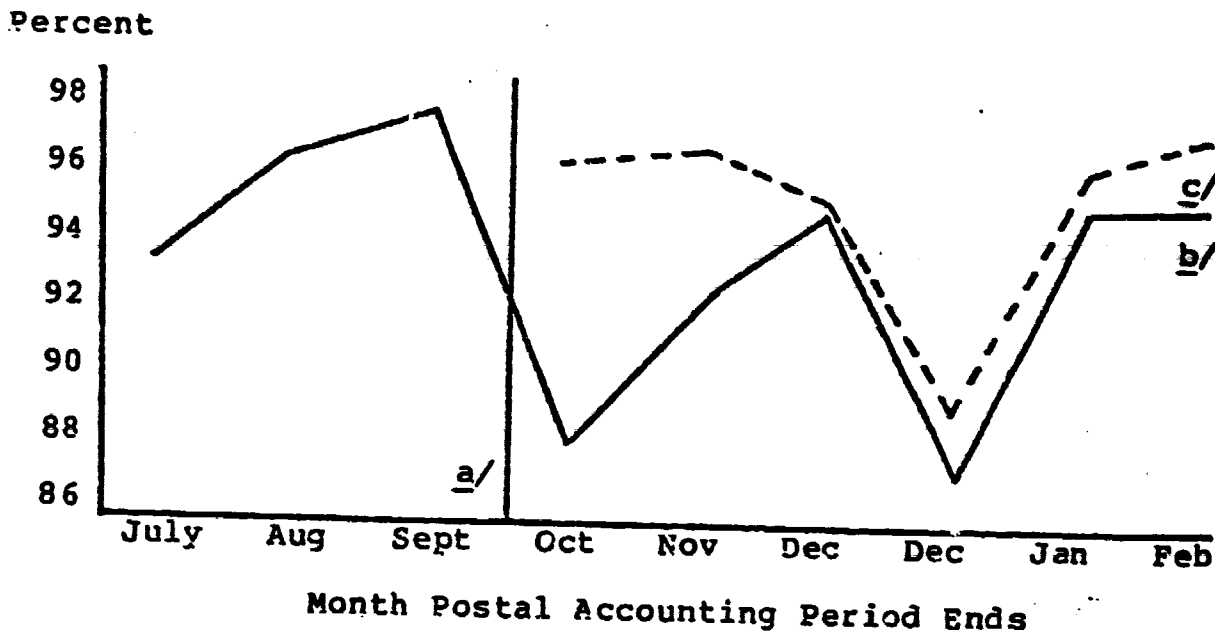
Net savings		<u>\$204,767</u> -----
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The key to realizing these savings depends, in part, on each manager accepting and accomplishing the objectives (mostly related to work hour reductions) identified.

Improved mail service questionable at this time

One objective of the consolidation was to improve mail service. This does not seem to have occurred. Public reaction just after the consolidation was very vocal. Many people complained that the quality of their mail service had deteriorated to an unacceptable level. Although many of the complaints related to late delivery of mail, verifiable and representative statistics for the period just after the consolidation from other than postal sources are nonexistent.

Using the Service's CDIS statistics, we compared overnight delivery performances before and after the consolidation. We also compared overnight delivery performances for 4-week accounting periods after the consolidation (through February 24, 1978) with the same periods last year. The results are shown in the following graph.



a/Date of Mid-Missouri consolidation--September 15, 1977.

b/Delivery performances before and after the consolidation.

c/Delivery performances for the same periods last year.

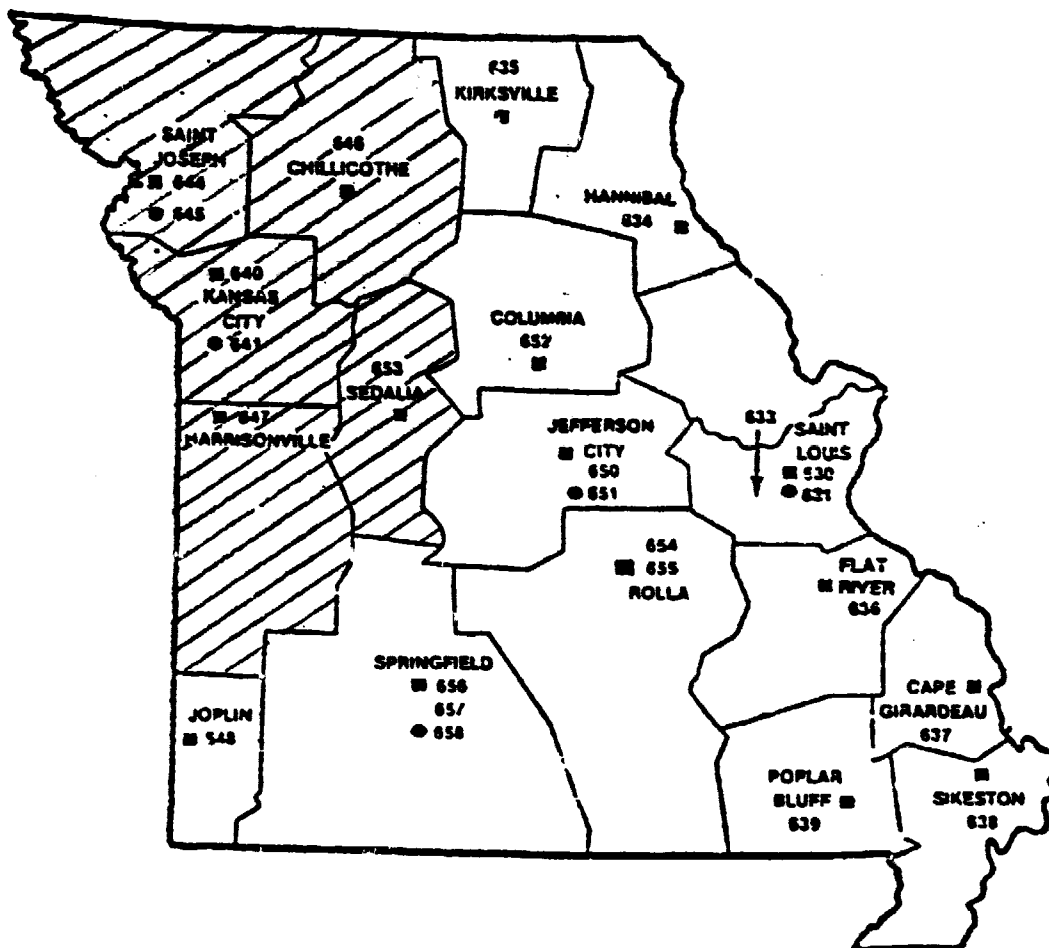
As can be seen from these statistics, overnight mail delivery performance has been lower since the consolidation. Part of the difference may be caused by the Service upgrading some delivery commitments. For example, before the consolidation mail destined for delivery from St. Louis to Columbia was committed to 2-day delivery. At the time of the consolidation, it was upgraded to overnight delivery. This was done to make the commitment consistent with the pre-consolidation delivery commitment from St. Louis to Jefferson City. Statistics for 2- and 3-day delivery areas show that delivery performances have generally not been as good since the consolidation. (See appendix II.)

We looked for indicators of whether mail service has improved since the consolidation. A comparison of mail dispatch schedules from the Mid-Missouri facility with pre-consolidation dispatch schedules of Columbia and Jefferson City showed that most mail is not being dispatched any earlier. Therefore, it is questionable that service in the Mid-Missouri area could improve because no significant transportation changes were made or planned for at the time our review was made.

Delayed mail reports for March 1978--six months after the consolidation--showed eight days during which substantial amounts of mail to be delivered in the mid-Missouri area were delayed at the facility for at least one day. On three of the days, over 20 percent of the mail was delayed. The highest delayed mail count for a single day was 30,740 pieces.

We discussed the question of mail service with the Gateway District Manager. He told us that they have had problems with mail delivery as a result of the consolidation, but added that service is improving and will continue to improve as more mail processing functions are mechanized. This seems reasonable, but the goal of improving mail service over that offered before consolidation may not be met without changes in the planned mail processing methods and transportation networks.

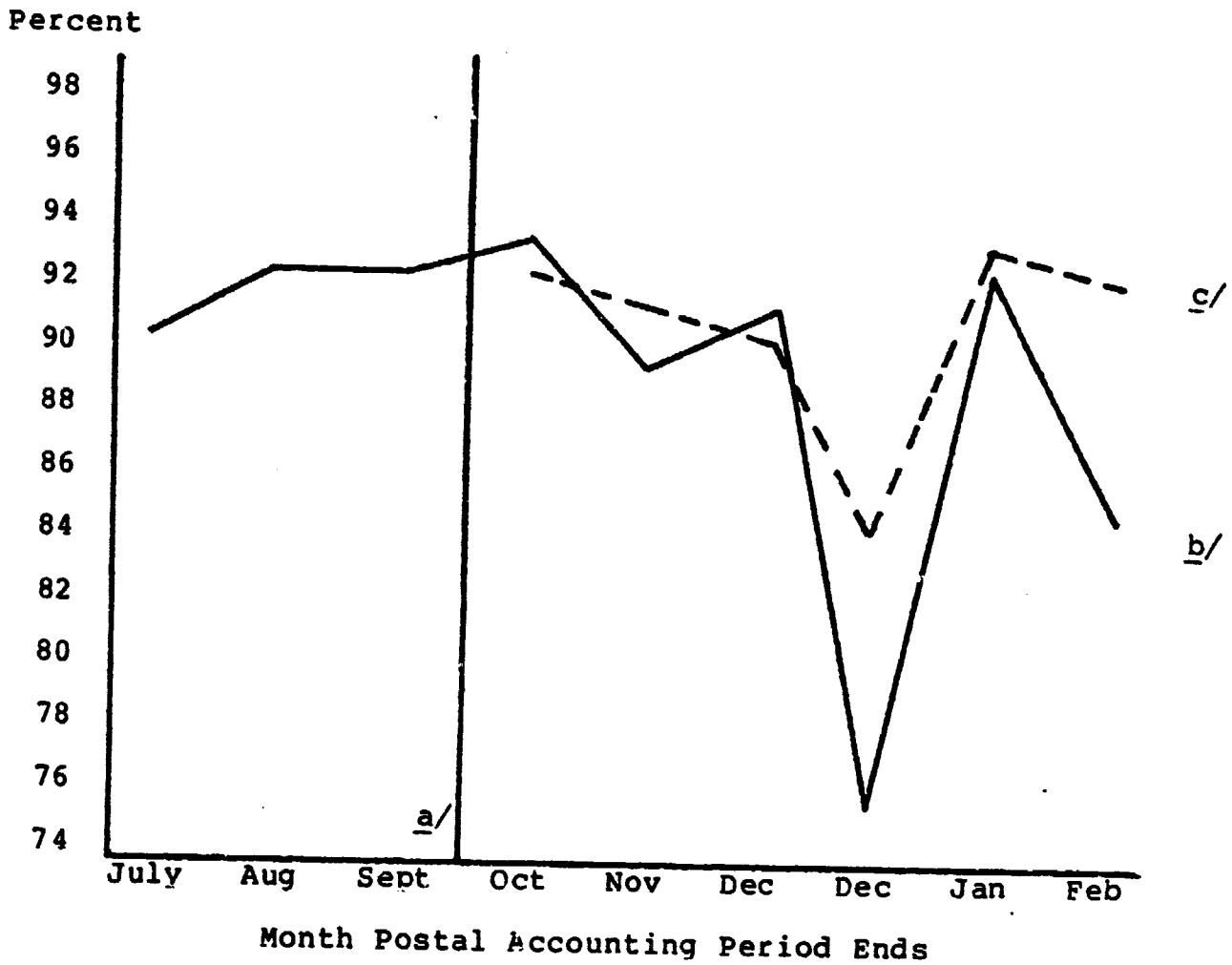
MISSOURI



LEGEND:

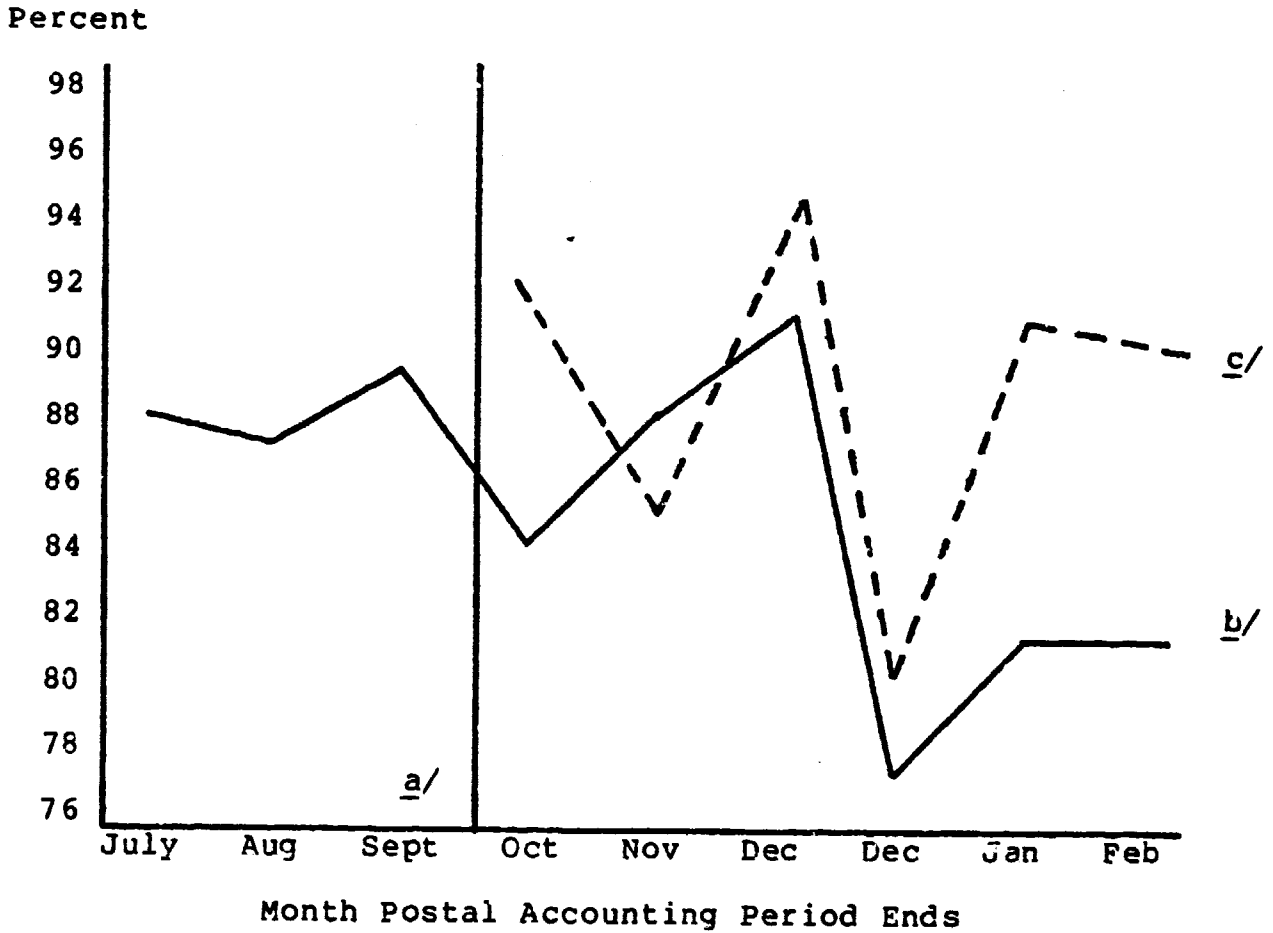
- Serves associate post offices within that 3-digit ZIP Code area.
- Is a city which has been assigned its own 3-digit ZIP Code but which is not a sectional center.
- Sectional center facilities under the jurisdiction of the Gateway District Office, St. Louis, Missouri.
- ▨ Sectional center facilities under the jurisdiction of the Mid-America District Office, Prairie Village, Kansas.

COMPARISON OF DELIVERY PERFORMANCE STATISTICS
BEFORE AND AFTER MID-MISSOURI CONSOLIDATION
FOR 2-DAY DELIVERY AREAS



- a/Date of Mid-Missouri consolidation--September 15, 1978.
- b/Delivery performances before and after the consolidation.
- c/Delivery performances for the same periods last year.

COMPARISON OF DELIVERY PERFORMANCE STATISTICS
BEFORE AND AFTER MID-MISSOURI CONSOLIDATION
FOR 3-DAY DELIVERY AREAS



a/Date of Mid-Missouri consolidation--September 15, 1978.
 b/Delivery performances before and after the consolidation.
 c/Delivery performances for the same periods last year.