

# 1839

## La Poste, instigator of coordinated time

La Poste has played a crucial part in the implementation of a shared coordinated time over the French territory. In 1839, while cities and villages had local times, La Poste shared one of its concerns with the government. At the time, ‘reports from postal inspectors stated that these clocks were sometimes set based on mean solar time, sometimes based on a mixed system and that often no system was even followed.’ With no standard time consistently observed by the whole country, directors of post offices and post houses had a hard time complying with the established timetables, necessary for their proper functioning and the smooth delivery of mail.

For the municipalities through which mail was transiting, the proposed solution was to set municipal clocks according to the Annuary issued by the French Bureau of Longitudes in order to synchronise mean solar time and real time based on a concordance table, ‘if not every day, at least several times per week’. The postal administration thus obtained the harmonisation of local times—first step towards establishing a reference time.



# 1864

## La Poste and the railway

The rise of the railway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to an increase in speed and to a higher volume of travels, and the measures taken in 1839 quickly became insufficient. 'With the development of railways and the setting up, on every line in the network, of travelling post offices or mail guards, mail transit by land is almost everywhere contingent upon the running of postal trains, directly or indirectly. However, railway clocks are synchronised with the Paris meridian and not mean solar time, meaning that these clocks, in every train station, are perfectly in accordance with those in Paris, and on the contrary, differ with those in post offices and most cities.'

To solve this new issue regarding time coordination, post offices were required to synchronise their clocks with railway clocks. By maintaining such a match, they were sure that timetables would be followed and exchanges of mail properly carried out. Thus, La Poste and the railway network have played a major part in disruptions leading to a common and coordinated time.



# 1891

## The legal time from the Paris Observatory

A law from 1891 introduced the legal time from the Paris Observatory. This unified time (both in train stations and post offices) became the only one in effect for the whole territory.

French legal time, as defined by the Paris Observatory, could be obtained by using the telegraph to synchronise public clocks. To that end, the regulation from 1895 provided that ‘the general telegraph network would be made available to the Paris Observatory to deliver time signals meant to set public clocks’. Thus, on Sundays—since postal services ran on that day too—for up to half an hour and in exchange for a yearly subscription paid by the town or the Chamber of Commerce, clocks could be reset as precisely as possible.



# 1911

## Greenwich Mean Time

The expansion of the railway network and the increase in trade were defining characteristics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Within such a context, time synchronisation on an international scale became a necessity and, in 1884, the *International Prime Meridian Conference* in Washington chose to take the Greenwich meridian as its reference meridian with the introduction of time zones. France would take several years before approving this international system for measuring time. With the French law from 9 March 1911, Paris legal time was discarded to align with Greenwich Mean Time.



# 1933-2022

## Talking clocks, 1933 – 2022

On 14 February 1933, the Paris Observatory in collaboration with the French PTT invented the first automated talking clock in the world. Whoever wished to know this global and accurate time could directly call the institution.

Working during almost 90 years, several generations of talking clocks followed, each featuring improvements such as a connected atomic clock in 1975 or the move to digital in 1991. During the 1990s, several millions of calls were made each year, as it was the only way to obtain the most accurate time possible. With the digital era and the advent of connected objects, the service became obsolete and disappeared on 1 July 2022.

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## *Il n'est pas 15 heures, Claude Closky, 1995*

Claude Closky is giving us all kinds of time, not the time that it is, but the time that it is not. Like a talking clock, every hour—except on 3 p.m.—a voice tells us that ‘the time is not 3 p.m.’.