



1863-1888

THE MODERN ERA BEGINS

The inauguration of free city delivery in 1863 marks the real beginning of the history of the modern letter carrier and it indirectly marks the beginning of the history of the NALC.

Free city delivery was a product of the Civil War: One bitter winter day in Cleveland, Ohio, a long line of citizens was anxiously waiting at the post office to see if there were any letters from husbands, relatives or friends fighting in the war. The assistant postmaster and window clerk, J. W. Briggs, was appalled at this sight. He felt the government should accommodate its citizens better than he could on that cold day in Cleveland. So Briggs canvassed neighborhood groceries to find out if mail could be brought to these stores, sorted by post office personnel and then delivered to the front doorsteps of patrons. Once he got the storekeepers' approval, Briggs marked out the first routes and delivered the mail himself. The Cleveland experiment was an instantaneous success, and shortly thereafter Congress passed legislation establishing free city delivery in every city with more than 50,000 people.

A moment to be remembered: On July 1, 1863—the day the savage battle of Gettysburg began—449 modern letter carriers began to walk the streets of 49 cities. One hundred and thirty-seven letter carriers delivered mail to the doors of patrons in New York City; three letter carriers delivered mail in Louisville, Kentucky; one letter carrier walked his route for the first time in Nashua, New Hampshire. The history of the modern letter carrier had begun.

Be it known by these presents that Timothy Mahony is constituted and appointed a Letter Carrier to deliver letters and other mail matter in the City of San Francisco from my Office, and is entitled to receive therefor the fees authorized by Law, to wit: five cents for each letter and two cents for each newspaper or circular.

Witness my hand this 1st day of September 1859.

W. S. Keller
Postmaster



Joseph W. Briggs

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Almost immediately, local associations of letter carriers began to spring up in cities across the country. A New York letter carrier association was founded in 1863 and a Chicago association in 1870. Originally organized as mutual benefit societies and social clubs, these early letter carrier associations quickly expanded their roles. They began to seek improvements in working conditions by enlisting the aid of local politicians. For those problems that could not be resolved locally, letter carrier associations would elect or appoint delegates and send them to Washington, DC to lobby their senators and representatives.

Although these early efforts to effect change were isolated and localized, they demonstrated letter carriers' determination to improve their working conditions. But carriers were bucking a spoils system that was so deeply ingrained in the service that real change was impossible. Furthermore, as the history of working people reveals, isolated and local efforts rarely move mountains. A national organization representing all letter carriers was needed, but the spoils system stood in the way.



COLLECTING LETTERS.

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KEEP AT IT

When your load is getting heavy
And the miles are "cussed" long,
When your patrons start a-crabbing
And the world is going wrong.
Just pucker up your whistle
In some half-forgotten song,
And keep at it!

When the catalogs are piling up
And loads of circulars come in,
When you're plowing through
the snowdrifts—
Maybe wet through to the skin—
Just try and pull your mouth
Into the semblance of a grin,
And keep at it!

If you're tired and discouraged
And you think, "I'll jack it up—
This is not the job for me:
I have drained life's bitter cup."
Say! Some other jobs are harder
Than the postman's—don't give up!
And keep at it!

"Lucy"
Derry, New Hampshire

First letter carriers of the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Post Office, 1879.



AN OBSTACLE REMOVED

A serious movement to reform the spoils system did not develop until after the Civil War. It gathered strength during the 1870s and ironically benefitted from the shooting of President James Garfield on July 2, 1881, by what history books have long described as a “disappointed office seeker”—Charles J. Guiteau. Immediately, reformers argued that Garfield was a victim of the spoils system: If there had been a proper civil service system, there might not have been a “disappointed office seeker” turned assassin. Garfield’s death on September 19 elicited an intense response from the public, which prodded the Congress into action.

This country’s first civil service law, known as the Pendleton Act, was passed by Congress in 1883, two years after Garfield’s death. Among other provisions, it specifically required letter carriers and post office clerks in every post office with 50 or more employees to take competitive exams to qualify for their jobs. It also included language which made their positions permanent. Although the law excluded all postmasters and employees in the smaller post offices, approximately half the postal workforce was covered. So for the first time since Andrew Jackson’s administration, letter carriers were hired because they were qualified for their jobs—not because they were members of a certain political party. Furthermore, these same carriers could not legally be fired

for political reasons. As a result of these reforms, the high turnover among letter carriers began to diminish, and a permanent core of carriers with a stake in the service developed.

The passage of the Pendleton Act had another effect on letter carriers—less obvious, but just as important. The relationship between Congress and letter carriers began to change. If letter carriers could no longer be counted on to represent the political interests of senators and representatives at home, why should the Congress do anything for them? Congress' interest in the welfare of letter carriers quickly faded, and carriers found it necessary to unite to protect their interests. And now that letter carriers were no longer dependent upon local and national politicians for their jobs, their loyalties shifted from the party and postmaster to each other. The beginning of the end of the spoils system fostered a community of interests among letter carriers which had never existed before. The stage was set for organization.

LITMUS TEST FOR THE FUTURE

Almost immediately after the Pendleton Act went into effect in 1883, letter carriers in the New York area banded together to obtain an annual vacation law.

Officially, letter carriers were not allowed vacations. They were supposed to work 365 days per year, including Sundays. The postmaster in New York City, however, permitted his carriers to take ten days of vacation per year, providing their fellow workers agreed to cover the routes of those on vacation. At the same time, federal employees in Washington, DC, including those working in the headquarters of the Post Office Department, were allowed 30 vacation days per year, a privilege not extended to the employees of the Washington, DC post office.

THE POSTAL RECORD

The *Postal Record*, NALC's official monthly journal, is slightly older than the union itself. First

published in 1887 as a private enterprise by Alvin G. Brown of Massachusetts, the *Record* was devoted chiefly to the concerns of letter carriers, but also carried material of interest to all postal workers.

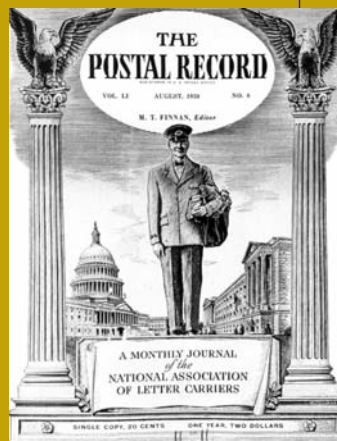
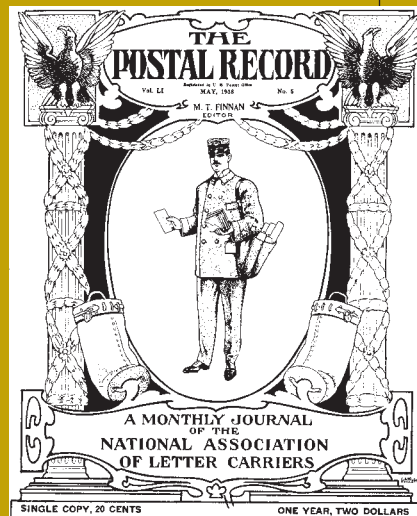
John F. Victory, a letter carrier elected NALC national secretary at the 1890 convention, purchased *The Postal Record* from Brown in 1891. A talented writer, Victory edited the magazine and built up its subscribership during his term of office. The NALC bought *The Postal Record* from Victory on December 1, 1893, acting on a resolution of the Kansas City, Missouri convention that year.

"Raffles" was the name given by irreverent NALC members to the drawing of the rakish-looking postman (above right) which appeared on every cover of *The Postal Record* for 31 years. Then, in August 1938, Editor Michael T. Finnan came out with a new cover. It was still the same blue-gray color but "Raffles" was replaced by a drawing of a vigorous-looking modern carrier. "Son of Raffles" only lasted 41 consecutive issues, replaced by photographs starting in January 1942.

This "modernization" of *The Postal Record* cover occurred only months before the union, in keeping with a resolution passed by the Los Angeles Convention of 1941, began mailing the magazine to every member's residence instead of delivering it in "club bundles" to union halls and post office workrooms for members to retrieve. Today, copies of the magazine also land on the desks of important decision-makers in Washington, D.C. and throughout the international labor movement. In a concession to the realities of the internet age, selected features and columns are also posted on the union's website.



John F. Victory



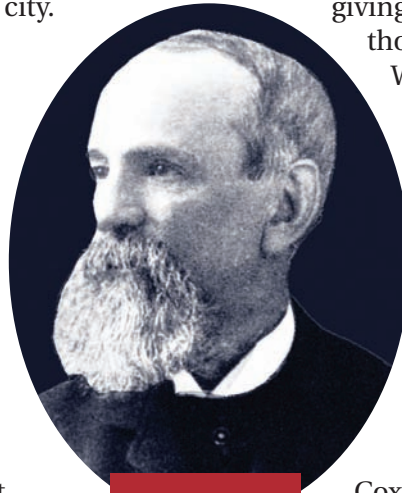
Frustrated with the discrepancy in treatment and newly blessed with the protections the Pendleton Act had provided them, Washington letter carriers petitioned the Department for the same leave privileges as other federal workers in the city.

Petitioning the Department was unprecedented in the history of the service, and it did not react favorably to this aggressive behavior. The Department's law officer issued a statement declaring that no law existed under which letter carriers could be allowed any vacation days whatsoever. The postmaster at the New York Post Office was soon ordered to cease giving carriers annual leave.

The New York City letter carriers did not passively accept this Departmental dictate, but rather decided to agitate for an annual vaca-

tion law. Together with letter carriers from several other cities, they approached Congressman Samuel "Sunset" Cox, and in 1884, after a monumental effort, Cox was able to persuade Congress to pass legislation giving all letter carriers—not just those in New York City or Washington—a 15-day vacation, with pay, every year. A surprising victory, it gave letter carriers first-hand experience in the advantages of organized agitation. Letter carriers throughout the nation were vividly reminded that in unity there is, indeed, strength.

A word about "Sunset" Cox. He was the one great exception to congressional apathy, working long and hard to improve the conditions of letter carriers. A Democrat, a former congressman from Ohio, and a two-term congressman from New York, he took up the cause of the letter carrier within the halls of Congress. It was Cox who



Samuel S. Cox



CARRIER EXAM, LATE 1800S

Sample Questions from the Qualifying Examination for Letter Carriers

Arithmetic

Question 1: A carrier makes 4 trips a day, carrying 64 letters and 32 papers each trip. The letters average in weight $\frac{1}{4}$ oz. each and the papers 2 oz. each. How many pounds of mail does he deliver in a day? (16 oz. to the pound.)

Question 2: In an office employing 35 carriers, each carrier loses 20 minutes a day in idle talk. Suppose the average salary of each to be \$2.50 for ten hours work, what is the cost to the Government of the lost time each day, and what will it amount to in a year of 313 working days?

Local Delivery

Question 1: Name the principal railroads (not exceeding five) which pass through or terminate in this city, and give the location (the street or streets on which situated) of the principal depot or ticket office of each.

Question 2: Name four streets which pass nearest to the building in which this examination is held, and mention one public building or prominent business house on each.

Question 3: Name the principal hotels in this city (not exceeding five) and the location (street or streets on which situated) of each.



was responsible for persuading Congress in 1879 to establish a regular pay scale for letter carriers. Up until this time, letter carrier pay was set by each postmaster, and glaring inequalities extended from city to city. The 1879 law created two grades of carriers in the larger post offices, with salaries fixed at \$800 and \$1,000 a year. In the smaller post offices, where letter carriers' jobs were still subject to the spoils system, Congress limited carriers' wages to \$850 per year, regardless of years of service.

CARRIERS AND THE 8-HOUR DAY

The struggle for an eight-hour day is a landmark in letter carrier history. It was also an intense nationwide movement, one involving an enormous number of workers in addition to letter carriers.

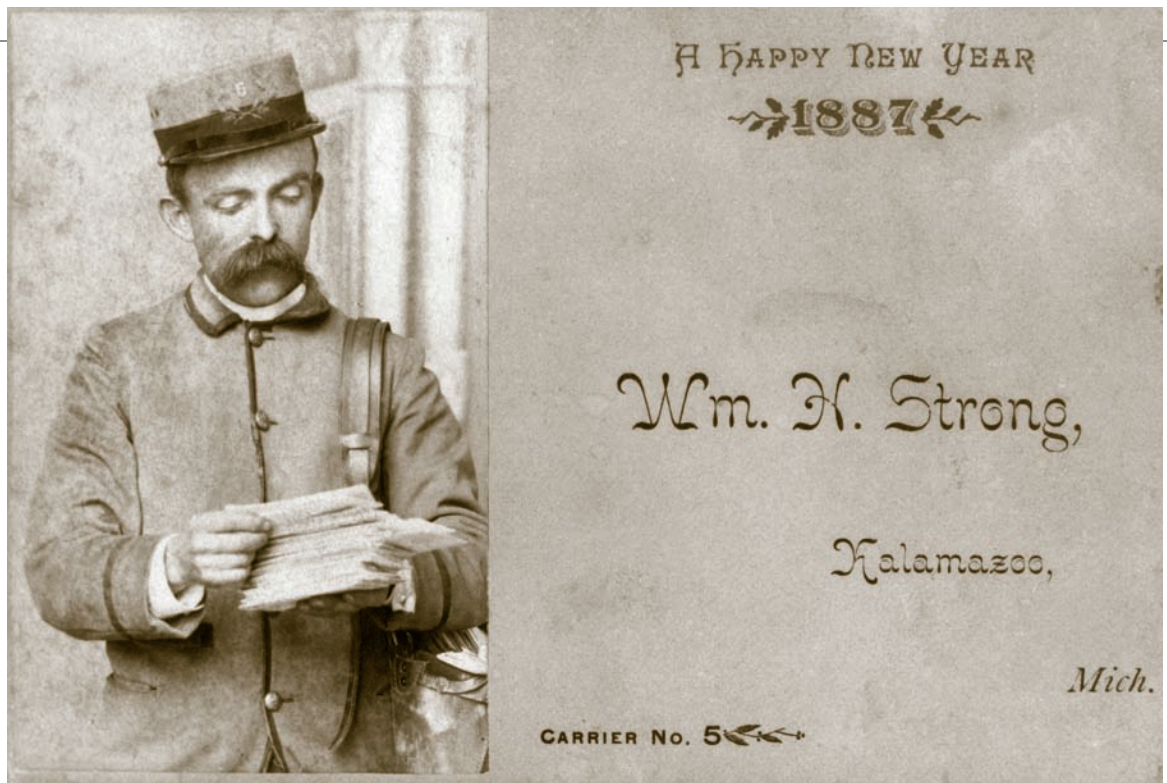
The movement began soon after the Civil War. The nation was industrializing, the economy was expanding and labor was beginning to realize its potential strength. The Depression of 1873-79 interrupted the campaign, but by the early 1880s, the move-

ment for an eight-hour day began to revive.

Letter carriers' involvement began as early as 1868 when Congress passed an eight-hour law for federal "laborers, workmen and mechanics." The Post Office Department, arguing that its employees did not fit the description, refused to comply. Frustrated in their attempts to force the Department to reverse itself, angry letter carriers in a number of large cities—New York, Chicago, Omaha, Buffalo, Brooklyn—turned for help in the 1880s to the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, the leading labor organization of the time. Letter carriers formed local Knights of Labor assemblies and many became leaders within the organization.

By the mid-1880s, the Knights were at the peak of their power. By 1886, more than 700,000 workers had joined this newly militant organization. The entire nation was up in arms over the eight-hour day. Workers were striking and protesting. Employers were fighting back with a vengeance, intent upon smashing both the Knights and the movement.

Like private employers, postal management also vigorously opposed the move-



USPS Library

“Eight hours of work per day” was the issue around which many carriers organized into a body of workers fighting for a common goal.

ment. And when an eight-hour bill for letter carriers, drafted by the Knights of Labor, was introduced in Congress in 1886, the Department harassed any and all active supporters. Some carriers who

led the campaign were fired for minor infractions of work rules. Others were either transferred to less desirable routes, assigned routes far from their homes, given extra duties or ordered to take vacations with no advance warning. In New York City, 150 letter carriers were suspended when the postmaster discovered they were members of the Knights. They were later reinstated, but only after the national office of the Knights of Labor interceded on their behalf.

Confronted with the aggressive opposition of the business community, the movement for an eight-hour day lost steam and finally dissipated. However, amidst the ruins of this major defeat for labor, one group of workers—the nation’s letter carriers—used the influence of their local associations to achieve success. With the help of their congressional champion,

“Sunset” Cox, supported by the lobbying of local letter carrier associations, particularly those in New York and Philadelphia, Congress overrode the Department’s strong opposition and passed the Knights’ eight-hour bill for carriers in 1888. This victory was jubilantly celebrated on July 4 of that year by a massive parade of letter carriers from Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC through the streets of New York City.

For letter carriers, who at that time were working at least 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week, the enactment of the eight-hour bill was an impressive and long overdue victory. But perhaps more important than the passage of the law were the forces released by the intense ferment of the eight-hour day movement itself. Now letter carriers began to see themselves—and each other—differently. “Eight hours of work per day” was the issue around which many letter carriers organized themselves into a body of workers—workers fighting for a common goal. Letter carriers were now ready to organize a union.