



1889-1901

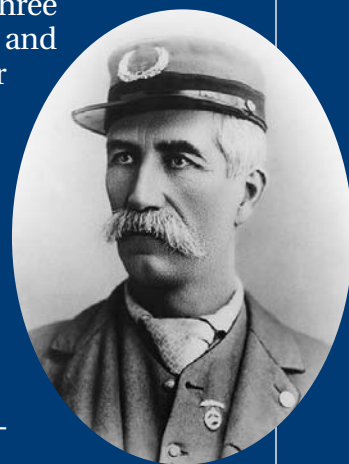
THE NALC IS BORN

Letter carriers had tried to organize a national union at least three times—in 1870 in Washington, DC, in 1877 in New York City, and in 1880 again in New York City. Recognizing that these earlier attempts had failed in part due to the expense of regularly convening enough carriers to sustain a national organization, in 1889 the Milwaukee Letter Carriers Association decided to time their call for another national meeting of carriers to coincide with the annual reunion of the Grand Army of the Republic—an organization of Union Army veterans—so that letter carriers who were veterans could take advantage of reduced train fares.

In issuing the invitation sent to every city delivery post office in the United States, the Milwaukee carriers advised delegates without regulation postal uniforms “to bring a letter of introduction from the postmaster or superintendent” and to bring “credentials from superior officers.” The Milwaukee carriers also set forth a partial agenda for the meeting:

1. The formation of a national organization.
2. Petitioning Congress for an increase of carriers’ salary.
3. Organizing a U.S. Letter Carriers’ Mutual Ins. Co.
4. The pensioning of carriers after continued service of [number to be debated] years.
5. Providing substitute carriers with a fixed salary during their period of probation.”

Ironically, the 60 carriers who answered Milwaukee’s convention call—48 accredited delegates and at least 12 other participants—were not from the large cities such as Philadelphia and New York that had worked so hard for the passage of the eight-hour law, but primarily from small and middle-sized cities. So when August Dahlman of Milwaukee called the convention to order on Thursday, August 29, 1889 in the meeting hall above Schaefer’s Saloon at 244 West Water St., delegates elected John J. Goodwin of Providence, Rhode Island, as temporary chairman, perhaps in an effort to balance regional concerns.



William H. Wood,
NALC’s first
president.



Ironically, on August 29, 1889, the same day the NALC was founded, Samuel “Sunset” Cox, congressional champion for the eight-hour day for letter carriers, made his last public appearance—fittingly before a group of New York City carriers. Eleven days later, Cox was dead. Carriers all over the country mourned his death and began raising funds to erect a statue in his honor. On July 4, 1891, an eight-foot bronze statue of “Sunset” Cox was unveiled in lower Manhattan. Over 2,000 letter carriers from the New York City area, joined by delegations of letter carriers from cities as far away as San Francisco and New Orleans, attended the event.

Delegates moved quickly, unanimously adopting a resolution to form a National Association of Letter Carriers and then, on the next day, elected William Wood of Detroit as the first president and appointed an Executive Board to coordinate all legislative efforts.

THE REACTION

The Post Office Department was shocked when it found out the carriers had organized a union. Resistance followed the shock almost immediately. For example, in St. Louis, as in other cities, all the leaders of the local branch were summarily dismissed and the branch temporarily disbanded. In some communities, members of the union were brutally forced to work eight hours on and off over a 24-hour period. In other communities, union supporters were given the least desirable routes.

The initial response of many carriers when they heard that a national association had been organized was also one of resistance, coupled with suspicion. Generally speaking, carriers from the big cities had not taken part in the first, historic meeting in Milwaukee and they were unsure of how to respond to the so-called “national association.” Initially, they remained apart, and, in fact, sent a

legislative committee to lobby Congress during the 1889-90 legislative session—as did the new national association. The two groups immediately worked against each other, clashing over objectives. Congress, unsure of which one to deal with, refused to listen to or act upon either committee’s concerns.

Letter carriers were angry and upset over this legislative fiasco. The May 1890 issue of *The Postal Record*, a new publication devoted to the interests of all postal employees, contained an eloquent statement from John J. Goodwin, a member of the newly formed NALC Executive Board. He expressed the general frustration:

Hasn't the bitterness of complete failure sickened our friends of guerrilla warfare?

The need for united action was obvious. The question was: Were letter carriers capable of setting aside their differences and working together?



The two groups of carriers decided to try. The New York Letter Carriers Association organized a meeting of delegates from cities not connected with the NALC. Representatives from the NALC were also invited to attend. This conference was held in New York City on July 4, 1890—one month before the first annual convention of the NALC was to take place. During the meeting, letter carriers succeeded in ironing out their differences and merging their organizations into one, resolving “That every delegate at the Conference pledge himself to use his best efforts to further the interests of the National Association, and to induce their respective cities to promptly become branch associations....” The catchphrase at the time was, “We should be co-laborers in a common cause.” And this was the spirit with which carriers attended their first convention in August 1890 in Boston, Massachusetts, and elected Goodwin president and John F. Victory of New York secretary. The NALC was now truly launched.

The union grew rapidly after resolving its organizational crisis: 58 branches in August 1890, 231 branches by August

1891, and in August 1892, the NALC boasted 333 branches.

THE BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN

Once organized, the NALC immediately represented its members in a major confrontation with the Post Office Department. This battle—over the still-controversial eight-hour day—was to be a decisive one for the NALC.

The Post Office Department, extremely unhappy with passage in 1888 of the eight-hour law for carriers, openly ignored it for several months. Then the Department adopted a policy of deliberate evasion: It reinterpreted eight hours a day to mean eight hours a day for seven days a week—or 56 hours a week. For example, letter carriers who worked nine hours a day for six days still owed the Department two hours of work on Sunday. This deliberate misreading of the law was enforced throughout the country. But the NALC—with its feet barely on the ground—responded swiftly and forcefully by



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The Second Annual Convention of the NALC was held in Detroit, Michigan, August 5-7, 1891.



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suing the federal government.

The suit startled everyone, especially the Post Office Department. Even more startling was the result: The NALC won the case in 1893, when the Supreme Court awarded letter carriers a total of \$3.5 million, settling thousands of overtime claims against the Department.

This first successful battle with the Post Office Department helped consolidate the new labor organization. Letter carriers formerly indifferent to the NALC or afraid to join because of management reprisals flocked to the union in great numbers. Only four years after the union's founding meeting in Milwaukee, its reputation as a fearless and successful advocate was permanently established.

The same year the NALC won its suit, the Post Office Department initiated a program which greatly aggravated its relations with the NALC and letter carriers. The "spotter system" was supposedly designed to weed out inefficient and dishonest letter carriers to improve service. In reality, the spotter system was initiated to cir-

cumvent the newly established civil service laws. It also harassed or forced from their jobs a good number of carriers who were active in the NALC. In fact, many letter carriers at the time believed the purpose of the system was to undermine the NALC.

The spotter system operated like this: hundreds of men, hired by the Department as a reward for their political loyalty to President Grover Cleveland and the Democratic party, were assigned to travel secretly from city to city literally to spy on carriers as they worked and to report all violations of work rules. If a charge against a carrier was sustained, the postmaster could fire the carrier and hire a new letter carrier of the right political persuasion—that is, a Democrat.

The spotters, none of them with postal experience, did their jobs exceedingly well. By the end of 1893, approximately one-third of the entire letter carrier force in Chicago, Cleveland, and Philadelphia had been brought up on charges.

The activities of these Department spies were repugnant to say the least, and the charges they brought against carriers ranged from the trivial to the malicious. For example, in 1895, 40 spotters brought charges against 173 Chicago letter carriers. Fifty of the carriers were charged with stopping to answer questions or to speak to their patrons as they delivered the mail. Only two of the charges were of a serious nature.

An example of the more malicious and outrageous charges carriers were forced to endure took place in Akron, Ohio, in 1895. A spotter was secretly watching a letter carrier on his route when the carrier happened to glance through a ground-floor window of a patron's home. Seeing a woman and child lying on the floor, he immediately entered the house, found the two almost suffocated by a gas leak, and carried them out to safety. The spotter reported the event to his superiors and recommended the letter carrier's dismissal for "deviation from his route." In the end, the carrier was suspended for 15 days without pay for violating postal work procedures.

Perhaps the most contemptible aspect of the spotter system was the manner in which letter carriers were told of the charges. In almost every case, carriers were not informed until months after the alleged violation had occurred. Then, without warning, a letter carrier would be asked to explain his behavior to postal officials. Naturally, few letter carriers were able to remember and

THE NALC SYMBOL: A LEGACY THAT LIVES

"The badges of the National Association have been received and the boys are highly delighted with them, and we are constantly being complimented on their beauty by the public."

So said a branch item submitted to *The Postal Record* from Indianapolis in 1891, referring to the new NALC symbol and reflecting the pride and enthusiasm letter carriers felt for the infant union.

The decision to adopt a union logo was made at the first NALC convention in August 1890, with the delegates appointing a committee to come up with a suitable design. The result—a hand bearing a letter addressed "U.S.A." within a circle encribed "National Association of Letter Carriers"—was adopted in January 1891. Produced as a gold badge hanging from a sheaf pin, the symbol soon became popular with carriers throughout the country.

The reason for producing a badge with a distinctive symbol was to help letter carriers—as union members and as skilled workers—identify one another. As reported in the 1890 *Postal Record*,

"these badges or emblems will be quite universal, and will protect Carriers and Postmasters of smaller offices from being imposed upon by anyone claiming themselves as P.O. men in good standing when they are not."

To ensure the sanctity of the badge, they could only be ordered by a branch secretary—at \$1.20 apiece in solid gold and 55 cents in gold plate.

NALC's decision to adopt a logo paralleled a trend developing throughout the young trade-union movement to identify goods produced by skilled union craftsmen. Among the oldest in the American labor movement, NALC's symbol continues to stand for letter carriers' pride in their union, their craft and their service to the public.





Hundreds of spotters were assigned to travel secretly from city to city literally to spy on carriers as they worked.

therefore could not adequately defend themselves.

This continual harassment gravely affected morale, and the NALC repeatedly protested to Department officials. The union submitted a formal protest on October 28, 1895, but the Department would not listen. Letter carriers were angry and frustrated, and no resolution was in sight. Finally, the press took up the carriers' cause. For example, the Superior, Wisconsin *Telegram* editorialized in 1895:

There may be some things which the present administration has done which the general public ... will commend, but the setting of a gang of spotters to dog the steps of Uncle Sam's carriers is not one of them.... It is a shame and a rank injustice to place the reputations of thousands of honest, hard-working men at the mercy of a horde of irresponsible fellows whose chief anxiety is to earn their salaries....

In March 1896, the spotter system was disbanded. Strong pressure from responsible newspapers had forced Congress to deny the Post Office

Department further funds for the employment of these spies.

THE EARLY OBJECTIVES OF THE NALC

It should be a source of pride to today's letter carriers that from the NALC's very inception, the union displayed deep concern for the plight of all carriers—those in small cities as well as those in big, the old as well as the young, substitutes as well as regulars.

When the letter carriers met in Milwaukee and Boston in 1889 and 1890, three issues were of paramount importance: a uniform wage structure, a minimum wage for substitutes, and a guaranteed pension for carriers. After these meetings, the NALC, as the representative of over 5,000 letter carriers, began its long, hard struggle to improve the working conditions of Uncle Sam's "gray coated carriers."



Priority number one was equalization of wages. The NALC believed all letter carriers should receive an annual wage of \$1,200, regardless of the size of the city in which they worked. An editorial in *The Postal Record* in 1889 described letter carriers' strong feelings on this issue:

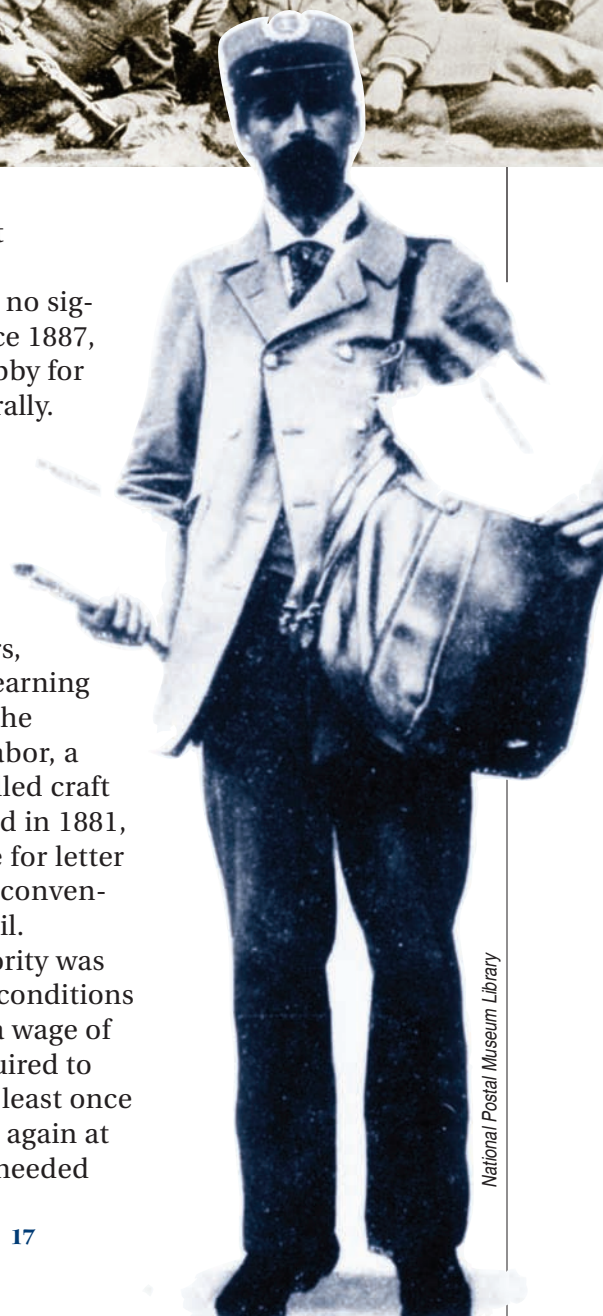
We have asked again and again what reason can be given for the distinction made between carriers in cities having a population of 75,000 and of those with less population. Do they work more hours? Manifestly not. Do they have any heavier bonds? Oh, no! Do they deliver more pieces per carrier? As an aggregate, yes; in individual cases, frequently not. Do they walk farther? No, the shoe is on the other foot!

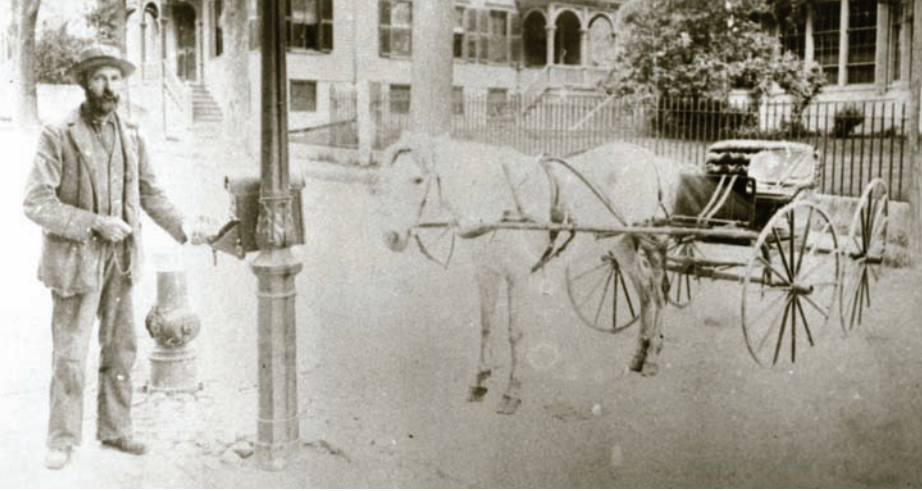
Do they get any more pay? Yes, sir! They get one thousand dollars a year, while the carriers of the lesser cities who do the same work must be content with eight hundred and fifty dollars. Why is this so? We give up. Why should it be so? It shouldn't. It is an outrage.

But Congress would not budge on the issue.

By the early 1900s, with no significant wage increase since 1887, the NALC also began to lobby for an increase in wages generally. Carriers were beginning to lag seriously behind other workers in the labor market. While bricklayers were earning an average of \$4.00 a day in 1900, and carpenters, \$2.80, letter carriers were earning an average of \$2.21. Even the American Federation of Labor, a loosely knit alliance of skilled craft unions originally organized in 1881, endorsed a salary increase for letter carriers at its 23rd annual convention in 1902, but to no avail.

The NALC's second priority was alleviating the intolerable conditions of substitute carriers. For a wage of \$1 per year, subs were required to report to the post office at least once every morning—and often again at noon—to see if they were needed





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that day. If they worked, they received a daily wage; otherwise, they received no remuneration whatsoever.

Furthermore, it was impossible for a substitute to keep another job to support himself or his family, because if the post office needed him, the sub had to deliver the mail or be fired. In other words, substitute carriers were expected to eke out a bare existence until an opening in the civil service list occurred in three to five years, if not longer, before they could then be appointed regular carriers.

The adversity under which substitutes labored was graphically portrayed by an early 1900s substitute carrier who, with barbed humor, satirically described “a very economical dish for 6 o’clock dinner”—fit not for a king, but for a substitute:

Make a raise of a 10-cent soup bone, the nearer the hoof the more bone for the money; then for each member of the family take three nice, fresh, large snowballs... and put the whole mess into a kettle over a slow fire. When it comes to a boil, allow the mixture to simmer gently for two hours. Pepper and salt to taste. Serve. Should the family be increased by an additional member or two, add more snowballs of the same brand, take no substitute. But under no circumstances increase the quality of the bone, as there is a danger of gout, if made too rich. After a meal of this sort a man is fortified for at least two days to pack about fifty pounds of mail up any number of flights of stairs or up any old hill and to repel the attack of vicious dogs.

The NALC pleaded tirelessly with Congress to alleviate the distress of substitute carriers. As an article in a 1901 *Postal Record* stated, “all the glittering promises of future compensation will not feed or clothe a man.” But, again, the pleas fell on deaf ears.

STATE ASSOCIATIONS

NALC’s State Associations date back to at least as early as 1892, when letter carrier representatives from 17 smaller Massachusetts cities met to discuss the equalization of wages.

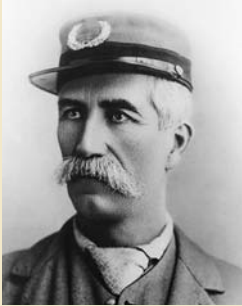
Originally established in response to a feeling that the National Association was not sensitive to this particular need, the meeting’s 41 delegates formed the Massachusetts Association of Letter Carriers of Second-Class Offices. Although organized as a challenge to the national union, the value of

state associations was soon recognized as a positive force. By July 1903, *The Postal Record* was able to report many large and enthusiastic meetings held by NALC State Associations. The *Record* extolled the benefits of state meetings of letter carriers, citing the promotion of mutual support, the sharing of opinion among branches, and the opportunities for members to meet their Congressmen.

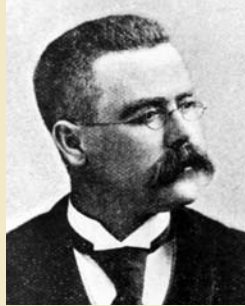
Today, state associations exist in every state except Alaska and play a key role in NALC’s legislative activities. They marshal

members to contact their elected representatives on behalf of NALC-supported legislation, vote for union-endorsed political candidates, and contribute to the Committee on Letter Carriers Political Education, the union’s political fund. State associations also conduct legislative and political training sessions at their conventions attended by branch delegates and held at least once every two years, as well as on other occasions. Since 1978, every NALC member has been required to belong to a state association.

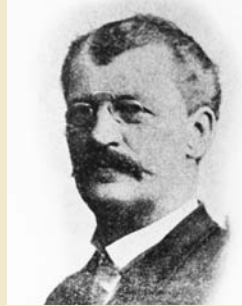
NALC PRESIDENTS



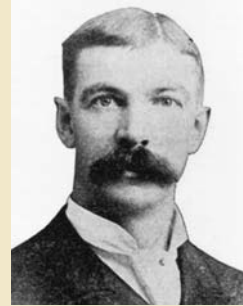
William H. Wood
1889-1890



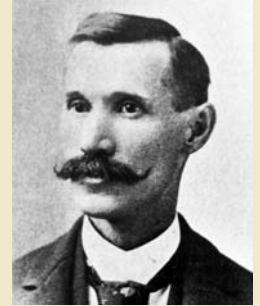
John J. Goodwin
1890-1891



Theodore C. Dennis
1891-1892



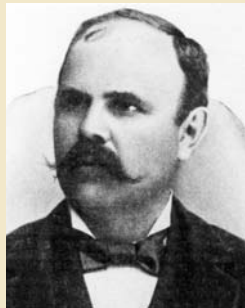
Frank E. Smith
1892-1893



C. C. Couden
1894



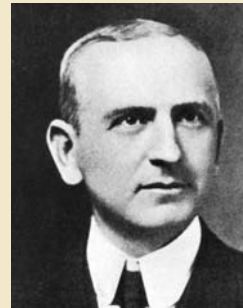
Richard F. Quinn
1895



John N. Parsons
1896-1900



James C. Keller
1901-1905



Jeremiah D. Holland
1905-1907



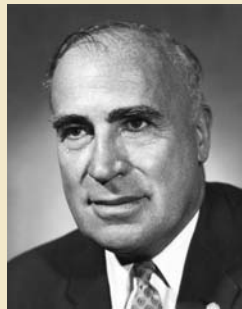
William E. Kelly
1907-1914



Edward J. Gainor
1914-1941



William C. Doherty
1941-1962



Jerome J. Keating
1962-1968



James H. Rademacher
1968-1977



J. Joseph Vacca
1977-1978



Vincent R. Sombrotto
1979-2002



William H. Young
2002-2009



Fredric V. Rolando
2009-