

African-American Postal Workers in the 20th Century

The 19th century was a time of enormous change in the postal workforce – from 1802, when Congress banned African Americans from carrying U.S. Mail, to the late 1860s, when newly-enfranchised African Americans began receiving appointments as postmasters, clerks, and city letter carriers. As the 20th century neared, the political pendulum began to swing backwards, and many gains of the immediate post-Civil War period were lost.

In the early 20th century many African Americans found steady, valuable jobs in urban Post Offices, but little room for advancement. Despite discriminatory employment practices, the Post Office Department was a rare avenue of opportunity for African Americans – postal jobs were coveted positions that helped lead to the emergence of a black middle class.

A new era of opportunity for African-American workers began in the 1940s, when U.S. Presidents – spurred on both by civil rights organizations and war-time necessity – began using their powers of office to encourage equal opportunity in the workplace. In the 1960s the number of African-American employees promoted to supervisory positions grew exponentially, and African Americans were appointed as postmasters of the nation's three largest Post Offices – New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. By the end of the 20th century African Americans comprised 21 percent of all postal employees, serving at all levels of the Postal Service.

Theodore Roosevelt's "Square Deal"

[Roosevelt] is not so much now an American President as he is the President of the black belt.
Senator Hernando D. Money to the U.S. Senate, 1903¹

In September 1901, at age 42, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest President in U.S. history following the assassination of William McKinley. A native New Yorker who was sympathetic to civil rights, Roosevelt took office at a time when southern states were steadily stripping away black voting rights and racism was on the rise. He ignited a firestorm of protest among southern politicians just a month after taking office by inviting Booker T. Washington, the influential black author and educator, to dine at the White House. The dinner, which became known as "the Booker Washington incident," was widely vilified by the southern press, which was outraged that a U.S. President had treated a black man as a social equal.

Roosevelt, who became famous for his belief that all Americans deserved a "square deal," enunciated his policy on fairness in federal appointments in a letter of November 27, 1902:

it is and should be my consistent policy in every State, where their numbers warranted it, to recognize colored men of good repute and standing in making appointments to office. . . I can not consent to take the position that the door of hope – the door of opportunity – is to be shut upon any man, no matter how worthy, purely upon the grounds of race or color.²

In January 1903 Roosevelt tested the power of the federal government to "interfere in the race problem" when he refused to allow the town of Indianola, Mississippi, to drive out its African-American postmaster. Roosevelt chose to suspend service at the Indianola Post Office rather than accept the resignation of Postmaster Minnie Cox, who had provided excellent service, and appoint a white man in her place.³ His action stirred the national debate about race, North and South, including in the U.S. Senate.

¹ *Congressional Record -- Senate*, 58th Congress, 1st Session, 128 (March 18, 1903).

² Quoted by Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina, *Congressional Record*, 57th Congress, 2nd Session, 2558 (February 24, 1903).

³ The "Indianola affair," as it became known, dragged on for a year until finally, in January 1904, Cox's term expired and a white man was appointed in her place. For more on Cox's story, see "African-American Postal Workers in the 19th Century," at <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/postalpeople.htm>.

Senator Hernando Money of Mississippi asserted that Roosevelt's liberalism towards African Americans only fanned the flames of prejudice:

*The social equality which has been manifested here lately and exemplified here lately in high places has brought out this race prejudice to a point where, while in the South they had been tolerating negro postmasters, they have now got to the point where they do not want to do so any longer . . .*⁴

Another account of the Roosevelt administration standing by an African-American appointee arose in 1903 when Postmaster General Henry C. Payne suspended rural mail delivery in a Tennessee community whose African-American carrier had been held up and threatened by armed, masked men. Payne stated that the government had two options: send U.S. troops to protect the mail carrier on his route, or suspend the route. Replacing the carrier with a white man, simply because some customers disapproved of a black mail carrier, was apparently not an option Payne considered. He explained:

*It is not the business of the government to force mail service upon the people of any part of the country. . . when the people in the localities which object to the appointees of this department are willing to accept them and permit them to perform their duties unmolested these sections will be given the benefit of the mails.*⁵

In some parts of the South, African-American appointees were threatened into resigning or not taking office. In 1904 the Humphrey, Arkansas, Post Office was dynamited in the middle of the night and completely destroyed, reportedly because some of the town's citizens objected to the appointment of a black postmaster.

Despite the hardships, many African Americans sought work in Post Offices. In 1907 one southern white editorialist complained that "there is scarcely a post office of a city in the south that is not overrun by negroes – just as is the case with the railway mail service."⁶ Reportedly, most applicants for postal jobs in the South were black. An article in the June 7, 1908, issue of *The Washington Post* noted:

*Comparatively well educated negroes are willing, indeed, glad, to take minor clerkships under the government, places which do not appeal to white men of ability for the simple reason that the white man can do better. The consequence is that the most capable of the negroes compete with whites of at best only mediocre ability.*⁷

Racial discrimination in the South steered many African Americans away from clerk positions in Post Offices and towards letter carrier positions. In 1905 the secretary of the Civil Service Commission's Atlanta District stated that because African Americans in his district knew that accepting Post Office clerkships "means trouble for them" they "really prefer to act as carriers – a position in which their services are welcomed by white Southerners."⁸ Booker T. Washington remarked in 1906:

*In many parts of the South the white people would object seriously to colored people handing them a letter through the post office window, but would make no objection to a colored mail carrier handing them a letter at their door.*⁹

Although Roosevelt was sympathetic to civil rights, by his own admission he appointed fewer African Americans to office than his predecessor, and he took no action to protect civil rights.¹⁰ He began to lose the faith of some civil rights supporters when he appointed racist "lily white" Republican candidates to office when it was politically

⁴ *Congressional Record -- Senate*, 58th Congress, 1st Session, 129-132 (March 18, 1903). Money stated his own beliefs on the Senate floor unequivocally: "This is a white man's country and a white man's government. It was established by white men for white men . . . The clause in the Constitution that made the negro a voter was a tremendous mistake."

⁵ Postmaster General Henry C. Payne quoted in *Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 1903, 1.

⁶ Editorial in *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 29, 1907.

⁷ *The Washington Post*, June 7, 1908.

⁸ *Ibid.*, September 10, 1905.

⁹ Booker T. Washington to Charles William Eliot, March 7, 1906, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Volume 13, 513, at <http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/Vol.13/html/513.html> (accessed November 30, 2009). According to Washington, 90 percent of the letter carriers of Montgomery, Alabama, were African-American.

¹⁰ In a letter of December 14, 1904, to Henry Smith Pritchett, Roosevelt stated "not a law has been passed or threatened affecting the negro or affecting the southern white in his relation to the negro during the three years that the South has been indulging in hysterics over me," and that the number of African Americans appointed to office, "which was insignificant even under McKinley, has been still further reduced." Cited in Seth M. Scheiner, "President Theodore Roosevelt and the Negro, 1901-1908," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (July 1962), 177.

expedient to do so.¹¹ Civil rights supporters were further discouraged by the Brownsville Affair in 1906, when Roosevelt dishonorably discharged 167 black troops, without a trial, on the basis of unsubstantiated testimony from prejudiced white residents of Brownsville, Texas.¹²

In 1908 William Howard Taft, Roosevelt's choice for successor, was elected President. From the start, Taft adopted a conciliatory tone with the South, stating, on the question of federal appointments, "it is not the disposition or within the province of the Federal Government to interfere with the regulation by Southern States of their domestic affairs," and that appointing African Americans to federal offices in prejudiced southern communities would do more harm than good.¹³ According to Historian Louis Harlan, Taft appointed no new black postmasters in the South and refused to reappoint incumbents as their four-year terms expired.¹⁴

Although the number of black postmasters fell, the number of black postal employees continued to grow. According to the African-American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*, in 1912 there were nearly 4,000 black postal employees nationwide, including about 280 black postmasters, 505 employees in Chicago, 417 in New York, and 173 in St. Louis.¹⁵

Wilson Administration Segregates Federal Workers

For the first time in history, a President . . . pronounced his administration's policy as one of racial discrimination.

William Monroe Trotter, 1914¹⁶

In the federal elections of 1912 Democrats retained control of the U.S. House of Representatives and took control of both the White House and the Senate. Democrat Woodrow Wilson won the Presidential election largely because two Republican candidates ran for office that year, splitting the Republican vote.

At the time, the Democratic Party was largely a party of Southern social conservatives.¹⁷ Even before the Democrats took office, a group calling itself the National Democratic Fair Play Association as well as some federal workers began calling for racial segregation in the workplace.¹⁸

In April 1913, in one of Wilson's first cabinet meetings, newly-appointed Postmaster General Albert Burleson, from Texas, reportedly complained about integrated working conditions in the Railway Mail Service, where black and white railway mail clerks worked elbow to elbow sorting mail in cramped rail cars. The Railway Mail Association, the mostly-white union of railway mail clerks, adopted the following resolution at its annual convention the next month:



Segregated waiting rooms in U.S. Public Health Service dispensary for federal workers, Washington D.C., ca. 1918.

courtesy Library of Congress

¹¹ See "President Theodore Roosevelt and the Negro, 1901-1908," *The Journal of Negro History*, July 1962, 169-182.

¹² In 1972 the records of all 167 troops were cleared and their discharges were changed to honorable.

¹³ William Howard Taft, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1909. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25830&st=&st1=> (accessed August 5, 2010).

¹⁴ See Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 342.

¹⁵ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 13, 1912.

¹⁶ *The Washington Post*, November 16, 1914, 2.

¹⁷ The Republican Party was the party of Abraham Lincoln. After the Civil War it espoused a strong federal government and civil rights for blacks. Socially-conservative Southern Democrats, meanwhile, wanted a return to the old social order. Democrats remained affiliated with social conservatism until the 1948 National Democratic Convention, when they voted for a strong civil rights platform. In the 1912 Presidential election Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic candidate, won more than 50 percent of the popular votes in all the Southern states; he won the popular vote in many Northern states only because Republican votes were split between two candidates.

¹⁸ In a letter printed in the December 1912 issue of *The Railway Post Office*, the journal of the railway mail clerks' union, Clerk Charles Ellis of the Kansas City and LaJunta line wrote: "There is one thing that can be asked of a democratic Congress that would be impossible from a republican one and that is segregation on the color line . . . as a party they should feel free to act on this question of a separate crew or line for the colored clerk. The colored clerk himself should welcome such a law. I am sure that each would rather mix with people of his own race than to be an alien in a white crew."

*Whereas, It has been demonstrated that it is to the advantage of all concerned that the negro clerks be given separate assignments from those of the Caucasian race . . . therefore be it Resolved, That this convention deems it advisable for the two races to be separated and the immediate steps be taken to that end.*¹⁹

Most black railway mail clerks worked in the South; some white clerks wanted to eliminate all black clerks, or at least to segregate work crews if it could be done in such a way that no white clerks would be inconvenienced.²⁰ While debating the proposed racial segregation of clerks, including how it might, paradoxically, lead to the appointment and promotion of more black clerks, one white union representative attempted to calm his fellow conferees:

*I think we can trust to that splendid gentleman from Texas who is the head of the Post Office Department to not in any way issue any order of reorganization that will be to the detriment of any white postal clerk.*²¹

Although no general segregation order is known to have been issued, some Railway Mail Service officials adopted the policy of segregating work crews, reassigning some clerks to create all-white crews on some lines and all-black crews on others, apparently with the Department's blessing.²²

In 1949 Thomas P. Bomar, a former letter carrier and railway mail clerk in Georgia, recalled the dark days of the Wilson era:

*Before 1912 both white and colored employees believed that the segregation provisions of the State laws did not apply to Federal property and they accepted it without friction or complaint. Negroes were given assignments and appointed on the basis of merit. Finally there came a clamor for segregation and discrimination. Numerous locker incidents were reported, as many white employees refused the same locker or locker rooms used with Negroes. Rules were suspended and the arbitrary transfer of Negro clerks to 'colored lines' became effective.*²³

Other federal workers were also segregated, at Post Office Department headquarters and at other federal agencies. On May 31, 1913, the seven African-American clerks at postal headquarters were screened off from their white coworkers, although none of their coworkers had requested it. Restrooms and some work rooms at Post Office Department headquarters and in a few other agencies' headquarters were also segregated. The lunch room at headquarters, meanwhile, had apparently already been whites-only, and remained so. When asked why there was no lunch room for black employees, the building superintendent bluntly explained that "as no restaurants in Washington were open to colored people, the government could not be expected to furnish one."²⁴

African-American political leaders, many of whom had encouraged their followers to vote for Wilson, felt betrayed. In November 1913 they sent a delegation to the White House in search of an explanation. Wilson denied that his administration followed a policy of segregation but promised he would look into the allegations. Segregation continued unabated. One year later the delegation returned to the White House. One member of the delegation, William Monroe Trotter, demanded an accounting, noting that "for fifty years white and colored clerks have been working together in peace and harmony."²⁵ Trotter's angry tone infuriated Wilson, who told Trotter that there was

¹⁹ *The Railway Post Office*, June 1913, 54. The Railway Mail Association, established in 1891, was originally open to all railway mail clerks. In 1911 it amended its constitution so as to admit new members of only "the Caucasian race," although existing black members were grandfathered in. In 1915, African Americans comprised 16 percent of the voting members of the union's Fourth Division (comprising Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida), or 101 out of 651 (*The Railway Post Office*, June 1915).

²⁰ See discussion in June 1913 issue of *The Railway Post Office*, 50-51.

²¹ *The Railway Post Office*, June 1913, 50.

²² A. L. Glenn, Sr., *History of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, 1913-1955*, 17, 38 (Cleveland, OH: Cadillac Press Co., 1957). In 1915 Chief Clerk G. T. Leake of the Railway Mail Service in Houston, Texas, pronounced himself in favor of segregation because it "reduces friction and promotes harmony" (Glenn, 38).

²³ Glenn, 44. In 1939 Bomar was named national secretary of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, the union of black postal workers. In 1952 he was promoted to Assistant General Superintendent of the Postal Transportation Service, a top job at postal headquarters.

²⁴ Mary Childs Nerney, "Segregation in the Government Departments at Washington," September 30, 1913, Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Reel 6 (Box I: C70), at the Library of Congress. Nerney, a white woman, served as the national secretary of the NAACP from 1912 to 1916. Unaware of her affiliation, white interviewees spoke candidly of racial discrimination. (Nerney's given name is sometimes listed as May instead of Mary.)

²⁵ Nicholas Patler, *Jim Crow and the Wilson Administration: Protesting Federal Segregation in the Early Twentieth Century* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2004), 179.

no discrimination in federal agencies, and that “segregation had been inaugurated to avoid friction between the races, not to injure the negro.”²⁶

National newspapers, including *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, took note:

*Mr. Wilson put the head of the government in the position of denying the principles of the government . . . We are not ready to concede that any body of citizenship has less standing under the law than any other. It is true, but to admit it officially is offensive.*²⁷

On May 27, 1914, the Civil Service Commission issued a new order requiring applicants for federal jobs to submit a photograph. Although the commission claimed the requirement was to prevent fraud in the application process, it enabled appointing officials to screen out black applicants.²⁸ The “rule of three,” which allowed appointing officials to select any one of the top three eligible candidates for office, was widely used to discriminate against African-American candidates.

Once they secured an appointment, employees still faced obstacles. Opportunities for advancement, and in some cases continued employment, were often hindered by local prejudice and biased supervisors, with some clerks being dismissed on fraudulent or questionable grounds. Historian A. L. Glenn described the no-win situation some railway mail clerks, in particular, found themselves in:

*Negro clerks in white crews had special troubles at times. If he was an able clerk, he was often said to be ‘too smart’ if mediocre, he was labelled indolent and indifferent. In a large crew he often had one or two friends but had to be alert as to the others.*²⁹

The experience of black postal employees varied, depending largely on local prejudices. John Wesley Dobbs, a clerk from 1903 to 1935 on the Atlanta to Nashville line, recalled that although he was the only black clerk in his crew he did not experience racial friction, even during his final eight years of service when he was clerk-in-charge.³⁰

Glenn noted examples of some white supervisors “going to bat” for black coworkers:

*During the Burluson administration . . . special attempts were made to segregate the personnel of mail crews on some RPO runs. . . . In a few instances the white clerks involved absolutely refused to give up their Negro clerk. Notably, Clerk-in Charge Gene Beckham of the Atlanta, Macon & Montgomery RPO refused to permit them to take Fielder Reddick out of his crew. It was reliably reported that the matter was handled through a Congressman and Senator. Reddick remained. Clerk-in-Charge Spies of the Jack. & Montgomery RPO did not wish to give up Lonnie Miller, his ace Negro clerk. Spies fought for his man and won.*³¹

Segregation in the Railway Mail Service and black clerks’ exclusion from the railway mail clerks’ union led to the formation of the National Alliance of Postal Employees in 1913 (see sidebar on page 6). Segregation in general and the photograph requirement for federal job applicants also helped catalyze the civil rights movement. Membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) rose from less than 400 in 1912 to more than 4,000 in 1914; by 1920 the NAACP’s membership surpassed 88,000.

²⁶ *Christian Science Monitor*, November 13, 1914, 6.

²⁷ *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 14, 1914, 6.

²⁸ In 1914, the year the photograph requirement was put in place, only 14 cases of impersonation or attempted impersonation in Civil Service examinations were discovered (Glenn, 91, citing December 1937 issue of *The Postal Alliance*).

²⁹ Glenn, 56.

³⁰ American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1940: John Wesley Dobbs, December 2, 1939, [[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(wpa113070415\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field(DOCID+@lit(wpa113070415)))], accessed 5/31/2006].

³¹ Glenn, 56-57.

1920s: Relief for Railway Mail Clerks

Prior to 1923 the Railway Mail Service was the most prejudiced of all branches of the service. . . The Railway Mail Service is today a model in just dealings and promotions.

Roy O. Wilhoit, President, National Alliance of Postal Employees, 1931³²

In 1921, after two terms in office, Democratic President Woodrow Wilson was replaced by Republican Warren Harding. Under Harding and successive Republican Presidents, general postal policy began to change. The working conditions and opportunities of African-American postal employees – particularly in the Railway Mail Service – improved. Part of the change might be attributed to the philosophical differences between the two parties – in the 1920s Republicans were still typically more socially liberal than Democrats, and more often advocated civil rights. Part of the change can also be attributed to Chicago politics.

In the 1920s African-American politician Edward H. Wright headed a strong Republican organization in Chicago, with influence over a voting bloc that was strong enough to decide elections. Wright convinced Illinois Congressman Martin B. Madden to intervene in the fight to elevate black postal workers. Madden, who had previously served on the Post Office and Post Roads Committee, was at the time chairman of the influential House Appropriations Committee. In 1922 and 1923 Madden's son-in-law, Paul Henderson, served as Second Assistant Postmaster General.³³

In 1921 the Post Office Department and the Railway Mail Association agreed that the promotions of railway mail clerks would be based on seniority, rather than the old point system, which meant that senior clerks were promoted regardless of race. A consequence of the new policy – perhaps unanticipated by the union – was that veteran black clerks who for years had been passed over began to receive promotions. When the union objected to the promotion of an African American to clerk-in-charge in December 1922, Second Assistant Postmaster General Paul Henderson defended the promotion, saying the employee was both qualified and entitled to it and that if necessary he would “call upon the U.S. Army to protect him in it.”³⁴ In 1922 Henderson also directed superintendents of the Railway Mail Service to appoint black clerks on certain railway lines where they had been excluded during the Wilson era – for example, on the busy lines between New York and Philadelphia.

In 1923 African-American John D. Gainey was appointed Assistant Chief Clerk-at-Large of the Railway Mail Service, specifically to handle grievances of black employees. The National Alliance of Postal Employees saw Gainey's appointment as a “turning point in the ‘cleaning out’ of foul practices.”³⁵ Gainey toured the country, investigating complaints and issuing recommendations. He ended the removals of clerks on questionable charges – according to Historian A. L. Glenn,

The National Alliance of Postal Employees

In 1911 the Railway Mail Association, the union of railway mail service clerks, amended its charter to exclude new membership to African Americans. Other employee unions, such as the National Association of Letter Carriers and the National Federation of Post Office Clerks, tolerated segregated local branches – marginalizing and effectively excluding black members in some cities.

In October 1913 a group of African-American railway mail clerks convened in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to form their own union – the National Alliance of Postal Employees. The National Alliance worked for equal rights for black postal workers in concert with civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The Alliance vigorously protested the photograph requirement for Civil Service applicants. It protested racial discrimination in the workplace – in appointments, assignments, promotions, disciplinary actions, and removals. And it vigorously advocated for the appointment of black supervisors and postal inspectors.

In 1923 the National Alliance opened its doors to all postal employees. In 1965 it opened its membership to all federal employees and changed its name to the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees.

On January 17, 1962, President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10988, prohibiting separate labor organizations based on race.

For more information on the history of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, see *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality*, by Philip F. Rubio (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

³² Glenn, 150

³³ According to Henry W. McGee, the first African-American postmaster of Chicago (1966-1972), it was through Representative Madden's influence that in the 1920s the Postmaster General named “four Negro clerks to foremen [in the Chicago Post Office], over the head of Postmaster Leuder.” [Henry W. McGee, “The Negro in the Chicago Post Office” (MA dissertation, University of Chicago, 1961), 41]

³⁴ Glenn, 80; see also 130.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

emancipating “hundreds of Negro railway postal clerks EVERYWHERE . . . even in the deep south.”³⁶ (In 1923 about 13 percent of railway mail clerks were African-American, serving mostly in the South.³⁷)

Glenn cites several examples of wrongs righted in the early 1920s through the intercession of Gainey and Henderson, including the reinstatement of Henry T. Ellington, a black railway mail clerk in Alabama who had been fired in 1916 after being falsely accused of embezzlement. Also, some railway mail clerks who had been arbitrarily reassigned to segregated black crews on distant runs during the Burleson years were allowed to transfer back to their original runs, closer to home.

1920s through 1940s: Opportunities Vary by City

A city where a Negro does not have to contend for his rights in America would be a miracle city and I have as yet to hear of such a city.

Letter Carrier Raymond A.C. Young, Baltimore, Maryland, 1944³⁸

Beginning around 1916, in what has been termed the “Great Migration,” hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the South in search of a better life in northern U.S. cities. African Americans moved north not only to escape from discrimination in the South, but also in search of economic opportunity. Manpower shortages caused by World War I were opening up jobs in the North, while crop failures in the South were eliminating jobs.³⁹

Northern cities swelled with new immigrants, both Southern-born blacks and foreign-born whites. Between 1910 and 1920, Philadelphia’s black population rose by 58 percent, New York’s by 64 percent, Chicago’s by 143 percent, and Detroit’s by 613 percent. In the 1920s the black population of New York and Chicago more than doubled again, and in Detroit it more than tripled.⁴⁰

Post Offices were an important source of employment for urban African Americans. By 1928 African Americans comprised nearly 20 percent of the postal workforce in Philadelphia, and nearly 24 percent in Baltimore.⁴¹ The percentage of African-American employees of the Washington, D.C., Post Office grew from about 24 percent in 1925 to 35 percent by 1931.⁴²

Harry S. New, Postmaster General from 1923 to 1929, promised that federal hiring would be color-blind, but it was not a promise he could keep. Although the Postmaster General stated the principles, principles were put into practice – or not – by local postmasters. Racial discrimination persisted in both the hiring and promoting of workers, even in the nation’s capital. Although the proportion of African Americans working at the Washington, D.C., Post Office in 1928 was on a par with their representation in the general population, they were over-represented in lower-level positions, with about 85 percent working as laborers and watchmen, and only about 15 percent in the higher-paying clerical force.

³⁶ Glenn, 82 and 115.

³⁷ According to Glenn (8), there were 2,500 black railway mail clerks in 1923; there were 18,784 clerks total according to the 1923 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* (39). In 1927 most African-American railway mail clerks worked in the Fourth Division of the Railway Mail Service, in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Florida (Glenn, 404).

³⁸ Glenn, 169, citing March 1944 issue of the *The Postal Alliance*.

³⁹ See *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*, by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1922), pages 79-105, for a discussion of some of the causes of migration.

⁴⁰ Between 1910 and 1920, the black population as a percentage of the total increased as follows: in New York City, from 2 to 2.9 percent; in Chicago, from 2.1 to 4.2 percent; in Philadelphia, from 5.5 to 7.4 percent; and in Detroit, from 1.3 to 4.2 percent. Foreign-born white immigrants poured into northern cities at a far greater rate than native-born blacks, outnumbering them by a factor of about 3 (in Philadelphia) to 12 (in New York) in 1920, and about 2 (in Philadelphia) to 7 (in New York) in 1930. Figures extrapolated from *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1914, 54-55; 1925, 43-45; and 1935, 21-25, at http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/past_years.html [accessed September 15, 2010].

⁴¹ Figures reported in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 21, 1928, and the *Afro-American*, September 29, 1928. In 1930, African Americans represented 11 percent of the population of Philadelphia, and 18 percent of the population of Baltimore.

⁴² Statistics reported in *The Washington Post* on November 15, 1925, and July 16, 1931. In 1930 blacks represented about 27 percent of the population of Washington, D.C.

In 1930 in Chicago, African Americans comprised about 70 percent of the Post Office laborers, 28 percent of the clerks, and 16 percent of the letter carriers, but only 5 percent of the foremen. Southern Post Offices, meanwhile, had a worse record of discrimination. In the mid-1930s, 80 percent of the letter carriers in Memphis and 75 percent of the letter carriers in Houston were black, but there were no black postal clerks in either city. Some southern Post Offices passed over black applicants entirely.

One commentator noted the tendency of local prejudices to crystallize into policy:

*If a policy of a particular post office is to bar Negroes from clerkships and make them carriers, then that policy is adhered to religiously. If it applies to Money Order, Stamp, and General Delivery windows, it likewise becomes a rule.*⁴³

Employees were sometimes not only assigned to different types of work depending on their race, but also to different rooms, or different sections of the same room. As late as 1949 the New Orleans Post Office maintained segregated "swing rooms," or break rooms for employees; as late as 1955 many Post Offices in Alabama, including those in Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile, maintained segregated swing rooms and toilets.

In the 1940s a string of executive orders battled racial discrimination in the federal workplace:

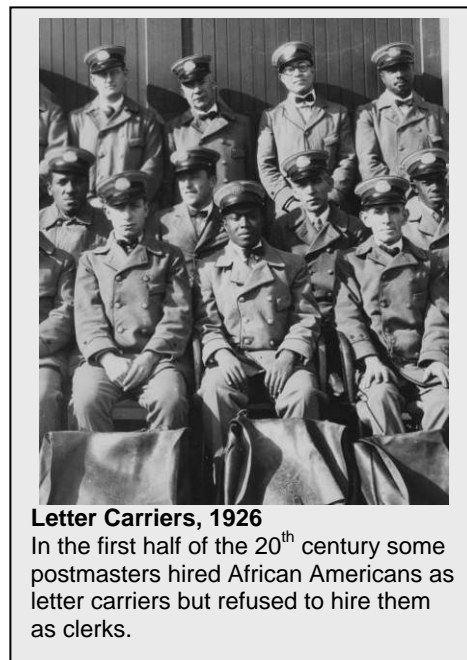
-- In November 1940 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order # 8587, eliminating the photograph requirement for civil service applicants.

-- In 1941 Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, reaffirming "the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in . . . government because of race. . ." ⁴⁴ The order also created the Fair Employment Practice Committee to investigate complaints of discrimination, redress valid grievances, and advise government agencies on how best to comply with the order. The committee chairman and its members served without compensation.

-- In 1943 Executive Order 9346 again reaffirmed "the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of any person . . . in Government by reason of race . . ." ⁴⁵ This order reinvented the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), giving the committee more teeth and its chairman an annual salary.

-- In 1946, with Executive Order 9808, President Harry S. Truman created the President's Committee on Civil Rights, to investigate the protection of civil rights by federal, state, and local governments, and to issue a written report with recommendations on how to strengthen the civil rights of all Americans. The committee issued its report, "To Secure These Rights," on October 29, 1947. ⁴⁶

-- In 1948, in Executive Order # 9980, Truman reiterated that "all personnel actions taken by Federal appointing officials . . . be based solely on merit and fitness," and ordered that the head of each government department was "personally responsible for an effective program to insure that fair employment policies are fully observed," directing each to appoint a Fair Employment Officer to help carry out such policies, under the "immediate



Letter Carriers, 1926

In the first half of the 20th century some postmasters hired African Americans as letter carriers but refused to hire them as clerks.

⁴³ Edward LaSalle, an official of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, quoted in Glenn, 98, citing January 1936 issue of *The Postal Alliance*. In February 1948 the same phenomenon was reported: "recognition of the civil rights for Negro postal workers is directly proportional to those accorded Negro citizens in communities in which they reside and are employed" (Glenn, 312).

⁴⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Executive Order 8802," June 25, 1941. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=16134> (accessed January 8, 2010).

⁴⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Executive Order 9346," May 27, 1943. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=16404> (accessed December 29, 2010).

⁴⁶ See "To Secure These Rights" at <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights1.htm> (accessed December 29, 2010).

supervision of the department head."⁴⁷ Decisions of the Fair Employment Officer could be appealed to the department head, whose decisions, in turn, could be appealed to a newly-created Fair Employment Board in the Civil Service Commission.⁴⁸

Patriotic propaganda during World War II called for all Americans to unite to fight at home and abroad for the American ideals of freedom and democracy, but domestically, African Americans were often treated like second-class citizens. Some Post Office break rooms and restrooms in the South were still whites-only, and nationwide, white postal employees were often given preferred work assignments. In Saint Louis, a black employee was arrested in 1941 following an altercation that arose after the clerk refused to move to the rear of the Post Office's cafeteria to drink his cup of coffee.⁴⁹ In 1944 a postal employee in Baltimore noted that "south of Washington, D.C., to the best of my knowledge, there is not a single Negro supervisor or window clerk serving any of the post offices."⁵⁰ Even in cities like Chicago, where blacks were politically powerful, less than 3 percent of postal supervisors were black.

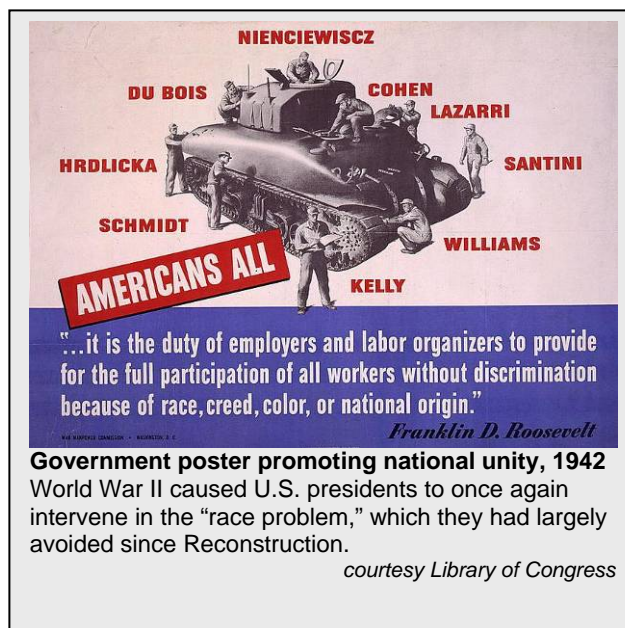
In 1943 Postmaster General Frank C. Walker published "A Message to All Postal Personnel" in the *Postal Bulletin*, which was issued to Post Offices nationwide. Walker stated that "discrimination is repugnant to all our principles of good government and decency," and instructed employees that:

*every postal worker should have full opportunity of aspiring to and reaching positions to which is talents, his energy, and his integrity entitle him. . . It is the duty of each postmaster and each superintendent to see to it that his office is so conducted that it cannot be charged justly than any person whomsoever under his jurisdiction has not received the promotions, the assignments, or other benefits that are due him.*⁵¹

Some postmasters took their duty seriously. Just 24 hours after he was confirmed as postmaster of Los Angeles in 1946, Michael Fanning appointed four new African-American supervisors in the Los Angeles Post Office, where about one-third of the workforce was African-American. Speaking at a convention of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, Fanning later declared:

*I state unequivocally that I don't know of a post office in the United States, including our own, where there is not some degree of race discrimination. . . Our legislators in Washington have provided the laws that are necessary to guarantee full freedom and race equality in the post office. Whether or not such freedom and equality is obtained, however, will be decided by the human element in the post offices.*⁵²

In 1947 Senator William Langer, chairman of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, ordered an investigation of allegations of racial discrimination in the hiring and promotion of employees at seven southern Post Offices. His special investigator found that African Americans – including honorably discharged veterans – were systematically denied appointments, promotions, and preferred assignments in Post Offices due solely to their race.⁵³



⁴⁷ Harry S. Truman, "Executive Order 9980," July 26, 1948. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=78208> (accessed August 5, 2010).

⁴⁸ Glenn cites several examples of the Board finding discrimination in Post Offices, where the Postmaster General had not (Glenn, 291).

⁴⁹ In 1943 Postmaster General Frank C. Walker issued an order banning segregation in cafeterias in government-owned buildings. Despite the order, segregation continued as late as 1953 in some cafeterias due to social pressures – including, reportedly, at Post Office Department headquarters.

⁵⁰ Glenn, 170.

⁵¹ *The Postal Bulletin*, June 2, 1943, 1.

⁵² *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 11, 1947, 3.

⁵³ See *Senate Report 1777, Part 2*, 80th Congress, 2d Session (1948), and also Glenn, 180-181, 183-184, 222-229.

African Americans also suffered disproportionately during the employee loyalty investigations that followed Truman's Executive Order 9835 of March 22, 1947. Ashby Carter, president of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, noted that "the majority of dismissals under the loyalty act were aimed at getting rid of Negro postal employees who spoke out for democracy within the post office system".⁵⁴

Despite the hardships faced by applicants and employees, postal jobs were coveted positions. Although African Americans did not find equal opportunity in postal work – they were rarely promoted to supervisory positions, for example – they at least found opportunity, in an era when little was available in the private sector. In a 1939 survey of African-American adolescent boys in New York City, "Post Office clerk" topped the list of preferred jobs; "mail carrier" was number six on the 22-item list.⁵⁵ Many black postal employees were college students or graduates; some had law degrees but worked at the Post Office because white law firms would not hire them. One former postal worker recalled that in 1941 he sorted mail in Detroit with an African American who had his own law practice. The employee recalled that his coworker "would show up in court on days and come to the post office and work nights," adding "that was pretty common."⁵⁶ A study of African Americans in Chicago in the 1930s noted that:

*In the [Chicago] post office one will find not only colored high school graduates, but also men with advanced college degrees seeking economic security and students studying medicine and law. In 1939, at least a half-dozen Negro postal employees were writing books! The "postal worker" is a social type . . . of definitely high status.*⁵⁷

Richard Wright, award-winning author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, worked as a clerk at the Chicago Post Office sporadically from 1928 through the mid-1930s, before leaving to pursue a writing career in New York City.⁵⁸

Civil Rights Pioneers

Many African-American postal workers were civil rights activists; some were also prominent leaders. Herbert Hill, national labor director of the NAACP from 1951 to 1977, recalled that whenever he visited towns looking for volunteers to lead civil rights activities, "there would be the minister, the undertaker, the lawyer and the post office worker." (*Washington Post*, March 14, 1974)

John L. LeFlore, a letter carrier in Mobile, Alabama, from 1922 to 1965, reorganized the Mobile branch of the NAACP in 1926 and served as its executive secretary until the NAACP was banned in Alabama in 1956. He helped reorganize NAACP branches in other cities and helped establish the Regional Conference of Southern Branches, serving as its chairman from 1936 to 1945. From 1956 until his death in 1976 LeFlore worked for civil rights under the auspices of the Non-Partisan Voters League. He fought for the desegregation of Mobile's public schools and businesses, worked to register and inform black voters and improve housing, and helped many African Americans find jobs. He wrote for *The Chicago Defender* from 1942 to 1952 and later was associate editor of the *Mobile Beacon*. In 1958 LeFlore helped mount a legal appeal of the rape conviction of Willie Seals by an all-white jury, on the basis that blacks had been excluded from both the grand jury and the trial jury. The appeal was ultimately successful and helped lead to the integration of juries in the South. Although in 1956 LeFlore was suspended without pay for 28 days and threatened with removal due to "irregularities" in his job performance, he kept his postal position until he resigned in 1965.

Westley W. Law, a letter carrier in Savannah, Georgia, from about 1948 to the early 1990s, was president of that city's branch of the NAACP from 1950 to 1976. Like LeFlore, Law spearheaded the civil rights movement in his city. He worked for the desegregation of public schools, worked for voting rights, and helped lead a 15-month boycott of segregated stores which ended in July 1961 when the stores desegregated their lunch counters. In September 1961 Law was fired from his letter carrier position following the election of a local U.S. Congressman who had made his firing a campaign promise. Law was reinstated the next month at the direction of President John F. Kennedy; he continued delivering mail in Savannah until he retired in the early 1990s.

Heman Marion Sweatt, a letter carrier in Houston, Texas, from about 1938 to 1947, participated in voter-registration drives in Houston, wrote for the black newspaper *The Houston Informer*, and served as the local secretary of the National Alliance of Postal Employees. Sweatt is most well known as the successful plaintiff in the 1950 U.S. Supreme Court case *Sweatt v. Painter*, the pre-cursor to *Brown v. Board of Education*. (See *Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall and the Long Road To Justice*, by Gary M. Lavergne.)

More activist postal workers are described in *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality*, by Philip F. Rubio.

⁵⁴ Glenn, 244.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth McDougald, "Negro Youth Plans Its Future," *The Journal of Negro Education*, April 1941, 224-225.

⁵⁶ Coleman Alexander Young, quoted in the *Detroit News*, March 9, 1987.

⁵⁷ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 reprint of 1945 edition), 509-510.

⁵⁸ It was while working at the Post Office that Wright first met like-minded intellectuals – both black and white. One of Wright's white coworkers encouraged him to join a local political organization that became, in the words of biographer Hazel Rowley, "Wright's university," introducing him to new ideas and people who inspired and encouraged him to take himself seriously as a writer. See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 78, and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., and Robert J. Butler, editors, *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 74-77. In 2009 Wright was honored on a U.S. postage stamp.

1950s: A New Era

Any man who seeks to deny equality among all his brothers betrays the spirit of the free and invites the mockery of the tyrant.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, First Inaugural Address, 1953⁵⁹

In the 1950s some of the seeds planted in the late 1940s began to bear fruit. African-American postal employees, meanwhile, did not wait passively for their rights to be handed to them. Many employees fought hard for their right to fair and equal treatment – not only in the workplace, but in communities at large. Several postal employees became prominent civil rights leaders, working with groups like the NAACP and the National Alliance of Postal Employees (see “Civil Rights Pioneers” on page 10).

After receiving complaints from a committee of the National Alliance of Postal Employees in the early 1950s, the new postmaster of Fort Worth, Texas, eliminated the “whites only” restrooms, swing rooms, and drinking fountains at the Post Office, telling the committee that “all employees within the post office were at liberty to use any and all facilities.”⁶⁰

In 1952, John LeFlore, a longtime letter carrier in Mobile, Alabama, and secretary of that city’s branch of the NAACP, noted that segregation continued in the Mobile Post Office at the direction of Post Office officials, not because the workers desired it. LeFlore explained:

White and Negro letter carriers have work desks indiscriminately placed and go about their duties in the post office as members of one big family . . . The men are congenial, they joke with one another, salute each other with a “hello, Frank,” or a similar expression . . . and get along as human beings should . . .

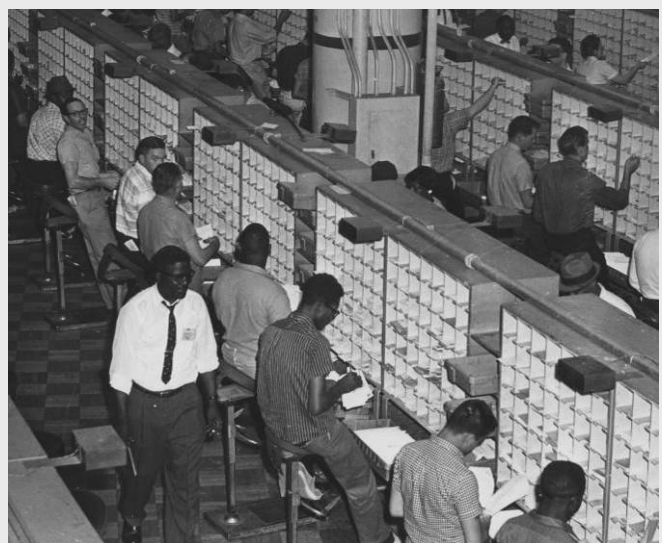
*All employees drink from the same water fountain. There are segregated restrooms and toilets not because the men asked for them, but because the officials, perhaps behind time with antiquated ideas about the place of race in a progressive atmosphere of democracy, don’t have sufficient vision to see the folly of segregation.*⁶¹

In 1953 LeFlore wrote to Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield, appealing to him to order an end to the practice of segregating restrooms and toilets in Post Offices, which was “widespread in the South with few exceptions.”⁶² While Summerfield apparently issued no such order, he helped level the playing field for black workers in other ways. In 1953 he introduced qualifying examinations for promotions to supervisory positions in Post Offices, which the National Alliance of Postal Employees had long advocated. Henry W. McGee, who became Chicago’s first black postmaster in 1966, noted that “under this system the number of Negro supervisors . . .



Letter Carriers in Mobile, Alabama, 1956

In 1952 African-American Letter Carrier John LeFlore called Mobile’s black and white letter carriers “one big family,” attributing the office’s segregated restrooms and toilets to Post Office officials with “antiquated ideas.”



Washington, DC, Post Office, circa 1958

In 1959 about 15 percent of the supervisors at the Washington, D.C., Post Office were black, versus 66 percent of the employees. Overall, the city’s population was about 54 percent black.

⁵⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1953. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9600> (accessed September 29, 2011).

⁶⁰ Glenn, 202-203.

⁶¹ *The Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1952, 13.

⁶² *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 8, 1953, 18.

increased tremendously.”⁶³ The percentage of African Americans in supervisory positions at some Post Offices more than doubled in the 1950s (see chart below). In Chicago, the number of black supervisors more than tripled, from 41 to 129.

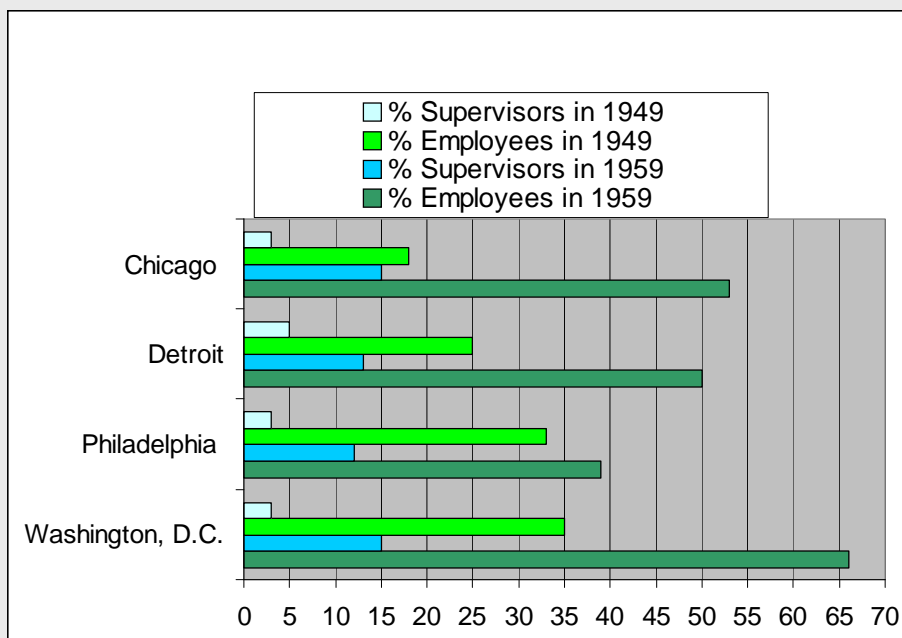
African Americans began serving as window clerks at the Louisville, Kentucky, Post Office and at a number of northern Post Offices by 1954. William C. Jason, the National Welfare Director of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, noted that:

*In the north, merit, fitness and seniority have actually become color blind in a number of the larger post offices. Bigoted officials who said the public would not stand for a Negro window clerk have learned better.*⁶⁴

In November 1954 African American Joseph A. Clarke was appointed as a staff assistant to First Assistant Postmaster General Norman Abrams, to help promote equal employment opportunity in the Post Office Department. Clarke, a former newspaper publisher, had previously worked for the State of New Jersey’s Urban Colored Population Commission, which investigated racial discrimination and suggested remedies. On the heels of Clarke’s appointment the National Alliance of Postal Employees rejoiced:

*At present all postmasters—especially the larger offices where many Negroes are employed—are PERSONALLY informed, when necessary, of the NEW attitude towards ALL employees regardless of race.*⁶⁵

In January 1955 President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10590, creating the President’s Committee on Government Employment Policy, to help ensure that equal employment opportunity was available to all regardless of race, color, religion, or national origin. The new committee superseded the Fair Employment Board created by executive order in 1948. On February 24, 1955, Postmaster General Summerfield published in the *Postal Bulletin* procedures to be followed by complainants (both applicants and employees), supervisors, and officers in handling complaints of discrimination. If complainants were dissatisfied with the results of the investigation at the Department level they could appeal their case to the President’s Committee on Government Employment Policy. Groups, as well as individuals, could file complaints. The National Alliance of Postal Employees called the policy a “crowning masterpiece” and considered that “the postal service—the humane part of it—has just about reached its zenith.”⁶⁶



Sources:

1949: A. L. Glenn, Sr, *History of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, 1913-1955* (Cleveland, OH: Cadillac Press Co., 1957), 424;
 1959: Henry W. McGee, “The Negro in the Chicago Post Office” (MA dissertation, University of Chicago, 1961), 91.

⁶³ McGee, 89.
⁶⁴ Glenn, 201.
⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.
⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

In March 1955 Mr. Leslie Liburd, president of the New York City branch of the National Alliance of Postal Employees, was appointed Assistant Regional Personnel Manager in the Post Office Department. Clarke administered his oath of office, stating that “from here on, there will be no ceiling on ambition . . . in the Postal Service, whether in New York or in Alabama.”⁶⁷ He later pointed out that adhering to the spirit of President Eisenhower’s executive order made not only ethical and political sense, but economic sense. He gave as an example a Post Office station where “Negro employees . . . had to travel across the entire building” to use a segregated restroom – integrating restrooms and having all employees use the closest facilities saved “100 man hours per day for the entire station.”⁶⁸

In December 1956 anti-job discrimination posters were carried on the sides of more than 25,000 mail trucks. When a racist postmaster in North Carolina refused to hire an eligible black applicant, Postmaster General Summerfield called the postmaster and threatened to fire him if he did not change his mind – the applicant was offered a job the next day.

In 1958 Herbert Hill, the labor secretary of the NAACP, simultaneously praised the Post Office Department and chastised other federal agencies when he noted that the Post Office Department was the only federal agency in the South that employed African Americans “above the level of janitor and other menial classifications.”⁶⁹

On November, 19, 1960, Frayser Lane of the Urban League noted:

*Because of the pay and security, the P.O. is the basic foundation for the Negro community . . . P.O. workers have bought more homes and sent more offspring to college than any other segment of our group.*⁷⁰

1960s: Advancement

I'd say we've got some catching up to be done and should do it.
Postmaster General J. Edward Day, 1961⁷¹

Although in 1960 the Post Office Department was the largest single employer of African Americans in the country, most African-American employees toiled in lower-level positions with little hope for advancement.

In 1961 newly-elected President John F. Kennedy and J. Edward Day, Kennedy’s choice for Postmaster General, embarked on an ambitious program to create equal opportunity in the workplace. On March 6, 1961, Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, establishing the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, stating that:

It is the plain and positive obligation of the United States Government to promote and ensure equal opportunity for all

⁶⁷ Glenn, 204.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 281.

⁶⁹ The New York Times, July 11, 1958, 46.

⁷⁰ McGee, 83.

⁷¹ The Afro-American, December 2, 1961, 2.



photo courtesy Library of Congress

William L. Dawson, Kennedy’s First Pick for Postmaster General

President-elect John F. Kennedy named J. Edward Day as Postmaster General on December 17, 1960, but Day was not Kennedy’s first choice for the job.

Soon after his election, Kennedy offered the job of Postmaster General to Democratic Congressman William L. Dawson, a powerful African-American political leader from Chicago. In 1960 Dawson, then an 18-year member of the U.S. House of Representatives, was serving as chairman of the House Government Operations Committee. If appointed Postmaster General, Dawson would have been the first black member of a Presidential cabinet.

To the consternation of many in the black community, Dawson turned down Kennedy’s offer, saying he would rather stay in Congress. Some critics could not believe that a black man would turn down such a historic opportunity – they thought perhaps that the offer was merely a gimmick to score points with black voters.

Corneal A. Davis, a long-time member of the Illinois House of Representatives and associate of Dawson, recalled asking his friend at the time “What the devil is wrong with you?” and Dawson telling him:

*I got my own power. Don't you know when I take that job Kennedy'd be my boss. I'll be the postmaster general, but I'll also sign my resignation when I take the job. And when he tells me I'm through, I'm through. And hell, I ain't going to be through until the people tell me I'm through.**

Dawson continued to serve in Congress until his death in 1970.

* Corneal A. Davis Memoir, Volume II, Interview by Horace Q. Waggoner, 1982, Archives/Special Collections, University of Illinois at Springfield, 173 [<http://www.uis.edu/archives/memoirs/DAVISCORN EALvII.pdf>, 1/6/2010].

qualified persons, without regard to race,

and acknowledging that the government had often failed to do this in the past.⁷² That same month Deputy Postmaster General William Brawley, meeting with the directors of the 15 postal regions, cited the underrepresentation of African Americans in the supervisory ranks as evidence of past discrimination.

That summer the Department selected 15 Special Assistants for Employee Relations, one for each regional office, to assure full-time attention to civil rights and employee-management relations. It published a “no discrimination policy” in the May 25, 1961, issue of the *Postal Bulletin* and issued a new “Code of Ethics for Postal Employees” on August 10, 1961. On December 12, 1961, Equal Employment Opportunity posters were issued for display in all Post Offices, and on January 12, 1962, posters were placed on all bulletin boards outlining how to file complaints of discrimination.

Meanwhile, several African Americans were appointed to high-profile positions:

-- In 1961 Christopher C. Scott, a 38-year postal veteran from Los Angeles, was appointed as a deputy to the Assistant Postmaster General for Transportation, making him the highest-ranking African American in the Post Office Department to that date, with an annual salary of \$18,500.

-- In 1961 Day appointed Henry McGee as regional personnel director for the Chicago Region, the highest position ever held by an African American in the Postal Field Service.

-- In 1961 Day appointed Mrs. Nancy C. Avery as acting postmaster of the Pacoima, California, Post Office – reportedly the first African American to head a first-class Post Office since the Reconstruction era.⁷³ Avery was appointed to the position permanently in 1963 and served until her retirement in 1984.

-- In 1962 Charles A. Preston, a postal clerk and college graduate from Fort Wayne, Indiana, was appointed as a postal inspector in the Inspection Service’s Philadelphia Division. Preston was the first African American appointed as a postal inspector since the 1800s.

In 1962 lockers and swing rooms in the Atlanta, Georgia, Post Office were desegregated, and two previously segregated Post Office stations were integrated. That same year, the Post Office Department took the unusual step of stripping Atlanta’s postmaster of his ability to promote employees after it was found that he discriminated against African Americans. Postmasters in several other cities, including Los Angeles, temporarily lost their promoting authority at around the same time, for the same reason.

In December 1962 Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson lauded the Post Office Department’s handling of job discrimination complaints, noting that “very few agencies have a record that matches the Post Office” and that the Department exceeded the government-wide average for taking corrective action on discrimination complaints by 15 percent.⁷⁴ One hundred and twenty-nine postal employees nationwide, from clerks and carriers to regional officials, were trained to conduct investigations and hold hearings in response to complaints of discrimination, in addition to their regular duties.

There were many challenges to be met. As late as 1961 the Mail Equipment Shops, near Post Office Department headquarters, maintained segregated employee lockers and exclusionary promotion practices. In January 1961 a complaint of racial discrimination in the Mail Equipment Shops by the NAACP sparked an investigation by the Postal Inspection Service. During the investigation, the Shops’ manager, Lloyd Sydnor, explained that job applicants were evaluated “without consideration to race,” but that African Americans “seldom file applications for higher rated positions which they themselves recognize they are not capable of filling.”⁷⁵ The majority of the Shops’

⁷² John F. Kennedy, “Executive Order 10925,” March 6, 1961, and “Statement by the President Upon Signing Order Establishing the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity,” March 7, 1961. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=58863> and <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=8520> (accessed December 3, 2010).

⁷³ Post Offices were divided into classes based on their revenue from 1864 to 1975; first-class offices were the highest-grossing. In 1961, 11.6 percent of Post Offices nationwide were designated as first-class.

⁷⁴ *The Afro-American*, December 15, 1962, 18.

⁷⁵ Statement of Lloyd B. Sydnor, April 10, 1961, taken by Postal Inspectors F. A. Mervis and K. S. Maynard in conjunction with Postal Inspection Service Case No. 120435-C, “Complaint of possible discriminatory practices in personnel matters involving Negroes employed at the Mail Equipment Shops,” in the files of the USPS Historian.

employees were African-American, and they were disproportionately stuck in lower-level positions (see the table “Mail Equipment Shops: Employees by Race and Job Level, April 1, 1961” at right).

Postal inspectors found that the supervisors working under Sydnor favored white employees for “details” (on-the-job training) in the Shops, thus ensuring that white employees would be the most qualified when positions opened up. The inspectors reported:

*White employees in the Mail Equipment Shops were placed in positions in anticipation of vacancies so that when they actually occurred they were the only employees qualified by experience for the jobs, thereby discouraging the Negroes from making applications.*⁷⁶

Following the investigation, the Shops’ manager initiated a series of corrective actions.⁷⁷

In 1963 the Department initiated the year-long “Postmasters Program for Progress,” which required that postmasters of offices with more than 125 employees develop and maintain an affirmative equal employment opportunity program and that they submit monthly written progress reports. At a series of conferences held at the University of Oklahoma that year, representatives from headquarters and the postal regions instructed key officials, including postmasters of the largest 313 Post Offices, to “deliberately seek out qualified Negroes for promotion.”⁷⁸

The desegregation of postal facilities was extended to privately-owned buildings in 1963, when the Post Office Department demanded of all contractors who operated contract Post Office stations that “any services provided within those premises must be available to the general public on an equal basis.”⁷⁹

Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, meanwhile, met with Postmaster General Day and 40 Texas postmasters at his Texas ranch that July and personally asked them to end any discrimination in their offices and to hire and promote minorities.

Between 1962 and 1964, the percentage of supervisor jobs held by African Americans rose from 5 to 10. Between 1961 and 1968, the percentage of top-earners in the Post Office Department who were African-American rose from less than one to roughly four percent.⁸⁰ In the same period, the overall representation of African Americans in the postal workforce increased from about 15 to about 20 percent.

Mail Equipment Shops: Employees by Race and Job Level, April 1, 1961			
Postal Field Service Level	Black Employees	White Employees	Total Employees
2	71	2	73
3	37	39	76
4	7	27	34
5		13	13
6		5	5
7		7	7
8		10	10
9		1	1
10		2	2
11		-	-
12		1	1
13		1	1
14		1	1
Total	115	109	224

Source: Exhibit No. 1, Post Office Department Office of Inspector, Case No. 120435-C, “Complaint of possible discriminatory practices in personnel matters involving Negroes employed at the Mail Equipment Shops,” files of USPS Historian.

Reverse Discrimination

Charges of reverse discrimination in the Post Office Department arose in 1963 after three African Americans were promoted to supervisor positions at the Dallas, Texas, Post Office, over the heads of more than 50 more qualified white employees.

An official of the United Federation of Postal Clerks noted that the Dallas promotions “violated the Post Office’s own prohibitions against racial discrimination” (*Wall Street Journal*, August 12, 1963, 1).

In August 1963 ten of the white employees filed a lawsuit in federal court claiming they had been discriminated against because of their race. Two months later the Post Office Department revoked the promotions, citing a procedural error, but kept the three African-American employees on at the same pay in a temporary status, with a promise that they would be first in line for future promotions.

⁷⁶ Post Office Department Office of Inspector, Postal Inspectors F. A. Mervis and K. S. Maynard to Inspector-in-Charge, Washington, D.C., April 20, 1961, Case No. 120435-C, “Complaint of possible discriminatory practices in personnel matters involving Negroes employed at the Mail Equipment Shops,” files of USPS Historian.

⁷⁷ Monthly meetings were held between management, the National Alliance of Postal Employees and other labor unions; seniority lists of the Shops’ employees were posted and training programs were established to enable senior employees to qualify for higher-level jobs; and opportunities for details were posted, in addition to the required postings for higher-level vacancies.

⁷⁸ *The Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 1963, 8.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Figures for top-earners in 1961 refer to Postal Field Service (PFS) levels 12-20, and in 1968, to PFS levels 12-21.

In 1966 African-American postmasters headed the nation's three-largest Post Offices – New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (see sidebar at right). Together, these offices handled about 14 percent of the nation's mail volume, with 11 percent of its employees. Chicago postmaster Henry McGee noted in 1967 that

"In my 38 years of postal service I have seen conditions change from almost complete segregation to the present time where opportunities for minority advancement is limited only to ability and drive."⁸¹

On April 29, 1969, Ronald B. Lee – formerly the head of the Post Office Department's planning and systems analysis office – became the first African-American Assistant Postmaster General when he was appointed Assistant Postmaster General of Planning and Marketing by President Richard M. Nixon.

As the 1960s progressed, African Americans benefited from increased job opportunities, both in the private and public sectors. The 1964 Civil Rights Act banned job discrimination by private employers; postal salaries, meanwhile, stagnated. As the Department began to face stiff competition for educated workers, the demographics of new employees shifted – less highly educated workers, and more women, began entering the postal workforce.

In 1966 Henry McGee, then personnel director of the Chicago Region, said "postal jobs go begging because the post office can't compete with pay scales in private industry," citing a starting wage of \$3.13 an hour for city transportation workers, versus \$2.64 at the Post Office.⁸² Seventy percent of newly-hired employees in Chicago that year were women, because men could find better paying jobs elsewhere.⁸³

In 1967 an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Division was created within the Bureau of Personnel, and Postmaster General O'Brien boasted that the Post Office Department was "the leading employer of Negroes in 12 major cities."⁸⁴ In some cities, like Detroit, Chicago, Washington, and Los Angeles, African Americans comprised 70 to 80 percent of postal employees. A writer for the black-interest newspaper the *Chicago Daily Defender*, however, noted that the Post Office Department had little choice but to hire African Americans:

the tight manpower market and the undesirable working conditions . . . have forced the employment of large numbers of Negroes. The facts indicate there just is not anyone else available for the Post Office Department to hire.⁸⁵



From Left to Right: Postmaster Leslie Shaw, Postmaster General Lawrence O'Brien, and Postmasters Henry McGee and John Strachan, 1967

Leslie N. Shaw, a successful banking executive, took a 25 percent pay cut to accept the job of acting postmaster of Los Angeles in April 1963. He was appointed postmaster in 1964, and served until 1969.

Henry W. McGee, a 37-year postal veteran who had risen through the ranks from substitute clerk to personnel director for the Chicago Region, was appointed as acting postmaster of Chicago in September 1966 and as postmaster less than two months later. McGee was not only the first black postmaster of Chicago – he was also reportedly the first career postal employee to head a major U.S. Post Office. He served as postmaster of Chicago until March 1972, when he was promoted to manager of the Chicago District, with responsibility for 250 Post Offices, from which position he retired in June 1973.

John R. Strachan, a 22-year postal veteran who had risen through the ranks from substitute clerk to assistant to the director of the New York Region, was appointed as acting postmaster of the New York Post Office in November 1966 and as postmaster in June 1967. He served as manager of the newly-created New York Metropolitan Postal Center beginning in 1971, but returned as postmaster of New York in December 1972 and served until his retirement in 1979 at the age of 62.

⁸¹ The *Chicago Daily Defender* December 14, 1967, 17.

⁸² *Ebony*, December 1966, 50.

⁸³ McGee noted that although women made excellent clerks, because they lacked seniority they ended up working as mailhandlers, where they had a harder time lifting heavy sacks of mail. To compensate, employees placed less mail in sacks to make them lighter, which cost the Post Office Department more to transport, since railroads charged by the sack, not by weight (*ibid.*).

⁸⁴ Post Office Department press release, October 13, 1967.

⁸⁵ The *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 26, 1968, 20.



Evelyn Brown, Washington, D.C., 1967

Women as well as minorities benefited from increased job opportunities in the 1960s. Mrs. Evelyn Brown started delivering mail in Washington, D.C., in 1963; she was the first woman to deliver mail in the city since the World War II era.

As the decade came to a close, Congress voted for steep pay increases for postal workers – 6 percent in 1967, 5 percent in 1968, 4.7 percent in 1969, and a total of 14 percent in 1970. Meanwhile, logjams of mail at outdated postal facilities, as well as deepening postal deficits, convinced Congress to reorganize the nation's postal system. In 1970, Congress passed the Postal Reorganization Act, transforming the United States Post Office Department into the self-funding, quasi-independent United States Postal Service.

From Postal Reorganization to the End of the Century

After the United States Postal Service was created from the Post Office Department, African Americans were increasingly promoted to managerial positions. On July 23, 1971, just 22 days after the United States Postal Service officially began operations, Ronald B. Lee was promoted to Assistant Postmaster General for Customer Development.⁸⁶ In October 1971 Alvin J. Prejean, former deputy executive director of the Chicago Urban League, was named director of the Office of Social Priorities, in charge of administering equal job opportunity programs. At the same time, Joseph N. Cooper was promoted to advertising manager in Communications and Public Affairs. Cooper had worked in advertising in New York City, was executive director of the New York Museum of Black History and Culture, and had hosted a weekly television show which focused on black achievements. By 1979, 4.5 percent of top postal executives were African-American.

But even while African Americans were making inroads into postal management, racial discrimination persisted in some postal facilities. In 1973 Napoleon Chisholm, a black employee in Charlotte, North Carolina, filed a class action lawsuit against the Postal Service, alleging that it denied him the opportunity to compete for promotions and also that it discriminated against black workers generally. The federal district court decided the case in his favor, and the court's decision was affirmed by the United States Court of Appeals in 1981.⁸⁷ The Postal Service was ordered to award back pay to employees who could demonstrate entitlement, to make "affirmative efforts" to recruit and appoint African Americans and to promote black employees in proportion to their overall employment rate, to establish objective criteria for promotions, details, and discipline, to use only validated written tests or new selection devices, and to create a new position – that of EEO Employee Complaints Representative.

Chisholm v. United States Postal Service illuminated the unequal treatment received by black employees at the Charlotte Post Office: not only was the promotional system discriminatory, from skewed written tests, to all-white promotion advisory boards that favored white applicants, and uneven application of procedures to benefit whites, but blacks were disciplined for offenses for which whites were not punished. Although blacks comprised only 30 percent of the workforce in Charlotte in the 1970s, they comprised more than 50 percent of workers suspended, and were terminated at twice the rate of white employees.⁸⁸



Chicago Post Office, circa 1970

In 1969, women comprised 30 percent of postal employees in Chicago; 94 percent of the women were African-American.

A series of studies in the 1980s highlighted both the Postal Service's strengths and weaknesses as an employer. A 1984 study found that the Postal Service was a leader in equal pay for equal work, that:

⁸⁶ Lee left the Postal Service in 1972 to become director of marketing analysis for Xerox Corporation.

⁸⁷ See *Chisholm v. United States Postal Service*, United States Court of Appeals, at <http://openjurist.org/665/f2d/482/chisholm-v-united-states-postal-service-a-e-t-r> (accessed January 5, 2011).

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, Note 24.

*the Postal Service paid its employees internally comparable wages, regardless of their gender or race, whereas in most other industries wages differed significantly by gender or by race, or by both.*⁸⁹

A study by the New York firm Clark, Phipps and Harris, Inc., in 1983, however, found that minorities were promoted less often, and disciplined more often, than white postal workers. Another study – of newly-hired postal employees in the Boston area in the late 1980s – found that blacks were slightly more than twice as likely as to be fired as whites, even controlling for factors like gender, age, drug use, absenteeism, test scores, accidents, and disciplinary infractions.⁹⁰

In the 1980s African-American postal employees formed two national networking and mentoring organizations to foster the career development of black employees. Network, an organization focused on mentoring African-American women managers and supervisors, first met informally in Chicago in 1984 and elected its first national board of directors in 1987. That same year a group of black postal managers and executives, perceiving a weakening commitment to affirmative action programs and a decreasing number of black executives in the Postal Service, formed the group Afro-American Postal League United for Success (A-PLUS), open to EAS employees and PCES executives.⁹¹

The final decades of the 20th century saw more African-American postal “firsts.” In January 1981 Mary A. Brown was appointed as the first black woman MSC Manager/Postmaster – at Shreveport, Louisiana.⁹² Mary J. Layton became the first black woman Assistant Postmaster General when she was appointed Assistant Postmaster General of the Public and Employee Communications Department in 1982.

The first African-American employee to attain the position of Regional Postmaster General was Emmett E. Cooper Jr., who was named the Eastern Regional Postmaster General in 1977. Johnnie F. Thomas was appointed Eastern Regional Postmaster General in March 1986, and in March 1989 Samuel Green Jr. became the third African-American to hold the position of Eastern Regional Postmaster General.

In 1992 the title “Vice President” replaced “Assistant Postmaster General.” In the 1990s the following African Americans served as Vice Presidents of the United States Postal Service (listed with their most recent title):

Sylvester Black	Vice President, Western Area Operations
Samuel Green Jr.	Senior Vice President, Customer Sales and Services
Robert F. Harris	Vice President, Diversity Development
Clarence E. Lewis Jr.	Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President
Henry A. Pankey	Vice President, Mid-Atlantic Area Operations

African-American Postal Governors, 1971 - 2000

The Postal Service’s Board of Governors was established by the Postal Reorganization Act of August 12, 1970. The Board, which is comparable to a board of directors of a private corporation, includes nine Governors who are appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. From Reorganization through the end of the century, the following African Americans served as Presidentially-appointed Governors of the Postal Service:

- George E. Johnson, 1971-1974
Johnson was a businessman and the founder of hair care products company Johnson Products Co., the first black-owned firm to be traded on the American Stock Exchange.
- Timothy L. Jenkins, 1980-1982
Jenkins was a lawyer and the chairman of an international management consultant firm.
- Ira D. Hall, 1987- 1990
Hall was an IBM executive.
- LeGree S. Daniels, 1990-2005
Daniels was a lifelong public servant and the first African American appointed in Pennsylvania’s Department of Revenue; she was named Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education in 1987.

⁸⁹ Martin Asher and Joel Popkin, “The Effect of Gender and Race Differentials on Public-Private Wage Comparisons: A Study of Postal Workers,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (October 1984), 22. Asher and Popkin’s study was triggered by a 1981 study that found that postal workers’ wages were higher than those in similar private sector industries. Looking at the same data, Asher and Popkin found that this was true only because private sector industries on average paid nonwhites and/or women less pay for comparable work, while white men in the Postal Service and the private sector were paid similar wages.

⁹⁰ See Craig Zwerling and Hilary Silver, “Race and Job Dismissals in a Federal Bureaucracy,” *American Sociological Review*, October 1992.

⁹¹ EAS, or “Executive and Administrative Schedule,” employees, consist of employees in most administrative and managerial positions; PCES, or “Postal Career Executive Service,” employees, consist of employees in key management positions.

⁹² From September 1975 until August 1992, when the Postal Service’s field structure was reorganized, Management Sectional Centers (MSCs) were responsible for all postal activities within a specific ZIP Code range. In 1981 there were 278 MSCs nationwide; the Shreveport MSC was responsible for about 125 Post Offices.

Clarence E. Lewis Jr. was named Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President in June 2, 1998 – the highest-ranking African-American postal employee to that date. Lewis started his postal career as a substitute city letter carrier in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1966. He advanced through supervisory and management positions in Norfolk and in 1986 became an executive in the Richmond Division. He received several promotions before his appointment as Vice President, Area Operations, Allegheny Area, in 1996, and as Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President in 1998. In March 2000 Postmaster General Bill Henderson gave Lewis the Benjamin Franklin Award, the Postal Service's highest honor.

Building upon its affirmative action and EEO programs, in 1992 the Postal Service created a Diversity Development department to “serve as the Postal Service’s social conscience.”⁹³ The goals of the department were to “increase employees’ awareness of and appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity” and to:

*ensure that all career and succession planning takes advancement for women and minorities into consideration, and that the cultural makeup of local communities is represented in the postal work force.*⁹⁴

In February 1997 an African-American manager at Postal Service headquarters remarked that although progress had been made in equal employment opportunity, the Postal Service still had “pockets of discrimination and a lack of commitment to equal promotional opportunities.”⁹⁵ That May, the chairman of the Postal Service’s Board of Governors, Tirso del Junco, announced that Aguirre International had been awarded a contract to conduct an independent study of the Postal Service’s diversity policies and practices as they related to hiring, promotion, training and contracting.⁹⁶ The Aguirre team found that minorities were well represented in the postal workforce at large, although they were underrepresented at the higher levels. Aguirre’s report, issued in January 1998, concluded that the United States Postal Service stood out as a leader in meeting affirmative action goals and striving for a diverse workforce.

At the end of the 20th century African Americans constituted roughly 21 percent of the postal workforce, versus 11 percent of the civilian labor force. At the same time, they filled about 14 percent of top postal management positions.⁹⁷

In 2000, *Fortune* magazine ranked the United States Postal Service 9th on its list of “America’s 50 Best Companies for Minorities.”⁹⁸

HISTORIAN
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE
FEBRUARY 2012

⁹³ United States Postal Service, *Comprehensive Statement on Postal Operations*, 1992, 1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

⁹⁵ *Federal Times*, February 17, 1997.

⁹⁶ The study was prompted by del Junco’s claim that African Americans were *overrepresented* in the postal workforce; he believed that some postal managers were guilty of reverse discrimination, to the detriment of Hispanic citizens (see *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1994).

⁹⁷ United States General Accounting Office, Report # GAO/GGD-00-76, March 2000, “Diversity in the Postal Career Executive Service.”

⁹⁸ http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2000/07/10/283788/index.htm (accessed August 29, 2007).