

Women Mail Carriers

Women have transported mail in the United States since at least the mid-1800s. By 1899, women were also delivering mail – first to rural customers and then, in 1917, to city residents. During the course of the 20th century, the number of women serving as mail carriers grew from less than 100 to more than 84,000. In 2007 there were more than 96,000 women carriers, representing 40 percent of the carrier force.

While early postal records do not list the gender of employees, the following women are known to have served.

Mail Messengers Since at Least 1845

The first known appointment of a woman to carry mail was on April 3, 1845, when Postmaster General Cave Johnson appointed Sarah Black

*to carry the mail between Charlestown Md P.O. & the Rail Road . . . daily or as often as requisite at \$48 per annum.*¹

For at least two years Black served as a mail messenger, ferrying the mail between Charlestown's train depot and its Post Office. Postal work apparently ran in the family – from 1824 through 1856 all of Charlestown's postmasters were Blacks, including Constantia F. Black, Charlestown's first woman postmaster, who was appointed in 1848.

Contract (“Star”) Route Carriers by About 1860

The earliest known woman who carried mail on a contract or "star" route was Mrs. Polly Martin, who drove a mail wagon from about 1860 to 1876 from Attleboro to South Attleboro, Massachusetts. Martin carried the mail as well as express packages, telegraph messages, and up to six passengers.

In the 1800s, when women were popularly regarded as delicate and fragile, women who carried mail were seen as larger-than-life legends in their own time. Carrying mail was not only physically demanding, but carriers, with their regular schedules, were potential targets for thieves. An interview in the May 5, 1884, issue of the *Boston Daily Globe*, subtitled "Brave Polly Martin, Who Used to Drive the Attleboro Mail. How She Horsewhipped Highway Robbers and Silenced Saucy Passengers," described Martin as a "tall, muscular woman." Martin told her interviewer that driving the mail wagon

was pretty tough sometimes, in the winter . . . Many a time I . . . got out and dug the horse out of the drifts.

She went on to describe how in her 16 years of service, she was accosted by robbers only once. When one of the robbers stepped into the middle of the road and grabbed her horse's reins she "pounded him in the face" with her horsewhip and kept right on going, adding "he had tackled the wrong customer that time."

In the 1880s, at least two women are known to have carried mail: Miss Susanna A. Brunner in New York and Miss Minnie Westman in Oregon. Brunner carried the mail from Port Washington to Great Neck, Long Island, from 1881 to 1885, while in her early 20s.² In 1888, Westman carried mail in Oregon on a 20-mile route from the Siuslaw River over the Coast Range Mountains to the Hale Post Office, about 15 miles west of Eugene. She was 20 years old at the time. Her father and uncle operated a stageline and held the mail contract. The October 21, 1888, issue of *The New York Times* stated that Westman

carries the mail night and day and fears nothing. She rides horseback and carries a trusty revolver.

At least 18 women reportedly carried mail on contract routes in the 1890s, including the legendary "Stagecoach" Mary Fields and Sarah M. Burks. Fields, a former slave, is the earliest African-American

woman known to have carried mail. Fields drove the mail wagon from Cascade to St. Peter's Mission, Montana, from 1895 to 1903. She was well known in the town of Cascade for being a cigar-smoking "crack shot" with a heart of gold; the news of her death in December 1914 was carried on the front pages of both local newspapers.

Miss Sarah M. Burks began carrying the mail from St. Johns to Jimtown, Arizona, in June 1898, when her father fell ill and could not fulfill his mail contract. Burks was also known as a skilled markswoman. The July 23, 1899, issue of *The Washington Post* reported that Burks, a "crack shot," rode the 52-mile route twice a week through the "wild and desolate and God-forsaken" region with a pistol at her waist and a revolver in her saddlebags.

Rural Mail Carriers by 1899

After the introduction of rural free delivery in October 1896, women soon joined the ranks of carriers delivering mail to customers. In the 1899 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*, First Assistant Postmaster General Perry S. Heath stated that

on at least two routes there are girl carriers, and they are as unflagging in their devotion to the service as the men and as efficient.

At least 11 women are listed as substitute rural carriers in the 1899 *Official Register of the United States*, filling in for husbands or family members when the need arose. In 1900, at least two women served as full-time rural carriers: Miss Emma Fehrman of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, and Miss Ethel May Hill of East Greenwich, Rhode Island. In 1899, Fehrman was a substitute rural carrier, filling in as needed for her brother, the regular carrier. By June of 1900, according to the federal census, she was the regular carrier; her brother was listed as a farmer. On August 15, 1900, Hill began serving as the first rural carrier at the East Greenwich, Rhode Island, Post Office. She drove a "horse and covered carriage" and served 539 customers along a 21-mile route. The 1901 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General* shows that by July 1901 she had delivered nearly 35,400 pieces of mail.

In addition to Hill, the 1901 *Official Register of the United States* lists the following full-time rural carriers:

Mrs. Cora M. Vail; Fullerton, California
Miss Lizzie C. Firtion; Suffield, Connecticut
Miss Vesta L. Miller; Milan, Illinois
Mrs. Bel C. Simkins; Reading, Kansas
Miss Georgia B. Smith; Liberty, Missouri
Mrs. Mary E. Newbold; York, Nebraska
Mrs. Allie M. Merville; Bliss, New York
Mrs. Clara E. Lane; Brodhead, Wisconsin

In 1902, about 25 women served as rural carriers; in 1904 there were 105 women rural carriers.

On July 15, 1904, Miss Viola Bennett was appointed as the first rural carrier at the Suwanee, Georgia, Post Office. She "won her appointment



Etta Nelson, 1907

Photo courtesy Brenda Seekins

From 1903 to 1907, Miss Etta Nelson delivered mail by horse and buggy or sleigh to about 75 families living along Rural Route No. 3, near Pittsfield, Maine. Her father was also a rural carrier. In early 1907 Nelson was named the most efficient rural mail carrier in Maine. She gave up the route when she married in 1907.

Only Single Women Need Apply

On November 24, 1902, Postmaster General Henry C. Payne ordered that effective December 1st :

a classified woman employe in the postal service who shall change her name by marriage will not be reappointed.

According to an article in the November 25, 1902, issue of *The Washington Post*, Postmaster General Payne thought that after marriage women "should stay at home and attend to their household duties."

The policy affected both rural carriers and city carriers; both types of positions were "classified," meaning they came under Civil Service rules. It also affected village carriers at second-class Post Offices, clerks at large Post Offices, and, beginning in 1908, some small-town postmasters. Although some exceptions were made – notably during World War I – the policy remained in effect until November 1921.

A similar policy was adopted by the federal government during the Great Depression. The Economy Act of 1932 decreed that federally-employed spouses of federal employees would be the first to be dismissed in the event of a reduction in force. This provision was repealed in 1937.

over seven male applicants, practically all of whom possessed superior educational advantages" to "aid her parents, who are in moderate circumstances, in bringing up and educating a large family of girls."³ In 1906 Bennett had a "narrow escape from death" when her horse spooked at a train and overturned her buggy.⁴

An article in the March 3, 1905, issue of *The [Atlanta] Constitution*, described the near-tragic accident of another rural carrier, Miss Etta E. Bolton of Mobile, Alabama:

She was driving her mail wagon across a swollen stream over a rickety bridge, when, just as she reached the middle, the structure gave way . . .

. . . With great presence of mind and exceptional pluck she managed to extricate herself from the debris and the struggling horse and gain the shore.

The wagon, horse and contents of the vehicle were doing their best to make an end to all, but Miss Bolton plunged again into the torrent and worked like a heroine of old to save the property. Nearly exhausted, she finally gained the bank, having saved every sack and pouch of mail . . .

In 1907, three of the four rural carriers at Boise, Idaho, and two of the nine rural carriers at Los Angeles, California, were women. On December 8, 1907, the *Los Angeles Sunday Times* printed an interview with one Los Angeles carrier, Mrs. Sarah George, titled "Life Not All Cake and Ale: Woman Mail Carrier Has Her Share of Trouble." George's greatest complaint was of rough roads. She explained that one road was "so narrow that two [horse] teams cannot pass in safety at any part of it," and another was practically a swamp – "if you once get into that mud hole, all the king's horses and all the king's men can hardly get you out." Despite the challenges, George loved her job, avowing that she owed "her health, if not her life, to her occupation in the open."

Flying the Mail by 1913

Mail was first carried experimentally by airplane at aviation meets, fairs, and exhibitions nationwide in 1911. The first woman pilot to carry mail at such an event was famed aviatrix Katherine Stinson, who dropped mailbags from her plane at the Montana State Fair in September 1913.

Stinson also was the first woman to carry regular airmail. In the spring of 1918, when regular airmail service began, Stinson flew an airmail trip from Chicago to New York. She had hoped to make the trip in one day, to break the world's nonstop distance record, but a lack of fuel forced her to land near Binghamton, New York, on the evening of May 23rd. The field she landed on was so muddy it tripped her plane, toppling it, smashing the propeller, and damaging a wing. Before crash-landing, she had flown 783 miles in about 11 hours, breaking two American records – for distance and for endurance (she had set the latter record herself the previous year). Though Stinson was uninjured, her plane needed repairs; she completed the remainder of the trip on June 1 in about three hours.



The first known woman to regularly fly the mail was Miss Helen Richey, who co-piloted a contract route between Washington, D.C., and Detroit beginning December 31, 1934. Richey, a veteran pilot with 1,000 hours of flying time when she was hired, had competed against eight other pilots for the job, which required her to co-pilot a round trip every other day, including at night.⁵

First City Carriers, 1917

The first women known to have delivered mail in U.S. cities were appointed during World War I, when manpower shortages induced the Post Office Department to test women as city letter carriers.

On November 6, 1917, Mrs. Permelia S. Campbell and Mrs. Nellie M. McGrath began delivering mail to customers in Washington, D.C., in the vicinity of Union Station. Campbell, about 40 years old, was the widow of a letter carrier and had four children to support. McGrath, in her early 30s, had two young sons. McGrath's husband, who had also been a letter carrier, was serving in the military.

Washington's postmaster, Merritt O. Chance, explained:

*This is the first time in the record of the Post Office Department of the United States that women have been used for carrying mail on routes in a city. It must be considered more or less in the nature of an experiment.*⁶

The two women were appointed as temporary substitute letter carriers. Although their service was "highly satisfactory," after about two weeks they were taken off their routes and were offered "indoor" work in the Post Office.⁷

On November 23, 1917, First Assistant Postmaster General John C. Koons asked the postmasters of eight of the largest U.S. Post Offices to also conduct 15-day tests of women as letter carriers, to prepare for a future possible wartime necessity. Koons chose December as the test month because hundreds of extra carriers were normally employed then anyway, to help with Christmas mail. In December 1917, dozens of women delivered mail experimentally in Chicago, New York, and St. Louis.

In August 1918, twenty-five women took the Civil Service carrier exam in Washington, D.C., with the understanding that they would be offered positions only if no men were available. On September 5, 1918, Miss Irma G. Craig, who had scored the highest, became the first regularly-appointed woman letter carrier in Washington, D.C.

In 1918, women also delivered mail in other cities, including Detroit, Michigan, and Portland, Oregon. Although most of the women gave up their jobs to returning veterans after the war, in at least one city women continued delivering mail. Miss Anna McDonald of Anaconda, Montana, delivered mail for 20 years, from September 1918 to about December 1938. Miss Frances Griffith, also of Anaconda, reportedly delivered mail from 1918 to about 1923.

During World War II, women once again worked as letter carriers in cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. But again, after the war, most women left the service or were let go. Through the late 1950s, relatively few women delivered mail. For example, in 1955, there were 95 women city carriers and 332 rural carriers, representing less than one percent of the carrier force.

In March 1959, Postmaster General Arthur E. Summerfield appointed Mrs. Cecil M. Harden, a former congresswoman, as his Special Assistant for Women's Affairs. Harden went on a nationwide speaking tour, promoting the employment of women in



New York City Letter Carriers, 1917

From left to right: Miss Eleanora Regan, Mrs. Josephine Norton, and Mrs. Viva R. Hawley, three of New York City's experimental women carriers in December 1917.



World War II-era newspaper headlines, from back to front: *Los Angeles Times*, 11/8/1942; *The New York Times*, 12/23/1942 and 2/26/1943; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12/16/1944 and 12/11/1945; *The Wall Street Journal*, 1/22/1946.

Post Offices. In January 1961, she reported that while the number of women rural carriers had increased slightly since her appointment, from 380 to 487, the number of women city carriers – 87 – had remained the same.

Village Delivery Carriers by 1918

Village delivery was a service similar to city delivery offered in smaller towns from 1912 to about 1960.⁸ More than one hundred women are known to have served as village carriers; most were appointed in 1918, 1919, and 1920. The first woman known to have served as a village carrier was Julia McGee, who delivered mail in Clairton, Pennsylvania, from January 1, 1918, to May 31, 1920.

In 1920, about five percent of the nation's 943 village carriers were women, with six towns in Pennsylvania – Clairton, Elizabeth, Gallitzin, Glassport, South Fork, and Saint Clair – served entirely by women village carriers.

As village delivery was gradually phased out in favor of city delivery, most of the remaining women village carriers either resigned or transferred to clerk positions. But a few women village carriers converted to city carriers, including Mary E. Humphreys of Jasonville, Indiana, in 1925; Jessie McCaa of Franklinville, New York, in 1926; and Elizabeth A. Craddick of Osborne, Kansas, in 1930.

The 1960s: A Decade of Change

I believe that Federal employment practices should be a showcase . . . maintained in every respect without discrimination and with equal opportunity.⁹

Statement by President John F. Kennedy on the Establishment of the President's Commission on the Status of Women

On December 14, 1961, President John F. Kennedy created the President's Commission on the Status of Women to study, among other things, federal employment policies and practices and federal and state labor laws, to determine what needed to be done "to demolish prejudices and outmoded customs which act as barriers to the full partnership of women in our democracy," specifically to their employment.¹⁰ Kennedy thought that the federal government should lead by example: in July 1962 he ordered that federal appointments and promotions be made "without regard to sex."¹¹

Kennedy's 1962 order opened the door to federal employment for many women. The number of women city carriers jumped from 104 in 1960, to 370 in 1965, to 3,500 in 1968.¹² By 1972, nearly 8,000 women delivered mail in cities, representing about four percent of city carriers. Eleven years later, in 1983, more than 18,000 women were serving as city carriers (about ten percent), and the number continued to grow.



Genevieve Baskfield, circa 1920

Miss Genevieve Baskfield was appointed as a village carrier in Zumbrota, Minnesota, on June 1, 1919, at the age of 18. She resigned in September 1924 shortly after her father, who had been postmaster, left office.



Evelyn Brown, 1967

Mrs. Evelyn Craig 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.

In 2007, about 59,700 women served as city carriers and 36,600 as rural carriers, representing 40 percent of the carrier force.



Jane Mikesell, 1969
Courtesy Jane Mikesell

Mrs. Jane Mikesell began her 30-year postal career on May 13, 1968, as a letter carrier in Phoenix, Arizona. She was that city's first woman letter carrier.

¹ *Journal of the Postmaster General*, April 3, 1845, Record Group 28, National Archives and Records Administration.

² W. Edward Baker and Bonnie Baker Soldano, *The Way It Was, An Album of Port Washington Recollections* (Port Washington, New York: Dockside Books, 1989), 68.

³ "Resolute Georgia Girl Is Rural Mail Carrier," *The [Atlanta] Constitution*, September 13, 1904.

⁴ "Woman Mail Carrier Hurt. Horse Throws Miss Viola Bennett from Her Buggy," *The [Atlanta] Constitution*, April 29, 1906.

⁵ *The Washington Sunday Star*, December 30, 1934, 1.

⁶ "Women to Carry Mail Tomorrow; City Post Office to Experiment With Two to Meet War Conditions," *The [Washington] Evening Star*, November 5, 1917, 1.

⁷ Letter dated November 23, 1917, from First Assistant Postmaster General J. C. Koons to the postmaster of New York City, in *The Postal Record*, March 1918, 76. Also "Indoor Work for Women Carriers, Mrs. Campbell and Mrs. McGrath on Routes Today for Last Time," *The [Washington] Evening Star*, November 17, 1917, 1. The women's service was cut short partly because some male substitute carriers complained that they had not taken the required Civil Service exam.

⁸ Village delivery service was tried experimentally in some small towns beginning in 1891, but the early experiments were abandoned due to the service's perceived small benefit at a large cost. The service was reintroduced on June 30, 1912, and peaked in 1926 when it was offered in 859 towns nationwide. The number of towns with village delivery dropped steeply during World War II, and on November 1, 1949, most of the remaining village carriers were converted to city carriers. Village delivery service was phased out in the 1950s; by 1957 only 10 village carriers remained.

⁹ John F. Kennedy, "Statement by the President on the Establishment of the President's Commission on the Status of Women," December 14, 1961. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=8483> (accessed May 30, 2007).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John F. Kennedy, "Memorandum on Equal Opportunity for Women in the Federal Service," July 24, 1962. From University of California, *American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=8786> (accessed May 30, 2007). In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson amended the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit sex discrimination in hiring in the workplace at large.

¹² The Vietnam War, which led to fewer male applicants for postal jobs, also contributed to a rise in the employment of women.