

Letter Carriers' Uniform: Overview

1868 *First Uniform: Cadet Blue-Gray with Black Trim*

Mail delivery in large cities began in 1863 but no official uniforms were worn until after July 27, 1868, when Congress passed legislation authorizing use of uniforms by letter carriers. On October 31, 1868, Postmaster General Alexander W. Randall issued an order describing the uniform to be “invariably worn by the letter carriers while on duty”:

1. A single breasted Sack Coat of “Cadet Gray” or technically “Blue mixed cadet cloth” extending two thirds the distance from the top of the hip bone to the knee, with a pocket at each side, and one on left breast – all outside – with flaps two and three fourths to three inches wide with length to suit – say 6 1/2 to 7 inches. Coat to be bound entirely round with good plain black Alpaca binding one inch wide, to be put half over edges, with five brass buttons with the design of the seal of this Department (post-rider with mail bag across the saddle) down the front to button up to the neck, and one-half inch black braid round the sleeves 2 1/2 inches from the bottom.
2. Pants of same material and color with fine black broadcloth stripe one half inch wide, down each leg.
3. A single breasted vest of the same material and color with seven oval brass buttons (vest size) with the letters P.O. upon the face.
4. Cap of the same material and color, navy pattern, bound round with a fine black cloth band 1 1/2 inches wide, with small size buttons at the sides of the same material and design, as those of the vest, and glazed cover for wet weather.
5. A reversible cape (detached from the coat) reaching to the cuff of the coat sleeve when the arm is extended, of the same material and color on one side, and gutta percha cloth on the other side, with five buttons, the same as on the coat down the front, and bound entirely round with plain black Alpaca binding one inch wide put half over edges.”¹



**Letter Carrier
circa 1880
Manchester NH**

First prescribed for letter carriers in 1868, uniforms were cadet blue-gray with black trim. A cap was mandatory. Collection of the National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution™. John G. Ellinwood, photographer

1873 *Hot Weather Wear*

In 1873, regulations widened the stripes on the pants to one inch and permitted lighter material for summer uniforms. Summer pants and coats were of gray flannel, and the coat had three buttons down the front. In 1873 regulations also permitted the use of panama hats in hot weather and called for the letters P.O.D. (for Post Office Department) to be placed beneath the likeness of the post rider on the uniform buttons. An alternate style of rainwear was also permitted: an overcoat, similar in cut to the winter coat, constructed with gutta percha cloth. Postmasters were to decide, in accordance with the carriers' wishes, which style of clothing to adopt so that all the carriers in one city would dress alike.

1887 *Hat Badge*

In 1887, *Postal Laws and Regulations* approved the optional use of a helmet and required letter carriers to wear numbered badges on their hat, cap, or helmet. The regulations described the badge as having “nickel-plated figures nine-sixteenths of an inch in length, surmounted by a metallic wreath,” but variations in badge design soon emerged.



**Letter Carrier
circa 1890
Chicago IL**

Carriers were required to wear numbered badges on their cap, hat, or helmet beginning in 1887. Collection of Jennifer Lynch; M. B. Lonergan, photographer.

1890s *Double-Breasted Winter Coat, Service Stars*

In 1893, regulations allowed a double-breasted winter coat with 10 brass buttons showing "a letter-carrier in uniform with mail bag on shoulder and letter in uplifted hand" or the seal of the Department (the post rider). Piping on the trousers was reduced to 1/4 inch. Summer coats were single-breasted, with five buttons, and straw hats were authorized for summer. Also in 1893, a brass hook 1 1/2 inches long by 3/4 inch wide was placed two inches above the sleeve seam on the right shoulder of the winter and summer coat, to hold the mail bag strap. The hook was dropped from regulations by 1913.

Regulations in 1893 also required summer outerwear to be the same blue-gray color as winter wear. Though uniform styles were supposed to be identical at each Post Office, an article in the December 1893 issue of *The Postal Record* noted that at the Baltimore, Maryland, Post Office, "no two [carrier] suits were exactly alike and nearly all suits had one colored trousers and a different colored coat."

In 1897, regulations authorized the use of service stripes – one for every five years of service – on the uniform and specified that substitutes should wear the letter "S" on their sleeves. In 1899, a black cloth bar replaced the "S," and service stars, equidistant between seams, replaced the service stripes. The stars were 3/4 inch in diameter and placed 1/2 inch above the black braid on each sleeve.

1901 *Coatless*

In 1901, shirts were allowed as outerwear in hot weather.

During the heated term, postmasters may permit letter carriers to wear a neat shirt waist or loose-fitting blouse, instead of coat and vest, the same to be made of light-gray chambray, gingham, light-gray cheviot, or other light-gray washable material, to be worn with turn-down collar, dark tie, and neat belt, all to be uniform at each office.

– 1902 *Postal Laws and Regulations*



**Letter Carrier
circa 1894
San Francisco CA**

Helmets were first approved for carrier use in 1887. Beginning in 1901, carriers were allowed to take off their coat in hot weather. Shirts were light gray or blue, and were worn with a dark tie. Collection of the USPS Historian, #2731.

The Verdict of Every Letter Carrier
 'Tis a Sensible, Practical Garment for the Summer.
 Has been Adopted by Several of the Leading Cities,
 including Boston, Mass., and Washington, D. C., in 1906.

Patent Allowed Others Pending

THE "COMBO" SHIRT-COAT

Advertisement for shirt-coat
The Postal Record, February 1902

UNION-MADE

SHIRTWAISTS
 Made of best quality Chambray Gingham or Gray Flannel. The most practical and comfortable garment on the market.

The Fechheimer Bros. Co. Tailors to the Letter Carriers.
 CINCINNATI, OHIO. OUR ORIGINATOR

Advertisement for shirtwaists
The Postal Record, June 1902

1920s *New Badge*

In 1922, the carrier's badge was re-designed. The new badge was solid, of nickel-plated metal, elliptical in shape, and topped with a 1/2 inch tall eagle with wings spread two inches wide. The numbers, raised in the center of the badge, were 9/16ths of an inch long. The words "U. S. Post Office" were raised along the top, and the name of the Post Office and state were along the bottom. Raised five-pointed stars adorned the right and left sides, visually separating the text. The badge was curved at 10% to conform to the shape of the headgear.

By 1927, the shirt collar could be either white or the same color as the shirt-waist. Although regulations called for shirts to be light- or nickel-gray until 1955, when the color of the shirt was officially changed to blue, both blue chambray and gray poplin or flannel shirts were worn.

Now, in each city, the letter carriers have a committee to investigate styles and recommend changes to be voted upon by all. Wordy battles have raged over the issue of blue chambray or gray poplin shirts.

– "Postman Knows All About You," *Baltimore Sun*, June 9, 1940

1930s–mid-1950s *Sweaters, Jackets, Short Sleeves, Safari-Style Helmet*

Beginning in May 1931, a sweater coat could be worn in lieu of the uniform coat in areas of mild winter weather with the provision that only one type of coat be worn in each city. The 1932 *Postal Laws and Regulations* specified only that the sweater coat be of "uniform color and design." Many different styles of sweater coat were available to carriers, and through the 1930s and 1940s the sweater coat evolved into the sweater blouse, the winter blouse, the zipper blouse, and the zipper jacket. In September 1942, coat buttons were changed from brass to plastic or some other non-metal material due to the war-time metal shortage. In September 1950 the restriction on metal was lifted. A 1944 amendment to the regulations specified that "elbow-length" shirt sleeves were optional. Short-sleeved shirts, worn without a tie, first appeared in uniform ads in *The Postal Record* in 1948. As early as November 1947 uniform manufacturers offered a zippered "Eisenhower style" jacket, and a safari-style pith helmet appeared in advertisements by 1949. The Eisenhower jacket was officially added to the letter carrier's uniform in July 1953, in an order signed by Assistant Postmaster General Norman Ross Abrams which read:

In lieu of the [sack] coat specified, a jacket known as the Eisenhower-type jacket, may be worn, the material and color to be as specified for the coat.

The order also specified black (rather than dark) ties for summer wear.

1956 *New Maroon Trim, New Emblem Patch, and a Skirt for the Ladies*

In December 1955, Postmaster General Arthur E. Summerfield announced new uniform specifications for letter carriers, stating that the newly styled items would become available January 15, 1956. Instructions, reflected in the 1957 *Personnel Handbook*, changed the cap braid and uniform trim – including service stars – from black to maroon. Shirts were changed from gray to blue. Ties were changed from black to maroon. Carriers could choose from the traditional double-breasted or a single-breasted winter coat. For the first time, a patch with the Departmental emblem appeared on uniform sleeves, in the form of a three-inch diameter maroon patch to be worn on the left sleeve, with a dispatch horse and rider centered in a circle, facing right. The patch had the words "POST OFFICE DEPT." along the top and "USA" on the bottom, separated by two stars. The 1955 specifications banned the use of sweaters as outerwear and called for plain backs in the Eisenhower jacket instead of optional plain or pleated backs. At the same time, uniform wear of female carriers was first discussed.



Letter Carrier
circa 1940

This carrier is wearing a single-breasted summer-weight coat and a gray bell crown cap with a ventilated black cane band. Collection of the USPS Historian, #2736a.

Items of uniform for female employees are the same as for male employees

. . . except for the addition of a skirt.

--1957 *Personnel Handbook*

The winter skirt was to be made out of the same material as the winter jacket, and the summer skirt out of the material authorized for summer trousers. Both skirts were to have a 1 1/4 inch wide waistband, 1/4 wide maroon braid trim down the sides as on the trousers, and were to be worn approximately 13 inches from the floor.

1960s Tailored Women's Wear, Emblem Patch Flipped

In 1962, fur caps for winter wear were added to the list of approved uniform items. In 1963, a nylon mesh cap for summer wear was added. Slacks, shirts with a maroon string tie, and jackets tailored for women were introduced in 1964, along with a modified men's-style cap and a beret-type cap. Also in 1964, regulations allowed carriers to wear the approved summer headgear of their choice. Styles previously had been chosen by a Post Office supervisor or uniform committee.

On February 1, 1965, the direction of the horse and rider on the sleeve patch was flipped to face forward (left), and the center background of the patch changed to blue. At the same time, a crescent-shaped, maroon craft tab embroidered in white with the words "LETTER CARRIER" was added just above the emblem patch. Also in 1965, a new jacket design was approved featuring "hand-warmer" slash-type lower pockets, a zip-in liner that could be removed in warmer weather, and buttons on the two upper pockets. Also approved was a three quarter (from the neck to just above the knee) water-repellent and wind-resistant surcoat made of Quarpel, a fabric used in military wear.

In 1966, carriers were once more granted the option of wearing a sweater as an outer garment. If so worn, the emblem was to be attached permanently. A pillbox cap for women was approved in 1969 and was advertised for sale in Fechheimer's uniform catalogues from 1970 through 1979. It was listed as part of the female carrier uniform until the 1998 edition of the *Employee and Labor Relations Manual*.

1970s New Service, New Look: The Eagle Patch and Dark Blue Trim

On July 1, 1970, revised postal uniforms called for a dark blue necktie, necktab, and round cap. Raingear, the chin strap on the fur cap, and braid on the pith helmet also changed to the new dark blue color. Letter carriers were to be outfitted in these new items by July 1, 1971.

On August 12, 1970, President Nixon signed into law the Postal Reorganization Act, which converted the Post Office Department into the United States Postal Service. On October 1, 1970, uniform patches were revised to feature the new emblem of the bald eagle poised for flight above the words "U.S. Mail," and the craft tab was moved to the left breast of coats and jackets. The emblem, but not craft tab, was added to sweaters as of January 1, 1971. Uniform buttons incorporated the new eagle logo. A new dark blue braid, five-eighths inch wide, was placed on coat and jacket sleeves and on the outside seams of trousers, slacks, and culottes. In October 1970, a dark blue knit face mask was authorized for cold weather.



Letter Carrier
January 1955

The eight-point cap, available by 1936, was the mandatory cap style beginning in 1955. Collection of the USPS.



Letter Carrier
early 1960s

The Eisenhower-style jacket was officially introduced in 1953. The left sleeve patch, featuring the seal of the Department, was added in 1956. In 1965 the direction of the horse was flipped to face "forward," and a craft tab was added just above the patch. Collection of the USPS Historian, #395.

New blue shirts with the revised emblem were available in January 1971. Employees were advised to wear the new emblem by July 1, 1971, the date the new Postal Service officially began operations. They were given one year – until July 1, 1972 – to adopt the rest of the uniform.

As of December 1972 carriers no longer had to wear headgear, provided they were otherwise in full uniform and easily identifiable as Postal Service employees. On April 1, 1973, the Postal Service allowed male carriers to wear knee-length shorts with black knee-length hose during the summer months. Shorts for women (knee-length, with knee-length dark blue hose) were adopted three months later. By 1979, the WAVE-style hat was made available to female carriers (see *Letter Carriers' Uniform: Hats*, for illustration).²

1980s *Baseball Cap*

In 1982, the baseball style cap was introduced to the letter carrier uniform, and the numbered metal badge that carriers had worn on their hats since 1887 was dropped.

In 1986, a new warm weather shirt – the "shirtjac" – to be worn outside the trousers was approved. It featured one breast pocket and two pockets at the waist. In addition, a new cold-weather knit "watch cap" with a roll-down face mask was approved. Effective October 1, 1986, carriers were also allowed to purchase dark blue shirts. In the latter part of 1986, new "slip resistant" shoes were made available for use to carriers and other uniformed employees. After January 1, 1987, the new shoes became mandatory for letter carriers.

1990s *New Look for a New Century*

In 1991-1992, the letter carrier uniform underwent extensive redesign. Outerwear garments were redesigned and changed to a navy blue color. In February 1991, a navy blue zipper-front cardigan became available in both a flat and bulky shaker knit. In July 1991, a visor and baseball cap – the first apparel items with the newly designed eagle and bar U.S. Mail emblem – were introduced. In September 1991, men's and women's long and short-sleeved shirts, and men's and women's shirt-jacs, all in a polyester/cotton broadcloth in postal blue with alternating pinstripes of red and blue, with the eagle and bar U.S. Mail emblem centered above the left breast pocket, became available. At the same time, men's and women's neckties, in a herringbone weave in navy blue with red and white dot pinstripes, were introduced. And in November, a new warm-weather, short-sleeve, sport-styled knit shirt with the eagle and bar U.S. Mail emblem above the left breast pocket was introduced.

In December 1991, the following items were added: winter parkas, with and without a hood, and a winter vest in postal navy blue with reflective red and gray stripe trim in a new nylon cordura/taslan-coated fabric. These outerwear items bore a version of the eagle and bar U.S. Mail emblem unique to outerwear apparel. Also in December, the winter trooper fur cap became available with an eagle and bar U.S. Mail emblem patch similar to the outerwear version, except centered on a square patch.

On February 3, 1992, for the first time, maternity wear became available for female carriers – a long- and short-sleeve blouse, slacks, and a jumper. On the same day, the bomber jacket was introduced in postal navy blue nylon cordura/taslan-coated fabric. It had a zip-out liner with reflective trim and logo. This jacket was to replace the Ike-style jacket. The letter carrier craft tab was to be worn only on the jacket.



Letter Carrier
1973

Carriers were first authorized to wear shorts in 1973. Hats were optional beginning in 1972. The numbered badge was worn until around 1980. Collection of the USPS.



Letter Carrier
1989

Canvas satchels began replacing the traditional leather satchels in 1973. The baseball-style cap was introduced to the letter carrier uniform in 1982. Collection of the USPS.

In March 1992, new socks were added to the carrier clothing line. Along with the black knee-length socks and hose already available, a blue-gray sock with two navy rings at the top became available in crew and calf-lengths, and a white sock with two navy rings at the top in both crew and calf lengths. White socks were not to be worn with trousers/slacks. In addition to socks, female employees were authorized to wear neutral-colored nylon stockings with skirts and jumpers.

An announcement in the June 27, 1991, *Postal Bulletin* clarified that garments such as shorts, culottes, skirts and jumpers should be no more than three inches above mid-knee, and that "bright, fluorescent hose and socks are not permitted."

The phase-out date for the old apparel items was set at April 1, 1994.

In February 1995, a new sun helmet was introduced, made of white woven mesh with a navy blue elastic webbing chin strap that could be stored above the brim on the front of the helmet and eyelets in black or navy blue for ventilation. Also in February 1995, a hip-length, navy blue nylon windbreaker with reflective trim was made available. It was the first garment to incorporate the new corporate logo, the "sonic eagle" emblem, which was placed over the left breast area. A coordinating blue craft tab was to be located over the right breast. In April, the new emblem was available on the following: short-sleeve shirts and blouses, maternity blouses, shirt-jacs, jumpers, maternity jumpers, sun visors, baseball caps, WAVE-style hats, and knit caps with face masks. In June, the new emblem was available on summer knit shirts and rainwear. Beginning in September 1995, the new corporate logo was available on bomber jackets, parkas, vests, fur caps, sweaters, and long-sleeve shirts. As of 2002, however, the previous-style emblem had not been declared obsolete.



**Letter carrier
2001**

In the early 1990s, outerwear changed to navy blue. The new corporate logo, the "sonic eagle," first appeared on the letter carrier uniform in 1995. Collection of the USPS; Gerald Merna, photographer.

¹ A sack coat is a shapeless coat with no waist seam. Alpaca is wool from a Peruvian animal of the same name. Gutta percha is a latex waterproofing material.

² WAVE-style hats were similar to the caps first worn by members of the Navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, established in 1942.