

Letter Carriers' Whistles and Door Knockers

Initially carriers hand-delivered mail to city customers. To alert customers that they had mail, carriers would knock or ring at doors, or whistle.

Since our present postmaster took charge of the office we have employed the use of whistles on our routes, and find it an excellent thing, and a saving to us daily of at least half an hour.

–Carrier C. L. Stemple, Youngstown, Ohio, in *The Postal Record* of March 1899

By 1912, new customers were required to provide mail slots or receptacles, and existing customers were encouraged to do the same. But in 1914 it was estimated that no more than half of city delivery addresses had mail slots or receptacles and that some carriers still spent up to one hour each day waiting at doors. Charles Schutter, who started delivering mail in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, in 1920, recalled that carriers were told to “buy something to tell the public we had the mail.” He bought a nickel-plated Cyclone Police Whistle at a local hardware store and used it for several years, according to a letter in the possession of The National Association of Letter Carriers.



Door knocker and whistle. (National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution™, 2001. Bill Lommel, photographer.)

A 1935 instruction manual, *Supervision of City Delivery Service*, stated that

[Carriers] are not required to carry whistles, but must ring the door bell when placing mail in a slot or receptacle for occupants of residences or apartments.

A letter carrier interviewed in 1938 in Baltimore, Maryland, stated that whistle-blowing was for outlying districts.

If I ever blew a whistle in my downtown district, I'm afraid they might lock me up.

–*Baltimore Sun*, April, 2, 1938

The 1945 edition of *Supervision of City Delivery Service* made no mention of whistling or ringing door bells.

LETTER CARRIERS' WHISTLES.

One of our Buffalo exchanges, after referring to the fact that the carriers of that city are now provided with whistles, offers the following:

"Proposed code of signals for letter carriers:

"One short whistle: Meet me on the steps; I have a letter for your husband.

"One long whistle: Ditto, I have a paper for same.

"Signals repeated: Two letters or two papers.

"One short whistle and one long one: Letter for the 'Missus.'

"Same reversed: Paper for the 'Missus.'

"Signals repeated: More than one letter or paper.

"Three short whistles: Letter for your husband, in a feminine hand, looks suspicious, better come get it yourself.

"Three long whistles: Letter for the young lady, address in a young man's hand. If in a feminine hand, make the last whistle doubly long.

"Mail for household employees may be indicated by to short toots after the regular signals."

Other signals, if necessary, may be used.

Article on whistles in *The Postal Record*, August 1893