



1950-1960

## APRIL IS THE CRUELEST MONTH

**A**pril 18, 1950 was a turning point in the history of both letter carriers and the NALC. It was a day that carriers of the time would never forget—a day that in many ways foreshadowed the upheaval of March 1970 and, by triggering the union's outrage and reaction, demonstrated that the NALC was, as had been true from its founding, committed to providing the best possible mail service for the public.

When President Truman appointed Jesse Donaldson postmaster general in 1947, rank-and-file letter carriers were pleased. A career man, Donaldson had once carried the mail. He, if anyone, would understand their problems and treat them fairly. But despite their hopes, Donaldson would deeply disappoint the nation's letter carriers.

The April 18 incident was set in motion earlier when Congress and the Bureau of the Budget slashed Post Office Department funds to the point where Donaldson did not have enough money to operate the service. Instead of fighting the cuts and enlisting the lobbying support of the NALC and other postal unions, Donaldson meekly accepted the reductions. Then, on April 18, 1950, without consulting the postal unions or Congress, Donaldson issued an order that still affects letter carriers and the public today. He reduced residential mail deliveries to once a day and most business mail deliveries to twice a day, while also severely curtailing many other postal services such as street collections, window service and parcel post deliveries. Donaldson's objective was to save the Department over \$80 million.

To today's letter carrier—long accustomed to once-a-day mail delivery—Donaldson's order may seem unremarkable. But for letter carriers in 1950, the order was equivalent to a stab in the back, or—as a carrier in Salt Lake City described it—"the carrier service has been hit below the belt." From the very beginning of their history, letter carriers have taken deep pride in providing first-rate mail service to the American public. In fact, when letter carriers founded the NALC in 1889, they expressed two reasons for organizing a union: mutual benefit and "the good of the public service."

The infamous order of April 18, 1950 also permanently changed the job of letter carriers and the nature of their work day. Prior to this order, a

letter carrier would return to the station after the morning delivery, take an hour or hour and a half break to eat and rest, and then sort mail before embarking on the second delivery. The one-trip delivery order forced carriers—for the first time in their history—to remain on the street constantly from the time they left the office until the end of the work day. In addition, lunch breaks were reduced to 30 minutes.

Although the order evoked a deluge of protests from the NALC, other postal employees, the public, and the press, letter carriers were especially indignant. Suddenly they found themselves eating their lunches on street curbs and next to or in collection boxes in all kinds of weather. Restroom facilities also became a major problem.

Donaldson's April 18 order delayed the mail of soldiers fighting in South Korea.

*AP Wide World Photos, Inc.*





New York City letter carriers protest Donaldson's April 18, 1950 order slashing service.

*St. Petersburg Times*

These unpleasant new predicaments aggravated the more serious hardships of the order: longer routes, some lengthened by as much as one-third; heavier loads; and lost work opportunities for substitutes. Last, but not least, it was the letter carrier who bore the brunt of the public's disgruntlement over the decline in service.

Under the leadership of Bill Doherty and Secretary Jerome Keating, the NALC vigorously campaigned for the restoration of service. Doherty accused Donaldson of "raping the postal service" and immediately marshaled the forces of the NALC to push Donaldson to rescind the order. The union argued that Donaldson's order—more drastic than any issued in two World Wars or the Great Depression—was a hysterical reaction to a manageable and common problem faced by previous postal administrations. Doherty and Keating decried the "public-be-damned" attitude of Donaldson, and they called upon the American people to decide the issue. But before the order could be rescinded, the Korean War broke out in June 1950, and any further action on the issue was suspended.

Throughout the decade, the NALC continued to fight for restoration of services. The longer routes, heavier work loads and deteriorating working conditions were seriously affecting the health and morale of its members. Disability rates, deaths and early retirement had increased markedly. Doherty appealed to the nation's sense of humanity in June 1952:





*Unless some higher authority steps in and re-establishes humane working conditions in the Postal Service, every post office in the nation will be no more than a tombstone for those letter carriers who went down under the killing pace of the curtailment order.*

In that same year, more than 1,500 letter carriers in New York City held a mass meeting to protest the 1950 service cuts and further curtailments ordered in 1952. These carriers sent a telegram to President Truman demanding Donaldson's dismissal.

But the NALC's fervent protests were all in vain. The service curtailments of 1950 were never restored and the issue was never seriously debated in Congress.

## LET THEM EAT CAKE

**A**lthough working conditions declined drastically after the service curtailments of 1950, from merely a dollars-and-cents point of view, the job of a letter carrier was considered a good one in 1952. A \$400-a-year pay increase in 1951 pushed carriers' wages to a scale between \$3,270 and \$4,070—a direct result of intensive salary campaigns and a sympathetic Congress. By 1952, letter carriers had caught up to workers with similar jobs in the private sector and were finally earning a living wage.

But 1952 was an election year, and letter carriers had no intention of voting away their recent, hard-earned



Top: Dedication ceremony for the National Headquarters Building on August 30, 1952. Far right: The building in 2013.



## NALC HEADQUARTERS

NALC's efforts to create a permanent home for the union began as early as 1925, but no serious action was taken until 1944 when dues money was earmarked for a Building Fund. To help the project become a reality, individual members, branches and auxiliaries voluntarily gave thousands of dollars to the Fund. The NALC honored Fred B. Hutchings of Branch 134, Syracuse, New York, for bequeathing the largest individual contribution, more than \$35,000, by naming the new building's meeting hall after him.

Construction on the NALC Building at 100 Indiana Avenue, NW, in Washington began in late 1950, and the building was dedicated on August 30, 1952, before 3,000 people at a ceremony at the foot of Capitol Hill. Carriers from all over the United States came to celebrate the occasion with over 600 people arriving on a special train from Brooklyn, and others by car, train and plane. Seven letter carrier bands traveled to the dedication from as far away as Salt Lake City and Seattle, and American Federation of Labor leaders William Green

and George Meany spoke to the assembled crowd as did legendary Postmaster General James A. Farley.

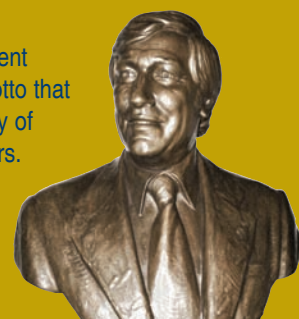
The new eight-story building provided the union with sufficient space not only for the union's headquarters operation, but also to move the Mutual Benefit Association's headquarters from Nashville and the National Sick Benefit Association from Boston and include the NALC Hospital Plan—now the NALC Health Benefit Plan. The growth of the Health Plan was a major factor in motivating the union in 1964 to add an eight-story annex to the original building, although the building's added space could not contain the explosion of the NALC Health Benefit Plan which moved to the northern Virginia suburbs in 1972.

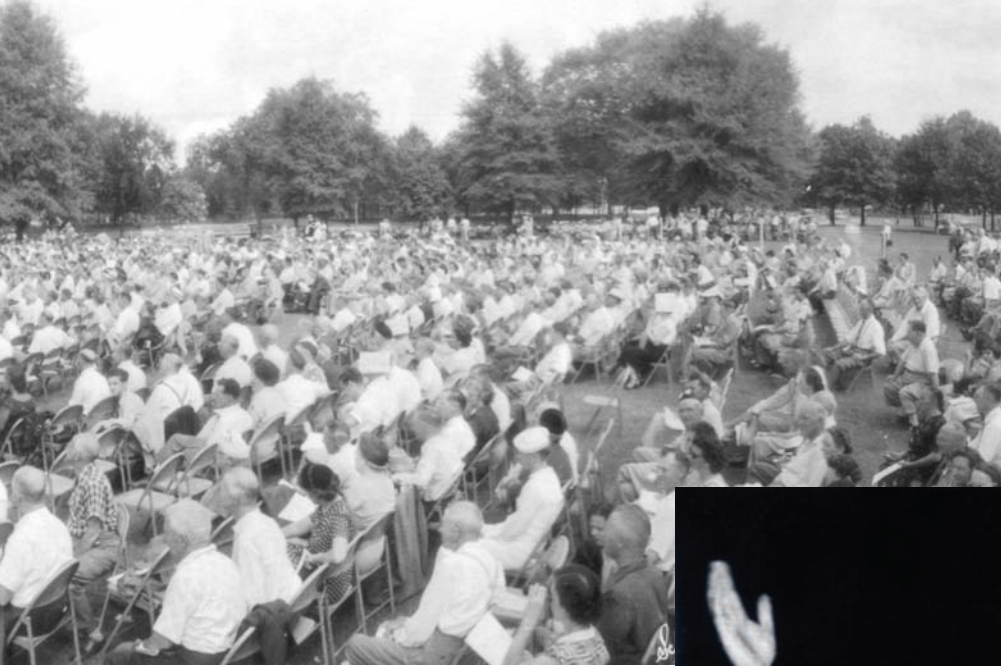
Since the building had more space than NALC required at the outset, the union was able to rent to other unions and organizations, with the income helping to cover mortgage payments, critically important in an era when the union was strapped for cash. Today, with the building owned free and clear, rental income from those floors occu-

pies by tenants goes toward maintenance and upgrades of mechanical systems.

Named the Vincent R. Sombrotto Building by the unanimous decision of the delegates to the 2006 convention in honor of the union's sixteenth national president, the building continues to meet the union's needs after more than six decades, albeit with occasional renovations and remodeling. Moreover, the building's location, only a stone's throw from the United States Capitol, has carried considerable prestige over the years while enabling the union's officers and members to travel a short and direct route when advancing the union's legislative interests.

The bust of President Vincent R. Sombrotto that resides in the lobby of NALC Headquarters.





gains. So, on Labor Day 1952, when Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Republican candidate for president, addressed the NALC convention in New York City, delegates listened carefully to his words. Traditionally, every change in administration in Washington, DC has generated speculation and some apprehension among government workers. But in a spirit of friendliness, Eisenhower made this pledge:

*If I have ... the responsibility of filling the highest post in the land, I am going to have one ambition: that, at the end of those four years, every working man and woman in the United States would say, "He was fair."*

In the same address, he uttered a promise which letter carriers would long remember:

*I want to repeat to the full convention what I promised and the request that I made to your president ... only a couple of weeks ago. I said to him, "Mr. Doherty, if I have this grave responsibility, I request that, if ever you find anything coming up that you believe is damaging the Postal Service or is unfair to any member ... you bring that to me, and I promise you in advance you won't sit on the doorstep anytime to get to me."*

But eight years later when Eisenhower concluded his second term as president, letter carriers were bitter and sullen; their hope of maintaining economic equality with other workers had vanished. Why? What happened in those eight years?

After Ike's resounding victory in the election of 1952, he appointed Arthur E. Summerfield to the position of postmaster general. A businessman, Summerfield was shocked at the antiquated practices that had turned his new charge—the Post Office Department—into an administrative nightmare. During his first 18 months on the job, he completely overhauled the Department, instituting modern business methods and decentralizing it into 15 regions. These brilliant accomplishments, however, were marred by Summerfield's insensitivity to the needs of postal employees and his indifference to the concerns of the NALC and other postal unions. Determined to run the Department at a profit, Summerfield zealously pursued a strategy of keeping postal salaries as low as possible.

The battle line between the NALC and

NALC President Bill Doherty introduces Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Republican candidate for president, to convention delegates in 1952.



*"I'm sorry you didn't get as much of a raise as you expected, Mr. Figby ... Maybe they'll issue a stamp commemorating you..."*

*George Lichty & Chicago Sun-Times Syndicate*

### The Wonderful Wizards of Washington



*McNaught Syndication*

Summerfield was drawn in 1954 when Summerfield tried to push a reclassification and salary plan through Congress. The plan, based on a study of postal pay structure which Summerfield had commissioned Fry Associates, a business consulting firm, to write, would have radically altered the service's entire classification system. In addition, the plan would have raised letter carriers' wages an average of \$100 a year—although some carriers would only have received \$10—while raising some supervisors' salaries by as much as \$5,000. The NALC was outraged at Summerfield's insulting offer of such a pittance to carriers, who had not received a pay increase in three years. But in many ways, the NALC was even more outraged that

there had been absolutely no prior discussion or consultation with the union about the plan.

The Lloyd-LaFollette Act of 1912, which recognized letter carriers' right to join a union, did not require the

Department to consult with or recognize the NALC, even though the union had long represented over 90 percent of working city delivery carriers. This limitation in the law did not seem significant in 1912. But by 1950, when the NALC had not been consulted or even warned of Donaldson's one-a-day delivery order, the letter carriers bristled. The weakness of Lloyd-LaFollette stared them in the face. The Summerfield administration, with its "daddy-knows-best" attitude, intensified the NALC's dissatisfaction with the status quo. Union recognition and a labor-management relations bill became a new rallying cry—at the very same time carriers were fighting tooth and nail for economic justice.

In 1954, Congress responded to NALC's call for economic justice. After the Fry Associates' plan died in committee, Congress passed a more realistic and fairer postal pay bill by landslide majorities—352-29 in the House and 69-4 in the Senate. The bill, however, stopped dead in its tracks in the summer of 1954, for Eisenhower, just as Calvin Coolidge had done in 1924, vetoed the pay bill.

The veto, a bitter pill for letter carriers to swallow, was only the beginning of Eisenhower's quiet assault on



Washington, DC letter carrier entering church to pray for an increase in salary in 1957.



the welfare of postal workers. One year later, on May 9, 1955, the president vetoed another pay raise for postal workers. Finally, in June 1955, a pay bill was signed into law—letter carriers’ first pay increase in four years. Critical as the increase was, it did not pacify rank-and-file carriers who were shocked at the administration’s intense opposition. In August 1956, a letter carrier in Worcester, Massachusetts hinted of rebellion:

*Are we not entitled to partake of the American way of life? We are sick of sympathy. If only the letter carrier would realize the dormant power in his ranks. We never would accept the answer: “They have no bread? Then let them eat cake.”*

Three months later, *The Postal Record* reported that “the average American family” earned \$5,520 a year before taxes in 1955 while the average letter carrier earned \$4,400—\$1,120 a year less. Yet, the 1956 Republican platform stated: “Good times in America have reached a breadth and depth never known by any nation.”

On August 1, 1957, letter carriers tried the unusual in their fight for better pay. The method: prayer. Tens of thousands of letter carriers throughout

the nation paused from their daily tasks to pray for a salary increase. In hundreds of cities, clergymen appeared at the local post office early in the morning to conduct a short service.

In spite of this dramatic act of faith, Summerfield and Eisenhower were unmoved. Another postal pay bill, approved by Congress, was vetoed by Eisenhower in September 1957. And not only did Eisenhower veto it, but he resorted to the pocket veto technique to kill it—waiting until members of Congress had gone home before announcing his veto decision. The Ladies Auxiliary of Branch 235 sent a “Death Notice” to *The Postal Record*. Edged in black, it captured the bitterness of the times:

*Cause of Death: President Eisenhower. Attempting to survive are the wives, mothers and children of postal workers.*

At the same time, *U. S. News and World Report* reported that while the wages of workers in private industry had increased between \$20 and \$36 a week in the previous five years, letter carriers’ wages had increased by a mere \$5.50.

Dissatisfaction welled up in the ranks of carriers. Although Eisenhower



A Washington, DC letter carrier, Robert S. Bancroft, was used as a model for this 1955 certified mail stamp.



## NALC HEALTH BENEFIT PLAN

During the early decades of the 20th century, postal employees fought for and obtained some, but not all, of the employment benefits received by workers in more enlightened segments of the private sector. By 1920, the government had adopted workers' compensation, sick leave and a retirement system—but it stubbornly resisted an employer-sponsored health insurance plan for another 39 years.

To solve the problem of meeting medical expenses on a letter carrier's salary, the NALC founded a hospitalization and surgical plan for its members in 1950. The plan operated for nine years before the U.S. Government, after a hard-fought legislative struggle, finally agreed to establish an employer-sponsored health insurance plan for all federal workers. The Federal Employees' Health Benefits Act of 1959 opened the way for the NALC to offer a new plan with greatly expanded coverage of medical costs. Following an enrollment period during which Plan enrollment shot up from 32,000 to more than 101,000, the new NALC Health Benefit Plan began operations on July 1, 1960.

The Plan has been enormously successful since its founding and today is one of the most highly rated plans in the federal program, offering a range of options providing excellent medical, surgical, hospital and prescription drug coverage to letter carriers, other postal employees, federal workers and dependents. Moreover, due to NALC's success at the bargaining table, the Postal Service pays most of the premium cost for health coverage for letter carriers and their families.

Headquartered in Ashburn, Virginia, outside of Washington, DC, the Plan is administered by a large professional staff led by elected union officers directly accountable to NALC members.



signed into law a pay raise on May 27, 1959, it did little to quell the mounting resentment. Some carriers vented their anger at the union and its officers and either quit paying dues or threatened to quit the union.

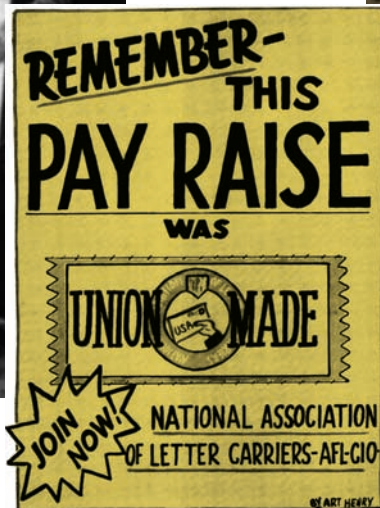
In response, an understanding Milwaukee, Wisconsin letter carrier tried to redirect the disaffected carriers' frustration:

*No matter what you believe, neither Congress, nor anyone else, is going to enact or even introduce legislation for your benefit, if your concentrated action is not in evidence.*

*There simply is no Santa Claus.*

Other carriers began to question the no-strike provision of the Lloyd-LaFollette Act and later legislation. Tentative whisperings were heard of work stoppages, mass sick-outs, and more aggressive action.

By 1960, letter carriers were having serious financial difficulties. Many carriers worked two jobs to support their families, and their wives often were forced to work to supplement carriers' meager income. A substantial number of letter carriers could not even qualify for an FHA loan to buy a home. A letter carrier from Paducah, Kentucky asked the members in February of 1960:



Letter carriers in action—  
Crusade for Economic Equality.

*How many of us have any change in our pockets a couple of days after pay day?  
Are we too proud to admit our poverty?*

Deeply affected by these outcries of pain and suffering, Bill Doherty and Jerome Keating led one of the most dynamic salary campaigns in the NALC's history in early 1960. The campaign, called "Crusade for Economic Equality," was aggressively fought, and Congress responded by passing a pay bill in June. But Eisenhower, in his last year as president, vetoed the legislation. His veto message denounced the "disturbing" and "shocking" lobbying activities of the NALC and other postal unions. Undaunted by Eisenhower's scathing criticism, the NALC lobbied fiercely for a veto override and was victorious. On July 1, 1960, Congress overwhelmingly overrode the veto—one of only two of the 169 Eisenhower vetoes to be overridden in eight years.

The Eisenhower era ended in January 1961, when John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency. Letter carriers of the time, then hopelessly behind the economic parade, would never forget the friendly "Ike" who vetoed four pay raises.

