



SAME WORK DIFFERENT UNIONS

CARRIERS CONTEND WITH LEGACY OF SEGREGATION

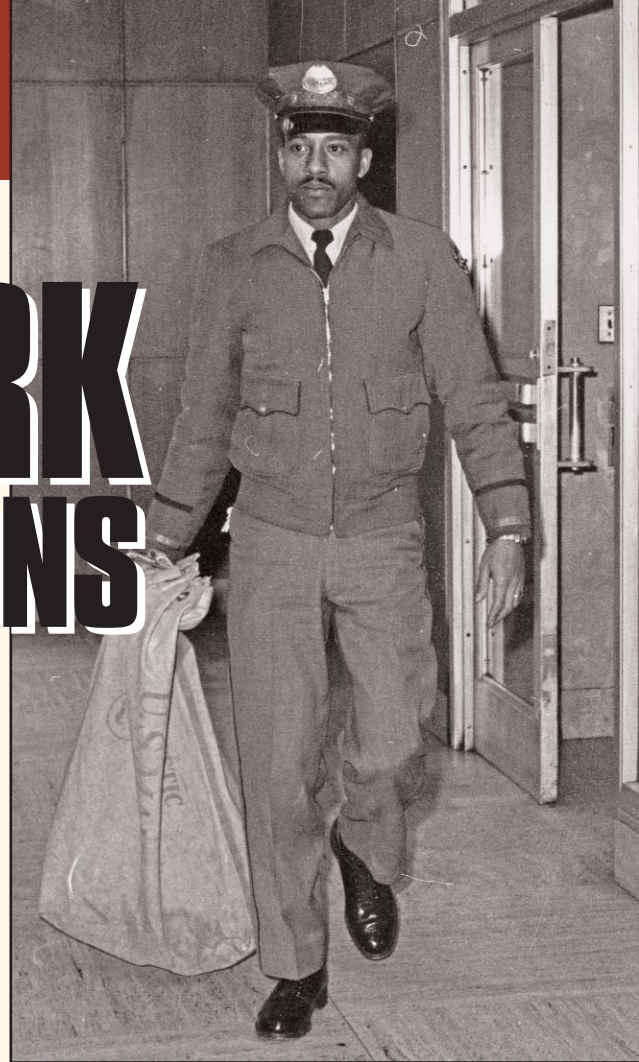
Spend some time with retired letter carrier Rocky Blake, and you realize that you're speaking with a man of dignity and substance. With a man who is respectful and precise, who possesses strong views but takes care not to state as fact that which he doesn't know to be fact. With a man who proudly served his nation for four decades in peacetime and in wartime, yet who speaks little about himself.

In these ways, Rocky Blake is decidedly old-school, a throwback with all the positive connotations this suggests in terms of outlook and demeanor.

Unfortunately, William "Rocky" Blake, 77, is a throwback in another way as well—to a time of inequality and racial discrimination that affected virtually all aspects of American society, and to which the National Association of Letter Carriers was not immune.

Blake became a letter carrier in 1957 in his native Baltimore, following four years of Air Force service during the Korean War era and a year as a radio teletype operator at the Pentagon. But he did not join the National Association of Letter Carriers upon being hired. That was not his choice. In fact, he did not have a choice.

"During our first week of orientation in the Postal Service, we were told that after 90 days, we would be eligible to join the union—with the stipulation that white carriers could join the NALC and colored carriers



could join the National Alliance of Postal Employees," Blake recounts.

White carriers were told that the NALC was "your union," he says, while black carriers were directed to the Alliance, an industrial union that welcomed black employees from all postal crafts. It wasn't until years later that Blake was able to join the National Association of Letter Carriers.

Blake, who still lives in Baltimore, has nothing but praise for the current leadership of the NALC, including at his branch, No. 176, which he calls "a blue-ribbon branch." His problems a half-century ago reflected the times, he knows, and the disparate union treatment long ago ended.

But the impact continues today. While his white co-workers with similar duration of service received their 50-year pins years ago and have been recognized for their service, that milestone remains years in the future for Blake and others.

"In 2006 I witnessed white carriers receiving their 50-year gold union pin," he says. "Those are carriers who were hired with me, but because of the color of my skin, I was not eligible to receive this honor and award."

In one sense, Blake's story is surprising, because it occurred against the backdrop of a United States Postal Service that has been a major employer of African-Americans, offering a path to the middle class for millions of black workers—including many with strong credentials who

Rocky Blake in his carrier uniform



encountered barriers to employment elsewhere. And the National Association of Letter Carriers, a notably progressive and diverse union, long has been in the forefront of the struggle for equality, not only for its members but for all Americans. One of the first black letter carriers, William Carney—a runaway slave turned Civil War hero—began carrying mail in 1869 and was founding vice president of NALC Branch 18 in New Bedford, MA.

And yet, Blake's story reflects the America of the mid-20th century, a period rife with Jim Crow practices and segregation, with poll taxes and separate facilities for whites and blacks in some parts of the country.

It's a story that finds resonance in the experiences of African-Americans who became carriers in the 1950s or early 1960s. Just listen to a few of the voices from Blake's hometown of Baltimore.

World War II Navy veteran Samuel Floyd spent three-and-a-half years with the Navy in the South Pacific. He then worked at a military installation in Baltimore, producing equipment to be shipped to U.S. troops fighting in Korea, before he transferred to the Post Office in 1952.

He wanted to join the NALC—but couldn't. So he joined the Alliance. "The white union you could not belong to, until they opened things up," Floyd says.

How did he feel about that rejection, particularly given his previous service to the country?

"It was a hurting thing," Floyd, 86, says. "It was embarrassing and everything else."

As soon as he was permitted to join the NALC, Floyd did so eagerly. "They had more pull. The Alliance didn't have the clout with the postmaster the way the letter carriers did."

Floyd, who retired in 1981 after 30 years as a letter carrier, is philosophical about the snub. "We were all a little upset, but it really was a reflection of the times. It was something that happened, and you just went along with it."

Russell Brown was happy to land a job with the Post Office in 1952 after his Army service in the Korean War.

"As long as I had a job, I didn't see that the union was all that much to get about, and you couldn't get much about it," says Brown. He will turn 81 this month. "So I just passed my time, and when they opened the union up, I joined it."

Brown, who carried mail for almost 35 years, anticipated that the racial exclusion would eventually garner attention.

"I don't think it should be going unnoticed all these years because it's not fair," he says. "I feel they should be recognized, but that's my opinion."

"You did the time, so why not be recognized? It's not like they're asking for pay; they're just asking to be recognized."

Ben Graham finished his Army service in 1946, and then spent about four years with the Social Security Administration before joining the Post Office, to which he'd long aspired. When Graham was a youngster in the 1930s, a black neighbor who was a letter carrier managed to send his son to college.

"He seemed to be doing well. I often said, 'When I grow up I want to be like him.' I was fascinated with the Post Office," says Graham, who found the reality a little different.

"There were unions for letter carriers, clerks and mail handlers," recalls Graham, who retired in 1981. "There was one union for all the black employees. All of them had to belong to one union, and it was a black union."

Graham, 84, was permitted to become an associate member of the NALC to get health care coverage because of a government stipulation, but when that special membership lapsed, he didn't renew it. Nor did he join the NALC once black carriers in Baltimore were allowed in.

"I had an attitude that if I couldn't join it before, the hell with it," he says. "I





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wasn't against the union, but I really put them out of my mind, after I couldn't join them the first time."

After working at a steel plant for five years following high school, Tom Waters came to the Post Office in 1952 as a temporary, making regular in 1958. He carried mail until he retired in 1984.

"I was a member of the postal Alliance, because in those days the NALC didn't take us seriously," Waters, 82, recalls. "So when they finally broke the color line, I was one of the first to join. I was a carrier; I wanted to know what was going on. But only the black union would accept us in those days."

Before becoming a letter carrier in 1956, Stanley Jackson had worked on the Harbor Tunnel in

Baltimore, spent a couple of years as a transit driver and then worked briefly as a city policeman.

Jackson, 86, stopped there in recounting his pre-Post Office experience. "You weren't by any chance in the military, were you?" he was asked. "Oh sure, I was in the Army," replied Jackson, as modest about his World War II service as are his fellow carriers and, indeed, his fellow members of the Greatest Generation. From 1943 on, Jackson fought in the European Theater.

Despite that public service to his city and his country, Jackson was not allowed to join the NALC—a rebuff he downplays.

"Back in 1956 I expected it, so it wasn't a surprise," Jackson says. "It was a sign of the times. You can't keep looking back. It was what it was."

That said, Jackson, who joined the Alliance before becoming an NALC member once he could, firmly believes that carriers who were precluded from joining the letter carriers union should

be recognized for 50 years of membership if their postal longevity warrants it.

Such a step is long overdue, Rocky Blake agrees. Among Baltimore carriers, "There has never been an African-American to receive this honor," Blake says, noting that the earliest this could occur—based on when the city's black carriers were allowed to join—would be 2013 or 2014.

Other institutions have addressed past injustices, Blake notes, including Major League Baseball, which made allowances for players whose careers were limited to the old Negro leagues, such as installing several in the Hall of Fame. The NALC should take similar steps, he contends, including counting time in the Alliance toward NALC recognition for the 50-year pin.

Baltimore wasn't the only place where black carriers were excluded from the NALC during this period.

After graduating from college in 1959, Edward Holden joined the Post Office in North Carolina. Unable to join the NALC, he became a member of the Alliance.

How did he feel about being turned away from the NALC?

"Well, you don't feel good about it, when you think about that there should be just one organization, because everybody's doing the same work," says Holden, 76. "Everybody who was living at that time knew that it was an injustice—and that there was nothing that was going to change it."

When he moved to Baltimore in 1964, blacks were beginning to get jobs delivering mail downtown, he says. "White carriers, to a degree, didn't like it, but there was nothing they could do about it. For some of them it took a long time."

Holden joined the NALC a couple of years after arriving in Baltimore.

The black carriers who lost time in the NALC should be given that time so their years of service can be fully recognized, he says.

"The black letter carriers performed their jobs just as well as the white letter

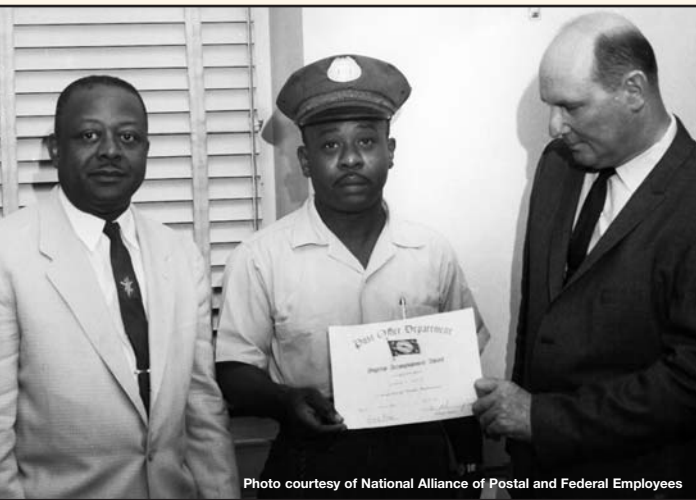


Photo courtesy of National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees

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National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees

carriers," Holden says. "You had to do your job to keep your job."

A couple of years after a stint in the Army, Jimmy Mainor signed on as a letter carrier in 1973 in Durham, NC—and even at that relatively late date he was steered away from joining the NALC.

"They kind of guided you to the Alliance," Mainor recalls. "It wasn't personal; it was just the way it was in 1973." But it created problems for black carriers.

"The NALC, after the reorganization, they were the exclusive bargaining agent for letter carriers," Mainor says. As such, the NALC could file grievances, talk to supervisors and generally help members on the job. But membership wasn't available to Mainor, and there was little he could do about that, because this was a time of transition in Durham, with blacks integrating the local postal workforce. "They had been used to a workplace without black people, somewhat. The society was changing, so it was interesting times."

Mainor applied himself to learning his new craft.

"At the time I didn't think too much about it, because I was just happy to have a job. As I began to learn, the carriers and the union, they were a thorn in management's side. I thought, 'That's the guys I want to be with. I want to get some education and challenge (management).'"

Finally in 1975, Branch 382 officers relented and let him in. Determined to make the most of the opportunity, Mainor ordered three manuals from the U.S. Government Printing Office. "I sent them a money order, and they mailed the books—*M-39* on management's instructions; *M-41*, the carrier handbook; and the *ELM*, the employee labor-relations manual."

That launched a 35-year career in the union. Mainor's first role was as a shop steward, after members encouraged him by saying, "You're not afraid of management. That's what we're looking at." He

would go on to serve as vice president, president and, since retiring at the end of last year, as executive vice president. He also was a local business agent for the Region 9 NBA, director of education for the state association and a national Dispute Resolution Team member.

Being elected president of a branch that had initially excluded him from membership was "amazing," he acknowledges.

In places where black carriers were excluded from the NALC, the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees (NAPFE) played a key role in providing union representation.

"Lots of affiliates of the NALC had Caucasian clauses in their constitution. Most were located in the South, and that's where we came in," says NAPFE President James M. McGee. "That was customary, not only with the Postal Service, but with other labor organizations."

The Alliance, which was founded in 1913 at the foot of Lookout Mountain in Tennessee, initially represented black railway mail clerks.

In 1923, the Alliance opened its doors to any postal employee who wanted to join. At its height, the union had 45,000 members, including many in the South, and branches in 32 states. Membership diminished as segregation in the NALC and other unions declined in the 1960s. Today, the Alliance has 10,000 members.

The Alliance offers "a window onto a broader problem of racial inequality and injustice," says Paul Nehru Tennessee, author of a new book titled "History of the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees, 1913-1945." The book was featured at an event in May at the Postal Museum in Washington, DC.

Along with the barriers to NALC membership that occurred in Baltimore and elsewhere, African-American letter carriers faced another potential obstacle in securing union representation—the existence of dual-charter branches.



The National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees was founded in 1913 (the first gathering in Chattanooga, TN, in 1913 is pictured below) to represent railway mail clerks, a dangerous job at the time. The sorting car (pictured at top) was usually located right behind the engine and in the event of a crash (like the one pictured above from 1934), the car often sustained damage. The union opened its doors in 1923 to represent employees from any postal craft who wanted to join.



Photo courtesy of NAPFE



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A number of cities, predominantly in the South, had dual NALC branches, one for white carriers and one for blacks.

This practice of separate NALC branches is the better chronicled of the two discriminatory practices of the past, both of which reflect the changing nature of race relations in the larger society. The two types of discriminatory practices occasionally overlapped, with some African-Americans joining both the Alliance, out of a sense of solidarity and pride, and the black NALC branch, to buttress their representation on the shop floor.

There were two periods of Jim Crow practice during which blacks were shunted into their own branches—from 1917 to 1919, and from 1941 to 1962.

African-American carriers long had been active in the NALC, but race relations in some regions of the country took a turn for the worse when the Dallas convention of 1917 approved dual charters for whites and blacks in the same city.

That was repealed two years later at the Philadelphia convention, but the existing dual charters continued. Not content with having separate branches in practice, advocates of segregation—mostly white southerners—made efforts to

restore the constitutional language allowing dual NALC branches. In 1941 they finally prevailed, as recounted in the NALC's 2006 publication, *Carriers in a Common Cause: A History of Letter Carriers and the NALC*.

The issue was intensely debated at subsequent NALC conventions, particularly throughout the 1950s. Advocates of dual charters maintained that blacks and whites couldn't get along in parts of

the South, and that having separate unions would keep the peace while retaining black members—and their dues—in the NALC. Opponents contended that separating carriers by race created second-class members, was inherently unfair and counter-productive, and was driving some African-Americans out of the union altogether.

In 1954, the year the Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine in the nation's public schools, the NALC convention in Cleveland voted to strike the dual-charter provision from the constitution. This meant that no new segregated branches could be formed, but debate over the existing 19 dual charters continued.

Determined to finally put the matter behind them, NALC leaders turned in 1960 to the union's new assistant secretary-treasurer, a young Detroit native. His first major assignment was to travel through the South—a region he was unfamiliar with—and merge the dual branches.

"My first stop was Atlanta, Georgia," recalls Jim Rademacher, who would later serve as NALC president from 1968 to 1977. "I got off the plane, and saw white restrooms and black restrooms—though they didn't say 'black'—white water fountains and black water fountains. I knew what I was getting into.

"The state law said that whites and blacks couldn't meet together, so I took the leaders of the white branch and the black branch to a federal courthouse. We sat down, the blacks on one side and the whites on the other. I locked the door, said they're not leaving here without settling it and that there'll be no NALC branch here in Atlanta if they didn't merge—because we didn't want to lose recognition."

In another city on his itinerary, Rademacher was meeting with leaders of the white and black branches in the basement of a white leader's home, when they saw a cross burning on the lawn. The men told Rademacher that for his safety he needed to leave



Photo courtesy of NAPFE

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immediately. They rushed him to the airport, where he awaited the next flight out.

Of the cities he visited as part of this assignment, Rademacher says that “the roughest time was in Baltimore,” because of the racial attitudes he encountered.

The 1960 NALC convention in Cincinnati established a committee on separate charters, which “was given the task of dismantling the Jim Crow branches,” says Philip Rubio, author of the 2010 book “There’s Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality.” The book, which explores the pivotal role of the Postal Service in providing economic opportunities for millions of African-Americans, won the 2011 U.S. Postal Service Moroney Award for Senior Scholarship in Postal History.

Rubio, assistant professor of history at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, NC, is himself a former letter carrier, from 1980 to 2000. Reflecting the racial progress that followed years of struggle, Rubio’s last decade as a carrier was in Durham, where he belonged to Branch 382, with part of that time spent under the branch’s first African-American president—Jimmy Mainor.

The pace of racial progress quickened after the action of the 1960 convention. In April 1961, the NALC’s executive council issued a directive against dual charters, spurred by the union’s understanding that its health benefits plan might be ended “if it didn’t force these die-hard cities to integrate and end dual charters,” Rubio says.

On Jan. 17, 1962, President John F. Kennedy effectively forced an end to the practice by issuing Executive Order 10988, which prohibited discrimination by unions representing federal employees.

Kennedy acted partly in response to years of efforts by the Alliance and the Negro American Labor Council to ensure

equal treatment—and to the cumulative effect of the actions of individual letter carriers like Rocky Blake, who participated in numerous freedom marches and sit-ins. In addition to the political pressure, Rubio says, Kennedy sought “to make the Post Office a model workplace to showcase democracy in America.”

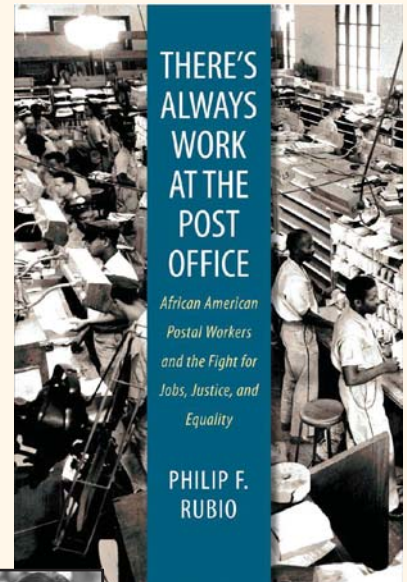
By the time of the 1962 convention in Denver, of the 19 remaining branches with dual charters, only two—both in Louisiana—had failed to comply with the union’s directive, and the two were thrown out of the NALC. At the convention, all dual branches—totaling about 6,000 members—were merged.

It is important to put these problems in perspective. Both practices—dual charters and racial exclusion—were limited regionally and existed only during certain periods. Nor were such practices absent from other unions during part of U.S. history. Moreover, both prior to and subsequent to these periods, the NALC has benefited greatly from its racial diversity—today more than one-sixth of its membership is African-American—including at leadership positions throughout the union.

That said, both practices outlined in this report violated the principles of the NALC as well as the ideals of the labor movement, and therefore merit a full airing. ⇨

While the practice of segregated branches is relatively well documented, information about the outright exclusion of African-American carriers from the NALC, as highlighted by the experiences of the Baltimore carriers featured in this article, is anecdotal and more difficult to pin down. It is also the practice that has most contributed to current problems of African-American members being denied full credit for their years of service.

The Postal Record would appreciate hearing from any carriers who experienced this discrimination, know others who did, or have information about it.



Philip Rubio, who is quoted in this article, is the author of “There’s Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality”