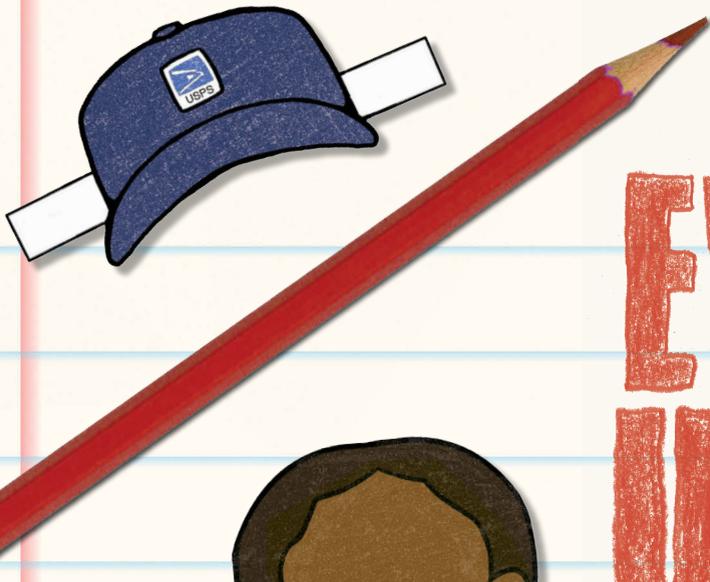
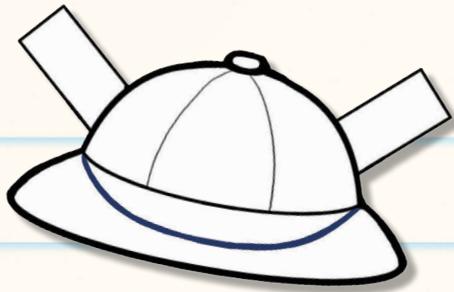


THE EVOLVING UNIFORM

HOW LETTER CARRIERS
HAVE HELPED DECIDE
WHAT WE WEAR





The original letter carrier uniform included a gray-blue coat, pants with a black stripe and a dark blue cap. The uniform changed in the early years to allow for a few different hat styles (see images at right).



The quest for the perfect letter carrier uniform never ends. With changes in the demands of carrying mail, in new fabric options and in styles come periodic changes in uniform options, and more changes may be coming in the future. Letter carriers in several cities are testing a variety of new garments that could result in modern high-tech fabrics being incorporated into approved uniform items. Until then, *The Postal Record* decided to take a look at how uniforms have evolved in the past.

Letter carriers did not wear standard uniforms until after the Civil War. Post offices had just begun to offer free city delivery to homes, allowing patrons to bypass long lines to pick up their mail at post offices—lines that had grown with anxious families eager for letters from soldiers. A Cleveland clerk and assistant postmaster, Joseph William Briggs, had initiated free home delivery, and after the war he wanted this new force of letter carriers to look professional.

Congress, wanting to give military uniform manufacturers from the war a new line of business, agreed. Carriers were required to pay for the full cost of the uniform. This was a considerable investment, since postal workers had no job security and were routinely fired after a presidential election so that the political friends of a new administration could take their jobs.

The uniform consisted of a blue-gray coat with five brass buttons, each bearing the Post Office Department seal, and a detachable cape lined with gutta-percha, a natural latex, on one side. Trousers had a half-inch stripe down each leg. A vest and cap completed the ensemble.

The *Milwaukee Sentinel* noted the new uniforms in February 1868, writing that “city letter carriers appeared in the streets yesterday for the first time in their uniform. It consists of a gray coat, pants and vest, and dark blue cap. The uniform is not remarkable in any particular way, but is quite tasteful.”

The Post Office didn’t take long to tweak the uniform. In 1873, it widened the trouser stripes and added a new button style. This was a big headache for letter carriers who had bought the first uniform, but the good news was that summer wear, with lighter material for warm weather, also was introduced. Nevertheless, carriers still wore coats and vests over their shirts in the heat.

By 1898, a western-style hat popularized by Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War became a uniform option. And carriers finally could go without coats in very hot weather by wearing just a light cotton shirt and a dark tie.

By the 1930s, a sweater coat was authorized to give carriers a comfortable option in mild weather. Plastic buttons replaced brass during World War II to free up the metal for the war effort. Uniforms continued to follow fashion as well—by 1953, carriers were sporting shorter, zippered Eisenhower



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jackets inspired by an Army uniform, with black piping and black tie.

Though letter carriers had a voice through the NALC in the choice of uniform styles, they still had to pay for uniforms out of their own pockets. That changed in 1955, when the Post Office agreed to provide an annual uniform allowance of \$100. In exchange, Postmaster General Arthur A. Summerfield demanded stricter standards of appearance and different uniforms for each craft, and postal workers could wear only uniforms with labels certifying that the garment met postal specifications.

Postal regulations first mentioned uniforms for women in 1957—female letter carriers could wear skirts but otherwise wore the same items as men. Before then, the uniform was a barrier to women who wanted to work as carriers. There was no official skirt option allowed, and women wearing pants was unthinkable. (The uniform restrictions were simply ignored in the wartime periods when many women held temporary letter carrier jobs.)

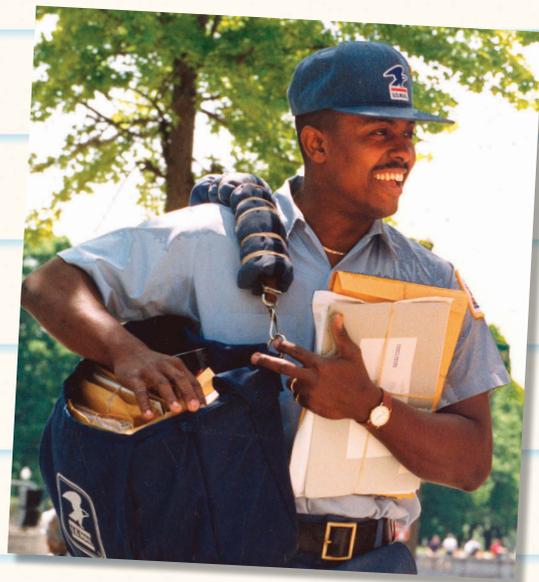
To create a more unified image, in 1967 the Post Office Department adopted the “post-office blue” worn by city carriers and clerks as the official color for all uniforms.

Big changes arrived in 1971, when uniforms were revised following the

establishment of the U.S. Postal Service. New badges were issued with emblems sporting the new USPS symbol, a dark blue eagle and the words “U.S. Mail” framed by blue and red bars. Hats had fallen out of style, and both men and women were allowed to go bareheaded on the job. Two years later, carriers finally were allowed to wear shorts.

The postal baseball cap emerged in the 1980s, along with the “shirtjac” shirt that could be worn without being tucked into pants.

The entire uniform was redesigned in the early 1990s including the introduction of new outerwear items using advanced synthetic materials. Outerwear was redesigned and changed to a navy blue color. A visor and baseball cap, the first items with the newly designed eagle emblem, were introduced. Men’s and women’s long- and short-sleeved shirts, and men’s and women’s shirtjacs, all in a polyester/cotton cloth in postal blue with alternating pinstripes of red and blue, were made available. They all had the eagle emblem centered above the left breast pocket. A warm-weather short-sleeved knit shirt also became available.





Women who substituted for male letter carriers serving in World War I had to improvise uniforms using postal jackets and hats (left). The uniform has evolved for women over time as well (below).

For winter, parkas, vests and a winter trooper fur cap were added. Maternity items for pregnant carriers also appeared then (the 1974 NALC convention had passed a resolution calling for maternity uniforms). Footwear was required to meet slip-resistant standards. A bomber jacket replaced the old Eisenhower jacket. 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.

A new button-down “woven” shirt was added in 2010. When domestic manufacturers stopped making a pinstripe fabric, the pinstriped shirts were phased out and the switch to plain postal blue poplin fabric was made, though remaining shirts made with U.S.-produced fabric may still be available for purchase today.

The National Agreement between NALC and the Postal Service finalized by an arbitration panel in 2013 granted city carrier assistants (CCAs) a uniform allowance closely aligned with the allowance afforded to career carriers. The previous category of non-career employees, transitional employees (TEs), had had a smaller allowance.

Given the importance of uniforms, Article 26 of the National Agreement—the union’s contract with USPS—gives NALC a voice in uniform selection through the joint uniform committee. In addition to the Article 26 joint committee, the NALC president appoints a standing uniform committee that functions throughout each year. The standing committee’s primary function is to discuss and develop uniform ideas, including those requested in uniform-related resolutions passed at

previous NALC national conventions.

“Our uniform is so important to how we do our jobs and how the public perceives us,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “It’s important that we have a say in what we wear every day.”

Uniform approval is a joint venture. Both parties, USPS and NALC, must agree to any changes or additions to the uniform program. The process can take just a few months, or years, depending on the item in question, and some proposals may never make it through the process.

The joint uniform committee considers many factors in uniform design, because a uniform works much harder than casual clothes. A letter carrier’s uniform needs to be tough to survive the beating that carriers dish out on their routes and again when they launder them. It also has to fit into a carrier’s uniform allotment, which can run out quickly. And a uniform item using modern fabrics can’t sacrifice appearance for comfort.

But keeping up with clothing technology is about more than looking and feeling good—uniforms are a safety issue. They help protect carriers from the many hazards of their jobs,



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A WEALTH OF IDEAS

Letter carriers have many ideas about how to continue improving uniforms to enhance function, professional appearance, style and comfort.

The Postal Record queried carriers on the NALC's Facebook page, [facebook.com/nalc.national](https://www.facebook.com/nalc.national), and evoked many responses. Many of the responses were consistent with uniform resolutions passed by previous national conventions and with many of the garments currently being tested. Here are a few:

- "Women's uniforms actually made for women, not men's uniforms with a few alterations."
- "Cargo pants and shorts would be nice! We have to carry so many different things it would be nice to have extra pockets."
- "It would be nice if our pants would have an extra pocket for the scanner."
- "Navy blue, athletic gray... would be great for us, color-wise."
- "Our rain gear looks great when it's dry, but it gets real dark when we are out in the rain. The rainwear needs more venting, too. A back vent and zippered armpit vents would be nice. I like the long raincoat; it would be nice to have a Gore-tex option."
- "Fleece-lined pants for winter would be great."
- "Moisture wicking/athletic type shirts for summer."

Letter carriers have always needed uniform items to deal with almost any weather condition.

including heat, sun, cold and foot injury.

Details matter in uniform design. Take shorts: Will they fit thousands of carriers of different shapes and sizes? Do they have enough pockets of the right size and shape? Will they remain comfortable through a day's work, while keeping the carrier looking neat and professional? Will they last long enough to justify their cost?

Even color and fabric style have functions. Dark clothes attract the sun's heat. Some fabrics protect against harmful ultraviolet (UV) sunlight; others offer little protection. Some colors and styles, such as stripes vs. solids, hide stains or sweat better than others.

The uniform committee takes its time to get it right because any mistakes in fit or design would affect thousands of letter carriers.

Many of NALC's uniform priorities and goals come from resolutions passed at NALC national conventions. Over the years, conventions have adopted many resolutions related to uniforms, calling for things like approval of additional cold-weather gear and sun-protective clothing. Any letter carrier can propose a resolution to his or her branch. If the branch adopts it and sends it to the NALC Executive Council, the delegates at the next national convention will consider the resolution.

When an item is adopted by the uniform committee, USPS publishes its specifications for the 200 or so vendors licensed to supply uniforms. USPS adds the item to the list of approved items in the *Employee and Labor Relations Manual (ELM)*. And, of course, vendors add it to their catalogues and websites.



The committee also deals with issues such as changes in fabric availability. If a certain fabric used in a garment is discontinued by suppliers or is no longer made in the United States, the committee must decide what to do, such as discontinuing the item or finding an alternative. USPS requires and NALC insists on U.S.-made items whenever they are available.

The committee may look at updating several uniform items in the future based on feedback from a few hundred volunteer carriers in several cities who have been testing garments this winter. The test garments are in line with multiple uniform resolutions passed by the delegates of previous national conventions. These resolutions include calling for better weather protection, health enhancing comfortable uniforms, a long-sleeved polo shirt, a navy blue polo shirt, reflective tape on work garments, sun protective clothing and cargo-style pants and shorts.

These carriers are providing feedback on the fabric and functionality of

these garments. If they pass muster, these modern fabrics and elements of functionality could be incorporated into the approved uniform options soon. Many of the new items combine comfort with protection from the elements by using modern fabrics that are breathable and waterproof, similar to modern sportswear and outerwear. Some of the test items include reflective stripes for improved visibility.

“Our uniforms matter. They protect us from the elements, keep us comfortable and project our image,” Rolando said. “NALC will always work to improve them so that letter carriers can look and feel their best every day.”

In addition to the uniform program controlled by the committee, the NALC-USPS Safety and Service Committee has developed a prototype of a highly visible, reflective vest that letter carriers could wear over any uniform for safety and identification purposes both during daylight hours and when performing services in the early morning and evening hours. The committee is a joint program created by the NALC and the Postal Service to identify and address factors that contribute to unsafe work environments for letter carriers (see the February issue of *The Postal Record*). The prototype vest fits well with the current uniform. The parties are working toward making these vests available in each office in the near future. More information about reflective vests will appear

in *The Postal Record* as it becomes available. **PR**

To see more images of how letter carriers' uniforms have evolved over the years, check out NALC's official history, Carriers in a Common Cause, available for purchase from NALC Headquarters or online at nalc.org. Templates for the letter carrier paper dolls used in this article and on the cover are available for download from The Postal Record section of the website.



GROCERY DELIVERY EXPANDS TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Grocery delivery testing, which began in the San Francisco area last summer, has now expanded to the San Diego and Los Angeles areas. In San Francisco, only early-morning grocery delivery has been tested. Letter carriers in the San Diego and Los Angeles areas are now delivering groceries throughout the day, including early morning delivery beginning as early as 3 a.m., evening delivery until 9 or 10 p.m. and several other delivery windows throughout the day, providing customers with multiple delivery time options.



Above: NALC Director of City Delivery Brian Renfroe and Region 1 National Business Agent Christopher Jackson met with the CCAs doing the grocery delivery tests.