

# Stuff you missed in history class: 10,000 black men named George



Jamie  
Lumm

**I**n the latter half of the 19th century, George Pullman was one of the most well-known capitalists and entrepreneurs in America. This was a time of few rights for workers and extreme inequality between the classes. Pullman found his niche by making sleeping cars for the newly expanding post-Civil War railroad system that brought people to various places in the country on a much more frequent basis. He sought to improve that system with luxury sleeping cars so that rail travel would be much easier and more pleasant. He added multiple layers of service over the next decades, including gourmet meals, ultra-clean cars, opulent furnishings, and most importantly, very professional staff to make the travelers feel pampered.

One of the key features of Pullman trains was the excellent service. Pullman hired thousands of former slaves who, following emancipation, had few job opportunities. But one shouldn't get the impression that Pullman was for race equality. There was a strict divide among the labor: White conductors collected tickets and sold upgrades along the routes, while African-American porters carried luggage, cleaned the cars, shined shoes, and cooked and served meals. In addition to this division, white workers received on average six times as much in wages as the porters, which meant the porters relied heavily on tips to make a living. There were a few women working on these trains as well; about one maid for every 50 porters was an African-American woman.

In the early 20th century, sleeping car porter was one of the few well-paying jobs for African-American men and was a treasured position to get. But the work was grueling: 400 hours a month on the job or 11,000 miles of travel were the minimum to get full-time pay of about \$30 a month, which they supplemented with tips. Out of this, they paid for their own uniforms as well as meals and lodging on layovers, and if any of the passengers made off with pillows or blankets, it was taken from their pay.

**But the work hours were one of the biggest problems.** When they slept their average three hours a night, it was on couches in the smoking car, hidden from the passengers. Worse, the porters were not even allowed to use their own names. Instead, it was a common practice for the porters to be called "George." Ostensibly done to honor the man who hired them, in reality it was a demeaning and disrespectful slur meant to keep them in their place. In the same way that slaves took on the last names of their owners, porters were "George's boys." While the newly freed slaves saw the porter positions as an opportunity to advance, over time the porters slowly became a symbol of black subservience.

Three times, from 1909 to 1913, porters tried unsuc-

cessfully to unionize to address some of these issues. In response, the company began its own "Employee Representation Program," which was of course a sham, but it distracted the efforts of workers long enough that it delayed further efforts at unionizing for another 12 years.

After toiling under these conditions for nearly 60 years, in 1925, the porters' fledgling union elected A. Philip Randolph to head up the unionizing drive. He was a highly skilled labor and community organizer, but he had never worked as a porter and hadn't even ridden in a luxury train car because African-Americans were not allowed to ride on the very cars that the porters serviced.

As the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union was formed, it put together a list of demands of the Pullman Company, including a significant pay raise, abolishing the practice of tipping, adequate rest breaks, increasing pensions and a name card in each car with the actual names of the porters serving it.

Since their tips often would be more than their actual wages, it seems counterintuitive that the porters would want to abolish them. But in reality, to get those tips, workers had to be subservient and rigidly obedient to their white clientele or risk being fired. Ending tipping and raising wages would effectively remove one of the more humiliating parts of their job.

The Pullman Company refused to bargain with the union and began spying on and firing the organizers and union sympathizers. Everything had to be done underground and included the use of secret handshakes and passwords. A ladies' auxiliary composed of the wives of porters was formed, arguably one of the most critical components of the secret operations. (Sound familiar?) One thing working in the porters' favor was that trains going from city to city across the country provided great opportunities for distribution of literature, news, job information and more.

**It took 12 long years for the porters to succeed and be recognized.** One key to victory was the 1934 passage of amendments to the Railway Labor Act that created a procedure for resolving whether a union had the support of the majority of employees in a particular "craft or class," a problem that had hampered porters' ability to win recognition. The Pullman Company finally sat down and negotiated with the porters' union in 1935. That same year, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters became the first African-American union recognized by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The union signed its first contract with Pullman in August 1937. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, fresh off a significant victory, went on to help integrate other jobs and unions across the country.

The story of the porters' struggle to organize their battles with the Pullman Company is depicted in the 2002 movie "10,000 Black Men Named George" starring Andre Braugher, Charles S. Dutton and Mario Van Peebles. It's available for purchase on the Internet and can be found on sites such as Netflix and YouTube.