

# POSTAL PIONEERS



**T**he United States has a rich history of tall tales: stories of the men and women who helped tame the wilderness and establish our nation. Think Johnny Applesseed or John Henry or Molly Pitcher—many of these tales are rooted in fact, even as the myths have grown larger and more unbelievable.

Letter carriers have their own tall tales of postal pioneers, those letter carriers and others who moved the mail across this wide country, delivering vital news and important materials. These tales remind us that though letter carriers today wear the same uniform and do the same job, they come from a long line of proud individuals who helped bind this nation with the mail.

## FREDERICK WOLF

In 1794, Congress officially established the Post Office as a permanent part of the federal government and authorized the appointment of this country's first letter carriers. In those early days of the republic, America's letter carriers received no salaries but were permitted by Congress to collect a fee of 2 cents for every letter they delivered.



Although 2 cents was a considerable amount of money in those days, this fee did not guarantee letter carriers a decent living wage. Recipients of letters had the option of accepting delivery service or visiting the post office to pick up their mail. Since delivery of one's mail was a luxury few people could afford, most chose to just pick it up.

Things weren't much better as the 1800s rolled on. Though mail delivery became more affordable, as the 2-cent fee remained unchanged, not everyone had 2 cents when the letter carrier came calling. For many, that meant waiting until the letter carrier came around again.

Frederick W. Wolf, a letter carrier in Troy, NY, was hired in 1854 and served for 54 years. Wolf came up with an innovative way to deliver the mail and make sure he got paid. When he would go to a house where the customer didn't have 2 cents, he would deliver the mail and make a mark on the door

Frederick Wolf



or the side of the house. He would then go to that house the next day to collect.

It was a system that worked well for him until a hot and windy May 10, 1862. That afternoon, some sparks from the steam engine of a train pulling out of the downtown Troy Union Depot set the Green Island Bridge on fire. Strong winds blew burning pieces of the bridge

into downtown Troy, where a firestorm proceeded to destroy 670 buildings. Though the fire killed eight people, it could have been much worse.

For Wolf, however, it was a crushing blow. Many of the buildings that had gone up in smoke bore the marks of postage due to him. Since Wolf had no other record of the amount owed him, he never recovered his lost wages.

## WILLIAM CARNEY

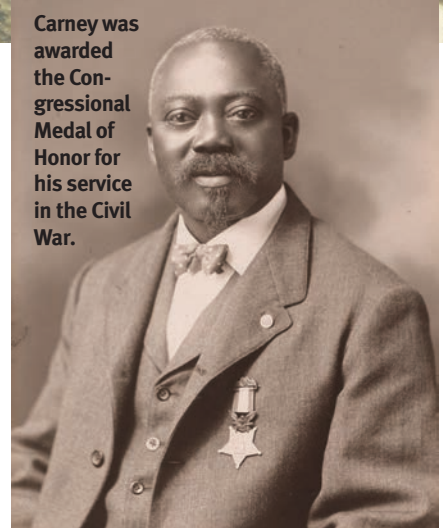
William Harvey Carney was born a slave in 1840 in Norfolk, VA. He was educated at a "secret school" by a local minister, acquiring rudimentary reading and writing skills at the age of 14. Carney escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses, and made his way to New Bedford in the free state of Massachusetts. He and his father, another escaped slave, eventually earned enough to buy the rest of the family freedom from servitude.

Carney worked the docks in New Bedford, a major whaling port, until he heard the call for Blacks to join the Union Army. In a letter to *The Liberator*, an abolitionist newspaper, Carney gave this account of his motivations in joining the 54th Regiment: "Previous to the formation of the colored troops, I had a strong inclination to prepare myself for the ministry, but when the country called for all persons, I could best serve my God serving my country and my oppressed brothers. The sequel is short—I enlisted for the war."

Carney participated in the suicidal assault on Confederate Fort Wagner near Charleston, SC, by the all-Black, all-volunteer 54th Regiment Massachu-



Carney was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service in the Civil War.



setts Infantry. In the midst of withering fire, when the first flag-bearer fell, Carney took up the regiment's colors and led his fellow volunteers to the crest of the parapet. There, Carney secured the banner in the sand as the battle raged.

When the federal troops finally fell back after dark, Carney wrapped the Stars and Stripes around the pole it was carried on and carried the banner back to Union lines, despite wounds to his chest, head and leg—the latter

# POSTAL PIONEERS

injury so severe that for more than 30 years he would limp every step of the way as he delivered the mail in New Bedford. As he handed the flag over to other survivors of the 54th, he told them, “Boys, I only did my duty. The old flag never touched the ground.”

For courageous action, Carney became one of the first Black soldiers to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

After recovering from his wounds, Carney worked a number of jobs before becoming a letter carrier in New Bedford in 1869. Many early letter carriers were military veterans, since appointments often were based on local political connections and it was common for a town’s prominent citizens, including the postmaster himself, to have served in the Union army.

There were just four letter carriers in New Bedford at the time of Carney’s



Mary Fields on her stagecoach

appointment. He was the only Black carrier in the city and among the earliest anywhere. Just two years earlier, in 1867, John Curry had become the nation’s first Black letter carrier, working in Washington, DC.

Carney carried mail for more than 30 years and—just as he had done in enlisting for the Union cause—the Civil War hero was quick to step forward when mailmen around the nation decided to band together in the National Association of Letter Carriers.

The charter of New Bedford Branch 18, issued on March 20, 1890, includes Carney’s signature as vice president. In

addition to the low branch number of 18, the founding date makes clear that the New Bedford carriers were among the first members of the NALC, which had been founded only seven months earlier.

After nearly 32 years of service, at the age of 61, Carney retired as a letter carrier. He still needed other work because, although he probably received a small stipend for his war wounds, postal employees had no retirement benefits at all. In 1901, the Massachusetts secretary of state asked him to take the job of messenger at the state house. Carney

accepted the post and held the job until his death on Dec. 8, 1908, as the result of an elevator accident.

## MARY FIELDS

Mary Fields was born into slavery in the 1830s, by most accounts in Tennessee, and worked for a slave-owning family in West Virginia (then Virginia) in the years leading up to the Civil War. After she was emancipated following the Civil War, Fields left West Virginia and worked on steamboats on the Mississippi River, eventually making her way to Toledo, OH, where she went to work in a convent.

Fields washed laundry, bought supplies, managed the kitchen, and grew and maintained the garden and grounds. But she was no saint, and her quick temper was known to boil over. There are reports of her yelling at anyone who stepped on the grass after she had cut it—intimidating behavior given her 6-foot stature and hefty frame.

She made her way west to Montana, where she worked for Saint Peter’s Mission near Cascade, performing maintenance and repair work, gardening, laundering and delivering supplies needed for the mission. She was dismissed from the mission for her crass behavior, unruly temper, and penchant for drinking and smoking in saloons with men. According to legend, she and a male mission janitor got into a fight and both drew guns.

After trying many other lines of work, in 1895 and in her early 60s, with the help of the local nuns, Fields obtained a contract from the Post Office Department to be a star route carrier. A star



Mary Fields

route carrier was an independent contractor who used a stagecoach to deliver the mail in the harsh weather of northern Montana. Fields was the first African American woman and the second woman to receive a star route contract anywhere in the country.

Fields, soon nicknamed “Stagecoach Mary” for her reputation of being fearless, not only had to deliver the mail but also had to protect it from bandits, the weather and even wildlife. She was known to carry both a rifle and a revolver. Despite her temperament, she also was known for her generosity and kindness to children.

After eight years, she retired and started a laundry business, an eatery and looked after local children. She remained famous, even becoming the mascot for the town’s baseball team. She was so beloved that she drank and ate for free in Cascade saloons and restaurants.

Mary Fields died on Dec. 5, 1914. After her death, the townspeople raised money to have her buried in a cemetery on a road she drove frequently that linked Cascade to the mission. Mary’s funeral was said to have been among the town’s largest.

## OWNEY

Owney was a small terrier mix who belonged to a clerk at the Albany, NY, post office in 1887. The dog often would come with the clerk to work and sleep on the mail bags. When the clerk quit the post office, he left the mutt with the clerks at the post office.

Without a permanent home, Owney would go with the mail bags, often riding in the mail car on trains. He was considered to be good luck by postal railway clerks, since no train he rode on was ever in a wreck.

Another story told of a mail pouch that had accidentally fallen out of a wagon during a delivery route the dog

was on. When the clerks returned to the main post office after the deliveries, not only was a bag of mail missing, so was Owney. They backtracked and eventually found Owney lying on top of the mailbag. He guarded the mail pouch until someone from the Post Office showed up to retrieve it.

Reports had him traveling to Boston; New York City; Buffalo, NY; Cleveland; Toledo, OH; Chicago and even into Canada. After a lengthy trip in Canada, the postal clerks at Albany became concerned that Owney might not return, so they bought a dog collar with a metal tag that read: “Owney, Post Office, Albany, New York.” As Owney made his trips, various railway post offices added individual dog tags.

He got so many tags that Postmaster General John Wanamaker gave him a coat to display them all; the coat jingled like sleigh bells. Wanamaker named Owney the unofficial mascot of the Post Office Department. One report claimed that Owney had 1,017 medals and tokens.

In 1895, the terrier went from Tacoma, WA, on a four-month trip throughout Asia and across Europe, traveling by postal train and ship that carried mailbags, before returning to Albany. A report claimed that the emperor of Japan had awarded the dog two passports and several medals bearing the Japanese coat of arms.

Owney in a postal railcar



After his death, Owney was preserved and is now on display at the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum.

Another reported that he had ventured into North Africa. Owney’s triumphant return to American shores was covered by newspapers nationwide.

Owney became ill and aggressive in his old age. In June 1897, after allegedly attacking a postal clerk and a U.S. marshal in Toledo, Owney was shot and killed on the orders of the local postmaster.

Owney’s remains were preserved, and he is the subject of an exhibit at the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum.

# POSTAL PIONEERS

## JOHN THOMPSON

In 1837, at the age of 10, Jon Torsteinson-Rue came to the United States from Norway, where his name was changed to John Thompson. His family moved from Illinois to Missouri, Iowa and Wisconsin. After gold fever struck, Thompson moved on to California and mined enough to buy a small ranch in the Sacramento Valley.

In 1855, Thompson saw an ad in the *Sacramento Union*: “People Lost to the World; Uncle Sam Needs a Mail Carrier.” The Post Office was having problems delivering the mail across the Sierra Mountains. Thompson knew the importance of speedy mail delivery, having received news too late of his own mother’s death by influenza. He quickly submitted his application for the job to a contractor and set off for his first run in 1856.

He took three days, going from Placerville to Mormon Station (which later became the town of Genoa, NV). The return trip took two more days. After his first successful run, he would make the run up to four times a month for the next 20 years.

Despite his eventual nickname of “Snowshoe,” Thompson didn’t use traditional snowshoes, opting for 10-foot skis and a single sturdy pole generally held in both hands at once. He wore a Mackinaw jacket, a wide-brimmed hat and covered his face in charcoal to prevent snow blindness. He carried no blankets, but did carry matches to start fires, and his Bible. He snacked on dried sausage, beef jerky, crackers and biscuits.

His mail sack often weighed up to 100 pounds, as he carried medicine, emergency supplies, clothing, books, tools, pots and pans.

Dan de Quille of the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* later wrote of Thompson: “He flew down the mountainside. ... His appearance was graceful,



**John Thompson (r) didn't use what we think of as snowshoes, instead using skis (far r). The route he traveled delivering the mail is above.**



swaying his balance pole to one side and the other in the manner that a soaring eagle dips its wings.”

Thompson often rescued prospectors caught in the snow. One well-known incident took place in 1856, when he found a trapper who had been sheltering with half-frozen feet in a deserted cabin for 12 days, with no food or fire. Thompson chopped him some wood so he would stay warm, and set out to Genoa for help. He had to carve skis and give lessons to the rescuers who had agreed to accompany him. Once back in Genoa, the doctor reported that the trapper’s feet needed to be amputated, but he had no chloroform. Thompson set out once again to Placerville, but there was none to be found, so he continued on to Sacramento before returning with the chloroform.

Despite his many years of service, Thompson was never paid by the government or the contractor for his services delivering the mail. As a subcontractor, he took it on faith that



he would eventually be paid. “If I do my job and get the mail to the people, Uncle Sam will pay me,” he said. However, even an 1869 appeal by the Nevada legislature to the federal government for \$6,000 in compensation went unheeded.

## A LASTING LEGACY

Whether on foot, by stagecoach, railway or even on skis, these postal pioneers fulfilled their duty to protect and deliver the mail. Letter carriers continue that tradition today when they take the oath to perform their sworn duties.

This article shouldn’t be mistaken for a complete list. These are just some of the stories we’ve heard over the years. If you know other stories of postal pioneers you’d like *The Postal Record* to consider for a future story, please send them to us. **PR**