Postal Reflections #2

THE POSTAL SERVICE is routinely lauded for its facilitating Role in the formation of Middle-Class Black America

The credit is due not to the service itself, but to the long work of organized Black labor and its political allies.

The postal service's ability to render middle class values as universally attainable, or at least universally desirable, only strengthened its stronghold on our cultural imagination.

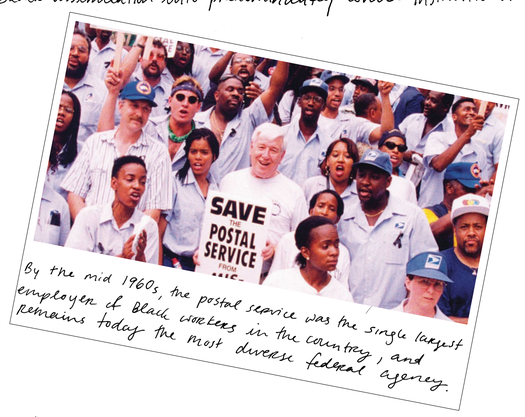
Postmaster Minnie M. Cox

Stagecoach Mary Fields
Pioneer and postal worker

Tupac as Lucky in Poetic Justice

The postal service espouses its own fantasy of inclusivity and upward mobility through civil service, curating a unique mix of patriotism and worker solidarity across its ranks.

But common struggle over time does not inevitably produce interracial unity, nor is unity measured by Black assimilation into predominantly white institutions.



By the mid 1960s, the postal service was the single largest employer of Black workers in the country, and remains today the most diverse federal agency.

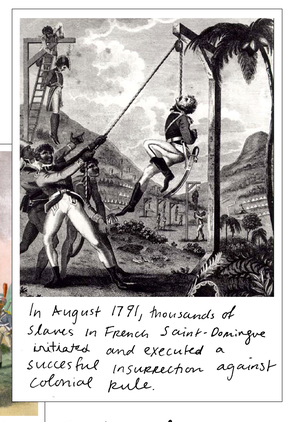
Though this rough timeline suggests a linear transformation of the postal workforce into a multiracial coalition — the postal service has always depended directly on Black labor...

In the colonial South and during the early years of the republic, slaves were commonly exploited for postal matters. Those entrusted as post riders ventured between plantations and towns to facilitate dispatches and deliveries, fortifying an Antebellum network of intersecting routes and routine interlocutions between slaves from various locations.

For generations, one can speculate, these moments of contact alloted opportunity for sly and satisfying subversions to racial and social protocol.

Henry Box Brown escaped slavery in 1849 by mailing himself in a wooden crate

Then something changed.

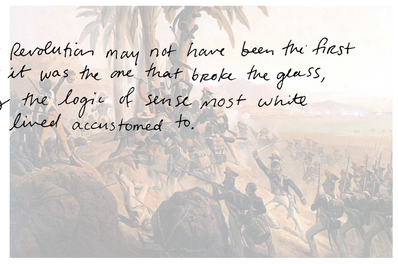


In August 1791, thousands of slaves in French Saint-Domingue initiated and executed a successful insurrection against colonial rule.

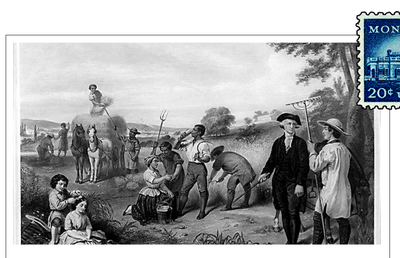
Toussaint L'Overture

The birth of a sovereign nation built by non-whites, let alone formerly enslaved people, terrified White Americans, whose bloody fight for independence a decade earlier was waged out of an incomparably less oppressive situation.

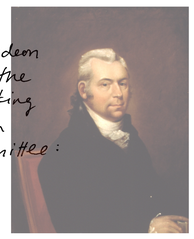
The Haitian Revolution may not have been the first brick, but it was the one that broke the glass, shattering the logic of sense most white Americans lived accustomed to.



Unprepared to recognize Black people as adept at collective organizing, let alone capable of harnessing real political power, those injected with this dose of racist paranoia were not exclusive to the South...



In 1801, President Jefferson appointed Gideon Granger, a lawyer from Connecticut, to the position of Postmaster General. Upon taking office, Granger wrote to the Southern members of the Senate Post Office Committee:



"... After the scenes which St. Domingo has exhibited to the world, we cannot be too careful... plans and conspiracies have already been concerted by [slaves] more than once, to rise in arms, and subjugate their masters... The most active and intelligent [slaves] are employed as post riders... by traveling from day to day, and hourly mixing with people... **they will acquire information. They will learn that a mans rights do not depend on his COLOR.** They will, in time, become teachers to their brethren... One able man among them, **perceiving the value of this machine**, might lay a plan which would be communicated by your riders from town to town and produce a general and united operation against you..."

Congress banned slaves from carrying the mail in 1802. Subsequent legislation specified that a Black person could not so much as transfer mail from horse to cart to office without White supervision.

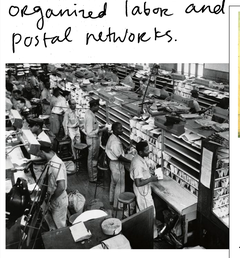
The information machine that built America was inherently bugged.

The postmaster General understood this. He also understood that slavery was unconstitutional, yet chose to use its unlawfulness as justification for the further dispossession of Black people.

Black postal labor would remain on furlough for the next sixty years.

An extension of draconian laws designed to promote illiteracy amongst slaves, postal work restrictions further obscured Black access to information systems. If slaves, whites feared, so much as **came in contact** with this fact, could that signal the end to the American project?

The machine portrayed in the Postmaster General's plea may be understood as the hybrid engine of organized labor and postal networks.



When configured as one, the harnessed potential promised by a universal service becomes incompatible with the goals of the state, a threat to the capitalist democracy that laid the infrastructure for its own mutiny.

This turn underscored a repeated paradigm throughout American history (even today, in a digital landscape where access to information is perceived as less tactile, but universal en masse):

that public services allowing the imagined community of a union of individuals must never be permitted to produce value outside of corporate or political interests.