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## Owney, the Postal Pup

June 13, 2011 in [Resources](#)***From adventurous stray to Railway Mail Service mascot***

In 1888, when Owney, a stray dog wandered into the Albany, New York post office, the postal clerks decided he could stay and the pooch fell asleep on some mailbags. That first night, no one could have ever imagined the role he'd take on in postal history. It seems the pooch was so attracted to the mailbags' texture or scent that he began to follow them. First, he'd go along with them onto mail wagons and then onto Railway Mail Service trains. Soon Owney began to ride with the bags on trains across the state — and then around the country!



Railway mail clerks considered the dynamic dog a good luck charm. At a time when train wrecks were fairly common (between 1890 and 1900, more than 80 mail clerks were killed in train wrecks and over 2,000 were injured), no train Owney rode was ever involved in one. The railway mail clerks adopted him as their unofficial mascot and would mark his assorted travels by placing medals and tags on his collar.

In 1895, the postmaster in Tacoma, Washington sent Owney on a trip around the globe as part of an advertising campaign for the city. Accompanied by a postal clerk, Owney traveled on steamships and trains from Tacoma through Asia, the Middle East, and the continental United States before returning to Tacoma 113 days later. After that, he continued traveling across the nation, as well as into Canada and Mexico.

Among Owney's many fans was U.S. Postmaster General John Wanamaker. Upon learning that the dog's collar was getting too weighed down by an ever-growing number of tags, he gave Owney a jacket on which to display his "trophies" from postal clerks around the nation. In 1894, a reporter for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported, "Nearly every place he stopped Owney received an additional tag, until now he wears a big bunch. When he jogs along, they jingle like the bells on a junk wagon."

Owney's exact age (as well as the origin of his name) is unknown. By the late 1890s he took ill twice, moved with more difficulty, and at times became ill tempered. In 1897, the Railway Mail Service decided he was getting too old to travel and for his own good, he was sent into retirement at the Albany post office. Apparently, the well-travelled dog was not keen on being permanently grounded and in June 1897 he slipped away and boarded a mail train headed to Toledo, Ohio. While in Toledo, he apparently bit a mail clerk and snapped at his handlers. It's said that the postmaster in Toledo believed Owney had become uncontrollable and requested that the local sheriff put him down. While some say the exact circumstances were never satisfactorily reported, sadly, Owney died in Toledo of a bullet wound on June 11, 1897.

Mail clerks raised funds to have their beloved mascot Owney preserved and he was given to the Post Office Department's headquarters in Washington, DC. In 1911, Owney was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution and today, the postal pup can be seen on display in the National Postal Museum's atrium, wearing his jacket and surrounded by many of his tags.

Owney's adventures live on, fascinating kids and adults alike. Several children's books have been written about him, and the pup has inspired the creation of contemporary traveling Ownneys. These modern day Ownneys are toy dogs used by elementary school teachers across the country to teach geography to their classes.

The USPS will be releasing a commemorative stamp for Owney that goes on sale July 27, 2011. The new illustration by artist Bill Bond depicts Owney in profile, facing left, with many of his tags and medals shining in the background.