

**ADDRESS OF GENERAL BLACK AT CONVENTION OF NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF FIRST-CLASS POSTMASTERS, RICHMOND, VA.**

**Sept. 28, 1910**

Gentlemen of the convention: I arise to address you in a city made immortal by the struggles, the sacrifices and the heroisms of its inhabitants. Although devoted to the Union, an unfaltering supporter of its cause, consoled and strengthened by the belief that the struggle ended as it should have ended, yet my eyes have never been blind to the great manhood, achievements, and woman-sufferings of those who fought for and believed in the right of the south in the great war. (Applause)

I come to you from the Capital of the nation now universally acknowledged. I come to you a citizen of the greatest of the children of Virginia, from that State of Illinois which so long followed the fortunes and policies of Virginia, which is proud of its descent from the illustrious mother, and which contributed so much to the cause of the Union and I am proud, arising in your presence, to know that over Virginia, as over Illinois and as over all other capitals, there floats one splendid flag to which not only all the citizens of the Republic pay allegiance but which the world has learned to recognize as the "flag of the free heart's hope and home." (Applause) And from whatever part of the country, however remote, this audience may assemble, it is all moved by devotion to the republic.

I have had assigned to me for a topic, "The Relation of the Civil Service Commission to the Post Office Department." You do not expect that in the discussion of this question I shall speak

simply of the narrow, technical and legal filaments which unite, but rather that I should speak to you of the great work coordinately done by those two institutions; how that work has progressed, what growth has been made, what good is to be secured.

### **EARLY RECOLLECTIONS OF THE POSTAL SERVICE.**

To illustrate that growth, my memory returns to my own state.

The town on which I lived, a county seat, when I first saw it was united to the American Public by a weekly mail. How well I recall Jim Munroe, who drove the coach, bright with its paint, and drawn by four prancing horses with glittering caparisons and nodding tufts of brilliant hue, over which he drew the rein and flourished the long and cracking whip; how the horses prances; how the old coach rumbled and spun, enveloped by its own mighty dust, and whirled the passengers and mail over as many as thirty miles a day.

By that mail the little Wabash town reached out over the corduroy and other roads to Indianapolis, to Chicago, toward St. Louis and particularly down to the queen city of the west, the then peerless Cincinnati, sitting on the banks of the beautiful river and holding the finest place among all communities of the interior. I remember, too, that as I grew older, searching in idle fashion among the old papers of the old town, I came across a letter signed by Amos Kendall, Postmaster General under Andrew Jackson, written in response to a petition signed by many good citizens of the Wabash Valley, that a semi-weekly instead of a weekly mail should be put on the line between Vincennes and Chicago by the way of Danville, because of the growing importance of the latter place. The petition

was addressed to President Jackson. It was answered by his Postmaster General. I wish that I could read that answer to you, because it contained a political platform of the highest ethics and laid down as long ago as that, the true doctrines of the public service in America. It recited that the President, General Jackson, had received this letter of petition and had directed the writer to prepare the reply. It declared the General's intense personal interest in the comfort and convenience of all the citizens who had petitioned his high consideration for them as citizens, his deference to their rights as Americans; "but," continued the epistle, "I am bidden by the General further to say to you that he has a double duty in this matter. He is also charged with the care of the interests of all of the people and with the conservation of all of their affairs which have been lawfully committed to his charge; that among these is the safeguarding of the public treasury, and he has been obliged, and he directs me to so advise you, to balance between your individual wants and the needs of the whole body of the public; and that it was his duty and his pleasure, in the consideration of this proposition, to communicate to his fellow citizens the fact that while he would gladly consent to their request, yet in the interests of an economy that looked to the well-being of all he found himself unable to direct such an extension as they requested and to double the mail facilities on the line indicated, because the public treasury was not in condition to justify the expense. (Applause)

It should be remembered, further that this letter was written at a time when the extension of the postal routes spoken of was to Chicago. Chicago at that time was in the chrysalis state. Its postmaster was supplied with no pneumatic tubes, with no corps of couriers and carriers, with no glittering array of boxes, and no selection of private drawers with rale keys, but, on the contrary, the time was not yet remote that the mail when received was placed in an old boot, hung convenient to the incoming and outgoing patrons, from whose leathery recesses each man drew out the entire mail, going over it and sorting out his own and returning the balance to its receptacle. And this was but some eighty years ago. And I want to remark, in passing, that the letter I am talking of now was an old letter when I got hold of it. Don't think that my years, venerable as they may be, stretched back to the beginning of things. (Laughter.)

And so despite the petition, the Postmaster General declined the extension of further facilities, and the citizenship of that portion of the great valley was obliged to content itself with one mail per week. To-day during the same period of time through that same village, now grown to modest metropolitan size, there passes many thousands of points of mail. Great trains run a large constituent of which is made up of the multitudinous mail cars, lighted with Pintsch lamps or

electricity, running forty, fifty, sixty miles an hour, day and night, and knitting the community with the whole world by almost instantaneous communication.

Letters in those days were carried without envelopes, heavily sealed with private seals attached with wax to prevent the breaking of privacy, (yet there were few postmistresses in those days.) (Laughter) and were carried for twenty-five cents a letter. You all know what the converse conditions are today.

From the town of which I have spoken a star route diverged, and once a week the rider, mounting his sway-backed mare, sitting upon the saddle-bags that contained the mail, would depart into the wilderness, over the prairie, on a wide circuit, distributing and collecting what might be meant for the scattered inhabitants or returned by them for the post. Time and again through the dim woods I have seen the old man ride, a switch in his hand, a song on his lips, a word of cheer or greeting for all that might meet him, iconic, simple, faithful, deterred by no elemental disturbance, faithful to his work and doing it well. Now almost hourly over that same territory once served by the solitary rider dispatches are rushed, post offices are sown as though broadcast, and the whole community is a sensitized part of the great nation near whose heart it lies.

That which has been true of that confined section has been and is true of every part of the Nation. A few thousand dollars a year then marked the expenditure, and if the expenditures exceeded the income the deficit was a matter of national

concern. Today where Kinzie's store stood, with its bootleg post, there rises a palace, story on story, recess behind recess, in which there thunders at every moment of the livelong night and day the incoming and the outgoing of the mail of a nation. To supply and to relieve the monstrous post great trains loaded exclusively with mail now come and go. Where Bob Foster's "pony" express rode and where on the wilder plains through surging Indians the other "pony" expresses stretched and raced for life and safety now bands of steel are loaded with incoming of invitations, messages of business, of affection, of assistance, of information, all of peace.

I am not here to flatter you by declaring that the enlarging mail facilities of the United States created this condition.

It is simply part and parcel, it is simply typical, of the growth, the splendor and the power of the Republic. How glad we ought to be that the ruthless hand of inexorable war did not destroy, but only checked, that growth and that perpetuity.

(Loud applause.)

And this might change has occurred in but little more than three quarters of a century of time, under the genius of business; for if every anything grew by reason of the genius of business it has been the Post Office Department of the United States since old Ben Franklin formulated its primal condition. Nor will I dwell, although the theme is tempting, upon the character of the community, its interdependence, its oneness, its sympathy, its interrelation that cannot be destroyed while

national life exists. Rather it is mine to follow the text and to tell you something of the other of these themes, and then to show how they are bound together.

### **BEGINNING OF THE CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION.**

For good or evil, the Civil Service Commission and the Post Office Department are of the same great administrative, elemental American life. It is now twenty-seven and one-half years since, to avoid conditions which had become full of menace and actual disgrace, wise men from the whole nation formulated the civil service law. It was no "sapling chance sown by the fountain of national prosperity, blooming in the springtime at Beltane to die," but it was the product of long debate, lasting through years of Congressional discussion, amended, discussed, furiously fought over, deferred, defeated, revived, and finally presented on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, 1883. It was derided as a runt; it was laughed at as an impracticability, as a dream of scholarly men and enthusiastic. Its supporters were designated as cranks, as mere theorists, as men not knowing the American life or the demands of American politics. But as it was presented and sighed twenty-seven years ago this last January, to that law, almost unaltered in paragraph or line, has stood all tests and is to-day considerably welcomed and approved by the vast mass of intelligent and thinking people. But how simple it was in that beginning. After the signing of the act that made the Civil Service Commission a fact, the machinery was embryotic. There were but seven men – three commissioners, a secretary, an examiner, a clerk add a messenger-

in its entire force. It did look like a rickety-handed body, with three administrators, two executives, a clerk and a messenger. It found room and harborage in the private quarters of one of the commissioners in the old Gormley Hotel, long since dismantled and destroyed, on one of Washington's very quiet streets. When it was necessary in the progress of its growth to remove to other quarters its effects were taken from the room of this commissioner, loaded onto a hand-cart and pushed by a negro porter to its new abode. The new abode was a charitably-loaned space in one of the bureaus of the Agricultural Department, for which the Commission paid no rent, and where it existed by sufferance. But there was room and space for the youngster, there was demand for it in the American life, and of this demand I shall speak later.

Every breath of its early existence was a struggle. An unfriendly press derided and attacked, hostile public officials sought to thwart its operations, often successfully. There was not a department of this great government that bade it welcome; there was not a politician in the land who did not scorn or hate it. To borrow a classic illustration, around its infant cradle the serpents of bad partisanship and the spoils-man's power wrestled and writhed, and yet the young child grappled them and if they are not wholly strangled it has given them the struggle of their lives. And there is more to come.

There was seminal truth in the cause of the civil service reform; there was a need which, dimly perceived by the fathers, had grown to be imminent at the time for its adoption, and that need



was the divorcement of the public service from the reign of the spoilsman.

A Chief Justice of the United States had described a part of the situation existing at the time of the passage of the law in this fashion: If contributions can be levied upon public servants, as is expected by those making the contributions that they will be continued in or promoted in public office as a reward for their contributions, and that where the levy of those contributions has been made with official cognition the Congress should see that the contributions were made good by increases in salaries to the contributors, and thus the public treasury would furnish the sinews, indirectly of partisan war. And having these views enunciated by this Chief Justice, the Supreme Court upheld the integrity of the law.

I hesitate to speak of all the reforms that were necessary, the demand for which compelled the enactment of the law. I only advert, in passing, to the deprivation of one-half of the citizenship of any representation in the minor offices of the Government; of the violent and rudimental changes made whenever party control was changed, in all the lines and incumbencies of those offices; the mighty shifting of power and patronage and money that followed changes in results in the national elections; of the feverish thirst for office which made the neighbor hunt his neighbor from a place that he might enjoy it himself; of the deadly dread that pervaded the incumbents lost with the defeat of their party they should be removed from office and thrown helpless upon the world, despite all that they might have done in the establishment

of good records and the performance of utterly faultless duties. I pass by without detail the enormous struggles between opposing parties, who while they wrote varying tenets upon their emblems, seemed at war over principles were really contending for the control of patronage as well, each holding out to fierce followers the hope of reward from the public treasury, and thus unloosing through avarice and through personal pride the petty price of office holding, and the vilest passions that can pervade a great community. I pass by the history of that period when in the settlement of Presidential succession, the American people were at the mercy of trained bands of armed officeholders, recruited from either party, alike, passing from booth to booth, settling the fate of cities, of states, and of the nation. All these things are written in the history of those times, and it was because the wise, grave, splendid citizens and legislators who discussed, formulated and passed the civil service law knew of these distressful and threatening conditions that they enacted its simple propositions.

The infant so swaddled and so cradled has grown. The same number of commissioners, the same administrative organization as at first, the law and its operations have been extended until to-day 1600 boards of examiners guard the avenues of entrance to the public service in every part of the American Republic. Five thousand devoted and earnest men constituting those boards are sentinels for the requirements of the law; and, greatest of the great changes, there is no Department in the government today that does not recognize the indispensable nature of the services rendered by the commission, (Loud applause) that does not say that

to its work they owe much of the integrity of the membership or the public service and nearly all of its strength and freedom from partisan appeal.

**HEEL OF THE MERIT SYSTEM IN THE POSTAL SERVICE.**

And this, my fellow citizens, is true of the great Department from whose offices you come as representatives. The Post Office Department numerically is the greatest of them all. It deals more intimately with the personal affairs of the citizen than any other of the Departments. There are more spectacular citizens connected with others. In time of peace or war the State Department is ever vigilant for the rights of the nation, and now and then there is a loud call upon it to conserve the rights of a single citizen; and its arm is never shortened. The Interior Department has to do with the territorial interests that still are a chief care of the nation.

That young giant the Agricultural Department is levying contributions from earth and sky and air; it is analyzing soils; it is trying the waters; it is seeking in all lands for seed and for scion adapted to the needs of the people and multiplying the productivity of American earth; it is meeting the thunder and the rain, the hail and the snow and warning the people of their coming; it foretells the blasts of the elements; it is doing all that science may do to make the land great and better and richer.

But not even that Department nor any of the others that

I have named reaches so constantly and so intimately in-to the affairs of the whole Nation as does this great establishment, the Post Office Department, the Department upon which the business man depends for the safety of communications and the furtherance of his fortune, upon which the farmer depends for his contact with the outer world; this great Post Office Department that serves every individual need, every fancy; that lays the sympathetic letter of friendship before the weeping eyes of the bereaved; that tells the whispered story of young love to waiting ears; that does all that may meet the mental necessities of a mighty people. This Department is the one which daily and nightly stands forth preeminent as the representative and servant of the people than all the others together.

The greatness of its growth is almost incredible. To-day it has in its employ and bears upon its rolls, classified, unclassified, Presidential and non-Presidential, 325,0000 men and women, to whom is paid yearly salaries aggregating \$140,000,000; and other expenditures raise the vast total to more than \$200,000,000. From his seat by the capital table the Postmaster General surveys the ends of the earth. He directs the movements of the clerks upon the shuttle-flying train which carries trade and thought and communication through the warp of our civilization and knits that cloth of gold into a thousand figures of American life. (Applause). He follows the great snips that go down to the sea on their errands of commerce and personal greeting. The variety and in-

tent of the services rendered under his direction are innumerable. The extent of his patronage has never been measured by any ordinary standard; and if such a vast mechanism as his Department were left unchecked it could be used for the promotion of the ambitions of the bad, the unpatriotic, the unwise, to the mighty detriment of the public.

These two institutions of the government, the United States Civil Service Commission and the Post Office Department, under the law have the same great common purposes, to subserve the public good and advance the public interests. The task of the commission is nowise related to the duties of the Department. In the execution of the duties that Department is as free as ever it was; but in the selection of the men who shall exercise this great power and crew, this immensely early compendium all of the people, being tax-payers, are equally interested. Their burdens are not all equal, but their interests are all equal and their rights are all equal, and among the first rights of an American citizen is the right of equality in search of public employment. This may seem ignoble but it is not. It is one of the highest evolutions of a free nation. All that we have accomplished tends to pride in the Government, tends to a patriotic desire that the Government should be well served, and that it should do its duty well and faithfully. Whatever advances along these lines and tends to relieve the Government from the burden of mere partisanship is a distinct gain to each and all of the people. Hence, when the law placed in the hands of the commission the duty of presenting nonpartisan candidates for appointment a great step was taken toward relieving the public service from a reproach.

and a dread that has attached to it. To-day the Civil Service Commission guards the door of entrance to the public service, including the Post Office Department. It throws that door wide open to every eligible man or woman in the Republic, wherever found. It says to the humblest boiler, him who has never lifted his face from the contemplation of his daily needs. If you have the native capacity or the acquired ability to serve the Government; if you have the ambition and the desire to serve the Government, then, according to your capacity shall you have the opportunity. Enter our extenuations and we will see that you are neither helped nor hindered by your political affiliations or your religious beliefs but that according to you shall exhibit capacity you shall have opportunity." This is the primary purpose.

#### **MISSION OF THE EMPLOYEES.**

Moreover, to this great service, necessarily as yet composed by men of force and genius who are devoted to their particular parties and their particular beliefs, and who are not as yet within the range of classification and the inhibitions of the civil service law, the civil service says as to all classified employees, "you shall not be compelled to contribute from your little stipend to the support of any organization against your choice; assessments shall not be levied upon you; contributions shall not be demanded of you, and while you are left absolutely free to give or to withhold as you may choose either to the party in power or to the party out of power, no superior shall in anywise interfere with you because you do or do not

do according to his ideas if political wisdom." Nor shall any man, fanatic or unbeliever, trouble any employee of the Government because that employee's religious faiths are not as his.

Moreover, it says that the places where he serves the Government shall be absolutely free from the intrusion of the political assessor, and in cases of violation of these rights the Civil Service Commission is the surest friend of the multitude of helpless and dependent employees. The discovery of an assessment made or a contribution demanded under the circumstances inhibited by the law is sure to meet with examination and with judgment; and by the enforcement of these ideals of the law freedom of conscience and of judgment in the matter of religion and of politics alike are secured, and the clerks that sit at their desk do not fear the bending of the brow of official authority as long as they do their duty and keep faith with their country. No longer are the men in the great Departments, from Maine to Texas, filled with gloom at the approach of elections and filled with terror after political changes. They, like other citizens, are free to exercise within the limits of the law individual choice, preferment and judgment, and no man can punish them therefore.

But this freedom of the individual is not all that is gained by the administration of the law. The ignorant rounder can no longer insist upon appointment at the hands of his chief and demand satisfaction from him whom he supported at the polls, in a raid upon the public treasury. He must pass the scrutiny and tests of the Civil Service Commission, and if found mentally, temperamentally or morally unfit the gates are closed upon him

and his predatory career stops at the limits of the public service. If no other gain had been made by the administration of the law than to free the service from the raids of the unworthy and violent it would have justified all the long struggle that has been made for the maintenance and supremacy of that law.

But independently of the mere letter of the statute, the administration of the civil service law has resulted in great and widespread good for the people. It is a requirement of that law that the appointments made under it in the Departments at Washington shall be according to the populations of the States, save where good administration justifies a waiver of the proportion. Once it was that a favored State, having a great preponderance either of brain or number in the Federal councils, filled the lists with the partisan selections of its successful chiefs. My own State, Illinois, had a vastly disproportionate number of appointments; the States of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Massachusetts, the same, while the far-away States like California, Oregon, the Carolinas, Georgia, were unrepresented in the public administration and in the public patronage, or were represented falsely by those who assumed a citizenship that they never properly had.

And so a great doctrine of equality according to the American ideals of government, an equality that relates to the senatorships, to representatives, to the electoral college, to every representative idea of American life, is now applied and being gradually enforced in the matter of holding public office.

#### **THE COMMISSION: A GREAT UNIVERSITY.**

In the address of the Assistant Postmaster General just read to you is the tremendous statement of the incredibly small number



of offenders against the public morals found among the hosts of the office holders. A hundred and seventy-five removals for cause in a year from forty thousand employees in a single branch. This is almost immaculate. What record ever excelled it? The people are appreciating this dual work, and to the music of their applause the President has paid his mighty tribute to her service by the classification of assistant postmasters this day made public. He is expanding the service in accordance with the public needs, and with the law of the land, which, at the close of his career, will be handed, unbroken, to his successor. And amid all besetments and temptations nothing higher can be said of a public servant than this.

Again, the Commission is the greatest university that ever has been organized on the face of the globe. I am not unmindful of the Academy in Athens, that city of the spirit of the ancient world; I do not forget the Sanhedrim at Jerusalem, where the elders and the scholars of the chosen people were assembled; I do not forget the gathering at Alexandria of the pupils of that mystery and marvel Hypatia; I do not forget the mighty academies of the Moors, which kept their dominions over the souls of the Spaniards long after they had been driven into exile, nor those gatherings in Paris and in Rome which today, as to centers of light, the world looks and wonders at the dying radiance; I do not forget the fame of Yale and Harvard and Cornell and Michigan and California, the great universities of Wisconsin and Ohio. Each of them may perhaps have a scholarship and a professorship unsurpassed according to their numbers. But what are they compared to the “scholarships” and the “professorships” of the Civil Service Commission?

By its draft upon the practical knowledge, upon the scholarly achievements, the long and patient scientific researches of this and of the older world, it has come that no question that relates to the happiness, to the growth of the Government, of the Nation, but is at some time or other sifted, examined, tested by the men and assistants of the Civil Service Commission. They are no proud pundits, no venerable professors; but day by day and week by week and year by year the scholarship of the American world lends its aid to them in their mighty classes, and those great classes are heard, according to the requirements of the service, in the hamlet, in the village, in the town, in the metropolis, in the capital. One hundred and fifty thousand American youths year by year come to our bar and recite their lessons and tell of their skill, or display their lack of knowledge. They are weighed by the inexorable standard of justice and equality; they are tried and tested by high scholarships; they are evenly dealt with, and while mistakes may occur, they are infrequent. This Commission will select the man who is to teach the Indian children, who is to supervise the adults of our wards, who is to teach the Filipinos their lessons in self-government. It chooses for service the men who are to weigh and measure the face of the earth, to pass upon the projects of reclamation and conservation; the men who are to explore the chemic secrets of the world and to determine the great duties that the Government owes to its citizens in the cultivation of the field and farm; and while we do not educate these men, we so manage that those that are best of them shall be chosen for the service of the Government. If a mighty river is

to be measured, civil service employees are there with plummet and line; if the resources of the mountain top are to be gathered into those great cups of salvation from which the glittering streams of richness are to run away from the thirsty soil and aid the great plains to blossom with all the richness and splendor of the most fruitful of earth, civil service employees are there to set the foundations and measure the courses and determine the resistance. And yet all of these we have not created, we have no developed. We simply test and measure and certify and give them to the service of their country without the fear of the spoilsman and without the fear of the fanatic.

### **EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY.**

And again, and perhaps greatest of all, no lingering hates from old-time strifes interfere with the progress of the chosen man in the task that he is to perform. The youngster of South Carolina and the youngster of Ohio start with equal feet in the mighty race for excellence. They each and all are the servants of the great Government; they become its devoted citizens. The idea of locality is lost in the contemplation of the majestic continental people, and to my mind no thing is surer than that this great emulation, free to all the children of the Republic, an emulation in good and in common service and in common devotion and in common patriotism, is knitting the confines and abodes of the Republic as firmly bound together as the granite blocks squared and hewed and lain with the plummet and level upon the imperishable structures by which the centuries have marched and around which they will continue their mighty circle.

And to speak particularly and finally of the relations of the Civil Service Commission and the Post Office Department, the one is the guard to the public service which the other administers; the one presents to the other the fitted and responsible and better candidates for positions; the other takes and uses them, and does by them the mighty tasks that the people of the Republic have lain upon it.

These tasks will not be performed in a day. We are a long way from a political millennium. Still, there will be those who strive for the spoils of office and who will in all ways endeavor to circumvent the law. Many post offices and other places are yet fairly party spoil under the law, to be striven for in the open; and in the strife for them I am reminded of the Miltonian descriptions of the battle between the Archangel and Satan, wherein the poet, graphically describing the mighty contest, says that it was "unsafe to be within the wind of such commotion." And it is true that in the struggles of the great chiefs of parties the little officeholders are not yet entirely safe from the ebullitions and the disturbances; but year by year conditions are bettering. Many evils are still done against the law surreptitiously; subscriptions are still clandestinely solicited of petty officeholders, and assessments are made upon them sub modo and in secrecy. But still, it is true that he who takes the sword must fall by the sword, and he who strives against the law will eventually fall before it. Yet the great work goes on and will go on, and the Republic, safer and stronger in the undisturbed condition of its multitudinous smaller officeholding classes, will gradually but surely apply to all of whom it ought to be applied the law of the civil service.