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This little terrier-mix dog came to national attention and made RMS the backbone of the nation’s postal system. Owney was his unequaled travels. As more than one story noted, this extraordinary time saver had “traveled more miles than some of the wealthiest sightseers.”

Admirers were drawn not only by Owney’s travels, but also by the physical proof of these journeys. This proof was in the way of small metal tags that people attached to his collar. These tags bore names of hotels, railroad depots, stores and people that Owney visited when he was in town, presumably for the holidays, although when asked the cause of his presence in the city he refused to talk for publication … He came up to make his regular call at THE GLOBE office, for he never fails to look in on the largest circulation for a moment. He dearly believes in the benefits of advertising.

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At right: This is the only known photograph of Owney in a Railway Mail Service train car. Below: Among Owney’s many tags is this baggage tag from “the City of Sunshine,” Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Owney the Mail Dog
by Nancy A. Pope, Historian
Smithsonian National Postal Museum

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Owney

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known travels. To date we know that Owney’s visits included a stop in almost every one of today’s contiguous 48 United States. Two articles relate a trip to Juneau, Alaska, but each puts him in that state only one day after he is in the American Midwest, making the Alaska trip unlikely without further documentation. As might be imagined, states that had large numbers of train lines dominate Owney’s travels, as do states in the northeastern United States, where Owney began his travels out of Albany, New York, in 1888.

While mail train cars were Owney’s preferred mode of transportation, his most famous journey was made aboard mail steamers as he traveled around the world (west from Tacoma, Washington) in 1895. As might be imagined, Owney stayed within the United States for the most part, possibly visiting Mexico once and Canada at least a half dozen times.

At the Intersection of Myth and Reality

One raw autumn day, some six years ago, a little puppy crept into the Albany post-office building for warmth and shelter. He was a harmless, hungry little fellow, shivering with the cold.

Owney of the Mail-Bags, by M.I. Ingernoll, St. Nicholas Magazine, March 1894, p. 388.

Owney’s story is usually told as a tale of a cold and hungry pitiful pup who, after being allowed to stay inside the Albany, New York, post office, cuddled up to sleep on a pile of mailbags. The dog was befriended by the clerks and followed the mailbags first onto a mail wagon and then into a railway mail car, where he made his first journey out of town.

It is a tale that has found its way into modern stories of the dog, including a booklet produced by the National Postal Museum in the 1990s. It is emotionally touching, but not necessarily historically accurate. Among the many contemporary articles about the dog, the 1894 St. Nicholas Magazine story is an important touchstone. Author M.I. Ingernoll penned a touching story both vividly and dramatically told. The story was of a homeless pup seeking shelter on a cold, dark night. It was to this story that a number of other reporters and writers turned for information on Owney’s first days in Albany.

Reports of Owney’s early days before the St. Nicholas article point to Owney belonging to an Albany postal employee. Although not as colorful or emotional, Owney’s connection with the mail probably began less dramatically than portrayed in St. Nicholas Magazine. A 1889 story of “Tony” (aka Owney), notes, “The mail clerks at the New-York, Owienie seems to have resolved to become the Stanley of his species and started out to see the world.”6

All stories of Owney, those written before and after the St. Nicholas tale of the wondering pup, emphasize his love for mailbags. Whatever the attraction, the smell or feel of the bags, Owney followed them from the post office onto mail wagons, and into railway mail cars. An article from 1891 notes that the dog “is never happy unless he is in a car, surrounded with mail bags. … Some of his admirers tried to get him photographed recently. They took him up to the photographer’s place, but no amount of coaxing, petting and threatening could make him keep quiet. … Finally his friends sent for some mail bags and threw them on the floor. The dog at once lay on top of them.”7 The trick worked and the session was under way.

Tales of Owney relate incidents in which he fearlessly guarded the mail and would not allow anyone aside from a uniformed clerk to touch the bags. As an article from the San Francisco Call put it, “He will defend a mail sack against any body but a postal clerk, and is quite savage in his defense.”8

Not long after Owney began riding the rails, mail clerks began keeping track of the dog by adding tags to his collar and through a journal that was passed from one train to another. Owney’s connection with the mail probably began less dramatically than portrayed in St. Nicholas Magazine. A 1889 story of “Tony” (aka Owney), notes, “The mail clerks at the Boston & Maine, Atlantic & Pacific, Buffalo & Pittsburgh, Baltimore & Grafton, Burlington & St. Louis, Chesapeake & Ohio, Chicago, Santa Fe & California, Philadelphia & Erie, and even the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Newspapers from the San Francisco Call to the Boston Daily Globe included stories on the dog when he visited their town.

In 1893, the San Francisco Call noted Owney’s arrival in town, guessing that he had come “with a view of renewing his acquaintance with his old friend, ex-Postmaster General Wanamaker, who is now residing in the state.”13 During that same trip, Owney visited Santa Ana, California. “He came in on the Southern Pacific train from Los Angeles with Mail Agent Music, who acted as his escort during his brief stay. … He took a short run north of San Diego, and then took the trains to Los Angeles and the Southern Pacific depot, where he boarded the afternoon train and returned to Los Angeles.”14
During a visit to Everett, Massachusetts in the spring of 1894, Owney was guided about by Charles Manser, the town’s Postmaster, who made sure that Owney received “several postcards” during his stay and presented the dog with a Masonic tag during a felowship ceremony.12 Members of the Freemasons and other fraternal organizations across the country were among those who celebrated their groups by donating tags to Owney’s collection.13

Owney’s friends in the postal service were especially active in adding tags to the dog’s collection. A story from 1894 listing several of Owney’s tags paid particul- lar attention to “the tag from Leadville, Colo., [which] is a silver dollar, one side of which is polished and inscribed, “Highest Real Postoffice in the World, with a note with the notice that “Before leaving here the Carriers of this office had Ballenger make a gold solate look. If he could have spoken, he would have said, ‘tain’t no use ole man. I’m stuffed.”18

Ky., September 2d, 1894,’ and this is the memento that until mail agent Stone arrived.”17

Owney had his credentials in a traveling-bag, and he also carried his blanket, brush, and comb, his medal-harness for Oa and cat show. The next month, some clerks decided to pass him along to meet the dog’s belongings: “To all who may meet this dog: Owney is his name. He is the pet of 100,000 postal employees of the United States of America. He started to-day, Aug. 19, 1895, for a trip around the world. Treat him kindly and don’t let the dog’s age be new-

By the last decades of the 1800s, the world was smaller than ever before. Dramatic improvements in transpor-

tation technologies had shortened travel time not only across the United States, but also around the world. In 1873 Jules Verne published the tale of an Englishman’s attempt to circumnavigate the world on a bet. The fictional account of “Eighty Days” may have been inspired by the journeys of George Train, an American eccentric. Train made at least three successful trips around the world, the first in 1870. The New York World sponsored the global trip of reporter Nellie Bly during the winter of 1889-89. Bly

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He is to-day, in all probability, the best-known and most universal- popular dog in the world. St. Nicholas Magazine, July 1896

After five trips around the world, Owney was in demand as much as RPO clerks continued to pass him along to meet some requests, Owney began to show more importance. By the time he reached his longest trip, Owney had been traveling on train cars for eight years. Although the dog’s age was now officially known (newspaper estimates widely guessed his age at anywhere from 8 to 17 at this time), he had been on the road for a long time. Through 1896, Owney con-

In 1864, he was placed on display on the third floor of what is now known as the National Museum of American History. In 1903, he moved with the postal and philatelic collections to the National Postal Museum. He can still be found there today, standing guard next to a RPO train car exhibit, ready to jump on board and follow the mail just one more time.

Owney’s travels continue to enchant new generations. His story is included in a variety of children’s books, brings him new fans each year. Elementary schools across the United States use the story of Owney as a way to connect their students with those in other states by sending stuffed toy dogs from the school through the mail accompanied by messages from students to one another.

The National Postal Museum is renovating its Owney exhibit for the summer of 2011. This renovation is from top to bottom, including a careful cleaning and decon- mination (arrested on one of a number of elements used in his original preservation), a new case and the addition of Owney’s tags into the public display. In addition to the physical upgrade, Owney will be getting an online interactive site that will connect teachers, students, families, and fans of the dog’s adventures. The dog’s website will include an interactive map that encourages exploration of Owney’s time, tags, and newspaper articles.

Finally, 123 years after Owney rode his first mail car, his place in America’s history will be cemented with his appearance on a postage stamp. The stamp, which goes on sale July 27, 2011, features a profile of Owney’s face against a backdrop of just a few of his many lies and fans to the nationwide adventures of the travel-

Owney: his future travels and newspaper articles. Owney made his first official appearances in May, when he appeared in an exhibit about the St. Louis dog and cat show. The next month, some clerks decided to sneak Owney back onto the trains. Old and still ill, Owney was still drawn to that life and by all accounts got back into the trains with enthusiasm. Sadly, it was not to be the dog’s last journey.

On June 11, 1897, Owney was in the Toledo, Ohio, post office. As usual, he’d followed the mailbags into the office where he was warmly greeted by Postmaster Tucker and clerks. Owney had often seemed reluctant to let people look at his tags, and on this day that reluct- ance took a violent turn. When mail clerk W.W.

Blankeris tried to look at Owney’s tags the dog turned on him, biting either his hand or leg (news reports disagree on location). Owney was hit by a Post Office Denuty U.S. Marshall Shannon was called to the scene and when the dog tried to attack him as well, he fired once, killing Owney immediately. Tucker and the Toledo clerks retrieved Owney’s body. At the time the idea of burying their beloved mascot was considered unseemly and insulting. Clerks across the country asked that the dog receive the honor they considered due him by remaining in the Post Office Department’s headquarters. Owney was kept on display, and even “travelled” again at least once when he was returned to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1904 for the department’s exhibition at the World’s Fair. In 1911, Owney was donated to the Smithsonian Institution, where he remains ever-
Owney and His Tags

Owney ... now wears a big bunch [of tags]. When he jogs along, they jingle like the balls on a junk wagon.
Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 4, 1894

It is impossible to estimate how many tags Owney received during his travels. The National Postal Museum has 372 Owney tags in its collections. These trinkets were passed along to the Smithsonian in 1911 when Owney arrived from the Post Office Department. Not all of the tags that Owney received during his lifetime are in that collection.

A few years into Owney’s travels (and tag collecting) the number of tags attached to his collar had become unbearable for the dog. As one newspaper noted, “it was the original intention to tag the dog at every stopping place, but he was hustled about at such a lively rate that the weight of the tags soon came near breaking his neck.” Fortunately, Owney’s postal friends stepped in to help. Postmaster General John Wanamaker ordered a jacket made for the dog, so that the tags could be spread out across his body while traveling. Even with this assistance, the number of tags the dog collected grew so large that RPO clerks and Postmasters removed several of the tags from time to time and forwarded them to either the Albany, New York, post office or to the national headquarters in Washington, D.C. Albany’s Postmaster created a small exhibit devoted to Owney’s tags in his city’s main post office. There are no existing documents that record each of the tags given to Owney in his lifetime. Estimates of the number of tags he received have been more than 1,000, but there is no way of verifying an exact number.

A number of interesting and intriguing tags did make the journey to the Smithsonian. A large number of the tags reflect Owney’s connection with the mail and America’s railways. These include checked baggage tags marked with a variety of railway lines, hotel room key tags and, of course, tags from Postmasters and clerks from all across the United States. Most of the tags are made of metal, but a handful of leather baggage tags are also in the collection.

Whatever the purpose or occasion, Owney’s tags provide a wonderful record of not only the dog’s travels, but also of American life in the 1890s. Owney’s home was any mail train car he wished to ride at the time. Many tags bear the names of 19th century American railroads. These tags were used by travelers who wished to check or store their baggage while traveling. A large number of hotel room number tags in the collection show the deep connection between Owney and his mail clerk friends. Railway mail clerks worked long hours, often away from home for days. During long runs, they stayed in a variety of places, railway dormitories, private homes and hotels.

Several tags advertise a variety of businesses. Astute business owners used this opportunity to promote their wares, adding tags to Owney’s collection that advertised everything from watches to dry goods. Many tags were “good for” free items or a few cents off a product. These tokens were used much as coupons are today. A merchant could offer 5-cents off a product as a lure to bring customers in for additional purchases. And, because his travels were often chronicled in newspapers, a number of civic-minded boosters chose to provide Owney with trinkets and tokens celebrating their town, state or local tourist stop.

Although nothing more than a common mutt, Owney attended his share of dog shows and was the star attraction of at least two such shows, including the 1893 Los Angeles show. More than a few of Owney’s admirers gave him personal identification tags. Tags such as these could be attached to a set of keys, luggage or other item that might be lost. Finders used the information on the tags to mail lost items back to their owners.

Businesses, towns, states, railroads and individuals are all remembered through the travels of one ragged little mutt. These physical trinkets of Owney’s life and travels show a nation discovering itself. The tags and stories showed a nation connected “from sea to shining sea” by railroads carrying people, cargo, mail and for a few short years, one lively little dog who captured the nation’s heart.

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