



Naming Post Offices Through Legislation

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Summary

Legislation naming post offices for persons has become a very common practice recently. More than one in five of the public laws passed by the 110th and 109th Congresses were post office naming bills.

Unanimity of a state's congressional delegation is required for the movement of naming bills to the floor of the House or Senate. The costs of dedicating a post office in the name of an individual are modest. Renaming a post office through legislation does not change either the U.S. Postal Service's or the public's identification of the facility by its geographic location.

This report describes how the practice of naming post offices through public law originated and how it is commonly done today. House and Senate practices for approving such legislation, and procedures followed by the U.S. Postal Service in organizing a dedication ceremony, are also described. This report will be updated early in the 112th Congress.

Contents

History	1
Procedure.....	2
Initial Steps.....	2
House Treatment of Postal Naming Bills	3
Senate Treatment of Postal Naming Bills	4
Dedication	5

Tables

Table 1. Quantity of Post Office Naming Laws, 106 th -110 th Congress.....	2
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Contacts

Author Contact Information	6
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Legislation naming post offices for persons has become a very common practice in recent years.¹ Approximately one in four of the public laws passed by the 110th and 109th Congresses were post office naming bills. This report briefly recounts the history of the practice of naming post offices for individuals, describes the process currently followed for enacting such bills, and explains how a law changing the name of a post office is implemented by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS).

History

The U.S. Post Office Department, the predecessor to the U.S. Postal Service, did not officially address the naming of post offices until 1891. Until then, the names of post offices were derived from a number of sources, including the name of the town or township in which the post office was located, certain neighborhoods, crossroads, local landmarks, and even the postmaster's name or place of residence. On February 18, 1891, Postmaster Miscellaneous Order 87 instructed the clerks of post offices nationwide to utilize the post office names published in the bulletins of the United States Board on Geographic Names when naming post offices. The next year, Postmaster Miscellaneous Order 48 instructed the fourth assistant Postmaster General not to “establish any post office whose proposed name differed from that of the town or village in which it was to be located.” The goal of this policy was to facilitate the expeditious and efficient delivery of mail by avoiding confusion over the location of a post office.

Congress first honored an individual by naming a post office through freestanding legislation in 1967. P.L. 90-232 named a combined post office and federal office building in Bronx, NY, as the “Charles A. Buckley Post Office and Federal Office Building” in honor of the late Representative Charles A. Buckley. Courthouses and federal buildings, some no doubt containing postal facilities, had been named before that.

The United States Postal Service (USPS) came into being in 1971 with its own separate real estate authority. All legislation to name USPS facilities then was referred to the House and Senate Post Office and Civil Service Committees, and when these committees were abolished, to the House Oversight and Government Reform and Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committees. (Legislation naming courthouses and other federal buildings is referred to the other committees.)

Post office naming acts were infrequent until recently, averaging 12 per Congress for the 102nd through the 105th Congresses. As **Table 1** indicates, the number of post office naming bills made law has increased significantly since the 106th Congress. The 110th Congress enacted more than double the number of post office naming acts as the 106th Congress.

Post office naming acts have become a very common form of legislation in recent years. In the 110th Congress, 109 of the 460 public laws passed, or 23.7%, were post office naming acts. In the previous Congress, 98 of the 482 public laws passed, or 20.1%, were post office naming acts.²

¹ This report originally was written by L. Nye Stevens, who has retired from CRS. It has been revised by the current author. Readers with questions about government corporations may contact Kevin R. Kosar.

² CRS tabulations based on data from the Legislative Information System, at <http://www.congress.gov/>.

Table 1. Quantity of Post Office Naming Laws, 106th-110th Congress

Congress	Laws
106 th	50
107 th	46
108 th	89
109 th	98
110 th	109

Source: CRS tabulations based on data from the Legislative Information System, at <http://www.congress.gov/>.

Many of the persons honored by post office naming acts were individuals of local renown. For example, S. 3082 (110th Congress) named a Kansas City, Missouri post office for the Reverend Earl Abel. Other honorees, though, were nationally recognized persons, such as Gerald R. Ford, Jr. (twice), Ronald Reagan (three times), Bob Hope, Cesar Chavez, Nat King Cole, Mickey Mantle, and Buck Owens. During the past two Congress, many post offices have been named for U.S. soldiers killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Usually, these bills honor individual soldiers (e.g., H.R. 5220 (110th) named a Beaverton, Oregon, post office for Major Arthur Chin). In one instance, though, a bill named a post office for all the local, fallen soldiers—H.R. 4454 named a Louisville, Kentucky, post office as the “Iraq and Afghanistan Fallen Military Heroes of Louisville Memorial Post Office Building” in order to “honor of the servicemen and women from Louisville, Kentucky, who died in service during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

Procedure

Initial Steps

The first step a congressional staff member should consider in preparing a post office naming bill is the selection of an appropriate post office. Most congressional districts contain many postal facilities. Staffers may wish to consider a few factors in selecting a post office, such as the proposed honoree’s ties to the area served by the post office and the condition of the building to ensure that it is aesthetically adequate. Another factor is whether the facility is owned by the USPS or is leased from a private owner. In the latter case, the building’s owner probably should be consulted. Finally, it is advisable to determine whether a proposed post office already has been named for someone. The USPS has compiled a comprehensive list of all the statutes enacted since 1967 to name post offices, including the addresses, name of the honoree, and reason(s) for the post office dedication.³ During this process, a congressional staff member may find it helpful to work with the USPS’s designated government relations person for his member’s home state.⁴

³ This list is available at <http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/postofficesfacilities.htm>.

⁴ A staffer may contact a Member’s designated USPS government relations representative by calling 202-268-3752, or by faxing the USPS’s government relations office at 202-268-3775.

Once a post office has been selected, two pieces of information are needed to draft the legislation. One is the precise address of the facility, and a second is the precise form and spelling of the name of the person who is to be honored.

Wording of post office naming legislation shows little variation. P.L. 108-17, signed by then President George W. Bush on April 23, 2003, is typical:

An Act

To designate the facility of the United States Postal Service located at 2127 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, North Carolina, as the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

Section 1. Designation

The facility of the United States Postal Service located at at 2127 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, North Carolina, shall be known and designated as the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

Sec. 2. References

Any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the facility referred to in section 1 shall be deemed to be a reference to the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

House Treatment of Postal Naming Bills

All but 10 of the 109 naming acts passed in the 110th Congress originated in the House. In the past, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee had a policy (though not a formal rule) that a post office naming bill will not be approved unless and until all Members from the state where the post office is located have signed on as cosponsors of the bill.

In the 111th Congress, the committee has continued this policy, and it has adopted these additional policies: (1) The committee will not consider bills to name post offices after living persons. “Exceptions to this rule are Presidents and Vice Presidents, former Members of Congress over 70 years of age, former state or elected officials over 70 years of age; former judges over 70 years of age; or wounded veterans of any age”; and (2) The sponsor of a post office naming bill must provide the committee with documentation summarizing the designee’s background. Additionally, the committee urges Members to contact the committee before introducing any post office naming legislation.⁵

In recent years, the committee has generally not marked up or otherwise formally approved naming bills in a committee meeting. Rather, committee staff keep a list of naming bills and other measures appropriate for consideration under suspension of the rules, or by unanimous consent, to be taken up when opportunities appear. Negotiations between the majority and minority leaders determine when and how the bills are to be considered on the floor.

⁵ Dear Colleague letter, Adolphus Towns, chairman, and Darrell Issa, ranking member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, February 11, 2009, pp. 2-3.

Passage by the House has almost always been routine, commonly by voice vote or on a roll call vote that is unanimous. An exception occurred on the House floor on September 27, 2005, when the motion to suspend the rules and pass H.R. 438 was defeated on a 190 to 215 roll call vote. The bill, which would have designated a post office in Berkeley, California as the Maudelle Shirek Post Office Building, was intended to recognize a community activist and long-time member of the Berkeley City Council. During the debate, opposition was expressed based on her attributed espousal of “principles that would be running contrary to American values.”⁶

Senate Treatment of Postal Naming Bills

Historically, the Senate’s treatment of post office naming bills has been less regular than that of the House. Under both Democratic and Republican leadership in the 107th, 108th, and 109th Congresses, the committee of jurisdiction—the Committee on Governmental Affairs, then the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs—has required that both Senators from a state agree to a naming bill, though formal co-sponsorship was not required. After the first session of the 109th Congress, the committee adopted a policy (not a formal rule) that it would no longer consider post office naming bills that honor living persons.⁷

At the beginning of the 110th Congress, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs discontinued this policy. In July 2008, the ranking members of the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, & International Security, to which the committee delegated jurisdiction over bills related to the U.S. Postal Service, announced some “criteria” for consideration of post office naming bills.

The subcommittee will not consider any legislation that would name a postal facility for a living person with the exception of bills naming facilities after former Presidents and Vice Presidents of the United States, former Members of Congress over 70 years of age, former state or local elected officials over 70 years of age, former judges over 70 years of age, or wounded veterans.

The subcommittee also announced that it

will not consider any postal naming legislation until the subcommittee has received a letter from both senators from the state in which the facility is located indicating their support for the legislation. Letters must include a short biography of the person for whom the facility would be named. For legislation naming a postal facility after a person - living or deceased - other than former Presidents and Vice Presidents of the United States, former Members of Congress, former state or local elected officials, former judges, or veterans killed in the line of duty, letters should also include a document from the Congressional Research Service summarizing the person’s background.⁸

⁶ Rep. Steve King, remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 151, September 27, 2005, p. H 8370.

⁷ The policy became effective on January 1, 2006. Since some bills naming post offices for living persons had been passed by the House in 2005, and were already before the Senate when the policy came into effect, there was some question whether or not they would fall under the policy. On June 14, 2006, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs ordered 14 postal naming bills to be reported, two of which (H.R. 2977 and H.R. 3549) named post offices for persons still living, one a former Member of the House.

⁸ John Kilvington, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, & International Security, “FFM Postal Naming Policy,” e-mail, July 11, 2008.

In the 111th Congress, the committee adopted the rule stating that it

will not consider any legislation that would name a postal facility for a living person with the exception of bills naming facilities after former Presidents and Vice Presidents of the United States, former Members of Congress over 70 years of age, former state or local elected officials over 70 years of age, former judges over 70 years of age, or wounded veterans.⁹

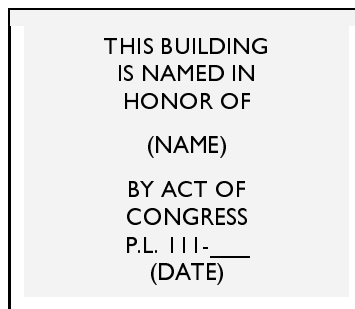
It is not uncommon for post office naming bills that have passed the House to wait several months for action by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the full Senate. To clear this backlog of legislation, the Senate sometimes considers these bills en bloc, passing them all by unanimous consent without debate.

As in the House, postal naming bills tend to be uncontroversial in the Senate. However, in 2008 there was some concern over H.R. 4774, which proposed to name a post office after a lobbyist.¹⁰ The House passed the bill, but the Senate did not.

Dedication

The practical effect of legislation renaming a post office is less than might appear. For operational reasons, post offices retain their geographical designations in the USPS addressing system, and there is no change in the way renamed post offices are identified in the official listing of post offices. The *National Five-Digit ZIP Code and Post Office Directory*, for example, which is widely circulated and available in post office lobbies, does not contain names of individuals for whom certain post offices have been named by law. Nor is there a separate list of named post offices that could be consulted to determine which post offices have been named in law and which have not.

The tangible effect of naming a post office is the installation of a dedicatory plaque in “a prominent place in the facility’s lobby, preferably above the post office boxes.”¹¹ The plaque, which is purchased locally at USPS expense running from \$250 to \$500, measures about 11 inches by 14 inches and contains the following inscription:



⁹ John Kilvington, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, & International Security, e-mail to author, February 18, 2009.

¹⁰ Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, “Maybe Just Name the Building’s Lobby after Her?,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2008, p. A13.

¹¹ USPS Handbook, *Administrative Support Manual (ASM)*, May 2005, p. 276.

USPS, working with the sponsor of the legislation, may take responsibility for organizing a dedication ceremony. The protocol includes invitations to the honored individual and his or her family, an honor guard, a religious figure for an invocation, media notification, and light refreshments such as cake and punch. Costs for these expenses may be borne by USPS from its contingency funds, or shared with local community interests.

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