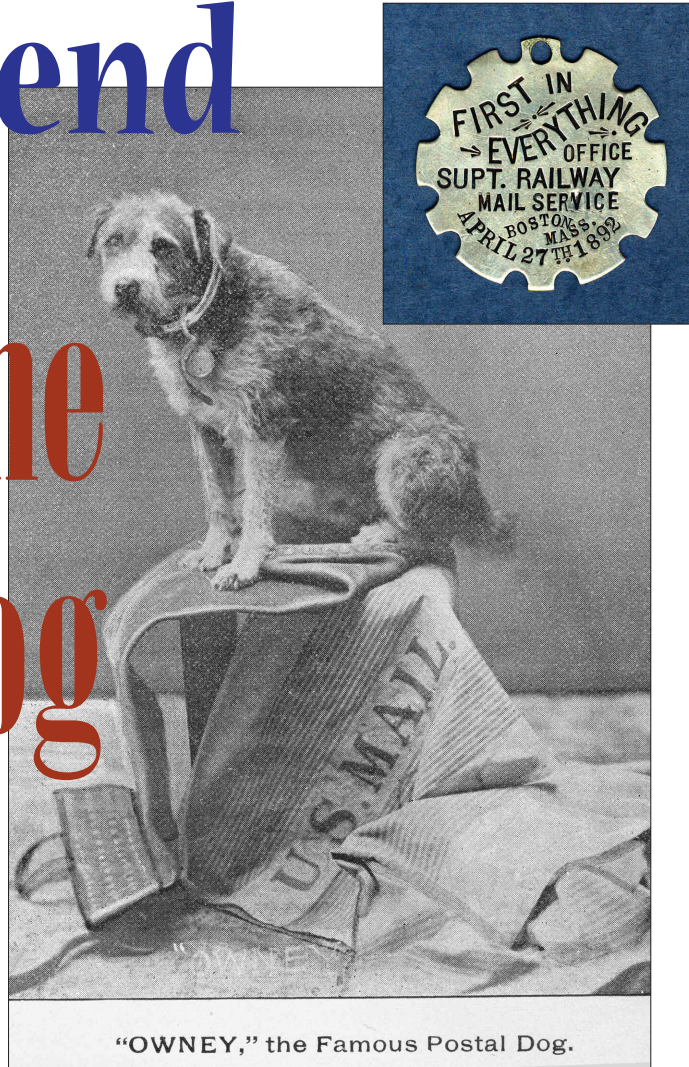


# The Post Office's Best Friend

## Owney the Mail Dog

by Nancy A. Pope, Historian  
Smithsonian National  
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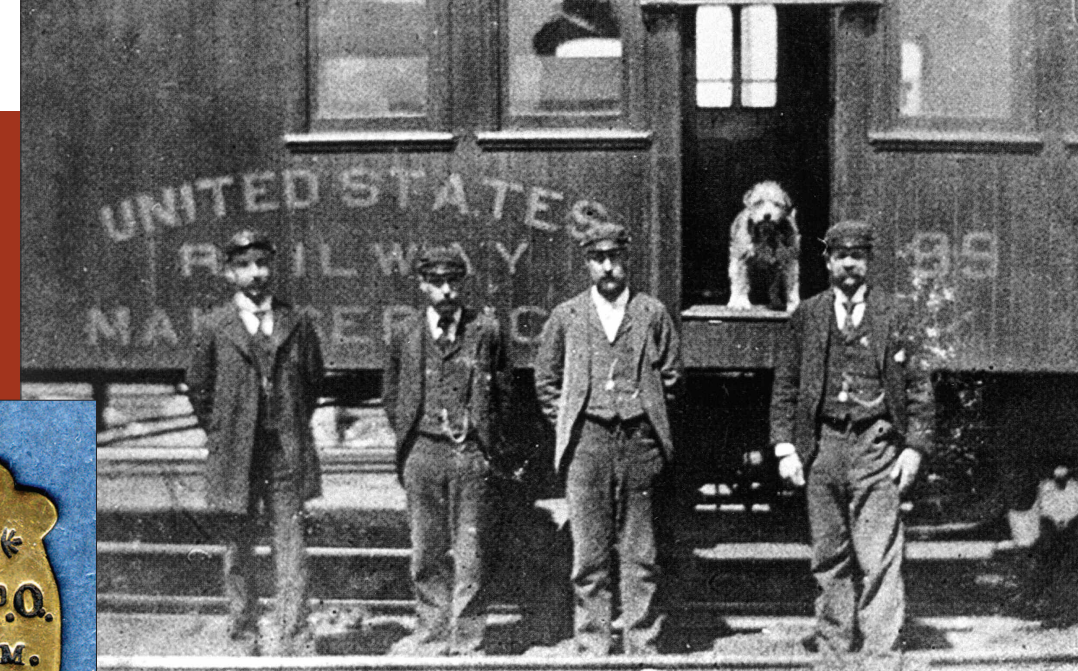
"OWNEY," the Famous Postal Dog.

of traveling and "seeing America" for enjoyment, an idea growing less and less relegated to only the moneyed classes.

By the early 1890s, the traveling postal dog was a regular feature in newspapers across the country as Owney visited town after town. Always traveling in a railway mail car, tucked in among mail bags, Owney secured a place in the hearts of America's railway mail clerks.

By the 1890s, mail was being carried by the Railway Mail Service (RMS) through every state in the contiguous United States. Like the modern day Internet, the RMS, was a communication system that relied on a complex network of interconnecting routes to transfer content from origin to destination. At its peak the service employed 20,000 railway mail clerks who worked the mail on more than 216,000 miles of track across the United States. As historian Richard John has noted, the

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] has traveled the length of every railroad in the United States and has seen the inside and enjoyed the hospitality of more post offices than the oldest inspector of the service. *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, January 4, 1895

service "quickly established itself as a central information infrastructure of the industrial age."<sup>2</sup> Key to the service's success was decentralization of mail processing. RMS mail sacks were opened and sorted while in transport. As soon as a Railway Post Office (RPO) car arrived at a station, sacks were whisked off the car to continue their journey, instead of taken to the local post office for processing. By the 1870s, this extraordinary time saver had made RMS the backbone of the nation's postal system.

When a scruffy little dog began appearing in towns and post offices alongside the RPO clerks, he captured the attention of postal workers and townsfolk alike. Owney's fame spread steadily through the early 1890s. In August 1895, an announcement that the dog was about to attempt a journey around the world sent journalists into overdrive and by the end of the year (and the successful end of his around-the-world journey), the little mail dog had become the most famous canine in the world.

### Owney in the News

*Owney is 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 clearly believes in the benefits of advertising.*

*Boston Daily Globe*, December 19, 1893

Newspapers, businesses and individuals used Owney's presence in their town as a promotional opportunity. News reports of the dog's arrival often included a listing of some of the tags he sported at the time. Few could resist this most unique method of advertising their businesses or wares.

Owney's fame grew steadily with more and more newspaper stories that followed the dog's travels. A large part of the great interest in Owney was his unequalled travels. As more than one story noted, Owney's travels exceeded the reach of people, let alone animals. The dog "has attained more distinction in this country than the average human citizen can hope for<sup>3</sup> and has "traveled more miles than some of the wealthiest sightseers."<sup>4</sup>

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 would hop off of a mail car to tour a town.

Through newspaper reports and information gleaned from Owney's tags, National Postal Museum staff has created a record of Owney's

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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. Aside from this trip, 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 homeless, hungry little fellow, shivering with the cold.*

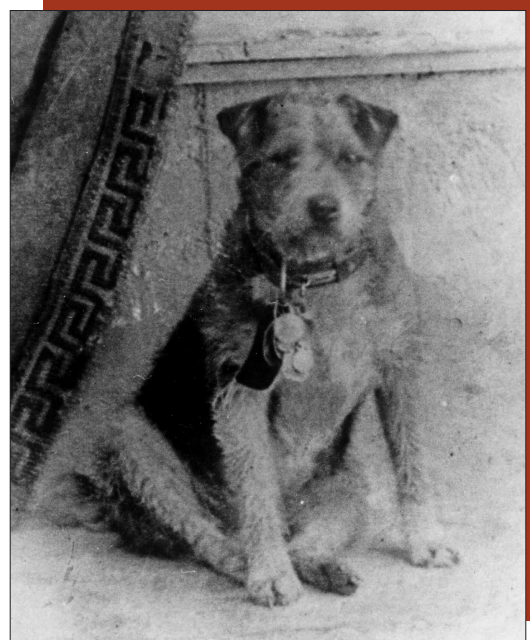
Owney of the Mail-Bags, by M.I. Ingernoll, St. Nicholas Magazine, March 1894, p. 388.

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 historical 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 Albany Post Office early conceived a liking for Tony, who for a morning constitutional used to walk with his master to the office. He liked them, too, and took great joy in watching them sort the mail and lock the bags. Soon he began to follow the mail wagons to the trains, and not long after he followed the bags into the mail car."<sup>5</sup>

In 1892, the New York Times wrote a story titled "Mail Agent's Dog Ownie." (Even after his name was established as Owney, authors debated a few different spellings, with Owney and Ownie being the most common.) In this article, the author writes, "Some six or seven years ago a clerk in the Albany Post Office owned the dog,



and permitted it to follow him to the office daily. Before the pup was grown its master quit the service, but the young canine liked the surroundings and refused to follow him. After a ride or two with the railway mail agents to Boston and to New-York, Ownie seems to have resolved to become the Stanley of his species and started out to see the world."<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> The trick worked and the session was under way.

Tales of Owney relate incidents in which he ferociously 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 mailsack against anybody but a postal clerk, and is quite savage in his defense."<sup>8</sup>

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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 train to train as Owney made his way around the country. Sadly, that journal has been lost to history, with only references to it (and some of its contents) surviving in written reports. In its second article on the dog, St. Nicholas Magazine related some of the notes after a clerk shared them with the author. Among them was a short poem from a Detroit, Michigan, clerk, "Owney is a tramp, as you can plainly see. Only treat him kindly, and take him 'long wid ye."<sup>9</sup> The journal had additional Owney-inspired poems, including one from a clerk at Hardacre, Minnesota, "On'y one Owney, and this is he; the dog is aloney, so let him be."<sup>10</sup>

When Owney disembarked in a town, he usually followed the mailbags into the local post offices, where Postmasters would let him stay as he liked. Sometimes food was brought to him, sometimes the dog liked to seek it out. Railway mail clerks often accompanied Owney in town tours that went beyond the local post office. Sometimes clerks and Owney stayed overnight, waiting for the clerk's next assignment train to arrive.

One of the most common intersections of myth and reality in Owney's story is that of his decisions on which train to ride and when. Numerous newspapers tell of Owney's determination to decide his own fate, travel on trains as he likes and when he likes. And it is this free-spirited nature of the dog that helped to make his fame in the 19th century and still appeals to writers and readers today.

And while Owney most probably decided where and when to go on his own many times, it was railway mail clerks who just as often determined where and when Owney should travel. An example of the dichotomy of thinking on Owney's travels can be found in a Los Angeles Times article. The author notes that Owney is always "enjoying the freedom of getting off where and when he pleases, and continuing his trip again without molestation." The same article ends with the notation that "Owney will probably remain in this city for some days before again taking to the road on his way to the City of Mexico."<sup>11</sup> More than a few articles about Owney praised his freedom to choose his travels in the same paragraph as list of the cities or states he would be traveling to next.

Age may have reinforced Owney's independent

spirit. In 1895, just two years before his death, Forest & Stream magazine referenced a New York Herald article that noted Owney "has now acquired thoroughly independent habits. He scorns the idea of being shipped away from one place to another like a leather satchel. His stay here now depends entirely upon his own sweet will. When the mood seizes him he will jump on one of the mail carts and board an express train bound for a destination to his liking." The article continues, quoting Superintendent Bradley of the RMS, "Owney will suit himself, I guess. ... Not long ago I received a letter from the managers of a dog show in St. Louis asking that I send Owney to be exhibited. Unfortunately Owney does not travel on scheduled time and his whereabouts then were unknown."<sup>12</sup>

### On the Road with Owney

*There is probably no tourist in the Union more widely known than "Owney." He has been traveling for several years, and has been over every trunk line railroad in the country and nearly all the branch lines.*

Sacramento Daily Union, April 10, 1896

Owney's travels took him all over the United States, aboard just about every railway line that carried the mail. His collection of tags include railway lines such as 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 sojourning in the state."<sup>13</sup> 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 over town to see the waterworks and park and a few of the fine residences on Main Street, and then took a street car on Fourth Street for the Southern Pacific depot, where he boarded the afternoon train and returned to Los Angeles."<sup>14</sup>

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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 pounds of bologna" during his stay and presented the dog with a Masonic tag during a fellowship ceremony.<sup>15</sup> 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.

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 particular 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, Leadville, Colo., Aug. 18th, 1894." This was followed with a note with the notice that "Before leaving here the Carriers of this office had Ballenger make a gold badge with the inscription, 'Letter Carriers, Maysville, Ky., September 2d, 1894,' and this is the memento that Owney carries in honor of his visit to our city."<sup>16</sup> The local Postmaster was often the first person Owney would greet after jumping off the train with the mailbags. As the *Boston Daily Globe* noted in 1894, this routine was followed in Greenville, New Hampshire. "The mail car dog Owney arrived last night. When the mail carrier put the mail bags on his wagon Owney jumped on and rode to the postoffice, where he alighted, entered and stayed with Postmaster C. E. Marsh until mail agent Stone arrived."<sup>17</sup>

Providence, Rhode Island's Postmaster Henry Gardner and staff hosted Owney for a large Thanksgiving dinner in 1894. A report noted that "Uncle Sam's boys in gray there had stuffed him so full of turkey, goose, 'with injurious stuffin' and 'fixins,' that Owney could hardly waddle coming off the car" when he reached New London, Connecticut. When he arrived at that town the next day, mail clerks put out a thick steak for the dog, who promptly "sniffed at it once and sauntered away with a regretful and disconsolate look. If he could have spoken, he would have said, 'tain't no use ole man. I'm stuffed."<sup>18</sup>

### Jules Verne, Nellie Bly, Owney?

*Owney had his credentials in a traveling-bag, and he also carried his blanket, brush, and comb, his medal-harness for full dress, and letters of introduction to the postal authorities of the world. St. Nicholas Magazine, July 1896*

By the last decades of the 1800s, the world was smaller than ever before. Dramatic improvements in transportation 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 "Around the World in 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 1889-90. Bly managed the trip in 72 days, 6 hours.

George Train's third around-the-world venture began in 1890 from Tacoma, Washington. That trip inspired Owney's most famous journey. Tacoma's city boosters and Postmaster Alanson Case, working with Railway Post Office clerks, arranged for Owney to take part in a grand publicity stunt. On August 19, 1895, Owney, accompanied by Mr. Woods, a purser, boarded the Northern Pacific steamship *Victoria* bound for China and Japan. The trip made national headlines as newspapers across the country wished the canine good luck in his attempt. Tacoma's boosters added a rather ominous tag to the dog's collar that read "Owney Boom, Tacoma, while you live, and when you die be buried in a Tacoma-made coffin." Postmaster Case added a letter to 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 speed him on his journey across ocean and land to Yokohama, Hongkong [sic], and New York. From New York send him overland to Tacoma, and who knows but he may compass the globe and beat the record of Nellie Bly and George Francis Train and be known as a celebrated globe-trotter?"<sup>19</sup>

Owney's trip around the world inspired an article in *St. Nicholas Magazine's* issue the following July. This and other articles focused on Owney's time in Asia, with author Charles Frederick Holder noting, "There was no time for side trips, and after meeting many officials, Owney sailed from Yokohama, arriving at Kobi on October 9, where he received medals and a new passport from the emperor. He was at Maji, October 19, Shanghai, October 26, and Foochow, October 31."<sup>20</sup> Owney continued from China through the Suez Canal and finally back to New York City. A few European newspapers noted with disappointment the dog's decision not to visit their continent.

Owney did not break any speed records, returning to Tacoma on December 29. But what he lacked in speed, he made up for in fame. As noted as he had been before this stunt, it was the trip around the world that solidified Owney's place for a time as the most famous dog in the world.

### A Sad Goodbye

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

After his trip around the world, Owney was in demand more than ever. Postmasters in Albany, Boston, New York and Brooklyn received letters asking for Owney's attendance at a variety of events. While RPO clerks continued to pass him along to meet some requests, Owney began to show more independence. By the time he returned from his longest trip, Owney had been traveling on train cars for eight years. Although the dog's age was never 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 continued to travel with relative ease, although some reports noted changes in his looks and demeanor. By early 1897, the once fat and lively dog appeared thin and exhausted. J.M. Elben, a St. Louis, Missouri, mail clerk, took Owney in, and for once the dog seemed ready to stay put.

In April 1897, the Superintendent of the Chicago mail district decided that Owney had ridden his last train. He issued an edict against allowing Owney aboard RPO cars. The superintendent, apparently not an animal lover, noted, "If the dog were in any wise remarkable for his intelligence, there might be some reason for paying attention to him. He is only a mongrel cur, which has been petted until the thing has become disgusting. His riding around on the postal cars distracts the attention of the clerks, takes up the time of employees at stations in showing him around, and it is about time he is kicked out."<sup>21</sup> This harsh verdict did not sit well with many; newspapers around the country sided with the dog whose adventures they enjoyed chronicling.

Owney made one of his last official appearances in May when clerk Elben brought him to 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 train cars with enthusiasm. Sadly, it was 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 reluctance took a violent turn. When mail clerk W.W.



*Owney could only be kept still for a photograph when a mailbag would be brought in for him to sit on.*

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 held at the post office. Deputy 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 he was due by being preserved and presented to the Post Office Department's headquarters. Owney was kept on display, and even "traveled" 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 has remained ever since.

In 1964, he was placed on display on the third floor of what is now known as the National Museum of American History. In 1993, 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, related in a number 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 school to 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 decontamination (arsenic was 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 to the nationwide adventures of the traveling dog. Owney's website will include an interactive map that encourages exploration of Owney's time, tags, travels and newspaper articles.

Finally, 123 years after Owney rode his first mail car, his place in America's postal 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 tags. Now Owney's fans can celebrate this most fascinating postal pup in a most postal way.

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## 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."<sup>22</sup> 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 known as "trade checks" also were given to the dog. These are tokens that



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. •

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, August 19, 1889, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Chandler, Alfred, editor, *A Nation Transformed by Information*, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> *News-Herald*, Hillsboro, Ohio, Thursday, May 9, 1895.

<sup>4</sup> *Highland Recorder*, Monterey, Vermont, May 17, 1895

<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, August 19, 1889, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, April 27, 1892, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, Wednesday, Sept. 23, 1891.

<sup>9</sup> *San Francisco Call*, April 20, 1893.

<sup>10</sup> Greig, Helen E., *St. Nicholas Magazine*, December 1894, p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1893.

<sup>13</sup> *Forest and Stream*, April 11, 1895.

<sup>14</sup> *San Francisco Call*, April 20, 1893.

<sup>15</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1893, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Boston Daily Globe*, April 18, 1894, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Evening Bulletin*, Maysville, KY, Sept. 3, 1894, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Boston Daily Globe*, December 13, 1894, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *The Sun*, December 3, 1894.

<sup>20</sup> *New York Times*, December 24, 1895, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> "Owney's Trip Around the World," Charles Frederick Holder, *St. Nicholas Magazine*, July 1896, p. 721.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, April 7, 1897, p. 6.