

## The History and Experience of African Americans in America's Postal Service

### **Woodrow Wilson: Federal Segregation**

During Woodrow Wilson's 1912 presidential campaign, he promised African Americans advancement. He stated, "Should I become President of the United States, [Negroes] [*sic*] may count upon me for absolute fair dealing and for everything by which I could assist in advancing the interests of their race in the United States."<sup>(1)</sup> Believing in his promise, many African Americans broke their affiliation with the Republican Party and voted for Wilson. He did not, however, fulfill the promises he made during the campaign to the African American community during his presidency. Less than a month after his March 4, 1913 inauguration,<sup>(2)</sup> President Wilson's Administration took the first steps towards segregating the federal service.

The question of federal segregation was first discussed in high administration circles at a closed cabinet meeting on April 11, 1913.<sup>(3)</sup> At the Cabinet meeting Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson argued for segregating the Railway Mail Service. He was disturbed by whites and African Americans working in the Railway Mail Service train cars. The workers shared glasses, towels, and washrooms.<sup>(4)</sup> He said segregation was in the best interest of the African American employees and in the best interest of the Railway Mail Service.<sup>(5)</sup> Burleson's ultimate goal was not only to make the railway lines "lily white"<sup>(6)</sup> but to segregate all government departments.<sup>(7)</sup> President Wilson replied to Burleson by saying that he had made "no promises in particular to Negroes [*sic*], except to do them justice."<sup>(8)</sup> He argued that he "wished the matter adjusted in a way to make the least friction".<sup>(9)</sup> While President Wilson expressed no direct objections to Burleson's segregation plans, support came primarily from other cabinet members.

Shortly after the April 11 cabinet meeting, cabinet members Treasury Secretary William G. McAdoo and Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson segregated employees in their departments with no objection from President Wilson.<sup>(10)</sup> Segregation was quickly implemented at the Post Office Department headquarters in Washington, D.C. Many African American employees were downgraded and even fired. Employees who were downgraded were transferred to the dead letter office, where they did not interact with the public. The few African Americans who remained at the main post offices were put to work behind screens, out of customers' sight.<sup>(11)</sup>

The segregation implemented in the Department of Treasury and the Post Office Department involved not only screened-off working spaces, but separate lunchrooms and toilets. Other steps were taken by the Wilson Administration to make obtaining a civil service job more difficult. Primary among these was the requirement, begun in 1914, that all candidates for civil service jobs attach a photograph to their application<sup>(12)</sup> further allowing for discrimination in the hiring process.

At the same time, the Railway Mail Association, representing the railway mail workers, refused African Americans membership. In response, African American railway mail workers created an organization that is known today as the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees. Among the efforts that NAPFE is best known for is their protest against the use of photographs for identification in civil service examinations. The Alliance began that protest in 1914, and continued until it was finally eliminated in 1940.

As soon as the Wilson Administration implemented federal segregation individuals and groups began to lobby against the administration's policy. Congressman John J. Rogers of Massachusetts introduced resolutions urging for the investigations of the treatment of African American employees in the Post

Office Department and other Federal Departments. Each one of these measures, however, died on committee calendars.(13) Groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Independent Political League also lobbied against segregation. The NAACP led protests, and letter writing campaigns, and gained the support of some whites. In response to NAACP protests Wilson replied that departmental segregation was “in the interest of the Negroes [sic].”(14)

In 1913 a group of African Americans led by the National Independent Political League petitioned the White House. The group met with President Wilson and was assured that “segregation had not been decided upon as an administration policy.(15) After this meeting the group was optimistic. Later that year, however, when a group of white liberals and African American leaders suggested the administration create a National Race Commission to “grapple with the Negro’s [sic] place in an expanding American democracy”(16) they were disappointed when Wilson rejected the plan.

Many individuals concerned with the segregation implemented by the Wilson Administration blamed only Wilson’s cabinet members, primarily Burleson and McAdoo, but not the President himself. They argued that since there was no executive order implementing segregation, Wilson could not have known about, or been in favor of the policy. Wilson was, however, aware of the policy being implemented by members of his cabinet. He, in fact, approved of segregation plans, and vigorously defended the segregation policy in personal letters to NAACP board chairman, Oswald Garrison Villard.

In his letters to Villard, Wilson said that the segregation of the African American employees in the departments was “[not] a movement against the Negroes [sic]”(17) He argued, “We are rendering them more safe in their possession of the office and less likely to be discriminated against”.(18) In other letters to Villard, Wilson said that he favored segregation because it provided African Americans with freedom to advance in their own circle. A practice that curtailed advancement of African Americans in society.(19)

Wilson also revealed his support for segregation in a letter to the editor of the Congregationalist. He stated, “I would say that I do approve of the segregation that is being attempted in several of the departments . . . I certainly would not [have] . . . if I had not thought it to their [Negroes’] [sic] advantage and likely to remove many of the difficulties which have surrounded the appointment and advancement of colored men and women.”(20)

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1)\_Nancy J. Weiss, “The Negro and the New Freedom: Fighting Wilsonian Segregation” *Political Science Quarterly* 84 (1969): 63.

2)\_“Presidential Inaugurations”, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/pihtml/pimenu.html>, (August 2, 2007).

3)\_Weiss, 64.

4)\_Kathleen L. Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation” *Journal of Negro History* 44 (1959): 159.

5)\_Weiss, 64.

6)\_“Postal Reform,” *Focus*, 6.

7)\_Wolgemuth, 159.

8)\_Weiss, 64

9)\_Ibid, 64.

10)\_Judson MacLaury, "Blacks" (paper presented at Annual Meeting, Society for History in the Federal Government, Washington, DC, March 16, 2000).

11)\_Ibid.

12)\_Wolgemuth,161.

13)\_Weiss, 68.

14)\_Ibid, 67.

15)\_Ibid, 71.

16)\_Ibid, 72.

17)\_Ibid, 118.

18)\_Ibid, 118.

19)\_Wolgemuth, 162.

20)\_Weiss, 65.

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