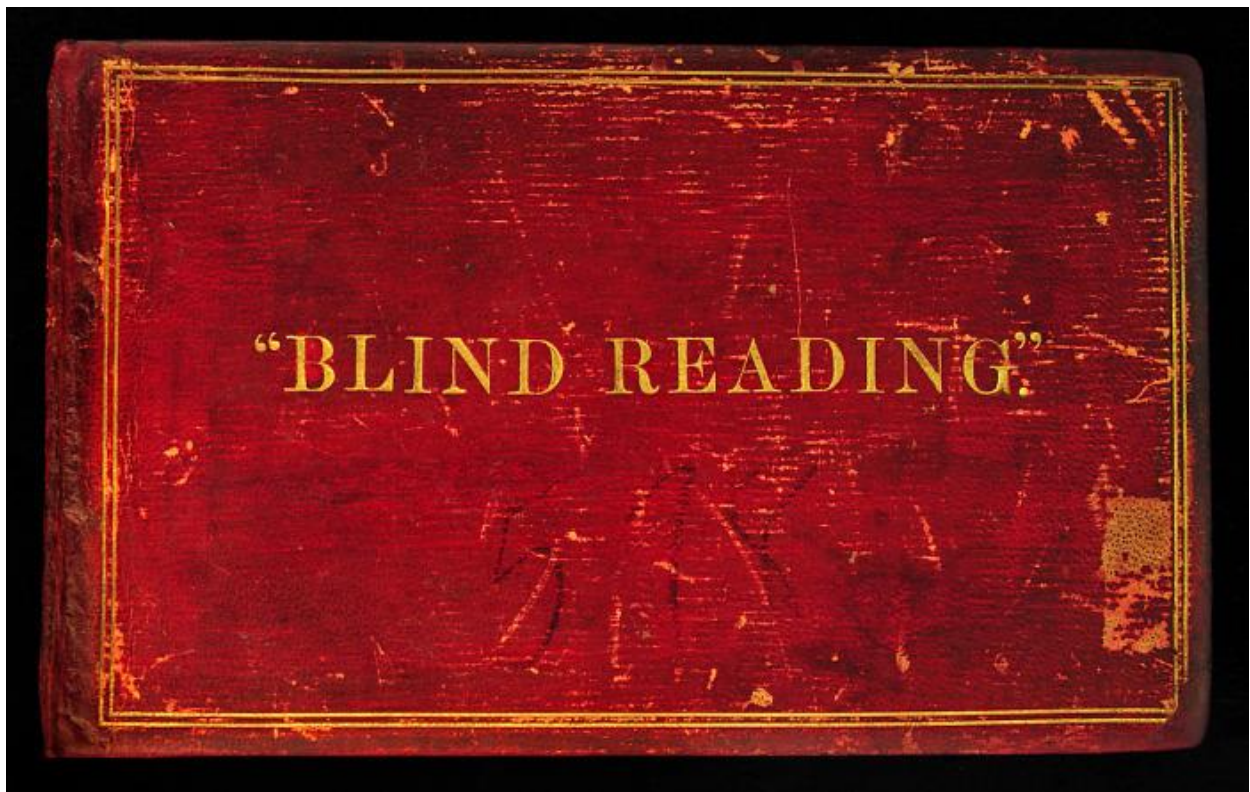


Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album Conversation Kit



Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album, 1883-1884. National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

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Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album



**“The women of the
[Post Office]
Department...are
good and
true...[and] work
very demurely,
purifying the rooms
they work in.”**

– Marshall Cushing, private
secretary of Postmaster General
John Wanamaker

[Dead Letter Office](#) from Bain News Service, publisher. Glass negative. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Though official records are extremely rare, it is known that women played active roles in early American mail service. Many, such as Elizabeth Franklin—sister-in-law of Postmaster General Benjamin Franklin—worked at family general stores that also served as post offices. In contrast, others acquired more formal positions after the death or retirement of their husbands. However, despite their presence, women were actively deterred from working within the postal service. By the early 1800s, any postmaster that appointed a woman as a clerk at a post office was cited with cause for dismissal.

The Civil War (1861–65) brought new career opportunities for women in the postal service. As men left to fight at the front, women were temporarily hired to fill the vacancies out of “charity,” with many relying on their male family members for financial support. Working under the idea that the mail must be delivered by whatever means necessary, it is during this time that the first women were hired in the Dead Letter Office—the postal service’s department that managed letters left unclaimed or deemed undeliverable. There they used analytical reasoning, and extensive training in language and geography to “blind read,” or deduce, the correct address and send the mail on its way. By 1906, enough women worked for the United States Post Office Department that Postmaster General George Cortelyou claimed they were the largest employer of women “with the exception of the public-school system.”

As the suffragist movement strengthened throughout the country, women in the postal service pursued equal rights as well. In the late 1800s, female Dead Letter Office clerks

went so far as to sign a petition requesting a raise to earn the same as their male counterparts. Even still, as late as the 1960s, female postal workers were fighting for equal restrooms and standardized uniforms, and it wasn't until 1962 that the Equal Pay Act guaranteed all federal employees receive equal salaries.

Driving Question

How does the role of women in the postal service's Dead Letter Office (1862–99) demonstrate the complicated views American society has had throughout history towards women in the workforce?

Supporting Questions

- In times of trouble and uncertainty, women have often stepped into positions previously held by men. How has society reacted to these shifts, and what changes, if any, have resulted?
- Despite being denied equal rights, women were praised and promoted for skills and abilities they were believed to excel in. How were these seemingly contradictory thought processes justified?

Civic Learning Themes

- **Rights and Responsibilities:** The freedoms, duties, and responsibilities that all Americans should exercise and respect as participants in our shared democracy.
- **Democratic Principles:** Principles such as equality, freedom, liberty, respect for individual rights, and deliberation that make up the founding ideals of our democracy. These principles, along with civic virtues, including honesty, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives, apply to both official institutions and informal interactions among citizens.

Learning Objectives and Aligned Standards

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

This conversation kit follows the learning arc outlined in the [National Council for the Social Studies College, Career and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#).

D2.His.9.6-8. Classify the kinds of historical sources used in a secondary interpretation.

D2.His.15.6-8. Evaluate the relative influence of various causes of events and developments in the past.

National Center for History in the Schools: National Standards for History

Thinking Standards

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved—their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Appreciate historical perspectives—the ability (a) describing the past on its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, diaries, letters, debates, arts, artifacts, and the like; (b) considering the historical context in which the event unfolded—the values, outlook, options, and contingencies of that time and place; and (c) avoiding “present-mindedness,” judging the past solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions by identifying likenesses and differences.

- Consider multiple perspectives of various people in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
- Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues as well as large-scale or long-term developments that transcend regional and temporal boundaries.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

- Obtain historical data from a variety of sources, including library and museum collections, historic sites, historical photos, journals, diaries, eyewitness accounts, newspapers, and the like; documentary films, oral testimony from living witnesses, censuses, tax records, city directories, statistical compilations, and economic indicators.

Common Core Standards

English Language Arts: Speaking and Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration, Grades 6-8

- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

English Language Arts: History Social Studies Standards: Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies

- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

- Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

Primary & Secondary Sources

All conversation kit resources can be found in this [Learning Lab collection](#).

Individual links to resources are also included below for your convenience.

- Primary Resources:
 - [Four images of original “dead” mail & solutions](#) from the “Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album.”
 - [Photo of people at work in the Dead Letter Office](#) from the Library of Congress, 1890.
 - [Photo of people at work in the Dead Letter Office](#) from the Library of Congress, c. 1864-1952.
 - [Pamphlet distributed by the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage](#) from the Jewish Women’s Archive.
- Secondary Resources:
 - [Object Spotlight of the Dead Letter Album](#) from the National Postal Museum.
 - [“A Brief History of American Dead Letter Offices”](#) from Smithsonian Magazine.
 - “Blind Reading: Bringing Dead Letters Back to Life” from the National Postal Museum: <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/blind-reading-bringing-dead-letters-back-to-life>

- [“Remembering the Dead”](#) from the National Postal Museum.

Facilitation Strategies & Discussion Formats

Opening Activity

In small groups, ask students to examine the envelope images from the Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album. Collectively (see pages 12 – 17), they should work to identify clues that tell them where their piece of mail was intended to be delivered.

As a class, discuss the visual clues students identified, sharing the “answer” pages from the Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album appropriately. Expand the discussion to include:

- The skills a postal service employee in the late 1800s would need to use when working to identify intended recipients.
- Any address or delivery information missing from the four included examples.
- The steps still needed to ensure the four included examples would be delivered to the intended recipients.

Foundational Knowledge

In partners, ask students to peer read aloud the [object information about Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Albums](#) from the *Smithsonian American Women: Remarkable Objects and Stories of Strength, Ingenuity, and Vision from the National Collection* book. The [excerpt](#) is available at the end of this kit.

- Students should highlight or underline sentences or phrases they find surprising or interesting.
- Student pairs should select three of their highlighted selections and transcribe them onto sticky notes that they place on the class whiteboard.

- Use these sticky note selections to identify any overarching categories or themes represented and group the notes by category or theme.
- As a class, brainstorm connections to other events and eras in American history that fall under the same categories and themes. Transcribe these historical connections on the class whiteboard under the appropriate category or theme.
- At this stage of the activity, you should have several themes written on the whiteboard, with items of interest from the article on sticky notes grouped around them. These, in turn, are surrounded by handwritten historical connections (events and eras in American History that relate to the identified theme).
- Record the contents of the sticky notes and handwritten events and eras by theme to use in the upcoming “Connections Through Research” activity.

Connections Through Research

Let students choose one of the theme/historic connections/items of interest from the article identified in the “Foundational Knowledge” activity. (If anyone in the class is stumped, they can explore the themes of historical connections for women in the workforce during World War II, gender-based wage inequity, or early female computer coders; see page 11.)

Using the Comparison Graphic Organizer, included at the end of this kit, ask students to research similarities between the two events/topics they have selected. In the process, students should locate a primary source related to their topic on [Learning Lab](#).

Once students have completed their research, evaluate their comprehension by asking them to compose a political cartoon or six-panel comic identifying the similarities between the history of women in the Dead Letter Office and their selected connecting historical event/topic.

Extension Ideas

- Modeled after historic letter-writing campaigns, have students draft a letter to an elected representative(s) expressing their concerns about the topic they

researched. If relevant to contemporary society, students should consider sending the letter to their elected representative(s).

- Use online resources—or the local library—to locate newspaper articles from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that discuss the Dead Letter Office and clerks.

Supplemental Resources

- Articles: For some additional information on the connecting historic themes suggested above, check out the following articles. Each contains contextualization for your students, as well as some other sources:
 - [“History at a Glance: Women in World War II.”](#) by the National WW II Museum.
 - [7 Women Coders Who Have Made a Huge Impact](#) by Hack Reactor
 - [Quick Facts About the Gender Wage Gap](#) by the Center for American Progress
- Lesson Plans: The Center for Civic Education's [The Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and Today](#) lesson plan (grades 7 – 12) is an excellent resource for how women's rights are still discussed and debated today.
- Primary Sources: Created in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities' EDSITEment resources, the [National History Day: Women's Rights](#) Learning Lab collection shares primary source analysis resources and lesson plans that support dozens of objects and articles.

This conversation kit was authored by Jessie Aucoin at the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum. Learn more at womenshistory.si.edu and postalmuseum.si.edu.

Supplementary Materials: Dead Letter Sleuthing, Original Letters

In small groups, ask students to examine the envelope images from the Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album. Collectively, they should work to identify clues that tell them where their piece of mail was intended to be delivered. As a class, discuss the visual clues students identified, sharing the “answer” pages from the Dead Letter Office Blind Reading Album appropriately. Expand the discussion to include:

- The skills a postal service employee in the late 1800s would need to use when working to identify intended recipients.
- Any address or delivery information missing from the four included examples.
- The steps still needed to ensure the four included examples would be delivered to the intended recipients.

Envelope A



Envelope B



Envelope C



Envelope D



Supplementary Materials: Dead Letter Sleuthing Solutions Key

Envelope A Solution

514 Railroad St; Sandusky Ohio



Envelope B Solution
Butte City, Montana



Envelope C Solution
Ozark, Ark.



Envelope D Solution
Healdsburg, Sonoma Co, California



Supplementary Materials: Comparison Graphic Organizer

Name: _____ Date: _____

COMPARISON GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Historic Event/Topic A

Summary

Dates

What does this event/topic tell us about people's perceptions of women at the time?

Did this event/topic challenge people's perceptions of women at the time? How?

Historic Event/Topic B

Summary

Dates

What does this event/topic tell us about people's perceptions of women at the time?

Did this event/topic challenge people's perceptions of women at the time? How?

Supplementary Materials: *Smithsonian American Women* Excerpt

Solving Mail Mysteries

Women making a mark in the Postal Service

By Lynn Heidelbaugh, Curator of Postal Operations, National Postal Museum

When we put something in the mail, we expect it to be delivered. Since the founding of the United States, the mail that went unclaimed at local post offices, bore insufficient postage, or lost momentum due to incomplete, illegible, or missing addresses was forwarded to the specialists in “dead letters” at the Post Office Department. The Dead Letter Office clerks used analytical reasoning, languages, and geography to “blind read,” or deduce, the correct addresses and send the mail on its way.

The Dead Letter Office hired its first women in 1862. Men were fighting in the Civil War, and the Post Office Department was flooded with mail. Three years later, the Dead Letter Office employed thirty-eight “ladies,” who outnumbered their seven male counterparts. But the women each earned only \$600 annually—\$300 less than their male coworkers. Several female employees signed a petition requesting a raise; their pay increase was granted in a subsequent congressional appropriation, along with a title change to “clerks.” Still, the women’s salaries remained lower than the men’s, and their offices and entrances were separate. Although both offices were visible to tourists visiting the nation’s capital and were written about in the popular press, the conspicuous presence of these white, middle-class women working in a federal agency challenged nineteenth-century norms.

This “Blind Reading” scrapbook preserves a proud selection of the clerks’ accomplishments in just a two-year period. Each of the twenty-one carefully mounted

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envelopes bears the following marking: "Deficiency in Address Supplied at Dead Letter Office." Like answers to a puzzle, the solutions are written on the backs of the pages, denoting successful delivery. The elegant handwriting and construction of this unsigned volume are identical to those in an album in the United States Postal Service's collection attributed to Clara M. Richter (ca. 1845–99). Shortly after the Civil War, the unmarried German immigrant joined the staff at the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the post office. During her thirty-plus years of public service, Richter became chief of the Dead Letter Office's foreign mail, reviving letters from the dead and helping make international communications more reliable.