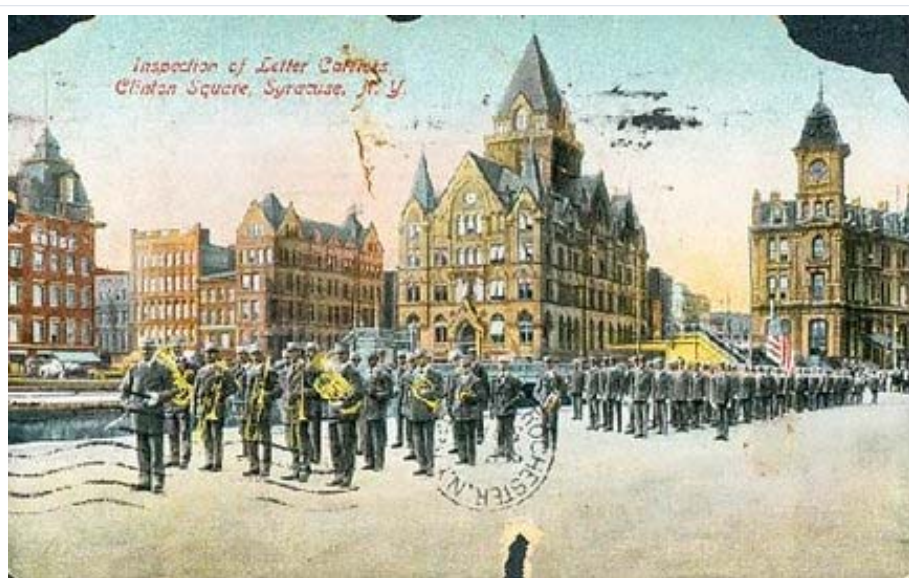


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Postcard a glimpse into city's black history

By Dick Case

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Provided photo

This postcard was mailed in 1909 from Syracuse to Rochester.

"Did you ever see a parade like this?" the writer of the postcard from Syracuse to Rochester wrote more than 100 years ago.

That's a good question to ponder during Black History Month.

It's a wonder that the old piece of paper survived all these years. Rhea wrote the card to Ruth in 1909. It presents an interesting historical mystery: were all those men shown in the ranks lined up along the Erie Canal in Clinton Square black letter carriers? (It carries the words "Inspection of Letter Carriers.")

At this distance, they appear to be.

The first rank is members of a marching band. The second group, furling an American flag, seem to be marchers.

I asked Dennis Connors, curator of history at Onondaga Historical Association, for his take on the postcard. He's familiar with it. He said he's seen pictures in

the OHA files of Syracuse police officers marching in the same location. Also, he knows of a Post-Standard rotogravure picture of a "mailmen parade" on West Onondaga Street, reportedly in 1890.

These, too, appear to be black mailmen, according to Dennis.

This much we know for sure: Edward Wilson was appointed Syracuse's first black letter carrier in November 1881. The milestone still is celebrated in the well-integrated U.S. Postal Service force. Wilson was photographed sitting among 22 Syracuse letter carriers in front of the arcade in the Bastable Building March 3, 1889.

Edward Wilson got his job during the administration of U.S. President Chester Arthur, a Republican. It was said he came to Syracuse from Virginia as a teenage boy with members of the local 122d Regiment after the Civil War. The appointment followed a visit to the city postmaster by a delegation with "claims of the colored man for recognition," according to a long article on Wilson in the Syracuse Courier newspaper in 1881.

The Courier described the carrier's first day on the route, in the city's Eighth Ward, "resplendent in his new regimentals" (carrier's uniform) "with the mail bag jauntily strapped upon his left side." When his appearance was known, "the houses turned out their people to greet him."

From the Back of the Bus

The Media Unit, a teen performance and production group, makes its contribution to Black History Month at 7 p.m. today with a performance of "From the Back of the Bus," a musical theater exploration of racism and racial healing. The show, which debuted in 1996, combines drama, dance, music and comedy. The free performance will be at ArtRage Gallery at the Norton Putter Gallery, 505 Hawley Ave., Syracuse. Call 315-218-5711 for information.

The production has toured from Jackson, Miss., to Portland, Maine and represented Syracuse in the 2000 All-American Cities competition. The performance is in conjunction with Eric Etheridge's exhibit of mug shots from the Jackson 1961 Freedom Riders and will be followed by an audience discussion of current race relations, facilitated by Walt Shepperd, executive producer of the Media Unit.

Walt will discuss his own experiences with the Freedom Riders, which began in 1964 when he was teaching English and coaching basketball at Madison Junior High School, before the first attempt to desegregate city schools. He worked with teachers in the Freedom Schools, the Northern Student Movement in Philadelphia and the Community Action Training Center in Syracuse.

The Media Unit also will perform "From the Back of the Bus" for Thursday Morning Roundtable Feb. 18 and later that day at 7:30 p.m. at BeVard Theater in the Civic Center.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, dcase@syracuse.com.

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