

Remembering Rutherford: Hidden spy system still exists in old post office

DNI.com 11-26-2011

The view into the ladies' room was closed but the men's room continued to be under surveillance. At the time there were very few women employees but privacy concerns were increasing even in the Post Office.

Predating even the Declaration of Independence, the Postal Inspection Service is the oldest federal law enforcement agency. It was initiated in 1772 by colonial Postmaster General Benjamin Franklin who appointed "surveyors" to regulate and audit the various functions of the early mail service.

Since Franklin continued as Postmaster under the Continental Congress and in the administration of George Washington, his system for oversight became an established part of the United States Post Office. Protecting the mail and maintaining the internal integrity of the post office were Franklin's high priorities. Congress made mail theft a capital crime in 1792.

Although the public and Congressional focus was on high profile coach and carrier robberies, most of the surveyors' time was invested in monitoring ("spying on") the sorting and delivery activity of postal employees. (In 1801 the "surveyor" title was changed to "inspector.")

The work of the inspectors came to light in Murfreesboro in 1962 when the main post office moved from the corner of College and Church Streets to West Main, and plans were made for relocation of the Linebaugh Library. While studying the 1909 structure prior to preparing plans for renovation, local architect Burney Tucker noted a system of hidden catwalks and observation vents looking into all areas of the building.

This hidden infrastructure was accessed through an outside entrance and a narrow, winding stairwell extending to the catwalks above the ceiling. Inspectors could enter and leave without being seen by anyone inside the building.

Post Office planners usually selected a stock design that was thought to be compatible with other important structures in the area. The decision to use a Romanesque/Italianate style for the 1909 Murfreesboro structure may have been influenced by Oaklands (then called Oak Manor).

The system of catwalks proved useful when the building was again renovated for the performing arts in the mid-1990s. Jim Ridley remembers: "As the renovation work was nearing completion, several of the Murfreesboro Little Theater leadership visited and noted that a sound and light booth had been omitted from the renovation plans. After some last minute plan changes, they were able to add this missing and essential feature using the old system of catwalks for access."

(To get into the booth today, the lighting technician goes to the top of the Inspectors' stairwell, enters the attic on a catwalk, climbs a ladder to a crossover catwalk, walks to the middle of the attic, and descends a second ladder.)

Norman Hutchinson, former Murfreesboro postmaster (1963-1983), assumed his position shortly after the Post Office moved to the 300 block of West Main Street. (This building currently houses the District Attorney and other offices.)

"My first encounter with the Inspectors was just a week or so after I assumed my duties," remembers Hutchinson. "They were waiting for me in the morning when I arrived at the office on West Main. I was advised that one of my carriers was spending an inappropriate amount of time at one address. He had been observed entering the house on several consecutive days and remaining inside for a length of time well beyond what was specified in the regulations."

Hutchinson was asked to sign termination orders for the identified carrier, but declined. "I was new on the job and felt I should personally investigate the situation before denying someone his livelihood," says Hutchinson. "I cautioned the carrier in question and had no further problems with him. We knew we were being watched."

The entrance for the Inspectors was on the east side of the building (now bricked over), and they had viewing stations wherever USPO employees worked or congregated.

"I only knew of the Inspectors being on the premises when the custodian would tell me that he found some indication that we had been visited," recalls the former Postmaster. "Of course we only did maintenance in the Inspector's domain on days specified by my USPO superiors."

The postal employees were generally aware that they were under surveillance and more or less took it for granted.

"At some time during the late 1960's or early '70's I learned that the viewing station into the ladies room had been closed," remembers Hutchinson. "There had been no problems or complaints at our location, but there may have been some complaints elsewhere. As more women were being hired, the Inspectors apparently became more sensitive to privacy concerns."

In addition to their outside entrances, the inspectors had "break-out doors" to the interior of the building. According to Hutchinson, this interior access could be used if an employee was observed destroying mail or other evidence and immediate action was required. "I assume they didn't want to have to run outside and around the building when quick action was needed," says Hutchinson.

One matter prompted Hutchinson to call upon the inspectors.

"One morning I got a very uncharacteristic call from the Rev. Bill Rice. A regular contributor had complained that her mailed contributions were not being acknowledged," says Hutchinson. "Rice had confirmed that a number of letters had been mailed with cash enclosed and never been delivered. He told me rather emphatically that someone in the post office was stealing his donations."

(The Bill Rice Ranch was founded in 1953 as a revival camp ministry for the deaf. During the 1960s this Christian camp ministry on Franklin Road east of Murfreesboro frequently received cash contributions in the mail. Although current Postal Regulations do not prohibit mailing cash, for obvious reasons postal authorities recommend against it.)

"I advised the Inspectors of the complaint," explains Hutchinson, "and they prepared several 'bait letters' addressed to the ranch with cash enclosed. These were put in the mail while the office was under continuous surveillance. Eventually they spotted one of the sorters slipping a bait letter into an unassigned post office box. When he later opened the box to get the 'bait,' he was arrested. That one lost his job and was prosecuted."

When the Post Office moved in the 1980s to the location on South Church, the new building also provided for unseen Inspector surveillance. The low ceiling around the building's interior perimeter and a high exterior roofline accommodate an enclosed viewing area. Stepping stones lead to the entrance on the east side of the building.

Current Postmaster Paul Trew confirms that the remote outside door near the southeast corner of the newest Post Office facility on Memorial is the Postal Inspectors' entrance.

Greg Tucker can be reached at gregorytucker@bellsouth.net.

A display panel near the old building, now the Center for the Arts, alleges that the old Post Office was "designed in 1909 by Robert Taylor." Actually, the building was a stock design developed decades earlier and used in multiple locations between 1890 and 1910. Taylor was the "Supervising Architect" for the Treasury Department (a political appointee) at the time of the Murfreesboro construction but had no role in the design.