Charlotte Waldo, Connecticut's First Woman Mail Carrier

By Jamie Eves • June 14, 2019

One of the great things about working at a history museum is that people are always showing (or giving) you artifacts, stories, and information. You never stop learning. A friend from Ashford, CT, recently gave me a faded photocopy of a tattered newspaper clipping from an 1894 issue of the Hartford *Times*. It was a story about Charlotte Waldo, at the time the only woman mail carrier in Connecticut. In a one-horse mail coach, Waldo drove the route from Ashford to Bolton Notch, delivering mail sacks to post offices along the way. I transcribed the article and it is reprinted below.

In the 19th century, most Americans regarded carrying and delivering the mail — and driving a stage coach — as masculine activities not suited to women. The Post Office did not appoint any female postmasters until the mid-1800s, and then only grudgingly and under the idea that running a small rural post office was mostly sedentary work acceptable for middle-class women. (Nineteenth-century working class women did all sorts of hard physical labor, but were not regarded as "ladies.") Even then, in 1900 women made up only 10% of American postmasters. Carrying the mail and driving horses generally was viewed as too strenuous, unseemly, or dangerous for "ladies." (Rural post offices were often located in taverns, off limits to middle-class women.) It was only in the 1880s that Susanna Brunner in New York and Minnie Westerman in Oregon became the first female mail carriers, joined in 1895 by Mary "Stagecoach Mary" Fields, the first African American woman mail carrier. In 1899 there were 11 woman mail carriers, most of them emergency substitutes for a male relative. Like Waldo, they delivered the mail to rural post offices, not door-to-door. Ethel Hill is usually credited with becoming the first woman mail carrier in her own right, in 1899, but Waldo seems to have come earlier. Women were not allowed to deliver mail in urban areas until 1917. Folks in Canterbury, CT, claim that Frances Vadavik was Connecticut's first woman mail carrier, beginning in 1942. But if the story in the Hartford *Times* is correct, Waldo was actually first, delivering mail to rural post offices (but not to homes) as early as 1894.

The anonymous reporter (probably a man) who wrote about Waldo claimed to be a supporter of women's rights and wanted to portray her as both competent and feminine. Although reporting that Waldo had some "masculine" traits, the author decided that it was her femininity that was her greatest strength. Waldo was tough, courageous, determined, and wore men's shoes — traits normally ascribed primarily to men in the 1890s — but also empathetic and a non-drinker, supposedly feminine attributes that made her stand out. She didn't drink while driving. She took good care of her horses. She stopped and broke up a fight between two men. And she wore a dress.

Unfortunately, the article also demonstrates the pervasive racism of the era. The author quotes Waldo using a racial slur, common at the time. Both Waldo and the author regarded African Americans as "other," fundamentally different from whites — as indeed, the middle class in the 1890s generally considered itself fundamentally different from the working class and immigrants.

Charlotte Waldo was a real person, not the figment of a log-ago newspaper reporter's imagination. She is buried in the North Ashford, CT, Cemetery. Her stone says she was born June 9, 1849, and died March 9, 1910. There are no other Waldos buried in that cemetery. I invite you read the entire article below, to see what you think about Waldo — and about rural Connecticut in the 1890s. I used ellipses […] where the original clipping was so tattered that the text was unreadable. I edited out the racial epithet, but indicated its location in the text.

ONLY WOMAN MAIL CARRIER

Manages the Worst Route in the State

It Lies Between Ashford and Bolton

On Time Without Regard to Weather

Charlotte Waldo Faithfully Performs the Duties of Several Kinds of Mail Service. – A Resolute Woman, "Not Afraid of Any Man Living."

Correspondence of the Hartford Times.

Rockville, August 14, 1894

Women have taken up almost every kind of occupation and trade formerly pursued exclusively by the sterner sex, but probably for novelty as well as for a total apparent unfitness, the woman stage-driver leads the van. It was while I was spending my vacation this summer away from all thought of "assignments" or "scoops," drinking in the pure, invigorating air which the healthy town of Willington is so noted for, that I first heard of the woman stage-driver as a reality, and not as the heroine of fiction, existing in some imaginary "town of C——" in a far-away western State. I immediately made up my mind that the route on my return to the city should take in a trip on this stage with this woman driver. An early ride of a few […] brought me to the […] Town of Ashford, in Windham County […] the post-office, from which […] starts, there is a sturdy old […] under whose spreading branches Washington and his staff stopped to eat their dinner while on a hurried journey to Boston. The gallant General Lyons of Revolutionary fame, and his tired Continentals, also camped out over night on this spot, and in an ancient dwelling-house near by, there is a small, old-fashioned pane of glass of a deep greenish tinge bearing some initials which the wife of General Lyons is said to have scratched on there with her diamond ring.

Shortly before 6 the woman driver, Charlotte Waldo, drove up in a carriage and went into the office, appearing a minute later with a United States mail pouch on her arm. She was of medium height, and although not fleshy, her entire build suggested great strength and endurance. Her face and hands were as red as a boiled lobster, from the exposure to all kinds of weather. Her hair cut short and parted in the middle, huge black eye-goggles, a black sailor hat with a white ribbon and a huge bow much the worse for wear, a pair of large men's shoes upon her feet, and the resolved, determined look on her face, all gave her a decidedly masculine appearance as she stood there with one hand on the carriage, merely to get in, and the other holding the mail bag. But the dress, a gingham with a huge plaid, made plain and loose, instantly declared her sex. Starting promptly at 6, we had gone probably about a quarter of a mile when a came out of a house and handed her a [...] place, where he was burned to a crisp.

“You see that old barn there?” my companion asked suddenly, after a climb of a particularly long hill made up of a series of little steep pitches. I nodded in the affirmative as I gazed at the building, a little low shed, with the roof terribly sagged and full of great holes, and the sides braced up together by means of fence rails placed against them and a general suggestion about the entire structure of the old one-horse shay on the morning of its dissolution. “Well, the man that owns it lives in that house there,” nodding towards a small three-room house in a bad state of repair. “He’s a hermit, and he ought to be complained of to the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. You see, he keeps a cow in that old shed and in the winter the poor thing suffers terribly from the cold. The building becomes half filled with snow at every snow-storm and twice last winter it nearly blew over and had to be pushed to place and braced up. Then, what little hay it holds, besides the cow, becomes soaked with every rain and is not fit to eat. When that is gone, he takes a wheelbarrow and goes up on that side hill and wheels down those tumbles, one by one, and feeds her. These lie out, with no protection from the weather all winter.” With this final outburst my entertainer relapsed into silence, having shown her tender regard for animals.

After sorting the mail at North Coventry, where we stopped long enough to get a light lunch at the hotel, we pushed on. Taking out her watch at the top of the hill, she informed me we were just a minute ahead of time. From the top of this hill it was straight down for quite a distance; then from the bottom there was a climb up a hill of apparently the same height and grade, the road being perfectly straight and the two hills resembling the sides of a broad-topped V. A country grocer's team was lazily crawling up the last pitch on the summit of the opposite hill, and I was asked to guess the distance between our team and that. "A quarter of a mile," suggested I, thinking that I had probably greatly overrated it. "Just one mile," said she with a triumphant smile at my failure to anywhere near approximate the distance. It seemed almost incredible at first, the clear morning air making the team appear so near that I fancied I heard it rattle as it moved slowly along over the stony road. But the time that it took us to reach the top of the hill proved to me that it must be fully a mile. On this hill she pointed out the spot where, as she tersely expressed it, she "stopped a couple of [here the author quotes the driver as using a familiar racial epithet] from fighting." I remembered then the account I had seen in a paper about the affair. One of the colored persons, becoming partially intoxicated, had called upon the other, a very steady old gentleman owning a small farm on the hill, and for a slight grievance had knocked him down and beat him unmercifully, bruising and cutting his head and reducing him to a state on insensibility, when a woman appeared on the scene and drove the intoxicated man away and had the injured man cared for. The assailant was afterwards arrested and committed to jail. The paper had spoken in high terms of the brave act of the woman. [....]

[…] me, every man driver, after he has been on a little while, takes to drink and ultimately becomes unfit for the position, while she never takes liquor in any form. Her calling, to say the least, is most eccentric, and uncommon, and one that very few women would have the rigid constitution and courageous determination to carry out. Her route lies over the old turnpike between Boston and Hartford, the larger part of it lying in the Bolton Mountain region and being made up almost entirely of long, steep hills with very few level stretches. Every other day she changes horses, and the good care she takes of them keeps them looking in good shape, in spite of the many miles of hills which they climb […] a week.

At Quarryville, the last sorting of the mail took place, and we drove along past the lower end of Bolton reservoir, and by the old burying ground with many of its quaint old tomb stones bearing dates back into the beginning of the seventeenth century. Bolton Notch, the end of our journey, was reached at 9:25, after having traversed across six towns and covering a portion of Windham county, the entire distance across Tolland county, and had we covered three miles more, we should have been in Hartford county. As the train came along three minutes later, I left the woman driver, after having had a most interesting ride with her. Although her exterior was rough and masculine in appearance, there was the woman there just the same, and although to the casual observer she appeared unfeminine in the extreme, in talking of the ills of human beings and the abuses to which the brute creation are subjected, she displayed a rare sympathy and depth of feeling which surprised me. Disappointed in early life, knocked about by the world ever since, and with no one to care what becomes of her, she has become hardened in manner and appearance, and has learned better than to wear her heart on her sleeve. But at heart, pure and simple, she is a woman still. As the train pulled out, just before entering the Notch, standing on the rear platform of the last car, I caught a last glimpse of her as she sat bent over the reins guiding her horse as he lazily moved up to the barn where she would take care of him and make her preparations to return in a short time over the long lonely road. With the utmost feelings of respect toward the woman and her occupation, I became a convert to Woman's Rights on the spot, and, turning, I entered the car.