

CULPEPER STAR★EXPONENT

Postal Service shuts Montpelier Station office over racial segregation exhibit

by Allison Brophy Champion Posted: Sunday, August 14, 2022

As with snail mail, information was slow in coming. But it's faster to realize that more conversation is needed about the difficult history of race in America, in Virginia and at James Madison's Montpelier.

The U.S. Postal Service gives "unacceptable" history as the reason it suddenly closed the rural post office next to James Madison's Montpelier on State Route 20—Constitution Highway—in Orange County. Madison was the fourth U.S. president.

The agency shut its Montpelier Station Post Office the first week of June because it objected to a historical exhibit there about how the depot was once racially segregated, a Postal Service spokesman said.

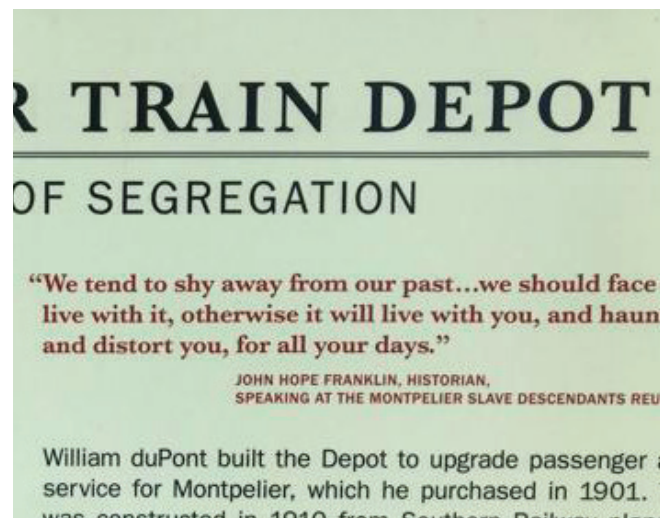
"While we attempted to address the issue with the property owner, that effort was unsuccessful, and it was decided that the proper course of action was to suspend the facility and provide service to our customers from nearby postal retail units," Bogenberger wrote in response to a query from the newspaper.

But Elizabeth Chew, Montpelier's interim president and CEO, said Saturday that "The U.S. Postal Service did not contact the current CEO or chief of staff, nor did it contact the previous CEO or chief of staff."



The Montpelier Station railroad depot, which houses a post office, has a history exhibit on the building in the Jim Crow era. ORANGE COUNTY REVIEW

"Service at Montpelier Station was suspended after it was determined the display at the site was unacceptable to the Postal Service," USPS spokesman Philip Bogenberger emailed the Culpeper Star-Exponent on Aug. 9.



A panel on Montpelier Station's exterior quotes the late U.S. historian John Hope Franklin, who spoke at Montpelier in 2007. CLINT SCHEMMER/STAR-EXPONENT

Bogenberger declined to answer follow-up questions about who with the Postal Service considered the exhibit objectionable, and what they found unacceptable. He did not answer questions about whether there had been a public

hearing on the matter or if the Montpelier post office is permanently closed.

“Please use the statement already provided,” Bogenberger emailed Friday.

Know the history

The historical display to which he referred is on a panel on one exterior wall of the depot and on panels inside the 1912 station. The post office had its own entrance, separate from the rooms in which the panels are shown.

The exhibit depicts the depot’s waiting room during Virginia’s racially segregated era.

The Montpelier Foundation, the national nonprofit group with oversight of the adjoining presidential estate, owns the mustard-yellow post train depot next to the historic site’s entrance.

In 2010, the foundation created the exhibit, “In the Time of Segregation.” A panel affixed to the building’s exterior introduces the exhibit inside.

Wealthy industrialist William duPont built the train station, based on Southern Railroad plans, in 1910. Hailing from a famous American family, he moved in 1900 from England to live with his family in the Madisons’ historic brick mansion.

Because U.S. society was racially segregated, duPont built the station with separate rooms for Blacks and whites, Montpelier Foundation CEO Chew said.

“The post office opened in that same building in 1912; been a post office since then,” she said in an interview last week.

Nearly a century later, The Montpelier Foundation created the exhibit to educate the public about the Jim Crow laws in the South that segregated the races and kept Black Americans from traveling to many places.

At a cost of \$600,000, the foundation undertook restoring the historic depot with financing from private supporters and public grants.

It dedicated the building to the memory of Russell Coffin Childs, Montpelier’s former special projects director, who died in 2006. It was Childs’ vision to restore the train depot as a way to tell the story of segregation in America. A plaque on the building notes his and his family’s generosity.



The recently restored Southern Railway depot at Montpelier Station, Va., includes separate doors for Blacks and whites. The station was racially segregated for decades per Virginia law. CLINT SCHEMMER/STAR-EXPONENT

“He viewed this story as one to inspire—to inspire a nation to never lose sight of its principles,” said Michael Quinn, the foundation’s president at the time.

The depot’s exhibit tells of African American life in Orange County and the nation during segregation, as well as the train station’s peculiar history with the duPonts.

In 2010, a Culpeper Star-Exponent reporter attended the display’s ribbon-cutting with keynote speaker Juan Williams, a historian, of National Public Radio. Among those attending the dedication 12 years ago was a woman whose parents worked for the duPonts, her mother in their kitchen and her father in their horse stables.

The woman, an African American, remembered there were places in the depot where she could not sit when traveling during those years of the government-mandated separation of races.

The exhibit still garners daily visits. It remains open, viewable by the public from Thursdays through Mondays, in spite of the post office’s closing.

Between 2010 and 2022, the exhibit shared space inside the depot with the post office, and there was no issue with that, Chew said.

“Why now?” she said.

Foundation weighs in
Christy Moriarty, the foundation's communications director, said in a statement Friday that the exhibit has co-existed with the post office in the Montpelier depot since 2010, having won wide public acclaim.

"We are proud of the exhibition that presents the realities of life during the Jim Crow era, showing the original segregated ticketing and waiting facilities," Moriarty said.

The foundation was not consulted in advance about the Postal Service's decision and was surprised by it, she said.

Making choices about the interpretation of U.S. history should not be the federal agency's role, Moriarty said.

"Montpelier owns the Train Depot building and the exhibition will remain open," she said. "We call upon the USPS to reverse the decision and reopen this historic facility that has served this community for over a century."

The U.S. government is current on its rent payments for the post office through August, and has a lease good through 2024, Chew said.

"We support the postal customers who had their post office closed without any warning or without any reason given," she said.

Postal customer reaction

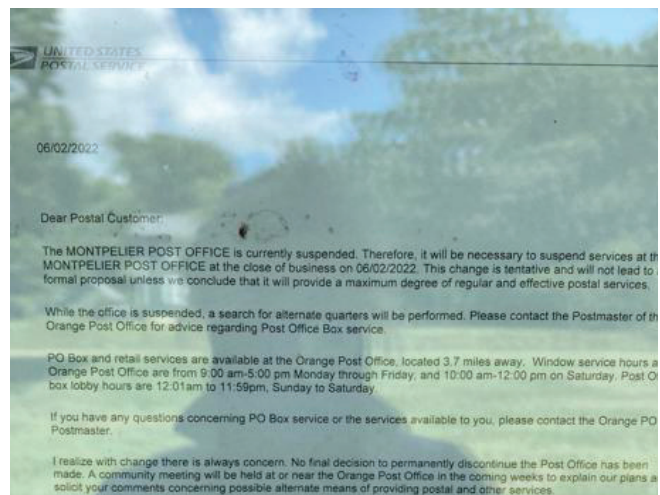
Mail customer Betsy Brantley, a local resident, has had a post office box at Montpelier Station for the past five years, until its recent closure.

About 100 people living in the Montpelier area received their mail there.

They have had no information provided to them about the closure other than a sign on the door a week later that promised a public meeting, Brantley said.

Customers were given no reason for the closure, and little guidance on how to get a new post-office box elsewhere, she said by phone Friday.

Brantley, an actress who starred in "The Princess Bride" romance and other movies, almost gasped Friday when told the Postal Service closed the post office over the depot's exhibit.



This June 2 letter was left on Montpelier Station for postal box holders and customers of the now-closed post office. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

"It is what I was hoping against hope was not the case. Until today, we had no proof," she said, adding, "It's not something we are proud (segregation) existed that way, but as with so many things unpleasant in our history, we are doomed to repeat what we do not identify."

Folks living in the vicinity of Montpelier don't get mail delivery and depended on the nearby post office.

Now, they have to pick up their mail in the town of Orange, nearly four miles distant.

"I knew the postmistress and postmaster—were on a first-name basis," Brantley said. "It was part of the pleasant existence in a rural community."

Displaced customers were supposed to get temporary postal boxes in Orange, and that hasn't happened yet, she said.

"It's just wrong to be totally close-minded and to not communicate any reasoning," Brantley said.

It's a very dangerous road the post office is traversing, she added.

"What is next? Anything unpleasant we can't face? This is not healthy," Brantley said.

The segregation exhibit was a great opportunity to explain how things have changed in America, she added.

"It's so scary if you don't allow that. Do you pretend it didn't happen?" Brantley said.

'It's outrageous'

Steven Brooks, a Montpelier Station postal customer since 2006, questioned why people were kept in the dark about the reason for the office's closure until informed by a reporter on Friday.

"It's outrageous," Brooks said by phone. "The post office is censoring a historical exhibit for what reason I cannot understand."

Only by turning the exhibit upside-down could it be construed as racist, he said.

"It's the opposite. It's completely wrong-headed thinking," Brooks said.

He challenged the Postal Service for not allowing a public meeting on the issue prior to the post office's closure. Postal customers were given no explanation about the decision, he said.

"It's a cancellation, that's the term for today ... 'If we don't like what you are putting out there, we'll close you down,'" he said.

Brooks added, "It's a small matter, but an important matter of following proper procedure and not doing things on the opinion of one or two people."

Spanberger gets involved

U.S. Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-7th, agrees that proper procedure was not followed in the closure of the Montpelier Station post office. The two-term lawmaker wants an answer from the Postal Service as to why.

Last week, Spanberger wrote Gerald Roane, the agency's Virginia district manager, inquiring about the abrupt discontinuation of service for Orange residents, press secretary Libby Wiet said. Her office had not received a response as of Friday.

The Culpeper Star-Exponent provided a copy of the congresswoman's letter and an associated press release to USPS spokesman Bogenberger in seeking more information about the closure. Bogenberger responded with his two-sentence statement.

The congresswoman requested information about the agency's justification for the decision, the current employment status of employees at the local post office, and alternative options for Orange County residents to receive their mail and packages.



Montpelier Station, built by wealthy industrialist William duPont in 1910, is seen from the entrance road to James Madison's Montpelier, the plantation home of the fourth U.S. president. CLINT SCHEMMER/STAR-EXPONENT

"As a representative for the Orange region, I am concerned by this abrupt discontinuation of mail service that has prevented those we serve from receiving the important items they rely on," Spanberger said in her statement. "I am also extremely frustrated by the lack of transparency, forewarning regarding the closure, and information following the closure that my constituents and local officials have received."

Per federal code, before closing or consolidating a post office, the Postal Service must consider the impact such a closure will have on the community and postal employees, Spanberger wrote.

Additionally, the Postal Service is required to consider its policy to "provide a maximum degree of effective and regular postal services to rural areas, communities, and small towns where post offices are not self-sustaining."

To close a post office, the agency is required to make its determination in writing, made available to the customers served by the office, and may not close it until 60 days afterward, the congresswoman said.

Told of the Postal Service spokesman's explanation for closing the Montpelier post office, Wiet said Spanberger's office looks forward to receiving a response directly from the agency.