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Williams: The Postal Service's response to a Jim Crow exhibit is unacceptable. It needs to reopen Montpelier Station.

by Michael Paul Williams Posted: August 17, 2022

MONTPELIER STATION — The shutdown of this post office next to an exhibit on a segregated railroad station typifies our nation's avoidance of its history of systemic racism.



The entrance to the Montpelier Station post office is at the opposite end of the building from the “white” and “colored” signs at the entrances to the old train depot.

MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS/TIMES-DISPATCH

The handsome train depot opened in 1910; the Montpelier Station Post Office opened two years later under the same roof. The building sits just north of the entrance to James Madison's Montpelier, the Orange County estate of the nation's fourth president, the “Father of the Constitution,” and the enslaving embodiment of the contradictions inherent in the nation he helped create.

The depot on Constitution Highway was restored and opened as a museum on the Jim Crow era in 2010, with a re-creation of its two former entrances — one for “white,” the other for “colored” — leading into separate and unequal waiting areas.

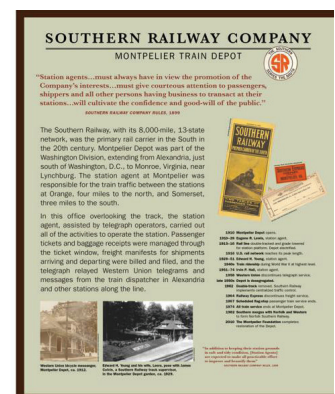
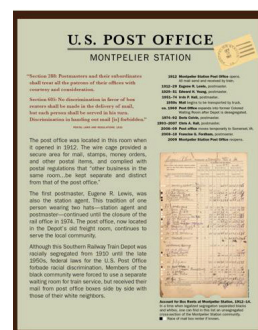
“This is a place of justice. This is a place that tells the truth,” journalist Juan Williams, a speaker at the

opening, said in a story on that event. “This is a place where you can take a child and say this place shaped our history as much as Madison shaped our history.”

Injustice shaped our history as much as justice. But America has a limited appetite for truth and justice these days. Virginia's governor would sacrifice classroom lessons about our nation's legacy of systemic racism at the altar of white comfort. And the United States Postal Service, as if suddenly shocked — shocked! — to learn that its post office shared a building with an exhibit on racial segregation, closed the post office in early June with little if any notice.

“There are two exterior doors to the museum, and signage above one door reads ‘Whites’ while the other bears a sign ‘Colored.’ Information about this museum and its proximity to the Post Office was only recently brought to the attention of senior Postal Service management,” says a USPS statement emailed by spokesman Philip Bogenberger.

“Because the Post Office is co-located in the same building as the segregation museum, Postal Service management considered that some customers may associate the racially-based, segregated entrances with the current operations of the Post Office, and thereby draw negative associations between those operations and the painful legacy of discrimination and segregation that marked prior historical eras.”



Thus, Postal Service management opted to “suspend” the Montpelier Post Office “with the intention of finding suitable alternative quarters in the community, or in the absence of any, to proceed with a discontinuance study if appropriate.”

In doing so, USPS appears to have violated its procedures on closing a post office, including notification of the affected community and a 60-day public comment period.

USPS leases the station space from The Montpelier Foundation, which created the exhibit. Its statements to the contrary notwithstanding, “They never notified us,” says Elizabeth Chew, interim president and CEO of the Foundation.

When it comes to this closing, the Postal Service appears to be, well, mailing it in. The station’s longtime customers are demanding that it reopen. So is their congressperson, Rep. Abigail Spanberger.

In a letter to Gerald Roane, USPS’s Virginia District manager, Spanberger wrote that she was “extremely frustrated by the lack of transparency, forewarning regarding the closure, and information following the closure that my constituents and local officials have received” and called it “wholly

unacceptable to leave entire communities in the lurch without reliable access to mail services.”

She added: “It has now been almost two months without answers or meaningful engagement from the USPS on this closure.”

When it comes to our past, too many folks would rather avert their eyes than stare historical truth in the face. In that way, the closing of Montpelier Station mirrors the resistance within The Montpelier Foundation board to expanding its narrative to include the story of the enslaved people who lived and toiled there.

Descendants of the enslaved at Montpelier recently obtained parity on the board. The timing of the post office closing isn’t lost on James French, a descendant who now chairs The Montpelier Foundation.

“It’s been 12 years, right?...widely acclaimed,” he said of the exhibit. “And never once has there been any negative public comment. And this post office has been in that building a hundred years. So what has changed?”

Governance at The Montpelier Foundation changed. “A couple of weeks later, suddenly our exhibit was beyond the pale. Without any change whatsoever,” French said. “They waited for when Black people had real authority in terms of interpreting our common history to make this complaint.”

The complaint is a bogus one. The exhibit clearly states that Black people, while forced to a separate room for train service, “received their mail from post office boxes side by side with those of their white neighbors.”

The Postal Service needs to leave historical interpretation to museums and restore service to this community.



Elizabeth Chew, interim president and CEO of the Montpelier Foundation, says she was not contacted by USPS before mail service at Montpelier Station was suspended.
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