

# The Washington Post

## Opinion Faced with history, the Postal Service flinches

by Editorial Board, August 19, 2022

As some Americans grapple with their country's fraught history of racism, it is crucial that the nation's institutions ensure they are not tuning out the past. That's why the U.S. Postal Service was wrong to close a stamp-size post office at a century-old former train depot in rural Virginia, a quaint building it shared with a small museum on Jim Crow segregation.

The segregation exhibit — curated with large plaques inside and outside the depot offering historical context and explanation — opened in 2010 at the entrance to President James Madison's Montpelier estate, southwest of D.C. The museum, accessible through side-by-side doors marked "White" and "Colored," has attracted tourists who see photographs, information panels and waiting rooms that were racially segregated until the late 1950s. The post office — one employee, open four hours daily — has a separate entrance around the side of the building.

The museum and post office coexisted with no known complaints or controversy for 12 years, until the post office was suddenly shuttered on June 2, with no advance notice; a letter in the window announced the facility had been suspended and promised a prompt public hearing, but none has taken place. That was inconvenient for 100 or so local customers who relied on the Montpelier post office for their mail. It was also a mystery, because the agency provided no explanation.

When journalists started asking questions, the Postal Service initially explained to the *Culpeper Star-Exponent* that "the display at the site was unacceptable" — an odd determination after a dozen years in which visitors, as well as historians, had raised no objections.

A second statement explained that, upon learning of the museum's segregation exhibit, senior Postal Service managers were concerned 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."



The Montpelier Station railroad depot in Montpelier Station, Va. ORANGE COUNTY REVIEW

So the Postal Service's explanation is that the agency, imagining a theoretical protest, bent over backward to avoid a hypothetical controversy. Yet the Postal Service could not cite any examples of "negative associations" arising from its proximity to the museum over the past dozen years. Nor could the Montpelier Foundation, which owns the building and leases space to the post office. And it is highly unlikely that a customer would think that, a half-century after official segregation ended, the Postal Service has somehow endorsed it at a tiny facility where an adjacent historical exhibit features large signs and informational panels.

It is historically tone-deaf to close down a postal facility because it shares an adjoining wall with a museum that sheds light on segregation. The Postal Service's move is at odds with its admirable track record of squarely facing history, including by issuing stamps honoring prominent Black Americans, even in the Jim Crow era. In this case, the agency has fallen short of its own traditions and should reconsider.