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Naming Post Offices Through Legislation

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Summary

Legislation naming post offices for persons has become a very common practice. During the 108th through 112th Congresses, almost 20% of all statutes enacted were post office naming acts.

This report describes how the practice of naming post offices through public law originated and how it is commonly done today. It also details the House and Senate committee policies for considering such legislation and the U.S. Postal Service's procedures for implementing post office naming acts.

Unanimity of a state's congressional delegation is required for the movement of naming bills to the floor of the House or Senate. Additionally, the Senate committee of jurisdiction has adopted the rule that it "will not consider any legislation that would name a postal facility for a living person with the exception of bills naming facilities after former Presidents and Vice Presidents of the United States, former Members of Congress over 70 years of age, former state or local elected officials over 70 years of age, former judges over 70 years of age, or wounded veterans."

The cost of dedicating a post office in the name of an individual is modest. Renaming a post office through legislation does not change either the U.S. Postal Service's or the public's identification of the facility by its geographic location. Rather, a small plaque is installed within the post office.

In the 111th Congress, H.R. 3137 was introduced to amend current postal law to clarify that the U.S. Postal Service may accept financial donations toward the cost of providing a commemorative plaque. This bill did not become law.

This report will be updated early in the 114th Congress or in the event of significant legislative action in the 113th Congress.

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Background

The U.S. Post Office Department, the predecessor to the U.S. Postal Service, did not officially address the naming of post offices until 1891. Until then, the names of post offices were derived from a number of sources, including the name of the town or township in which the post office was located, certain neighborhoods, crossroads, local landmarks, and even the postmaster’s name or place of residence. On February 18, 1891, Postmaster Miscellaneous Order 87 instructed the clerks of post offices nationwide to utilize the post office names published in the bulletins of the United States Board on Geographic Names when naming post offices. The next year, Postmaster Miscellaneous Order 48 instructed the fourth assistant Postmaster General not to “establish any post office whose proposed name differed from that of the town or village in which it was to be located.” The goal of this policy was to facilitate the expeditious and efficient delivery of mail by avoiding confusion over the location of a post office.

Congress first honored an individual by naming a post office through freestanding legislation in 1967. It named a combined post office and federal office building in Bronx, NY, as the “Charles A. Buckley Post Office and Federal Office Building” in honor of the late Representative Charles A. Buckley (P.L. 90-232; 81 Stat. 751).¹ Courthouses and federal buildings, some no doubt containing postal facilities, had been named before that.

The United States Postal Service (USPS) came into being in 1971 with its own separate real estate authority (39 U.S.C. 401(5)). All legislation to name USPS facilities then was referred to the House and Senate Post Office and Civil Service Committees, and when these committees were abolished, to the House Oversight and Government Reform and Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committees.

Post Office Naming Legislation In Recent Years

As **Table 1** indicates, the number of post office naming bills made law rose and fell between the 108th and 112th Congresses. During this period, post office naming acts were a very common form of legislation, comprising almost 20% of all statutes enacted.

Table 1. Quantity of Post Office Naming Laws, 108th-112th Congress

Congress	Naming Laws	Post Office Naming Acts As Percentage of All Statutes
108 th	88	17.7% (88/498)
109 th	98	20.3% (98/482)
110 th	109	23.7% (109/460)
111 th	70	18.2% (70/383)
112 th	46	16.25% (46/283)
Average	82	18.0% (82/455)

Source: CRS tabulations based on data from the Legislative Information System, at <http://www.congress.gov/> and U.S. Postal Service, Office of the Historian, “Postal Facilities Dedicated by Congress in Honor of Individuals,” at <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/dedicated-facilities.pdf>.

¹ U.S. Postal Service, Office of the Historian, “Postal Facilities Dedicated by Congress in Honor of Individuals,” January 18, 2013, at <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/dedicated-facilities.pdf>.

Many of the persons honored by post office naming acts were individuals of local renown. For example, the 110th Congress named a Kansas City, MO, post office for the Reverend Earl Abel (P.L. 110-353; 122 Stat. 3983).

Other honorees, though, were nationally recognized persons, such as Gerald R. Ford, Jr. (twice), Ronald Reagan (three times), Bob Hope, Cesar Chavez, Nat King Cole, Mickey Mantle, and Buck Owens.

During the recent Congresses, many post offices have been named for U.S. soldiers killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Usually, these bills honor individual soldiers.² Congress also has named at least one post office for all of a locality's fallen soldiers.³

Procedure and Legislative Process

Initial Steps

The first step normally considered in preparing a post office naming bill is the selection of an appropriate post office. Most congressional districts contain many postal facilities. A few factors might be examined in selecting a post office, such as the proposed honoree's ties to the area served by the post office and the condition of the building to ensure that it is aesthetically adequate. Another factor is whether the facility is owned by the USPS or is leased from a private owner. In the latter case, the building's owner might be consulted. Finally, a search might be done to determine whether a proposed post office already has been named for someone. The USPS has compiled a comprehensive list of all the statutes enacted since 1967 to name post offices, including the addresses, name of the honoree, and reason(s) for the post office dedication.⁴ During this process, it can be helpful to work with the USPS's designated government relations person for a Member's home state.⁵

Once a post office has been selected, two pieces of information are needed to draft the legislation. One is the precise address of the facility, and a second is the precise form and spelling of the name of the person who is to be honored.

Wording of post office naming legislation shows little variation. A statute (P.L. 108-17; 117 Stat. 623) signed by then President George W. Bush on April 23, 2003, is typical:

² For example, the 112th Congress named a Cedar Park, TX, post office for Army Specialist Matthew Troy (P.L. 112-107; 126 Stat. 328).

³ For example, the 110th Congress named a Louisville, KY, post office as the "Iraq and Afghanistan Fallen Military Heroes of Louisville Memorial Post Office Building" in order to "honor the servicemen and women from Louisville, Kentucky, who died in service during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom" (P.L. 110-221; 122 Stat. 734).

⁴ This list of post offices named through legislation and other post office naming research materials are available at <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/post-offices-facilities.htm>.

⁵ A staffer may contact a Member's designated USPS government relations representative by calling 202-268-3752, or by faxing the USPS's government relations office at 202-268-3775.

An Act

To designate the facility of the United States Postal Service located at 2127 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, North Carolina, as the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

Section 1. Designation

The facility of the United States Postal Service located at 2127 Beatties Ford Road in Charlotte, North Carolina, shall be known and designated as the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

Sec. 2. References

Any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the facility referred to in section 1 shall be deemed to be a reference to the “Jim Richardson Post Office.”

House Treatment of Postal Naming Bills

Most post office naming acts originate in the House. In the past, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee had a policy (though not a formal rule) that a post office naming bill would not be approved unless and until all Members from the state where the post office is located have signed on as cosponsors of the bill.

In the 113th Congress, the committee adopted a rule which states: “The consideration of bills designating facilities of the United States Postal Service shall be conducted so as to minimize the time spent on such matters by the committee and the House of Representatives.”⁶ At the time of the publication of this report, no additional committee guidance had been issued.

In recent years, the committee has generally not marked up or otherwise formally approved naming bills in a committee meeting. Rather, committee staff keep a list of naming bills and other measures appropriate for consideration under suspension of the rules, or by unanimous consent,

⁶ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, “The Rules of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform,” 113th Cong., 1st sess., p. 11, at <http://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/1-21-12-OGR-Committee-Rules-for-112th-Congress.pdf>. The committee had this same rule in the 112th Congress. It also issued a “dear colleague” letter that set the following policies for committee consideration of post office naming bills: The committee also released a Dear Colleague letter that set five policies for committee consideration of post office naming bills: (1) “Legislation designating post office buildings for living persons will not be considered by the Committee. Exceptions to this rule are bills naming facilities after former U.S. Presidents or Vice Presidents, former Members of Congress over 70 years of age, former state or local elected officials over 70 years of age, former judges over 70 years of age, or a wounded veteran of any age.” (2) “Postal facility naming bills should have the co-sponsorship of the entire state delegation where the post office is located.” (3) “Upon receipt of the requisite co-sponsors, Members sponsoring postal facility naming bills must provide to the Committee documentation summarizing the designee’s background. Please contact the Committee for additional direction on what information needs to be included in the designee’s biographical information. Offices may also be asked to request from the Congressional Research Service additional biographical information on a designee.” (4) “Postal facility naming bills will be considered by the Committee only after all of the previously mentioned criteria are met.” (5) “In order to efficiently utilize the time and resources of the Committee and the House, postal facility naming bills will be considered once every two or three months.” Darrell Issa, Chairman, and Elijah Cummings, Ranking Member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, “OGR Committee Policies on Commemorative Resolutions and Post Office Namings,” Dear colleague letter, March 2, 2011, at <http://e-dearcolleague.house.gov/details.aspx?52559>.

to be taken up when opportunities appear. Negotiations between the majority and minority leaders determine when and how the bills are to be considered on the floor.

Passage by the House has almost always been routine, commonly by voice vote or on a roll call vote that is unanimous. An exception occurred on the House floor on September 27, 2005, when the motion to suspend the rules and pass H.R. 438 was defeated on a 190 to 215 roll call vote. The bill, which would have designated a post office in Berkeley, CA, as the Maudelle Shirek Post Office Building, was intended to recognize a community activist and long-time member of the Berkeley City Council. During the debate, opposition was expressed based on her attributed espousal of “principles that would be running contrary to American values.”⁷

Senate Treatment of Postal Naming Bills

Under both Democratic and Republican leadership in the 107th, 108th, and 109th Congresses, the committee of jurisdiction—the Committee on Governmental Affairs, later the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs—required both Senators from a state to agree to a naming bill, though formal co-sponsorship was not required.

After the first session of the 109th Congress, the committee adopted a policy (not a formal rule) that it would no longer consider post office naming bills that honor living persons.⁸

In the 111th Congress, the committee adopted the rule stating that it—

will not consider any legislation that would name a postal facility for a living person with the exception of bills naming facilities after former Presidents and Vice Presidents of the United States, former Members of Congress over 70 years of age, former state or local elected officials over 70 years of age, former judges over 70 years of age, or wounded veterans.⁹

The committee re-adopted this policy in the 112th Congress and the 113th Congress.¹⁰

It is not uncommon for post office naming bills that have passed the House to wait several months for action by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the full Senate. To clear this backlog of legislation, the Senate sometimes considers these bills en bloc, passing them all by unanimous consent without debate.

As in the House, postal naming bills tend to be uncontroversial in the Senate. However, in 2008 there was some concern over H.R. 4774, which proposed to name a post office after a lobbyist.¹¹ The House passed the bill; the Senate did not.

⁷ Rep. Steve King, remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 151, September 27, 2005, p. H8370.

⁸ The policy became effective on January 1, 2006. Since some bills naming post offices for living persons had been passed by the House in 2005, and were already before the Senate when the policy came into effect, there was some question whether or not they would fall under the policy. On June 14, 2006, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs ordered 14 postal naming bills to be reported, two of which (H.R. 2977 and H.R. 3549) named post offices for persons still living, one a former Member of the House.

⁹ John Kilvington, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, & International Security, e-mail to author, February 18, 2009.

¹⁰ John Kilvington, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, & International Security, e-mail to author, March 3, 2011; and John Kilvington, Staff Director, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, April 19, 2013

¹¹ Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, “Maybe Just Name the Building’s Lobby After Her?,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2008, p. A13.

Dedication

The practical effect of legislation renaming a post office is less than might be imagined. For operational reasons, post offices retain their geographical designations in the USPS addressing system, and there is no change in the way renamed post offices are identified in the USPS's listings of post offices.

The tangible effect of naming a post office is the installation of a dedicatory plaque in “a prominent place in the facility’s lobby, preferably above the post office boxes.”¹² The plaque, which is purchased locally at USPS expense running from \$250 to \$500, measures about 11 inches by 14 inches and contains the following inscription:

THIS BUILDING
IS NAMED IN
HONOR OF
(NAME)
BY ACT OF
CONGRESS
P.L. 112-____
(DATE)

USPS, working with the sponsor of the legislation, may take responsibility for organizing a dedication ceremony. The protocol includes inviting the honored individual and his or her family, an honor guard, a religious figure for an invocation, media notification, and light refreshments such as cake and punch. Costs for these expenses may be borne by USPS from its contingency funds or shared with local community interests.

Legislative Developments in Recent Congresses

During the 111th Congress, Representative Darrell E. Issa, the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform’s ranking minority Member, introduced H.R. 3137 on July 9, 2009. This bill would require the USPS

to provide for a suitable plaque ... no later than 120 days after the date as of which—(1) a law has been enacted providing for the designation of the postal facility involved; and (2) sufficient amounts have been received ... to provide for such plaque.

Federal law authorizes the USPS “to accept gifts or donations of services or property, real or personal, as it deems, necessary or convenient in the transaction of its business” (39 U.S.C. 401(7)). H.R. 3137 also would amend 39 U.S.C. 404(7) to read,

[The USPS shall have the power to] accept gifts or donations of services or property, real or personal, as it deems, necessary or convenient in the transaction of its business including monetary donations made (in such manner as the Postal Service may prescribe) for the funding of plaques in connection with the commemorative designation of postal facilities.

The House Oversight and Government Reform Committee reported the bill on July 10, 2009.¹³ No further action was taken on the bill.

¹² U.S. Postal Service, *Postal Bulletin 22151*, March 31, 2005, p. 6.

¹³ The Congressional Budget Office stated that H.R. 3137 “would have no discretionary cost to the federal government.” Congressional Budget Office, “Cost Estimate: H.R. 3137,” July 24, 2009, at <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/104xx/doc10489/hr3137.pdf>.

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