

Owney the Railway Mail Service Dog Lives On

A stuffed toy dog named for a 19th century mail mascot will visit all 50 states to help students learn about geography.

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Owney the Railway Mail Service Dog made history when he completed an around-the-world voyage with mailbags on trains and steamships in 1895. Fast-forward more than 100 years, and Owney's explorer tradition lives on in the form of a stuffed toy dog, named after the historic hound, who is traveling to each of the 50 states to help elementary school students learn about geography.

Owney is near the beginning of his journey. So far the tan-and-white dog has seen Flanagan, Ill., Callahan, Fla., Woodstock, Ga., and Charleston, S.C.

Students who participate in the project track Owney's progress on a map and learn about the states he visits. During a recent stop at Memminger Elementary School in Charleston, students added a pin bearing the South Carolina state flag to Owney's vest. Next stop: Walnut Cove, N.C.

The original Owney who inspired the project was a stray, wirehaired dog who wandered into the Albany, N.Y., post office in 1888. According to the National Postal Museum's Website, the dog was attracted to the scent or texture of mail bags and followed them onto a Railway Mail Service train. Owney began to ride with the bags on trains across New York — and then the country, before making his historic overseas trip in 1895. Mail clerks adopted Owney as their unofficial mascot, and marked his travels by placing medals and tags on his collar and later a vest. Each time Owney returned home to Albany, the clerks there saved the tags.

Owney met an unfortunate end in 1897 when he bit a mail clerk in Toledo, Ohio, and was euthanized. Mail clerks paid to have his body preserved, and he can be seen today in the atrium at the National Postal Museum in Washington, D.C, wearing his vest and surrounded by the metal tags he was given on his travels.

The real Owney has inspired several books, including "A Lucky Dog: Owney, U.S. Rail Mail Mascot" by Dirk Wales and Diane Kenna.