

COLLECTION BOX COLORS

Street letter boxes have been painted a number of different colors by the Postal Service over the years, but their exact colors for the decades after their introduction in the 1850s is unknown. The earliest known reference to the color of collection boxes is found in *The Story of the Post Office* (1889), by W.B. Jones, although it is not clear whether the colors applied only to boxes in Boston or to those in other cities as well:

There are over 800 street letter boxes from which collections are made by the Boston [post] office and its sub-stations. To people who reside within this postal district it is well known that some of these boxes are painted red and others green. The red boxes are the most important ones, and they are visited every hour by the carriers.

Another reference is found in a report of Fourth Assistant Postmaster General J. L. Bristow, dated October 24, 1903, and part of the *Congressional Serial Set*. The Machen referred to is A. W. Machen, General Superintendent of the Free-Delivery System from May 6, 1893, until May 27, 1903.

The color of the paint of the street letter boxes has been changed from time to time according to the taste of the administrative officers of the Department. Years ago it was dark green, afterwards vermilion red . . . In 1897 Machen adopted the aluminum color, and also changed the method of painting . . . posts to be painted green, boxes aluminum bronze.

By at least 1909, collection boxes were painted green. On February 27, 1913, however, Postmaster General Frank H. Hitchcock ordered that collection boxes be painted "either vermilion or coach-red." Ten weeks later, on May 10, the order was rescinded by Postmaster General Albert S. Burluson because fire departments, city councils, and the public complained about the confusion with red fire boxes and equipment. The boxes were repainted green.

Green gave way to olive drab after World War I when the War Department gave the Post Office Department a vast supply of surplus olive drab paint. This became the standardized color for collection boxes and remained in use until 1955.

On the Fourth of July in 1955, Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield announced that street collection boxes would be painted red, white, and blue to make them easily identifiable. The new paints also were longer lasting. Specifications for the red, white, and blue color scheme were printed in *Postal Bulletin* 19867, dated August 9, 1955.

When the Post Office Department was reorganized, creating the United States Postal Service in 1971, a solid, deep blue color for collection boxes was announced. Reflective decals with the new Postal Service logo were attached to the mailboxes. This color scheme is still used today, with the substitution of the newest Postal Service logo, the "sonic eagle" in white on a blue background, which was adopted in 1993.