

## **Vinnie Ream's Employment in the U.S. Postal Service**

-from the Vinnie Ream biography by Glenn V. Sherwood

The Deficiency Act of 1862 authorized employment of women in the Government. The cost of living was high in Washington. The family's tight money situation motivated Vinnie to seek a \$500 per year job as a postal clerk. In 1864, Congress would set a maximum salary of \$600 per year for women while their male counterparts could earn from \$1,200 to \$1,800 per year.[15] Any means of gainful employment was highly treasured. This impelled Vinnie to write Missouri lawyer James Rollins in July of 1862 asking him to contact the Postmaster General, Montgomery Blair. The Pennsylvania congressman, John W. Wallace, also wrote Blair recommending Vinnie's appointment, saying that she was "the daughter of an old and valuable friend." Blair signed the order to hire Vinnie on November 1, 1862. On November 10, she signed an oath of allegiance and submitted an affidavit that she was "above the age of 16 years." [16] Conditions were often miserable in the Dead Letter Office. The agency wanted to keep women workers out of public sight and they were placed in a sweltering high balcony overlooking the main room. Mary Clemmer Ames, a noted woman reporter, observed: "The gentlemen which you see at work below have nothing to complain of in lack of light and air, but the ladies above say that their little gallery is the escape valve to all the poisoned air below; that their heads are so near the roof there is no chance for ventilation, and that sudden death, among their number has been caused by the air poison which pervades this gallery." The women were not permitted to open the mail. An article in the New York Times observed, "The letters must be opened by men because, as is said, immoral things are sometimes found in them. To see these things would, it is supposed, corrupt the morals of women." [17] ...In 1864 she was a committee member for war relief. A card she had printed said: "Vinnie Ream, in charge of the Post Office—Grand Sanitary Fair—contributions of stationary and unsealed letters gratefully received by her at No. 325 North B Street, between Delaware Avenue and 1st Street, Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C." She busily set up a booth called the "Post Office" where she wrote letters for donations. One news account said that she became "quite noted for having received \$20 apiece from some distinguished gentlemen for several letters from her gifted pen." [24] ...Reluctantly, the Reams allowed Vinnie to study sculpture with Clark Mills, thinking this was the least harmful alternative to harness their daughter's unbridled energy. She obtained permission to leave work early each day from the Dead Letter Office if her quota of 200 letters had been processed.... [25] Vinnie Ream went on to model Abraham Lincoln from life sittings and obtained the commission from Congress to make a marble statue of Lincoln for the U.S. Capitol in July of 1866 after the President's death. She resigned from the Post Office and was listed in the 1866 City Directory as a "sculptor."

### **Notes:**

15. Ross K. Baker, "Entry of Women into Federal Job World—at a Price," *Smithsonian Magazine*, (Jul 1977) p82 gives the respective salaries, mentions the tough working conditions and is a good historical overview.
16. Rollins, Wallace letters, affidavit: OPM Records Facility, St. Louis, MO; Register of Officers and Agents in the Service of the U.S. Government, The 30 Sep 1863 volume lists Vinnie Ream among the staff of the Dead Letter Office at a Salary of \$500 and indicates that the ladies were employed under the "Act" of 21 Jan 1862. The 30 Sep 1865 volume lists her at a salary of \$600. She was not listed as being there in 1867, (VR was listed as a "sculptor" in the 1866 Washington City Directory, MLK Library); Thomas R. Wegner, postal historian in a letter to the author indicated that Vinnie's Dead Letter Office code was "W" on covers that she processed. He has some actual covers processed by Vinnie Ream.
17. Dead Letter Office conditions: Mary Clemmer Ames, *Ten Years in Washington*, (Hartford: The Hartford Publishing Company, 1882) pp397-405; *The New York Times*, 18 Feb 1869.
24. "Gifted pen" quote, VR war relief work: LFW; CIO; "Sanitary Fair" card pasted in old clippings scrapbook, HFP; Relief associations: Leech pp206-218.
25. VR applied to McClelland "to quit her desk at 12 o'clock" to study with Mills: LFW.

For more information on Vinnie Ream, visit the web site:

**[HTTP://WWW.VINNIEREAM.COM](http://www.vinnieream.com)**

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