

# The Clerk's Black History Series



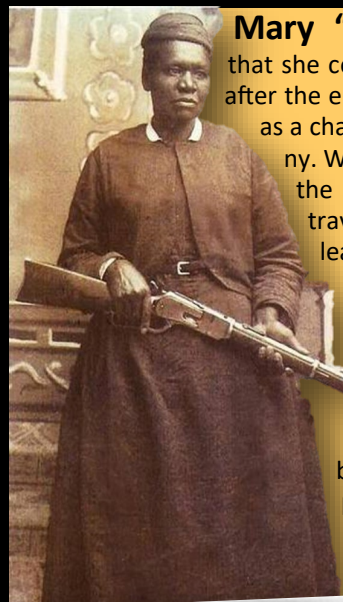
**Debra DeBerry**  
Clerk of Superior Court  
DeKalb County



## Mary "Stagecoach Mary" Fields

(c. 1832 – 1914)

First African-American Woman Star Route Mail Carrier in the U.S.



**Mary "Stagecoach Mary" Fields** was born a slave in Hickman County, Tennessee sometime in 1832. It is said that she celebrated her birthday on March 15, but not much is known about her early years during slavery. However, after the end of the Civil War in 1865, Mary moved to Mississippi and began to work on the steamboat, 'Robert E. Lee' as a chambermaid. It was here that she met Judge Edmond Dunne and began working for him as a caretaker and nanny. When the Judge's wife died in 1883, Mary transported the Judge's five children to their Aunt, Mother Amadeus, the mother superior of an Ursuline convent in Toledo, Ohio. In 1884, Mother Amadeus traveled to Montana to establish a school for Native American girls at St. Peter's Mission leaving Mary behind in Ohio. Upon hearing that Mother Amadeus was suffering with pneumonia, Mary traveled to Montana to nurse her back to health and work in the Mission. Mary stayed in Montana at the mission and worked as a forewoman for the next 10 years, raising chickens, growing vegetables, chopping wood, doing various carpentry work and hauling supplies from nearby Cascade. And when supplies were low, she would travel to Great Falls or the city of Helena, Montana. Mary was known for having the "temperament of a grizzly bear" and for being protective and devoted to the nuns and their students. During one fateful trip to pick up supplies at night, Mary's wagon was attacked by wolves. The horses were startled and overturned her wagon, tossing the cargo to the ground. Mary staved off the wild animals and protected the cargo and horses with her revolver and rifle until morning, returning to the mission missing only a small amount of molasses.



Mary was a baseball fan and transcended traditional gender roles. She never married or had children and wore men's clothing.

Mary's temper was as large as her six foot frame and because of her tendency to smoke, swear, and fight with other hired men at the mission, she found herself being challenged on a daily basis. She was known to make five dollar bets that she could "punch a grown man out with one hit," and many men took her up on the challenge. Many men also lost five dollars, as Mary had a strong hand and an even stronger temper. When confronted by a cowpuncher about the money she earned at the mission, Mary responded with a shootout behind the nunnery. Although the man was only slightly wounded and embarrassed,



Mary was asked to leave the Mission by the Bishop in 1894. Although the nuns defended Mary, they had no choice but to follow the bishop's orders. Mary moved to Cascade County, Montana, where she was the only black resident. The nuns didn't let Mary go empty-handed though and with her own money and money from the nuns, Mary opened a small café. The café failed after only ten months because of Mary's generosity to feed people that couldn't pay.

In 1895, at almost 63 years of age, Mary earned a contract as a Star Route Mail Carrier delivering mail from Cascade to Saint Peter's Mission, becoming the first African-American Woman to hold the job. In spite of her age, she was known as the fastest applicant to hitch a team of six horses. With this job, "**Stagecoach Mary**" was born and with her mule named Moses, she never missed a day or delivery. If the snow was too deep for horses, Mary would put on a pair of snowshoes and carry the sacks of mail on her shoulders. She continued delivering mail into her 70's and became a local hero. At the age of 71, Mary retired from the star route carrier service and continued babysitting and doing laundry until her death. Mary Fields died in 1914 of liver failure at Columbus Hospital in Great Falls. Her neighbors buried her in the Hillside Cemetery in Cascade.

