

# “Little Davy” Lewis, the Forgotten Hero

HOW AN ILLITERATE  
YOUNG MAN ROSE FROM  
COAL DUST TO BECOME  
“THE FATHER OF PARCEL POST”  
AND A CONGRESSMAN  
CREDITED WITH INTRODUCING  
THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Cumberland Post Office customers are welcomed by a large portrait depicting a white haired gentleman wearing a gray suit. When observing the imposing portrait, a few individuals may wonder why the gentleman deserved recognition in a Post Office, while others may ponder who the image represents and where he resided. The unassuming character not only deserves a portrait in the Post Office, but his likeness on United States postage stamps as well. The accomplishments of David J. Lewis, Allegany County resident, were monumental on state, and national levels. Rising from desperate poverty and illiteracy, he achieved greatness as western Maryland’s most influential politician.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1869 to immigrant Welsh parents seeking employment opportunities offered in the coal mines, David’s childhood consisted of meager food rations and hard physical work—mining never brought prosperity the family sought. And like many children during the late 19th century, David was required to work at an early age to supplement the family income. In David’s life, it meant entering the coal mines at the age of nine. The Lewis family worked only to see their money disappear at the notorious company store.

David recalled that, “It was with very great price that I shouldered my little pick and shovel. But as I have said, there was nothing unusual in this as many younger than I... became coal miners.” Despite being employed, young David never owned shoes, ate a balanced meal, or enjoyed pleasure activities. Life became increasingly difficult when his mother died in 1881, leaving behind David and an older sister to care for siblings. The family situation became so



The plaque on this portrait at the Cumberland Post Office:

*“David J. Lewis  
Member of U.S. Congress, Economist  
Philosopher, 1869 – 1952.  
He devised the National Parcel Post.”*

PHOTO COURTESY SEAN O'DONNELL, POSTMASTER CUMBERLAND, MARYLAND

critical that David left the mines at age 12 to be a caregiver. The coal mines also took a toll on David’s father who exited the underground environment in 1900 because of health issues.

David re-entered the mines after his arrival in Mount Savage, Maryland, around 1887. Now 17 years of age, it is unclear whether he initially worked in a Big Vein coal mine or a clay mine as both were located within a close distance of the town. It is also unknown why he chose to move from Pennsylvania to Mount Savage, perhaps promises of a better life. If so, economic stability once again proved to be fleeting and David found himself impoverished and in the unenviable position of never having entered a formal school building.

Those painful experiences formed an unwavering motivation to change the political and economic systems that trapped hard working families into lives of poverty. David sincerely believed the human condition could be improved and he acted accordingly by fighting for “radical” legislation that we take for granted today.

David’s life began to change in an unusual way when he found himself lying horizontal in a narrow coal seam after hours of exhausting work. “I decided that knowledge would give me a more desirable life,” Lewis later wrote.

It would be difficult to find a more unlikely epiphany than Lewis experienced. How would an illiterate young man rise from coal dust to become a knowledgeable person? Even Lewis wrote that such a thought was “ridiculous, although momentous.”

The great turnaround in Lewis’ life started by chance. His interest in improving working conditions drew the attention of Mount Savage miners who urged Lewis to attend and address a larger audience in Cumberland. The Knights of Labor, a national labor union gaining momentum in the local coal fields, happened to be the audience Lewis eloquently addressed. Impressed with the young miner’s comments, a local reporter approached David after the meeting and suggested that he meet with a local attorney for the purpose of studying law. Davis later wrote the reporter’s comments proved to be the greatest favor he ever received because he never dreamed of such a career.

According to *Thomas & Williams History of Allegany County*, 1922, Benjamin Richmond was the prominent attorney who became interested in Lewis’ future and offered to lend him books and provide tutoring services. More good fortune came his way when Reverend John Nott, a Mount Savage minister, offered to tutor David in Latin, a necessary step at the time for passing the bar exam. The odd combination of a lawyer, minister, and coal miner was about to be tested.

David welcomed the tutoring offers and immediately organized a rigorous study schedule despite the long hours of underground labor. Ten hours of mining accompanied the reading of textbooks at night. “I was so tired that I had to hold my books in such a manner that my arms hurt, and that would force me to stay awake and study,” recalled Lewis. He also recalled eating lunch quickly to provide additional study time, using his carbide lantern for illumination. The stamina and discipline required to master math and language skills under such harsh condition was remarkable and spoke to his keen intellect. It was a proud day in 1892 when the diminutive “Little Davy Lewis” entered the Allegany County Court



**Top: Lewis’ tenacious spirit proved to be an asset in the court room.**

**Below: David and wife, Florida (Bohn) Lewis made their home in Cumberland, Maryland.**

*PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAN WHETZEL COLLECTION*

House to become the only student admitted to the county bar in a decade.

In 1892 David moved to Cumberland where he set up a law practice and later married Cumberland native Florida Bohn. Lewis’ tenacious spirit proved to be an asset in the court room and caught the attention of George Pearre, one of the city’s most prominent lawyers and politically connected citizens. Pearre also served as United States representative from District 6, which meant he spent considerable time in Washington. During



**President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing the Social Security Act of 1935. Left to right: Sen. Robert Wagner (D-NY); Sen. Alben Barkley (D-KY); unknown; Sen. Robert LaFollette, Jr., (PROG-WI); Sen. Augustine Lonergan (D-CT); Frances Perkins (appointed Secretary of Labor); Sen. William H. King (D-UT); Rep. David J. Lewis (D-MD); Rep. John Boehne, Jr. (D-IN); and Sen. Joseph Guffey (D-PA).**

Pearre's absence, Lewis represented both the C&O Canal and B&O Railroad in local matters—a seemingly curious contradiction to David's beliefs that may not be fully understood today, since he earlier developed the view that railroads were a common good that should not be held in private ownership.

Current political labels like “Republican” and “Democrat” may sometimes confuse historical issues, including Lewis' views. It was Theodore Roosevelt, a Progressive Republican, who led the famous “trust busting” crusade against big business, while promising common citizens a “Square Deal.” And it was the Republican Roosevelt who advocated for regulation or break up of railroads and powerful business monopolies, proposals that would seem to be more typically aligned with progressive Democrats today. In any event, company officials must have been curiously concerned that a former coal miner with progressive ideas was handling their affairs. In 1898, the uneasy partnership ended when David joined the national campaign of presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. Bryan, a Democrat and hero of the working class, inspired Lewis to drop affiliation with the Republicans.

Not yet holding a political office, Lewis began an extensive and impressive study of American railroads. He later

published “Why the Railways Have Failed” and became a nationally known speaker on the subject. He concluded that rail shipping rates discriminated in favor of the wealthy and against workers. The conclusion was supported not only by facts but Lewis' family experience when shipping costs restricted access to necessary goods. Lewis argued that lower rates would benefit everyone.

In 1901, David won election to the Maryland Senate as a Democrat, a remarkable accomplishment in a Republican controlled district. True to his word, the first year senator co-sponsored and worked hard for a mine inspection bill. Who better to describe coal mining conditions than the laborer-turned-lawyer from Mount Savage! “Little Davy,” the colorful coal miner, caught the attention of the *Balti-*

*more Sun* as he vigorously pushed for labor law reforms, including a 14-year-old minimum age requirement for mine and factory employment, compulsory education, direct election primaries, establishment of free public libraries, and authorship of a Workman's Compensation Bill in 1902. The Maryland bill was the first workers compensation bill under state administration, one of Lewis' “radical ideas” that became a hallmark for worker's rights.

Lewis' major accomplishment at the national level occurred when he advocated for another law after being elected from Maryland's 6th Congressional District. It was born of the Lewis' family plight that was shared by rural, under-served communities. David's father turned to truck farming after leaving the mines only to find that shipping costs discouraged production. At the time parcels were handled by a few “express companies” that were closely tied to railroads. This system complicated shipping because parcels were only dropped at the railroad express offices which were often miles (even days) from customers, thereby creating difficult, confusing and expensive delivery schedules. Critics pointed out the entire express system smacked of collusion and needed to be reformed.

David campaigned on the proposal that the government run Post Office was already delivering mail directly to

households, so why not include parcels (packages) within the system. At the time the country was predominately rural, so support for parcel post delivery was overwhelming. Not surprisingly, the express companies strongly resisted the move to parcel post service because it would negatively impact their profits.

David's research into railroads and delivery systems quickly brought him to national prominence during the political battle on Capitol Hill. The western Maryland legislator was praised by the *Boston Herald* as the person who created parcel post as a natural function of government built roads. The newspaper also dubbed him "The Father of the American Parcel Post." Newspapers across the country became captivated by the "little Welshman" who was portrayed as the biblical David slinging rocks against Goliath (express companies).

The bill as presented to the House included parcel insurance, C.O.D. and weight limits on parcels. While the bill underwent revisions, it was "Little Davy" who drafted the act and fought for its passage that earned him acclaim. Parcel Post service began in January 1913 and proved to be an overwhelming success. In the first five day period, the Post Office delivered over four million parcels. Marketing quickly developed through mail order catalog companies—Montgomery Ward sold houses through the postal system while Sears Roebuck sold four suits and a watch every minute. Revenue of mail orders skyrocketed after parcels were delivered affordably to the customers' home addresses.

Perhaps David's most significant contribution to working class Americans involved writing, sponsoring, and fighting for the Social Security Act that forever changed the government's role in providing a social safety net. The election of Franklin Roosevelt made the act possible, and he called for its passage in 1935. David, a progressive reformer who became a Franklin Roosevelt "New Dealer," became directly involved in the bill's wording and passage because he believed the government had a social and economic responsibility to its citizens.



**President Roosevelt campaigned with David Lewis in the 1938 United States senatorial election. Roosevelt sought to unseat the incumbent Democrat, Millard Tydings, who opposed many of the President's New Deal programs. Lewis was 69 years old at the time Roosevelt requested that he run for the U.S. Senate. Despite FDR's support, Lewis lost his last election. The President did not forget Lewis and quickly appointed him to the National Mediation Board.** PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN WHETZEL COLLECTION

Lewis introduced the Social Security Act into a subcommittee of the House of Representatives and was recognized as an authority on the legislation. Representative Robert Doughton of North Carolina outranked Lewis and believed that he had privilege to copy and introduce the bill in his name, thereby making it "Doughton's bill," a move that angered Lewis. During the committee hearings, it was Lewis who received news coverage about his detailed knowledge of the subject and it was Lewis who was honored with an ovation by House members when he entered the chamber to begin debate on the bill. After passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, President Roosevelt recognized Lewis' contributions and invited him to the ceremonial bill signing. The president presented Lewis with a pen used at the ceremony—a symbol of great value to "Little Davy" who kept it on display in his office.

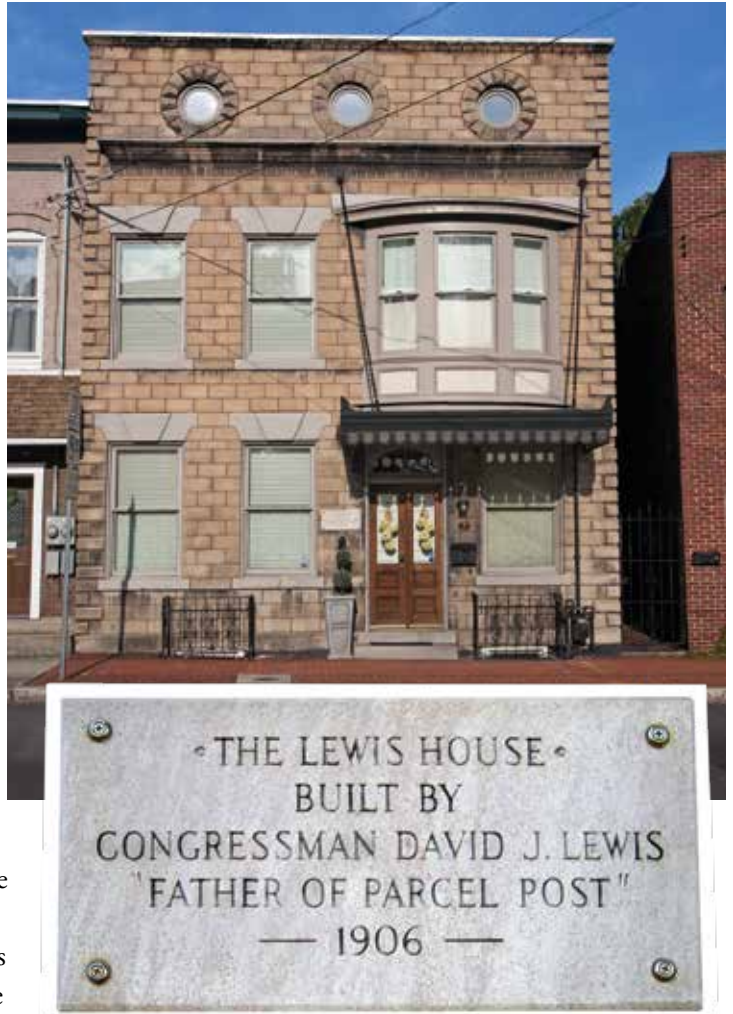
Today, more than 70 million Americans receive Social Security benefits.

Lewis' record for helping the "forgotten folks" has stood the test of time with one exception. During the fight for women's suffrage in Maryland, the local chapter of the



Just Government League sought Lewis' support for the 19th Amendment that would make it illegal to deny the right to vote to any citizen based on sex. Group members lobbied David as a state senator and once again as the 6th District Congressman in 1915. At a meeting between Lewis and the suffrage group the congressman expressed his views in narrow terms. He believed suffrage was a state matter, thereby explaining his previous support for the amendment as a state representative. But like most Democrats at the time, David would not support women's voting rights as a congressman. This narrow interpretation of the 19th Amendment seems to be at odds with his advocacy for other sweeping reforms.

David added many credits to his career, including proposals for the League of Nations, service on the Federal Ways and Means Committee, advocacy for direct election of United States Senators, membership on the U.S. Tariff Commission, and Franklin Roosevelt appointee to the National Mediation Board. While adding credits to his name, Lewis never sought the spotlight and he lived modestly in Cumberland until his death in 1952 at the age of 83. As a measure of respect for the former congressman, President Truman sent flowers to the George Funeral Home. Another display of his modesty is the plain grave stone at Hillcrest Cemetery located near Cumberland.



**Above left: Lewis' 1938 press photo for the United States Senate race.**

**Above: The Lewis house, a Georgian Revival structure at 18 Greene Street, Cumberland, MD, bears a plaque to the modest nearly forgotten working class hero.**

*PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN*

David J. Lewis was best known for repeating a bit of wisdom that also serves as a proper epitaph to a storied life (in Welsh accent): "The world do not owe a man a livin', but the world do owe a man the right to make a living."

It is ironic that the person who valiantly fought for everyone's right to make a living has nearly been forgotten. The Western Maryland Central Labor Council of the AFL-CIO strives to keep a candle to his memory burning by semi-annually awarding the David L. Lewis award to a worthy member. But it is the Cumberland Post Office portrait of the white haired gentleman wearing a gray suit that best serves as a visible reminder of western Maryland's working class hero.

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