

Social Security

Social Security Numbers

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The First Social Security Number and the Lowest Number

The first SSN issued was not the lowest number, and the lowest number was not the first SSN. In fact, the first number issued wasn't really the first number issued at all.

The "First" Social Security Number (SSN)

Issued Through Local Post Offices

Since the Social Security Board did not have a network of field offices in late 1936, it contracted with the U.S. Postal Service to distribute and assign the first batch of Social Security numbers through its 45,000 local post offices around the country. Of these 45,000 post offices, 1,074 were also designated as "typing centers" where the cards themselves were prepared. The procedure for issuing the first SSNs were that the SS-4 application forms were to be distributed by the post offices to employers beginning Monday, November 16, 1936. These forms asked the employers to indicate how many employees they had at their place of business. Using the data from the SS-4 forms, the post offices then supplied an SS-5 form for each employee and these forms (on which the assignment of an SSN was based) were to be distributed by the post offices beginning Tuesday, November 24, 1936. The completed SS-5 forms were returned to the post office where an SSN would be assigned and a card typed with the name and SSN. This step could happen on one of several ways. The person could return the card in person and wait while the "typing center"

prepared their card, or they could hand the form to their local letter carrier, or they could put it in the mail. Once the SSN was assigned and the card typed, the local letter carrier then returned the card to the place of business as a piece of regular mail. The record of the SSN assignment was sent to Social Security headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland, where the master file of SSNs would be kept.

So the first card was issued, sometime in mid-November, 1936, somewhere in one of 1,074 post offices to someone whose identity and SSN are unknown. In theory, the first card should have been issued on November 24th, but there have been reports of cards showing earlier dates. It is not clear whether the cards with earlier dates were actually issued on that day or whether some post offices predated some of their cards. If the 45,000 local post offices followed their procedures, no cards could have been issued before November 16th, and none should have been issued before November 24th. But here again, there is always the possibility that some local post offices failed to follow their instructions. The best we can say with certainty is that the first SSN was issued sometime in mid-November 1936. In any case, on whatever day the first card was issued, hundreds of thousands of SSNs were probably issued on that same day, *so many people had Social Security cards issued on the very first day they became available.*

The First Official SSN

Once the SSN records were received in Baltimore they were grouped in blocks of 1,000 and the master records were created. On December 1, 1936 the first block of 1,000 records were assembled and were ready to start their way through the nine-step process that would result in the creation of a permanent master record and the establishment of an earnings record for the individual. When this first stack was ready, Joe Fay, head of the Division of Accounting Operations in the Candler Building, walked over to the stack, pulled off the top record, and declared it to be the official first Social Security record. (This was the first point in the process where there was enough control to designate an

official first card--it would have been impossible to try and identify the first card typed in one of the 1,074 typing centers around the country.) This particular record, (055-09-0001) belonged to John D. Sweeney, Jr., age 23, of New Rochelle, New York. The next day, newspapers around the country announced that Sweeney had been issued the first SSN. It would be more accurate to say that the first *Social Security record* was established for John David Sweeney, but since master records were invisible to the public and the Social Security card was a very visible token of the program, the newspapers overlooked the nuance.

And so John David Sweeney, Jr. is the closest thing we have to the first person to have received a Social Security card--although his status is more symbolic than actual.



John David Sweeney, Jr.

Mr. Sweeney was the son of a wealthy factory owner, and had grown up in a 15-room Westchester County home staffed with servants. In an effort to learn the family business, Mr. Sweeney was working as a shipping clerk for his father at the time he filled out his application for a social security card. The Sweeneys were Republicans and the whole family voted for Landon in 1936, although John Jr. allowed that he liked the new Social Security program even though he didn't think much of the New Deal. John Sweeney died of a heart attack in 1974 at the age of 61 without ever receiving any benefits from the social security program; however, his widow was able to receive benefits based on his work until her death in 1982.

The Lowest Number

We do know who received the Social Security card with the lowest number, card 001-01-0001. Since the Board controlled the issuance of the account numbers to the post offices, and since they were to be distributed geographically by area number, the agency was in a position to at least control where the number was issued--and it tried to control who it was issued to.

Social Security numbers were grouped by the first three digits of the number (called the area number) and assigned geographically starting in the northeast and moving across the country to the northwest. But if you look closely at the distribution pattern you will see an apparent anomaly. The lowest area numbers are assigned to New Hampshire, rather than to Maine, even though Maine is the most northeasterly of the states. This was apparently done so that SSN 001-01-0001 could be given to New Hampshire's favorite son, Social Security Board Chairman John G. Winant (Winant was the former three-time Governor of New Hampshire). Chairman Winant declined to have the SSN registered to him. Then it was offered to the Federal Bureau of Old Age Benefits' Regional Representative of the Boston Region, John Campbell, who likewise declined. It was finally decided not to offer this SSN as a token of esteem but instead to issue it to the first applicant from New Hampshire. This proved to be Grace D. Owen of Concord, New Hampshire, who applied for her number on November 24, 1936 and was issued the first card typed in Concord, which, because of the area number scheme, also happened to be the card with the lowest possible number.

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