

Union Handling of the Mail During the American Civil War

Purpose: To illustrate several of the ways in which the Union dealt with the secession of Southern states, creation of the Confederate States of America (CSA), and mail conveyance during the American Civil War.

Organization: Suspension of Government Mail
Private Express Company Mail
Demonetization and New Adhesives
Central Overland Mail Route
Army Camp Post Offices
Soldier's Letters
Flag-of-Truce Prisoner-of-War Mail
Flag-of-Truce Civilian Mail
Covert Civilian Mail
Post-Appomattox

Background: South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20, 1860. Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi followed. These six Independent States created the Confederate States of America (CSA) on February 4, 1861. Texas joined the CSA on March 6. The CSA formed its own Post Office Department (POD) on February 21, 1861. The Union continued to operate the postal services within these Independent and later Confederated States. However, tensions grew, leading to armed confrontations and the confiscation of vessels and vehicles used to transport mail. The Federal military occupation of Alexandria, Virginia on May 23, 1861 resulted in closure of the primary North-South postal route between Washington, DC and Richmond, Virginia. The USA suspended its postal operations in the CSA effective May 31, 1861. The CSA initiated its own postal system on June 1, 1861. During the Civil War that followed, the USA employed government-sponsored as well as private methods to transport mail within the Union and across-the-lines.

Rarity: Surviving examples of Union mail handling in response to Southern secession are uncommon and are often in poor condition. Each cover included in this exhibit was selected because it represents one of the finest examples extant to illustrate an important aspect of mail handling by the Union during the Civil War.

South Carolina Voted to Secede from the Union on December 20, 1860



Mailed from Charleston, South Carolina to Alabama on December 20, 1860 paid by USA postage. Despite declaring independence that day, the USA postal service continued to operate South Carolina's postal service.

Post-Secession Usage of the USA Postal System

Pre - June 1, 1861

USA Postmaster General Blair continued the services of the USA POD in the seceded Independent States and in the Confederate States until May 31, 1861. This was intended to entice the seceded states to rejoin the Union by showing good will and also to protect Northern businesses owed money by Southern customers.

The Independent Statehood period ran from the date the state seceded through the day before it joined the CSA. The Confederate period commenced the date the state joined the CSA through May 31, 1861.

Independent State Usage



Confederate 7-Star flag patriotic cover mailed from Richmond, Virginia on April 28, 1861 franked with a USA 1857 issue 3 ct. stamp to pay the USA first class letter rate. Virginia seceded from the Union on April 17 and joined the Confederacy on May 7, and thus was an Independent State at the time this letter was posted.

Confederate Usage



Confederate 7-Star flag patriotic cover mailed from Lawrenceville, Georgia on April 5 (1861) franked with three 1857 issue 1 ct. stamps to pay the USA first class letter rate. Georgia joined the Confederacy on February 4.

Suspension of Southbound Mail

Post - May 23, 1861

Union troops occupied Alexandria, Virginia on May 23, 1861, blocking the Washington-Richmond postal route. On May 24 USA Postmaster General Blair ordered discontinuation of USA mail to Richmond and the diversion of all letters addressed to the seceded states to the USA Dead Letter Office (DLO) in Washington, DC. A May 27 USA Post Office Department order suspended all US postal operations in the CSA effective May 31, 1861.



Southbound May 28, 1861 carrier usage from New York City to Virginia, but diverted to the USA DLO. Returned to the sender (Address written on the left) on June 4, 1861 hand stamped "DUE 3 cts" for the return postage due.

Post - June 7, 1861

The USA ordered the discontinuation of all postal communications with the CSA on June 7. All southbound mail was diverted to the USA DLO in Washington, DC after that date.

Mailed southbound to the CSA June 15, 1861 from New Haven, Connecticut to Pontoloc, Mississippi bearing sender's directive "Via Louisville KY DPO" but diverted to the USA DLO. Returned to the sender (address written on the left) hand stamped "DUE 3 cts" for the return postage due.



Southern Letter Unpaid

The USA POD had discontinued the Nashville post office and the Nashville-Louisville mail route on June 12, 1861. On June 13 the Louisville, Kentucky postmaster began holding northbound mail arriving from Nashville rather than divert it to the USA DLO. On June 24 the USA POD instructed him to “forward letters from the South for the loyal states as unpaid after removing postage stamps“. Instead, he created the “SOUTHn. LETTER/UNPAID” marking to indicate to addressees that USA franking supplied by Southern senders was invalid for postage. Northbound mail was released for distribution from Louisville beginning on June 25, 1861.



(Cert)

Mailed northbound June 28 (1861) from Murfreesborough, North Carolina hand stamped “PAID” and “10”, indicating payment of the CSA postage in cash, to Indiana attempting to use a Star Die entire to pay the USA postage. Traveled via Nashville to Louisville where the USA postage was not recognized, the “SOUTHn. LETTER/UNPAID” and “DUE 3” hand stamps were applied and the cover was placed in the US mail on July 6.

Steve Walske records 28 legitimate “SOUTHn. LETTER/UNPAID” covers.

July Louisville date stamps are the least common.

Adam's Express Company

Adam's Express began transmitting letters across-the-lines between their offices in Nashville and Louisville on June 22, 1861. The sender paid the CSA and USA postage plus an express fee of 22 cents per ½ ounce.

The American Letter Express Company and Whitesides Express similarly offered across-the-lines express mail service. All private express mail service was terminated by USA Presidential proclamation on August 26, 1861.



Sent inside another envelope from an unknown location in the CSA to Nashville for transmission across-the-lines to the USA by Adam's Express. This interior envelope was carried northbound across-the-lines by Adam's Express, hand stamped "ADAMS EX. CO. JULY 31 1861 LOUISVILLE, KY", and placed in the USA mail in Louisville with USA postage paid, from where it was forwarded on August 1 for delivery.

An Adam's Express S. A. Jones, Agent label provides instructions and rates for sending mail to the CSA.

One of only 4 recorded covers bearing an Adam's Express label.

Adam's Express Company



(Cert)

Southbound letter, USA postage paid by entire, carried across-the-lines by Adam's Express per sender's directive "Pr. Adams & Co.", from New York City to Knoxville, Tennessee. Received Adam's Express New York and Knoxville office hand stamps. Manuscript "35/1" indicates the express charge. Arrived in Tennessee during its nine day period, June 24 to July 2, 1861 as an independent state.



Letter handed to the Adam's Express Boston office on July 6 (1861), hand stamped "PAID J.W.R." with manuscript "25" indicating prepayment of the express fee and carried across-the-lines, USA postage paid by entire, via Louisville-Nashville to Memphis, TN. Adam's Express placed the Memphis postmaster's provisional adhesive over the USA entire indicia and placed it in the CSA mail, postmarked July 15 (1861) for delivery.

The only recorded Memphis postmaster's provisional on an across-the-lines express cover.

Old Stamps Not Recognized

Tens of thousands of dollars worth of USA stamps resided in Southern post offices at the beginning of the Civil War. The Federal government feared that Southerners would smuggle them into the North to sell them there, thus financially aiding the Confederate rebellion. So, the Federal government demonetized all prior USA postage stamps and all but two stamped envelopes.

Three cities, Chicago, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia, used "Old Stamps Not Recognized" hand stamps to indicate non-acceptance of the demonetized stamps. Many other postmasters used manuscript inscriptions, such as "Old Stamp", "Stamp No Good", "Not Recognized", etc.

Philadelphia



Philadelphia, Pennsylvania carrier usage postmarked September 26, 1862. Payment of the carrier fee by an 1861 issue 1 ct. adhesive was accepted. Payment of the postage by a demonetized 1857 issue 3 ct. adhesive was not accepted, resulting in the "OLD STAMPS NOT RECOGNIZED" hand stamp. The letter was marked "Due 3" to indicate the postage to be collected from the addressee.

(Cert)

Harrisburg

Union patriotic cover postmarked September 2, 1861 in Harrisburg franked with a demonetized 1857 issue 3 ct. stamp resulted in "OLD STAMPS NOT RECOGNIZED" and "DUE 3" hand stamps, indicating non-acceptance of the stamp and the postage to be collected from the addressee.

One of only 2 recorded patriotic covers with the Harrisburg "OLD STAMPS NOT RECOGNIZED" hand stamp. (Cert)



USA 1861 Issued Adhesives

The Federal government issued new stamps in 1861 to replace the demonetized stamps. The earliest known use of the 1861 issue 1 ct. and 3 ct. stamps on cover are September 21 and September 17, 1861, respectively.

1 Cent Adhesive



Union patriotic cover franked with three demonetized 1857 issue 1 ct. adhesives, which were not accepted for postage. The letter was held for postage, a strip of three 1861 issue 1 ct. stamps affixed over them, cancelled "PAID", and postmarked October 14 (1861) for delivery.

3 Cent Adhesive

Letter franked with a demonetized 1857 issue 3 ct. adhesive, cancelled and postmarked October 22 (1861) in Chicago, Illinois, but hand stamped "HELD FOR POSTAGE" and "OLD STAMPS Not Recognized". The corner card identified the sender who affixed the proper 1861 issue 3 ct. stamp, and the letter was postmarked the next day, October 23, for delivery.



One of only 2 recorded Chicago "OLD STAMPS Not Recognized" covers bearing both the 1857 and 1861 3 ct. stamps.

Central Overland Route

Pony Express

The Butterfield (Southern) Route running from St. Louis or Memphis to San Francisco via Arkansas, Texas and Arizona became the principal overland mail route beginning September 15, 1858. The Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company initiated the Pony Express on April 3, 1860 to demonstrate the much shorter Central Route's superiority, in the hopes of acquiring a lucrative government mail contract. Butterfield's horses and equipment were confiscated when Texas seceded from the Union on February 1, 1861. So, USA Postmaster General Blair abandoned the Butterfield Route and contracted with the Overland Mail Company to use the Central Route, carrying mail from St. Joseph, Missouri to Placerville, California, effective July 1, 1861. After that date, the Pony Express ran twice weekly until it was terminated on October 26, 1861, two days after the Overland Telegraph line was completed.



Sent eastbound by the Pony Express on June 19 (1861) from San Francisco bearing sender's directive "Per Pony Express". The express fee is paid with a \$2 Pony Express stamp, and placed in the US mail in St. Joseph, Missouri, postmarked July 2 (1861), the 10 ct. entire paying the "Over the Rockies" rate, for delivery to New York City.

(Cert)

American Express carried this letter privately (Money Package label on the backflap, not shown) from St. Louis to St. Joseph, Missouri, where it was date stamped by the Pony Express agent September 5 (1861), the \$1 per ½ ounce express fee paid in cash, the obligatory USA 10 cts. postage paid with USA stamps, and carried westbound by the Pony Express for delivery to San Francisco.

(Cert)



The unique Pony Express cover bearing an American Express money package label (on reverse, not shown) and 1861 issue 1 ct. and 3 ct. stamps paying the obligatory government 10 cents postage.

USA Army Field Post and Camp Post Offices

General Banks Division

General Banks had a postmaster with the authority to sell stamps and to use unique origin marking devices appointed to his Division's Harper's Ferry headquarters. Five different marking devices were employed between September 12, 1861 and November 26, 1862, three using the initials G B D, and two being "BANKS' DIVISION" circular date stamps. It is believed that the absence of any geographic origin was intended to prevent the Confederates from learning the location of Banks' troops.



"G. B. D." field post office and "PAID" hand stamps, date stamped "SEP. 22", prepaid 3 cts. This is the first Banks' Division hand stamp marking. It was only used from September 20 to October 18, 1861.

Miamiville Post Office, Camp Dennison, Ohio

Several large army camps, such as Camp Dennison in Ohio, prepared postmarks to deal with the thousands of letters generated by soldiers stationed at, or passing through, the camp.



Mailed from Camp Dennison, Ohio on May 24, 1864 to Brazil, franked with 90 cents USA stamps to pay double the 45 ct. British mail rate via Southampton. The addressee, James Monroe, was a US Consul in Brazil.

Soldier's Letters

The USA Congress passed a law on July 22, 1861 allowing soldiers to mail their letters without prepaying the postage, provided the envelopes were endorsed "Soldier's Letter" and were certified as such by bearing the signature of the Major with his regiment indicated by number and state.



Magnus patriotic envelope carrying a Union soldier's letter, hand stamped "SOLDIER'S LETTER 1st LI VOLs", certified by the signature of Captain James C. Beecher, deposited in the USA mail unpaid, hand stamped "Due 3" for the postage to be collected from the addressee.

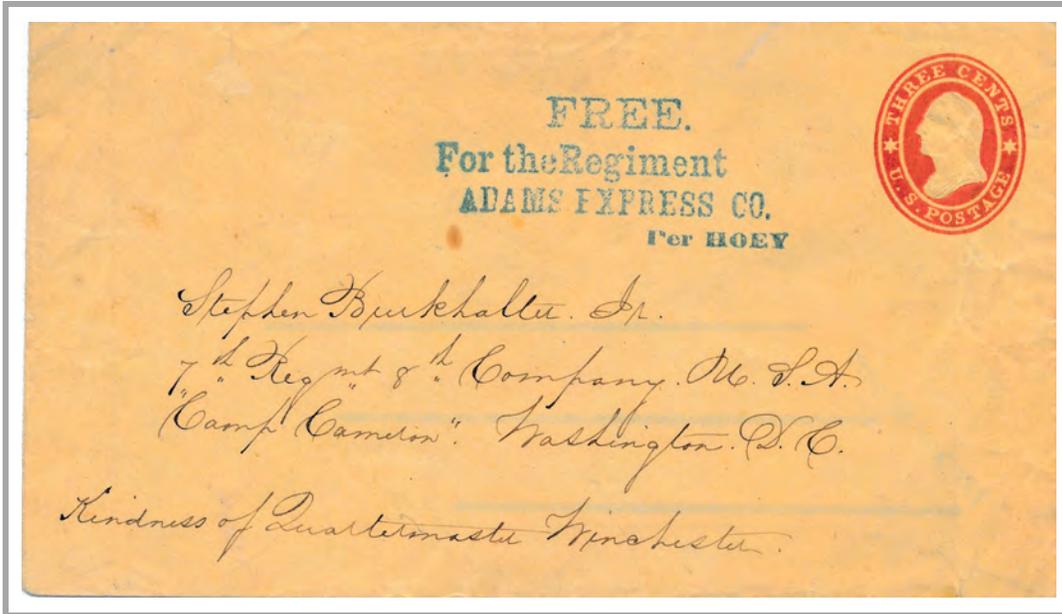
The burden of signing each envelope prompted many regiments to prepare postmarking devises for this task.



Patriotic envelope carrying a Union soldier's letter, certified with "Soldier's Letter, A.J.M. Col. 26th N.J.V." hand stamp, deposited in the USA mail unpaid, hand stamped "Due 3" for the postage to be collected from the addressee.

Adam's Express "Free for the Regiment"

The Adam's Express Company applied "Free for the Regiment" markings to mail which they carried free of charge between New York regiments and those defending the Capital during April to May 1861.



Mailed from New York to Washington, DC using a 3 ct. stamped envelope, bearing sender's directive "Kindness of Quartermaster Winchester".

One of the finest of only 7 known examples; Especially rare using a stamped envelope.

(Cert)

Sanitary Commission

The Sanitary Commission was founded in New York City shortly after the firing on Fort Sumter. It raised more than \$20 million in money and supplies for the care of armed services personnel and provided thousands of hours of services by volunteers during the Civil War. The Commission began supplying stamps for soldier's mail and paying the postage due on soldier's letters in 1864.

Mailed January 7, 1865 from Grand Rapids, Michigan to a Union soldier in Chattanooga, hand stamped "DUE 6" for the lack of 3 cts. postage (for an overweight letter) and the 3 cts. penalty fee, awaiting payment so that it could be delivered. The Sanitary Commission paid the postage and applied its hand stamp "PAID BY U.S. SANITARY COMMISSION", allowing delivery.



Flag-of-Truce Prisoner-of-War (POW) Mail

Regulations required that a flag-of-truce letter be enclosed in an unsealed inner envelope and sent in an outer envelope with postage paid to the exchange point. There, the outer envelope was discarded and the letter examined by the military authorities. Delivery from the exchange point to the destination required payment of the postage by stamps of the other side or by an attached coin. The USA and CSA postage could be paid on a single envelope if the sender possessed stamps of both sides.



Southbound mixed franking flag-of-truce POW cover from Johnson's Island Prison endorsed "For flag of truce mail via City Point and Richmond Virginia" with Union manuscript "Ex DSA" censor marking (DeAlva S. Alexander) applied at Johnson's Island. Postmarked "SANDUSKY O. JUN 24" (1864), paid to the exchange point with a USA 3 ct. stamp, placed in the CSA mail at Richmond with a CSA 10 ct. stamp, postmarked June 27 (1864) and forwarded to Chapel Hill, North Carolina hand stamped "10" for forwarding postage due. The enclosed letter includes an unused USA 3 ct. stamp.

The better of only 2 known mixed franking POW covers bearing a CSA 10 ct. blue lithograph stamp.



Northbound POW cover from Andersonville Prison bearing manuscript censor marking "Exd HW" (Captain Henry Wirz). Postmarked Andersonville, GA., paid to the exchange point with a CSA 10 ct. stamp. Placed in the USA mail in Old Point Comfort, Virginia with a 3 ct. USA stamp, postmarked August 25 (1864).

One of the finest known Andersonville covers with both USA and CSA postage paid on one envelope.

Flag-of-Truce Civilian Mail

Via Old Point Comfort

Flag-of-truce civilian mail was poorly tolerated and actively discouraged by the severe restrictions imposed by the USA Post Office Department. Flag-of-truce routes established across military lines were usually used to convey civilian mail only at the discretion of the local military authorities.

Southbound



Southbound civilian flag-of-truce inner envelope sent December 1861 from New York City to Camden, South Carolina via Old Point Comfort and Norfolk, Virginia. Discarded outer envelope paid the USA postage to Fortress Monroe. CSA postage was paid by a US half-dime affixed with wax, acknowledged by "PAID 5c" when placed in the CSA mail in Norfolk, Virginia, postmarked December 28, 1861 for delivery.

Northbound

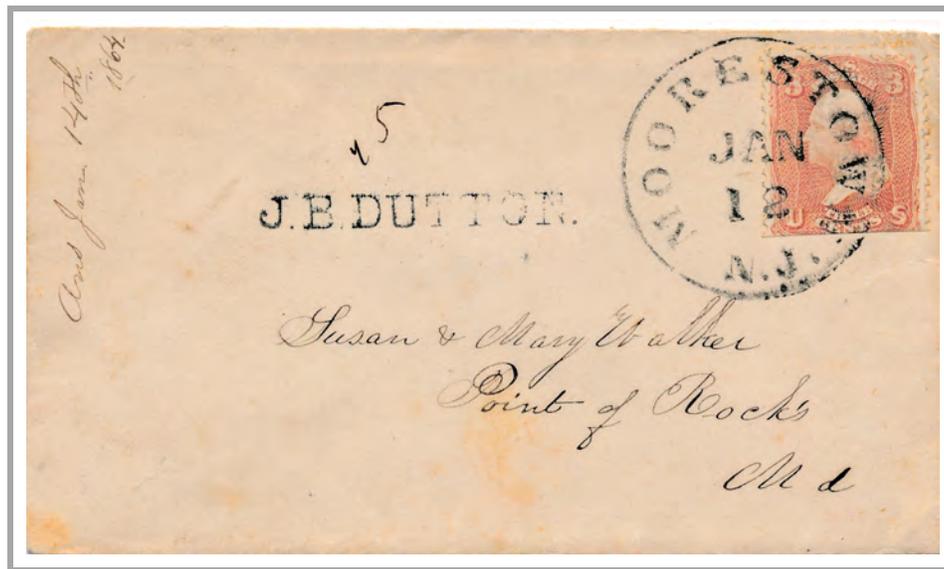


Northbound flag-of-truce letter mailed October 26 (1863) from the Wilmington, North Carolina. Provost Marshall to the USA Secretary of War requesting permission "for Mrs. J. Currie Burnett to come north by flag of truce to join her husband a federal soldier". Entered the USA mail unpaid at Old Point Comfort on November 5, diverted to the USA DLO hand stamped "UNPAID", endorsed by "C.F. Macdonald/ACTING THIRD ASS'T PM GEN" and forwarded "DUE 6" (penalty rate) to the War Secretary who approved the pass, allowing her to board the flag-of-truce steamer to USA-controlled Fortress Monroe.

Covert Civilian Mail

J.B. Dutton Mail System

The USA took control of Northern Virginia in March 1862 but periodic CSA raids terrorized the region and hampered attempts to re-establish the USA postal service. J. B. Dutton fled Waterford, Virginia for safety and settled across the Potomac River to Point of Rocks, Maryland. He established a private mail service between Waterford and Point of Rocks, apparently with the tacit approval of the USA Provost Marshall at the Potomac River crossing. Southbound mail carried by Dutton was sent in the USA postal system to Point of Rocks, from where it was hand-carried to the addressee. He applied the straight-line hand stamp "J. B. DUTTON" to southbound mail. The Dutton mail system operated from January 1863 to March 1865.



"J. B. DUTTON" straight-line hand stamp on southbound cover mailed January 12 (1864) from Moorestown, New Jersey to Point of Rocks, Maryland.

One of the finest of the 13 recorded J.B. Dutton covers.

Post-Appomattox Collapse of the CSA Postal Service

The Confederate armies under Generals Lee and Johnston surrendered at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. The last Confederate forces east and west of the Mississippi surrendered on May 4, 1865 and on June 2, 1865, respectively. Looting ensued, and general order, including the CSA postal system, collapsed. The USA Postal Service could not be immediately re-established. Therefore, mail service in the South was variably suspended.



Flag-of-truce cover from a prisoner-of-war at Johnson's Island bearing a Censor's marking, franked with a USA 3 ct. stamp, postmarked Sandusky, Ohio April 21, 1865 with a handwritten directive "Via Vicksburg, Miss", for delivery to Plantersville, Alabama. Cover back stamped New Orleans June 25, 1865 where the "MAILS SUSPENDED" marking was applied. The cover presumably was returned to the sender in another envelope.



Mailed from Ephrata, Pennsylvania May 5, 1865 franked with a USA 3 ct. stamp for delivery to Mobile, Alabama. It could not be delivered because mail service had not been re-established in Alabama. It was hand stamped "MAILS SUSPENDED" and presumably returned to the sender in another envelope.