

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: THROUGH-THE-LINES PRISONER MAIL

Exhibit Focus and Structure: This exhibit presents prisoner of war mail that crossed the lines through flag of truce exchanges that were permitted by the Union and Confederate States during the American Civil War. It is structured in two sections – covers from CSA prisons traveling northbound and covers from Union prisons traveling southbound. The sub-headers on each page present key information regarding usage, the prisons, and/or historical context. The captions describe the postal rates, unique handstamp and manuscript censor, and examiner markings applied by prison staff and district provost marshals who inspected the mail and, if known, the point of exchange under flag of truce and the route the cover traveled.

Prisoner Mail from Captured CSA Soldier Held at Union Prison at Fort Delaware



An example of a through-the-lines usage traveling southbound, bearing correct US and CSA postage (3¢ 1861 and 10¢ Die A, respectively) and an oval handstamp censor's marking applied at Fort Delaware, which was used from April to October 1864. The cover was exchanged under flag of truce at Fortress Monroe and entered the CSA mails in Richmond, Virginia on 13 September 1864.

Historical Background: Flag of truce exchanges facilitated through-the-lines POW correspondence. The first prisoners were taken by the Confederate Army on 21 April 1861, and early POW covers are scarce because neither side initially confined captured enemy soldiers to a camp or prison. As the conflict progressed, the necessity of incarcerating prisoners became obvious but the challenges associated with housing and feeding the expanding populations led to a formal exchange program in which prisoners were required to be paroled within 10 days of capture. This practice ended in April 1864 when General Grant declared that continuous recirculation of troops would eventually lead to the extermination of all able-bodied Southerners. This decision weakened the Confederacy and accelerated its eventual surrender, but resulted in exploding prison populations, deteriorating conditions, and immense human suffering. POW covers from this period are more common and these letters represent perhaps the most significant human element of the Civil War mails.

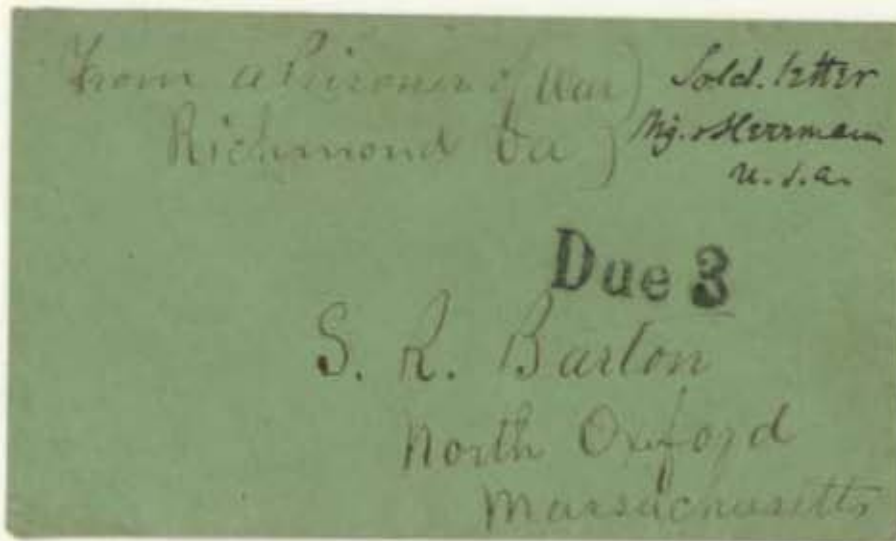
Bold statements describe important items and especially rare covers are framed in a Red Box for ease in identification. Every item has at least one certificate from The Philatelic Foundation or The Confederate Stamp Alliance.

CONFEDERATE PRISONS

Use of Outer and Inner Envelopes

First Period Usages

Flag of truce exchanges were permitted from July 1861 to September 1862 and July 1863 to June 1865 — during the interim, such exchanges were suspended. Flag of truce letters from POWs were usually enclosed in an inner envelope, which was placed inside another envelope and mailed with required postage to the flag of truce exchange point. The inner envelope was either stamped with required postage for the receiving postal system or marked due, and the outer envelope was discarded at the exchange point. Unpaid letters entering the Northern postal system from privates and non-commissioned officers were to be charged 3¢ if properly certified as a soldier's letter by a commissioned officer. Postage for officers was 3¢ if prepaid and 6¢ due if unpaid.



Inner envelope from Lt. Barnard B. Vassal, Union POW held at Ligon's Tobacco Warehouse, Richmond, to North Oxford MA, endorsed "Sold. letter Mg. Herrman U.S.A." (Gen. Wool's staff) applied at Fortress Monroe and incorrectly handstamped "Due 3" for unpaid soldier's letter despite Vassal's rank as an officer, which required 6¢. Vassal was a nephew of Red Cross founder Clara Barton and was captured at Ball's Bluff (Leesburg) on 21 October 1861.

Sent from Union officer held as POW at Libby Prison, Richmond, inner envelope to Norwich CT, endorsement of Lt. J. P. Rockwell, carried by flag of truce to Old Point Comfort where it entered mails with 9 March 1862 datestamp and "Due 3", original letter is enclosed.



These covers represent scarce examples of prisoner mail originating in Confederate prisons during the first flag of truce exchange period from July 1861 to September 1862, prior to the explosion of prison populations and the end of the formal prisoner exchange program in April 1864.

CONFEDERATE PRISONS

10¢ Rose Lithograph POW Cover

First Period Use



Sent from Union officer held as POW at **Salisbury prison** in North Carolina, pencil "ExNK" censor's mark, 10¢ Rose Lithograph cancelled at Salisbury 31 July ("1861" error date - should be 1862), carried by flag of truce and entered US mails at Washington DC 10 August; incorrectly handstamped "Due 3" for US postage to Gray ME for unpaid soldier's letter despite sender's rank as an officer; original letter from Major D. M. Dill, datelined "Salisbury N.C. July 30, 1862".

Three 10¢ Rose Lithograph POW covers are recorded

During the first flag of truce exchange period, the majority of southbound POW mail was directed to Old Point Comfort (Fortress Monroe) in Virginia where it was exchanged at Norfolk, Virginia, and northbound mail followed the opposite route. This flag of truce routing through Washington DC is therefore unusual.

At this point Salisbury held no more than 600 prisoners, who were well fed and housed under satisfactory conditions. Two years later, following the termination of the formal prisoner exchange program, 10,000 prisoners arrived and turned Salisbury into the "most loathsome dunguns in Rebeldom."

CONFEDERATE PRISONS

Second Period Uses

The covers below represent northbound letters from US POWs in CSA prison camps that were exchanged during the second Flag of Truce period and were not enclosed in an outer envelope. They therefore bear postal markings of both the Union and Confederate systems and are more scarce than those sent via outer envelope.



Sent by a Union officer held at **Camp Oglethorpe** in Georgia and exchanged by flag of truce to Port Royal SC, endorsed by Capt. James H. Pierce, Co. C, 118th Regt., NY Vol. Infantry, and censored "H.J.H. aag" (asst. adjutant general), 10¢ Die A cancelled at Savannah GA 28 August 1864; Port Royal SC September datestamp and "Due 3" for unpaid US postage to Bloomingdale NY; about 28 covers are recorded by Galen Harrison.



Sent by Union officer held as POW at **Camp Sorghum**, Columbia SC, endorsed "Henry W. Cross Lieut 59th Mass Infy Vols., Prisoner of War Columbia, S.C.", censor's manuscript "Exd J. C. Martin, Capt Comdg"; carried by flag of truce to Old Point Comfort, 10¢ Die B corner position left uncanceled by CSA post office, cancelled by Old Point Comfort 16 December 1864 datestamp and "Due 6" for correct US postage for officer to Newburyport MA; Galen Harrison reports about 20 covers from Camp Sorghum.

CONFEDERATE PRISONS

Richland Jail

Patriotic Envelope



Sent from Union POW held at Richland Jail, Columbia SC to Bedford PA, censor marking "Exd R D. Senn Capt Post Gd", carried by flag of truce to Old Point Comfort, 10¢ Die A left uncanceled by CSA post office, US 3¢ 1861 and CSA 10¢ Die A cancelled at Old Point Comfort 25 August 1864.



Sent from Union POW held at Richland Jail, patriotic envelope with 9th Corps, 4th Division design (Magee imprint) addressed to Warsaw NY, censor's marking "Exd R D Senn Capt Post Gd", carried by flag of truce to Old Point Comfort in care of Col. H. T. Oulde (Commissioner of Exchange), CSA postage paid on outer envelope, US 3¢ 1861 cancelled 25 August 1864, with letter datelined "In Prison, Columbia S.C. August 12th 1864" from Lt. William H. Mix to his mother.

POWs in CSA prison camps rarely possessed or used patriotic stationery

Richland Jail was located in Columbia, SC and held prisoners from 1 January 1862 until the three-story building was burned to the ground and the prisoners rescued when Sherman entered the City on 17 February 1865. Galen Harrison reports 39 covers known.

CONFEDERATE PRISONS

The Infamous Andersonville Prison

Rare Adversity Wallpaper Use

Sent from Union POW held at Camp Sumter in Georgia, better known as Andersonville, censored by Camp Commandant Capt. Henry Wirz ("Exd. H.W. In Extremis"), adversity use of wallpaper envelope to Lewiston ME, single 5¢ De La Rue Typograph underpays the 10¢ CSA rate, cancelled by 'ANDERSONVILLE GA.' dateless woodcut circle, carried by flag of truce to Old Point Comfort, entered US mails with 25 August (1864) datestamp and "Due 6" for US postage.



The only wallpaper envelope signed by Andersonville prison commander Henry Wirz—approximately 32 covers from this CSA prison are recorded by Galen Harrison and only some of those are signed by Wirz.



Andersonville prison was the largest and most notorious CSA military prison. On 27 March 1864, Captain Henry Wirz assumed command of the stockade, and by the end of the war approximately 13,000 of 45,000 Union POWs held there had died, mostly from starvation and disease. After the war, Wirz was charged with conspiracy and murder by US authorities. His trial was held in the Capitol building in Washington. A number of former prisoners testified on prison conditions, many accusing Wirz of

specific acts of cruelty. The court also heard from CSA officers and considered official correspondence from captured records. Wirz presented evidence that he pleaded to CSA authorities to obtain more food and maintained that he tried to improve the prison conditions, but was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. On 10 November 1865 he was hanged at the site of the current Supreme Court building, becoming one of very few Confederate officials to be tried, convicted, and executed for war crimes.

UNION PRISONS

Southbound covers from Confederate POWs in Union prison camps are more common than northbound covers from Confederate prisons, with Galen Harrison reporting approximately 2,000 and 600 known, respectively. Unique to the Southbound covers from Union prisons are handstamp censor and examiner markings applied by prison staff and district provost marshals who inspected the mail prior to it entering the postal system, and there were 11 prisons that used such handstamps at various times.

The CSA postal system became operational on 1 June 1861, the date upon which the US Post Office Department suspended service in the disloyal Southern States. Southerners used to paying 3¢ ordinary postage were charged 5¢ if under 500 miles and 10¢ if over. Effective 1 July 1862, the single rate increased to 10¢ irrespective of distance.

Old Capitol Prison

First Union Prison



Inner envelope from Confederate POW held at Old Capitol Prison in Washington DC and addressed to Catawba Station NC, POW endorsement "Private G. R. Clodfelter, Co. C, 48th Regt. No. Co. Troops," with 4-line boxed handstamp censor marking "Approved by Order of/Henry B. Todd/ Capt. & Prov. Marshal/J.W. Sturtevant/Lieut. & Adjutant," CSA letter rate paid by 10¢ Die A cancelled on 10 January (1864) upon entry into the CSA mails at Richmond.

Following the Battle of Manassas in July 1861, Old Capital prison in Washington DC became the first in the North to hold Confederate POWs. It acquired its name due to use as a temporary capitol following the burning of Washington by the British during the War of 1812. Galen Harrison records 94 covers known.

George R. Clodfelter enlisted 1 August 1862 in Co. C, NC 48th Infantry. He was taken prisoner 10 November 1863 at Culpeper VA, and confined to Old Capitol Prison. He was transferred to Point Lookout from which he was paroled and exchanged prior to the end of this practice in April 1864 by order of General Grant. Following his recirculation into the military, he was killed 5 February 1865 at Hatcher's Run VA.

UNION PRISONS

The Battle of Gettysburg

Captain Benjamin F. Little Correspondence

Benjamin F. Little was appointed captain in Co. E, NC 52nd Infantry Regt., on 28 April 1862 and promoted to full lieutenant-colonel on 3 July 1863, the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg. During Pickett's Charge, Lt. Col. Little was severely wounded while leading his men and captured on the battlefield. Lt. Col. Little's military records confirm that after spending time at the Letterman General Hospital at Gettysburg, he was transported to West's Building Hospital and eventually to Ft. McHenry, both in Baltimore MD prior to being exchanged at Point Lookout.

Letterman General Hospital. US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Gettysburg PA, 24 July 1863, entering the CSA mails at Richmond VA, 4 August 1863 with CSA 10¢ Die A for postage to Little's Mills NC. Harrison reports 20 known covers.



West's Hospital Building. US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Baltimore MD, 5 October 1863, entering the CSA mails at Richmond VA, 20 October with CSA 10¢ Die A for postage to Little's Mills NC. Harrison reports 20 known covers.

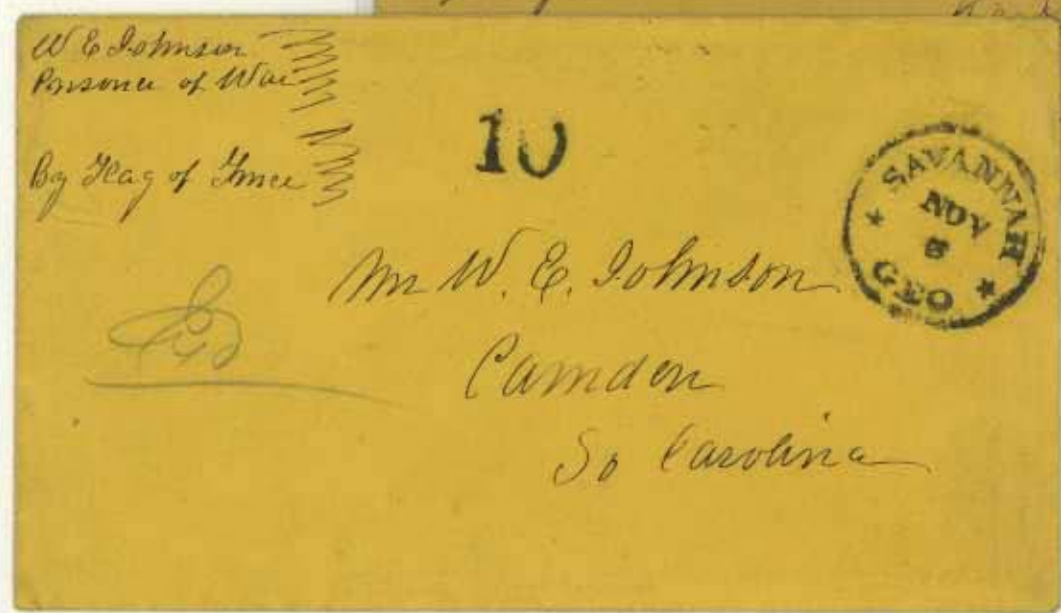
Ft. McHenry. US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Baltimore MD, 10 December 1863, entering the CSA mails at Richmond VA, 18 December with CSA 10¢ Die A for postage to Little's Mills NC. Harrison reports 29 known covers.



UNION PRISONS

Confederate "Immortal 600" Prisoners

In June 1864, US and CSA generals in Charleston SC each placed 50 captured enemy in areas under bombardment; the tit-for-tat engagement ended in the exchange of the POWs. Shortly after the 50-prisoner incident, 600 more Union prisoners were brought to Charleston. In retaliation, approximately 600 CSA prisoners were moved to Morris Island near Charleston, arriving on 7 September. They were held in open barracks as human shields under direct shelling from CSA forces. After the stalemate, the "Immortal 600" CSA prisoners were moved from Morris Island on October 23 and sent to Fort Pulaski, then back to Fort Delaware.



From Lt. W. E. Johnson, a CSA prisoner and one of the "Immortal 600" held by US forces; 21 October 1864 from Morris Island; 6 November 1864 from Fort Pulaski.

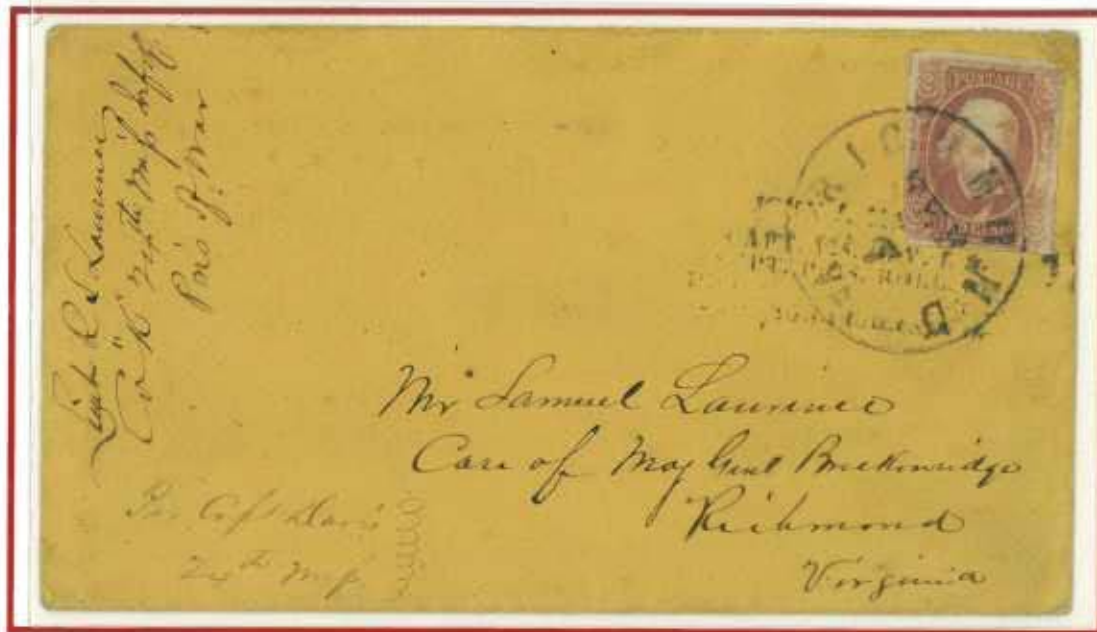
Censored by John Cassels, Captain and Provost Marshal of Fortress Monroe, then sent by flag of truce to Richmond, where 10¢ Die A cancelled 5 August 1864; the Confederate prisoner, Lt. G. H. Keiser, was sent shortly after to Morris Island and became one of the "Immortal 600."



UNION PRISONS

POW Mail with CSA Drop Letter Rate

The drop letter rate was 2¢ in both the North and South throughout the duration of the War.



Inner envelope from Confederate POW held at Johnson's Island in Sandusky OH and addressed to Richmond, care of General Breckinridge, POW endorsement "Lieut. R. L. Laurens, Co.'K' 24th Miss. Infty. Pris. of War" and "Per Capt. Davis 24th Mass.," censored with "John J. Manor/ Capt. 128 O.V.I.&/Supt. Pris. ROLL.&/Pris. Correspondence./Johnsons Island. O." handstamp, drop letter rate paid by 2¢ Jackson Engraved cancelled on arrival 7 February (1865).

One of four or five known POW covers with 2¢ Jackson Engraved



Sent by a Confederate POW at Fort Delaware to Charleston SC and exchanged by flag of truce between Port Royal and Charleston; US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Delaware City 15 November (1865); entered CSA mail as a drop letter with 2¢ rate.

UNION PRISONS

Fort Delaware

CSA 20¢ Washington



Sent by Confederate POW held at **Fort Delaware** to Hillsville VA, censor's oval handstamp, flag of truce via Richmond-Old Point Comfort; US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Delaware City 30 July (1864), CSA 5¢ Richmond Typograph also cancelled by grid at Delaware City, then by Richmond 17 August datestamp.



Sent from a Confederate POW at **Fort Delaware** to Augusta GA via Richmond-Old Point Comfort flag of truce route; US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Delaware City 5 November 1865; entered CSA mails with 20¢ Washington cancelled 21 January 1865, single US rate but double CSA rate.

One of three recorded POW covers with the 20¢ Washington

Fort Delaware was located on an island on the Delaware River near Delaware City. It held prisoners from July 1861 until January 1866, at its peak housing over 12,000. During October 1863, the mortality rate reached 12.5%, which contrasts with the highest monthly rate at Andersonville, the most infamous of Southern prisons, of only 9%.

UNION PRISONS

Rock Island Barracks

Types I and II Censor's Handstamps



Sent by Confederate POW held at **Rock Island Barracks**, Rock Island IL to Edgefield District SC, circular censor's handstamp "Approved Rock Island Barracks, Ill./Prisoner's Letter/Com'y of Prisoners", flag of truce via Old Point Comfort with US 3¢ 1861 and cancelled at Rock Island IL 28 February 1864 and entering the CSA mails at Richmond 18 March with "DUE 10" handstamp for CSA postage. This type I censor's handstamp was in use from 12 January to 30 April 1864.



Sent by Confederate POW held at **Rock Island Barracks** to Macon GA, oval censor's handstamp "R.I. Barracks./Prisoner's Letter/Examined", flag of truce via Fortress Monroe at Old Point Comfort and entered CSA mails at Richmond with US 3¢ Pink star die 1861 cancelled at Rock Island IL 15 July and CSA 10¢ Die A also cancelled at Richmond VA 15 August. This type II censor's handstamp was in use from 5 May to 11 July 1864, indicating that the letter was held in camp at least four days before being placed into the mails.

Rock Island Barracks was located on an island in the Mississippi River. It received 5,000 prisoners on 1 December 1863 and operated continuously until July 1865. Galen Harrison reports 123 known covers.

UNION PRISONS

Point Lookout—Camp Hoffman

Types I and II Censor's Handstamps



Sent by Confederate POW held at **Camp Hoffman**, Point Lookout MD to Shady Grove VA, oval examiner's handstamp "Approved Point Lookout, MD/J.A. Patterson/Capt. Provost Marshall", flag of truce via Old Point Comfort with US 3¢ 1861 and CSA 10¢ Die B entering the CSA mails at Richmond where both stamps cancelled. This type I censor's handstamp was in use from early October 1863 to late April 1864.



Sent by Confederate POW held at **Camp Hoffman** at Point Lookout MD to Murfree's Depot, Southampton County VA, octagonal examiner's handstamp "Prisoner's Letter/Sept 9, 1864/Examined", flag of truce with US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Point Lookout 9 September 1864 with manuscript endorsement "care of Capt. J.R. White who will please forward". This type II handstamp was in use from August to September 1864.

Camp Hoffman was established shortly after the Battle of Gettysburg and was built to hold 10,000 prisoners. Approximately 50,000 prisoners were confined during its operation and about 3,500 died. Galen Harrison reports 196 known covers.

UNION PRISONS

Johnson's Island



Sent by Confederate POW held at Johnson's Island to Big Spring Depot VA, censor's oval handstamp "Prisoner's Letter/Johnson's Island, O./Examined JC", US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Sandusky OH and CSA 10¢ Die B cancelled 5 March, flag of truce from Old Point Comfort and entered CSA mails at Richmond.



Sent by Confederate POW held at Johnson's Island to Rapidan Station VA, manuscript "ex. OW" censor's mark (Oscar White), US 3¢ 1861 cancelled 8 October 1864 at Sandusky OH and 11 October Richmond VA, "DUE 10" handstamp for CSA postage, flag of truce from Old Point Comfort and entering the CSA mails at Richmond.

Johnson's Island was a 40-acre site on an island on Lake Erie. Throughout the conflict, more than 15,000 rebel prisoners were confined and, despite Winter temperatures approaching 30 below zero, Johnson's Island had the lowest death rate of any major prison in the North or South—less than 2%.

Galen Harrison reports 364 known covers, the most of all Civil War prisons.

UNION PRISONS

Other Union Prisons



Sent from a Confederate POW captured at Gettysburg and held at **David's Island**, DeCamp General Hospital, Pelham NY, to Little Yadkin NC, US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Pelham 4 August 1863, sent by flag of truce from Old Point Comfort to Richmond where CSA 10¢ Die A cancelled 25 August; with original letter datelined "David's Island NY Aug the 4th 1863," from R. H. Bennett who was captured on the first day of the battle. David's Island was open only four months to hold prisoners captured at Gettysburg. Galen Harrison reports 10 known covers.



Sent by Confederate POW held at **Camp Chase**, Columbus OH to Forsyth County NC, circular censor's handstamp "Examined Camp Chase O", flag of truce via Old Point Comfort and entered the CSA mails at Richmond VA, with US 3¢ 1861 cancelled 23 October 1864 at Columbus OH and CSA 10¢ Die A cancelled 12 November 1864 upon entering CSA mails at Richmond VA. Camp Chase used one major handstamp examiner's marking, this example being the latest subtype. Galen Harrison reports 240 known covers.

UNION PRISONS

Last Day of CSA Post Office

Capture and Imprisonment of Jefferson Davis

With Union forces surrounding but not yet occupying the City of Richmond, the Confederate postal system discontinued operations on 31 March and General Lee and his forces evacuated Petersburg and Richmond on 2 April 1865. The next morning the mayor requested that Union forces occupy the CSA capital to "preserve order." Lee fled towards the village of Appomattox Court House, but was met by Grant and surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia on 9 April, marking the unofficial end of the conflict. Jefferson Davis was captured the following day by Union troops in Irwinville, Georgia and on 19 May was imprisoned at Fortress Monroe.



Sent by Confederate POW held at **Johnson's Island** to Mebaneville NC, censor's oval hand-stamp, US 3¢ 1861 cancelled at Sandusky 22 March 1865, flag of truce from Old Point Comfort and entered CSA mails at Richmond VA, with CSA 10¢ Die A cancelled 31 March 1865 - the last day the CSA post office operated.



Sent by Jefferson Davis to his wife while a POW at **Fortress Monroe**, marked "Politeness of Hon J. Speed US Atty Genl." as both censor's mark and free frank; letter entering the mails with 25 November 1865 Washington DC datestamp, subsequently marked "Advertised Dec. 5" and "UNCLAIMED," although eventually received by Ms. Davis and backstamped January 5 at Augusta. One of three known postally used covers sent by the ex-president as POW.