

A WELL-HANGED

VIGILANTE JUSTICE SAN FRANCISCO 1856

The Hanging of Charles Cora and James P. Casey for Murder

San Francisco was plagued by crime in the early 1850s, leading to the formation of the Vigilance Committees, which attempted to restore order through speedy trials and public hangings.

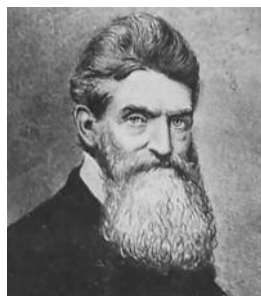
In 1855 a notorious gambler named Charles Cora shot dead a U.S. marshal, William Richardson, after an altercation between Richardson and Cora's wife, Belle, a well-known brothel owner. James King of William, a local newspaper publisher, ran editorials calling for justice, not only for Cora, but also for corrupt politicians, including one of the city supervisors, James P. Casey.

King's accusations provoked Casey to shoot King on the street outside the newspaper's offices on May 14, 1856. King died on May 20, and two days later the Vigilance Committee dragged Cora and Casey to the second story of Fort Gunnybags and hanged them in front of a huge crowd. The dual hangings are depicted on this lettersheet.



COLLECTION

A POSTAL HISTORY OF
THE NOOSE AND NECK

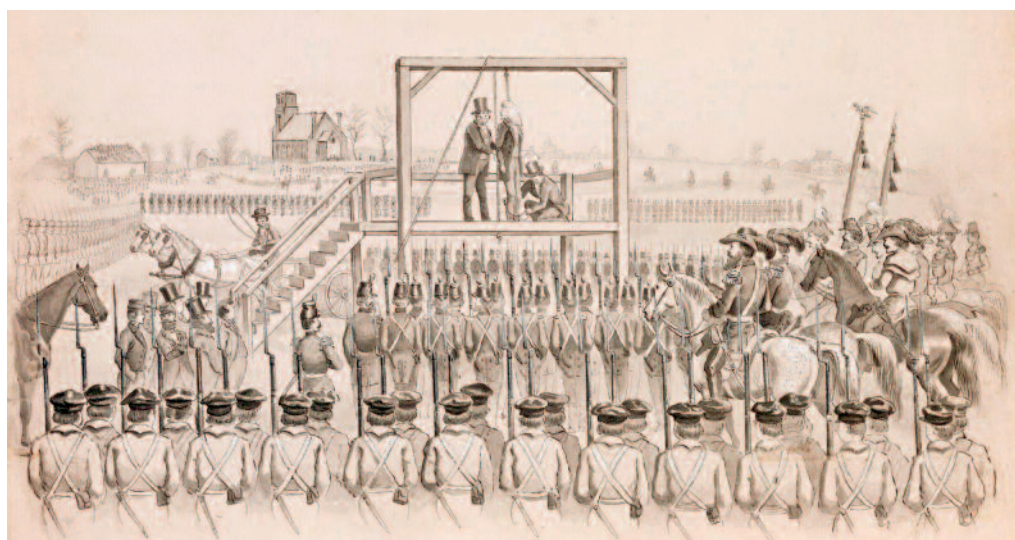


JOHN BROWN
CHARLESTOWN, VIRGINIA 1859

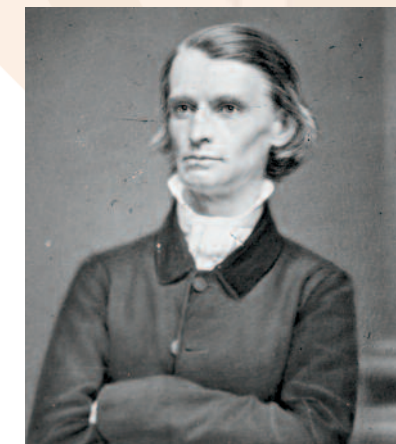
Abolitionist Who Led the Raid on
the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry

John Brown, a fervent abolitionist who attacked the arsenal at Harper's Ferry in 1859, hoping to incite a slave rebellion, was hanged on December 2, 1859. The cover at right was addressed to John Brown and forwarded from Harper's Ferry to Charlestown, Virginia, on November 29, three days before he was hanged for treason. The content was "Rescue Stuff."

Future Confederate generals, Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart, participated in Brown's capture. The hanging was witnessed by future assassin, John Wilkes Booth. The cover below is addressed in care of General Henry A. Wise, who signed Brown's death warrant as governor of Virginia.



Hanging of John Brown, drawing by David Hunter Strother



Henry A. Wise

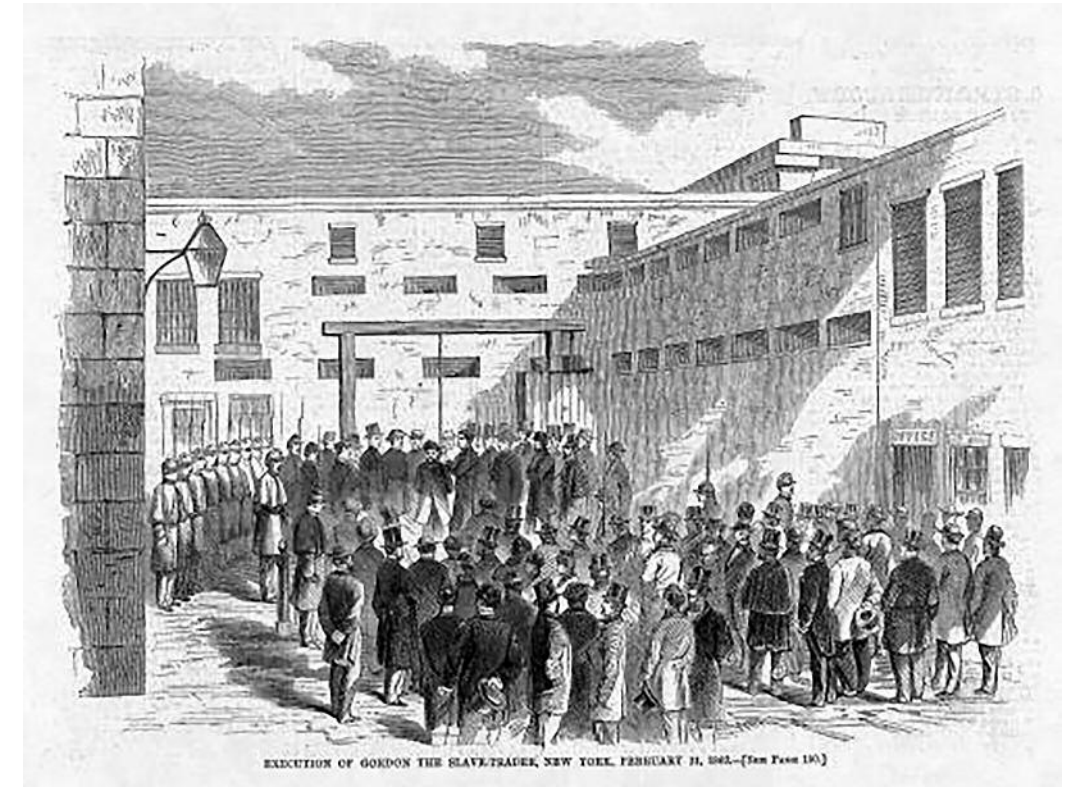


HANGING CAPTAIN GORDON NEW YORK CITY 1862

The Only Slave Trader Executed for His Crimes Against Humanity

Nathaniel Gordon was 36 years old when he was hanged in 1862, the only slave trader in the U.S. to be tried, convicted, and executed “for being engaged in the Slave Trade” under the Piracy Law of 1820.

According to the facts reported by Lieutenant Henry N. Todd, USN, on August 7, 1860, Gordon loaded 897 slaves aboard his ship *Erie* at Sharks Point, Congo River, West Africa, “of whom only 172 were men and 162 grown women. Gordon ... preferred to carry children because they could not rise up to avenge his cruelties.” The *Erie* was captured by the USS *Mohican* 50 miles from port on August 8, 1860. The cover shown here was mailed to an officer on the *Mohican* in November 1860.

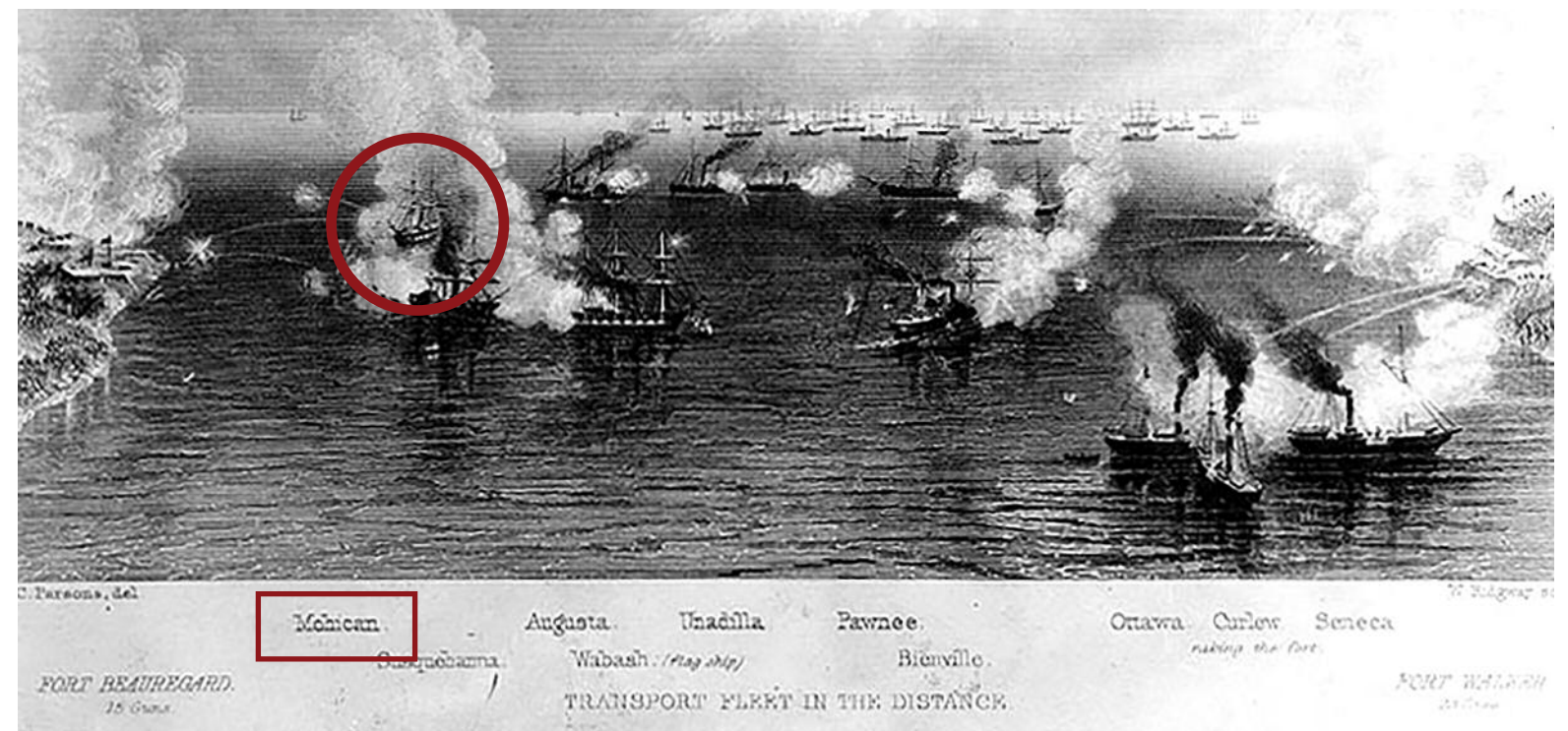


EXECUTION OF GORDON THE SLAVE-TRADE, NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 21, 1862.—(See Page 130.)



Captain Gordon’s supporters pleaded for a presidential pardon, but Lincoln responded, “I believe I am kindly enough in nature, and can be moved to pity and to pardon the perpetrator of almost the worst crime that the mind of man can conceive or the arm of man can execute; but any man, who, for paltry gain and stimulated only by avarice, can rob Africa of her children to sell into interminable bondage, I never will pardon.”

The evening before the execution, Gordon unsuccessfully tried to kill himself with strychnine poison. He was hanged at noon on February 21, 1862.

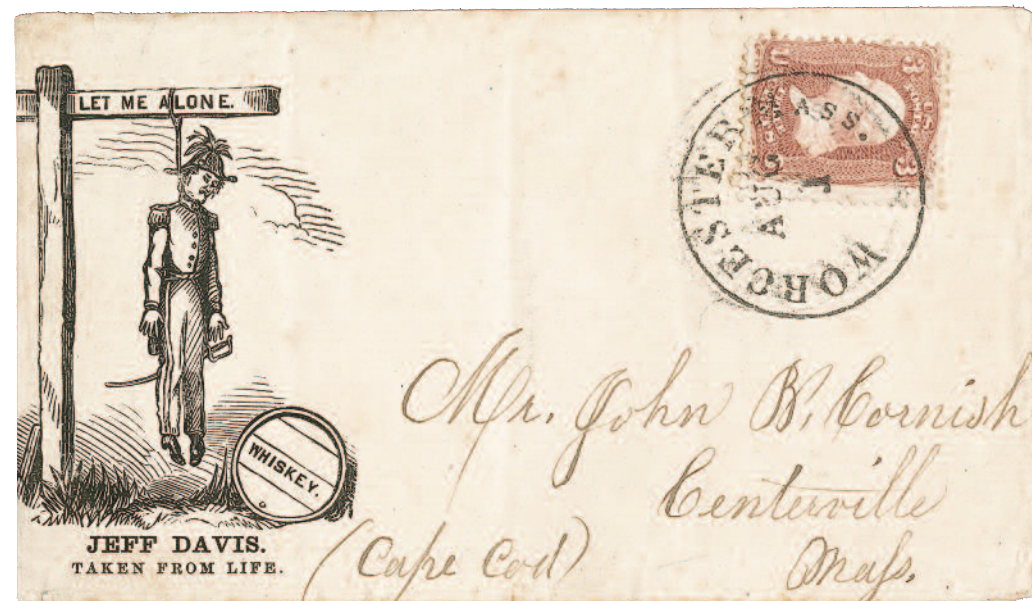


CIVIL WAR ENVELOPE IMAGES OF JEFFERSON DAVIS HANGED

Anti-Confederate Sentiment Aroused with Cartoons of Hangings

Anti-secession sentiment in the North inspired stationery publishers to produce a variety of cartoons depicting the Confederacy's leader, Jefferson Davis, hanged in different poses.

The image at top right is one of the "Fate of Traitors" design. Printed by John G. Wells in 1861, this design adds other elements to the usual hanging Davis—African-Americans performing acrobatics over the fallen CSA flag, and three more traitors being held in the gallows. The simpler "Fate of Traitors" design in two colors is shown at right.



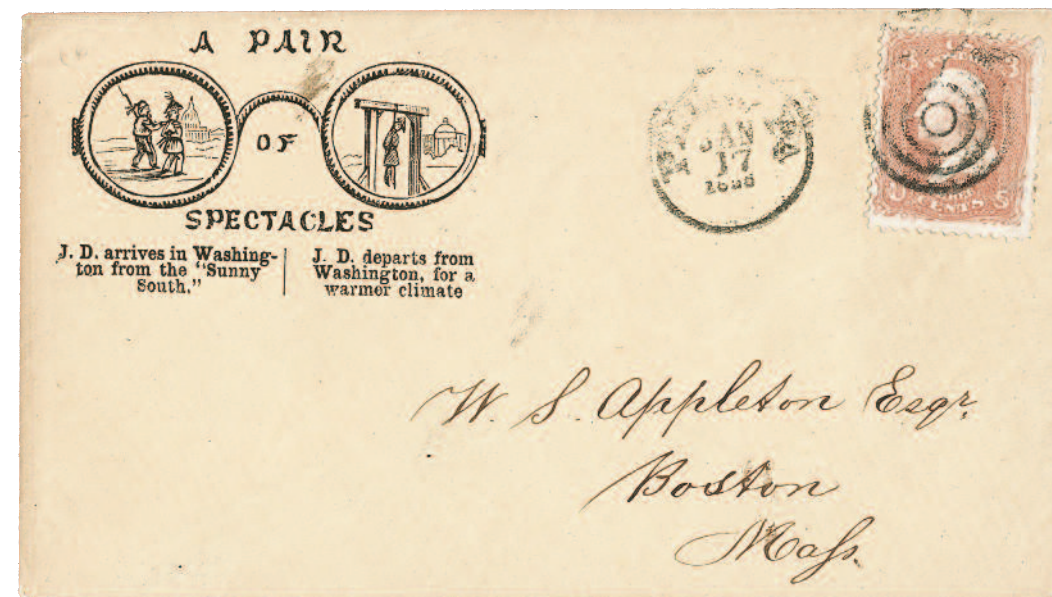
Hanging Davis "Taken from Life" design in black and blue. The whiskey barrel used to support Davis before the hanging is a symbol of Southern manufacturing, and Davis's sword is used to weigh him down to ensure a good neck break.



CIVIL WAR HANGING ENVELOPES



Samuel Curtis Upham of Philadelphia was a prolific publisher of patriotic envelopes and stationery during the Civil War. He also produced counterfeits of Confederate money and stamps. The two designs above were published by Upham. Both are plays on words and images—"The BRAGG fruit of Palmetto *Tree-son*," refers to Confederate general Braxton Bragg's "grape" shot and the South Carolina state tree. The "Pair of Spectacles" design shows Davis arriving and departing Washington, D.C., "for a warmer climate."



At left is a rare hand-colored "Davis in Suspense" design and very rare use from Kansas.



At right is a rare image of Davis being hanged by Lincoln ("A.L.") using a necktie, with the caption, "A pretty good choke, (joke,) on J.D. Verdict,—served him right." Imprint "J. G. Wells, Corner Park Row & Beekman St. N.Y. John G. Wells was the author of *Every Man His Own Lawyer and Business Form Book: A Complete Guide in All Matters of Law and Business Negotiations, for Every State in the Union* (1875).



CONFEDERATE “HANGING LINCOLN” ENVELOPE

President Lincoln Hangs from a Tree with Axe and Split Rail Around His Neck

The Hanging Lincoln design is widely recognized as the most distinctive of all Civil War patriotics. There are currently twelve recorded examples of the Hanging Lincoln cartoon envelope, all used within the Confederacy. This is the only one with a Postmaster's Provisional paying postage.



In this cartoon, President Lincoln is hanging upside down from a tree limb, with his symbolic axe and fence rail tied around his neck. The caption reads, “Abe Lincoln the destroyer. He once split Rails. Now he has split the Union.”

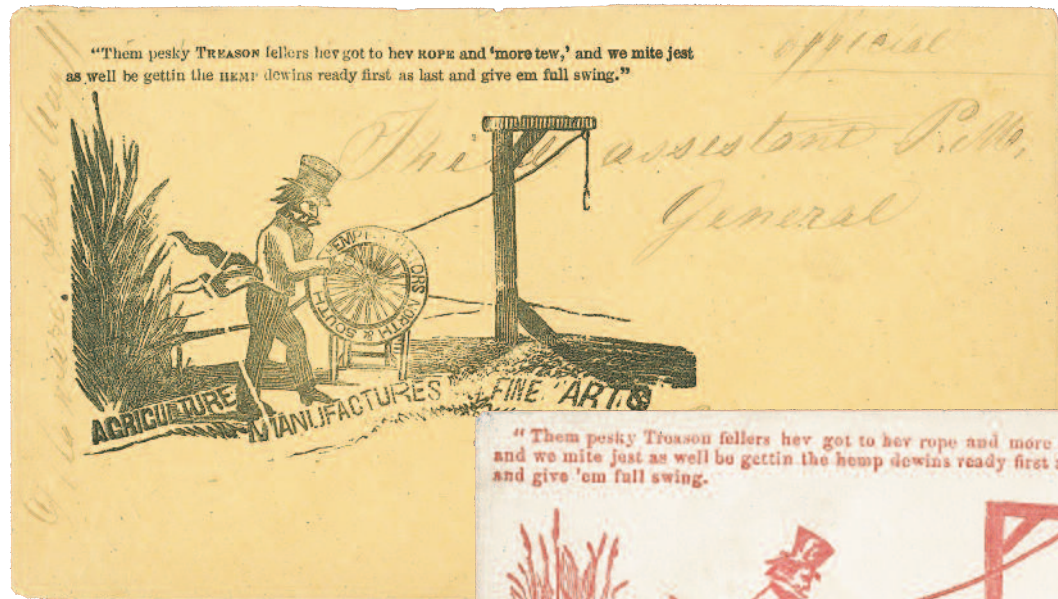
To the left and right is the caption “The penalty of disregarding the constitution. Impeached, deposed, Tried and convicted” (there is a spelling correction from “disposed” to “deposed”).

Standing beside Lincoln is a mustachioed Winfield Scott, labeled “Old Fuss n Feathers,” dropping his sword and exclaiming “My glory is gone for ever.”

On the ground is the Union flag, captioned “The stars and stripes lie in the dust, Never to rise.” A star at left has the caption “The southern star is rising” and the Confederate 11-Star flag towers above with the caption “The stars and bars shall for ever wave triumphant.”

Along the bottom is the imprint “Copyright claimed. HM & WC Box 417 Nashville Tenn.” Despite continuing investigation, the publisher’s name (“HM & WC.”) is unknown.





HEMP FOR TRAITORS

Southern rope for a “full swing”



SECESSION’S END (OF THE ROPE)

Rope forming hangman’s noose



COTTON BALE AT THE GALLOWS

England is the Lion



Darling these stamps were taken from a dead Rebels pocket after the battle at Gettysburg. The gentleman who gave them to me is a Steward in one of the Battery Hospitals and he took them out of the Rebels pocket himself. Keep them as a relic of war.



HAND-DRAWN HANGING OF JEFF DAVIS

CSA stamp from “a dead Rebels Pocket”

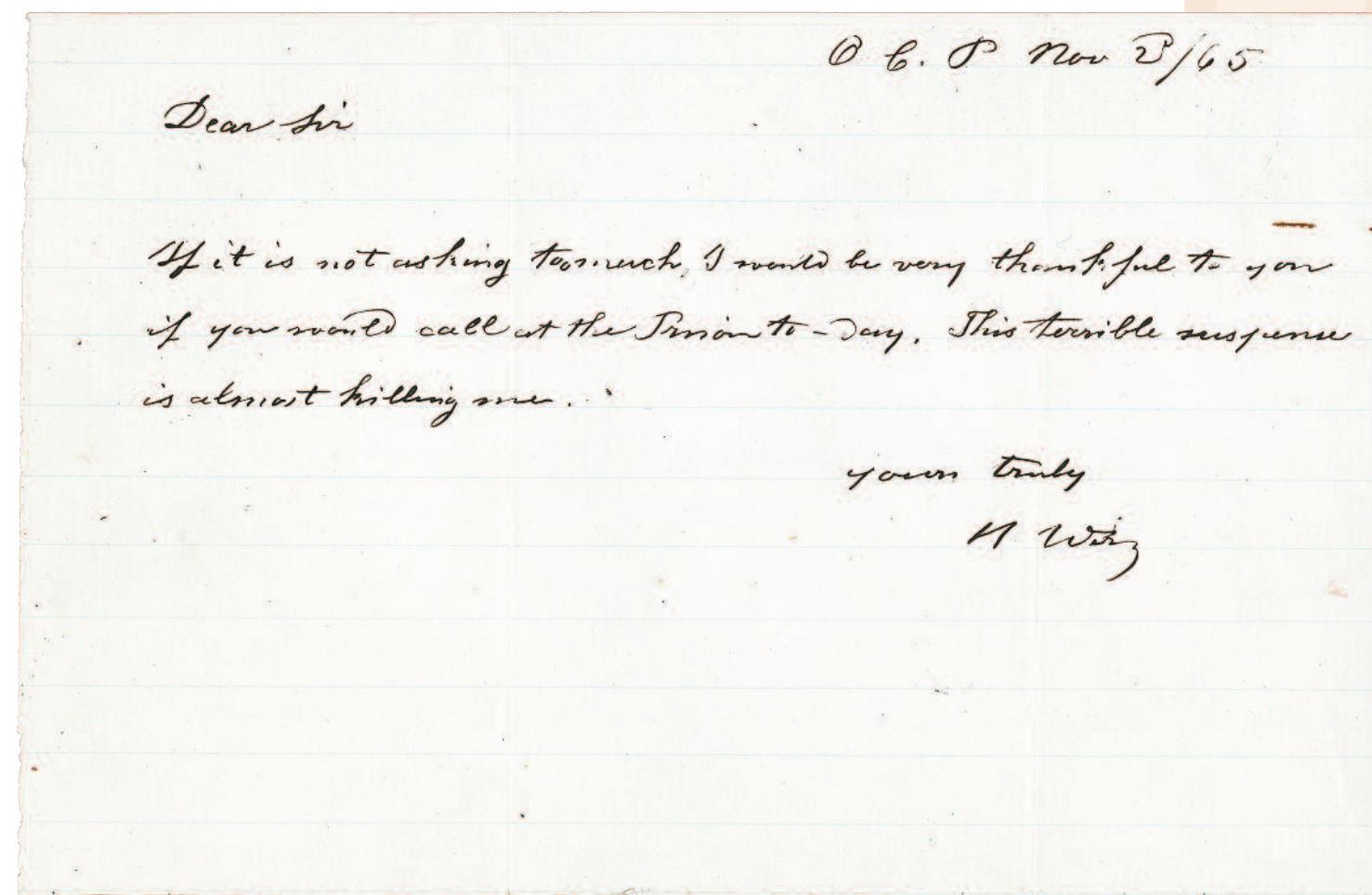
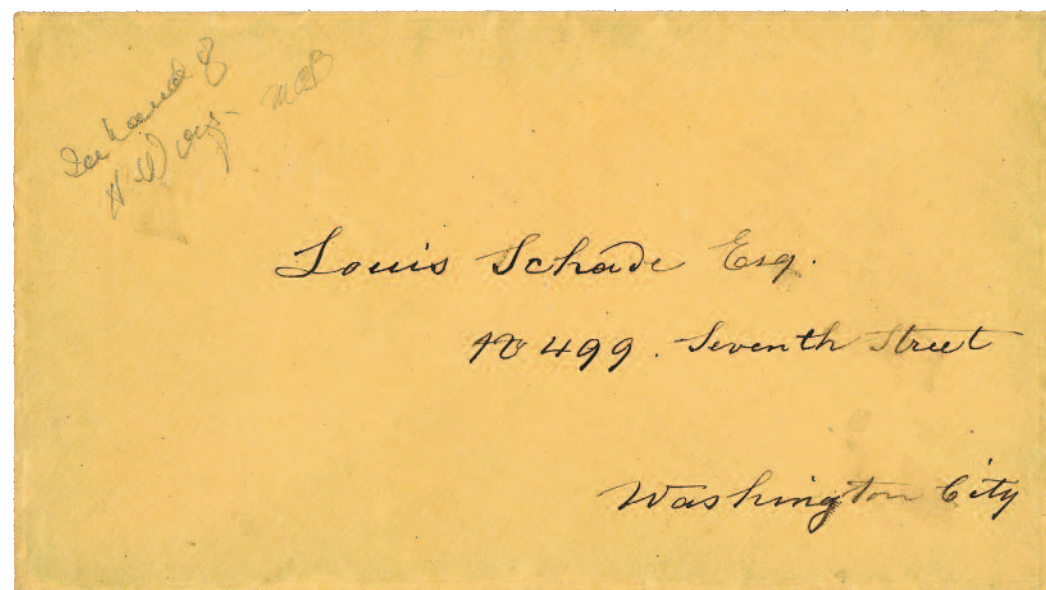
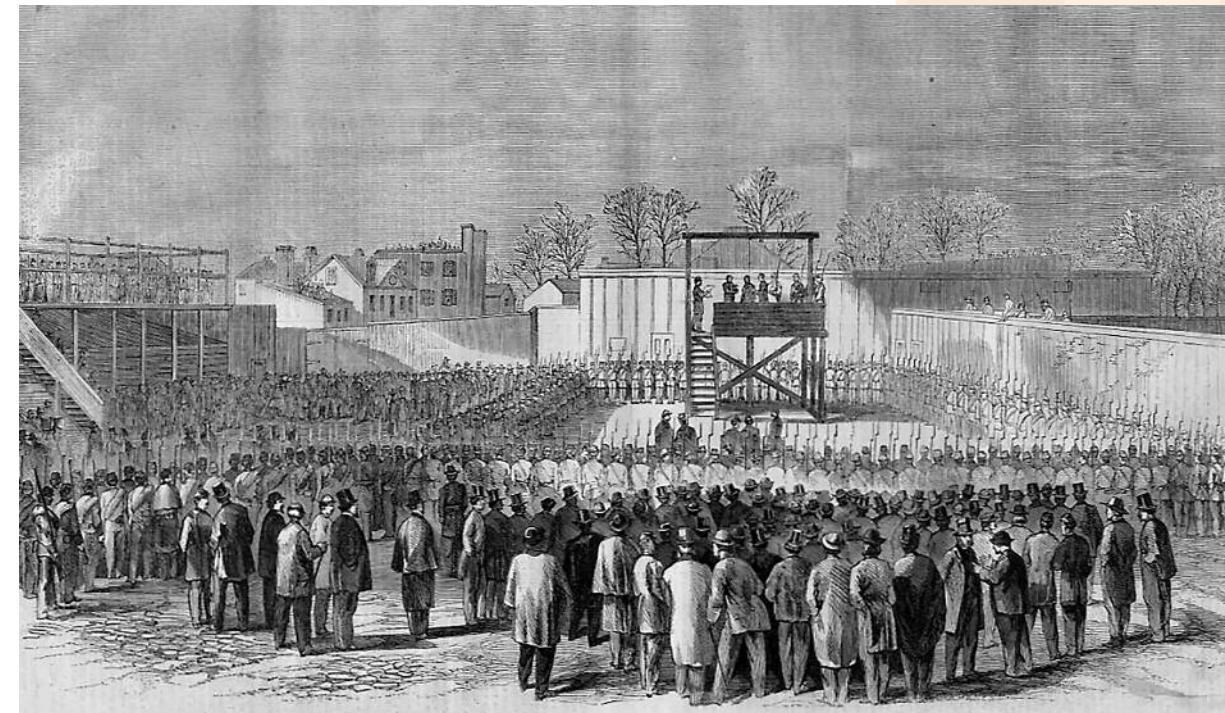
Above the gallows: “Coming events, cast their shadows before.” Letter states “Darling these stamps taken from a dead Rebels pocket after the battle of Gettysburg. The gentleman who gave them to me is a Steward in one of the Battery Hospitals and he took them out of the Rebels pocket himself. Keep them as a relic of war.”



CAPTAIN HENRY WIRZ OF ANDERSONVILLE PRISON INFAMY WASHINGTON, D.C. 1865

The Only Confederate Officer Hanged for War Crimes

Heinrich Hartmann (Henry) Wirz, a Swiss-American Confederate officer, was commandant of Camp Sumter, a prisoner-of-war camp near Andersonville, Georgia, where conditions led to a high mortality rate. After the war, Wirz was tried and hanged for conspiracy and murder related to his command of the camp—one of only two individuals convicted for war crimes during the Civil War. Wirz had hoped for a pardon, and in this autograph letter, dated eight days before his hanging, he asks his lawyer if he would visit him at Old Capitol Prison to advise on the status of his pardon. He writes, “This terrible suspense is almost killing me”—an perfect choice of words.



*“This terrible suspense is
almost killing me.”*