



Figure 1: This civilian flag of truce cover broke several rules governing the transmittal of letters across the lines.

Breaking the Rules: A Civilian Flag of Truce Cover

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

The civilian flag of truce cover in Figure 1 broke several rules, although there were not infrequent exceptions. Per Newberry District, South Carolina, student Giana Wayman, this is the only flag of truce cover recorded from the Newberry District.

The small blue commercially-made cover addressed to Rev. N.M. Gordon in Keene, Kentucky, bears a Newberry C.H., S.C., November 14, 1864, double-circle datestamp with a PAID handstamp from Newberry showing that the Confederate postage was paid. A manuscript directive "By Flag of Truce" is at lower left.

Note the more than two-month period it took to go through the mail system to the exchange point at Old Point Comfort, although this was not uncommon.

Union postage was noted with a handstamped encircled "DUE 6." There was a three-cent penalty for not prepaying the postage because this was a civilian, not a military cover.

The closure of across-the-lines express company operations at the end of August 1861 effectively stopped civilian correspondence between the North

and South. When prisoner of war mail began to be exchanged between Old Point Comfort and Norfolk, Virginia, in September 1861, it included some civilian flag of truce mail.

These mail exchanges were under the control of the military and were not intended for civilian mail. Any civilian mail that was exchanged was strictly at the discretion of the commanders of the flag of truce exchange points.

In some cases, the commander refused to forward civilian flag of truce mail because of the extra burden it placed on censors and it was returned to the Dead Letter Office (Figure 2).

• *This envelope should have gone to the Dead Letter Office, but it didn't. Had there been a CSA stamp on this cover, it likely would have been directed to the DLO. For whatever reason, this letter was allowed through the lines.*

The same requirements for flag of truce mail that applied to prisoner of war mail also applied to civilian mail. Although these requirements were more strictly enforced for civilian mail, they were not always



Figure 2: ‘Dead Letter Office at Washington,’ a wood engraving sketched by Theodore R. Davis and published in the February 22, 1868, *Harper’s Weekly*.

followed, which resulted in a variety of frankings and markings.

Handling undeliverable mail occurred from the beginnings of the General Post Office (Post Office Department) in the 1700s. In his *Stamp Collector* article of July 14, 2003, David L. Straight stated that the position of Inspector of Dead Letters was created by Congress in 1777.

Dead letters are those that could not be delivered to the addressees and that had no return address on the envelope. If unclaimed by the sender, they were sent to the DLO. In the 1817 *Postal Laws & Instructions*, such unclaimed letters were called “Dead Letters.”

In 1825, the DLO became a post office division. A postal act approved on March 3, 1825, was the act governing the disposition of dead letters until 1862.

The act summed up previous acts of 1799, 1810, and 1817.¹

In late January 1862, Union Secretary of War, Simon Cameron (Figure 3) ordered a halt to all exchanges of civilian flag of truce mail. Civilian flag of truce mail sent North was diverted to the Dead Letter Office, per U.S. General Order No. 7.

This order followed an announcement in the January 1862 *U.S. Mail & Post Office Assistant* that stated, “The facilities afforded by sending letters to the rebel states under a flag-of-truce are not intended, and cannot be permitted, to cover general correspondence.”

This prohibition was affirmed by the new Union Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton (Figure 4), in May 1863.

By the end of February 1862, the Confederate

States mail system stopped forwarding almost all such letters. The cover was sent unsealed because civilian mail was subject to examination just like prisoner mail.

- *It should have been examined by censors at the Old Point Comfort, Virginia, exchange point where it was postmarked on January 18 [1865], yet there is no evidence of censorship.*

The mandated two-envelope method was not used for the subject cover and we don't know if the letter was properly kept to one page per regulations. Instructions were decreed by individual Union military commanders in charge of exchange points, as they had control over all flag of truce mail. The general instructions were that letters were limited to personal matters.

- *It should have been sent by the two-envelope method, but it wasn't. Postal markings of both North and South appear on the same cover.*

The Confederate postage was required to be prepaid. Letters were to be enclosed in an outer envelope and were to be addressed to the commander at the exchange point. Similar instructions were implemented by the Southern commanders for northbound flag of truce mail exchanges.²

There are other covers from Rev. N.M. Gordon that did end up in the Dead Letter Office but they are from Keene, Kentucky, going South. One example is Lot 4114, from Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Sale 981 of the Barry K. Schwartz collection of Kentucky postal history, held December 10, 2009. This cover was formerly in the Scott Gallagher collection, another avid collector of Kentucky postal history. (Figure 5)

The subject Newberry civilian flag of truce cover exemplifies the sort of thing that intrigues postal historians. Collectors love covers that break the rules.

Endnotes

- 1 Richard B. Graham, "The Dead Letter Office Until 1851," *The Chronicle*, February 1990, Vol. 42, No. 3, Whole #145.
- 2 Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown Jr., Jerry S. Palazolo, *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2012.

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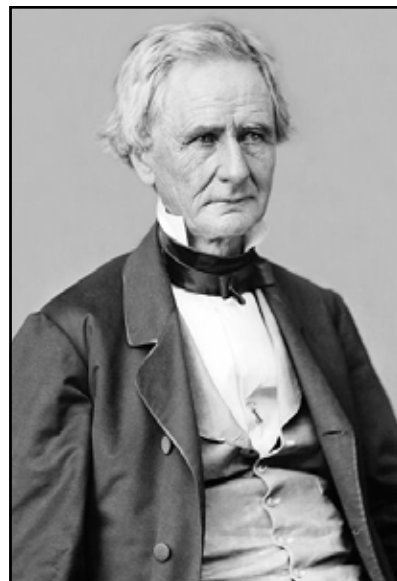


Figure 3: Simon Cameron, U.S. Secretary of War, 1861-1862.



Figure 4: Edwin M. Stanton, U.S. Secretary of War, 1862-1868.

Figure 5:
Gordon correspondence from Keene, Kentucky, that terminated at the Dead Letter Office. (Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries)

