

Confederate Collectanea



Figure 1: One of only three recorded covers from Athenaeum Prison in Wheeling, West Virginia. (*Angus William McDonald Jr. correspondence*)

The Athenaeum Prison at Wheeling, (West) Virginia

By Gen. Patricia A. Kaufmann

One of only three recorded covers from Athenaeum Prison (alternatively spelled Atheneum) in Wheeling, West Virginia, is shown in Figure 1.

This inner envelope is from Colonel Angus McDonald Jr. of the Seventh Virginia Cavalry to his wife in Brady's Mills, Maryland. There is a manuscript examiner's notation at the top, "Head Quarters Wheeling Va. Sept 17th 1863, Examined & Passed W. L. Shafer, Capt. 12th Infy."

The cover is franked with a U.S. three-cent rose, Scott 65, which is tied by a blue grid with a matching "Wheeling, Va., Sep. 18" circular date stamp. The manuscript "Examined" at lower left has been crossed out.

Only one Athenaeum Prison cover is recorded in Harrison¹ from this same correspondence.

A third cover, from the same correspondence, is pictured in Figure 2 courtesy of Wayne Farley.

Earl Antrim, the respected prisoner of war student of an earlier generation, listed the

prison² but noted no covers recorded. Records continue to change as information is shared and recorded.

The Athenaeum, Wheeling's Civil War military prison, was at the southeast corner of John and Market Streets. It was a four-story structure built in 1853–54 as a warehouse for the Crescent Manufacturing Company, a maker of boiler, sheet, and railway iron.

The first and second floors were used by the company while the third and fourth were outfitted as a theater, which opened in January 1855. The prison took its name from the theater, the Athenaeum.

In the fall of 1861, after the Civil War began, two large rooms on the second floor of the building were rented by the government for use as winter quarters for secessionist prisoners. The theater portion of the building was effectively closed by this action.

From October 1863 to October 1865, the entire building was rented for use as a military prison, barracks, and hospital. Called by some



Figure 2: Another Athenaeum Prison use from the McDonald correspondence. (Courtesy Wayne Farley)

the “Lincoln Bastille,” the Athenaeum held Confederate prisoners captured in battle, civilians who refused to take the oath of allegiance, rebel spies, court-martialed soldiers, and those guilty of various other offenses such as bushwhacking.³

The prison was under the direction of Provost Marshal Major Joseph Darr Jr. of the First West Virginia Cavalry.⁴ Eventually, most of the prisoners were transferred to Camp Chase near Columbus, Ohio, thus the number of people confined fluctuated from well over a hundred to as few as fifty or sixty, no doubt why uses from there are rare today.

After the war, the building contained a malt business and agriculture store. It burned down in October 1868. The building had a life of only fourteen years, but it saw much of the cultural and Civil War history of Wheeling during this period. The location is now a small park in front of West Virginia Northern Community College, and the Athenaeum is remembered by none.⁵

Past sales of these Athenaeum Prison covers indicate that the correspondent was Col. McDonald Sr. but I believe it far more likely to be McDonald Jr.

Both served with the same rank in the Seventh Virginia Cavalry, according to military records, and both were incarcerated at Athenaeum. As with much of such data, there is conflicting information online and it often takes

persistence and common sense to get to the truth. It is far more likely that McDonald Jr. was writing to his wife than McDonald Sr. writing to his daughter-in-law.

My theory was confirmed by Wayne Farley, who was surprised that I had it described as I did, as he had seen what he considered an incorrect description by the auction from which I purchased it. This erroneous description had been passed along for decades.

Also accompanying the Figure 1 cover was a long 1982 explanation of why this cover was not a POW cover at all, rather an Across the Lines cover. The alternate theory related the history of the father, Colonel Angus McDonald Sr., upon which that erroneous assertion was based.

Angus William McDonald Jr. (1829-1914) was a 32-year-old lawyer from New Creek, West Virginia, when, on June 1, 1861, at Romney, West Virginia, he was commissioned a 1st lieutenant in the Seventh Virginia Cavalry.⁶

He resigned while serving in the legislature but returned to the Army and served as a 1st lieutenant and commissary officer on his second tour. He was promoted to colonel and served on the staff of Governor Henry Wise. On May 5, 1863, he was taken prisoner in Hardy County, West Virginia, and confined to Athenaeum Military Prison on May 15, held hostage for a man named Rucker.



Figure 3: The gravestone of Angus W. McDonald Jr.

He had five brothers in the Confederate Army.⁷ Post-war, he was mayor of Berryville and elected to the West Virginia legislature in 1894. A sketch of McDonald Jr., written by him, can be found online.⁸ His grave is shown in Figure 3.

McDonald Jr. (Figure 4) was the lineal descendant of a series of family members by the name of Angus McDonald dating back as far as the early 1700s.

The senior McDonald (1799-1864), a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, was the first colonel in command of the 7th Virginia Cavalry.

According to various sources, McDonald Sr. was also incarcerated in Wheeling where it is reported that he was treated cruelly and held handcuffed in a “dungeon” measuring seven by ten feet. His incarceration deteriorated his already poor health and, after release, he died on December 1, 1864. He was buried with full military honors at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond.⁹

The papers of Angus McDonald Sr. are housed in the Library of Virginia (Accession Number 21877).

The wife of the father and mother of the son, Cornelia McDonald, wrote *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865*, which was edited by another son, Hunter McDonald.

These Athenaeum Prison covers are a

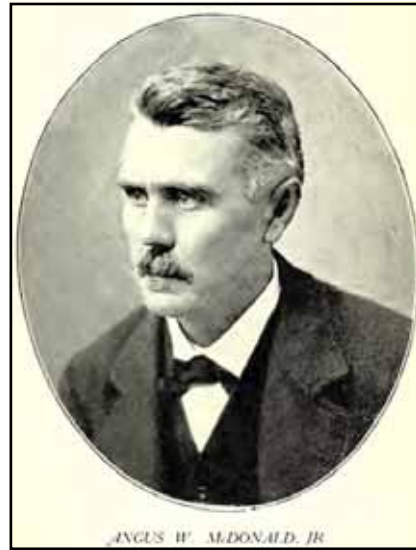


Figure 4: Angus W. McDonald Jr., lineal descendant of a series of family members named Angus McDonald, dating back to the early 1700s.

lesson about doing your own research. You just may overturn the long held misconceptions of decades or even centuries.

Endnotes

- 1 Galen D. Harrison, *Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War*, published by the author, 1997.
- 2 Earl Antrim, *Civil War Prisons and Their Covers*, New York: Collectors Club Handbook No. 12, 1961.
- 3 Margaret Brennan, “Athenaeum Prison,” *The West Virginia Encyclopedia*, <http://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/305> Accessed June 2013.
- 4 Harrison, p. 219.
- 5 Ed Phillips “Athenaeum was Beautiful Theater, Infamous Prison” *The Intelligencer*, *Wheeling News-Register*, <http://www.theintelligencer.net/page/content.detail/id/563182/Athenaeum-Was-Beautiful-Theater--Infamous-Prison.html?nav=5299> Accessed June 2013.
- 6 Lt. Angus William McDonald Jr. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=19025881> Accessed June 2013.
- 7 West Virginia student. <http://civilwardata.com/active/hdsquery.dll?SoldierHistory?C&390724> Accessed June 2013.
- 8 Angus William McDonald Jr., “Sketch of Angus William McDonald, Jr., eldest son of Colonel Angus W. McDon’ald, by himself.” <http://www.electricscotland.com/webclans/m/macdonald/glengarry9.htm> Accessed June 2013.
- 9 Angus William McDonald http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Caponer/Angus_William_McDonald Accessed June 2013.

(Gen. Patricia A. Kaufmann has collected, researched and written about Confederates for 50 years; she has been a dealer since 1973, specializing in Confederate stamps and postal history.)