



Figure 1. College cover, Virginia Military Institute (CSA Catalog type VA-19b)

Using History to Authenticate Covers

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Collectors and expertisers alike have a powerful tool at hand to authenticate covers: historical facts. Yet this essential resource is often overlooked or ignored in verifying postal history. No matter how authentic a cover looks, if facts dispute the claim, the object cannot be genuine. Additionally, depending on the issue at hand, it might be necessary to render a “no opinion” because the claim of authenticity cannot be determined one way or the other.

Both collectors and expertizers hate the no opinion determination; however, rendering a no opinion is actually a gift to the submitter because it allows for the possibility of verification at a future date should further evidence be presented to bolster the case. However, resubmitting an item to an authentication service without additional evidence to support a case is a wasted effort.

The cover presented in this article is not such a murky example. Figure 1 shows an illuminated college cover from Virginia Military Institute (VMI), CSA catalog type VA-19b, displaying a “Sic Semper Tyrannis” oval but no “Superintendent’s Office,” just as is the example in the *Confederate States of America Catalog*.¹ VMI covers are extremely sought after and come in numerous colors. The design is also recorded as a prewar use.²

The first clue that should get the attention of any serious postal historian is the lack of a postmark tied to the CSA 13, 20-cent green. With advertising covers, including college covers, the origin postmark is usually the city or town advertised



Figure 2. James Lawson Kemper, after 1865
Photograph, public domain

on the cover — although not always. Logic dictates that the subject postmark is most likely Lexington, Virginia. Studying the example in the *Confederate States Catalog*, the faintly-struck postmark is first, not only recognizable as Lexington, Virginia, but second, also easily verifiable using an overlay transparency copied from August Dietz's 1929 *Postal Service of the Confederate States of America* opus.³ (Although nearly one hundred years old, Dietz's volume continues to be a valuable resource for Confederate students.)

The cover is addressed to "Gen[eral] Ja[me]s L. Kemper, House of Delegates, Richmond, Virginia." The contemporaneous docketing at upper left reads, "The P.M. [postmaster] will please see that this is delivered immediately." It is in the same hand as the address panel. Up the left side, in darker ink and in a different hand, is "Major Gilham," indicating the sender.

Now let's examine the identity of the correspondents. The addressee, James Lawson Kemper (1823–1895), was well known as a Confederate general for most of the Civil war, so the prefix general is not unusual. One might predictably assume that the title of general on the subject cover would indicate a Civil War use. A lawyer by trade, Kemper was the youngest of the Confederate brigade commanders and the only non-professional military officer in the division that led Pickett's Charge. During that infamous Gettysburg military engagement, Kemper was wounded and captured, but rescued (fig. 2).⁴

Delving deeper, there are several red flags in the address and docketing. In 1858, Kemper was a brigadier general in the Virginia militia. He also represented Madison County in the Virginia House of Delegates. After the start of the Civil War, Kemper served as brigadier general in the Provisional Army of Virginia and then as a colonel in the Confederate States Army, becoming head of the 7th Virginia Infantry. He was promoted to brigadier general on June 3, 1862, and later to major general. Postwar, he was elected governor of Virginia.

Figure 3. *William Gilham*, Flavius Fisher
ca. 1861
Courtesy Virginia Military Institute Archives



Figure 4. William Gilham's headstone

The sender was Indiana native William Henry Gilham (1818–1872; figs. 3 and 4). In 1840 Gilham graduated fifth in his class from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. In 1846 Gilham was hired to join the faculty at the newly founded Virginia Military Institute. He and Thomas Jonathan—later known as Stonewall—Jackson taught together at the school throughout the 1850s (fig. 5).⁵ In 1860, he wrote a military manual, *Manual of Instruction for the Volunteers and Militia of the United States*, which was still in use 145 years later.

Important to this discussion is Gilham's rank. Shortly after the Civil War broke out, on July 15, 1861, Gilham was promoted from major to the rank of colonel and commissioned into field and staff officers of the 21st Virginia Infantry. He became commandant of Camp Lee, the camp of instruction for thousands of Virginians. He was ordered back to VMI on January 20, 1862.⁶

CONCLUSIONS

- The CSA 13, 20-cent green was added to an antebellum cover to make it appear a Confederate use. The earliest recorded use of this stamp is June 1, 1863.⁷
- James Kemper was in the Virginia House of Delegates before the war. He was also a general in the Virginia militia before the war.
- William Gilham was a major before the war. He was stationed at VMI both before and during the war, but his rank of major was prior to July 15, 1861, and the CSA 13 was not issued until two years later.
- William Gilham was promoted to colonel July 15, 1861.
- This cover is definitely prewar.

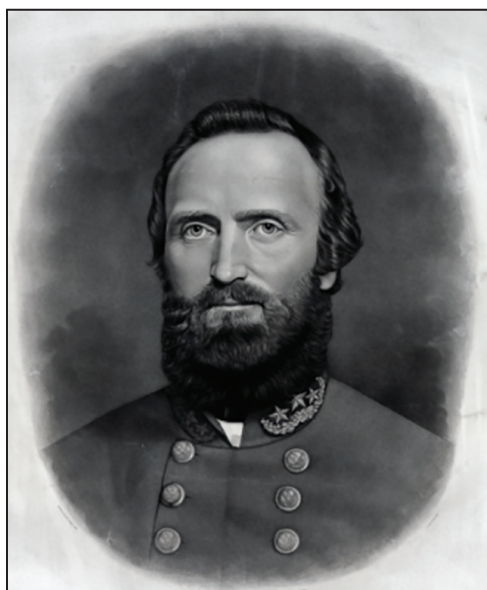


Figure 4. Stonewall Jackson ca. 1871
Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and
Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

A lot of expertising is common sense. But expertising also requires accessing a good library and connecting with an active network of other capable students. Combine these with experience and a desire for the facts no matter the consequence to your initial assumptions or your wallet.

The Internet has made historical research much faster and easier than in decades past, and there are more digital resources available now than five years ago. Caution must be exercised, however, because there is much conflicting information on the internet. Primary sources (e. g., legal documents and records, contemporary newspapers, diaries, church records, and books written at the time) are always preferred, but even they can be misleading.

NOTES

1. Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown, Jr., Jerry S. Palazolo, eds., *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, (n.p.: Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2012), 460.
2. Larry Baum, CSA advertising census taker, email exchange.
3. (Richmond, VA: Dietz Printing, 1929). See page 320.
4. James L. Kemper, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_L._Kemper/. Accessed July 9, 2017.
5. William Gilham, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Gilham/. Accessed July 9, 2017.
6. "William Gilham," American Civil War Soldiers online database, Historical Data Systems, Inc., accessed July 9, 2017; Jennings Cropper Wise, *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute from 1839–1865*, (Lynchburg, VA: J. P. Bell, 1915).
7. Kaufmann, et al., *Confederate States*, 351.