



Figure 1: An 1860 3-cent star-die entire tied by a Wentworth, N.C., May 30 circular date stamp used in 1861 during the period when U.S. postage was accepted in the Confederacy.

U.S. Postage Used in the Confederacy from North Carolina

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

The first step required for the creation of the Confederate States of America was the secession of states from the United States, followed by the coming together of the then independent and sovereign seceded states to form a new government on Feb. 4, 1861.

This process began with South Carolina's secession in December 1860. Beginning on Feb. 4, 1861, and continuing through March 11, 1861, the founding delegates, among other matters, adopted a provisional constitution, elected a provisional president and vice president, created a Post Office Department, confirmed John H. Reagan as the Postmaster General (March 6, 1861), and adopted a permanent constitution.¹

North Carolina seceded on May 20, 1861. Confederate luminary August Dietz Sr. took the position that the admission of North Carolina to the Confederate States of America occurred on the same day as the secession ordinance.² It is clear, however, that North Carolina was admitted to the CSA on May 27, based on the following chronology.

The secession ordinance was passed on May 20, 1861. On May 27, CSA Secretary of State Robert Toombs sent a letter to Welden N. Edwards, the president of the secession convention, expressing his and President Jefferson Davis' pleasure with North Carolina's actions and conveying Davis' Executive Proclamation, dated May 27, 1861, accepting North

Carolina as a state in the Confederacy. So while North Carolina might have expressed a desire on May 20 to be admitted to the CSA, the act of admission legally occurred on May 27.³

The U.S. 1860 3-cent star-die entire in Figure 1 is tied by a Wentworth, N.C., May 30 (1861) circular date stamp. It is addressed to the Hon. Jno. W. Cunningham, Raleigh, N.C. with contents docketing notation of "Gallaway" at the upper left.

North Carolina was the last state to secede before the Confederacy became responsible for its own postal system on June 1, 1861. As North Carolina joined the Confederacy on May 27, only five days were possible for this scarce Confederate use of U.S. postage. It represents the next to the last day of the U.S. rate.

Those not familiar with U.S. and Confederate postal history might question the lack of a year date in the canceling device, but serious students know that star-die envelopes are one of the surest ways to define the date. The star-die envelopes came on the market to the public in August 1860.

By June 1, 1861, the U.S. postal stationery was no longer valid in Confederate States and was demonetized from August 1861 in the Union to prevent its use in the Confederacy. Western post offices and western expresses demonetized the envelopes but uses are seen well into 1862.



Figure 2: Waverly Plantation House, the home of the Cunningham family for nearly two centuries.

Although the U.S. postage could no longer officially be used to carry the mail, the Confederacy did use “appropriated” (not returned to the United States) postal stationery for some time after the organization of the Confederate Post Office, as did individuals. They simply put Confederate postage (a 5-cent or 10-cent rate) over the U.S. indicia and used them as unpaid envelopes.

Thus, the narrow window of opportunity conclusively dates the subject North Carolina use as May 30, 1861. Many a bargain has been scooped up by a Confederate student from an unwitting dealer’s shoebox with this bit of important knowledge.

Wentworth is in Rockingham County, N.C., which was formed in 1785 from Guilford County. It was named after Charles Watson-Wentworth, second marquis of Rockingham, who was a leader of a party in the British Parliament that advocated American Independence.

In 1787, an act was passed authorizing the purchase of land from Robert Galloway & Company, where public buildings were situated, thus the community of Wentworth was established.

In 1798, commissioners were named to create the official town of Wentworth on land given by Robert Galloway for that purpose. The first court was held at Wentworth in May 1799; Wentworth has been the county seat ever since.⁴

John Wilson Cunningham (1821-1889)⁵ was a planter, merchant, and political leader. Born in Petersburg, Va., the Cunningham family was of Scottish origin.

In 1796 John’s father, Alexander, purchased a large tract of land in northwestern Person County in the Piedmont region in north-central North Carolina. He established a branch of his mercantile business there at what, by 1821, had become a post office known as “Cunningham’s Store” along the border with Halifax County, Va., and Person County, N.C.

He built his home, Waverly Plantation (Figure 2), near the store that was on the main line of the stagecoach route from Petersburg, Va. to Hillsborough, N.C. Waverly remains in the Cunningham family today.

Alexander and his son John built up the plantation to include 8,000 acres and became one of the wealthiest planters in the area. At one time, he owned 193 slaves.

John attended Bingham’s School and then the University of North Carolina, graduating in 1840. He was a successful merchant and served for many years as the presiding justice of the Person County Court. In 1844, he was elected to the North Carolina House of Commons, and he represented Person County in the state senate from 1852 to 1860.

On July 5, 1860, John Cunningham married Martha Sommerville and by the 1880 census there were 10 children listed with a birth range that ran from 1861 to 1879.

Although Cunningham considered Lincoln’s election in 1860 as an affront to North Carolina, and argued that the state’s interest could be protected only by leaving the Union and joining a southern confederacy, his justification for such a course of action was the age-old right of revolution rather than the doctrine of secession.

A strong supporter of Governor John W. Ellis, he was named to the council of state under Ellis and remained a member during the administration of Henry T. Clark, who became governor upon Ellis’s death in 1861. Cunningham represented Person County in the Secession Convention that met in Raleigh on May 20, 1861. In 1864-1865, he again served in the lower house of the legislature.

An ardent follower of Governor Zebulon B. Vance, he supported wholeheartedly Vance’s resistance to encroachment of Confederate civil and military authorities upon the state’s sovereignty. He served in the state senate in 1866-1868 and in the legislatures of 1872, 1877 and 1879.

The John Wilson Cunningham Papers, 1854-1869, are collection number 00196 in the Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library.⁶

Endnotes

- 1 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, pp. 3-37.
- 2 August Dietz, Sr. *The Postal Service of the Confederate States of America*. Dietz Press, 1929, p. 34.
- 3 Kaufmann, Crown, Palazolo; *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 4 A History of Rockingham County, http://www.carolana.com/NC/Counties/rockingham_county_nc.html. Accessed February 2013.
- 5 Caswell County Family Tree, <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=caswellcounty&id=I40478>. Accessed February 2013.
- 6 John Wilson Cunningham Papers, 1854-1869; http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/c/Cunningham,John_Wilson.html. Accessed February 2013.