



Figure 1: A cover front addressed to “Mr. Timothy Rives, Prisoner of War, Point Lookout, Md/Care of Provost Marshal” upon which is docketed “taken the Oath” (of allegiance to the Union).

## Point Lookout Prisoner-of-War Timothy Rives

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

A cover front from Camp Hoffman at Point Lookout, Maryland, is shown in Figure 1. It is franked with a three-cent rose (U.S. Scott 65), cork canceled on a cover front addressed to “Mr. Timothy Rives, Prisoner of War, Point Lookout, Md/Care of Provost Marshal” upon which is docketed “taken the Oath” (of allegiance to the Union) with red contents-docketing “Sept 5, 1864, from his daughter Laura, Va.”

It bears an Old Point Comfort, Virginia, September 14 (1864) double-circle datestamp, the flag-of-truce mail transfer point.

In 1961, Earl Antrim explained the many known cover fronts from Point Lookout. He cites Stanley B. Ashbrook as stating he bought a lot of about 2,000 fronts from a dealer named Coleman in 1920, more than a century ago. They were considered wastepaper and sold as being of no further use documenting the Civil War. While the backs were sold as wastepaper, the fronts, fortunately, were salvaged.<sup>1</sup>

All such mail was incoming to prisoners at Point Lookout. The file markings are often quite interesting, giving reasons for nondelivery such as the one to Rives, who was released when he took the U.S. oath of allegiance.

Other such memos indicated that the prisoner had



Figure 2: An aerial view of Point Lookout Prison and Hammond General Hospital dated 1864. (Library of Congress)

died, the letter was too long, or broke other rules such as prohibiting cross-writing. The censor usually signed his initial to show that the letter had been examined, although this was not done on the Rives’ example.

The red pen markings denoted the writer, date, and place of origin. A pencil abbreviation was usually used to indicate the state of origin and appears faintly as “Va” to the left of the stamp.

Blue crayon with the first initial of the prisoner was typically appended as well. There appears to be faint blue marking at the lower left where such initials were usually placed; I suspect someone tried to erase it.

Point Lookout, shown in Figure 2, was one of the largest and worst Union prisoner-of-war camps. It was established August 3, 1863, not long after the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863. The first prisoners arrived in mid-July.

The prison's official name was Camp Hoffman, but it was rarely used. More than 20,000 prisoners were kept there by the end of the war, twice the capacity initially planned for.

All prisoners lived in overcrowded tents and shacks with no shelter to protect them from extreme heat in the summer and bitter cold in the winter. Coastal storms were frequent on the long, low barren peninsula where the Potomac River joins the Chesapeake Bay.

Fresh drinking water was scarce and usually polluted. There was never enough food nor firewood. A prisoner might be fortunate if Christmas dinner consisted of a rat. More than 3,500 prisoners died there; there were only 50 successful escapes.<sup>2</sup>

### Timothy Rives

Hon. Timothy Rives (June 17, 1807-October 29, 1865) of Virginia was one of the most famous orators and ablest lawyers of his day. He was described as more an advocate than a counselor—a respected criminal attorney and political speaker.

A staunch Unionist, he was elected to the Secessionist Convention to represent Prince George and Surry Counties. He was one of numerous people who watched with anguish as the Commonwealth of Virginia seceded from the Union.

As was the case with many others, he stood by his state despite his great regret in signing the secession document to represent his constituents.

Despite his age (57) and political leanings, Rives joined the Confederate Army as a captain on November 16, 1861, and was given a command in the Third Virginia Infantry, Army of Northern Virginia.

Figure 3 shows a receipt for bacon and vinegar signed by Rives as captain and A.C.S., dated at

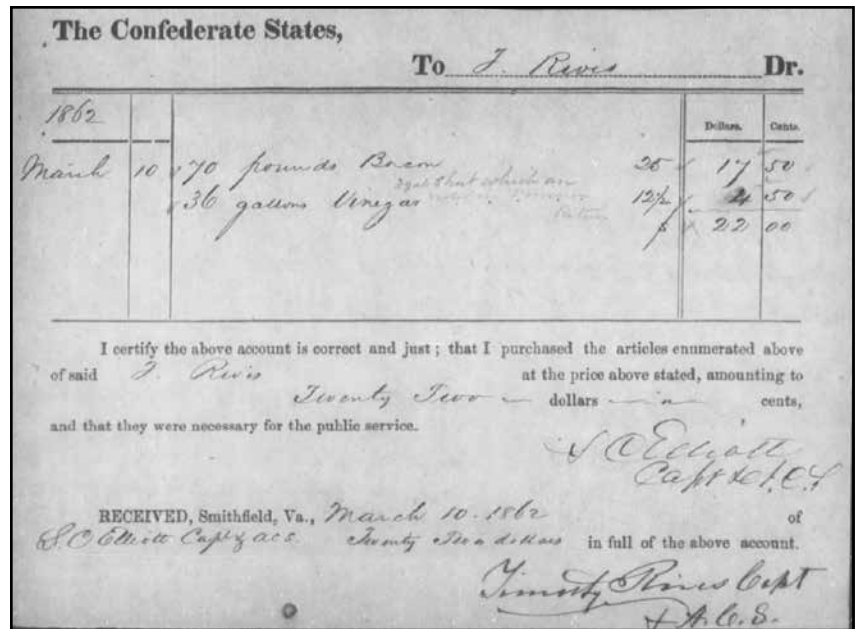


Figure 3: A receipt for bacon and vinegar signed by Rives as captain and A.C.S. (assistant commissary of subsistence), dated at Smithfield, Virginia.

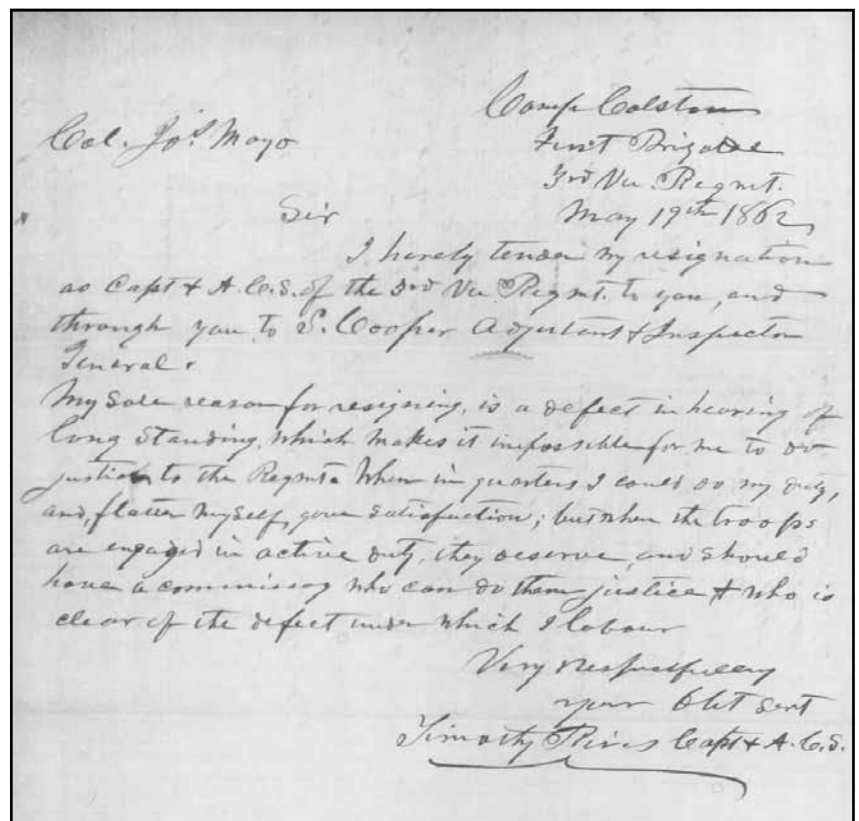


Figure 4: Rives' signed letter of resignation, dated May 19, 1862, citing a serious hearing defect.

Smithfield, Virginia. "A.C.S." is defined as Assistant Commissary of Subsistence, responsible for procuring food stores and supplies.

I found the location of Smithfield particularly appropriate since the town was, and is, renowned for bacon, ham, and all things porcine.

The Commonwealth of Virginia first regulated the use of the term “Smithfield Ham” in a 1926 statute as passed by the Virginia General Assembly, although the company started well more than a century before. Bermuda-born Capt. Mallory Todd (1742-1817) is recognized as the father of the Smithfield Ham industry. Receipts for Smithfield Hams are on record as early as 1779.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Rives did not remain long at his post. Figure 4 is his signed letter of resignation dated May 19, 1862, citing a serious hearing defect:

*“When the troops are engaged in active duty, they deserve and should have a commissary who can do them justice & who is clear of the defect under which I labour (sic).” Military records show him relieved of command June 1, 1862.*

Returning to civilian life, the war personally came to him June 9, 1864, when he was captured as a prisoner of war at the beginning of the Siege of Petersburg. Unarmed, he was driving to a neighbor’s house, an aged and obviously infirm noncombatant. He was confined to Point Lookout, Maryland, September 12, 1864, with no mention in military records where he was incarcerated in the intervening period.

When the Siege of Petersburg was initiated in June 1864, the Union sought a quick victory with the capture of the vital road and rail center at Petersburg. Instead, it became the longest siege in United States military history at 292 days.

Figure 5 is a photo showing the aftermath of the famous Crater. Prophetically, Rives’ home was situated within sight of the Crater and was destroyed together with the old tombs in the family burial ground on June 9, 1864, at Rives Salient.

Rives died of natural causes the month after the subject-letter posting. A monument to him was erected in 1867 by personal friends and admirers.

It was subsequently moved to the Soldiers Section of historic Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg. The cemetery grounds cover 189 acres, making it the second largest cemetery in Virginia behind Arlington National Cemetery.

Blandford Church features a full set of windows designed by Tiffany Studios. The oldest marked grave dates from 1702. It seems a suitable resting place for Timothy Rives.

### Endnotes

- 1 Earl Antrim, “The ‘Rebel Archiver’ Prisoner-of-War Covers,” *Confederate Philatelist*, Vol. 6, No. 1, January 1961, pp. 3-6.
- 2 The American Civil War, Point Lookout Prisoner of War Camp, <https://www.mycivilwar.com/pow/>



**Figure 5: The Crater at Petersburg, blown up by 8,000 pounds of mine powder within Elliott’s Salient at dawn July 30, 1864.**



**Figure 6: A Smithfield Ham as sold today.**

*md-point-lookout.html* (Accessed May 13, 2022).

- 3 Patrick Evans-Hylton, *Smithfield: Ham Capital of the World*. (Charleston, S.C., Arcadia Publishing, 1982)

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