

The Civil War Post

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Short-lived Norfolk Flag-of-Truce Route

The Gibraltar of the Chesapeake

It should come as no surprise that American history influences postal history. With Richmond as its capital, many assume all of Virginia was under the control of the Confederacy during the American Civil War. This is not the case.

More than 400 years ago, in 1607, English Captain John Smith came ashore at a place that became known as Point Comfort, Va. After surveying the area in 1608, Capt. Smith pronounced it a "little isle fit for a castle." In 1609, colonial settlers built a small wooden structure there and called it Fort Algernourne. It was large enough to hold 50 men and seven mounted cannons. It was of strategic importance for four centuries until decommissioned in 2011 as part of the 2004 Base Realignment and Closure process. Upon its closure, President Barack Obama declared Fort Monroe a national monument, the 396th unit of the National Park System¹.

The construction of Fort (or Fortress) Monroe was commissioned by President James Monroe on the spot Capt. Smith came ashore. Building began in 1819; it was substantially complete by 1834, the largest stone fort ever built in the United States. It guarded the Chesapeake Bay, protecting the Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation's capital against hostile access by water. It cost nearly \$2 million to build and covered 63 acres of land with its walls stretching 1.3 miles around.²

In the spring of 1861, following Virginia's secession from the Union on April 17, President Abraham Lincoln quickly moved to reinforce Fort Monroe. Consequently, this bastion remained in Union hands throughout the war. The fort played an important part in numerous Union initiatives – yet only once fired at an enemy, wasted rounds that bounced off the ironclad CSS *Virginia* during the March 1862 Battle of Hampton Roads against the USS *Monitor*.

Due to the threat of invasion by the large Union Army force at Fort Monroe across Hampton Roads from the threatened cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth, Confederate troops evacuated the Norfolk area the evening of May 9, 1862, into the morning of the next day.

President Lincoln stayed as a guest in Quarters No. 1 at Fort Monroe May 6-11, 1862. During his visit, President



Figure 1. An 1862 civilian flag-of-truce cover sent by the short-lived Norfolk route to Virginia Miller in Leesburg, Va.

Lincoln, Maj. Gen. John E. Wool and Commodore Louis M. Goldsborough planned an attack on Norfolk, Va.

When Union troops arrived on May 10, they found the Confederates had abandoned the batteries at Sewell's Point, as well as other fortified positions in the vicinity. Federal troops occupied Norfolk and Portsmouth on May 10th.³

Norfolk Flag-of-Truce Route

From September 1861 until May 1862, most southbound mail was directed to Fortress Monroe, where it was exchanged under flag of truce with Confederate officials at Norfolk, Va. The letters were then placed in the Confederate mails at Norfolk. Northbound mail followed the reverse path, typically entering the U.S. mails at Old Point Comfort, Va.

After federal troops occupied Norfolk, southbound mail entered the Confederate mails at Petersburg, Va. Northbound



An 1861 map by E. Sachse & Co. & Magnus, showing C. Fortress Monroe, Old Point Comfort and Hygeia Hotel, Va. (Library of Congress)

mail continued to be posted at Old Point Comfort and occasionally at Annapolis, Md., and Washington, D.C.

Beginning in July 1863, and until the end of the war, mail was exchanged at City Point, Va. Southbound mail entered the Confederate mails at Richmond. Northbound mail entered the U.S. mails at Old Point Comfort.⁴

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There are two recognized types of flag-of-truce mail: prisoner of war and civilian. Both types were subject to censorship and almost always bear a manuscript or handstamped censor marking. Letters were to be enclosed in an outer envelope and addressed to the commander at the exchange point.

The cover shown in Figure 1 is a civilian flag-of-truce cover sent by the short-lived Norfolk route. A light pencil censor manuscript "Ex EBC" is at the top between the two postal markings: a Norfolk, Va., Jan 19, 1862, double-circle postmark with a matching PAID 5C. At upper left is a manuscript "postage within" and a faint impression of a half-dime to the lower left of the address. The half-dime was enclosed in the envelope to pay the postage. The envelope is addressed to "Miss Virginia Miller Leesburg, Loudon County, Va." It is a pale green-lined lady's envelope with "CRM" embossed on the tip of the top back flap, presumably the initials of the unidentified sender.

Addressee Virginia J. Miller (1842-1932), shown in Figures 2 and 3, was the daughter of prominent Washington physician Thomas Miller (1806-73), shown in Figure 4. The Millers were residents of Washington, D.C., where Dr. Miller (1806-73) was a White House physician. They were relatives of the Harrison family of Leesburg, Va.



Figure 2 (left).
A young diarist
Virginia Miller in
standing pose,
as she would
have appeared
about the time
the Figure
1 letter was
mailed.

Figure 3 (right).
Portrait of
Virginia Miller as
an older woman.



Dr. Thomas Miller was married to Virginia Collins Jones Miller (1809-92), daughter of Maj. Gen. Walter Jones (1775-1861) and mother of diarist Virginia.

Walter Jones practiced law in Fairfax and Loudoun counties. He was appointed U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, 1804-21. He practiced law and argued more than 300 cases in the U.S. Supreme Court, as well as in Virginia and Maryland. A close friend of James Madison, James Marshall and John Calhoun, Jones rode at the head of the District of Columbia Militia at presidential inaugurations, holding the rank of major general. Living to the onset of the Civil War, he strongly opposed Virginia's secession.

Walter Jones was an ardent advocate of the American Colonization Society, initially named the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America from its founding in 1816-17 until 1837. He was said by some to be one of the founders. The society encouraged and supported the migration of free-born blacks and emancipated slaves to the continent of Africa. The African-American community and the abolitionist movement overwhelmingly opposed the project.

The Thomas Miller family stayed at the Harrison family home through much of the Civil War. Harrison House, also known as Glenfiddich House, is a well-known historic landmark in Leesburg. It was named after its original owner, Henry T. Harrison (born 1797, not the Confederate spy born in 1832).

During the Civil War, Harrison House served as both a hospital and headquarters for the Confederate Army. Generals Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson (1824-63) and Robert E. Lee (1807-70) were visitors there, among many other famous military figures. The diary of Virginia Miller was discovered when the house was sold in 1980. Janet LeHane, one of the new owners, transcribed the diary.


The diary begins on Nov. 15, 1861, noting the arrival of the 21st Mississippi Regiment in Leesburg, as well as Union troop movements near Mathias Point and an exchange of high-ranking Union prisoners in return for Confederate privateers. Subsequent entries describe military visitors to the Harrison House from the Albemarle Cavalry of Mississippi Regiments. Virginia Miller relates hearing cannon fire from the Battle of Ball's Bluff (also called the Battle of Leesburg) on Oct. 21, 1861, and witnessing deaths and severe injuries of soldiers. She was particularly



Figure 4. Portrait of Dr. Thomas Miller, father of diarist Virginia Miller.

moved by the death of Col. Erasmus Burt (1821-61), a well-known Mississippi doctor and politician who was taken to the Harrison House after taking a mortal gunshot wound during the battle. He was breveted general on the battlefield, but died before the promotion was received.⁵

Virginia Miller later wrote of the naval victory of the CSS *Virginia*, the world's first steam-powered ironclad warship, which was built by the Confederate States Navy during the first year of the war. Miller concludes the diary by describing a meeting with Gen. Robert E. Lee at Point of Rocks, Md. A copy of the transcript of the Miller diary is in the Thomas Balch Library.⁶ The current location of the original manuscript is unknown.

After the war, Virginia Miller returned to Washington, D.C., where she was involved in various patriotic societies. She is listed in Washington city directories through 1929. 

Endnotes

1. Mary Koik, "The Civil War in Hampton Roads: Fort Monroe Gibraltar of the Chesapeake" American Battlefield Trust, www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-hampton-roads-fort-monroe#:~:text=Fort%20Monroe%20remained%20an%20active,transferred%20to%20nearby%20Fort%20Eustis, accessed Sept. 27, 2023.
2. Fort Monroe History, Hampton, Va., <https://hampton.gov/1912/History>, accessed Sept. 27, 2023.
3. "The History of Fort Monroe," National Park Service, www.nps.gov/fomr/learn/historyculture/index.htm, accessed Sept. 27, 2023.
4. Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown Jr. and Jerry S. Palazolo, *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2012, page 489.
5. Col. Erasmus R. Burt, Find A Grave memorial 24331624, www.findagrave.com/memorial/24331624/erasmus-r-burt, accessed Sept. 27, 2023.
6. Emily Hershman, *Diary of Miss Virginia J. Miller* (SC 0039), copy of transcript held by Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, Va., www.leesburgva.gov/departments/thomas-balch-library/, accessed Sept. 26, 2023.

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