

JOHN CASSELS, PROVOST MARSHAL AT FORT MONROE, VA. NEW TYPE HANDSTAMPED CENSOR MARKING

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John Cassels, 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry

Daniel W. Shelley was assistant provost marshal at Fort Monroe, Va., from March 1864 until June 1865. According to the House Documents of the 1866 U.S. House of Representatives, a deposition by Shelley states:

Captain John Cassels was Provost Marshal at Fort Monroe, Virginia, from June, 1863, to January 1865. Sworn to and subscribed before me at Fort Monroe, Virginia, July 10, 1865. William J.L. Nicodemus, Lieutenant Colonel United States Army. E.D. Townsend, Assistant Adjutant General.

Provost marshals were military officers charged with such duties as making searches, seizures, and arrests, the custody of deserters and prisoners of war and the issuance of passes. Their duties included the examination of letters to or from potentially disloyal persons.

Both the U.S. and Confederate provost marshal organizations examined the across-the-lines mail. While there are numerous different manuscript provost marshal markings, there are far fewer handstamped markings. Provost marshal handstamp markings are far rarer than prison censor handstamps. No Confederate provost marshal handstamp markings are known.

In the National Archives & Records Administration (NARA) is an undated telegram on printed 1864 letterhead from the file of John Cassels, shown in Figure 1, which says:

Please send me by telegraph word that he (Cassels) will be appointed to the first vacant captaincy in his regt. (regiment) Such acts as his earn promotion and prompt recognition is the way to get gallant service. (signed) Benj. F. Butler, Maj. Gen.

Although the tenor of Gen. Butler's request appears accurate, an 1864 date appears inaccurate; Cassels was already a captain in 1864. While I could not find the exact date of Cassels' promotion to

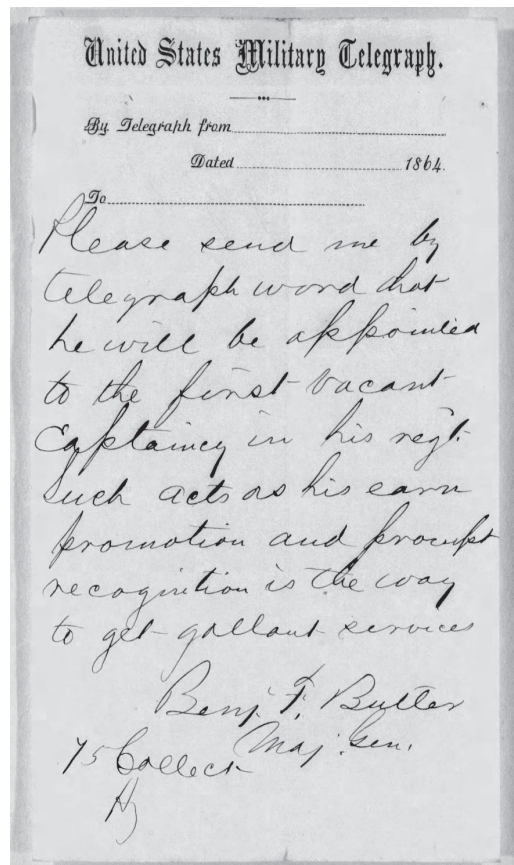


Figure 1. Undated telegram in the file of John Cassels (signed) Benj. F. Butler, Maj. Gen., who asks that Cassels be appointed captain.

captain, the next document shows he was already a captain in 1863. Such are often the inconsistencies of military records.

General Orders dated Dec. 6, 1863, read as follows:¹

*GENERAL ORDERS,
HDQRS. 18TH A. C., DEPT. VA., AND N. C., Numbers 47.*

Fort Monroe, Va., December 6, 1863.

Captain John Cassels, Eleventh Pennsylvania Cavalry, is announced as aide-de-camp to the major-general commanding, and provost-marshal at department headquarters.

He will be obeyed and respected accordingly.

By command of Major-General Butler

On Sept. 18, 1864, Gen. Butler wrote to Governor Andrew Gregg Curtin of Pennsylvania from the field. He again recommended Cassels for promotion, this time to major in the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiment.

Butler states:

I take the liberty to do so, because it has been perhaps, partly (by) my act that he may not be considered within the lines of promotion. There is no post which requires more responsibility than that of provost marshal. After carefully watching Captain Cassels' course for many months, I am satisfied not only in his efficiency and energy, but also with his integrity and patriotism.



Figure 2. Benjamin B.F. Butler in 1861, as photographed by Mathew Brady (Library of Congress).

Benjamin B.F. Butler (1818-93), shown in an 1861 Mathew Brady photograph in Figure 2, was a controversial Massachusetts politician, trial lawyer and Union army general. His military career produced mixed results. Commanding the Union Department of Virginia, he took command of Fort Monroe on May 18, 1861.

In 1861, while serving as commander of Fort Monroe, Va., Gen. Butler made the decision, on his own authority, not to return slaves fleeing into Union lines to the Confederacy on the grounds that they constituted “contraband of war,” whose return would boost the Southern war effort. This declaration earned him a place in history. Although he did not go to Fort Monroe to free the slaves, with his shrewd legal mind he nonetheless set a precedent. President Abraham Lincoln used the same reasoning in issuing the *Emancipation Proclamation*.

Also in the Cassels file at NARA is a telegram dated July 30, 1864, to Assistant Provost Marshal Lt. D.W. Shelby, signed by John Cassels as "Capt. & Pro. Mar." It is shown in Figure 3.

John Cassels served with Field & Staff officers of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry, 108th Regiment, Company C. He was mustered into service in Philadelphia on Sept. 21, 1861. Cassels was promoted to major of Company C on Oct. 28, 1864. He was brevetted Lt. Col. on March 13, 1865, and resigned April 1, 1865.²

In Chapter 19 of Gen. Benjamin Butler's autobiography, he gave Cassels a glowing review:³

I found Lieut.-Col. John Cassels as provost marshal of the department. I did not re-appoint him when I made up my staff.

There are no more arduous duties in the administration of a military department than those devolving upon the provost marshal. He is charged with the arrest of all citizens whose doings make such action necessary, and also to put in close confinement the officers or soldiers whose detention may be ordered. He is charged with the duty of breaking up all irregular places in which any infractions of the law either military or civil are carried on. In short, he is the chief of police of the department, and he is also charged with the prosecution of all civil offences before the provost court. If he is an honest and efficient man that makes him exceedingly obnoxious, so that my experience was that if no complaints were made against a provost marshal he clearly was not doing his duty.

I had scarcely taken possession of my office before the traders, sutlers, liquor dealers, and citizens who had been dealt with before the provost court came flocking in with complaints against Colonel Cassels. He, of course, was an utter stranger to me, and if I put him in charge of the office, it would result in his having in his possession of very considerable amounts of money to be accounted for, and I knew bribes would be offered to induce him to wink at all sorts of transgressions. I thought it my duty, therefore, to investigate fully without saying anything to him and even without letting him know that I was investigating him, until I should come to something on which I could base a serious charge. I therefore announced an officer of the Twenty-Seventh Massachusetts as provost marshal, and that sent Colonel Cassels back to his regiment, the Eleventh Pennsylvania Cavalry.

I had brought with me some secret service men on whom I could rely, but who were not announced to be on my staff, or even to be known to me by sight. I had one there before I came, for the purpose of investigating certain matters in regard to the recruitment of negro

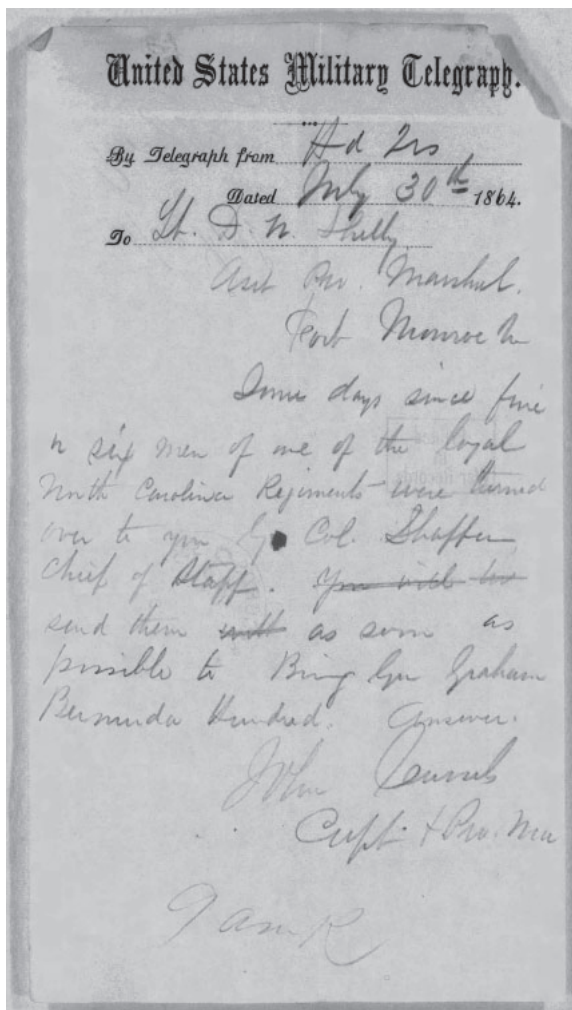


Figure 3. July 30, 1864, telegram signed by John Cassels as "Capt. & Pro. Mar."

troops. I investigated every complaint made regarding Cassels that was not utterly frivolous, and I came to the conclusion that these complaints were beyond all question the ebullitions of spleen or hatred. Among other things Cassels was charged with having taken a sum of money from one man, another sum from another, and so on, always for his own use; but by an examination of the records of his office, which had been placed in the hands of the acting provost marshal, I found that in every instance the sums were not only admitted to have been taken, but that he had charged himself with those sums on the books to be turned over on the settlement of his accounts. I finished my examination about 11 o'clock P. M., on the 8th of December, and sent an orderly to Colonel Cassels' tent with directions that he should report to me forthwith. He immediately reported to me, and I said to him: 'You are appointed lieutenant-colonel and aide-de-camp on my staff, and detailed as provost marshal of the department. You will proceed to duty to-morrow morning. I have examined all the complaints against you, and I believe they are all unfounded, and that you are an honest man.'

He held that office, and fulfilled its duties to my entire satisfaction so long as I was in command. When I was relieved his accounts and conduct were investigated at great length in the most vindictive manner, but nothing was developed to his discredit.

The Cassels Provost Marshal Handstamps

Shown in Figure 4 is a cover imprinted at top left with "Provost Marshal's Office, Head Quarters Dept. Va. & North Carolina, FORT MONROE, VA." "OFFICIAL BUSINESS" is printed at right. There is a lightly struck, but readable, large octagonal examined marking at left: "APPROVED / FORT MONROE, Va. / Aug 14, 1864 / JOHN CASSELS, / PROVOST MARSHAL."

Figure 5 shows a digitally-enhanced close-up of the marking. At first glance, the date appears to be Aug. 11, but closer examination reveals it conclusively to be Aug. 14. The top of the "1" is flat, while the "4" connects to the upright marking with an obvious downward diagonal stroke. The record of the addressee, as follows in this narrative, also precludes it from being Aug. 11.

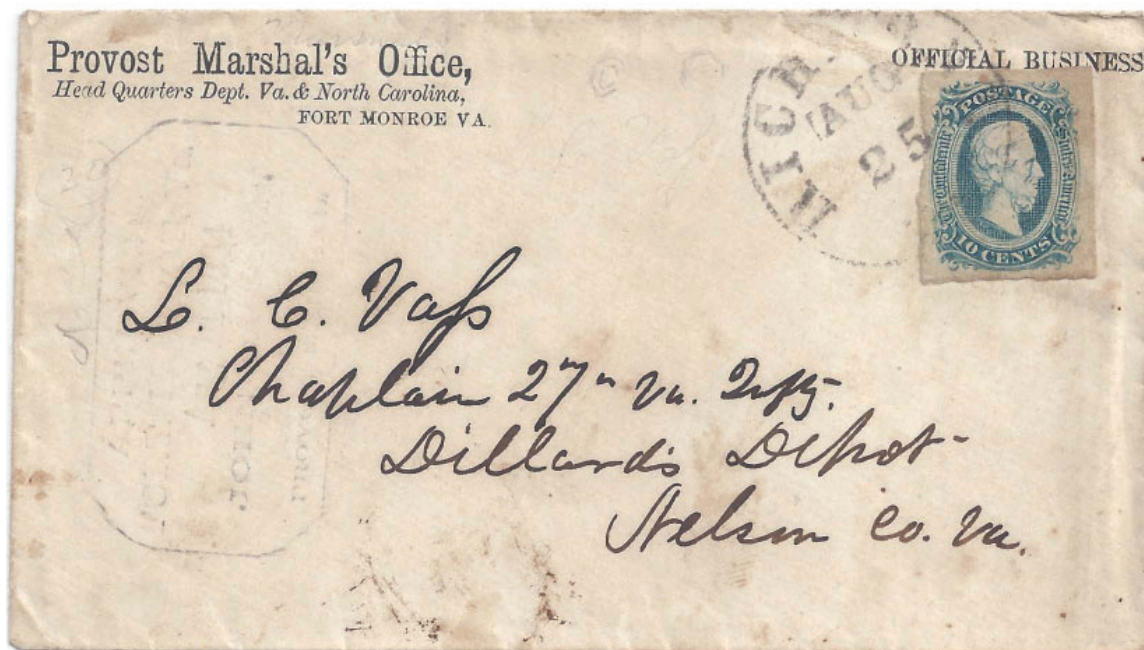


Figure 4. Lightly struck Type 2 John Cassels censor marking on Provost Marshal's Office imprinted cover from Fort Monroe.

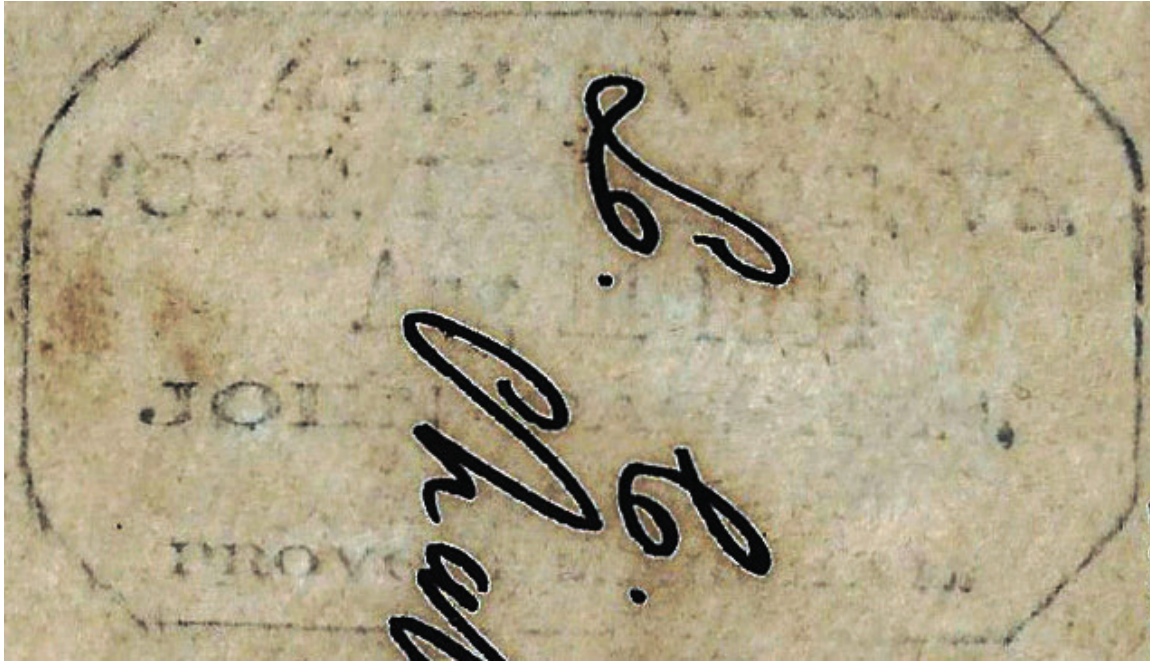


Figure 5. Enlarged close-up of Type 2 censor marking, “APPROVED / FORT MONROE, Va. / Aug 14, 1864 / JOHN CASSELS, / PROVOST MARSHAL,” with no rank noted.

It is incongruous that a Cassels marking is not shown nor cataloged in the *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History (CSA Catalog)*.⁴ One is, however, listed in the 1986 *New Dietz Catalog*, showing a May 22, 1864, date.⁵ It narrowly missed being listed in the 1959 catalog as well. The Cassels handstamp is also listed and illustrated in Galen Harrison’s *Prisoners’ Mail from the American Civil War*,⁶ and its discovery announced and later mentioned in several articles in the *Confederate Philatelist (CP)*. Harrison was the flag-of-truce section editor for the *CSA Catalog*. This omission was clearly an oversight.

A Cassels handstamp is mentioned in *Special Mail Routes of the American Civil War*⁷ on page 98, but there is no illustration, nor is it in the summary classifications. The Walske/Trepel book states there are fewer than five covers with this handstamp known, with which I agree. The *Special Mail Routes* book, still available quite reasonably from the society, is an invaluable companion to the *CSA Catalog*.

In a 1959 article in the *Confederate Stamp Album* (predecessor of the *CP*), Griffin G. Frazier wrote about two civilian flag-of-truce covers (folded letters) with Cassels markings in his article “A New Provost Marshal Marking.”⁸ One marking was handstamped (the new listing) and one was manuscript. Frazier does not show an image, but describes it as “APPROVED / FORT MONROE, Va. / Mar. 11, 1864 / JOHN CASSELS / Capt. and / PROVOST MARSHAL.” This March 11, 1864, cover is illustrated in *Civil War Prisons and Their Covers*, by Earl Antrim.⁹

Frazier mentions that the 1959-discovered new provost marshal handstamp was accepted by the *Dietz Catalog* editorial board for flag-of-truce covers, comprised of Van Dyk MacBride, Thomas M. Parks and Earl Antrim. The 1959 *Dietz Catalog* had just recently been published. The next in the catalog series was not until 1986, nearly 30 years later, when the Cassels censor marking was included.

In 2003, Dr. James W. Milgram announced another different provost marshal marking, that of Horace T. Sanders at Norfolk.¹⁰ Milgram cited the March 11 Cassels-handstamped cover and noted

that the *New Dietz Catalog* had a Cassels marking with a May 22, 1864, date that for some reason was listed as “out of the mails.” Milgram doubted that was true, based on other known hand-stamped provost marshal covers. I agree with Milgram. In a follow-up article in 2005, he illustrated the cover that Frazier had not shown, as well as transcribed the interesting letter from Havana.¹¹

In a 2013 *CP* article, Galen Harrison illustrated the Cassels handstamped cover dated May 22, 1864.¹² A close-up of that marking is shown in Figure 6.

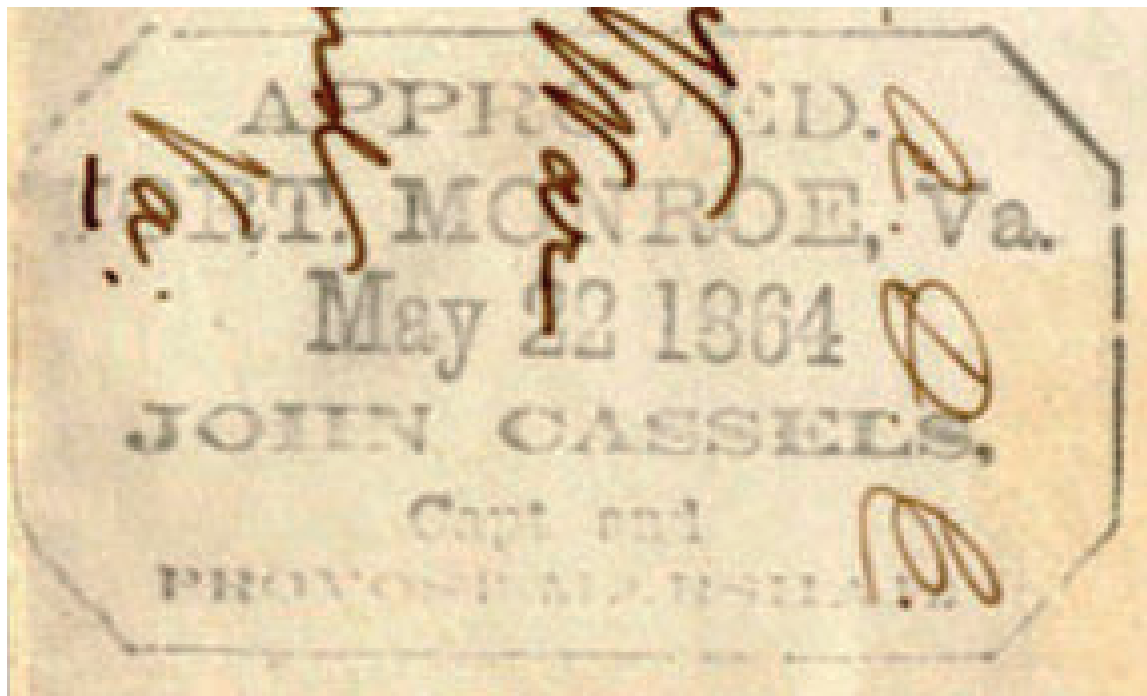


Figure 6. Close-up of earlier Type 1 censor marking, “APPROVED / FORT MONROE, Va. / May 22, 1864 / JOHN CASSELS, / Capt and / PROVOST MARSHAL,” showing Cassels’ rank.

The Frazier item is an earlier use than the Figure 5 example and shows his rank “Capt. and.” By August 1864, Cassels’ rank was no longer part of the handstamp, thus rendering it a second type – without his rank – the only one so far recorded. Although the marking is very light, I find no trace of rank.

I consider the first-discovered Cassels censor markings to be Type 1 and the marking without rank as Type 2. Comparison of the two types brings other differences to light. The octagonal border is different on the Type 2, with more curved lines than sharp corners. Type 2 measures 52mm wide by 29 mm high. These are virtually the same measurements made by Milgram of the Charles M. Whelden octagonal provost marshal handstamp (measured at 52½ by 29 mm); thus I conclude these were a relatively standard size for the period. The Horace T. Sanders marking was measured as 49 by 27 mm, quite similar. Type 2 is also the latest-recorded Cassels handstamp.

The Type 2 Cassels cover shown in Figure 4 is franked with a CSA 11, 10¢ blue, tied by a Richmond, Va., Aug 24 (1864) circular datestamp. It is addressed to “L.C. Vass Chaplain 27th Va. Infantry (Stonewall Brigade) Dillard’s Depot Nelson Co(nty) Va.”

Dillard’s Depot post office was changed to Tye River Depot at some unspecified time during the Civil War, according to the *Virginia Postal History Society Catalog*.¹³ It is listed as having a modest population of 82 souls.

Harrison's records show only three POW covers from Fort Monroe, all of them from President Jefferson Davis, which this obviously is not. There is only one cover recorded by Harrison from the Hygia Hotel at Fort Monroe; it is also an imprinted envelope, although there is no censor marking. The newly discovered cover with the Type 2 Cassels handstamp is more likely a civilian flag-of-truce use, although the sender is undetermined. Less likely, it could be from a prisoner or paroled prisoner.

An example of Cassels' manuscript censor marking is pictured in Figure 7, which shows a folded letter sent by civilian flag-of-truce and marked "Examined J. Cassels." It is written in English for purposes of censoring and datelined *Havana (Cuba) 22 Deceb. 1863*, to "Mrs. Oskar Aichel, Anderson C.H., S.C." from her German-immigrant husband. The letter was endorsed "By Flag of Truce" and was enclosed in an outer envelope that was discarded at the exchange point. It was carried by steamer to New York City and from there to the exchange point through Old Point Comfort to Fort Monroe (also called Fortress Monroe) in Virginia. Letters originating outside the continental United States and carried into the Confederacy under a flag-of-truce are extremely rare – rarer than blockade-run covers into Confederate ports. This is one of the two covers mentioned in Griffin Frazier's 1959 article announcing the Cassels handstamp censor marking. There was one with the then-new handstamped censor marking and this manuscript one.



Figure 7. Cassels' manuscript censor marking on folded blockade-run letter from Havana, Cuba.

Cassels' Passes and Documents

Easily found online, there are illustrated examples of provost marshal passes that are either signed or handstamped by Cassels, such as a pass at the Hampton History Museum dated Oct. 24, 1863. The Cassels-signed pass granted M.P. Bloxom permission to purchase and carry to Fox Hill one sack of salt for family use. Another pass handstamped Aug. 4, 1864, allowed Elias Pierce to travel to Hampton and return by command of Maj. Gen. Butler; it is found on the University of Delaware website.

There are numerous interesting documents under Cassels' signature or handstamp in official records such as:

PROVOST-MARSHAL'S OFFICE,
HDQRS. DEPT. OF VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA,

Fort Monroe, April 25, 1864.

Major-General BUTLER,
Commanding Department of Virginia and North Carolina:

GENERAL: I have the honor to report that of the 126 prisoners received on March 13 from the navy, reported as captured on the blockade-runners Don, Scotia, and Mary Ann, I have up to this time released 95, leaving 31 still in my custody. The examination of those remaining is progressing, and as soon as it can be shown satisfactorily that they are subjects of a foreign power they will be released.

I am, general, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

JOHN CASSELS,
Captain and Aide-de-Camp, Provost-Marshal.

Lachlan Cumming Vass I – Chaplain of the Stonewall Brigade

The addressee of the new Type 2 Cassels-censored cover is Rev. Lachlan Cumming Vass Sr. (1831-96), shown in Figure 8. Vass was born in Fredericksburg, Va. He was an 1850 graduate of Princeton University, after which he studied law and ultimately attended Union Theological Seminary in Virginia from 1858-59, from which he was graduated in 1860.

Elizabeth Maury Vass Wilkerson, great-granddaughter of Chaplain Vass, is in possession of Vass's diary for years 1865-89. It was edited by Wilkerson in book form: *Diary of Rev. L.C. Vass, Chaplain, Stonewall Brigade*, published in 2008. As printed, most of the Vass diary did not begin until April 2, 1865, in Petersburg. But there are select earlier war-dated letters to family.¹⁴

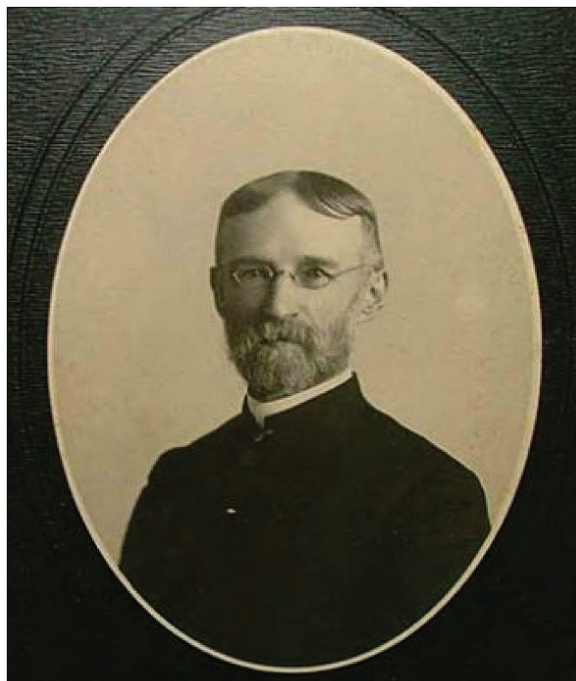


Figure 8. Civil War photo of Chaplain Lachlan Cumming Vass, Stonewall Brigade.

According to military records, Vass was commissioned into Field & Staff on Dec. 4, 1862, as chaplain of the 27th Virginia Infantry (Stonewall Brigade), Army of Northern Virginia. Vass's correspondence shows he was already serving with the troops at least as early as May 9, 1862.

Chaplain Vass was taken prisoner July 10, 1864, at Frederick, Md., at the Battle of Monocacy. He appears on records of the U.S.A. General Hospital at Frederick with a diagnosis of "convalescent." From there, he was transferred to Baltimore, where he is shown as confined in Baltimore at West's Buildings Hospital July 30, then transferred the next day to Fort Monroe July 31, 1864. Neither military records nor diary indicate from what he was recuperating.

Vass appears on a roll of prisoners of war at Fort Delaware Aug. 7, 1864, but he wasn't

there long. The next day, on Aug. 8, he appears on a list of men sent to City Point, Va., on a flag-of-truce steamer by order of Gen. Benjamin Butler. He was exchanged Aug. 12, 1864, and transferred to Petersburg on Aug. 13, 1864. From there, no further military record is found.

The Vass diary reveals more. The diary begins with a wartime autobiography that establishes he was chaplain at the post at Petersburg, serving both Federal and Confederate wounded and sick in the hospitals. By his own words, he was left behind enemy lines to care for 600 wounded Confederate prisoners at Frederick, Md., and returned several months later under a flag of truce to his post of duty alongside his fellow southerners at Petersburg.

His diary entry on May 15, 1865, states he and the other doctors were that date relieved of their duty with the Confederate wounded. He took the U.S. Oath of Allegiance (parole) two days later to be allowed to preach.

After the war, Vass served as a minister in and around New Bern, N.C., where he accepted the call to pastor the First Presbyterian Church in July 1866.

Vass died of double pneumonia in 1896, not long after moving to Charlottesville, Va., to become chaplain of the University of Virginia. He was spoken of highly in newspaper and church obituaries, leaving a compelling legacy for his family and his church.

For more about this Stonewall Brigade chaplain, see my column in the January 2024 edition of the *American Stamp Collector & Dealer*.

Endnotes

1. Ohio State University ehistory: *War of the Rebellion: Serial 049, Page 550, OPERATIONS IN N. C., VA., W. VA., MD., AND PA.* (Accessed Oct. 9, 2023).
2. 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry Field and Staff Officers. www.pa-roots.com/pacw/cavalry/11thcav/11thcavofficers.html (Accessed Oct. 9, 2023).
3. Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book: Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major General Benjamin Butler. Chapter 19: Observations upon matters connected with the war.* (A.M. Thayer & Co., Book Publishers, Boston, 1892).
4. 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. 489-493.
5. Hubert C. Skinner, Erin R. Gunter, Warren H. Sanders, *The New Dietz Confederate States Catalog and Handbook*, (Miami, Florida, Bogg & Laurence Publishing Co., Inc., 1986), page 210.
6. Galen D. Harrison, *Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War*, (Thompson-Shore, Inc., 1997), pp. 246-247.
7. Steven C. Walske and Scott R. Trepel, *Special Mail Routes of the American Civil War*, (Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2008), page 98.
8. Griffin G. Frazier, "A New Provost Marshal Marking," *Confederate Stamp Album*, November 1959, pp. 82-83.
9. Earl Antrim, *Civil War Prisons and Their Covers*, (Collectors Club Handbook Number 12, Collectors Club, N.Y., 1961), page 174.
10. James W. Milgram MD, "A New 'HORACE T. SANDERS' Provost Marshal Handstamp," *Confederate Philatelist*, May-June 2003, pp. 87-92.
11. James W. Milgram MD, "Provost Marshal Handstamps – Further Findings," *Confederate Philatelist*, October-December 2005, pp. 151-153.
12. Galen Harrison, "McCary Ballard & the Saga of Lt. Benjamin S. Calef," *Confederate Philatelist*, January-March 2013, pp. 24-33.
13. Robert L. Lisbeth, *Virginia Postal Markings and Postmasters: Colonial-1865*. (Virginia Postal History Society, 1984), page 113.
14. Elizabeth Vass Wilkerson, *Diary of Rev. L.C. Vass, Chaplain, Stonewall Brigade*. (AuthorHouse, 2008).