



The Civil War Post

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Virginia First-Day Cover from Green's Mansion House

This is not a modern first-day cover. The cover shown in Figure 1 is franked with a U.S. Scott 26, 3¢ dull red, tied by a neat Alexandria, Va., April 17, 1861, double-circle datestamp on the first day of Virginia independence. It has an illustrated advertisement for Green's Mansion House on the verso, as shown enlarged in Figure 2.

A Civil War First Day Cover

The cover is addressed to Miss Mary F. Kagey, New Market, Shenandoah Co., Va. Mary Kagey (1832-1911) had a brother, David Franklin Kagey (1834-1923), who served as a hospital steward with the 25th Virginia Infantry. Part of their wartime correspondence is archived at the Library of Virginia.

Virginia was only independent for a few weeks before joining the Confederate States of America on May 7, 1861. Alexandria covers that can be attributed to the Confederacy during the war are few in number because the city was taken by U.S. troops on May 24, very early in the war.



Figure 1. Scott U.S. 26, 3¢ dull red tied Alexandria, Va., April 17, 1861, postmark on the First Day of Virginia independence.



Figure 2. Green's Mansion House advertising on the back of the Alexandria, Va., First-Day Cover.

A strategic transportation hub, Alexandria was occupied by the federal army for the remainder of the war, becoming a logistical supply center for the Union Army. Troops and supplies were transported to Alexandria via port and railroad, then dispersed where needed at the front. Wounded soldiers were brought in on trains to be treated in Alexandria hospitals.

Col. Elmer Ellsworth – First Union Officer Killed

May 24, 1861, is a notorious date for both Alexandria and the American Civil War. Figure 3 shows a Currier & Ives print circa 1861 that depicts the death of Col. Ellsworth, shot by Marshall House Hotel owner James W. Jackson as Ellsworth descended a stairway after taking down a large Confederate flag flown above Jackson's hotel. Jackson is shown confronted by one of Ellsworth's men who killed Jackson in retaliation, Lt. Francis Edwin Brownell of Company A, 11th New York Infantry. He was awarded a Medal of Honor for his actions. The original print is in the Library of Congress.

Col. Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth (1837-61) was the first conspicuous casualty and the first Union officer to be killed in the war. He was a personal friend of President Abraham Lincoln. After studying law in Chicago, in 1860 he took a job in Lincoln's law office in Springfield, Ill. Ellsworth had also helped with Lincoln's political campaign. A lawyer from Mechanicsville, N.Y., the 24-year-old Ellsworth enlisted as a colonel in the U.S. Army at New York City in 1861. He was commissioned into the 11th New York Infantry, on May 7 of that year.



Figure 3. Currier & Ives print circa 1861 depicting the death of Col. Elmer Ellsworth at point blank range. Library of Congress.

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From Washington, across the Potomac River, Ellsworth had seen the large Confederate flag flying from the hotel through field glasses and, it is said, promised the president's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, that he would take it down. President Lincoln was grief stricken at the death of his friend. Lincoln ordered an honor guard to bring Ellsworth's body to the White House where he lay in state in the East Room. Lincoln wrote an emotional letter to Ellsworth's parents that he signed, "Sincerely your friend in a common affliction," the first of many sad letters he would write over the next few years.

Figure 4 shows a Matthew Brady photograph portrait of Col. Ellsworth in suit and cape with a cane. The death of Ellsworth generated an endless array of souvenirs memorializing his death, such as the Union patriotic cover design pictured in Figure 5, as well as engendering the rallying cry of "Remember Ellsworth" as a call to arms.

In Figure 6, another Matthew Brady portrait from the Library of Congress archives shows Lt. Francis E. Brownell, who confronted and killed Marshall House Hotel owner James Jackson after he assassinated Col. Ellsworth.



Figure 4. (above) Col. Elmer Ellsworth of Field and Staff, 11th New York Infantry Regiment. Brady's National Portrait Gallery, 1861, published by E.&H.T. Anthony. Library of Congress.



Figure 5. (above) Union patriotic cover design memorializing the death of Col. Ellsworth, a martyr to the cause.



Figure 6. (left) Lt. Francis Brownell, who confronted and killed Marshall House Hotel owner James Jackson after he assassinated Col. Ellsworth. Brady's National Portrait Gallery, 1861, published by E.&H.T. Anthony. Library of Congress.



Figure 7. Marshall House, Alexandria, Va., where Col. Ellsworth was shot for attempting to remove a Confederate flag from the roof. Brady's National Portrait Gallery, 1861. Library of Congress.

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Figure 8. Wartime photograph of Mansion House Hospital circa 1861-1865 by photographers Bowdoin, Taylor & Co., Library of Congress.

The Marshall House is shown in Figure 7, where Col. Ellsworth was shot. The photo is also by Matthew Brady (1822-96). Soldiers and souvenir hunters carried away pieces of the flag and other mementos associated with Ellsworth's death.

Green's Mansion Hotel Converted to a Union Military Hospital

The advertising image on the back of the subject cover is of Green's Mansion House, as shown in a period Civil War photograph in Figure 8.

Green's Mansion House was converted to a hospital during the Civil War. It was the largest hotel in Alexandria. In early November 1861, Green received notice stating he had three days to vacate; it took more than a week to remove everything. On Dec. 1, 1861, Mansion House Hospital was opened as a general hospital. Parts of nearby buildings were also used as part of the hospital. The facility could hold up to 700 sick and wounded soldiers.

During the four years of the war, Union hospitals treated 6,000,000 cases of illness and 400,000 battle wounds and injuries. Two-thirds of Union deaths during the war were a result of disease.

In 2016, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) aired a two-season miniseries, *Mercy Street*, set in the Mansion House Hospital in 1862. It will come as no surprise that I was a big fan of the show, which followed the lives of two volunteer nurses on opposite sides of the conflict – Nurse Mary Phinney, a staunch Unionist, and Emma Green, a naïve Confederate belle. Both characters were based on real people.

Baroness Mary Phinney von Olnhausen (1818-1902) was an American nurse, abolitionist and diarist who served as a nurse there. She also served as a nurse in the Franco-Prussian War, for which she was awarded a Cross of Merit for Women and Girls in 1873 by Kaiser Wilhelm I (similar to an Iron Cross).

Emma Green was one of the teenage daughters of James Green, proprietor of Green's Mansion House. His family lived in John Carlyle's historic 1753 mansion, concealed by the hotel. The series traced not only her work at the hospital but her romance with Benjamin Franklin (Frank) Stringfellow who served as a brilliant scout and a spy.

Frank Stringfellow "the most dangerous man in the Confederacy"

Frank was a slightly built man standing 5'8" tall and weighing less than 100 lbs. – some sources say 94 lbs. It took some convincing to persuade the Army he was physically capable enough to serve; he was denied a position multiple times. But what he lacked in brawn he made up in brains. He was eventually commissioned a captain in the 4th Virginia Cavalry. Stringfellow began spying right away. One of his first spying missions placed him in Alexandria, where he met Emma.

Confederate President Jefferson Davis sent Frank to Washington in March 1865. Upon learning that Richmond had fallen, Frank decided to leave Washington and return to Virginia. By the time he arrived in April, he learned there were rumors that he was involved in Lincoln's assassination since he and Lincoln-assassin John Wilkes Booth had once shared the same

boarding house. There is no evidence he was ever involved.

Frank realized Virginia was unsafe for him, so he fled to Canada. While in Canada, he and Emma corresponded. In 1867, Frank returned to Alexandria and the two were wed Jan. 23 that year. Frank subsequently entered Virginia Theological Seminary and was ordained as an Episcopal priest. He lectured extensively about his experiences in the Civil War to help raise money for the church. Coincidentally, one of the first books I ever read about the Civil War was *Stringfellow of the Fourth: The Amazing Career of the Most Successful Confederate Spy*. It is still in my library.

Stringfellow later wrote President Ulysses S. Grant to reveal that, in 1864, he had been close enough to shoot Grant, then commanding the entire Union Army, but could not bring himself to pull the trigger. Grant thanked him for sparing his life and promised that he or any future president would accommodate any request he made. In 1898, he referenced Grant's offer and asked that he be allowed to serve

as an Army chaplain in the Spanish-American War. His request was granted.

Epilogue

Known as Braddock House Hotel since the early 1880s, after its acquisition by new proprietors, the deteriorated structure once known as Green's Mansion House was torn down in 1973 to reveal an unobstructed view of the historic Carlyle House. I personally remember this because 50 years ago I lived in Alexandria and watched the unfolding demolition with interest. My first tour of the 18th-century John Carlyle House in the 1960s involved walking around "that obtrusive structure," which was demolished despite the predictable protests of preservationists.

This historic cover from the longest-occupied Confederate city of Alexandria evokes tales of countless significant events in our American history. City streets were filled with people who ably bore witness to the conflict of brother against brother where allegiances blurred and loyalties shifted as the war played out. ☐

Endnotes

1. Patrick Kiger, Boundary Stones, "First Union Officer Killed in Civil War Was a Friend of Lincoln," <https://boundarystones.weta.org/2016/01/07/first-union-officer-killed-civil-war-was-friend-lincoln>, Accessed July 22, 2023.
2. Sarah Coster, "Nurses, Spies and Soldiers: The Civil War at Carlyle House," *Carlyle House Docent Dispatch*, March 2011.
3. Public Broadcasting Service, *Mercy Street*, www.pbs.org/mercy-street/about/ Accessed July 22, 2023.
4. R. Shepard Brown, *Stringfellow of the Fourth: The Amazing Career of the Most Successful Confederate Spy*, Crown Publishers Inc, 1960.
5. "Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow: The Spy Who Spared a General," *Evolution of Espionage in America*, www.intelligence.gov/evolution-of-espionage/civil-war/confederate-espionage/benjamin-stringfellow Accessed July 22, 2023.



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