



Censored Mail from Fort Monroe to Chaplain L.C. Vass, Stonewall Brigade

Cassels Provost Marshal Handstamps

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 handstamp markings. Provost marshal handstamp markings are far rarer than prison censor handstamps. No Confederate provost marshal handstamp markings are known.

A type 1 May 22, 1864 Cassels provost marshal handstamp is shown in Figure 1. Recently, I identified a second type as shown in Figure 2. The primary difference is that the "Capt and" have been removed. Comparison of the two types brings other differences to light. The octagonal border is also different on the type 2, with more curved lines than sharp corners.

Shown in Figure 3 is the cover with the type 2 Cassels handstamp. It is imprinted at top left with Provost Marshal's Office, Head Quarters Dept. Va. & North Carolina, FORT MONROE, VA. OFFICIAL BUSINESS is printed at right. The lightly struck but readable large octagonal examined marking at left reads: APPROVED / FORT MONROE, Va. / Aug 14, 1864 / JOHN CASSELS, / PROVOST MARSHAL. Figure 2 is a digitally-enhanced close-up of that marking with "Capt. and" missing. It is also the latest recorded Cassels handstamp. There are fewer than five recorded Cassels handstamps of either type.

The cover is franked with a CSA 11, 10¢ blue Jefferson Davis engraved type 1 stamp

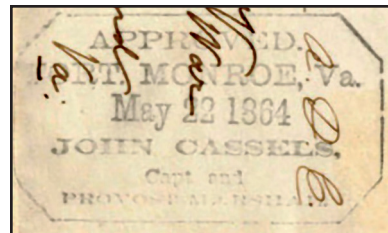


Figure 1. Type 1 censor marking: APPROVED / FORT MONROE, Va. / May 22, 1864 / JOHN CASSELS, / Capt and / PROVOST MARSHAL showing Cassels' rank.

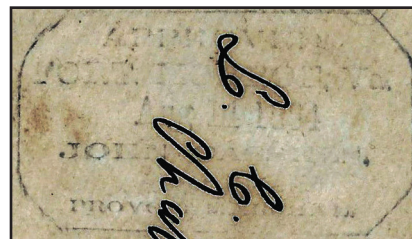


Figure 2. Type 2 censor marking: APPROVED / FORT MONROE, Va. / Aug 14, 1864 / JOHN CASSELS, / PROVOST MARSHAL with no rank noted.



Figure 3. Lightly struck type 2 John Cassels censor marking on U.S. Provost Marshal's Office imprinted cover from Fort Monroe.



Figure 4. Benjamin F. Butler in 1861 as photographed by Matthew Brady (Library of Congress).

Captain John Cassels was Provost Marshal at Fort Monroe, Virginia, from June 1863 to January 1865 under the supervision of Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, shown in Figure 4. Cassels either personally signed censored mail as provost marshal or used a special handstamp.

Fort Monroe (also known as Fortress Monroe), Virginia, was completely in Union control during the American Civil War. It was never in Confederate hands. Thus, all mail from there that traveled south did so under flag of truce. The subject cover is a civilian flag-of-truce use, although the sender is undetermined. Less likely, it could be from a prisoner or paroled prisoner. Per military regulations, it used the standard two-envelope system. Inner and outer envelopes with the appropriate postage of the respective countries were used. The outer envelope was discarded at the exchange point, while the remaining inner envelope served to convey the letter to its final destination.

For more information on Capt. John Cassels of the 11th Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiment and his censor markings, see my article in the first quarter 2024 issue of the *Civil War Philatelist*, quarterly journal of the Civil War Philatelic Society. If you are not a member, I would be pleased to sponsor you.

Lachlan Cumming Vass I — Chaplain of the Stonewall Brigade

The addressee of the subject cover is Rev. Lachlan Cumming Vass Sr. (1831–1896), shown in Figure 5. He was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, to a distinguished merchant father who was a native of Forres, Scotland. His mother, Elizabeth Braine Maury, was a lineal descendant of the Huguenot families of De La Fontaine and Maury, who escaped from France on the revocation of the edict of Nantes, 1685.

Vass was an 1850 graduate of Princeton University with the English salutatory (second in his class), after which he studied law and ultimately attended Union Theological Seminary in Virginia from 1858–1859, from where he graduated in 1860. The latter institution was founded in 1812 as an adjunct of Hampden-Sydney College in central Virginia. The “Union” in the name represents the partnership of the synods of Virginia and North Carolina on behalf of theological education.

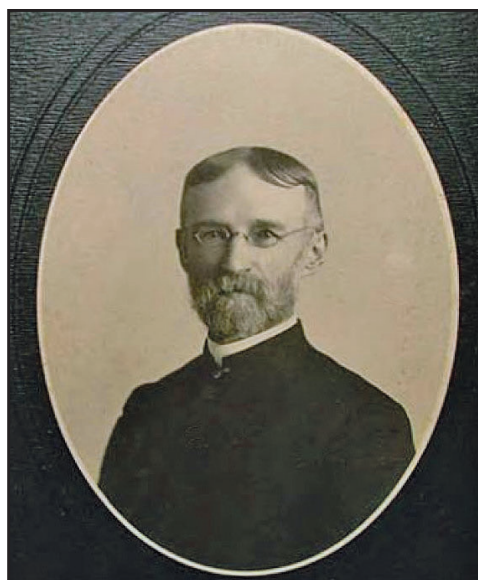
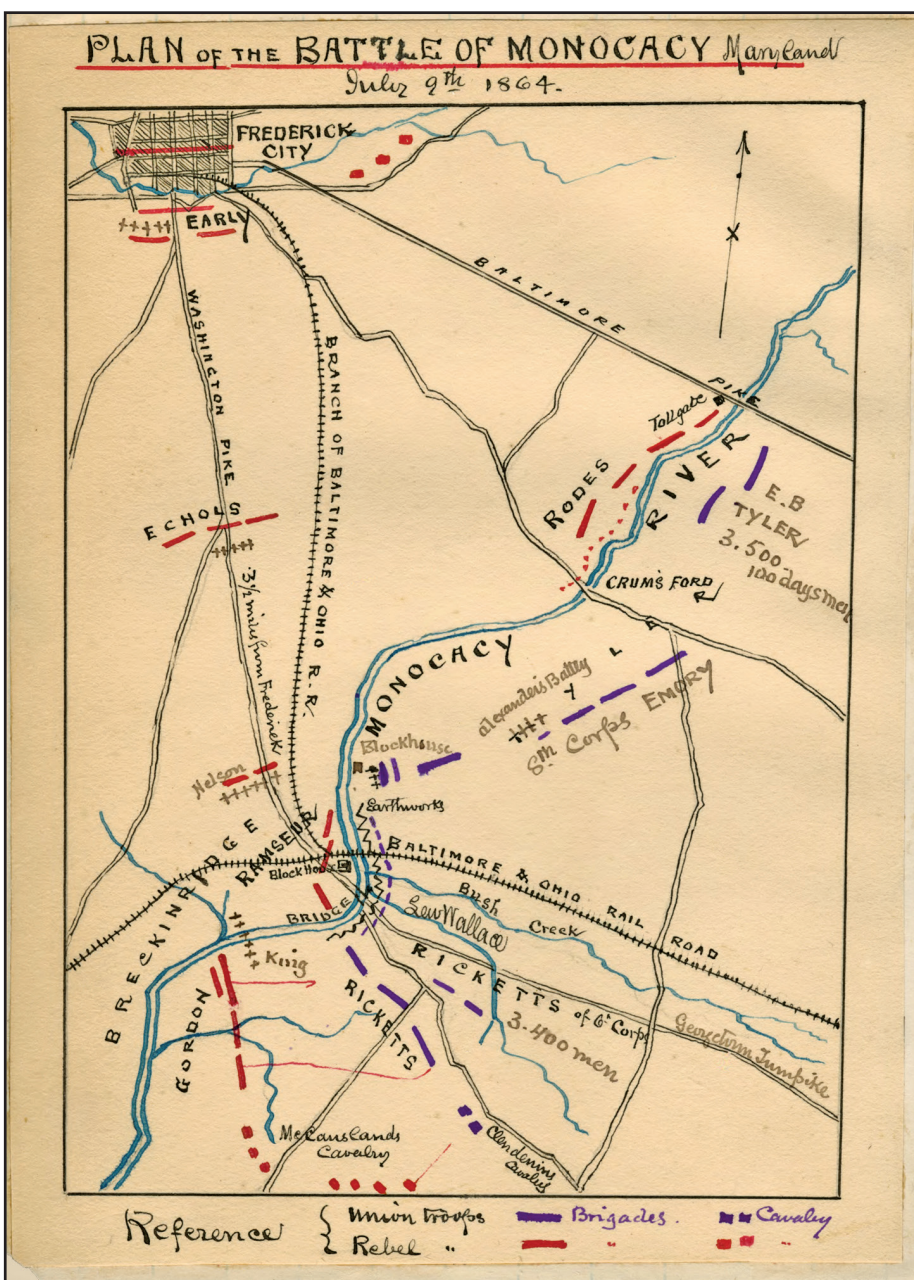


Figure 5. Civil War photo of Chaplain Lachlan Cumming Vass, Stonewall Brigade.

Figure 6. Plan of the Battle of Monocacy, July 9, 1864. (Library of Congress)



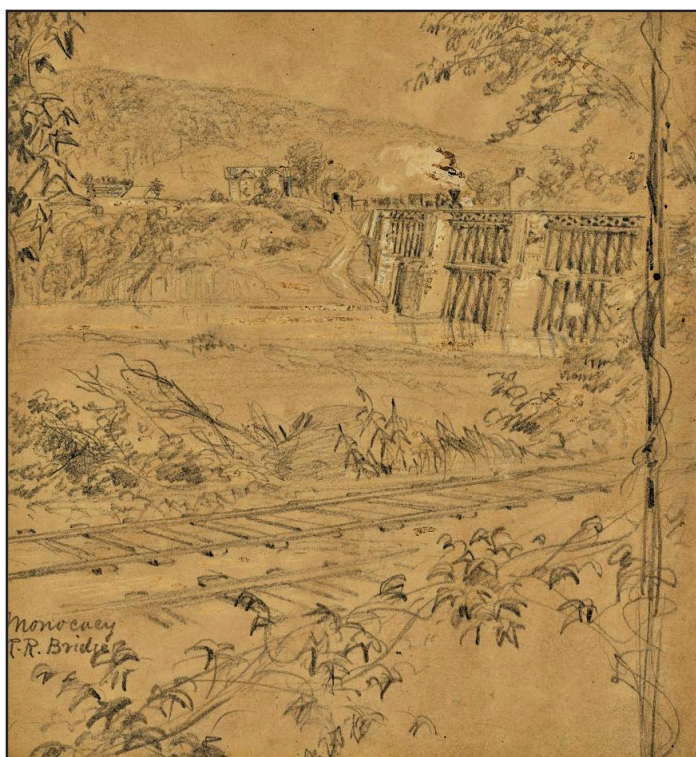


Figure 7. Monocacy railroad bridge as sketched by Alfred Waud in 1863 for Harper's Weekly. (Library of Congress)

V 27 Va	
L. C. Vass	
Rank, Chaplain Co., 27 Reg't Va	
Admitted	July 10, 1864
To	U. S. A. Gen'l Hosp., Frederick, Md.
From	Frederick, Md.
Diagnosis	Convalescent
Missile	
W'd at	, 18
Treatm't	
Ret'd to duty	, 18
Transf'd to I. C.	, 18
Transf'd to	July 31, 1864
Furloughed	, 18
Deserted	, 18
Disch'd from service	, 18
Died	, 18
Re-adm'd from furlo' or des'n	, 18
Remarks	to Baltimore
Md. Reg. No. 62	Hos. No. 2915/2
Dated	
(203-31) (a 3-076) Copyist.	

Figure 8. National Archives record showing Chaplain Vass at the U.S.A. General Hospital at Frederick with a diagnosis of "convalescent."

V 27 Va	
L. C. Vass	
Rank, Chaplain Co., 27 Reg't Va	
Admitted	July 30, 1864
To	U. S. A. Gen'l Hosp., West's Buildings, Baltimore, Md.
From	Frederick, Md.
Diagnosis	
Missile	
W'd at	, 18
Treatm't	
Ret'd to duty	, 18
Transf'd to I. C.	, 18
Transf'd to	July 31, 1864
Furloughed	, 18
Deserted	, 18
Disch'd from service	, 18
Died	, 18
Re-adm'd from furlo' or des'n	, 18
Remarks	Fort Monroe
Md. Reg. No. 77	Hos. No. 2916/2
Dated	
(203-36) (a 3-076) Copyist.	

Figure 9. National Archives record showing Chaplain Vass confined in Baltimore at West's Buildings Hospital July 30, then transferred the next day to Fort Monroe July 31, 1864.

Elizabeth Maury Vass Wilkerson, great granddaughter of Chaplain Vass, is in possession of Vass's diary for years 1865-1889. It was edited by Wilkerson in book form: *Diary of Rev. L.C. Vass, Chaplain, Stonewall Brigade*, and 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.

According to military records, Vass was commissioned into Field & Staff on December 4, 1862, as chaplain of the 27th Virginia Infantry (Stonewall Brigade), Army of Northern Virginia. The Stonewall Brigade was also known as the "Bloody 27th," allegedly due to the large number of unruly Irishmen in its ranks. Vass's correspondence shows he was already serving with the troops at least as early as May 9, 1862, as indicated by a thus-dated letter to his mother.

Chaplain Vass was taken prisoner July 10, 1864, at Frederick, Maryland, at the Battle of Monocacy. Figure 6 shows the Plan of the Battle of Monocacy, July 9, 1864. The map shows the location of troops on either side of the Monocacy River and north into the city of Frederick, Maryland. The map was created by Robert Knox Sneden (1832-1918) and is housed at the Library of Congress.

The Battle of Monocacy was part of "Early's Washington Raid." CSA General Jubal Early's troops met Federal forces near the river.

Union General Lew Wallace's men bravely held their ground, although they were badly outnumbered. In often conflicting statistics, the National Park Service states there were 15,000 Confederates to 6,600 Union. The American Battlefield Trust website says there were 14,000 Confederates to 5,800 Union. Vass's diary quotes statistics of 18,000 vs. 5,800. Regardless of the inconsistent numbers, it is clear there were overwhelming odds. Wallace's delaying tactics earned the battle the nickname "The Battle that saved Washington."

Per the Army Historical Foundation, after the battle, Wallace gave orders to collect the bodies of the dead for burial on the battlefield. One of the monuments on the battlefield includes a simple inscription written by Wallace that sums up the battle: "These men died to save the National Capital, and they did save it." Their actions bought time for additional Union troops to reinforce Washington.

Figure 7 shows a pencil and Chinese White sketch by renowned Civil War artist and press correspondent Alfred R. Waud (1828-1891) that depicts the Monocacy railroad bridge subsequently destroyed by Confederate troops in July 1864. The sketch was published on page 521 of the August 15, 1863, edition of *Harper's Weekly* as part of "Reminiscences of the Maryland Campaign."

Vass appeared on the records of the U.S.A. General Hospital at Frederick with a diagnosis of "convalescent," and from there was transferred to Baltimore, as shown in Figure 8, where he was confined in Baltimore at West's Buildings Hospital July 30 then transferred the next day to Fort Monroe July 31, 1864, as shown in Figure

9. Neither military records nor diary indicate from what he was recuperating.

Vass appears on a roll of prisoners of war at Fort Delaware August 7, 1864, but he was not there long. The next day, on August 8th, he appears on a list of men sent to City Point, Virginia, on a flag-of-truce steamer by order of Gen. Benjamin Butler. He was exchanged August 12, 1864, two weeks before the subject cover reached Richmond. Military records show Vass was transferred to Petersburg on August 13, 1864. From there is no further record.

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 at Frederick, Maryland, to care for 600 Confederate wounded.

Vass returned several months later under a flag of truce to his post of duty alongside his fellow southerners at Petersburg. In a letter to Rev. J. Leighton Wilson dated April 1, 1865, Vass stated:

I suppose that since the commencement of my labors in Petersburg, I have been brought into contact for a short or long period with at least (1500) fifteen hundred persons in our hospitals... the active operations now beginning bring us increased numbers of wounded, many of whom soon die... it is now past 11:00, Saturday night. Distant cannoning is heard apparently far



Figure 10. Gravestone of Rev. Lachlan Cumming Vass and wife Mary Elizabeth Vass at Cedar Grove Cemetery in New Bern, N.C.



Figure 11. Mary Eliza Jones Vass, wife of Rev. L.C. Vass Sr.

in Grant's rear; and artillery is beginning to belch forth its echoing thunders along our line around the city. It however may all mean nothing.

The echoing artillery volleys described by Vass disclosed a war nearing its end. Vass describes the sorrow felt by the troops when told that Gen. Lee had capitulated to Grant on April 9th. Many at first would not believe it, including Vass, and countless cried openly at the news. The chaplain writes eloquently about the sad reality of death all around them while trying to bring men to Christ, one by one.

Chaplain Vass made lengthy detailed lists of the sick and wounded at the hospital after the Battle of Monocacy, as well as recording deaths and interments. His May 15, 1865, diary entry states he and three named doctors were that date relieved of their duty with the Confederate wounded at the General Hospital. He took the U.S. Oath of Allegiance (parole) two days later in order that he be allowed to preach.

After the war ended, Vass served as a minister in and around New Bern where he accepted the call to pastor the First Presbyterian Church of New Bern in July 1866. The majority of his sermons were written in Greek; most are housed at the Presbyterian Historical Foundation.

On May 9, 1867, Vass married Mary Eliza Jones, a member of the New Bern congregation. Her portrait is shown in Figure 10. Together, Lachlan and Mary had five children. Their three girls all died in short intervals in 1877–78 of diphtheria. Vass's son and grandson,

Page No. 10

SCHEDULE 1.—Inhabitants in South and City of New Bern, in the County of Currituck, State of North Carolina, enumerated by me on the 28 day of June, 1870.

Post Office: New Bern North Carolina W. F. Hodges, Ass't Marshal.

1	2	3	DESCRIPTION.			7	VALUE OF REAL ESTATE OWNED.		10	PARENTAGE.		14	15	16	17	18	19	20
			Age last birth-day, if under 15 years.	Sex.	Color.		Value of Real Estate.	Value of Personal Estate.		Place of Birth, naming State or Territory of U. S.; or the Country, if of foreign birth.	Native of Foreign Birth.							
1	69	Smith Deborah	22	F	W	Occupation			New York									
2	"	"	26	F	W	"			"									
3	"	David Richmond	30	M	W	Merchant Dealer	2,500	2,000	"									
4	70	Vass Lachlan	39	M	W	Presbyterian Chaplain	13,000	3,000	Virginia									
5	"	" Mary E	31	F	W	Keeping House			North Carolina									
6	"	" Leah A	1	F	W	At Home			"									
7	"	" Elizabeth	1/2	F	W	"			"									
8	"	"							"									

Figure 12. Federal census of 1870 for New Bern, N.C., listing Vass family members on lines 4-7.

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Member of



of the same name, were also called to ministry and served as well-known missionaries in the Congo. Their other son, Edward Smallwood Vass, became a physician.

An amusing story from Vass's great granddaughter concerns Rev. Vass and his young son, Lachlan. It seems the son was shooting at birds, which had landed on the steeple of the church. The boy's shots left holes in the steeple. When it was determined young Lachlan was the one who had done the damage, he was severely punished by his father.

When Elizabeth Vass Wilkerson visited New Bern a number of years ago with her husband, their tour guide took them past the church and explained that the visible holes in the steeple were made by Yankees using it for target practice during the occupation of the city. The Wilkersons got quite a chuckle out of that specious tale.

An unattributed local New Bern, North Carolina, newspaper obituary posted on the Find A Grave website, memorial 28306272, declared Rev. Dr. Vass:

A man of gentle and cultivated manners, of fine literary and poetic attainments ... Dr. Vass, purposed (sic) writing a history of the Stonewall Brigade in which he served as chaplain during the war, being in close personal contact with Stonewall Jackson, qualified him for that work.

Rev. Vass served the New Bern church from 1866-1890, thus he had a powerful connection to the congregation. Figure 11 shows the 1870 federal census for New Bern, North Carolina, that lists Vass family members on lines 4–7. From 1890–96, Rev. Vass served as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia.

Since Mary Vass was born and raised in New Bern and their children were all born there, it is no surprise that the Vass family was congregated in New Bern as their final resting place. The family gravestone at Cedar Grove Cemetery is shown in Figure 12.

Vass died of double pneumonia not long after moving to Charlottesville, Virginia, to become chaplain of the University of Virginia. Having lived a virtuous life, he left an honorable Christian heritage for both his family and his church.

Endnotes

Union Presbyterian Seminary, History, <https://www.upsem.edu/about/history/> (Accessed October 9, 2023)

Elizabeth Vass Wilkerson, *Diary of Rev. L.C. Vass, Chaplain, Stonewall Brigade*. (AuthorHouse, 2008)



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