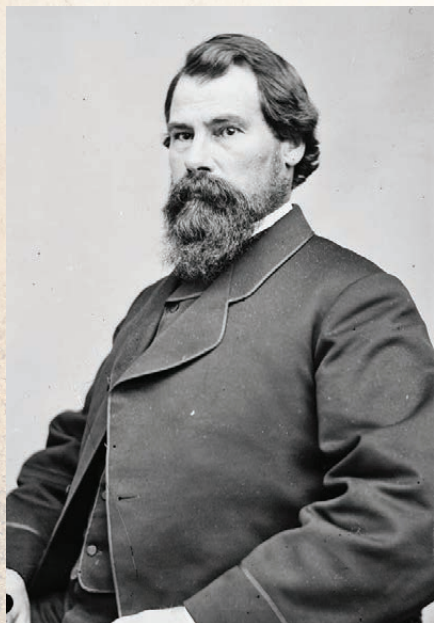


THE WAR OF WORDS



THE ROLE OF MAIL DURING THE CIVIL WAR



Confederate Postmaster General John Reagan

On April 12, 1861, the first shots of the Civil War rang out at Fort Sumter in Charleston, SC. While the war would become the bloodiest in the nation's history, there was another often-forgotten aspect of that conflict—its impact on the mail.

Mail was vitally important to everyday life in the 1800s, being the only universal network tying the citizens of the country together. That importance becomes even more clear when one looks at the lengths the Union and the Confederacy went to create, preserve and maintain the operation of the mail through the rift in the nation's fabric.

Before the guns began to fire at Fort Sumter, the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 prompted South Carolina to vote to secede from the United States. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas followed, seceding in January and February 1861. These states agreed to form a new federal government, the Confederate States of America, on Feb. 4, 1861.

The South established its own Post Office Department that same month, with former Texas Rep. John Reagan appointed postmaster general in March. Reagan hired Southern Post Office clerks and encouraged those soon to depart Washington, DC, to bring any maps, reports, forms, plans or other postal supplies that they could get their hands on. In all, Reagan placed 8,535 of the country's 28,586 post offices under Confederate control.

"Reagan in effect had stolen the U.S. Post Office," historian William C. Davis later wrote.

UNCERTAIN TIMES

President Lincoln vowed in his 1861 inaugural message to continue delivering the mail in the seceded states:

The mails, unless repelled, will continue to be furnished in all parts of the Union.

So far as possible the people everywhere shall have that sense of perfect security which is most favorable to calm thought and reflection.

Congress agreed with Lincoln's first point and passed a law authorizing the discontinuance of service on routes where delivery was unsafe.

No one knew what this would mean. Postmasters sought guidance. James R. Gates, a postmaster in the seceded state of Mississippi, wrote to Illinois Sen. Stephen A. Douglas for counsel in mid-February. He asked him to "let me know if the mails will be stop[p]ed," and "when it will take place." He was not alone in wanting to know.

In mid-November 1860, one Washington, DC, resident quickly sent a letter to an acquaintance in South Carolina before he would "be required to pay 'foreign postage' on a letter to Charleston."

Stephen W. Church, a Northern-born merchant living in Charleston, wrote his uncle two weeks after South Carolina seceded to report that everything was "in a complete state of anarchy," including a shortage of postage stamps. "This of course is one of the least of the troubles," Church wrote, "but it annoys me very much."

Ultimately, federal mail service to southern states was officially suspended on May 31, 1861.

SOLDIERS' MAIL

For the troops fighting on either side of the conflict, letters to and from home were vital. Some seemed to spend all their free time writing letters. Many letters were keepsakes that soldiers kept close to their hearts. Other letters were prepared and kept on their person so that if they were killed, a final message could return to their loved ones.

Maj. Sullivan Ballou of the Second Rhode Island Infantry wrote to his wife, Sarah, just days before the First

Opposite page:
Soldiers gather at an
Army post office

Right: A soldier reads
a letter (lower left) and
rests after a drill in
Petersburg, VA, 1864

Battle of Bull Run, where he'd be mortally wounded:

My Very Dear Wife: Indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days, perhaps to-morrow. Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write a few lines, that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more.

Both armies assigned personnel to collect and distribute the mail from wagons and tents that served as post offices. But it wasn't a perfect system, as when they were on the march, mail could take weeks to find its recipient.

Hermion Clarke, a Union soldier encamped at Bermuda Hundred in the South explained to his father in 1864: "We have moved so often that letters couldn't find us. Write often, and I will run the risk of getting the letters."

The constraints of the war meant that the Post Office needed to evolve to meet the needs of the day. Those changes include:

- Stamps were difficult to obtain and keep dry, so beginning in July 1861, a soldier could write "Soldier's Letter" and include his name, rank and unit on the envelope, and postage would be collected from the recipient.
- In July 1863, distance-based letter rate categories were eliminated, and city delivery was introduced in the nation's largest cities.
- In November 1864, the money order system began, making it safer for soldiers and citizens alike to send money through the mail.
- To allow troops to vote in elections, many states developed absentee ballot rules (see "As if present: A history of absentee voting" in the September/October 2024 issue of *The Postal Record*).
- Prisoners of war and other citizens were allowed to send letters, and they were exchanged between the combatants through flag-of-truce



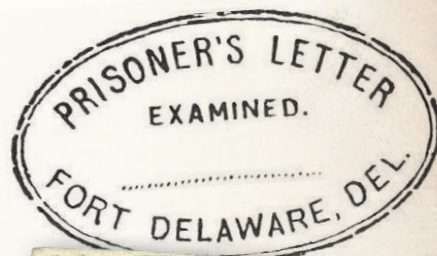
ships. These letters were heavily censored to not reveal any sensitive war information.

POST OFFICES AT WAR

At the beginning of the war, all Confederate postal business continued to use U.S. currency and postage stamps. To prevent the Confederacy from using U.S. stamps, the Post Office redesigned its stamps and distributed them to postmasters to replace the pre-war ones. After a short time, the earlier ones were demonetized.

The Confederacy had trouble finding a printer that could print its own stamps in the southern states and had to turn to England, its trading partner, to get plates and stamps produced until 1863. The first Confederate stamps became available in October 1861 and bore the portrait of President Jefferson Davis, the first living president to appear on a stamp.

Taking advantage of the fervor in both countries, printers created patriotic stationery illustrating their cause. These covers (envelopes) often included flags, cannons, political leaders, slogans, soldiers, and caricatures to mock or attack the other side. As the war went on, paper became scarce in the South and letter writers took to using any paper they could find, such as pieces of ledgers. These envelopes became known as "adversity covers."



Above: A
cancellation
for prisoners'
letters

Left: A Confed-
erate stamp
featuring Presi-
dent Jefferson
Davis

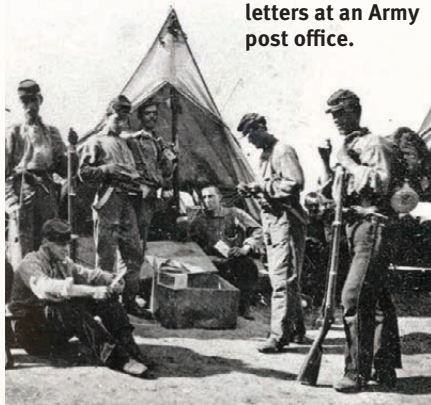


Above: Covers that featured patriotic imagery

Right: A charity stamp used to raise funds for the U.S. Sanitary Commission



Soldiers read their letters at an Army post office.



While some mail did pass through flag-of-truce ships, other mail traveled on blockade runners to avoid the Union's blockade on Confederacy ships. It often went through Cuba, Bermuda and the West Indies. Postage had to be paid twice—postage for U.S. stamps and a payment to the ship's master.

As the war continued, coins—which were backed by the value of the metal—began to be hoarded, which made it hard to buy and sell products. Merchants and others started to use postage stamps as small change. This proved problematic because of their size and adhesive backing they often got wadded and stuck together.

In July of 1862, the use of postage stamps as currency was legalized in the U.S. and beginning in August, the Treasury Department issued “postage currency.” Postal currency were reproductions of stamps on larger, ungummed paper, valued at 5, 10, 25 and 50 cents. Eventually, this paper currency moved away from reproducing stamps.

In 1861, President Lincoln created the U.S. Sanitary Commission to be responsible for the health and welfare of Union soldiers, but he left it unfunded. That meant the commission had to get creative, raising money for the hospitals, supplies and care of wounded soldiers—including by selling the world's first charity stamp. Charity stamps are special stamps sold to help a cause, with the entirety of the price going to the charity.

By 1863, the need for services provided by the Sanitary Commission was simply overwhelming. The Commission started to hold “sanitary fairs” run by local women's groups, which sold all types of donated products to attendees. At the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair, held in the spring of 1864, the fair's post office sold two stamps produced for sale at that fair. Though the stamps didn't bring in much money, it started a fundraising mecha-

nism that continues to this day, such as with the well-known Breast Cancer Research semi-postal stamp.

WAR'S END

Letters from the troops heralded the end of the war and the troubling times of Reconstruction to come.

Acting Assistant Inspector General of the Union's Second Brigade John Alexander wrote in a letter just before the surrender of 89,000 Confederate troops in 1865:

Every day there are droves of men coming by here going home that belonged to Lee's Army... Some of Lee's men stopped at our Camp last night and the boys shared their rations with them and their tents and appeared as cheerful as larks in each others company.

God grant that I may see peace in our land again. But when I think of my comrades that have fallen by my side in the dark hour of battle, something says 'how can you forgive these men that have made so many homes desolate in the land'. I hope I may be charitable enough to forgive them...

As Union troops regained southern territories, Confederate post offices were returned to federal control. By the end of 1865, almost 500 routes had been restored, and by Nov. 1, 1866, almost half of the post offices in the South had been returned to federal service.

In May of 1865, Confederate Postmaster General John Reagan and President Jefferson Davis, who were fleeing the Union's Army of the Potomac, were captured and arrested. Reagan was held in solitary confinement for 22 weeks. In 1868, President Andrew Johnson granted a pardon to Reagan and other Confederate leaders. He returned to his home state of Texas and in 1874 was elected to the seat in the U.S. Congress he held before the war. He served as the first chairman of the Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads. **PR**