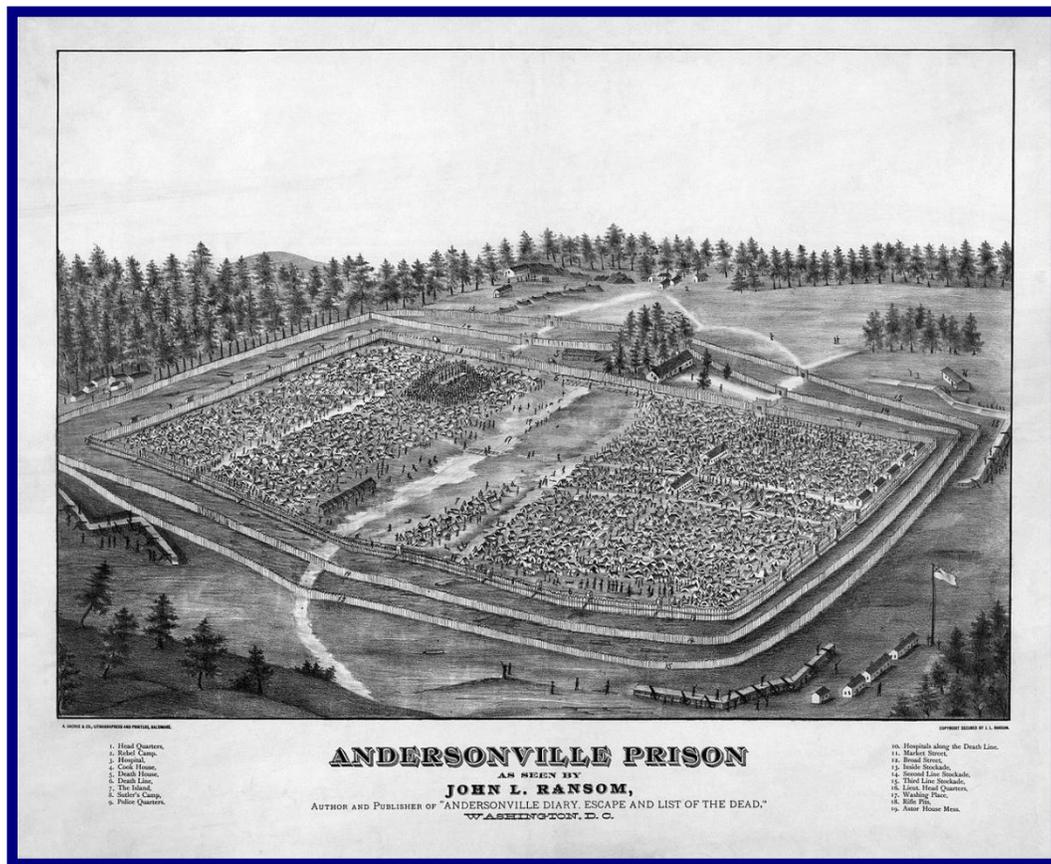


# ANDERSONVILLE

## Letter to Union Colonel William H. Noble A Prisoner at Andersonville

John L. Kimbrough MD



**Figure 1** – An 1882 sketch of Andersonville Prison by John L. Ransom, author of *Andersonville Diary, Escape and List of the Dead*. (Public Domain Image)

Andersonville – the most infamous of the Civil War prisons is a name that is associated with degradation, overcrowding, disease, sheer misery, and death. Approximately 45,000 total Union prisoners were confined at Andersonville of which over 12,000 died due to the appalling conditions.

Officially known as Camp Sumter, the prison camp was established in southwestern Georgia with the first prisoners in place by February 1864. The name “Andersonville” comes from the small town close by on the Georgia Southwestern Railroad. Andersonville was the supply depot

for the prison camp and the arrival point for the prisoners. The town name was and is commonly used to identify the entire prison. This late in the war there were extreme shortages of just about everything throughout the Confederacy. Establishing a new major prison camp with adequate supplies was bordering on the impossible. The Andersonville prison stockade was first constructed encompassing 16 acres. In early summer 1864, the stockade was enlarged to 26 acres. Inside the stockade was a “deadline” which the prisoners were forbidden to cross and could be summarily shot by the guards if they did. Originally planned to hold 10,000 prisoners, the camp population swelled at times during the summer of 1864 to over 30,000 prisoners. The prisoners within the stockade had very little shelter except for some very crude small huts, known as “shebangs,” that they constructed themselves out of pieces of wood, sticks, old tent material, and whatever else might have been available. Sanitation was nonexistent, and disease was rampant. A small creek, known as “Stockade Creek,” ran through the stockade and was the only source of water for the prisoners. Even before the end of the war, the morbid conditions at Andersonville became apparent to the Northern public. Many Northerners believed that the abuse was deliberate on the part of the Confederate government.

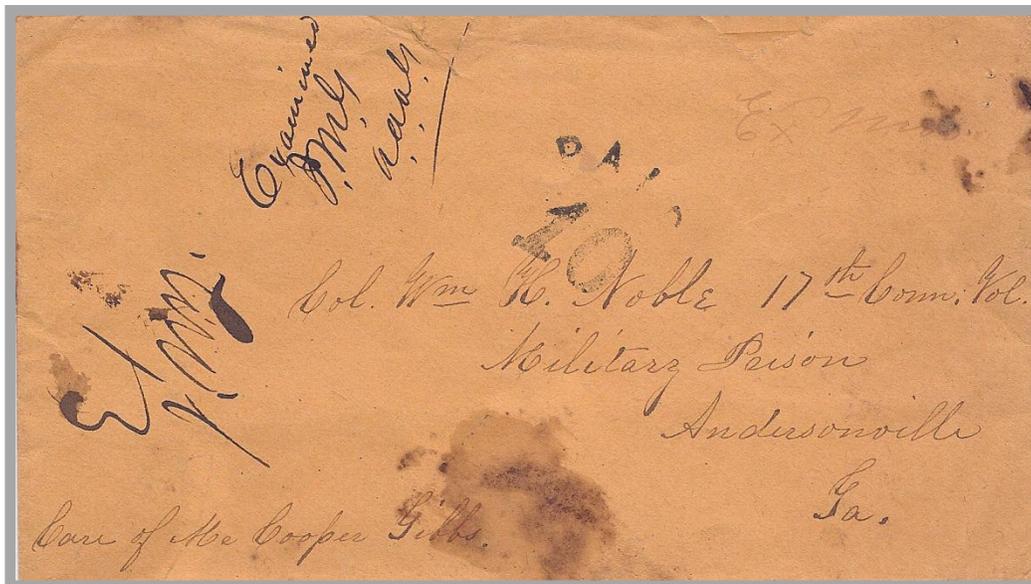


**Figure 2** – A photograph of Andersonville Prison dated August 17, 1864. The “shebangs” are quite prominent and the “deadline” can be seen at the right. (Public Domain Image. The name of the photographer is not identified)



**Figure 3** – Captain (later Major) Henry Wirz. Origin and date of photo is unknown. Henry Wirz is wearing the uniform of a CSA Captain. (Public Domain Image)

At the end of the war in an act of vengeance, the Confederate commander of the prison stockade, Major Henry Wirz, (1823-1865) was taken to Washington DC, tried as a war criminal by a military tribunal and hanged at the Old Capitol Prison on November 10, 1865. Major Wirz was the only Confederate executed after the war for war crimes. The real causes of the conditions at Andersonville were not so much the fault of Major Wirz as they were of the Confederate government's mismanagement and inability to provide the necessary supplies. Couple this with the complete breakdown of the exchange system which helped to produce the severe overcrowding, and the recipe for disaster was firmly in place. Not to be forgotten is the fact that the Union had its own miserable prison camps such as Elmira, New York where the death rate approached that of Andersonville even though the North was better equipped to care for the prisoners than the South.

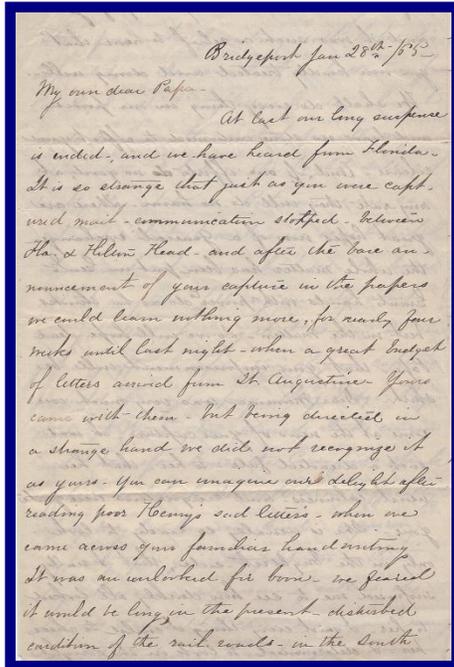


**Figure 4** – North-to-South through-the-lines cover from Bridgeport, Connecticut to Andersonville Prison through Union Jacksonville, Florida and Confederate Lake City, Florida.

With so many prisoners at Andersonville and since prisoners were allowed to receive and send mail, one would think that there would be many examples remaining of Prisoner of War (POW) mail in and out of Andersonville. That is just not the case. To a collector of Civil War period POW postal history, an Andersonville related cover is extremely difficult to acquire. Galen Harrison in his research published in 1997 (*Prisoner's Mail from the American Civil War*) records only 32 covers from the Andersonville prison. Letters addressed to Andersonville prisoners are just as scarce. Whenever such a cover previously unknown presents itself, it adds more information to the postal history of the period. The cover in Figure 4 is such an item. This

is a North-to-South through-the-lines cover which originated in Bridgeport, Connecticut and is addressed to Col Wm H. Noble, 17th Conn Vol, Military Prison, Andersonville, Ga. The original letter (Figure 5) remains with the cover from the Colonel's daughter and confirms the Connecticut origin of the cover.

**Figure 5 – Andersonville Letter**



*Bridgeport Jan 28th / 65*

*My own dear Papa,*

*At last our long suspense is ended, and we have heard from Florida. It is strange that just as you were captured mail communication was stopped between Florida and Hilton Head and after the bare announcement of your capture in the papers we could learn nothing more for nearly four weeks until last night when a great budget of letters arrived from St Augustine. Yours came with them but being directed in a strange hand we did not recognize it as yours. You can imagine our delight after reading poor Henry's sad letters when we came across your familiar handwriting. It was an unlooked for boon. We feared it would be long, in the present disturbed*

*condition of the railroads in the South before we could hear anything of you and it was such a relief to hear that you were kindly treated and doing well. We shall do everything in our power and leave no stone unturned to effect your release. And if our efforts do no good, at any rate they will do no harm. There are great hopes now of a general exchange the whole matter has been put in Genl Grant's hands with power to do as he thinks best in the matter. So we will hope dear Papa that your imprisonment will be short. Dear Mamma was very much overcome at the news of your capture. It was such a dreaded fate to her that her usual calmness and resignation were quite gone. She is usually so ready to look only on the brightest side that it really surprised me to see how darkly all looked to her. I said everything I could to cheer her & determined to look on the bright side until we could hear about you. These four weeks of waiting with hopes disappointed on the arrival of each steamer from Port Royal without any letters for use almost made Mamma ill and I, for all my determination to look on the bright side, got terribly blue at times. But now we are so relieved that it makes us very hopeful. You must not worry about us. We have not at any time felt any anxiety about money matters knowing that as soon as we get any official information of your capture we could draw your pay. Maj Dodge, paymaster at Washington, married Dick's cousin and I have often heard the Crawfords speak of him, so I think there will be no difficulty. Everybody has been very kind inquiring anxiously after you. The first two or three days there was a succession of callers who did all they*

*could to cheer Mamma & many kind letters poured in as I suppose Mamma will tell you. It was a good thing for reading and answering them occupied her time and kept her from dwelling on her trouble.*

*You must let us know how much we are allowed to talk on military matters. We are almost afraid to "tell all we know" in these letters for risk of their being turned back. **Lieut Robinson AAAG at Jacksonville forwarded your letter and informed us that we might send letters to his care to be forwarded by flag of truce.** (emphasis - JLK) He did not say whether discourse be confined to yea yea & nay nay or not, so we have gone a little beyond that.*

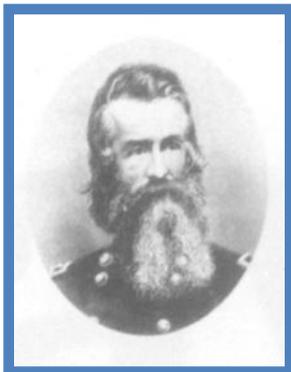
*I must tell you that your favorite Genl Ames has been brevetted Maj Genl. In the words of the correspondents, his three brigades "covered themselves with glory." And Terry from Connecticut is a Maj Genl of Vols and Brig Genl of regulars at one jump...for gallantry at Fort Fisher.*

*Henry was almost heart broken at your capture. He calls you his truest dearest & best friend, says we can have no idea how gloomy everyone was at St Augustine. He is now with the ---. His letters brought tears to our eyes.*

*Mr. Howe has gone to England only for six or eight weeks I believe, so if we had that deed it could not be executed now.*

*I hope my own dear Papa will keep in good spirits and not get down hearted. We will pray for him all the time. Perhaps good will yet come from all this & it will be all for the best. God grant you may receive kind treatment as such & dear sweet kind dear Papa deserves. I don't think anyone could have the heart to treat my darling Papa badly.*

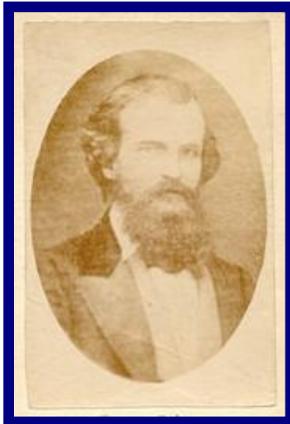
*Your ever loving daughter,  
Nettie*



**Figure 6** – Union Colonel William H. Noble c1865. (Public Domain Image)

William Henry Noble (1813-1894) (Figure 6) was commissioned Colonel of the 17th Connecticut Infantry on August 29, 1862. A lawyer by profession, Colonel Noble had very little if any prior military training but served with distinction. While leading his regiment at Chancellorsville, his horse was killed under him and he was wounded in the arm and the leg during Stonewall Jackson's flank attack. He recovered well enough to rejoin his regiment at Gettysburg where he commanded a brigade at Cemetery Hill. Later in 1864, his unit was relocated to Jacksonville and St. Augustine, Florida, and Colonel Noble assumed command of the 2nd Brigade in Florida. He was captured as a POW during a sudden Confederate guerilla attack on December 24, 1864 while he was traveling to St. Augustine from Jacksonville. Colonel Noble was confined at the Camp Sumter (Andersonville) prison and was in fact the highest ranking Union officer confined at that prison. He was exchanged some time in

early 1865 and saw service after his exchange at Vicksburg, Annapolis, and again in Florida at the end of the war finally mustering out of service at Hilton Head, South Carolina on July 19, 1865. He returned to Bridgeport where he resumed the practice of law. For his meritorious service, he was brevetted Brigadier General by General Grant before the end of the war on March 13, 1865. After the war, he would remember his experiences at Andersonville with horror, and he would refer to that prison as a “snakepit.” His treatment was apparently quite the opposite of what his daughter hoped for in her letter.

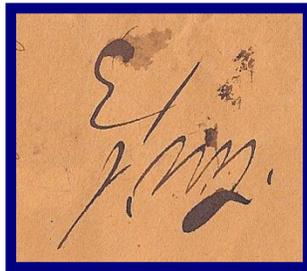


**Figure 7** – Confederate Colonel G. Cooper Gibbs c1863. (Meserve-Kunhardt 19th Century Photography Collection)

The cover is addressed to Colonel Noble Care of Mr. Cooper Gibbs. Colonel George Cooper Gibbs (1822-1876) (Figure 7) was the administrative post commander and the commander of the prison guard detachment at Camp Sumter (Andersonville) October 1864 to April 1865. The command structure at Camp Sumter (Andersonville) was unique in that Captain Henry Wirz (Captain Wirz was promoted Major shortly before the end of the war) was in command of and responsible for everything within the stockade itself but was not responsible to or under the command of Colonel Gibbs. Captain Wirz reported directly to the Confederate Department of Prisons in Richmond. Colonel Gibbs was a witness against Major Wirz at the post war trial in Washington DC.



**Figure 8**  
Examined JMG AAAG



**Figure 9**  
Ex JNY

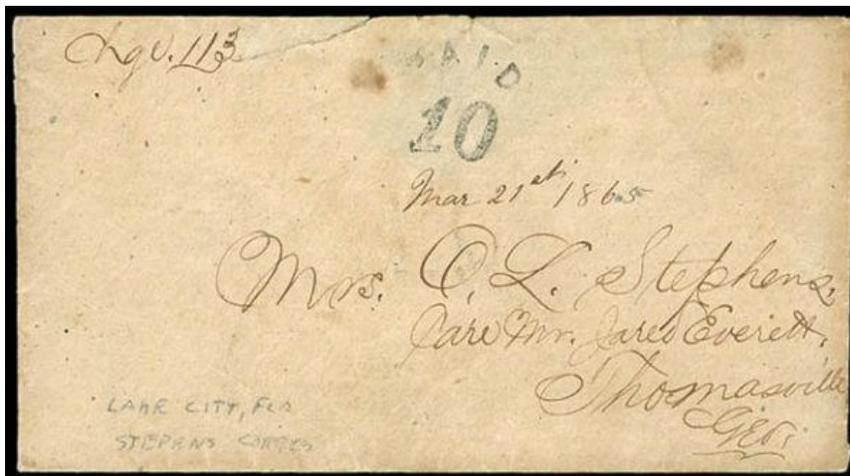


**Figure 10**  
Ex HW

Jacksonville was an important supply depot and a shipping point for Florida beef and provisions for the Confederate armies. The Union recognized this and occupied the city early in the war in March 1862. Although no actual battles were fought at Jacksonville, the city changed hands several times until early 1864 when the Union established firm control over that region and held it to the end of the war. The United States Post Office Department (USPOD) reestablished a US post office in Jacksonville in early February 1864 with the earliest known letter from the reestablished post office datelined February 9, 1864. From February 1864 through April 1864, US mail to and from Jacksonville was routed through Union held Port Royal, South Carolina and

received the Port Royal postmark. The earliest known cover with a Jacksonville Union manuscript postmark is April 10, 1864, and a makeshift typeset postmark first appeared 10 days later on April 20, 1864. It was not until mid-May 1864 that Jacksonville received a standard postmark from the USPOD with the earliest known use of such a postmark dated May 13, 1864.

From the letter and the markings on the Andersonville cover in Figure 4, the journey that the cover took to travel from Bridgeport, Connecticut to Andersonville can be traced. The envelope was addressed in the same hand as the letter. This indicates that the family had specific instructions as to how to address the letter. This is an inside envelope. The outer envelope contained the address to the Union transfer point with the Union postage. The letter states that the family was instructed to send the cover through Union occupied Jacksonville, Florida in care of the AAAG for forwarding through-the-lines by flag-of-truce. According to the letter, the cover was therefore sent directly to Jacksonville as the transfer point and travelled most likely by ship. By January, 1865, the date of the Andersonville letter, the reestablished US post office in Jacksonville had been functioning normally for some months and was accepting mail from anywhere in the Union. The outer cover would have been discarded at the transfer point and only the inner envelope transferred to the Confederate side. The manuscript examiner's mark on the cover at top left (Figure 8) "Examined "JMG AAAG" is the Union examiner's mark from the Acting Assistant Adjutant General presumably in Jacksonville, Florida. The letter, however, identifies a Lieutenant Robinson as the Jacksonville AAAG. The examiner's initials do not match that name. The logical assumption is that someone else who is identified only by the "JMG" initials had assumed the post of AAAG at Jacksonville before the letter arrived. The cover was transferred by Flag-of-Truce to Confederate Lake City, Florida where it entered the Confederate postal system for delivery to the military prison at Andersonville, Georgia. About 60-65 map miles separate the two locations. The Union authorities sent the cover through-the-lines very possibly with a coin to pay the Confederate postage or perhaps the Confederate postage was paid by the Confederate agent who transferred the letter. There is no Lake City, Florida postmark on the cover. But the handstamp PAID 10 is unique to Lake City covers from 1864 and 1865 and definitely identifies this cover as having gone through the Lake City post office where the Confederate postage was paid. There are other standard Lake City, Florida covers (not through-the-lines) known from this same time period which bear the same "PAID 10" handstamp and are also without a postmark (Figure 11).



**Figure 11** – Confederate Lake City, Florida cover addressed to Thomaston, Georgia dated by period docketing to March, 1865 with the same PAID 10 handstamp as the Figure 4 Andersonville cover and no postmark. (Courtesy Schuyler Rumsey Auctions)

The manuscript mark at the lower left of the Andersonville cover in Figure 4, “Ex JNY,” (Figure 9) is from a documented Andersonville examiner whose name is not known. Interestingly, the letter was also examined by Captain Wirz as the “Ex HW” (Figure 10) marking at the upper right testifies. Captain Wirz’ initials are found on other known Andersonville covers, so it is quite apparent that Captain Wirz himself would personally examine the prisoner’s mail. In short, the cover travelled from Bridgeport to Jacksonville where it was transferred through Lake City to Andersonville. Noted Florida postal historian, Dr. Deane Briggs, has recorded only four covers South-to-North transferred through Lake City, Florida to Jacksonville with Confederate rates but no examiner’s markings as they were transferred through-the-lines covertly prior to the Union reestablishment of the Jacksonville post office (Figure 12). And none of these four covers are POW covers. The Andersonville cover in Figure 4 is currently believed to be the only known through-the-lines cover (POW or otherwise) to have been transferred from Jacksonville through Lake City in the opposite North-to-South direction after the reestablishment of the Union Jacksonville post office. What a wealth of postal history information that can be gleaned from a simple letter and cover including the documentation of a very obscure through-the-lines route used for mail to the Andersonville prison.



**Figure 12** – South-to-North through-the-lines cover from Confederate Lake City, Florida to Union occupied Jacksonville, Florida. The enclosure from another similar cover from the same correspondence grants permission for a civilian to travel through-the-lines and dates the covers to 1863 prior to the reestablishment of the Union Jacksonville post office. No examiner’s marks and no Union postal markings indicating that the cover was handcarried covertly through-the-lines and not through official channels. One of four recorded similar covertly carried covers from the same time period Lake City to Jacksonville. (From the Briggs Confederate postal history exhibit.)

My thanks to Dr. Deane R. Briggs for sharing with me his knowledge of the Jacksonville, Florida post office and his Florida Jacksonville through-the-lines research.

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