

Stampless Provisional Covers Having Charge Box or Similar Notations¹

Steven M. Roth
John L. Kimbrough MD

The Philatelic Issue

The *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History* published in 2012 (hereafter referred to as “Catalog”) contains the following statement (hereafter referred to as “Statement”) in the introduction to the Confederate Postmasters’ Provisionals (hereafter referred to as “provisional” or “provisionals” as the context might require) section of the book:

“Some covers with handstamped rate and paid markings or postmarks with integral rate and paid markings have manuscript ‘charge box’ markings. Such markings are associated with stampless uses and are evidence the specific cover is not provisional in nature.”²

No evidence is presented in the Catalog to support the conclusion set forth at the end of this Statement. The obvious assumption derived from this Statement is that the charge box notation was only used at the time of posting. But was that necessarily true? The authors do not believe so.

Further on in the same section of the Catalog, the Statement is repeated in various individual provisional listings, such as the listings for Dalton, Georgia, and Talbotton, Georgia, using modified conditional language to indicate that the charge box notation *might* indicate a stampless non-provisional use. The assertions in the Statement and in its several variations, obviously, are not consistent except in one regard. They beg the essential question: does a charge box notation on a cover (or the absence of such a notation) indicate when the cover was postally used in relation to when the postage was actually paid?

Both the presence of the Statement in the Catalog and the various conditional modifications of the Statement in the provisional section of the Catalog have caused confusion among students of Confederate philately. Part of the confusion arises from the fact that no previously published Confederate catalog specifically addressed the subject. Part of the confusion stems from the fact that prior to the publication of the Catalog, covers bearing the charge box instruction to the sender’s postmaster, or the addressee’s arrangement with his postmaster, sometimes were certified by various authentication services as genuine stampless provisional covers.

The Catalog’s Statement and conditional assertions have called all this into question. Collectors of Confederate philately rightly now ask, for example: (a) are my covers, which are listed in the Catalog as provisional covers, and which have a Scott provisional number and in some cases have prior certificates indicating genuine provisional status now no longer considered as provisional covers because they have charge box notations? and (b) if such covers are still considered to be provisional covers, does a charge box notation on my cover affect the value of

my Catalog-listed provisional cover compared to a similarly Catalog-listed provisional cover without that notation? This article addresses and answers such questions and offers guidance for evaluating stampless covers having charge box notations.

It is the position of the authors, arrived at as described below in this article, that:

- The Statement and the conditional variations of the Statement set forth in the Catalog are incorrect.
- The presence of a charge box notation *does not automatically* nullify or prevent provisional status with respect to a paid stampless cover.
- The presence of the charge box notation *by itself* does not confer provisional status on a paid stampless cover.
- The presence of the charge box notation *plus some other confirming evidence* on the cover *might confer* provisional status on a paid stampless cover if the notation *and* the additional evidence confirm payment of postage in advance of actual use of the cover.
- The presence or absence of the charge box notation on a Catalog-listed provisional stampless cover neither increases nor decreases its value in comparison to other similar provisional covers without the charge box notation.

A Brief History of the Charge Box Notation and Its Use

Several studies of the use and meaning of the charge box notation have been published over the years by postal historians Calvet M. Hahn³ and James W. Milgram MD.^{8,9,10,11} None of these studies addresses the questions raised in this article.

Credit for postage was often extended by certain postmasters to the sender for otherwise unpaid mailed letters and to the addressee for letters sent with postage due. Documentation of this practice in the United States began in the late 18th century. For example, Postmaster Dunn of Cincinnati, Ohio, posted the following notice in 1795:

*“. . . to those who have a right to calculate on receiving letters appearing at this office, that in future they may come with ready cash in hand or no letters or papers.”*⁴

The postmaster at Easton, Pennsylvania, Abraham Horn, posted this notice, in part, in 1827:

*“All those who kept no accounts at this office are notified that hereafter all letters taken out of the office must be paid at the time they are delivered. As too much of my time has been taken up heretofore in collecting postage . . .”*⁵

These practices, cited as examples of early credit practices by postmasters, apparently violated the postal laws and regulations. The official post office position was clear: postmasters were not authorized to grant credit to patrons. This was clearly set forth, for example, in the postal instructions for 1832:

*“Section 63. You are not authorized in any case to give credit for postage.”*⁶

Similar language was also occasionally present in various forms in the instructions or regulations published in 1825, 1842, 1847, and 1851.

What is clear from the United States postal laws and regulations, as well as the presence of covers having charge box notations, is that the early practice in the United States seems to have been that postmasters generally refused to grant credit since they would be personally liable for any defaults in payment by their debtors. But some postmasters did give credit to some post office patrons anyway.

It is likely that the systems used by postmasters to collect charge box indebtedness from box holders varied from post office to post office since the system of granting credit to box holders was not officially sanctioned.⁷ Indeed, unofficial printed and handwritten invoices and payment receipts are well known among collectors of early United States postal history. No official printed bills or receipts for payment emanating from the United States Post Office Department have been noted by the authors.

The charge system, as it informally evolved in those post offices where it occurred, appears to have been limited to patrons who rented post office boxes. Perhaps this perquisite was used by some postmasters to encourage patrons to rent boxes since the postmasters were entitled to keep the rents collected with respect to such boxes.¹²

The charge box benefit, when it was available, not only provided a means of payment for postage on outgoing stampless letters, but also was available to pay the postage due on incoming stampless letters. This gave rise to two different classifications for such markings: one that was a non-postal marking and one that was a postal marking.

The notation “charge box,” or a similar marking, on outgoing mail was not an official postal marking, but was instead the sender’s instruction to his postmaster to charge that patron’s account for the outgoing letter. The notation on incoming mail, however, was an official postal marking applied by the postmaster of the addressee’s post office noting that the account of the addressee should be charged for the postage due. This critical distinction was first recognized and discussed by James W. Milgram MD.¹³

The charge box notation was sometimes also used on covers where stamps were affixed. There are examples of covers known with the charge box notation that also bear legitimately used stamps from the 1847 and 1851 issues.¹⁴ Such covers likely represented otherwise unpaid outgoing covers on which the sender’s postmaster affixed stamps to pay the postage and then charged the amount affixed to the sender’s account.

The charge box notation was discontinued sometime in 1855 when prepayment of postage by stamps or cash became mandatory. By January 1, 1856, when prepayment by stamps only became mandatory, the marking had disappeared from use in the United States postal system. This apparently became true as well when general issue stamps became available at Confederate post offices.¹⁵

The Confederate Use of Charge Box Notations

The charge box notation is not specifically addressed in the Catalog except in connection with the Statement and its variations. As discussed above, the marking either was an informal instruction to the postmaster made by a letter's sender or was an official accounting notation made by the postmaster in an addressee's post office.

The practice of using the charge box or similar notation on stampless covers was revived by some Confederate postmasters as a way for people to pay postage, perhaps because no coins or low value Confederate treasury notes were readily available with which to pay postage — especially during the early Confederate stampless period.

The charge box system was not specifically addressed in the Confederate postal laws and regulations and, therefore, its use would have been governed by the United States postal laws and regulations in effect on November 1, 1860, as is the case of all postal matters not addressed by Confederate law.¹⁶ These were the United States postal laws and regulations for 1859. Whether it was unlawful for Confederate postmasters to operate such an informal system of credit, as it was in the case of United States postmasters, is of no practical importance to this article's inquiry since the system was used and was widely tolerated.

Confederate charge box notations are found mostly on stampless covers. Occasionally, however, as in the case of the United States system, such notations are found on outgoing stamped covers (Figure 1), indicating thereby that at least some postmasters in the Confederacy allowed people to charge stamps to their box accounts for outgoing letters.



Figure 1 – Albany, Georgia, 20c Green Bisect NOV 16, 1864 “Chg Box 102” at top center (PF Certificate 2001)

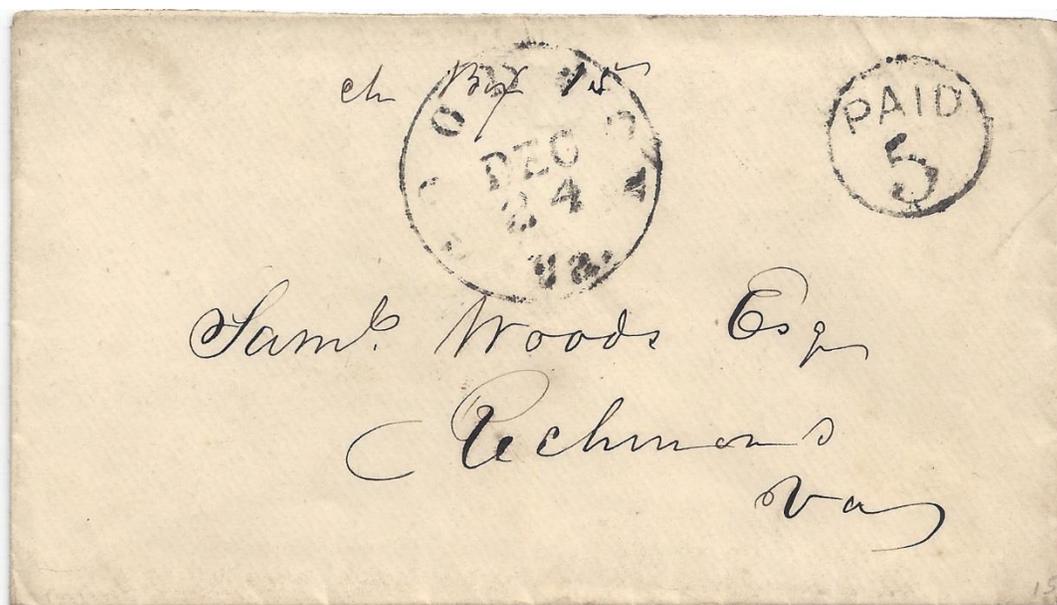


Figure 2 – Goodson, Virginia, Stampless PAID 5 cover (not a provisional) Dec 24, (1861). “Ch Box 15” at top center.

The Goodson, Virginia, stampless PAID 5 cover (Figure 2) has a manuscript “Ch Box 15” marking at top center showing that the postage was paid by charging it to the sender’s box account. However, this cover does not show any other marks to suggest that the date of payment of the postage (via the charge box account) and the date of the use of the cover were not the same. The cover was presumably fully serviced at the time of posting and is, therefore, a paid (via the charge box notation) stampless cover and not a provisional stampless cover.

The cover shown in Figure 2, as well as many other covers not illustrated in this article, belies the argument (sometimes made by those who believe that a charge box notation precludes the possibility of provisional status) that extending credit to a postal patron was not the same as payment being made by that postal patron. Whether or not such an extension of credit amounted to payment from a legal or accounting perspective, the presence of both the charge box notation and the PAID 5 handstamp on the same cover indicate that the sending and receiving postmasters believed the charge box notation was tantamount to payment.

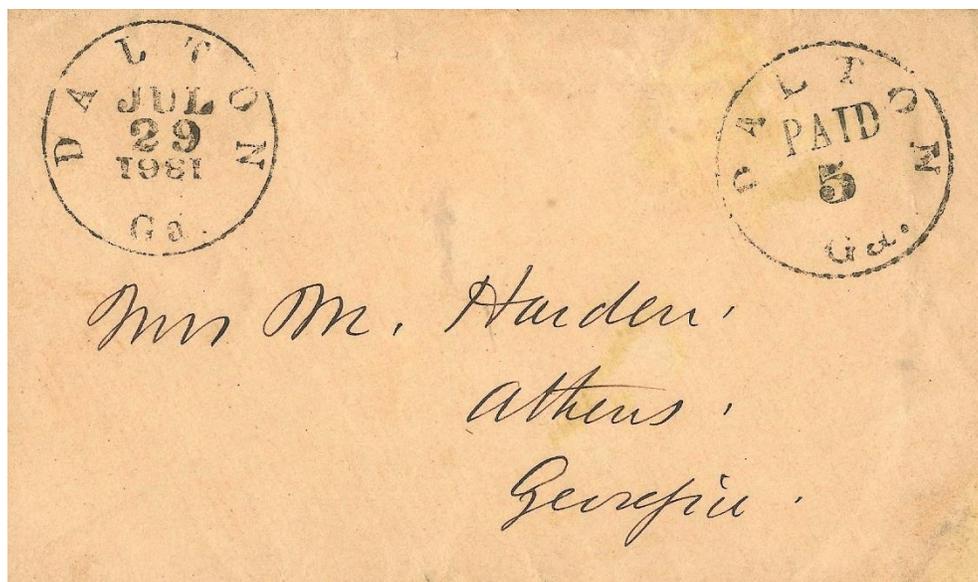


Figure 3 – Dalton, Georgia, stampless PAID 5 provisional cover (without a charge box notation) dated JUL 29, 1861 (Courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Archives).

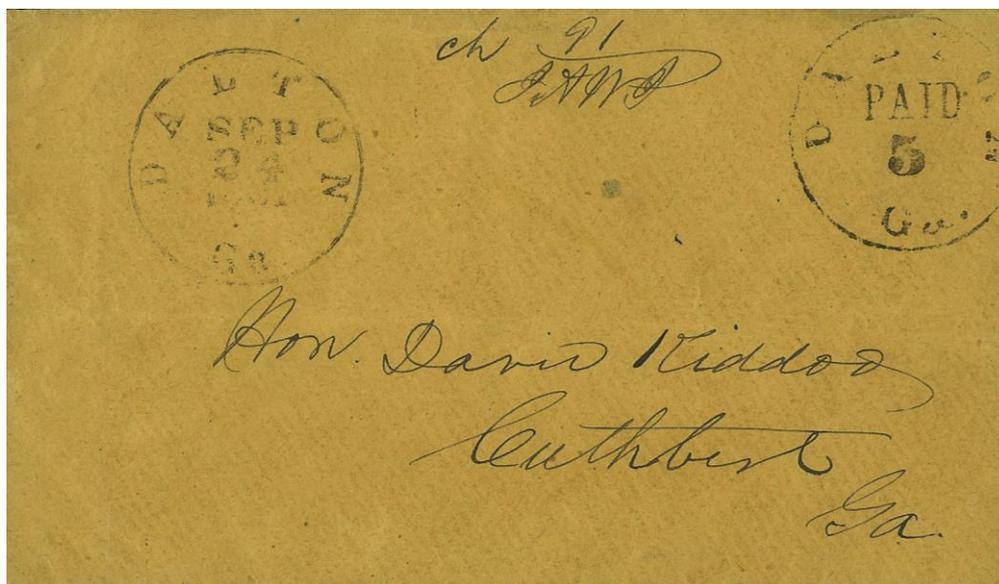


Figure 4 – Dalton, Georgia, stampless PAID 5 provisional cover dated SEP 24, 1861 with “Ch (Box) 91” notation (Courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Archives).

The two Dalton, Georgia, covers (Figures 3 and 4) illustrate some of the confusion engendered by paid stampless covers in the context of this inquiry. Both covers are essentially identical in appearance with the postal markings in similar locations. The only significant difference is that one cover (Figure 4) has a charge box notation, while the other cover (Figure 3) does not. Both covers, however, are cataloged as provisional covers — CSA Scott #20XU1 and Catalog (CC) DAL-GA-E02 (Type B). The Catalog listing for Figure 4 contains the following caution:

“There are several recorded examples of Type B (PAID 5) and C (PAID 10) envelopes with charge box markings. This and the scarcity of stampless markings from Dalton is evidence the provisional marking was also used as a stampless marking. Stampless uses are not easily distinguished from provisional uses. Each example must be considered on its own merits.”¹⁷

Considering the above statement in the Catalog, the authors must inquire with respect to Figures 3 and 4: Is one cover any less a provisional use than the other based solely on the presence or the absence of the charge box marking? The authors believe the answer is “no.” The authors note that both covers (Figures 3 and 4) are listed as provisional covers in the Dalton, Georgia, section of the 2001 Crown census of Georgia provisional covers.¹⁸ This indicates that, at least in the year 2001, the charge box notations on such covers were not a consideration with regard to provisional status.

What Constitutes a Stampless Provisional Cover?

It is necessary to first understand what is meant by “stampless provisional” vs “stampless paid” covers. A “stampless paid” cover refers to a cover postmarked, rated, and paid for at the time of posting and not sold and paid for in advance. The Catalog defines a “Postmasters’ Provisional” as:

“Locally prepared stamps and envelopes printed, handstamped or marked in manuscript with a value valid for postage. These were prepared in advance and sold by the postmaster for local use as postage stamps and postal stationery.”¹⁹

For the purposes of this article, only stampless provisional covers are addressed. The key determinant of provisional status is that the covers were prepared and sold by the postmaster to the postal patron in advance of the covers’ actual mailing.

Each cover, of course, must be judged on its own merits and on the evidence available to sustain its status. In the past (i.e., before the publication of the Catalog), many covers were identified as provisional uses and were assigned Scott provisional numbers as well as their own special classifications in the various Dietz Confederate catalogs. In many cases, this was done decades ago, and much of the documentation used at the time of the original listings to support such classification has been lost. Such provisional listings, however, have continued to be carried forward as such in the Catalog as *legacy* provisional covers and will continue to be so carried forward unless and until evidence surfaces sufficient to alter that status.

Students of Confederate philately are called upon to examine three basic types of provisional covers: 1) covers with provisional adhesive stamps, 2) printed provisional envelopes, and 3) stampless provisional envelopes. It is fairly easy to make a determination with respect to the first two categories. The third type can present significant problems and is the subject of the discussion in this article.

For the stampless paid envelopes, the first and most important question that must be answered is: was the marking applied to the envelope and sold to a postal patron in advance of its use? Or, to

put it in similar analogous terms, was the envelope similar to an item of postal stationery (such as a USA Star Die cover) purchased on one date and mailed at some later date?

In many cases, the question whether the marking was applied in advance of use has been determined by the presence of a control marking on the cover. Control markings can be in the form of dated and undated postmarks (e.g., Thomasville, Georgia, and Georgetown, South Carolina), a special marking (e.g., Savannah, Georgia, rosette), or the postmaster's initials (e.g., Selma, Alabama).

Many markings that are accepted as provisional markings include postmarks with integral rate and paid markings (e.g., Atlanta, Georgia). Today our knowledge of such markings and their use reveals that some were also used as handstamped paid markings not prepared and paid for in advance of use. Others are "fancy" markings or markings differing in appearance from those classified as handstamped paid markings (e.g., Galveston, Texas, and Walterborough, South Carolina). Many of these have been handed down to us as legacy provisional markings with little or no proof with respect to when in the mailing process they were paid for and when in the process they were used.

There are various factors that should be considered in the evaluation of a potential stampless provisional cover to determine if the cover was paid for in advance of its use. None of these factors (or combination of factors) automatically confers provisional status on a cover because of its (or their) presence on the cover, but any one or any combination of these factors might be relevant in evaluating the provisional status of the cover. These include:

- Was the same marking also used as a handstamped paid marking?
- Is there a known postally unused example of the marking on cover?
- Is the same marking recognized as a provisional but with a different rate?
- Are there any handstamped paid markings recorded from the town?
- Is the marking from a town other than that indicated by the postmark?
- Has the marking been altered or revalued?
- Is the marking under a general issue postage stamp that was postally used?
- Were the envelopes provided by the postmaster or did the postal patron provide his own?
- Does the cover bear a "politeness of" marking? If so, what is the significance of that marking, if any?

Students of such covers are faced with having to make a meaningful determination of provisional status using the best evidence available. In some cases, the only evidence is the cover itself with the postal markings and/or manuscripts which might or might not be present.

No Presumption of Provisional Status

Normally when faced with something new in Confederate philately, such as a previously unlisted marking on cover, students accept the item as genuine unless they can determine through examination that it is a counterfeit, historically inaccurate, or is fabricated. This is not true of markings that might be previously unlisted provisional markings.

The default position with respect to possible new provisional markings is to not accept them as provisional covers, but instead to assume they are not provisional markings unless there is clear evidence to support the fact that the paid cover was prepared in advance of use.

How Is All This Relevant to a Cover Bearing a Charge Box Notation?

The authors believe that the presence or absence of a charge box notation is rarely, if ever, relevant to the determination of provisional status except as an indication of payment since credit, as a legally binding obligation upon the debtor, is deemed to be a form of payment when given. The presence of the notation adds little, if anything, to the question of *when* the payment was made in relation to the date of actual use of the paid cover. For that aspect of the inquiry, the other factors mentioned above must be present (alone or in some combination of factors) to determine the payment and use relationship.

The Special Case of Stampless Folded Letters

An argument has been put forth from time-to-time that the use of a folded letter, in and of itself, automatically negates the possibility of provisional use. The argument made is that people simply would not bring unused lettersheet paper to the post office to pay for postage in advance of use because it would be difficult to know where to put the postal marks if the paper had not already been folded and addressed and the letter already written. There is an appealing logic to this position that makes it likely correct, in practice, but not necessarily. On the surface, the argument is reasonable. But it could have happened that people did bring in lettersheets for advance postage, either folded without any writing or not folded. The authors would not have done that had we lived in the 19th century, but that is not to say that doing so was impossible. It was not.

It is the authors' position that folded lettersheets, like envelopes, should not be presumed to be provisional covers merely because they were paid covers, but that they can be proved to have provisional status if there is some indication on the folded letter that the date of payment was in advance of the date of use. Such folded letters should be scarce, if not rare, but should not be ruled out *ipso facto* because they are folded lettersheets.

The Argument Against the Charge Box Notation Conferring Provisional Status

An argument has been made that a lack of stampless PAID covers for a town or city is proof that the listed provisional markings for that town or city were also used as non-provisional stampless PAID marks. We believe that this is possibly true, but not necessarily. We also believe that such an argument begs the essential questions posed by this article: when was payment made and when did use occur in relation to one another?

This argument assumes that provisional covers and PAID stampless covers could only be differentiated, one from the other, if one believes (without any basis for that belief) that all charge box notated covers were only used at the time of posting, and never at some later time. The authors do not accept this assumption,

An Examination of Some Interesting Covers



Figure 5 – Dalton, Georgia, stampless PAID 5 provisional revalued “10” NOV 4, 1861 with “Ch (Box) 83” notation

Figure 5 is a Dalton, Georgia, PAID 5 provisional cover that has been revalued “10” in manuscript. It is listed in the Scott catalog as CSA #20XU1b and in the Catalog as (CC) DAL-GA-E02 (Type Bb). The logical assumption is that the sender brought in a previously purchased PAID 5 cover addressed to Manassas Junction, Virginia, which is a distance over 500 miles thereby requiring an extra 5c in postage. But was this assumption necessarily true? The charge box notation could have been applied at the time of posting to account for the extra 5c charge, or it could have been applied at the time of the original purchase of the PAID 5 cover.



Figure 6 – Dalton, Georgia, stampless PAID 5 provisional revalued “10” JUN 1, 1862

There is a second revalued cover (Figure 6), exactly like Figure 5, with the postal markings in the same position and with the manuscript “10” revaluation. This cover was written in the same hand and to a town more than 500 miles distant from the sender’s town. The second cover (Figure 6) has no charge box notation. Why not? Was it overlooked? These are questions with no answers. These two covers (Figures 5 and 6) are currently the only two recorded Dalton PAID 5 provisional covers revalued “10.” To say that one is less likely to be a provisional cover than the other because of the presence or absence of a charge box notation again raises the essential question posed by this article.

The authors note that Dalton, Georgia, as a post office, was used in this article as an example for purposes of explanation. There are other towns with listed provisional covers, a few of which have charge box markings on them and others that do not. And there are other towns with listed provisional covers which have very few recorded stampless PAID covers — towns such as Atlanta, Georgia, and Montgomery, Alabama. These cannot all be thrown together into one universal “charge box rule” because how the charge box notation and the *ad hoc* system were used was up to each postmaster who used this unofficial credit system.

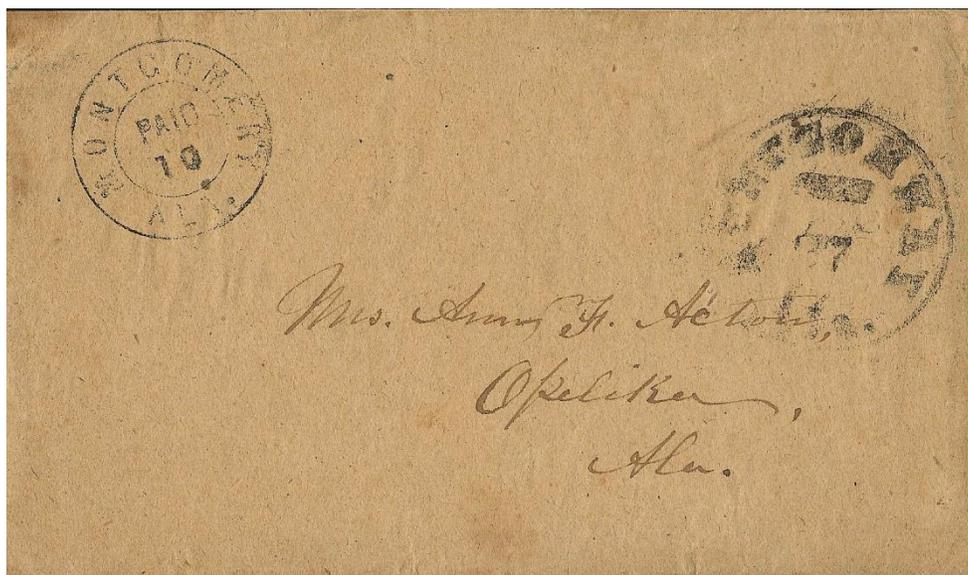


Figure 7 – Montgomery, Alabama, stampless PAID 10 provisional cover (Courtesy Robert A Siegel Auction Galleries Archives)

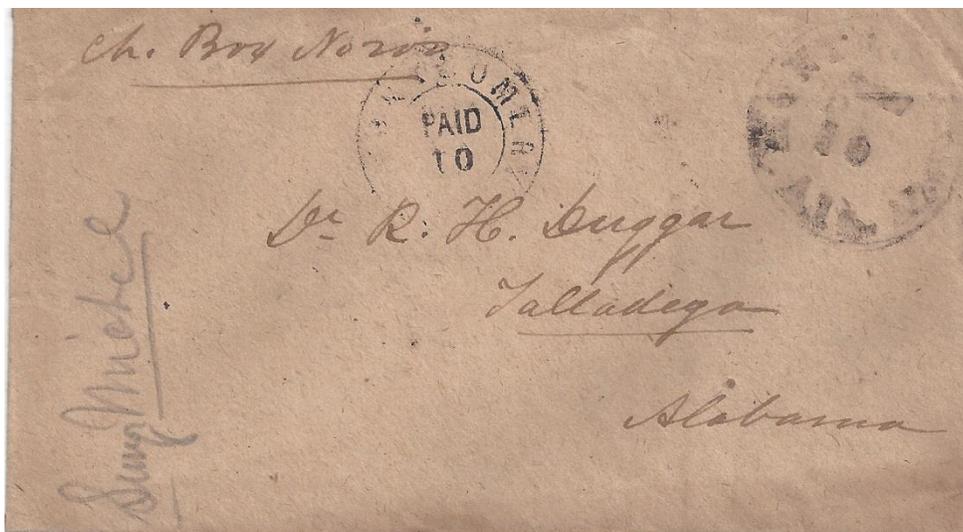


Figure 8 – Montgomery, Alabama, stampless PAID 10 provisional cover with “Ch Box No 200” notation

The two Montgomery, Alabama, stampless PAID 10 provisional covers (Figures 7 and 8) both show the same Montgomery PAID 10 mark, and the same somewhat smeared Montgomery, Alabama, circle datestamp (CDS). Both markings on both covers were struck using different inks. This is a strong indication that the PAID 10 marks and the CDS were applied at different times.

The Montgomery PAID 10 mark is documented as a provisional marking by at least one recorded example without postal use. To deny provisional status to the charge box Montgomery PAID 10 cover based on the presence of that marking, and for no other reason, seems foolish to the authors.

Summary of the Authors’ Position

The authors believe that the presence or absence of the charge box notation or its variations neither denies provisional status to a cover nor confers such status. At best, the presence or absence of such a notation might be one of the factors used to determine that the postage for a cover had been paid. The notation is not an indicator of when the cover was actually used in relation to such payment.

Position of the CSA Authentication Service (CSAAS) with Respect to Previously Recognized and Catalog-Listed Stampless Provisional Covers with a Charge Box Notation

It is the position of the current CSAAS that certificates will continue to be issued for purported stampless provisional covers without regard to the presence or absence of a charge box notation or whether the cover is or is not a folded letter. Certificates for such covers will be issued based solely on the genuineness of the postal markings and, if applicable, with the covers identified by the current listed Catalog designations. Covers with possible unlisted provisional markings will be examined using the criteria set forth in this article and any other evidence that might be available to determine the relationship between the date of payment for the cover and the date of

its actual use. Provisional status on previously identified, recorded, and listed stampless provisional covers will not be nullified by a new certificate based solely on the presence of a charge box notation or based solely on the fact the cover just happens to be a folded letter.

The authors are both students of Confederate philately with many years of experience between them. John L. Kimbrough MD currently serves as the chairman of the Confederate Stamp Alliance Authentication Service (CSAAS), and Steven M. Roth currently serves as an active member of the CSAAS.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Tony Crumbley (CSAAS active member), Jerry Palazolo (CSAAS active member and former chairman), and Patricia A. Kaufmann (emeritus CSAAS member) for reading and commenting upon the article before it was finalized.

Notes

1. Although the authors use the phrase “charge box” throughout this article, the phrase, as used by the authors, includes other phrases and terms such as “charge”, “box”, “Ch” and the like.
2. Kaufmann, Patricia A., Francis J. Crown, Jr. and Jerry S. Palazolo, *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, (np: Confederate Stamp Alliance 2012), 248.
3. Hahn, Calvet M., “Uncle Sam’s Charge Account Postal System,” *S.P.A. Journal* (Society of Philatelic Americans Journal), 40 (1978), 727-741;
4. Ibid. 727.
5. McDonald, S. Editor, *American Philatelic Miscellany*, (Lawrence, MA. 1976), Seymour Dunbar, “United States Postal History,” Figure 3, 402.
6. *Laws, Instructions and Forms for the Regulation of the Post-Office Department* (Washington, DC 1832), 37.
7. Ibid,
8. James W. Milgram MD, “Charge It To My Post Office Account,” *American Philatelist*, 89 (1975), 613-629.
9. Milgram, “Postage Charged to My Post Office Box Account,” *The Chronicle* 138 (1988), 90-98.
10. Milgram, Quoted in “‘Charge’ and ‘Charged’ Markings: Billing Postal Charges to a Box Holder’s Account,” *The Chronicle* 239 (August 2013), 211-235.
11. Milgram, “Confederate ‘Box’ Usages,” *The Confederate Philatelist* (July-August 1982), 113-116.
12. Milgram, Act of May 18, 1842, Section 202, quoted in *The Chronicle* 239 (August 2013), 212.
13. Milgram, “Postage Charged to Post Office Box Accounts,” *The Chronicle* 138 (May 1988), 90.
14. Milgram, Illustrated in “‘Charged To Post Office Box Accounts,” *The Chronicle* 146 (May 1990), 100.
15. *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, December 30, 1862, citing post office regulations at Vicksburg, stated: “3. Persons will not mark on their letters ‘charge box’ &c., but will purchase stamps and put on [sic] their letters. Hereafter, all such letters will be treated as unpaid and sent to the dead letter office.”
16. An Act to Continue in Force Certain Laws of the United States of America, February 9, 1861.
17. Kaufmann, 263

18. Crown, Francis J., Jr. *Preliminary Census of Georgia Postmasters' Provisionals*. Published by the author (2001), 49-54.
19. Kaufmann, 514.