

Civilian Through-the-Lines Mail Accepted and Rejected – An Overview

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At the outbreak of active hostilities in April 1861, many families were divided not only in their loyalties to either one side or the other, but also by geography and location. Close relatives often found themselves living on opposite sides of the divide between North and South. The postal system was the only way these separated relatives could keep in touch with each other.

At the beginning of the Confederate period, the United States Post Office Department (USPOD) continued to operate as usual and without interruption in all the seceded states through May 31, 1861. Prior to this date, it was not a problem to send a letter from seceded Georgia to Union Wisconsin as the standard USA postal rates remained in effect and the letter was carried entirely by the USPOD. On June 1, 1861, the USPOD had ceased all operations within the seceded states, and the Confederate Post Office Department assumed responsibility for the movement of the mail within the Confederacy. New postal rates were established, and it consequently became far more difficult for the Confederacy to send or receive letters to or from the North. During the early summer of 1861, North – South through-the-lines mail stilled flowed with a formal system using private express companies as intermediaries and using across-the-line corridors such as Nashville, Ten to Louisville, Ky as one of the most prominent transfer points. This was a very complex system involving both postal services and a private express company which physically made the transfer from one postal system to the other. This all ended in August 1861 when the USPOD put a stop to all formal across-the-lines civilian mail.

Prisoner of War (POW) through-the-lines mail was permitted and tolerated. Throughout the war, POW mail was moved reasonably well. Not so the counterpart civilian through-the-lines mail which was only barely tolerated and often was actively discouraged mainly by the severe restrictions put on such mail by the USPOD. The through-the-lines routes and transfer agent system set up for POW mail was never designed to be used for civilian letters.

Early on, an informal wartime civilian across-the-lines Flag-of-Truce system was set up through Norfolk, Va with the Union transfer point being occupied Old Point Comfort, Va located across Hampton Roads from Norfolk. Such letters required that postage be paid for both postal systems. In order to accomplish this, the preferred method was to use two envelopes – one inside the other. In the case of a South-to-North letter, the outer envelope would show the Confederate postage paid to the transfer point. At the transfer point, the inner envelope containing the Union postage and the Union address would be removed and the letter examined before being transferred. The outer envelope would be discarded. Occasionally a single envelope method was used early on with both Confederate and Union postage on the same envelope, but by early 1862 this was rejected by the Union. Civilian cross border mail almost always used the inner-outer two envelope method. The Union further required that the Federal postage be fully prepayed as the USPOD would not deliver a South-to-North civilian through-the-lines letter with postage due.

Letters coming from the North into the Confederacy had the same restriction, but it was occasionally ignored and letters would sometimes be delivered with postage due. Having to prepay the postage for the opposite postal system was a huge discouragement to such mail as it was very difficult for families in the North to obtain Confederate stamps and likewise for families in the South to obtain Union stamps. This was usually accomplished by family members enclosing stamps with their letters and hoping that the stamps would get through and not be “confiscated.” This was entirely an informal system and operated solely on the whim of the local authorities. It is quite certain that a fair number of such letters were very likely never delivered and ended up in the Dead Letter Office.

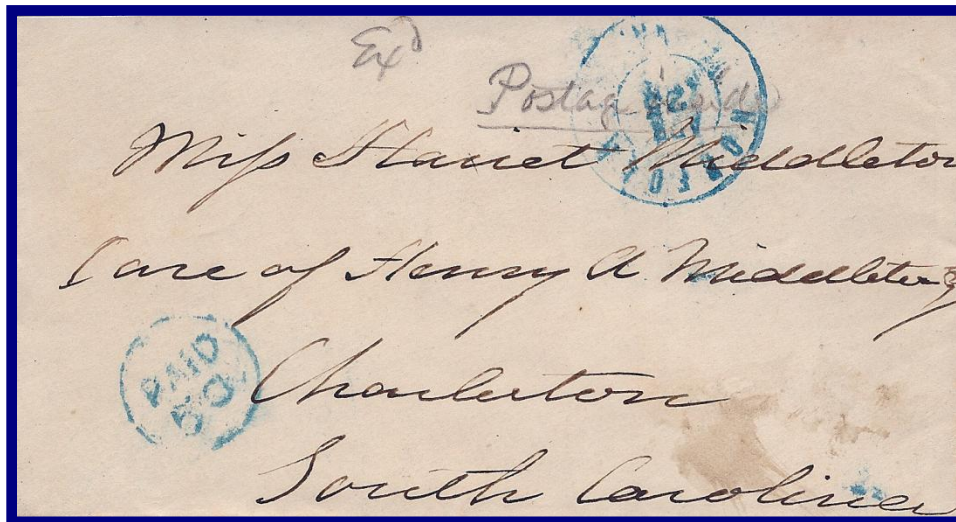


Figure 1 – Civilian North-to-South Cover via Norfolk, Va April 25, 1862.

The cover illustrated in Figure 1 originated somewhere in the North and is from the well-known Middleton Charleston, South Carolina correspondence. It is known that the Middleton family had relatives in Rhode Island which is therefore very likely the origin of the cover. This cover would be the inner envelope with the outside envelope bearing the Union postage and discarded at the Old Point Comfort, Va transfer point. Note the “Ex’d” manuscript in pencil at the top center with the matching manuscript “Postage Paid.” All cross border letters were required to be examined. Since the cover bears no Confederate stamp, very likely the Confederate postage was prepaid by inserting or attaching a coin with the letter. This was another way occasionally used to prepay the postage on a cross-border cover. Since the letter is absent, the examiner’s mark is necessary in identifying this cover as a Flag-of-Truce cover and not just as a standard cover originating in Norfolk. Norfolk was not the only transfer point used during this time as there are a few cross border North-to-South covers known which entered the Confederate postal system in Petersburg, Va.

On May 9, 1862 Norfolk, Va fell to the Union and was occupied for the remainder of the war. With the occupation of Norfolk by the Union, the Norfolk – Old Point Comfort transfer of civilian mail ended. From May 1862 until mid 1863, post office sponsored informal civilian cross-border mail was effectively banned. By the summer of 1863, this began to change as more civilian mail began to be allowed but purely at the discretion of the local military authorities.

Restrictions on such civilian mail were tightened and more effectively enforced including the limitation of the letter to only one page, the complete prepayment of postage, and the routing of all civilian mail through Union Fortress Monroe, Va. It was made clear that this was not an automatic service and that only some or certain letters would be allowed through while others may be rejected or end up in the Dead Letter Office. Almost all of the later war civilian cross-border mail went through Richmond, Va on the Confederate side and Old Point Comfort, Va on the Union side if heading North and City Point, Va if heading South. Occasionally routing notations such as “via Flag of Truce boat” or “via Fortress Monroe” or some such similar notation mainly used on POW mail can be found as well on civilian mail.

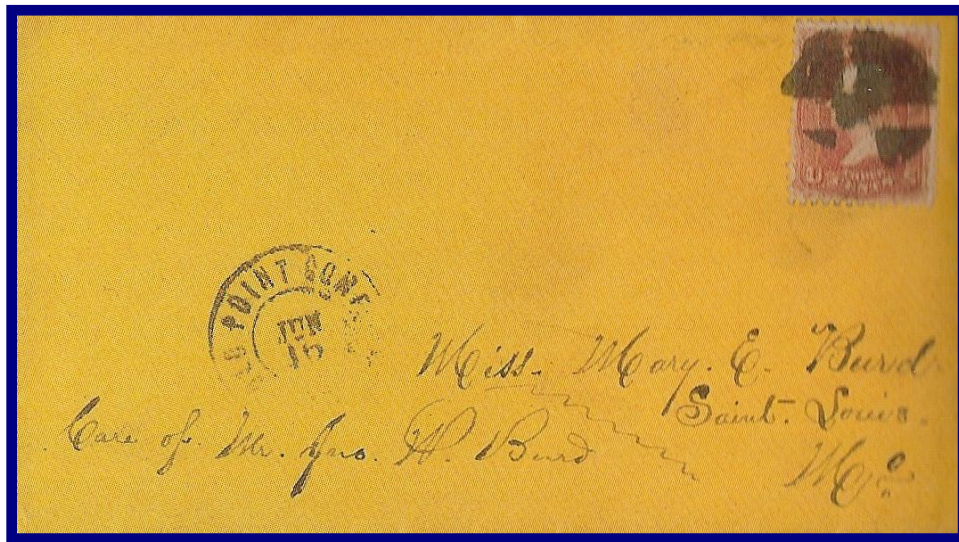


Figure 2 – Civilian South-to-North Cover via Old Point Comfort, Va June 16, 1864.

The cover illustrated in Figure 2 has no notations to indicate that this is a cross-border cover. This cover is identified as such by the original letter which still remains with the cover and is datelined at Richmond, Va June 5th 1864. In the letter, the writer states that the Flag-of-Truce mail is “irregular” and “uncertain.” This is the inner cover with the outer cover containing the Confederate postage discarded at the time of transfer. The Union postage was prepaid with a Federal stamp and entered the USA postal system in Old Point Comfort, Va for delivery to St. Louis, Mo. The cover is in fact from the very well-known Miller-Burd correspondence between Capt John J. Miller Missouri State Guard (Confederate) and his friend and fiancé’ Mary E. Burd in St. Louis, Mo. Capt (Dr) Miller was an Assistant Surgeon who was captured and paroled several times in St. Louis but was ultimately sent to the prison at Johnson’s Island in July 1863 where he spent eight months before being transferred to Point Lookout for exchange in April 1864. After his exchange, he spent the remainder of the war in Richmond. During his active service, Capt Miller was wounded and lost a leg as the result of his wound. John J. Miller and Mary E. Burd were married after the war. The Miller-Burd correspondence is an excellent source of civilian South-to-North cross border mail as there are multiple covers known from this correspondence.

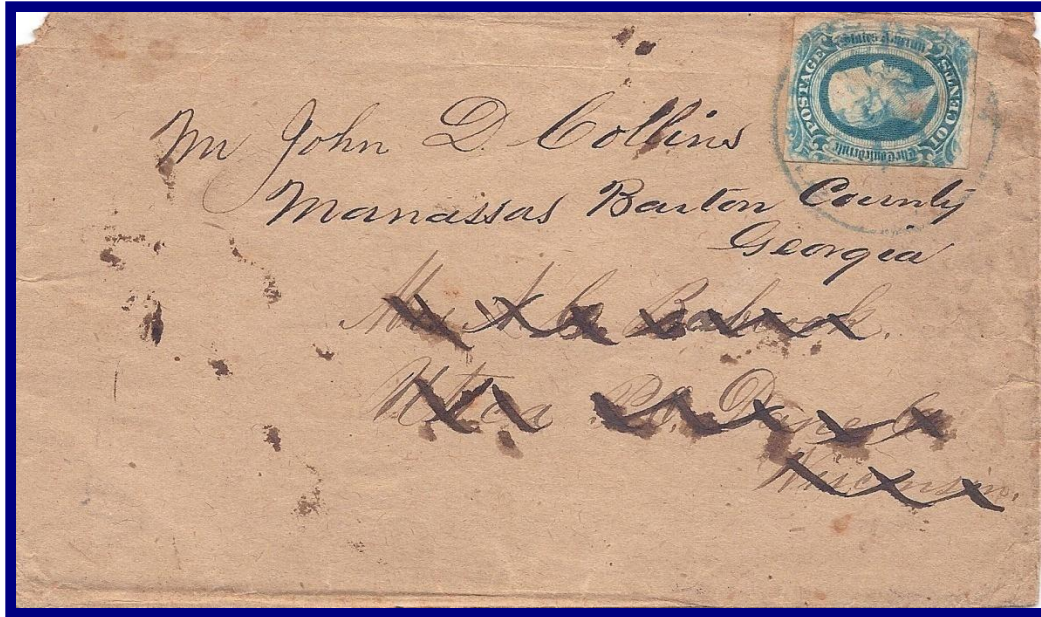


Figure 3 -- South-to-North Civilian Rejected and Returned to Sender.



Figure 4

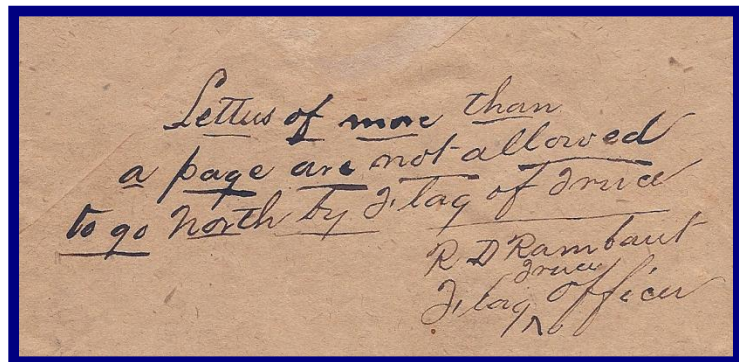


Figure 5

The cover illustrated in Figure 3 shows what happened to a particular letter which did not follow the rules. This is the inner envelope of a South-to-North attempted cross-border cover. The address in the North which is lined through is to Mrs. A. C. Babcock, Utica PO Dane Co., Wisconsin. The cover originally contained a Union 3c stamp to pay the postage from the Union transfer point to Wisconsin. In the enlargement shown in Figure 4, the outline of the original stamp can be seen on the cover at the top of the Confederate stamp. The cover contained a very lengthy letter which has survived and is still with the cover. The cover was rejected because the letter was too long. Only letters of one page were allowed to pass through-the-lines. The letter indicates that the cover originated in Manassas, Georgia. The outer envelope would have been addressed to the transfer agents in Richmond or perhaps routed "via Flag of Truce" with the Confederate postage which was discarded in Richmond. This inner cover with the Federal postage attached and the letter were sent to Petersburg for examination by the military. The Confederate military examiner rejected the letter and wrote the following notation on the reverse

of the cover “Letters of more than a page are not allowed to go North by Flag of Truce” and signed it “R. D. Rambaut, Flag of Truce Officer” (Figure 5). The sender states in his letter that he has enclosed a Confederate stamp so that his relative could write a return letter. Since the examiner rejected the letter, it appears that he removed the Union stamp and then affixed the Confederate stamp enclosed in the letter and returned the cover and letter to the address on the letter dateline. The stamp is an Archer & Daly Type II tied by the blue Petersburg, Va postmark dated in June 1863 and addressed to Mr. John D. Collins, Manassas Barton County, Georgia. The notation on the reverse and the return address are in the same hand. The examiner did not have to do this. Probably the only reason the letter was returned to the sender and has therefore survived was because the letter contained a Confederate stamp which was used by the examiner to pay the return postage. Otherwise, the letter and cover would have been discarded or sent to the Dead Letter Office. Surviving civilian through-the-lines covers themselves are not all that common. A surviving civilian attempted through-the-lines cover with the original letter that was rejected by the examiner is a significant rarity.

The examiner, Robert D. Rambaut (1839-1909), was born in Petersburg, Va and enlisted in Co C 12th Va Infantry in May 1861. Prior to the war and after the war, he worked as a clerk. In mid 1863, he was detailed as a mail examiner but was discharged from the service in September 1863 (reason not given) presumably because it is documented that he had been sick frequently and was therefore not fit for further service.

From the letter, the sender, John D. Collins, was a school teacher in Manassas, Georgia in his 41st year. The letter that he attempted to send to his sister is extremely interesting and tells much about the current situation in the Confederacy in general and in Georgia in particular. The letter is quoted in its entirety.

*Manassas, Bartow County, Ga.
June 7, 1863*

My Dear Sister Amorilla:

When in your last letter, written about two years ago, you spoke of the probable interruption of our pleasant correspondence. I could not realize that it was to be so. It is true, the war had then begun, and everything was tending rapidly to non-intercourse between the United and the Confederate States of America; still, I have always been accustomed to the privilege of free correspondence with friends in whatever part of the world they may have been -- whether in barbarous Africa, in half-civilized China, or in the islands of the Pacific; -- and it really was strange to think that the time was approaching when, for years together, I should not be permitted to hear one syllable from my only relatives on earth, although we were living in the same enlightened land, & within three or four days' travel of each other. I could hardly conceive that such an event was possible; yet how have we been made to feel its existence during the progress of the present fratricidal and relentless war! Pen cannot record how anxious I have felt to hear from you and to learn how it fares with you temporally and spiritually in these horrid times. It is fair to presume that you have been no less solicitous for me. An opportunity occurred some time in the early part of last year to send letters through the army

lines, under flag of truce; but unfortunately, I did not know it till it was too late. Now that a similar chance is offered, I cheerfully embrace it; and hope I shall be pardoned for writing on Sunday, which I do in my haste for fear the opportunity will be lost.

My wife and I have enjoyed fine health during the last two years, not having been sick more than a day or two each, and at no time sufficiently ill to need a physician. I have not changed my residence, as the strange names at the head of this might lead you to suppose; for Manassas and Bartow Co. are only new names for Cassville & Cass Co.; the new names having been bestowed in honor of Gen Bartow of Savannah who was killed at Manassas, Va., July 21. 1861.

My occupation remains the same that it has always been. Our college was suspended two years ago, most of our students and one of our teachers having volunteered in the army. I am now teaching in one room of the same building, a sort of academy or high school, in which I have had moderate success, having realized, I suppose, on the whole, about enough to pay family expenses-with which I am pretty well satisfied considering the cost of maintaining a family in time of war when speculation runs so high. Last year I taught a mixed school of from 20 to 35 scholars-the female college being at that time suspended. This year the female college is again open, so that I have now only boys, the number ranging from 30 to 40. I could have had a larger school, but, as I had no assistant, I refused to take more than 40. My income has been greater this session than at any past period, though not proportional to increase of expenses. However, it will enable me to live, and I am content -- particularly as my profession exempts me from military service, and that without extra taxation. By our present laws, all ministers of the gospel, physicians who have been in the practice 5 years, and teachers of two years' standing or upwards are exempt from conscription. Physicians and lawyers are subjected to a professional tax of 50 dollars each, in addition to their property tax. I am liable to be taxed only on my property and the income of my profession, should it reach \$1000 per annum; so that you see I am in the most favored class next to the ministry. No one has yet been conscripted above 40 years of age, though the President is authorized to extend the conscript act to persons between 40 and 45, whenever occasion may require. I am now, as you are aware, in my 41st year.

I suppose you lament, no less than we, the destructiveness & fury of the present war. It is not likely that you & I will ever agree as to where the blame chiefly rests; but many of the results we may equally deplore. I understand that the South aims to establish its independence; I am not able to comprehend the end aimed at by the North, further than to "whip" in the fight. As to restoring the union, that seems to me totally out of the question. One might almost as well talk of restoring the Roman Empire. If the object be to abolish slavery, I cannot see what good is expected to result to compensate even the vast destruction of life & property that has already taken place to say nothing of the still greater amount of waste that must occur to both north & south before such a result can possibly be brought

about -- even admitting its possibility, which is doubtful. Negroes sell now about three times as high as when I first came to Ga., & about 50 to 70 per cent higher than I have ever seen them sell before. About two weeks ago, a family of seven negroes, born free, and residing in this county, sold themselves into voluntary bondage, for the sum of \$100 dollars each! This may seem strange & unreliable, but is, I suppose true, though I did not witness the transaction. If such be the disposition & choice of the negro, why wish to set him free? My wife's parents are still living, & left our house yesterday at the close of a pleasant visit. My wife's mother is not in good health, but is able to ride about & to work some. Ada Collins Gatt, my wife's niece, still lives with us, & has made much improvement since I wrote to you last. We teach her entirely at home.

You have no relatives in the South but me to suffer by the war. I have many in the north, & suppose among so many some must have fallen a sacrifice. My wife lost a cousin at Richmond a year ago. A cousin by marriage was killed in the second battle at Manassas. Others of her relatives have died in hospitals or suffered from wounds of a serious nature; but none of them were nearer than cousins. Many of my former pupils have lost their lives in the war. Two of them, in particular, were noble fellows, to whom I was greatly attached.

I suppose my property at the North has been confiscated; or, if not confiscated, that it has been sold for taxes, & in either case will be lost to me. Of course I shall regret the loss; but I can live without the property. I ought to have sold the whole long ago & invested the money nearer home; & that \$300 lent to Wm. I ought to have kept in my own pocket where it would have been safe.

I have spoken of the expensiveness of living here. This is only the natural result of the condition of our country -- our ports being blockaded, & a great portion of our producing population serving in the army & being only consumers. These two circumstances would, of course, produce a scarcity unknown to former times & calculated to enhance prices to a considerable extent. The exorbitant prices demanded for some articles is, however, rather to be attributed to speculation in trade, & the substitution of a paper for a metallic currency. I propose to inclose an Atlanta "prices current," which will give you some idea of what we pay for articles of food & clothing. You must not, however, infer that we are in danger of being starved out; for the present year promises to be more fruitful than the last, & many essential articles are much cheaper now than they were a few months ago. Flour has been 40 cts & salt 80 cts a pound -- now much reduced. Money is very plenty, & public provision is made for the poor; so that there is not much real suffering. As for starvation - I have not heard of such a thing. Labor as well as provision has advanced. Good shoemakers or blacksmiths can earn \$5.00 a day, & so support their families almost as well as ever. Luxuries are somewhat scarce - but what of that? People that cannot do without them, do not merit independence.

Please write without delay, & let me know all about Daniel & Amos, & Lorenzo, & William & their families, & Theresa. Also give us what you can about our uncles & cousins & our particular acquaintances & friends. How comes on little Lois Catharine? And what has become of Uncle Ellery & family? Tell us about prices, & what you think of the war. Tell our friends you have heard from us. Please inclose one or two U. S. stamps, as it is difficult to get them here & I may have an opportunity to write again. I send a Confederate stamp for your use. See within.

I neglected to tell you that Elizabeth's only brother has been in the army for a year past. He has been stationed at Savannah & Charleston, most of the time, but at latest accounts was in Mississippi. He is probably in the vicinity of Vicksburg, though she has not heard from him for some time, & is quite uneasy lest harm may have befallen him. There is, of course, mourning all over the land; there being hardly a family that has not lost a beloved member or friend. Oh! when will the war cease? God, no doubt, has a purpose in it, & I will try to say, & to feel, Thy will, O Lord, be done! But let us pray that this cup of bitterness may soon pass away.

The consideration of war or of gain absorbs almost everything else. We have meetings, as usual, but very little genuine religious feeling seems to exist.

Elizabeth sends her best love, and says she should be extremely glad to see you all again. We wonder whether we shall ever enjoy this pleasant privilege again. Pray for us. Ada seems to take an interest in my relatives. She is fond of looking at their pictures, & seems desirous of seeing their living originals. I cannot convince her that my brother Lorenzo is better looking than her uncle that is now writing to you, though I have often assured her that such is the fact.

Wheat harvest has now begun, with the prospect of an abundant crop. Gardens, corn, etc., looking well. Fruit, perhaps, not so abundant as we sometimes see, but will be tolerably plentiful for ordinary purposes, though not for distillation. As ever, I remain,

*Your true & loving brother,
John D. Collins*

P.S. Instead of inclosing slip I quote a few prices. Flour 10 to 15 cts per pound; meal about 7 cts; salt 35 cts; rice 11 to 12 1/2 cts; bacon 1.00 butter 1.25 to 1.50; tallow 1.50; sheeting 4/4 1.40 per yard; calico 2.50; nails 1.00 per pound by the key; sole-leath 4.00 per pound; other things in due proportion.

John D. Collins of Manassas, Georgia was obviously unaware of the one page length restriction placed on civilian cross-border mail at this time and must have been severely disappointed when the letter was returned to him. One can only wonder if he was ever able to contact his sister again.

Civilian through-the-lines mail from the war years utilizing the two postal systems can at times be very difficult to identify. If there are no specific notations on the cover itself, often the original letter is required to make a proper identification. This is an obscure part of Confederate postal history that can easily be missed without paying the proper attention to the cover and fully researching the cover and the contents if present.

Reference -- For more information on Civilian through-the-lines mail and other aspects of wartime cross-border mail, the book *Special Mail Routes of the American Civil War: A Guide to Across-the-Lines Postal History* by Steven C. Walske and Scott R. Trepel published in 2008 by the Confederate Stamp Alliance is highly recommended.

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