

Figure 1.

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES: NEW DISCOVERY OF A FAKE MARTINSBURG, VIRGINIA, COVER

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In January 2017, I was notified by a good dealer friend of mine about a Confederate Martinsburg, Virginia, postal history item that he had just acquired from another dealer. I told him to send me a scan of the cover so that I could evaluate it, because it sounded almost too good to be legitimate. The item in question is shown in figure 1. The cover shows a nice Martinsburg 32-mm circular datestamp similar to the one used from November 22, 1849, through February 11, 1862.¹ It ties a Confederate four-margin CSA #9 (T-E-N) stamp on a dark brown envelope. Located in Berkeley County, Martinsburg is in the eastern panhandle of what is now West Virginia. This area was bitterly contested during the Civil War largely because the B & O Railroad ran through it.

At first glance, the cover looks authentic. The address and the docketing on the left side, both written in period ink, appear to be from the proper time. The stamp is genuine. The Martinsburg use seems plausible since similar Martinsburg Confederate examples are known from the early years of the Civil War. Without further examination, I would have purchased the cover for my collection.

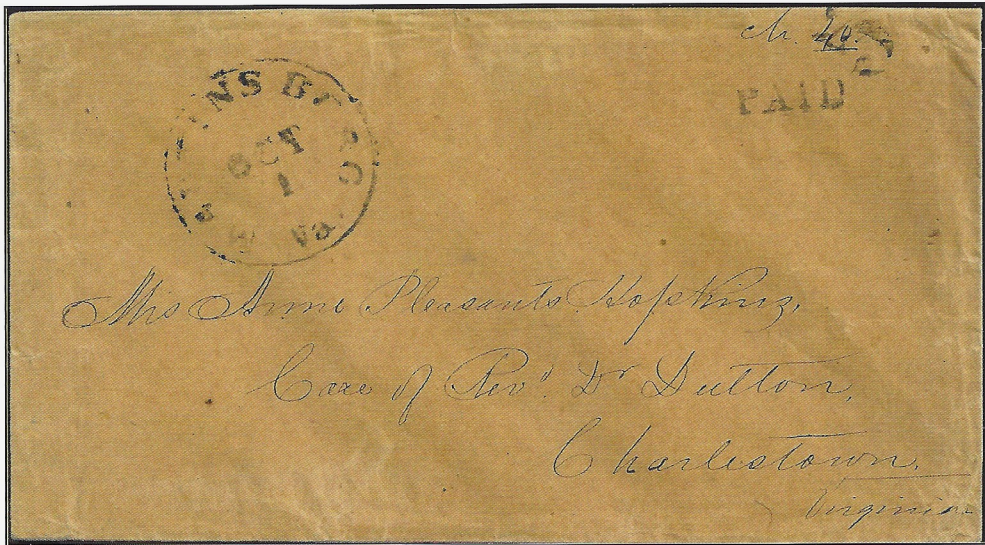


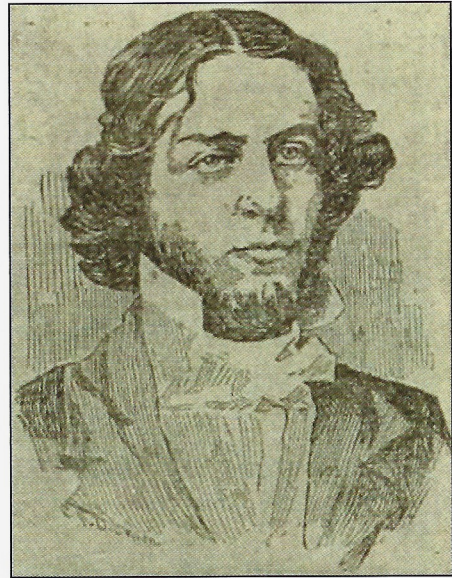
Figure 2. Legitimate Martinsburg Confederate datestamp with handstamp "PAID 5." This is a local use to Charlestown, Virginia, with additional pen notation at upper right to "ch[arge] [P.O. Box] 40."

My first concern, however, was the late Martinsburg use; the T-E-N stamp is not known to have been used prior to April 1863.² Figure 2 is a legitimate Confederate use, dated October 1 (1861) and showing the same postmark type. Unlike the bolder appearance of Confederate use in figure 1, this postmark shows the deterioration of some of the letters in the dial. According to the Virginia Postal History Society, the latest Martinsburg Confederate use was February 11, 1862.³ Because Confederate forces held Berkeley County at various times until September 18, 1864, later Confederate uses can be found.⁴ But when I researched records for November 1863, which would have been the period during which the stamp was postmarked, the same source revealed that Berkeley County was continuously in Union hands from July 23 to December 31, 1863.⁵ This was my first red flag about the Confederate use.

I next investigated the Hampden Sidney, Virginia, addressee: Dabney Carr Harrison (1830–1862; fig. 3). An Internet search turned up a forty-eight-page article entitled "Sketch of Dabney Carr Harrison, Minister of the Gospel and Captain in the Army of the Confederate States of America," written in 1863 by Harrison's brother-in-law, William J. Hoge.⁶

Born September 12, 1830, in Martinsburg, Dabney Harrison was the son of Presbyterian pastor Rev. Peyton Randolph Harrison. According to Hoge, "for 9 months he [Dabney] acted as pastoral supply to the college church at Hampden Sidney, and for 6 months more he sustained this relation to the First Presbyterian Church in Lynchburg." At the age of twenty-six, Dabney was chosen for a two-year term to be Chaplain of the University of Virginia. He would have been at Hampden Sidney when he was about twenty-six or -seven years old, the year date either 1856 or 1857.

Figure 3. Dabney Carr Harrison as illustrated in the *Confederate Veteran*, vol. 7, no. 8 (August 1899), 356



His brother, Peyton Randolph Harrison (Jr.), a lieutenant in the 2nd Virginia Infantry, was killed on July 21, 1861, at the Battle of First Manassas. Peyton's death galvanized Dabney to raise Company K of the 56th Virginia Infantry in Hanover County. He was made captain and chaplain of that company. On February 16, 1862, at the Battle of Fort Donelson, Tennessee, Dabney was mortally wounded and died several days later in Nashville.

The docketing "P R Harrison" along the left edge of the cover in figure 1 could refer to Dabney's father or to his brother—they shared a given name. I believe the initials are those of his brother, who prior to the Civil War was an influential lawyer in Martinsburg. This information suggests that the cover would have originated in 1856 or 1857 when Dabney was at Hampden Sidney College. More importantly, both Dabney and his brother, Peyton, died prior to the year the Confederate stamp was issued in 1863.

At this point, I notified my dealer friend about the fraudulent Confederate use and he agreed with my assessment. He then proceeded to obtain a refund from the dealer who sold the cover to him.

This, however, is not the end of the story. A few days after my discovery and while looking over my collection, I was amazed to find a similar cover among some rather common Martinsburg covers (fig. 4). While I have owned this cover for a number of years, I never really examined it. Comparing it to figure 1, it is easy to see that the addressee handwriting is the same as well as the docketing. Even the stamp placement in the lower left corner is similar. The Martinsburg postmark is tied to a US Scott #11, which dates the cover to 1856 or 1857. Knowing that Dabney Harrison was only at Hampden Sydney for nine months, I concluded that the two covers were dated only a month apart—October and November—and that they would have been together at some point in their history.



Figure 4. Legitimate Martinsburg cover in author's collection



Figure 5. Detail of covers in figures 1 (left) and 4 (right).
The postmark at left has been hand-drawn and is a forgery.

Placing the covers side by side, it is apparent how easy it would be to replace a poor or missing US Scott #11 with the Confederate stamp and then reconstruct the rest of the Martinsburg postmark on the stamp. All that is needed is a similar cover for comparison to perform the reconstruction. Under high power magnification, it clearly can be seen that some of the letters outside the Confederate stamp have been partly enhanced while the lettering on the stamp itself is completely hand-drawn (fig. 5). The 'Va.' is notable because the 'V' is closer to the 'a' in the Confederate example, and both letters are different in appearance. The placement of the '22' under 'NOV' is a little to the right in the Confederate use as compared to the '12,' which is properly aligned under 'OCT' in the legitimate postmark. It is not surprising that the numeral 2 is drawn in on the stamp since it would easier to try to copy a known number that already partially appears on the cover.

There are legitimate Union Martinsburg uses from April 1862 onward, but these have a different style of postmark (figs. 6–10). The appearance of these different postmarks also negates the possibility that an earlier postmark would still be in use as late as November 1863 and during the same time period that another postmark was being used.



Figure 6. Martinsburg 31.5-mm blue circular datestamp postmark "APR 14 [1862]" with soldier's DUE 3 rate in oval. Endorsed by Eugene Powell, Major of the 66th Ohio Infantry.



Figure 7. Martinsburg 26.5-mm double-circle datestamp "OCT 5 1863" with target killer on a 3-cent U.S. 1861 stamp. The postmaster was still using "VA" in the postmark three and a half months after statehood. Latest recorded example of this cancel.

After identifying the similarly addressed cover in my collection, I felt compelled to purchase the fraudulent Confederate cover from the original dealer and use it in an article to caution and inform my fellow collectors. Although I was uneasy about the contact—I had indirectly caused this dealer to lose a potentially lucrative sale—the dealer, appreciative of my interest in the cover, agreed to sell it to me for a price similar to that of a used T-E-N stamp off cover.

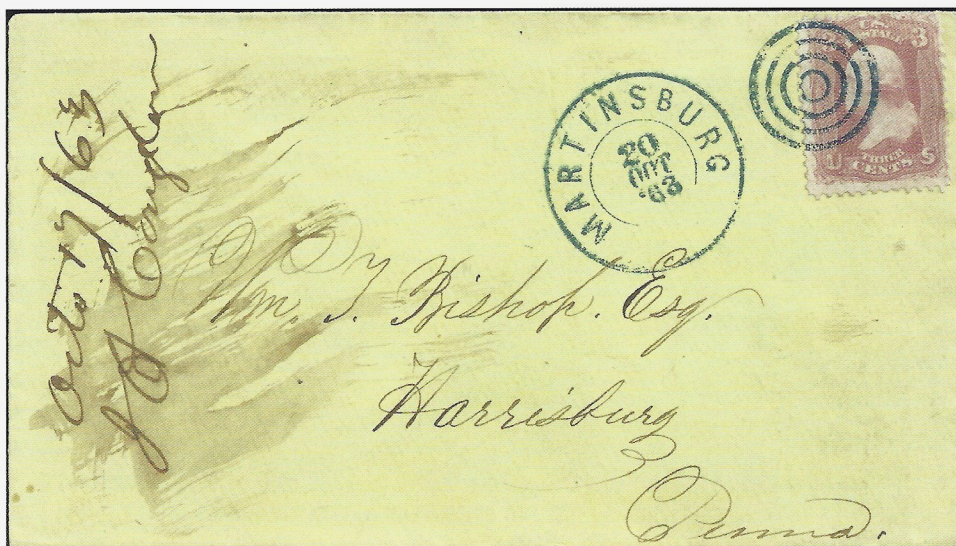


Figure 8. Martinsburg 29-mm double-circle datestamp "20 OCT [18]63" with integral target killer tying a U.S. 3-cent issue of 1861. On the postmark, the space for W.V. has been blanked out; subsequent examples show the W.V. for West Virginia. Someone in the post office apparently did not support statehood at that time. Earliest recorded example of this cancel.



Figure 9. Martinsburg similar blue postmark "4 JUN [18]64" with W.V. showing in the postmark (unlike fig. 8). DUE 4 in circle indicates a double-weight drop letter due rate. This is a local Martinsburg use with no indication that it was a soldier's due.

He had planned to remove the stamp and sell it separately. The result, however, would have been a stamp marked with a hand-drawn cancel ready to be sold to an unsuspecting buyer. The dealer apparently had purchased the cover in a group lot from a collector in Europe. Thankfully, I was able to purchase the item intact and thus, remove it from the philatelic marketplace.



Figure 10. Martinsburg 27-mm blue postmark "OCT 12 [1864]" with DUE 6 in circle (double-weight letter rate). No soldier's endorsement is found on the cover, but the enclosed letter, datelined "Winchester, VA – Oct 9, 1864," was written by a soldier from the 37th Massachusetts Infantry.

I hope this article will motivate others to research their covers and stamps for fraudulent uses. The CSA has an Authentication Service whose members are willing and able to evaluate questionable items.

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NOTES

1. Robert L. Lisbeth, *Virginia Postal Markings and Postmasters, Colonial–1865*, 2nd ed. (Richmond, VA: Virginia Postal History Society, 1984), 259.
2. Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown, Jr., and Jerry S. Palazolo, *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History* (n.p.: Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2012), 341.
3. Tom Stanton, *Way Markings*, vol. 31, no. 3 (August 2000): 37.
4. F. B. Voegle, *The Berkeley Journal, Chronology of the Civil War in Berkeley County*, no. 26, (2000): 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 19.
6. William J. Hoge, *Sketch of Dabney Carr Harrison: Minister of the Gospel and Captain in the Army of the Confederate States of America* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America; Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1863). Online at <https://archive.org/details/03456528.3423.emory.edu/>. Accessed 9 April 2017.