

A QUINTESSENTIAL NORTHBOUND ACROSS-THE-LINES COVER

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The two principal North-South postal routes at the beginning of the Civil War were Washington, D.C., to Richmond, Va., and Louisville, Ky., to Nashville, Tenn. Federal troops occupied Alexandria, Va., on May 23, 1861, resulting in closure of the Washington, D.C., to Richmond, Va., mail route. The following day, United States (U.S.) Postmaster General Montgomery Blair ordered all mail addressed to the seceded states diverted to the U.S. Dead Letter Office (DLO) in Washington, D.C., and suspended all postal operations in the Confederate States of America

(CSA), effective May 31, 1861. The federal government then discontinued the Memphis and Nashville, Tenn., post offices on June 6 and 12, respectively, thus closing the remaining major northbound mail route, Nashville, Tenn., to Louisville, Ky.¹

However, the United States and the CSA permitted mail transmission across the lines by private express companies, as long as their respective postage was paid in addition to the express company fees. The



The only-recorded cover bearing the Southern Express Co. hand stamp and one of only two across-the-lines covers franked with an 1861 3¢ adhesive.

American Letter Express Co. and the Adams Express Co. began carrying mail across the lines through their Louisville and Nashville offices on June 15 and June 22, 1861, respectively. Louisville and Nashville became the principal distributing offices in the U.S. and CSA for all northbound and southbound mail.¹

The Adams Express Co. held a virtual monopoly of the express business in the mid-Atlantic and the South prior to the Civil War. When Adams realized that his Southern operations were jeopardized by creation of the CSA, he split his company into Northern and Southern entities by selling his offices and routes in the CSA to Henry B. Plant, his Southern Division manager, on April 8, 1861. This resulted in the creation of the Southern Express Co.¹

The Adams Express Co. became the predominant across-the-lines mail carrier. The Southern Express Co. jointly operated the across-the-lines business with the Adams Express Co. and conducted operations in all the Confederate States throughout the Civil War and after the war.¹

When the federal government suspended its postal operations in the CSA on May 31, 1861, more than \$200,000 of U.S. adhesives and stamped envelopes resided in Southern post offices.² The federal government was fearful that the CSA would benefit financially from the retained U.S. postage, so it demonetized all 1851-60 adhesives and all but two stamped envelopes, and issued new adhesives and stamped envelopes to prevent the CSA from using U.S. postage to financially

aid the rebellion.² The new 1861 stamped envelopes and adhesives were distributed unevenly across the Northern post offices over an almost five-month span, beginning in mid-August 1861. The earliest recorded uses of the 1861 1¢ and 3¢ adhesives are on Aug. 17, 1861, in Baltimore, Md.^{2,3} When a postmaster received 1861 adhesives and stamped envelopes, he was directed to advertise their availability in a local newspaper and initiate a six-day exchange period during which old postage could be exchanged for the new stamps and stamped envelopes. The postmaster was instructed to demonetize the old stamps and stamped envelopes at the end of the exchange period so that they could no longer be exchanged or used for postage at that post office.²

Louisville, Ky., postmaster John J. Speed received the new 1861 stamped envelopes and adhesives on Aug. 19 and 22, respectively. He initiated a three-day exchange period for the adhesives, which ended on Aug. 24, 1861, and demonetized the 1847-57 adhesives on Aug. 25, 1861.³

A proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln terminated all intercourse – including correspondence – with the seceded states on Aug. 26, 1861, ending all mail conveyance across the lines by the private express companies.¹ Consequently, the newly issued U.S. 1861 adhesives could be used on across-the-lines mail between Louisville and Nashville for only four days, between Aug. 22 and Aug. 25, 1861.

The cover accompanying this feature was carried north-bound, across the lines by the Southern Express Co., franked with the Nashville, Tenn., 5¢ provisional adhesive to pay the CSA postage for a letter traveling fewer than 500 miles. The provisional is tied by “THE SOUTHERN EXPRESS CO./AUG 23/NASHVILLE” handstamp. The cover is endorsed “Paid 2/-,” indicating prepayment of the express fee of two bits (25¢). The cover arrived the next day, Aug. 24, at the Adams Express Co. Louisville office, where the U.S. 1861 3¢ adhesive was applied to pay the U.S. postage. It was deposited in the U.S. mail at Louisville, Ky., on Aug. 25, 1861, for delivery to Philadelphia. The cover was mistakenly routed to the U.S. DLO but was forwarded Sept. 5 (DLO handstamp on reverse) to the addressee, marked “REC'D SEPT. 7” and “DUE 3 cts” in Philadelphia. This cover has been certified as genuine by the Confederate Stamp Alliance.

In summary, this cover possesses a unique constellation of features that render it a quintessential cover. According to Hubert Skinner, “a quintessential cover is unique in several of its aspects and in the combination of stamp varieties and usages is matchless and clearly one of a kind.”⁴ First, this is the only-recorded cover bearing the Southern Express Co. hand stamp. Second, this is one of only two recorded across-the-lines covers bearing an 1861 3¢ adhesive. The adhesive was applied and postmarked on Aug. 25, 1861, the day the 1857 3¢ adhesive was demonetized in Louisville. Third, this is one of six across-the-lines covers franked with the Nashville, Tenn., 5¢ postmaster provisional adhesive, and the only one with the Southern Express Co. hand stamp. Taken together, these features make this one of the most important across-the-lines covers extant and one of the great icons of Civil War and Confederate postal history, clearly a quintessential cover.

REFERENCES

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Advertisement from the Aug. 24, 1861, *Louisville Daily Democrat* announcing the availability of the 1861 adhesives on Aug. 22 and a three-day exchange period.