

# Confederate Military Telegram from Memphis June 1862

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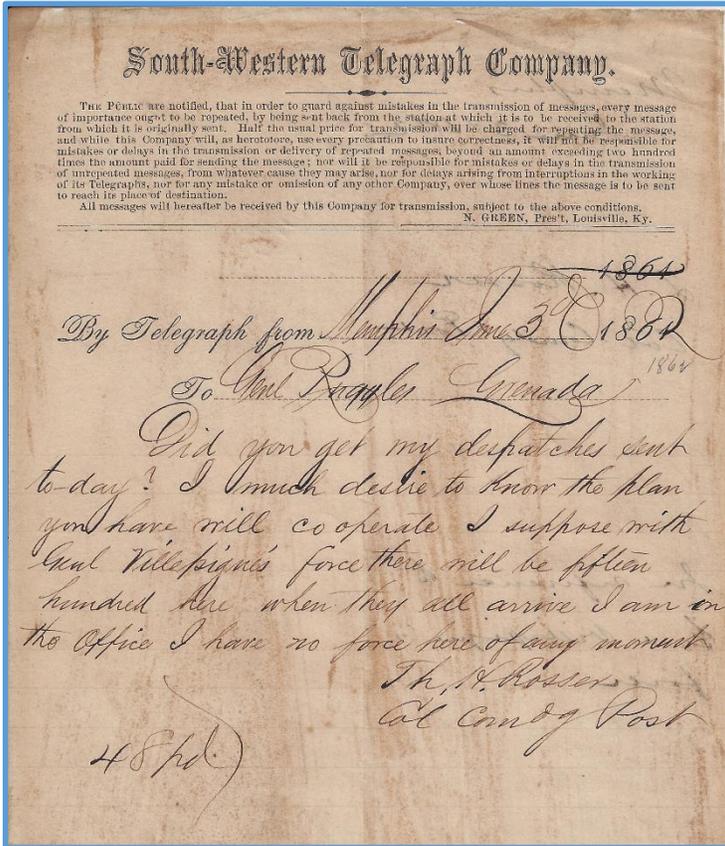


Figure 1 – Confederate Military Telegram Memphis, Tennessee, to Grenada, Mississippi, June 3, 1862.

The invention of the telegraph revolutionized long distance communication in the mid-19th century. Multiple telegraph systems were independently developed at about the same time in the 1830's and 1840's. The system first patented by Samuel Morse in 1837 quickly prevailed and was greatly expanded through the 1840's and 1850's. By 1860, the telegraph system was well established in the eastern part of the country. By October 1861, the first trans-continental telegraph linking California (via Carson City, Salt Lake City, Omaha) with the East was completed. During the Civil War, the Union recognized how important telegraphy was to the war effort whereby messages from the front and orders to the armies could be conveyed in a matter of minutes or hours rather than the days it would take by train or military courier. Washington DC was the hub of the Union military telegraph with all lines leading to the War Department. President Abraham Lincoln was known to have spent hours and hours in the War Department telegraph room waiting for messages from the front and from his generals so that he could get immediate up-to-date information and send orders as necessary.

In telegraphy, the South lagged behind. At the time, the telegraph was not as well established in the mostly rural South as it was in the North. The Confederate leaders certainly did not make overall good use of the telegraphic resources that were available to them. Consequently, Confederate telegrams of a military nature are very scarce items today and much sought after by collectors. Presented for discussion is one such Confederate military telegram from Memphis, Tennessee, in June 1862. The telegram sheet (Figure 1) has the letterhead for the South-Western Telegraph Company which was formed about 1860 from the consolidation of a number of smaller companies and served points in Texas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi and perhaps other locations as well. If the telegram was addressed to someone not in a city or town served directly by a telegraph office, then the telegram could be sent to the nearest telegraph office to the recipient and then conveyed the remaining distance by army courier if military or by the mail if military or civilian. An example of a postal cover which contained a telegram is seen in Figure 2.

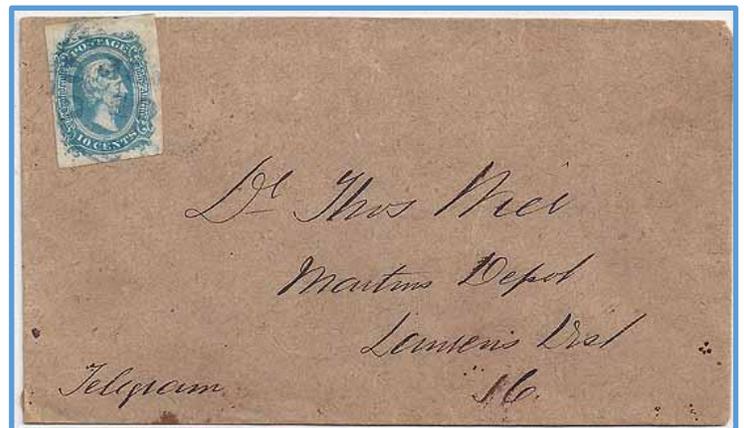


Figure 2 – CSA #11 AD postmarked Columbia SC to Martins Depot, Laurens District SC. Note “Telegram” notation at lower left. Cover carried a telegram from the Columbia SC telegraph office to Martins Depot, a station on the Laurens Railroad about 50 miles away. The cover is an example only and not associated with the telegram that is the subject of this article.

The text of the telegram reads –

*By Telegraph from Memphis June 3, 1862  
To Genl Ruggles Grenada (Mississippi)*

*Did you get my dispatches sent today? I much desire to know the plan you have. Will cooperate I suppose with Genl Villepigue's force. There will be fifteen hundred here when they arrive. I am in the office. We have no forces here of any moment.*

*Th. H. Rosser  
Col Cmdg Post  
48 Pd*

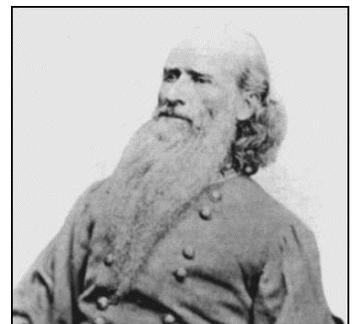
The “48 Pd” at the bottom of the page most likely means that a fee of 48c for the telegram was paid by the sender. Receiving docketing on the reverse indicates that the telegram was received at headquarters. It is not known if a reply was ever sent.

The historical context of the telegram is important in understanding what was happening in the area at the time. General John Bordenave Villepigue commanded the forces at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on the Mississippi River not far from the Arkansas border. Fort Pillow in early June 1862 was threatened by the Union Navy on the Mississippi River north of the fort and advancing south. With the fall of Corinth, Mississippi, to the Union at the same time (May 31, 1862), Fort Pillow became an untenable position. General Villepigue had no choice but to pack up what guns and supplies that he could and evacuate his forces south leaving 19 guns behind. The evacuation of Fort Pillow (June 3-4, 1862) left no significant Confederate force other than a small Confederate Navy flotilla to oppose the Federals advancing down the Mississippi River and effectively doomed the city of Memphis to capture by the Union. Memphis was occupied by the Union on June 6, 1862, just 3 days after this telegram was sent and remained under Union occupation for the remainder of the war. With the capture of Memphis, the Confederate Tennessee State Government effectively ceased to exist. Fort Pillow would later in 1864 become the site of the infamous Fort Pillow Massacre (April 12, 1864), one of the major atrocities of the war, when Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest attacked the fort and decimated the Union garrison composed of both white and colored soldiers.

Military Officers associated with the telegram –

1) Colonel Thomas H. Rosser (1818-1897) – Colonel Rosser, the sender of the telegram and the commander of the post in Memphis in June 1862, was a well-known Missouri Confederate leader and had distinguished service early in the war as Colonel of Rosser's Missouri Infantry Battalion (Confederate) and the 1st Missouri Infantry State Guard (Confederate). No record of further service after the fall of Memphis.

2) Brigadier-General Daniel Ruggles (1810-1897) – General Ruggles (Figure 3), the recipient of the telegram, was in command of Confederate troops in Mississippi but was in no position to render aid to Memphis or to keep Memphis in Confederate control. He rendered good service in 1861 at Corinth and later at the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, but thereafter his duties for the remainder of the war were mainly administrative as a district and departmental commander.



**Figure 3 - Brigadier-General Daniel Ruggles.**



3) Brigadier-General John Bordenave Villepigue (1830-1862) (Figure 4) – General Villepigue (an 1854 graduate of West Point), the commander at Fort Pillow, was an able officer and general with distinguished service first at Pensacola, Florida, and then conducting a skillful defense of Fort Pillow against superior forces until ordered to retire from the fort. The telegram indicates that General Villepigue was expected to come to Memphis with his forces. That apparently did not happen as it was too late to try and save Memphis, so the general retired to Mississippi. Later, General Villepigue contracted a “fever” in Port Hudson, Louisiana, and died of disease in November 1862.

**Figure 4 – Brigadier-General John Bordenave Villepigue in a pre-war photo as a Union Lieutenant.**

One of the great things about collecting Confederate postal history is that there is so much actual history behind each and every cover, letter, document, and in this case telegram that is collected. In this day and age with all that is available through the Internet, much of this history can be easily discovered. Learning more details about the lives and accomplishments of the people involved with the items that are collected gives a much further and deeper perspective and appreciation of the history of the times.