

Magnolia Mills, Florida

A New Confederate Find

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Figure 1 – Stampless Magnolia, FLA., Handstamp PAID 5 dated 28 JULY (1861). Addressed to Sumpter (sic) C. H., S. C. with 1861 receiving docketing at the left.

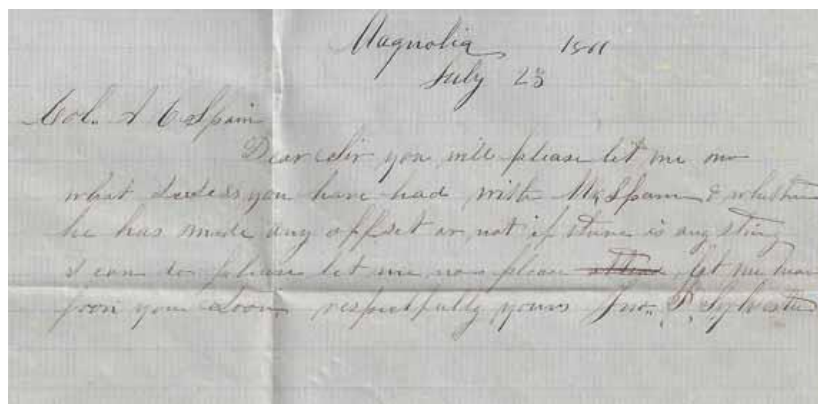


Figure 2 – Original letter datelined “Magnolia July 25, 1861.”



Figure 3 – USA 3c Red Star Die piece Magnolia, FLA., 24 MAR (1861) – USA Used in the CSA period for Florida.

When I recently acquired the Magnolia, Florida, cover as part of a larger purchase (Figure 1), I was at a loss to properly identify the cover as I had never heard of Magnolia, Florida. The cover is clearly Confederate in origin with the 5c rate under 500 miles and dated July 1861 confirmed by the period receiving docketing at the left. The original short business letter that surprisingly has remained with the cover is datelined “Magnolia July 1861” and also confirms the date of use (Figure 2). Included with the cover was a separate cut square piece of a USA 3c Red Star Die with the same Magnolia, Florida, postmark dated 24 MAR (1861) which fits into the USA Used in the CSA period for Florida. There are no provenance marks on the reverse of the cover to suggest which collectors of times past may have owned the cover.

I looked in the catalogs and found nothing. I checked the list of 1862 USA Post Offices¹, and Magnolia, Florida, was not on the list. However, a Magnolia Mills, Florida, post office was listed in Duval County. I initially discounted that post office as the origin of the cover because “Mills” was not in the postmark. The widespread practice at the time was to use the full official name of the post office in the postal markings. I consulted Deane Briggs’ book on Florida Civil War postal history, and found a very short listing for Magnolia Mills with the notation “No Confederate covers have been recorded.”² I again discounted Magnolia Mills as the origin of this cover due to that notation in the book and the absence of “Mills” in the postmark, not thinking that I may have stumbled on the only known Confederate cover from that post office after 163 years.

Not finding a definitive answer, I next consulted the Internet by searching for “Magnolia, Florida.” A very interesting finding appeared. Magnolia, Florida, was identified as a town on the St. Marks River in Wakulla County, later changed to Leon County, which was settled in the 1820’s.³ Florida was acquired in 1819 from the Spanish and became a state in 1845. A USA Territorial Post Office was established at Magnolia in 1827 and discontinued in 1840 with a name change to Port Leon

well before Florida became a state.⁴ So what looked promising as a possible source for the cover evaporated as that Magnolia post office did not exist by the time of the Civil War.

Since I was getting nowhere, I next contacted Deane Briggs, who has published extensively on Florida postal history, to see what his thoughts were on the cover. He responded that this cover is a very important new find and is definitely from Magnolia Mills as it is the same postmark recorded used at Magnolia Mills pre-war in the late 1850's. There are perhaps 10-20 estimated pre-war Magnolia Mills covers from the pre-war 1850's (Figure 4). Florida postal historians consider this Magnolia, Florida, postmark to be a "Hotel Postmark" as the postmaster was believed to have operated from an office in the Magnolia Hotel.⁴ The USA and later CSA postmaster was Nathaniel D. Benedict who owned and operated the Magnolia Hotel at that time. So it was certainly logical that he also used the hotel as his post office. This may be the reason the postmaster omitted "Mills" from the postmark. This cover is now reported to be the only Confederate cover known from this obscure Florida post office. The small Star Die piece also shows use in the Confederate period (Figure 3). Through the 1850's and into the Civil War, there was no Florida post office officially named "Magnolia." There was only "Magnolia Mills" at that time. It is apparent from the pre-war covers to Magnolia Mills, that the "Mills" was also left off the address of at least some of the covers.



Figure 4 – Pre-War cover 1858 addressed to Magnolia (Mills), Fla., and forwarded to Savannah, Geo., showing the same Magnolia (Mills) postmark as the 1861 cover in Figure 1. Note that “Mills” is not included in the address. Even though there was no official post office in Florida named “Magnolia,” the cover was delivered most likely to the Magnolia Hotel. The postmaster owned the hotel and had his office there. The addressee, a Presbyterian minister from Brooklyn NY, was most likely a guest at the hotel and then moved on to Savannah where the cover was forwarded. The post-war history of the Magnolia Hotel is recorded in detail by Deane R. Briggs MD in a research article published in the *Florida Postal History Society Journal*.⁸ (Illustration courtesy of Thomas M. Lera).

To understand why nothing else Confederate is known from this Florida post office, it is necessary to give a brief history of Magnolia Mills. Located on the west bank of the St. Johns River, Magnolia Mills was twenty-seven miles south of Jacksonville. This was the site of a steam mill on the river for processing lumber. This area was also sometimes referred to as "Steam Mill." To further confuse the situation, both "Steam Mill" and "Magnolia Hotel" appear on some period maps of the area – "Steam Mill" (Magnolia Mills) being on the west bank of the St. Johns River and "Magnolia Hotel" being close by on the bluff above the river. A USA post office with the Magnolia Mills official name was established 10 NOV 1853 with Nathaniel D. Benedict appointed postmaster. Benedict continued as the postmaster into the Confederate period with his Confederate appointment dated 25 JUL 1861. The subject cover (Figure 1) is dated only three days after his official appointment as the Confederate postmaster. The Magnolia Mills Confederate post office was very short lived. The post office was discontinued by the CSPOD 8 NOV 1861 by a name change to Green Cove Springs and the appointment of a new postmaster. No Confederate covers have as yet been recorded from the Green Cove Springs post office. On 31 MAY 1866, the USPOD re-established the post office officially as Green Cove Springs.⁵

It is certainly uncommon but definitely possible at this late date to find something new and previously unknown concerning Civil War postal history as this cover proves. All one has to do is look for it and do the research. The results can often be quite exciting and well worth the effort.

Opinion – I consider it to be very relevant to the study of postal history to try to find out something about the people associated with the covers, both the sender and the addressee, if possible. These covers that we so diligently search for and collect are about real people who lived and experienced the times. These covers are not just abstract pieces of paper.

The addressee, Col Albertus Chambers Spain (1821-1881), was an attorney and politician in Sumter, South Carolina. He was a veteran of the Mexican War. After the war with Mexico, he served in the South Carolina state legislature. He was a delegate to the South Carolina Secession Convention of 1860 and a signer of the South Carolina Ordinance of Secession. After the Civil War, he lived in Darlington, South Carolina, where he is buried. The title of "Col" was honorary.⁶

The sender of the cover, John P. Sylvester (1828-1912), entered service as a private in Company C 1st Florida Battalion Cavalry 17 OCT 1861 and transferred to Company C 1st Florida Cavalry 1 JAN 1862. He was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant 4 AUG 1862. After the war, he lived in Kissimmee, Florida, where he is buried. On the Federal Census of 1860, he is listed as a Lumber Merchant in Welaka, Florida.⁷

My thanks to Deane R. Briggs MD for providing the history and the details of the Magnolia Mills, Florida, post office and for reviewing the article for content and accuracy.

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Endnotes

1. *List of Post Offices in the United States 1862*, Theron Wierenga Reprint, Holland, Michigan, 1981.
2. Briggs MD, Deane R, *Florida Postal History During the Civil War*, Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2017, p. 143.
3. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnolia,_Florida.
4. Briggs MD, Deane R., Francis Ferguson, Thomas M. Lera, Editors, *Florida Postal History 1763-1861*, The Florida Postal History Society, 2018, p. 216.
5. Briggs MD, Deane R., Francis Ferguson, Thomas M. Lera, Editors, *Florida Postal History 1763-1861*, The Florida Postal History Society, 2018, pp. 213-215.
6. Find-a-Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/70747630/albertus-chambers-spain>
7. American Civil War Research Database, <http://www.civilwardata.com/>
8. Briggs MD, Deane R., "The Magnolia Hotel, St. Johns River, Florida," *Florida Postal History Society Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3, September 2013, pp 8-10.