

Headquarters Western Department

Semi-Official Imprint

John L. Kimbrough MD

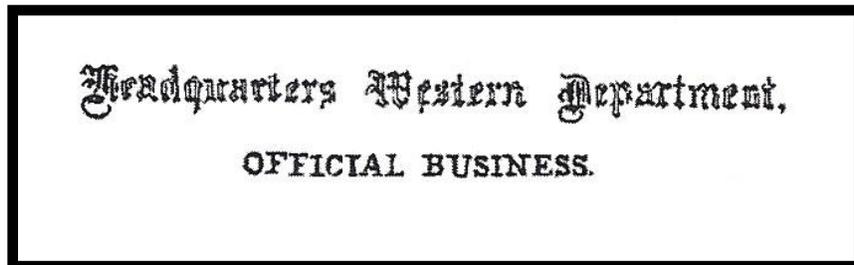


Figure 1 – “Headquarters Western Department Official Business” Semi-Official imprint listing in the *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History* Type WD-ZA-33.

The imprint in Figure 1 appears in the current Confederate catalog as a Confederate Semi-Official imprint in the “Military Departments” sub-section. The imprint was first listed by Dietz in his 1959 catalog and was carried over to the 1986 New Dietz catalog before appearing in the current 2012 Confederate catalog in the same form as illustrated. The basis for the original catalog listing was most likely one of the covers examined in this article. But is it really a Confederate imprint? Could it perhaps be a Union imprint instead? These questions are addressed by further research.



Figure 2 – “Headquarters Western Department Official Business” Semi-Official imprint lined through on cover with Confederate postal use from Bowling Green, Kentucky, dated 9 NOV (1861).

I first acquired the cover in Figure 2 in 1999. At the time, I did not think much about the cover except that it was an excellent Confederate postal use from Confederate occupied Kentucky, and the imprint was catalog listed. I sold the cover and never saw it again until just recently when I reacquired the cover as an auction purchase. A full analysis of the cover is that the postal use has the blue Bowling Green KY postmark dated 9 NOV (1861) with manuscript "Paid 10." The imprint is lined through indicating private use and not official business use. The cover is addressed to A. S. Alexander Esqr for Mrs. Gilmer, Washington, Wilkes Co., Georgia. The cover was sent by Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy F. Gilmer home to his wife in care of his father-in-law.

Jeremy Francis Gilmer (1818-1883), an 1839 West Point graduate, was a pre-war US Army Engineer Officer. At the beginning of the war, he was commissioned as a CSA Engineer Officer and served as a Lieutenant Colonel on the staff of General Albert Sidney Johnston as Chief Engineer of Confederate Military Department No. 2 which at that time included the Western Theater. He was known to have been in Bowling Green in Oct-Nov 1861. He was wounded at the Battle of Shiloh but recovered. In 1862 he was promoted Colonel and became Chief of the Engineer Bureau in the Confederate War Department. In 1863, he was promoted from Colonel directly to Major-General without having been a Brigadier-General and later assisted in the defenses of Charleston and Atlanta. General Gilmer was considered by many to be the best military engineer in Confederate service. After the war, he engaged in railroad activities and was president of the Savannah Gaslight Company. The handwriting on this cover is clearly that of General Gilmer early in his Confederate service as there is much available examples of his handwriting with which to compare.

On reacquiring the cover, I realized that over the intervening years I had not seen any other examples of this imprint. I had also never heard any references made to a Confederate "Western Department."

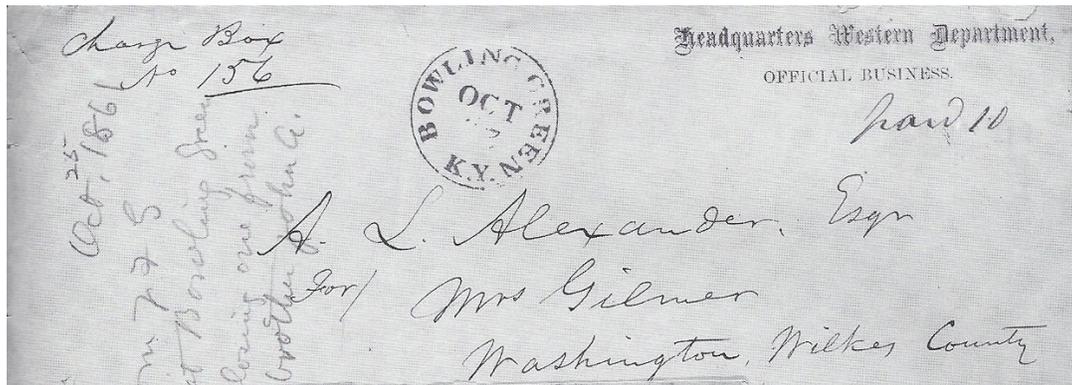


Figure 3 – “Headquarters Western Department Official Business” Semi-Official imprint lined through on cover with Confederate postal use from Bowling Green, Kentucky, dated 25 OCT (1861).

The first thing I did was to do a search and see if I could locate any other covers with this imprint. I found two additional covers. The cover in Figure 3 was offered in a 1998 Robert A. Siegel auction. The image is scanned from the printed catalog where the bottom of the cover was cut off. The cover is legal sized with the imprint not lined through. The postal use is again from

Confederate occupied Bowling Green KY “Paid 10” and is from the very same correspondence as the cover in Figure 2. The date is 25 OCT (1861). To my knowledge, this cover has not surfaced since the 1998 auction and may still reside in the buyer’s collection. Incidentally, the cover in Figure 2 was also offered in the same auction.

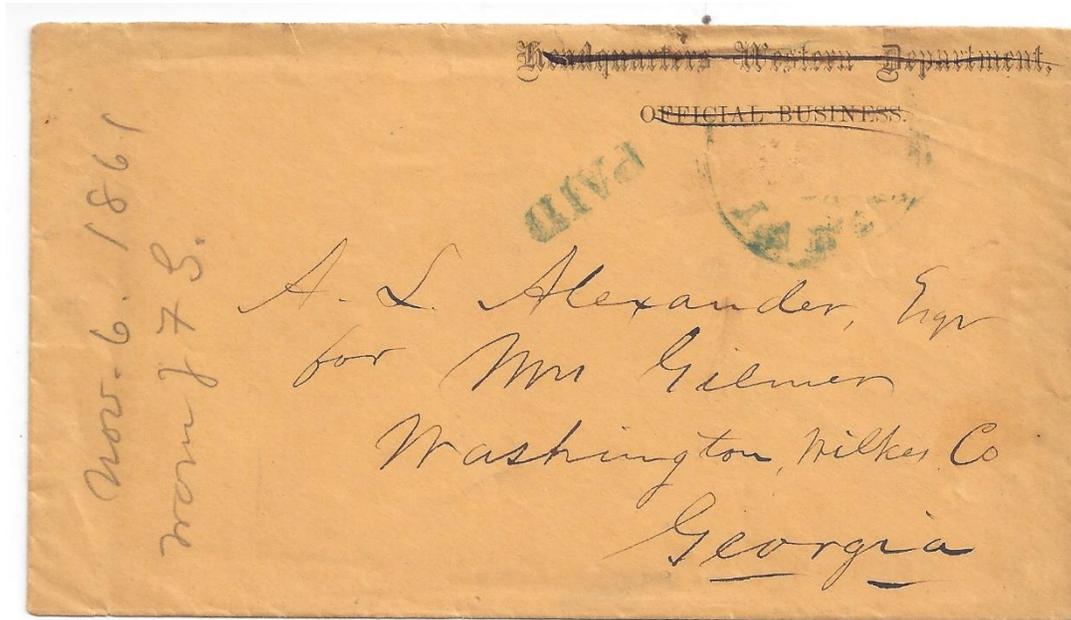


Figure 4 – “Headquarters Western Department Official Business” Semi-Official imprint cover with Confederate postal use from Nashville, Tennessee, dated 6 NOV (1861).

In searching the Internet, I discovered the cover in Figure 4 for sale in another dealer’s stock and quickly purchased it. Again, the cover is from the same correspondence as the covers in Figures 2 and 3, but this time the cover was used in Nashville, Tennessee, and dated by docketing as 6 NOV 1861. Since this date is between the other two covers, it appears that Colonel Gilmer traveled to Nashville for a short time and then returned to Bowling Green. I continued to search for additional covers, but I found none. I widened my search to include possible pre-war use of this imprint, but I found none. To my knowledge, these are the only three now recorded covers with this scarce imprint. There may be others residing in collections, but I am not aware of them. Very likely additional imprinted covers, if any exist, would come from the Gilmer Correspondence.

The story is not yet over. What about the Western Department? I had never heard of it, so it was worth investigating. Certainly, one of the great things we have available to us today is the Internet. Information can be obtained very quickly which not too many years ago would have taken a very long time. Hours would be spent in libraries and archives going through books, journals, and printed auction catalogs. More hours and days would be spent attempting to find information through mail correspondence. The Internet has changed all that and has now made researching postal history so much easier. In my searching, I could find no reference whatsoever specifically to a Confederate military department called the “Western Department.” The obvious conclusion is that such a Confederate department never existed. That was not true for the United States. In 1853, the US Army Department of the West was created. This was a major command which oversaw the military activities west of the Mississippi River to Oregon and California. At the beginning of the

Civil War in July 1861, the Western Department under the command of Union Major-General John C. Fremont was organized and merged with the Department of the West. The western part of Kentucky was included in the Union Western Department in August 1861. In early September 1861, the Confederate Army entered Kentucky and occupied a large part of the state until February 1862. On November 9, 1861 (the date of the cover in Figure 2), the Union Western Department went out of existence. Based on this information readily available on the Internet, I submit that this imprint is most likely not Confederate but is more accurately “Confederate Use of a Captured Union Imprint.” It appears that CSA Colonel Gilmer either in Bowling Green or somewhere else in western Kentucky came across these unused Union imprinted envelopes and used them to write letters home to his wife. Unfortunately, none of the three covers have the letters with them which may have better explained the circumstances. The evidence for this is largely circumstantial, but the evidence is very compelling. Absolute proof of this would be finding one of these imprinted covers with Union use very early in the war. If any exist, I was not able to find one.

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