Where are the Confederate Route Agents?
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The question raised in the title of this talk is one of the most important problems in U.S. railroad postal history, and, perhaps, in Confederate postal history.

Route Agents

Route agents were post office employees who had charge of the mail carried on trains (or steamboats). They attended the sacks of letters, sorted the mails for stations along the route and received mail from stations and from individuals. They postmarked letters which were not cancelled when they received them. They were the only persons authorized to postmark mail on trains until, in 1864, they began to be replaced by Railway Post Office (R.P.O.) clerks.

The principal difference between route agents and R.P.O. clerks seems to be that R.P.O. clerks did more extensive sorting of letters addressed to post offices beyond the route. This seemingly minor difference is important to collectors, because the postmarks distinguished route agents from R.P.O.s. Route agent postmarks have the designation R.R. or Agent, following the railroad name or the route terminals; R.P.O. markings, except for a few late uses of route agent markings, invariably contain the letters R.P.O.

The post office department signed contracts with the railroads (the route agent contracts), requiring special cars, or spaces in cars, to be provided for the route agents and the mail in their care. The route agents themselves were always post office employees.

Since the first railway post office was established (in the north) in 1864, only route agents need concern us here.

Antebellum Route Agents

Before the war, covers postmarked by southern route agents are not hard to find, in the sense that postmarks of a majority of the railroads are known. A representative collection of route agent postmarks from the southern states can be formed; Figure 1 illustrates a sampling.

The majority of early route agent markings show the terminals of the route but some (as the Western & Atlantic RR and the East Tennessee & Georgia RR markings in Figure 1) show the railroad company name.

Confederate Route Agents

With the start of the Confederate Postal System, all this changes. Suddenly almost all route agent postmarks disappear.

We know that there were Confederate route agents. In a May 13, 1861 proclamation, C.S.A. Postmaster General Reagan announced that he was reappointing all currently serving route agents [Dietz, 1929, p. 18].

Figure 2 illustrates a contract between the Postmaster General of the C.S.A. and the Atlanta & West Point Railroad Company. The contract reads, in part “... the mail shall be conveyed ... in a separate and convenient car, or apartment of a car.
Figure 1. Antebellum route agent covers of Augusta & Atlanta, Western & Atlantic, Macon & Montgomery, East Tennessee & Georgia and Atlanta & Montgomery railroads.
suitably fitted up, furnished, warmed, and lighted, ... for the assorting and keeping safe of the mails, and for the exclusive use of the Department and its mail agent, if the Department shall employ such agent ...”

There are, in fact, a few Confederate route agent markings. Figure 3 shows one from the period of use of U.S. postage in Confederate Texas, a cover written up by Charles Towle in his 1985 Chronicle article.

A Confederate route agent postmark which has been seen on several covers is shown in Figure 4. The line is Alabama & Tennessee Rivers Railroad, from Selma to Talladega, Alabama.

Figure 2. Route agent contract between the C.S.A. and the West Point Railroad Company.

Figure 4. Alabama & Tennessee Rivers R.R. March 24, 1862.
A third Confederate route agent cover is shown in Figure 5. The postmark reads “Miss. Central Rail Road/March 20th 1862” in pencil. Docketting in ink reading March 14, 1861 is obviously in error. There is no enclosure in this envelope and so it is difficult to determine the origin and hence its route. The Mississippi Central Railroad, from Jackson to Canton, Miss., did not have a (U.S.) route agent contract until August 4, 1865, but the C.S.A. post office department may have issued one before that. I have not attempted to obtain a C.S.A. certificate on this cover. Perhaps I should.

The Dietz catalogue of 1986 lists six postmarks, including the Alabama & Tennessee Rivers Railroad marking in Figure 4, that appear to represent route agents. As I explained in two 1991 articles in Transit Postmark Collector, even several of these raise questions as to their Confederate use. But the fact remains that Confederate route agent markings are extremely rare, especially in comparison to pre-war uses.¹

Station Agent Markings

Many comprehensive collections of Confederate postal history contain one or more station agent covers. Such postmarks contain the name of a railroad and also the name of a town. An example is shown in Figure 6. Because the name of a station is included in the postmarks, these were unquestionably applied at that towns and not by route agents on the trains.

Exactly what the functions and duties of the station agents were is not clear, as their responsibilities are not spelled out in the Postal Laws & Regulations. Charles L. Towle, writing in his 1982 Chronicle article, made the case that the markings represent postmarks of town postmasters who happened to have access to the railroad station handstamps. He quotes Elliott Perry as asserting that they ought to be referred to as “Ticket Office Town Cancellations.”

Concerning station agents, I illustrated in a 1988 Chronicle article an Illinois Central Railroad station agent postmark of Sublette, Ill., on a drop letter. This cover clearly was not carried by the Illinois Central or any other railroad. The use is, of course, not Confederate.

Whatever the nature of the station agent really is, it is quite different from the route agent.

Post War Railroad Markings

After the war, and after the railroad lines destroyed by the Yankees were rebuilt, route agent postmarks reappear, but not the pre-war handstamp types. Figure 7 shows examples of three route agent markings applied soon after postwar rebuilding. The first two, Augusta & Atlanta (Georgia RR) and Western & Atlantic RR (Atlanta to Chattanooga) are of a quite different style than their pre-war counterparts in Figure 1. The third (South-Western RR) is of a provisional nature, probably put together from a local printer’s type. This railroad used several pre-war handstamps, with larger dials. The Macon & Montgomery RR marking in Figure 1 is one.

The early 1860s was a time of change in postmark types in the north as well as the south. Larger diameter date stamps from post offices and route agents gave way to smaller ones. But in the north, some route agents (and post offices) continued using the same handstamps they had been using. However, I have seen no southern antebellum route agent handstamps continue after the war.

¹ The new Confederate States of American Catalog and Handbook (2012) has delisted these six markings, with the exception of the Alabama and Tennessee Rivers Railroad handstamp.
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So we see that route agent markings in the Confederate states, with a few exceptions, disappear as the War begins.

During the period June to October, 1861 (the Confederate stampless period) the disappearance can be explained. The postal laws stated that route agents could not accept letters paid in cash, although they could sell stamps. Confederate route agents in the stampless period could, therefore, accept only unpaid letters. But unpaid letters, which could only be sent by soldiers, are rare in this period. But why, after that, do we see almost no railroad markings?

We might expect to find an order from the Postmaster General instructing all route agents to refrain from postmarking mail. This could be in the form of a letter to route agents. Or it could be that a post office official traveled around the Confederacy confiscating route agent handstampers. This would explain why none of the antebellum route agent handstamp types reappear after the war. So far I have encountered no documentation of any such actions. I am hoping that researchers of Confederate documents will turn up the answer.

Bibliography