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American Civil War Postage Due: North and South

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Abstract

The American Civil War was a very traumatic period in the history of the United States. Not only were brothers fighting brothers and whole families being torn apart by geographic location and political differences, but also there were grave problems in communication between the North and the South, especially from soldiers in the field or in prisoner of war camps. The mail was the major form of communication for individuals and businesses in the United States (and the world for that matter) during this time period. After the start of succession on December 20, 1860 in South Carolina, the United States Post Office Department (USPOD) maintained mail service throughout the entire country for approximately 5 months.

Once the actual fighting started on April 12, 1861 with the firing on Fort Sumter, the USPOD began experiencing increasing difficulties in handling the mail within and across the Confederacy borders (with the United States). Escalating hostilities, coupled with a desire by the U. S. Government to inflict hardship on the Confederacy, caused the United States Postmaster General Montgomery Blair to suspend all mail service to, from, and within the Confederate States on May 31, 1861. Thus, while intra-Union mail was handled with relative ease and efficiency by the in place United States Postal System, mail traveling both north and south and within the Confederacy was handled by a newly formed and resource limited postal system under the direction of the Confederate Postmaster General John H. Regan. The Confederate Postal System was formed in March 1861 and took over operations on June 1, 1861, immediately after the USPOD ceased operations. Regan was able to build the Confederate Postal System in just a few short weeks by raiding experienced USPOD employees, who sympathized with the South, to fill key administrative positions. In general; however, the Confederate Post Office was under supplied, rates were high, and operations were limited due to lack of funding from the Confederate Government (competing with war expenses). The efficiency of mail delivery was tied to the progress of the war and to some extent the will of the military commanders.

This article traces the flow of mail both within and between the North and the South. In particular the flow of Postage Due mail becomes the major focus of the discussion, since the Confederacy did not recognize Union stamps as postage and the Union did not accept Confederate stamps for mail delivery in the North. A large portion of the mail handled during the American Civil War was postage due – especially mail that had to cross the border between the United States and the Confederacy. This article discusses Civil War Postage Due mail, the rates and penalties applied, and the method of delivery or route of the mail as it traveled from a sender in the North to a recipient in the South or vice versa. Flag-of-Truce mail involving prisoners on both sides will be a major discussion topic along with the operation of the Dead Letter Offices both within the North and the South.