Postal History of the C.S.A., through the Confederate Generals' Mail (1861-1865)

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Abstract

For all intense and purposes, Confederate postal history began on December 20th, 1860 with the secession of South Carolina from the Union. Although short-lived and having only 14 government issued adhesive stamps, the Confederate postal system offers a wealth of usages both for study and collecting. These usages can be explored in many ways to include the mail utilized by the Confederate generals.

As the first Confederate stamp was not issued until October 1861 (earliest known usage is Oct. 16), categories evolved starting with Independent State Usage, which is defined as the time between secession and joining the C.S.A. Once a state became part of the Confederacy, usage was then categorized as U.S. used in the Confederacy. It lasted until June 1st, 1861 when U.S. postage became invalid for use in the Confederacy, and the Confederate Post Office Department under Postmaster General John H. Reagan took over operations.

This was followed by postmasters' provisionals (prepared in advance of mailing) and handstamped paids (prepared at the time of mailing) until the first government adhesive stamps appeared. From time to time the provisionals and handstamped pads reappeared as government stamp shortages occurred.

In all postal history, postal markings are a major part of collecting. War time always produces a great variety of such markings, for not only are there town postmarks and cancellations, there are Army field cancellations with no date logos so as to screen troop movements, Prisoner-of-War and Flag-of-Truce examination markings, Due markings on soldiers mail, blockade runner steamship markings, and Dead Letter Office and Southern Letter Unpaid markings after U.S. postage was declared illegal in the South. There are also the markings you would expect to find at any time: railroad cancellations, college postmarks, official business frankings (for the Confederate Post Office only), steamship markings, forwarded, advertised, missent, held for postage and way markings.

When the blockade closed off the European sources of paper, southerners found themselves scrimping and saving every available scrap. A once used cover was never wastefully destroyed, but was carefully turned inside out, regummed, and used again; this kind of usage is known of course as a Turned Cover. As the need for paper grew more pressing, people even began to use spare rolls of wallpaper to fashion envelopes, resulting in the lovely covers so popular with collectors today. Not only was wallpaper used, but any sheet of paper with sufficient blank space to provide an address side was put into service. Such items as tax recipes, music sheets, wrapping paper, election ballots, bank checks, insurance blanks, maps, religious tracts, account books or any printed forms- all were cut to shape, pasted together and used as envelopes. Nowhere else in philately can one find such strange uses as in the Confederacy where desperate shortage caused such fascinating makeshifts.