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American Poet Sidney Lanier;
A celebrated life cut short by a Civil War prison

The prisoner of war cover shown in Figure 1 has had the back unceremoniously removed. This is an example of an item that most serious Confederate postal historians have in their collections – or have at least seen.

Rebel Archives and Pickett Papers

In 1961, Earl Antrim described in the *Confederate Philatelist*[1] how the backs of Point Lookout, Md., prison covers came to be removed from their fronts. He explained that near the end of the Civil War, the Confederate archives in Richmond were victim to the great fire of April 2, 1865, set by evacuating Confederates. Records that weren't burned in the conflagration were largely destroyed by local officials or abandoned and largely lost to future generations (Figure 2).

Later, the federal army gathered what Confederate records it could and shipped them to the records division of the War Department in Washington, D.C. This became the basis of a legendary project undertaken by the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a fraternal organization composed of veterans who served during the war in the Union army, navy, marines and revenue cutter service (forerunner of today's United States Coast Guard). A GAR badge is shown in Figure 3.

The GAR was dissolved in 1956 after the death of its last member, Albert Woolson (1850-1956). It was followed by the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, composed of male descendants of U.S. Army and U.S. Navy veterans.[2]

As part of the GAR archives project, members applied at least two varieties of the "Rebel Ar-

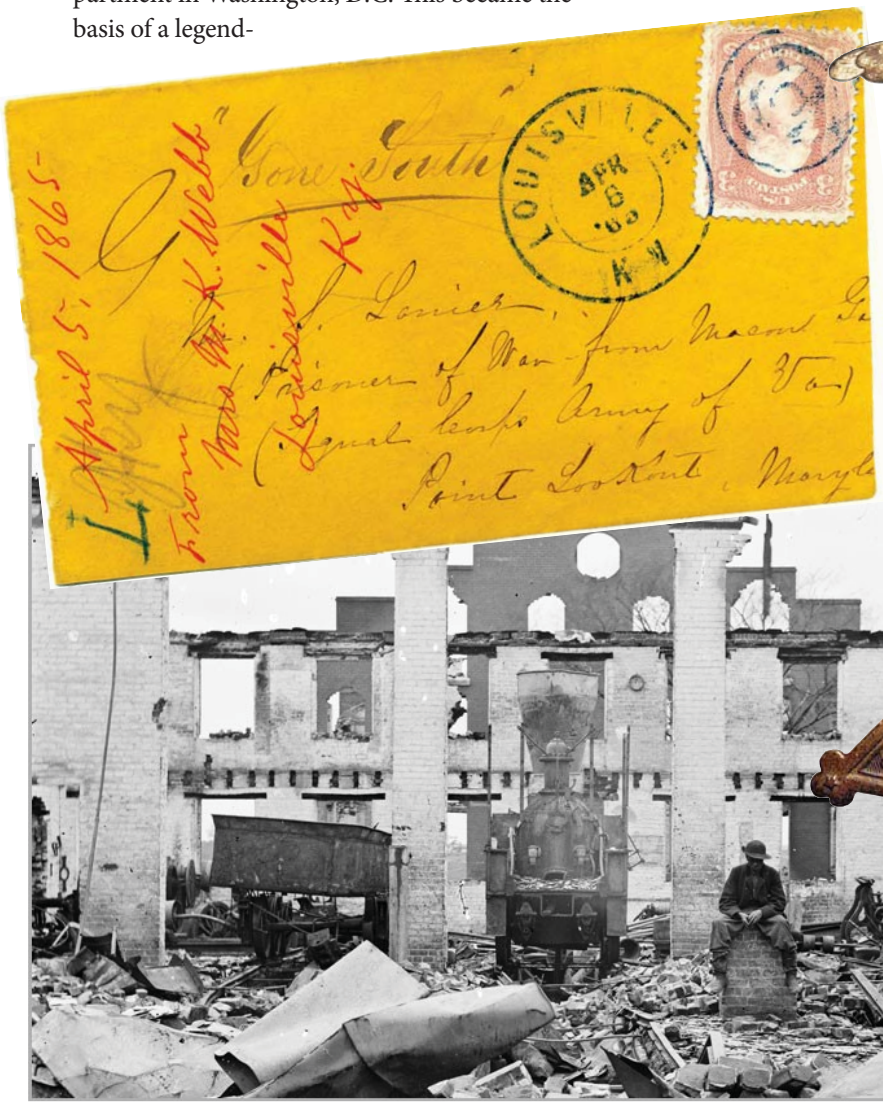


Figure 1 (above left). Cover front addressed to prisoner of war S[idney] Lanier at Point Lookout, Md.

Figure 2 (left). Contemporaneous view of ruins from the burning of Richmond.

Figure 3 (above). Grand Army of the Republic badge.

chives" handstamp to thousands of documents, as well as to about 2,000 covers containing undelivered letters addressed to prisoners at Point Lookout, Md. The GAR task provided full-time employment for some veterans. Two shades of ink are recorded for the handstamp: a light red and a dark purplish red (Figure 4).

This mass of documents was integrated with federal papers into the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies and the smaller series on the navies, which were published between 1880 and 1900. Later, many documents were made available to the Library of Congress (LOC), the New York Public Library and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Much of the remainder was sold to waste paper dealers.

Figure 4. Rebel Archives / Record Division / War Department double-oval handstamp.

Figure 5 (above). Young Sidney Lanier.

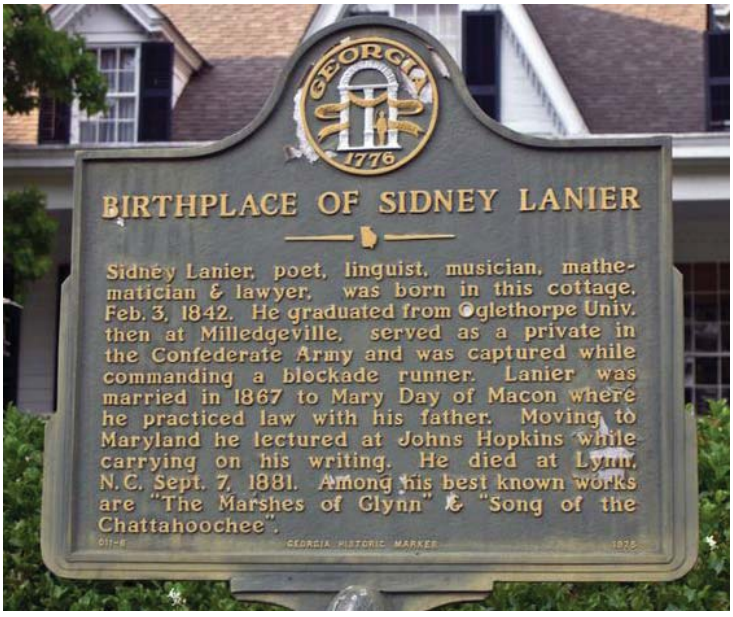
Figure 6 (right). An older Sidney Lanier.

Figure 7 (below). Marker in front of the cottage in which Sidney Lanier was born.

Stanley B. Ashbrook stated that in 1920 he bought about 2,000 cover fronts, as well as complete covers, from a dealer named Colman. All were addressed to prisoners at Point Lookout, most dated after the war had ended.[3] What a haul!

Confederate student Thomas M. Parks made a study of the fronts and several covers that had the complete Rebel Archives handstamp on the back. There was a story circulating that the Rebel Archives markings were applied by clerks at Point Lookout. He logically concluded that there was no reason for prison clerks to cut off the backs of the covers, nor was the Rebel Archives located at Point Lookout – it was in Washington, D.C.

Complete covers are known with this marking on the front or back, as well as part of the mark offset in reverse across from the address. The clerks apparently filed the original letters in their covers, conscientiously marking most of these at upper left with the prisoner's last initial in blue pencil, as well as the date and sender of the letter and city and/or state from which they came. Toward the end, they evidently became tired of this tedious process and marked only the initial for filing purposes.



There was a "housecleaning" of government records after World War I and many old files were sold to waste paper dealers. Someone with a modicum of philatelic knowledge rescued the Point Lookout items and attempted to erase the Rebel Archives markings. Tiring of that futile effort, the individual instead resorted to cutting off the backs of the covers.

I sometimes hear from panicked collectors who fear buying items marked with Rebel Archives handstamps. Yes, there have been thefts from the National Archives and the Library of Congress, but many items were legitimately deaccessioned more than a century ago. I personally confirmed this with an archivist from NARA.[4] Nevertheless, it never hurts to check with NARA if in doubt. It is my experience that the organization will generally respond within 24 hours or less. Documents with rare autographs appear to be more desirable

targets than postal covers, which were earlier discarded as having little or no value. How fortunate for postal history students.

The records of the Confederate States of America, also known as the Pickett Papers, were purchased by the United States in 1872 from John T. Pickett, former diplomatic agent of the Confederacy, and transferred by the Department of the Treasury to the Library of Congress in 1906 and 1910. Other items, received by gift, purchase or transfer, also comprise part of the collection, including approximately 100 additions between 1898 and 1956. The James Wolcott Wadsworth Collection was given to the library as an addition to the records in 1926. The Department of the Treasury also transferred a large group of Confederate treasury records in 1920. In 1921, much of the material processed as part of the War Department series was received from descendants of Confederate officers.

The records of the Confederate States of America, including those of the Confederate Post Office Department, were arranged, described, and microfilmed in 1967. The finding aid describing the collection was revised in 2001 to include additions to the collection.[5]

During the 1970s and 1980s, I spent many a day carefully sifting through the physical Confederate States Post Office documents in the Pickett Papers at the Library of Congress. I was fortunate to have offices in downtown Washington, D.C., only a few Metro stops away from the Madison Building, where I spent a lot of time with dusty files. This was well before research became common via Internet sources.

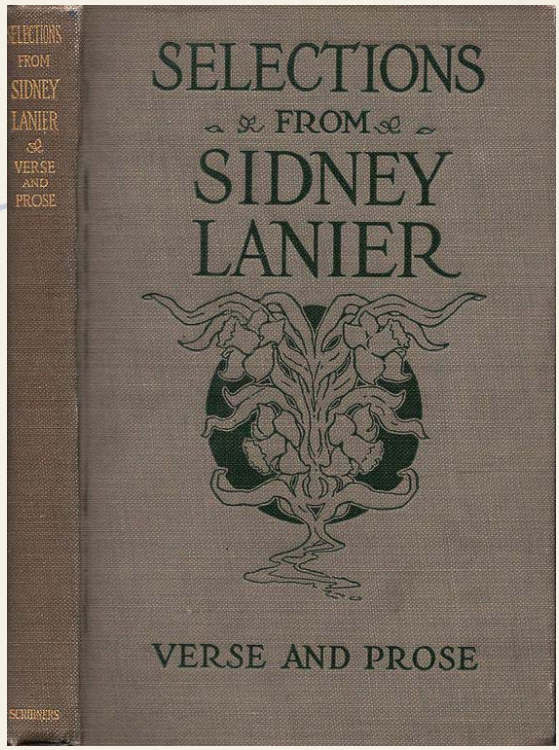


Figure 8. ***Selections from Sidney Lanier: Verse and Prose.***

During the Washington 2006 World Philatelic Exhibition, I set aside a full day for research in my old haunt. I was beyond disappointed when I was told that all records had been converted to microfilm and I was no longer allowed to handle the original documents. I fully understand the necessity, but it was one of the great joys of my earlier research – personally handling the records and being transported to the past. To intensify my distress, the microfiche images are often poor – too dark, too light and/or totally out of focus. Ugh.

Sidney Clopton Lanier

Sidney Clopton Lanier, Sr. (1842-81) is widely acknowledged as one of the finest poets produced by the South in the 19th century (Figures 5 and 6). It is generally accepted that Lanier ranks with New England poets Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson as a significant contributor to American poetry of that era.

Sidney was born in Macon, Ga., to lawyer Robert Simpson Lanier and his wife, Mary Jane Anderson Lanier. A historic marker sits in front of the cottage in which Sidney was born. That marker is shown in Figure 7.

He was steeped in the Southern traditions of music and literature before entering Oglethorpe College in 1857 at age 14, from which he graduated first in his class in 1860. Without instruction, he learned to play the guitar, piano, violin and flute.[6]

Lanier decided to pursue a Ph.D. at Heidelberg University, but the Civil War intruded and caused him to instead join the Macon Volunteers, which became part of the 2nd Independent Battalion Georgia Infantry. He enlisted July 10, 1861, at Sewell's Point, Va. He was assigned to the Virginia theater throughout most of the war. His name is sometimes spelled "Sydney" or just seen with the initials "S.C." Lanier. Such variances are common in military records, as records were handwritten and differences are often attributed to phonetics.

On March 9, 1862, Lanier witnessed the battle between the USS *Monitor* and the CSS *Virginia*, more commonly known as the Battle of the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*. The ironclad CSS *Virginia* was built on the raised

Figure 9. Sidney Lanier sat under an oak tree at this location, inspired to write ***The Marshes of Glynn*****.** Photo by Jud McCranie

hull of the former USS *Merrimack* (not *Merrimac*, as it is often improperly called), which burned and sank in dock April 20, 1861. The new name was assigned less than three weeks before the battle. The media of the day continued using the original name, perhaps out of habit.

Lanier transferred to mounted signal duty in late summer 1862, and served on the staff of Maj. General Samuel Gibbs French. In May 1863, he visited the battlefield of Chancellorsville, which inspired his 1865 poem, *The Dying Words of Jackson*.[7]

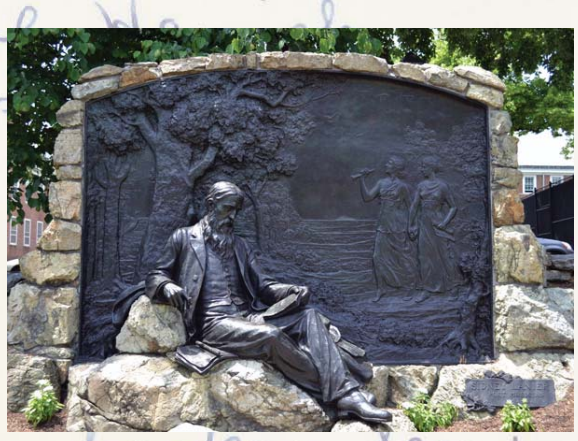


Figure 10. Monument on the campus of Johns Hopkins University, designed in 1942 by Hans Schuler and dedicated in Lanier's honor.

Clifford Anderson Lanier (1844-1908)[8] was the middle of three children and the younger brother to Sid, as Sidney was more commonly called. Cliff was a close companion to Sid and an essayist, novelist and poet in his own right. At age 14, he moved to Montgomery to work as a clerk in the Exchange Hotel, one of several owned by his grandfather, Sterling Lanier. After about a year, he joined his brother as a student at Oglethorpe College. In 1862, having left college for health reasons and working another short stint in Montgomery, he reunited with his brother Sid – this time in the Macon Volunteers of the Confederate Army, having enlisted May 2, 1862, at Macon, Ga.

Military records show that the Lanier brothers mostly served side by side in the same units. They first served in the Georgia 2nd Infantry Battalion, in both B and D companies. They were then transferred together to the mounted signal corps, first in Capt. Nathaniel W. Small's Company (July 21, 1861), then C.S. Milligan's Independent Signal Corps (March 1, 1863). The brothers participated in various military campaigns in North Carolina and Virginia. In 1864, they both were transferred to duty on separate British vessels running the federal blockade along the Atlantic coast.

The younger Lanier served as a signal officer on the blockade runner *Talisman*, a Scottish-built paddle steamer of English registry, built as a blockade runner. She was registered Aug. 6, 1864, but her career was short-lived. She foundered at sea Dec. 31, 1864, during a storm on one of her runs from Wilmington, N.C., to Bermuda with a cargo of cotton.[9] She wrecked on the way to being repaired.[10] The crew was rescued and landed at Bermuda.[11] Eluding capture, Cliff Lanier traveled from Bermuda to Nassau, Bahamas, to Cuba to Galveston, Texas. He made his way back to Macon with much difficulty, much of it by foot. He arrived on May 19, 1865, after the close of hostilities and just days before his mother's death.

Sid was aboard the blockade-running side-wheel steamer *Lucy* when it was boarded Nov. 2, 1864, striking her colors in compliance with a demand from the USS *Santiago de Cuba*.[12] Refusing to take the advice of the British officers on board to don one of their uniforms and pretend to be one of them, he was captured. This tactic, although worth a try, did not always work. A Southern drawl vs. a British accent would not be difficult to detect.

Lanier was subsequently incarcerated at Point Lookout, Md., where he contracted tuberculosis, generally known as "consumption" at the time. He suffered greatly from this disease for the rest of his life. At that time, it was incurable and usually fatal.[13] He traveled widely after the war, vainly searching for a cure.

The Lanier military records are not as complete as some I have encountered. There is a March 19, 1943, dated letter in the files to Mrs. Julian S. Harris, Registrar of the Gen. James H. Lane Chapter UDC (United Daughters of the Confederacy) in which Maj. Gen. J.A. Ulio states that the Confederate States Army records on file are incomplete and information is sparse. Many of the dates are "either/or," and I have found conclusive proof of dates and information from other trusted primary sources.

The cover front shown in Figure 1 is addressed to "Mr. S. Lanier (Prisoner of War from Macon Ga., Signal Corp Army of Va), Point Lookout, Maryla[nd]." Point Lookout, officially known as Camp Hoffman, was located at the southern tip of St. Mary's County.

This use is franked with a 3¢ rose 1861 issue (U.S. Scott 65), tied by a duplex of Louisville, Ky., dated April 6 [18]65, only three days before Lee's surrender at Appomattox. The cover is docketed in magenta ink up the left side and indicates the enclosed letter was dated April 5, 1865, and sent by Mrs. M.K. Webb of Louisville, Ky. Clearly,

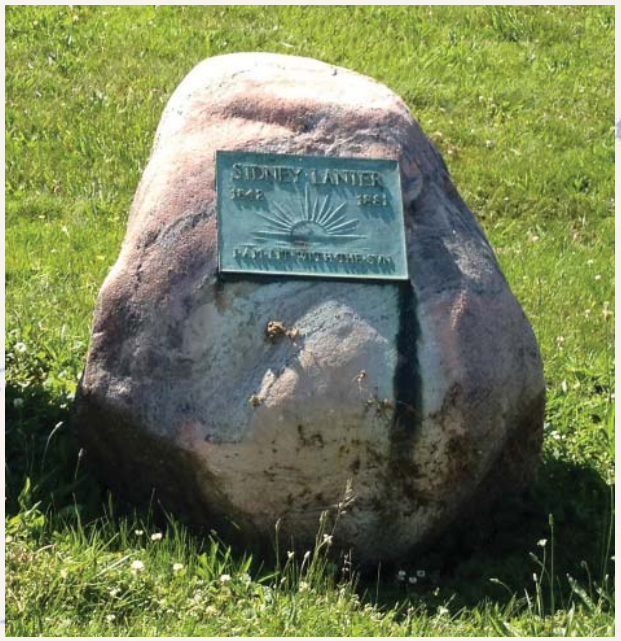


Figure 11. Grave marker for Sidney Lanier.

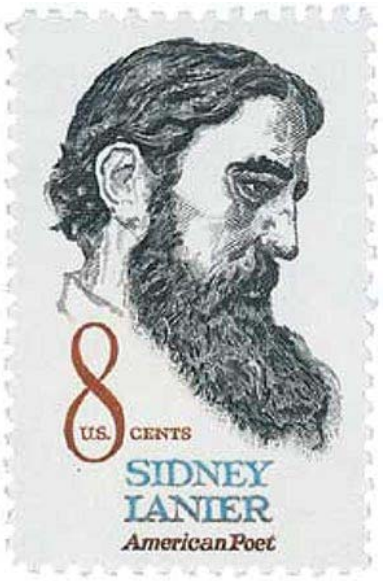


Figure 12. US 8¢ postage stamp honoring American poet, Sidney Lanier (Scott 1446).

she did not realize that he had been detailed to a blockade runner in August 1864 and was no longer serving in the Signal Corps with the Army of Northern Virginia.

A clerk's note at top shows Lanier had "Gone South." He was received for exchange at James River, Va., on Feb. 14, 1865. Military records show him on 30-day furlough to Macon, Ga., as of March 29, 1865. The censor marking "G" at top was used at Point Lookout from Jan. 16-April 3, 1865, according to Galen Harrison; the examiner's identity is unknown.[14]

After the war, Sidney Lanier passed the Georgia bar and practiced law for several years with his father in Macon. Later in life, he became a professor of literature at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Sid married Mary Day (1844-1931) on Dec. 19, 1867, in Macon, Ga., at Christ Episcopal Church. From this union, they had four sons: Charles Day Lanier, Sidney C. Lanier Jr., Henry Wysham Lanier and Robert Sampson Lanier.[15]

There was a link in Sid Lanier's mind between music, feeling and poetry. Lanier had written dozens of pieces for flute, one of which a critic likened in style to Berlioz. His virtuosity was acclaimed by such serious musicians as Leopold Damrosch, a German-American orchestral conductor and composer, and friend of musical luminary Richard Wagner. Such praise helped him secure positions with the Peabody Orchestra in Baltimore, as well as with the New York Philharmonic.

Lanier's theory of poetry assumed that the most musical was also the most emotionally powerful and, since he wished to reeducate the emotions of his audience, his poetry should exploit its music. A book of Lanier verse and prose selections is shown in Figure 8.

During 1878, Lanier offered his ideas on the musicality of poetry as a lecture series at Peabody Institute, the oldest music conservatory in the United States, which officially became part of Johns Hopkins University in 1985. To Lanier, "verse" meant the relationship of sounds in poetry. All that distinguishes music from poetry, for Lanier, was the tone of vowels and consonants compared to that of flutes and strings.[16]

During his postwar visits to Brunswick, Ga., Sid frequently sat beneath a live oak tree from which he drew inspiration, resulting in some of his finest poems. A marker indicates the location, as shown in Figure 9. He was also honored with a large bronze and granite sculptural monument on the campus of Johns Hopkins University in 1942, designed by Hans Schuler and dedicated in Lanier's honor; it is shown in Figure 10.

On Sept. 7, 1881, at the young age of 39, Sidney Lanier died of the tuberculosis he contracted while imprisoned at Point Lookout. Although he died in Lynn, N.C., having gone South for better weather, he is buried in Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore, Md., in the Sycamore Area, Lot 25. His grave marker is shown in Figure 11.

Lanier was honored with a U.S. 8¢ postage stamp in 1972 (Scott 1446, Figure 12), issued in his hometown on the anniversary of his birthday. Located on the Chattahoochee River in northern Georgia, Lake Sidney Lanier, the largest lake/reservoir in Georgia, is also named for him. He has been widely written about and is revered as one of America's notable poets, the greatest Southern poet of his time. His work is described as a "feast for the soul."

The author enjoys hearing from readers and may be reached at ***trishkauf@comcast.net***.

Endnotes

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