

Confederate Mail Transmission Across the Union Lines During the American Civil War

Purpose and Organization: To illustrate the eight principal ways (routes) by which Confederate mail was carried across the Union lines during the American Civil War. The exhibit is organized as follows:

Government Post Office Mail	May 24 - June 7, 1861
Private Express Company Mail	June 15 - August 26, 1861
Flag-of-Truce Prisoner-of-War Mail	September 1861 - June 1865
Flag-of-Truce Civilian Mail	November 1861 - March 1865
Trans-Mississippi Express Mail	April 1862 - April 1865
Covert Civilian Mail	September 1861 - June 1865
Blockade Runner Mail	May 1862 - March 1865
Trans-Rio Grande Mail	July 1861 - May 1865

Background: South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20, 1860. Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi quickly followed. These six Independent States created the Confederate States of America (CSA) on February 4, 1861. The CSA formed its own Post Office Department (POD) on February 21. John H. Reagan was appointed CSA Postmaster General on March 6. The Union continued to operate the postal system of these Independent and later Confederate States. However, Federal military occupation of Alexandria, Virginia on May 23 resulted in closure of the primary North-South postal route between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia. The USA suspended its postal operations in the CSA effective May 31. The CSA initiated its postal system on June 1. The CSA developed ingenious and complex government-sponsored and private methods to transport mail across the Union lines during the Civil War that followed.

Rarity: Only small amounts of Southern mail were successfully transported across the Union lines. Surviving examples are scarce and often in poor condition. Covers included in this exhibit were selected because they represent some of the finest examples extant to illustrate Confederate mail transport across the Union lines.

Northbound Mail via Richmond-Washington, D.C. Was Diverted to the CSA Dead Letter Office (DLO) Beginning May 24.



Mailed northbound May 22 (1861) from Athens, Georgia but diverted to the CSA DLO, where its handstamp and manuscript notation "M-78-1" were applied. The letter was returned to the sender on August 23, 1861.

This CSA DLO marking was used between May 24 and June 1, 1861. Less than 5 examples are known.

Southern Letter Unpaid

After May 31, northbound mail was transmitted to Louisville via Tennessee. However, the USA POD discontinued the Nashville post office and the Nashville-Louisville mail route on June 12, 1861. On June 13 the Louisville, Kentucky postmaster began holding northbound mail arriving from Nashville rather than divert it to the USA DLO. On June 24 the USA POD instructed him to “forward letters from the South for the loyal states as unpaid after removing postage stamps“. Instead, he created the “SOUTHn. LETTER/UNPAID” marking to indicate to addressees that USA franking supplied by Southern senders was invalid for postage. Northbound mail was released for distribution from Louisville beginning on June 25, 1861.



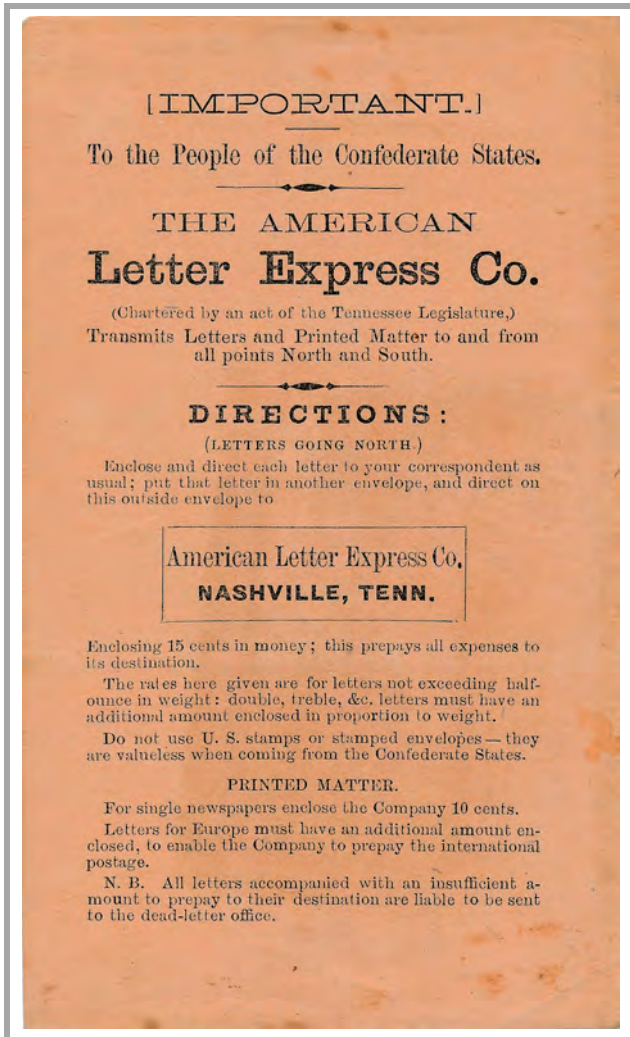
Mailed northbound June 28 (1861) from Murfreesborough, North Carolina hand stamped “PAID” and “10”, indicating payment of the CSA postage, and attempting to use a Star Die entire to pay the USA postage. Traveled via Nashville to Louisville where the “SOUTHn. LETTER/UNPAID” handstamp was applied. Mailed from Louisville on July 6 hand stamped “DUE 3” for 3 ct. postage due.

Steve Walske records 28 legitimate “SOUTHn. LETTER UNPAID” covers.

July Louisville date stamps are the least common.

The American Letter Express Company

After the Louisville-Nashville mail routes were suspended on June 12 the USA and the CSA still permitted across-the-lines Private Express mail if their respective postage was paid.



Louisville and Nashville became the principal distributing offices in the USA and CSA, respectively, for all across-the-lines mail.

The American Letter Express Company began transmitting letters across-the-lines between their offices in Louisville and Nashville on June 15, 1861. The sender paid the appropriate USA or CSA postage plus a 12 ct. express fee for each ½ ounce.

Left. This American Letter Express Company enclosure provides instructions for mailing letters north across-the-lines.

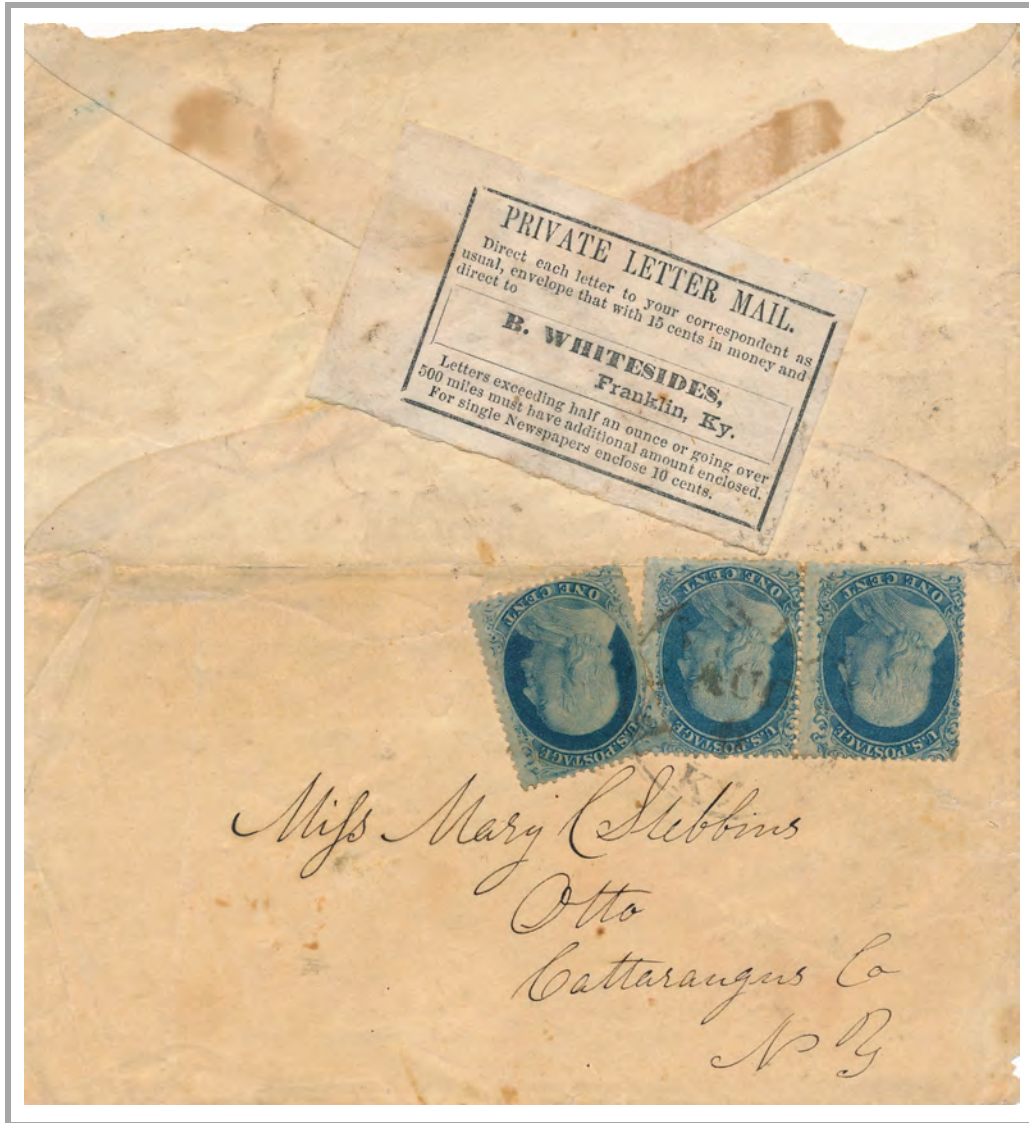
A USA Presidential proclamation terminated all commercial intercourse, including correspondence, and thus private express mail service, between the North and South on August 26, 1861.

Below. Sent inside another envelope from an unknown location in the CSA to Louisville for transmission to the USA. Hand stamped "AM. LETTER EXP. Co. JUL 9 1861 LOUISVILLE. KY" and carried northbound across-the-lines by American Letter Express, USA postage paid, and placed in the USA mail in Louisville, postmarked July 10.



Whitesides Express

M.D. Whiteside initiated express mail service between Nashville and Franklin, Kentucky on June 22, 1861. The sender paid the appropriate CSA and USA postage plus a 12 ct. express fee for each ½ ounce. Private express mail service was terminated by USA Presidential proclamation on August 26, 1861.



Sent inside another envelope from an unknown location in the CSA to Nashville for transmission to the USA by Whitesides Express. This interior envelope was carried northbound across-the-lines by Whitesides Express and deposited in the USA mail in Franklin, Kentucky, with their express label attached and USA postage paid, postmarked August 6 (1861) for delivery.

One of only 2 recorded covers bearing the Whitesides Express label.

The Adam's Express Company

The Adam's Express Company began carrying letters across-the-lines between their offices in Nashville and Louisville on June 22, 1861. The sender paid the CSA and USA postage plus an express fee of 22 ct. for each ½ ounce. Private express mail service was terminated by USA Presidential proclamation on August 26, 1861.



Sent inside another envelope from an unknown location in the CSA to Louisville for transmission to the USA by Adam's Express. This interior envelope was carried northbound across-the-lines by Adam's Express, bearing "ADAMS EX. CO. JUL 31 1861 LOUISVILLE, KY" handstamp, and placed in the USA mail in Louisville with USA postage paid, from where it was forwarded on August 1 for delivery.

Adam's Express S. A. Jones, Agent label affixed to the reverse provides instructions and rates for sending mail to the Confederate States.

One of only 4 recorded covers bearing an Adam's Express label

The Southern Express Company

The Southern Express Company conducted business in the CSA and jointly operated its across-the-lines business with The Adams Express Company in the North. Private express mail service was terminated by USA Presidential proclamation on August 26, 1861.



Carried northbound across-the-lines by The Southern Express Company. Franked with the Nashville, Tennessee 5 ct. provisional adhesive tied by "THE SOUTHERN EXPRESS CO. AUG 23 NASHVILLE" hand stamp to pay the CSA postage for a letter carried less than 500 miles. Endorsed "Paid 2/-", indicating the express fee of two bits (25 cents). Arrived the next day (August 24) at the Adam's Express Company which placed the newly issued USA 3 ct. stamp on the cover to pay the USA postage and deposited it in the USA mail in Louisville, postmarked August 25 for delivery to Philadelphia. The cover was mistakenly diverted to the USA DLO but was forwarded on September 5 (DLO hand stamp on reverse) to the addressee, marked "REC'D SEPT. 7" and "DUE 3 cts" in Philadelphia.

Only 6 across-the-lines private express covers bearing the Nashville, Tennessee 5 ct. postmaster's provisional adhesive are recorded. This is the only one carried by The Southern Express Company.

Flag-of-Truce Prisoner-of-War Mail

Northbound

Regulations required that a flag-of-truce letter be enclosed in an unsealed inner envelope and sent in an outer envelope with postage paid to the exchange point. There, the outer envelope was discarded and the letter examined by the military authorities. Delivery from the exchange point to the destination required payment of the postage by stamps of the other side or by an attached or inserted coin. The USA and CSA postage could be paid on a single envelope if the sender possessed stamps of both sides.



Northbound prisoner-of-war inner envelope "From Capt WW Warner/Prisoner of War Madison, Ga". Endorsed "Soldier's Letter/JA Campbell AAG" and bearing censor's marking "Examined". Entered the USA mail in Nashville hand stamped "Due 3" and postmarked July 25, 1862. The Claremont, Iowa postmaster likely placed the USA 3 ct. stamp on the reverse to satisfy the postage due.

One of only 2 recorded covers from the Madison, Georgia prison.



Northbound prisoner-of-war cover from Andersonville Prison bearing manuscript censor marking "Exd H. W." by Captain Henry Wirz. Postmarked Andersonville, Georgia, paid to the exchange point with a CSA 10 ct. stamp, placed in the USA mail at Old Point Comfort, Virginia with a 3 ct. stamp, postmarked August 25 (1864).

One of the finest known Andersonville covers with both USA and CSA postage paid on one envelope.

Flag-of-Truce Mail

Flag-of-truce civilian mail was poorly tolerated and actively discouraged by the severe restrictions imposed by the USA Post Office Department. Flag-of-truce routes established across military lines were usually used to convey civilian mail at the discretion of the local military authorities.

Northbound Via Old Point Comfort

Northbound Flag-of-Truce Letter from a Confederate Soldier



Flag-of-truce wallpaper cover mailed January 15, 1864 by a Confederate soldier from Mobile, Alabama franked with a US 1857 issue 3 ct. stamp. Carried across-the-lines "Per Flag of Truce" (under folded flap) and placed in the USA mail in Old Point Comfort, postmarked February 1. The demonetized stamp was not recognized and the letter was forwarded to Jackson, Missouri "DUE 6" (penalty rate).

Northbound Flag-of-Truce Letter from a Civilian



Northbound flag-of-truce letter mailed October 26 (1863) from the Wilmington, North Carolina Provost Marshall to the USA Secretary of War requesting permission "for Mrs. J. Currie Burnett to come north by flag of truce to join her husband a federal soldier". Entered the USA mail unpaid at Old Point Comfort on November 5, diverted to the USA DLO hand stamped "UNPAID", endorsed by "C.F. Macdonald/ACTING THIRD ASS'T PM GEN" and forwarded "DUE 6" (penalty rate) to the War Secretary who approved the pass, allowing her to board the flag-of-truce steamer to USA-controlled Fortress Monroe.

Trans-Mississippi Express Mail

Government Express

The Confederate Congress authorized Postmaster General Reagan to establish trans-Mississippi express mail service on October 1, 1863 because of Union disruptions of its postal service across the Mississippi River. Shreveport and Alexandria, Louisiana in the west and Brandon and Meridian, Mississippi in the east were selected as safe, accessible mail accumulation points. The service operated from October 1863 to April 1865.

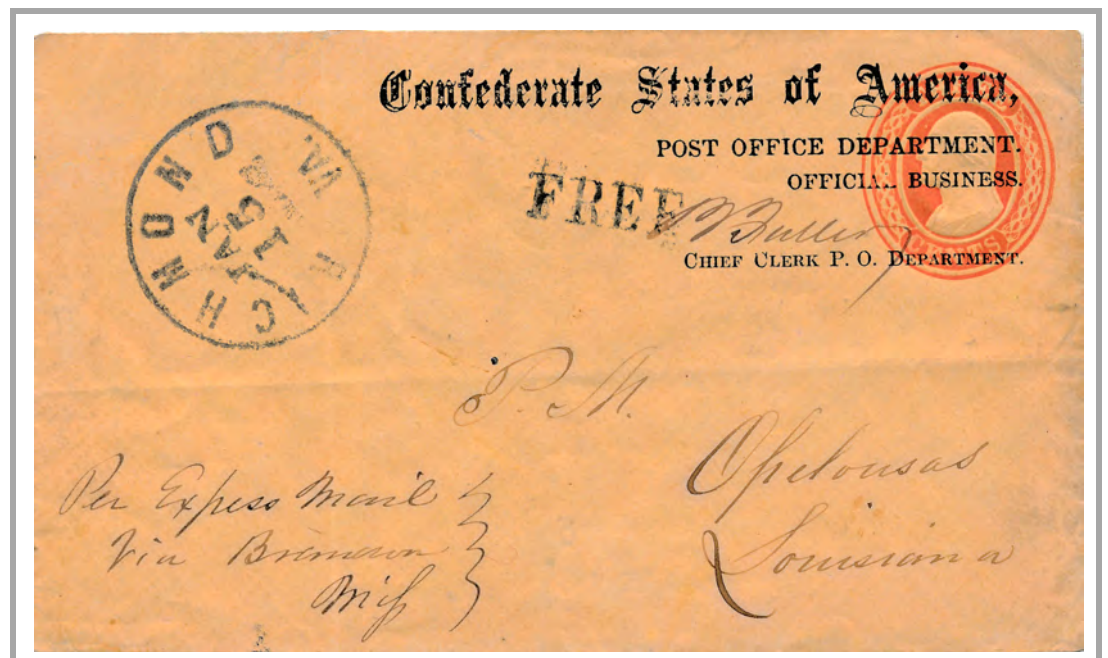
Government 40 Cent Rate



Mailed November 11 (1863) westward from Richmond per manuscript directive "Via Brandon Miss" to Alexandria, Louisiana. Four CSA 10 ct. adhesives pay the 40 ct. CSA government trans-Mississippi express mail rate.

Post Office Business Postage Free

CSA postal regulations permitted this POD official business correspondence to be sent westward from Richmond across the Mississippi River "Per Express Mail Via Brandon Miss" postage free to the postmaster of Opelousas, Louisiana.



E.H. Cushing

The unreliability of the CSA post office trans-Mississippi express mail service spawned the development of several private express mail services which carried mail across the Mississippi River. These included E.H. Cushing, Arthur E. Edey, J.M. Barksdale, E.W. Black and I.W. Sturdivant, among others.

E.H. Cushing, editor of the *Houston Daily Telegraph*, initiated his private trans-Mississippi express mail service after New Orleans fell to Federal forces on April 26, 1862. This service brought news for his newspaper and facilitated letter communication with Texas troops in the east. Cushing's agents in Shreveport and Alexandria arranged the transportation of mail in both directions across the Mississippi River. Cushing attached four different types of advertising labels to the back of some eastbound letters. He discontinued his private express service on September 12, 1864, upon request by the CSA Post Office Department.



“Forwarded by E. H. Cushing.” Black on green newsprint label (Type 1) affixed to back of letter addressed to Richmond. Pencil docketing “Milt, Aug. 23’ 62” indicates date of origin in Texas. Carried by Cushing’s Express across the Mississippi River and placed in the CSA mail in Chattanooga paid by two CSA 5 ct. adhesives, postmarked October 6, 1862 for transmission to Richmond.

Only about 20 Cushing labels of all types exist. This Type 1 label, used on eastbound mail during 1862 - 1863, is the rarest of the four label types.

J.M. Barksdale's Arkansas Express

J.M. Barksdale, following discharge from the Confederate 2nd Arkansas Mounted Rifles due to wounds in December 1862, operated an express mail service between Arkansas and Reynolds' Arkansas Brigade between the summer of 1863 and late 1864. He placed westbound letters in the CSA mail in Washington, Arkansas. Barksdale charged \$1.00 for westbound letters to Arkansas and carried eastbound letters for free.



Endorsed "Soldier's Letter, Alex. E. Spence Capt., Co 'B' 1st Ark Regt" and "Paid \$1.00". Barksdale carried this letter across the Mississippi River to Washington, Arkansas where it was placed in the CSA mail, hand stamped "10", indicating postage due, for transmission to Arkadelphia, Arkansas.

This is the only cover said to be carried by Barksdale that shows actual proof of handling by him.

E.W. Black's Arkansas Express

Elias W. Black, a soldier in the 4th Arkansas Regiment discharged for disability in June 1862, operated an express mail service between Arkansas and the Army of Tennessee in 1863. He carried westbound letters to Washington, Arkansas where he placed them in the CSA mail. Return letters were sent under cover to his attention at Hampton, Arkansas. Black charged \$1.00 for letters to Arkansas and carried return letters for free.



Endorsed "by express Black" and "Paid \$1.00" and carried across the Mississippi River by Black to Washington, Arkansas and deposited in the CSA mail franked with a CSA 10 ct. stamp, postmarked October 21 (1863) for delivery.

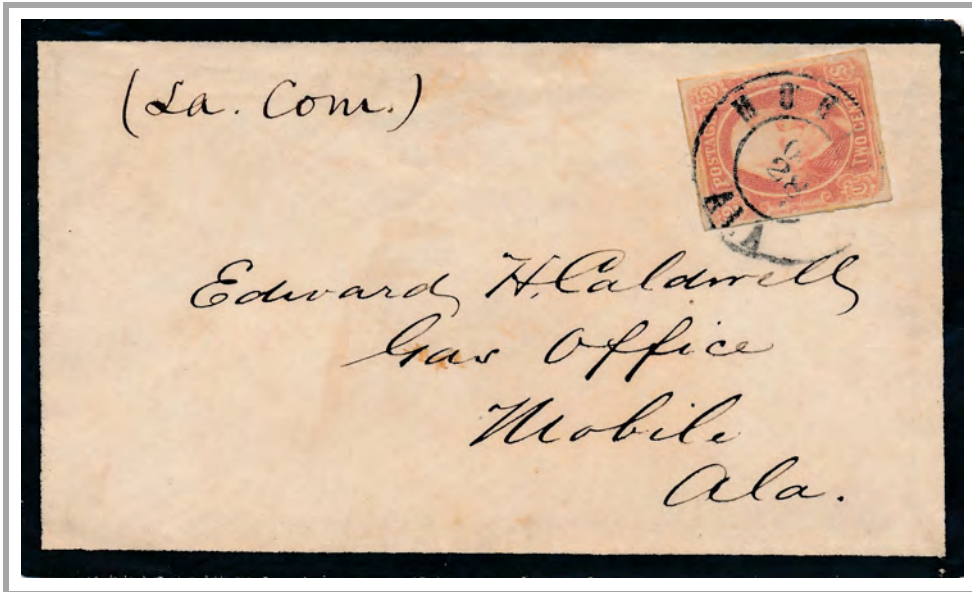
Black provided return instructions on the back: "I will leave Hampton Calhoun County on the 6th of Nov have your letter there by that time and I will take it to the Army. EWB".

Appears to be the only recorded cover with Black's endorsement.

Covert Civilian Mail

Louisiana Relief Committee

A group of expatriate New Orleans citizens in Mobile, Alabama organized the Louisiana Relief Committee on May 31, 1863 to aid poor New Orleans citizens who remained in Union-occupied New Orleans. They shipped food and clothing to New Orleans and helped citizens leave New Orleans for the Confederate States, apparently with tacit approval from the Federal authorities in New Orleans. The Committee carried letters not sanctioned by the USA, paying the CSA postage on these letters as a favor to the senders. Jules C. Denis, Provost Marshall at Mobile, examined all these southbound letters until he was replaced on June 24, 1864.



Mourning cover bearing manuscript notation “(La. Com.)” carried by the Louisiana Relief Committee from New Orleans to Mobile, Alabama. The Committee deposited it in the Mobile post office franked with a CSA 2 ct. stamp to pay the drop letter rate.

One of only 2 known mourning covers carried by the Louisiana Relief Committee.

Hand-carried by Favor (Smuggled)

Confederate civilian mail was sometimes transported covertly across the lines by individuals who possessed passes to cross the lines or who had simply slipped through the lines, carrying bootlegged letters on their person. They would then place the smuggled letters in the postal service of the receiving side.



Confederate 8-Star flag patriotic cover originating in Union-occupied New Orleans franked with a pair of CSA 5 ct. stamps for CSA mail transmission to Richmond. Instead, the letter was smuggled out of New Orleans “Through Kindness of Judge Jones” who hand-carried it to Richmond where he deposited it in the CSA mail on June 22 (1863) for local delivery.

Blockade-run Mail

Inbound

President Lincoln proclaimed the blockade of the Southern coast on April 19, 1861.



Only four of the 13 deep water ports were not effectively closed by the Union by mid-1862 and remained active in blockade-running for most of the war. This map shows their proximity to the neutral West Indies ports that acted as staging points for supplies and mail. Almost 90% of incoming blockade-run covers were transmitted through Wilmington, North Carolina and Charleston, South Carolina, which principally connected with Nassau (Bahamas) and Bermuda.

Incoming blockade-run letters were sent inside another envelope to a foreign staging port where the outer envelope was discarded and the inner envelope placed in the blockade-runner's mail bag.

This inbound blockade-run internal envelope was carried by the Ship "Fannie", postmarked Wilmington, North Carolina on December 19 (1863), hand stamped "SHIP" and manuscript "12", indicating 10 ct. CSA inland postage and 2 ct. ship fee due from the addressee.



Carried from Havana, Cuba "per Schr. Break O' Day" to New Orleans, hand stamped "SHIP" and manuscript notation "10", indicating 10 ct. CSA inland postage due. A 2 ct. ship fee was not charged.

One of only 4 recorded blockade-run covers inbound via New Orleans.



Outbound blockade-run cover postmarked Petersburg, Virginia August 30 (1864), franked with a CSA 10 ct. adhesive, endorsed "Via Wilmington" to Nassau (Bahamas). Upon arrival, "SHIP-LETTER B SP 9 64 NASSAU" was applied, the cover marked 4 pence due for the ship charge, but went "Unclaimed" and was "ADVERTISED".

One of only 6 recorded blockade-run covers that went unclaimed in Nassau and thus advertised.



Outbound blockade-run cover bearing manuscript directive "Care of Jervey & Mueller Nassau, N.P.". Red "NASSAU B JU 7 64 PAID" date stamp and crayon "8" indicating 8 pence paid for double rate British mail. Pair USA 3 ct. stamps affixed in Nassau, carried to New York, hand stamped "N.YORK STEAMSHIP", manuscript "14" indicating 14 ct. postage due for double the 10 ct. steamship rate minus 6 ct. paid with stamps.

Blockade-run Mail

Costa's Foreign Mail Express

On October 15, 1861, Antonio Costa formerly announced a foreign mail service out of New Orleans. His circular stated "*The undersigned, now suffering in common with others, the inconvenience of blockade and non-intercourse with foreign countries, by the advice and approval of J.L. Riddell, Post Master at New Orleans, taken all needful measures to establish at his own expense, a monthly mail between New Orleans and the Mexican port of Tampico to connect with the regular British mail steamers touching at that port.*"

J.L. Riddell, the New Orleans Postmaster, added "*Letters intended for this Mail, may be enclosed along with the money required per tariff above, and the outer envelope addressed, Costa's Foreign Mail, care of Postmaster, New Orleans*". The tariff to Europe was \$1.00, including CSA postage.

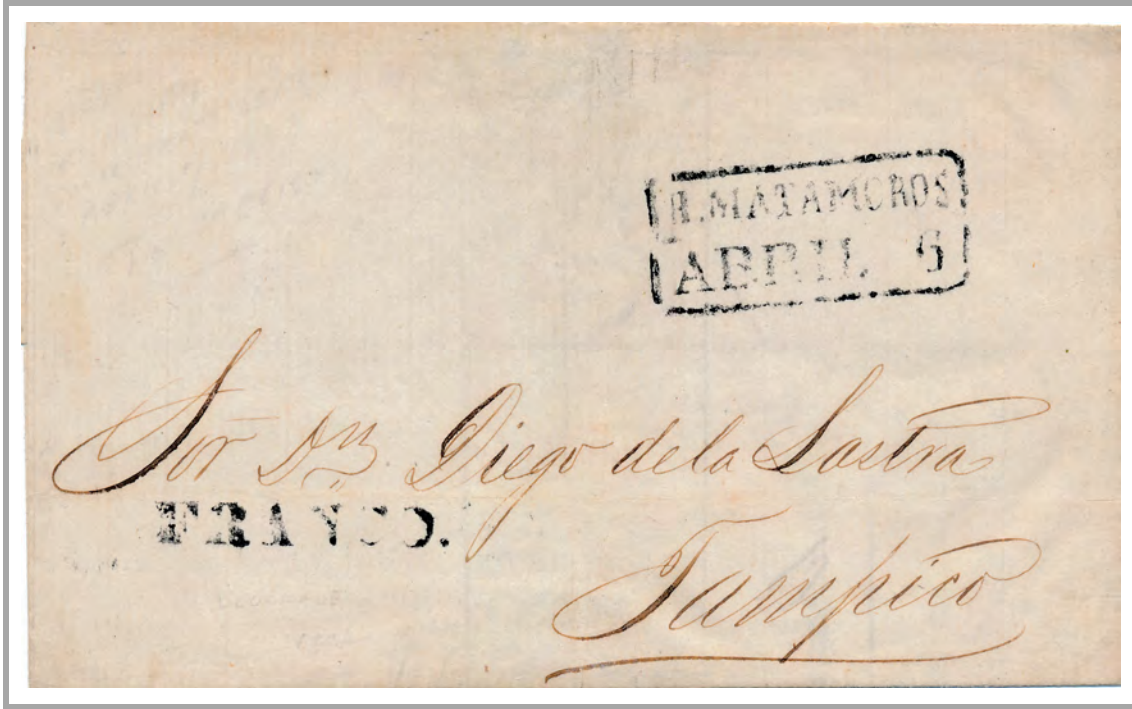


This folded letter, datelined "*New Orleans, 17 Sept. 1861*", addressed to Havre, France, was originally enclosed in an outer envelope addressed to a forwarder in Tampico. It was carried on Costa's first trip, which departed October 10, 1861 with 1233 letters, via Brownsville, Texas to Tampico, Mexico. There, the forwarder, Ramon de Obregon, added a 1 real stamp to pay the Mexican inland postage and deposited the letter at the British office in Tampico for transport to France by Royal Mail steam packet (RMSP). It was carried by RMSP Clyde from Tampico on November 29, arriving St. Thomas December 12, then by RMSP Shannon on December 16, arriving Southampton January 1, 1862, and finally arriving Havre, France January 3, 1862.

The only positively identified outbound letter from New Orleans transmitted by Costa's Express.

Trans-Rio Grande Mail

Mail exchanges across the Rio-Grande River between Southwest Texas and Mexico to circumvent the Federal blockade occurred from late 1861 until May 1865. The three major routes were 1) Matamoros, Mexico and Brownsville, Texas; 2) Piedras Negras, Mexico and Eagle Pass, Texas; and 3) Neuvo Laredo, Mexico and Laredo, Texas.



Smuggled across the Rio Grande River from Brownsville, Texas to Matamoros where it was placed in the Mexican mail prepaid for delivery to Tampico, Mexico.

Originated in Mexico, smuggled across the Rio Grande River at Piedras Negras to Eagle Pass, Texas, where it was franked with two CSA 5 ct. stamps and deposited in the CSA mail postmarked Eagle Pass March 28 (1863) for delivery to San Antonio.

