

The Civil War Post

Patricia A. Kaufmann

Military Censorship

The 11-star flag patriotic (CSA Catalog type F-16, Verse 13¹) shown in Figure 1 is a nice example with a Richmond, Va., June 6, 1863, circular datestamp and matching soldier's "DUE 10." Confederate soldiers were allowed to send their mail "due" with postage to be paid by the recipients, who were quite willing to pay to hear from their loved ones in the field.

The envelope is addressed to Wm. Anderson, Little Yadkin, N.C., from C.M. Anderson, Co. I, 33 regt N.C.T. (North Carolina Troops), as endorsed at lower left. But it is not

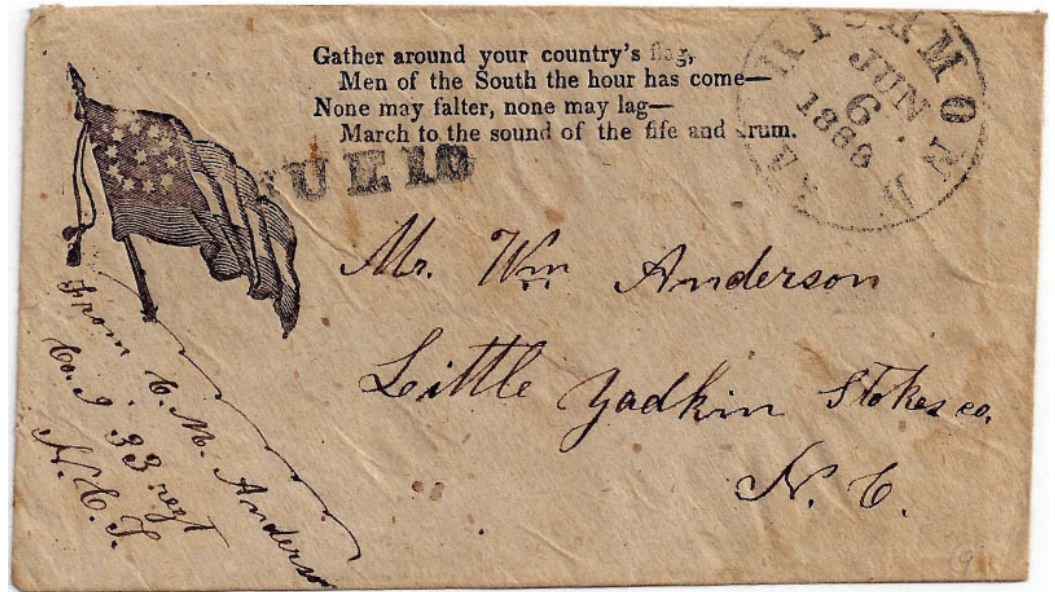
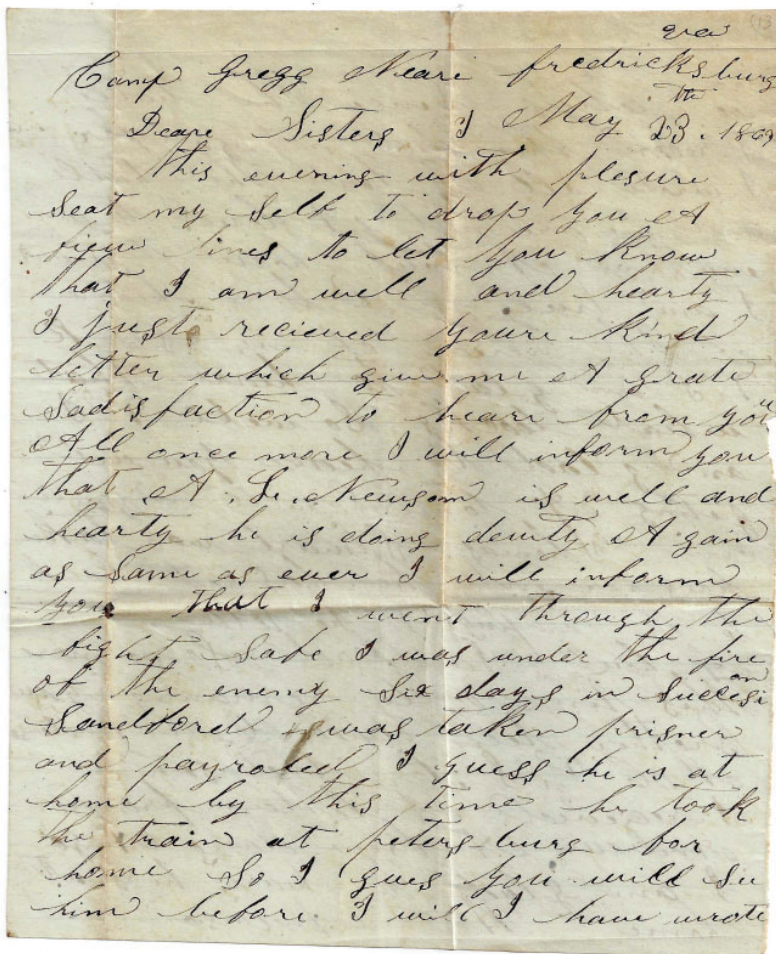


Figure 1 (above). Confederate 11-star flag patriotic posted from Richmond by Pvt. Charles Anderson to his father in Little Yadkin Station, N.C., with a letter for his sisters.

Figure 2 (left). Page 1 of Pvt. Anderson's letter to his sisters, headed Camp Gregg near Fredericksburg, May 23, 1863.



the cover that caught my attention. It was the contents of the enclosed soldier's letter shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Written with poor spelling and grammar, the letter to his sisters mentions in part,

"...I went through the fight safe & was under the fire of the enemy six days in succession. Sandford was taken prisner and payroled. I guess he is at home by this time he took the train at Petersburg for home so I gues you will see him before I will. I have wrote too letters sence the battle. I recon they did not go far. I wrote all about the battle and we are not aloud to write anything about how it went."

This letter specifically mentions military censoring and states his first two letters probably never reached their destination because he wrote about the battle and was not allowed to do so.

The battle referred to was doubtless the Battle of Chancellorsville, shown in the Kurz & Allison 1889 chromolithograph in Figure 4. It shows Confederate troops under the command of Gen. Stonewall Jack-

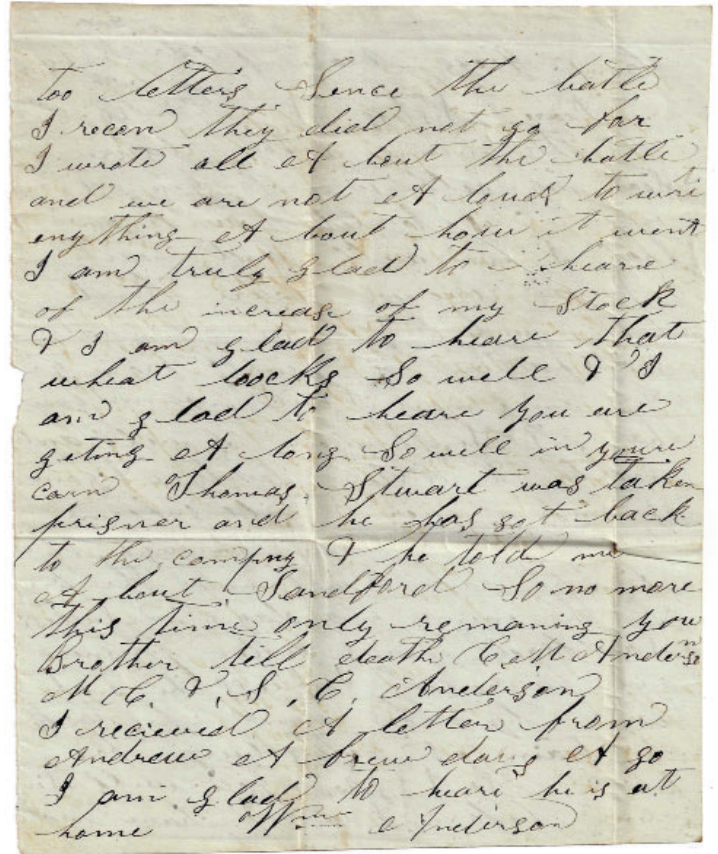
“I have wrote too letters sence the battle. I recon they did not go far. I wrote all about the battle and we are not aloud to write anything about how it went.”

son advancing on the Union army, as well as Gen. Jackson being mortally wounded by friendly fire on May 2, 1863. He was taken to a nearby field hospital where his left arm was amputated; he died eight days later of pneumonia.

The emotional trauma of Stonewall's death, coupled with the regiment's heavy losses, were doubtless too much to be ignored by those who witnessed it or fought in that battle. Jackson was revered by the troops. The 33rd North Carolina took 480 men to the field and sustained 201 casualties, or 42%. How could soldiers help but pour out their emotions to loved ones in descriptive letters? On the other hand, passing on the gory details of war to families who feared for their safety was hardly reassuring.

Figure 3 (right). Page 2 of Pvt. Anderson's letter in which he states, "we are not A loud to write anything A bout how it went (the Battle of Chancellorsville)."

Figure 4 (below). Battle of Chancellorsville, as shown in the Kurz & Allison 1889 chromolithograph. (Library of Congress)



Charles M. Anderson was a 21-year-old farmer when he enlisted Aug. 10, 1861, as a private in Company I, North Carolina 33rd Infantry, Branch's/Lane's Brigade, A.P. Hill's Division, 2nd Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. The unit was also known as the "Confederate Stars," a Forsyth County unit. Anderson was AWOL (absent without official leave, but without intent to desert) July 15, 1862, returned Jan. 15, 1863, and taken prisoner July 12, 1863, at the Battle of Funkstown, Md., part of the Gettysburg Campaign. He was transferred to Point Lookout Aug. 9, 1863.

Anderson became a Galvanized Yankee, which is defined as a soldier captured in battle who signed an oath of allegiance to fight for the opposing side. To many, this seemed preferable to literally rotting away in a prisoner camp. The term "Galvanized Yankee" also applies to Union soldiers who joined the Confederate Army for the same reasons. It was preferable to starvation or other indignities endured in Southern prisons.

Anderson joined the U.S. Army Jan. 15, 1864, and was assigned to Company B, 1st Infantry. It is not surprising he went

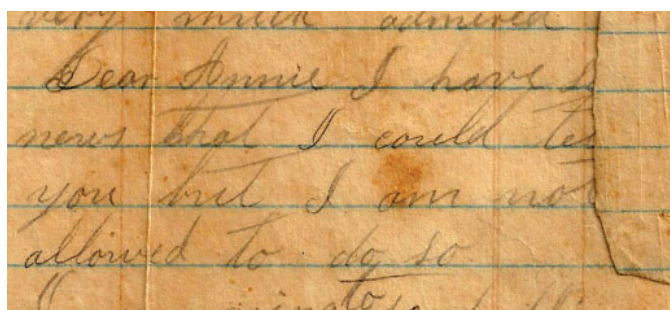
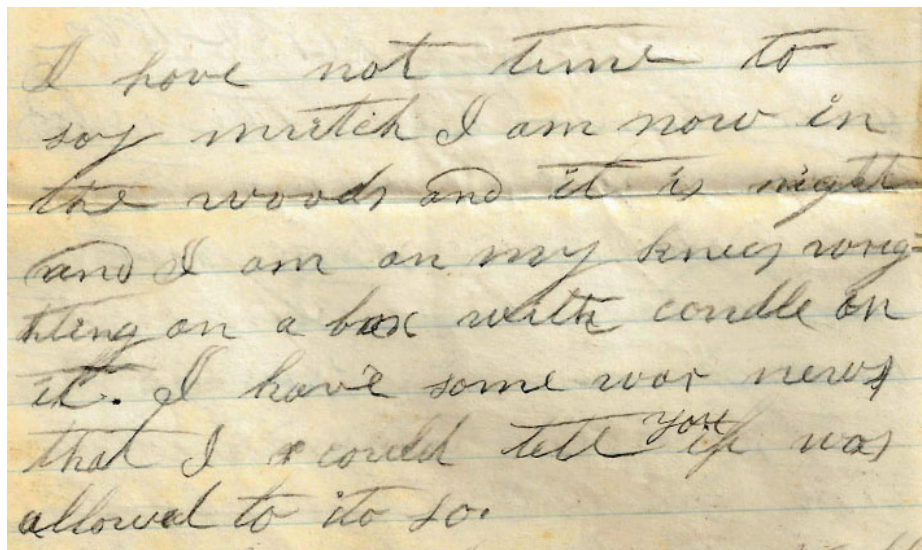


Figure 5 (top). Part of numbered letter "No. 2" dated April 14, 1862, from Pvt. Henry Basye, in which he tells his wife he has some war news he could tell her if allowed to do so.

Figure 6 (above). Clip of numbered letter "No. 3," dated May 2, 1862, from Pvt. Henry Basye, in which he repeats he has some war news he could tell Annie but is not allowed to do so.

to fight for the Union, since many Yadkin County residents were among those who overwhelmingly opposed secession, largely owing to its Quaker past and historical Unionist sympathies.

This was the second time in a short period that I've encountered soldiers' letters in which they stated they were not allowed to say everything they'd have liked. I discussed the only two recorded Jenkins Express covers in recent issues of the *Civil War Philatelist* and *Kelleher's Stamp Collector's Quarterly*, as well as giving a presentation on the subject at the Collectors Club (New York, CCNY) on Dec. 1, 2021. That presentation is linked on my website.²

During my CCNY talk, I mentioned that Henry Basye, a private in the 9th Virginia Cavalry (Army of Northern Virginia) more than once told his wife, Annie, to be careful what she wrote to him. He also repeatedly told her he was not allowed to write everything he'd like.

The first page of Henry Basye's April 14, 1862, "No. 2" letter instructs Annie not to put anything in her letters that she does not want known, as all letters are opened and read before delivery. A small portion of the second page is shown in Figure 5. It reads, in part:

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“... I have some war news that I could tell you if was allowed to do so.”

He repeatedly used the specific wording “not allowed,” which leads me to believe this was censorship, although there are no formal examined markings on covers or letters.

Basye letter “No. 3” is headed “Sycamore Bottom (Va.) May 2nd, 1862,” a year to the day when General T.J. Jackson was shot. Henry worshipped Stonewall, even nick-naming his first-born son Stonewall.

Once again, Henry gives Annie the familiar admonition, as shown in Figure 6:

“You told me in your letter to tell you everything I had seen and heard but I am not allowed to do so.”

I interpret Henry Basye’s continued warnings to his wife as military censorship, especially since their mail crossed from Confederate troops in the field through Union-held territory on the Northern Neck of Virginia, an area heavily infiltrated with spies from both sides.

Military censorship especially resonates with me because of my late father, who was a young officer in the European theater during World War II. I have multiple letters from him warning my mother to be careful what she says because all letters are opened and read – echoes of Henry Basye and Charles Anderson.

I have a lengthy handwritten description of my father’s war movements, which he wrote in 1945, stating at the beginning of his extensive chronicle that he could not put this

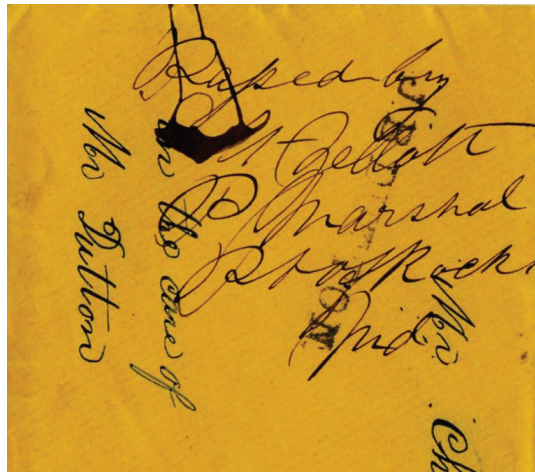


Figure 7. An example of manuscript censor markings at the end of a J.B. Dutton straightline handstamped cover marked “Passed by Lt. Yellott, P Marshal, Pt of Rocks, Md.”

down on paper until the war was over because he was not allowed to because of troop movements, tactical information and such. The concealing of troop positions from the enemy is the reason Army of Northern Virginia and other collectible field cancels exist.

There is significant physical and written evidence of military censorship of civilian mail across the upper Potomac River. The foremost difference with those described in this article is that they went through a provost marshal with examined and passed manuscript notations on the covers, making them easy to identify as censored mail. Figure 7 shows such an example on the left end of a J.B. Dutton-handstamped cover with “Passed by Lt. Yellott, P Marshal, Pt of Rocks, Md.”

On the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) website, is an interview with Myron Fox, a past vice president of the Military Postal History Society. He is an expert on U.S. military and civilian censorship in World War I and World War II.³

Fox indicated that soldiers’ letters were not censored in an overt manner before the Civil War. He speculated that most troops before then were illiterate and officers were largely trusted, so they didn’t bother.

When asked, “When were the first soldiers’ letters censored in the United States?” Fox replied:

“There was some censoring during the Civil War because letters sometimes had to cross enemy lines. He suggested that most Civil War censoring came from prisoner-of-war camps. For example, if someone was writing a letter from Andersonville, those at the camp didn’t want people to know what was happening so the prisoners wouldn’t be allowed to say anything bad about a camp.”⁴

“The censors were looking out for two things in World War I and World War II. They didn’t want the soldier to say anything that would be of value to the enemy, such as where they were. They always wanted to camouflage how strong the troops were. ‘Loose lips sink ships’ was the phrase that was very prevalent in WWII and that was the theory in WWI as well.”



Examples of a few Union handstamped censor markings, photographically cropped from covers.

Another PBS interview question to Fox was, "Did censoring influence the quality of the letters written?" to which Fox replied:

"In general, in the Revolutionary War and Civil War the letters have much more information. The writers would say, 'We're outside of Fredericksburg' or 'I'm in the 12th division,' and that's important information that was often cut out in World War I and World War II."

Fox's observations are in line with my experience while reading Civil War letters over the years.

There are innumerable letters extant from soldiers in which they described military movements, potential and actual plans, detailed descriptions of battles just experienced and news from other military fronts. Letters to soldiers from home often include comments about morale and economic conditions. In these instances, there was clearly no censorship.

Mail censored in the field by friendly censors would not necessarily be marked because censorship was not officially required, thereby meaning that notation was not needed to demonstrate accountability, unlike mail to and from prison camps which were marked as examined. Only the larger Union prisoner camps had handstamp censor markings. Confederate camps utilized only manuscript examined markings.

Censorship was likely on a case-by-case basis generated by specific military commands, instead of a wide-sweeping directive. As shown by the two correspondences cited in this article, the Army of Northern Virginia clearly censored at least some incoming and outgoing letters, although that was a tall order with the incredible volume of mail. Importantly, the object of field censorship was to prevent the leakage of military information to secure the success of operations.

Endnotes:

1. Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown, Jr., Jerry S. Palazolo, Editors, *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, 2012, Confederate Stamp Alliance, www.csalliance.org
2. Civil War and Confederate Stamp and Postal History Articles and Presentations www.trishkaufmann.com/articles
3. "War Letters: Censorship!" *American Experience*, PBS, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/warletters-censorship/ accessed Dec. 10, 2021.
4. Andersonville was infamous as a Confederate prison camp where many Union soldiers starved.

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Patricia A. (Trish) Kaufmann was first introduced to Confederate postal history in 1965. She became actively involved in organized philately in 1969, became a dealer in 1973 and today specializes solely in Confederate stamps and postal history. She enjoys hearing from readers and may be reached at [trishkauf@comcast.net](mailto:trishkauf@comcast.net).



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