Figure 2: An 1861 Magnus print of Fortress Monroe and Old Point Comfort.
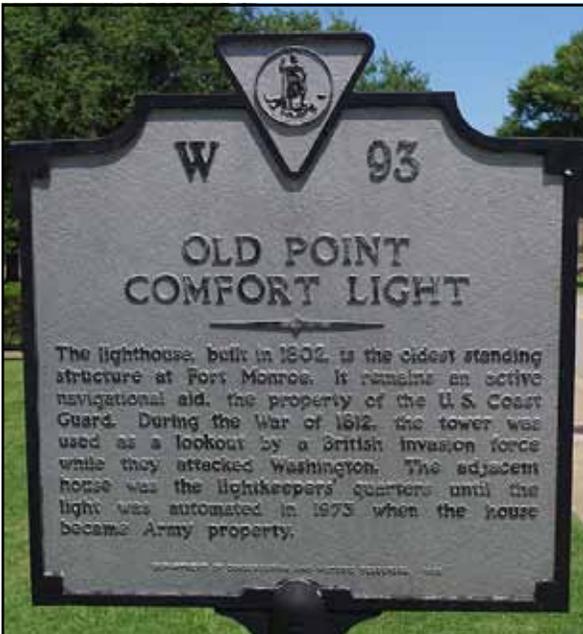
A Virginia historical marker at Old Point Comfort.
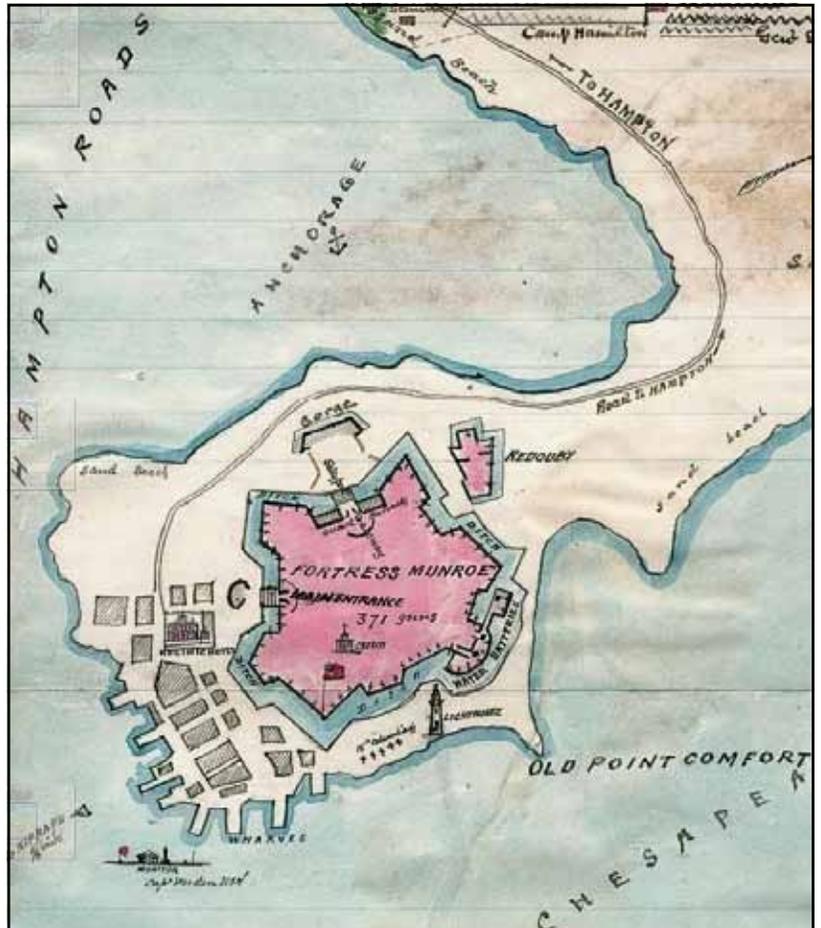
Figure 3: An 1862 map of Fort Monroe by Robert Knox Sneden showing casemated water battery, redoubt, and gorge position, the first two protected by secondary moats.

Civil War Old Point Comfort Postmarks are Union Uses, Not Confederate

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Anyone who has a passing acquaintance with Civil War postal history has seen the familiar Old Point Comfort, Virginia, double-circle postmarks as shown in a tracing of the marking in Figure 1. They were from Virginia during the Civil War, so they must be Confederate, right? No—wrong.

Old Point Comfort (OPC) played a significant role in the postal history of the Civil War. It is located on the Virginia coast just north of Norfolk across from Hampton Roads. It is shown in Figure 2 from a published 1861 Charles Magnus print in the Library of Congress. On the print at lower left is inscribed, "Drawn from Nature. Lith. & print by E. Sachse & Co., 104 S. Charles St., Balto."

Figure 3 is another view from an 1862 map of Fort Monroe by Robert Knox Sneden. It shows the casemated water battery, redoubt, and gorge position, the first two protected by secondary moats.

Hampton Roads is arguably most well known as the site of the March 9, 1862, duel between the ironclads *Monitor* and *Merrimack*. The Northern-built *Merrimack* was rechristened the CSS *Virginia*, but this first battle between ironclads has remained in public lore as the Battle of the *Monitor* and *Merrimack*. The naval engagement is also known as the Battle of Hampton Roads.

Located at Old Point Comfort was Fortress Monroe, a large fort that was part of the pre-war U.S. coastal defense system. The fort guarded the entrance to Hampton Roads and the James River, strategically important as the entrance to Chesapeake Bay.

In 1861, at the beginning of the war, Fortress Monroe was garrisoned by the Union, as was the entire Old Point Comfort area on the north side of Hampton Roads. This area of the Virginia coast remained in Union hands throughout the entire war and was never under the control of the Confederacy.

Consequently, the Old Point Comfort postmark represents Union usage, not Confederate. Nonetheless, confused collectors write them up as Confederate uses almost every day.

Figure 1: A tracing of an Old Point Comfort double-circle datestamp used during the Civil War.

On April 20, 1861, the Union Navy burned and evacuated the nearby Norfolk Navy Yard, destroying nine ships in the process. It kept Fort Monroe at Old Point Comfort as a United States stronghold.

The Confederacy's relatively short occupation of Norfolk gave it a major shipyard and thousands of heavy guns, but they held it for only one year.

Norfolk is another area general collectors frequently get wrong. Most Norfolk, Virginia, wartime postal uses are also Union.

Confederate-held Norfolk fell to Union troops May 10, 1862, after Lincoln organized an amphibious expedition of troops from Fort Monroe. Thus, only before this date in the war are Norfolk uses Confederate.

The Old Point Comfort Mail Exchange System

The principal Northern exchange point during most of the war for through-the-lines mail was Fortress Monroe at Old Point Comfort. The *New York*, a Union flag-of-truce boat shown in Figure 4, was used for the exchange of prisoners and mail. The double-stacked, side-wheel steamer ran regularly from Fortress Monroe

Figure 4: The flag-of-truce boat *New York* docked at Aikens Landing while waiting for exchanged prisoners.

Figure 5: An Andersonville Prison cover showing frankings of both the United States and Confederacy on one cover, contrary to regulations mandating a two-envelope system with the outer envelope to be discarded at the exchange point

Figure 6: A civilian flag-of-truce letter with the manuscript directive, 'By Flag of Truce from Fortress Monroe to Richmond Va.'

Figure 7: A South to North cover franked with a three-cent rose and tied by a OPC double-circle datestamp on a flag-of-truce cover to New Bedford, Mass. A half-dime paid the postage.
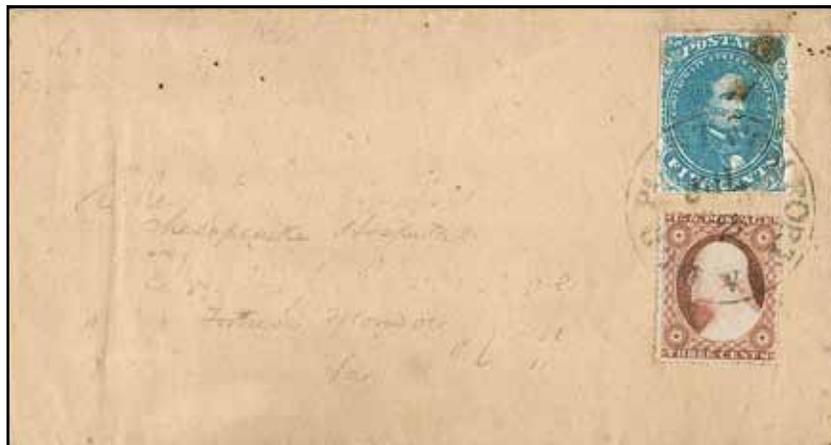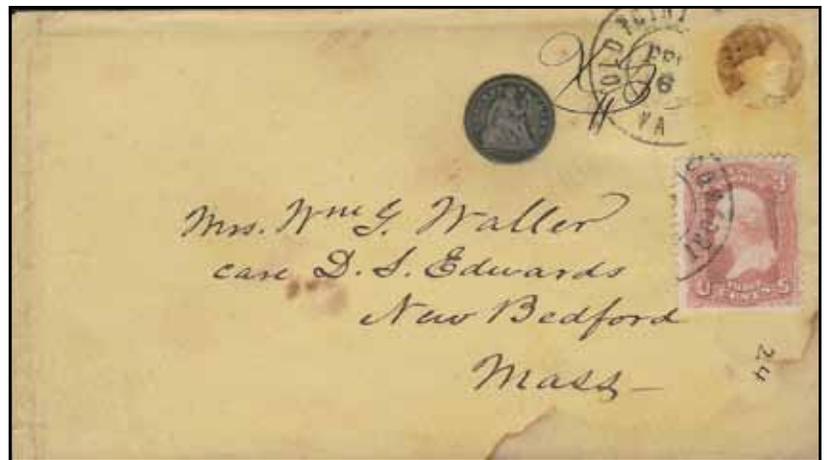
Figure 8: A large style pre-war OPC canceling device was used early in the war, as shown on this POW cover to Chesapeake Hospital.

Figure 9: A wartime view of Chesapeake Hospital in Hampton, Virginia.

to Southern exchange points on the James River. A Library of Congress photo shows the *New York* at Aikens Landing waiting for exchanged prisoners; it was taken some time between 1861-65.

Much of the soldiers' mail from the Union Army went through Old Point Comfort and such covers bear the Old Point Comfort postmark. These OPC soldiers' covers are Union covers and bear either a U.S. three-cent stamp or were sent as due covers.

Unlike in the Confederacy, United States citizens were expected to prepay their letters. If the required three cents U.S. postage was not affixed, the envelope was stamped either "Due 3" or "Due 6."

Envelopes with a soldier's endorsement merited a "Due 3," while a non-endorsed envelope or a civilian envelope received a "Due 6," although this difference was often not observed.

As well as being important as the site of Union soldiers' mail, Old Point Comfort also served as the main transfer point for flag-of-truce mail between the North and South. Confederate prisoners in Northern prisons could write letters home through Fortress Monroe.

General instructions for flag-of-truce mail were that letters were to be enclosed in an outer envelope and were to be addressed to the commander at the exchange point.

Both prison-of-war and civilian flag-of-truce mail was subject to censorship and they usually bear a manuscript or handstamped censor marking. Nonetheless, envelopes showing frankings of both sides on one cover are not uncommon and are prized by collectors.

Figure 5 shows such a cover from the infamous prison at Andersonville, Georgia.

North to South

North to South letters do not have an OPC postmark, but usually have a manuscript routing mark indicating Old Point Comfort or Fortress Monroe as the transfer point. Covers that entered both the United States and Confederate postal systems had to pay postage in both systems.

Prisoners' letters would be taken to Old Point Comfort via the federal postal system where they then passed under flag of truce to the Confederacy and were taken to Richmond for entry into the Confederate postal system for delivery to their final destination.

Figure 6 shows a civilian flag-of-truce letter (handled the same way as prisoner mail) franked with Scott CSA 12 tied by a Richmond, Virginia, postmark and addressed to Brownsburg Virginia, with a manuscript directive at lower left: "By Flag of Truce from Fortress Monroe to Richmond Va."

The letter is datelined at Harshmansville, Ohio, on October 3, 1863, and includes the statement: "Through the courtesy of the gentlemen officers — letters not of a military or political character will be forwarded by the Flag of Truce."

The outer envelope, bearing U.S. postage and addressed to Old Point Comfort, was discarded at the exchange point, as required.

South to North

South to North letters to prisoners took the reverse route, first going to Richmond where they were then taken by flag of truce to Old Point Comfort for placement in the federal mail system for delivery to the northern prison. These South to North covers do bear the Old Point Comfort postmark as the point of entry into the federal system.

Figure 7 shows a South to North example with a Scott U.S. 65 tied by an Old Point Comfort double-circle datestamp on a flag-of-truce cover to New Bedford, Massachusetts

The stamp has been lifted to show the mucilage remnants where a half-dime was affixed. The coin was removed to pay the postage and an 1853 half-dime was affixed to the cover for exhibit purposes. The censor's manuscript marking is underneath the postmark.

The Other Old Point Comfort Postmark

While the double-circle Old Point Comfort datestamp is the one widely associated with wartime use, for the first several months of the war the large style pre-war canceling devise was in use, as shown in Figure 8. This larger device was used off and on when they got busy.

This unsealed prisoner-of-war cover was addressed to William Alexander Fewell at Chesapeake Hospital (Hampton), Virginia, a South-to-North use sent through Fortress Monroe and Old Point Comfort, with mixed franking of United States and Confederate postage. Fewell served in the 1st Palmetto Sharpshooters, was wounded at Sevens Pines, and died at Chesapeake Hospital before this letter was received.

From the files of the Library of Congress, is shown a wartime view of Chesapeake Hospital in Figure 9.

Figure 10 shows the earlier Old Point Comfort marking on a Libby Prison cover from Richmond, Virginia, addressed home to Norwich, Connecticut.

Lt. Joseph Perkins Rockwell (1843-1885) served in the 18th Connecticut Regiment. He was taken prisoner at Winchester, Virginia, wounded at Piedmont and imprisoned at Macon, Georgia.

Libby is the prison all passed through in the South; Point Lookout, Maryland, was the prison all prisoners passed through in the North.

Easy to Tell the Difference

If you are still confused by Old Point Comfort uses during the war, it is really quite simple. If the cover has a U.S. stamp on it, is addressed to a place in the North, and there are no censor markings, it is simply a Union cover, such as that pictured in Figure 11. It is most likely from a soldier stationed at Fortress Monroe or nearby, although civilians also used the OPC post office. There is no Confederate connection.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries for the majority of the images used in this article. My thanks also to the Library of Congress.

Figure 10: A prisoner-of-war cover with the large Old Point Comfort canceling device used early in the war.

Figure 11: A Union use from Old Point Comfort with no Confederate connection.

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An aerial view of Fort Monroe taken by the U.S. Army in 2004.