



The Civil War Post

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How Do Postal Artifacts Find Their Way Into the Collector Market?

All postal history collectors are handling mail that – at one time – belonged to someone’s family. Theoretically, all postage stamps originated through the post office. So, how does such material get into the hands of collectors?.

With the proliferation of the Internet, more people are finding great-great Uncle Homer’s mail offered for sale to collectors, usually while they are researching family genealogy. This is often a shocking revelation to descendants. Some people demand to know where dealers or collectors came by what they consider personal family treasures. But, undoubtedly, earlier family members either did not see them in the same way or died without instructions to pass such items on to their heirs.

To most collectors, it is fairly routine knowledge how such postal collectibles come to market. Others have never given it a second thought. This article provides but a few examples of how material gets into collector hands.

Newspaper Ads and Direct Mail

In my area of specialization, most envelopes originate as far back as the mid and late 1800s, not long after the American Civil War. Stamp collecting was in its infancy and many people were looking to add to their embryonic collections.

Some stamp dealers and collectors ran ads in local newspapers looking for specific items, whether stamps only or envelopes and letters. Direct mail solicitations continue to come to me today, announcing “our stamp buyer is in your area this month.” Dealers can’t sell if they can’t buy. I have run such ads and sent direct-mail solicitations in the past myself.

Dr. James A. Petrie (1843-1913), one of America’s early philatelic fakers, traveled across the South in the 1870s placing newspaper ads that offered high prices for old Confederate stamps. He also wrote directly to Southern postmasters, inquiring about their creations. The Petrie ads frequently illustrated items that were nonexistent. His so-called finds were often counterfeits or fantasies prepared and sold to those who were easy prey in early days of collecting. He particularly targeted wealthy Europeans, such as Tapling and Ferrari, the two most prominent collectors of the period. Sometimes Petrie hit the proverbial jackpot and found genuine philatelic rarities, then based his forgeries on these rarities. His creations still plague collectors.

August Dietz, acknowledged as the “Father of Confederate Philately,” also wrote directly to Southern postmasters shortly after the war in his quest for rare provisional stamps. He often



Figure 1. One of two rare Livingston, Ala., 5¢ blue provisionals (Scott 51X1) used on one cover, found in 1869 by a Southern railroad employee in a file of old letters.

made a windfall when writing to those postmasters – “O, those old things [paraphrased], I’ll give them to you for nothing.” At the least, he found out about production details directly from local stamp creators. Dietz was a professional printer, publisher and philatelic student, as well as a part-time stamp dealer.

We are indebted to many of the early stamp dealers of the nascent era who sought out these rare treasures and carefully documented their acquisitions, ascertaining as much as possible directly from those who created the prizes we so cherish today. While these searches were certainly in their monetary interest, they are also most certainly to our great benefit today.

Many new rarities were announced in the philatelic press of the day. The Livingston, Ala., 5¢ blue (Scott 51X1), illustrated in Figure 1, was one of two used, on one cover. The cover was first found in 1869 by a Southern railroad employee in a file of old letters. News of the discovery was first reported in the *American Stamp Mercury* on page 110 of volume 3 (1869) and, later, by the legendary John Walter Scott in the June and July 1869 editions of the *American Journal of Philately*. The two stamps have passed down through countless legendary stamp collections since then. Most recently, this example – one of only 11 recorded either on or off cover – sold in the collection of the late Dr. Ralph Brandon in 2014. It is pictured here courtesy of Siegel Auction Galleries, which sold the Brandon collections.

Tiptoeing Through the Teepees

The late Judge Harry J. Lemley (1883-1965) was a federal judge on the United States District Court for the Eastern and Western Districts of Arkansas, appointed by President Franklin Roosevelt. I worked with his son, Col. Kenneth McRae Lemley, both on the sale of his father’s collection by Kaufmann

Auctions in October 1977, and as co-author of the Arkansas section of the 1986 *New Dietz Catalog*. “Mac” Lemley, as he preferred to be called, used to tell me stories of his father literally going into the teepees of Arkansas Native Americans.

Judge Lemley attained national recognition as an authority on Native Americans, confining his research to Arkansas, where he conducted a systematic study of their life and customs, searching for artifacts in the mounds and village sites along rivers and streams. Major portions of this collection were – and perhaps still are – on display in Tulsa, Okla.

In his articles, Judge Lemley placed emphasis on people and events, rather than only philately. Perhaps I first found my love of intertwining social and postal history from reading his material. Kaufmann Auctions reprinted all of his many articles from the *Confederate Philatelist* at the end of the auction catalog of his phenomenal collection. It remains one of the most memorable and unusual assemblages I ever had the privilege of handling.

Shown in Figure 2 is a folded letter from the Lemley collection with a manuscript Choctaw Nation postmark “Luk fah tah C.N. April 4th/62” and “Paid 5” Confederate rate from an assistant to the colonel at Luk Fah Tah to Col. Peter P. Pitchlynn at Eagletown. The letter concerns a request for payment of expenses related to Confederate regiments under Col. Pitchlynn’s and Captain Washington Hudson’s commands. It is one of the two recorded covers mailed from a post office within the Confederate Military Department of Indian Territory, this being the only reported cover bearing a town name.

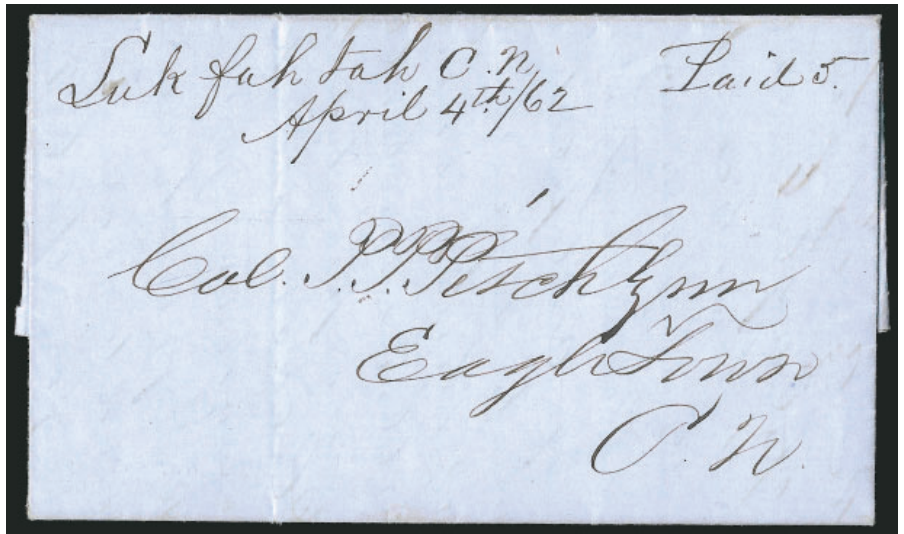


Figure 2. One of the two recorded covers mailed from a post office within the Confederate Military Department of Indian Territory, found by Judge Harry J. Lemley while scouring for postal artifacts in Native American villages in Arkansas.

Stamp Collecting Physician’s Patient

Shown in Figure 3, the only recorded 3¢ 1861 Madison C.H., Fla., postmaster’s provisional used on cover, found its way into the philatelic stream via a collecting doctor.

Dr. Gaius Marcus Brumbaugh was physician to Fanny Corbin Thompson (1819-96), wife of the cover’s addressee. Dr. Brumbaugh’s signature is on her death certificate, a validated copy of which I still preserve.

A first-hand account of the discovery was related by Dr. Brumbaugh in his letter to H.F. Albrecht & Co. in New York, as printed in *The Postage Stamp* (Fred J. Melville, London). Brumbaugh related that he asked Mrs. Thompson to scour her old wartime correspondences, as he was a stamp collector. Thus, he acquired the cover and letter (of which only the dateline was retained, to keep the contents confidential) in 1895.

I personally knew Brumbaugh’s heirs, who were stamp collectors and Kaufmann clients. Kaufmann Auctions sold a family collection for one of them who was still lamenting – years after the fact – the family sale of the only recorded 3¢ Madison provisional on cover.

Dumpster Diving

With unfortunate regularity, indifferent family members leave piles of correspondence and other treasures on the trash heap, in dumpsters and at curbside for trash pickup. Many dumpsters, such as the one shown in Figure 4, have been the recipients of unknown treasure.

I have personally witnessed all such examples and written about them in these and other pages. Sometimes a collector, or

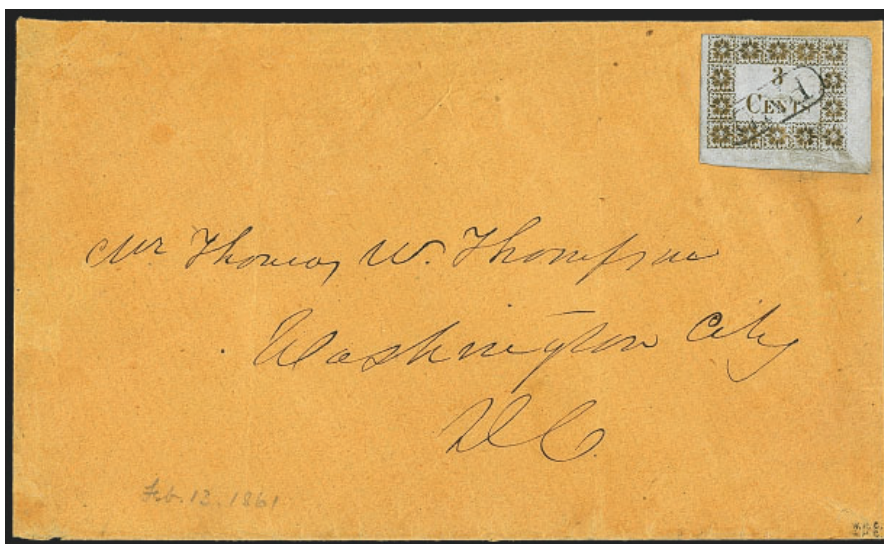


Figure 3. The only recorded 3¢ 1861 Madison C.H., Fla., postmaster’s provisional used on cover found its way into postal historians’ hands via a collecting doctor who asked a patient to look through her wartime correspondence for items he could add to his collection.

Figure 4. All too often, rare documents, covers and even entire stamp and cover collections make their way into dumpsters, never to be seen again. Occasionally, forward-thinking collectors luck out.

a junk dealer simply looking for monetary value, salvages postal treasures. And, sometimes, these items are lost to philately and to history for all time.

I was involved with a major collection a number of years ago that was thrown out in the trash. The collector literally had warehouses full of material worth millions of dollars and stacked to the ceilings. These items were acquired over a lifetime of collecting. His son hired college students to sort the veritable mountain of material, as if young students would have any idea whatsoever what it was worth. They threw out rare documents and, yes, the very rarest of stamps and covers. They even threw out gold coins! They had no idea that the pencil notes on the auction lot cards represented bidder numbers and five and six-figure prices paid.

The acquiring collector was still alive at the time, although quite elderly and in ill health. He had no knowledge this was going on. It is unfortunate he was a wealthy hoarder. Nothing was arranged on exhibit pages nor mounted in albums. All purchases were unorganized and on original dealer stock or auction lot pages. Some were from the previously mentioned Judge Harry J. Lemley collection.

I have no charitable words for the son, who was responsible for the destruction of not only his father's cherished collectibles but, foolishly, his own inheritance. He consulted no philatelic professional, rather leaving it to unknowledgeable youth to sort. Fortunately, his prized gold coin collection, worth seven figures, was stored in multiple bank safe deposit boxes throughout the city.

Nearby neighbors asked if they could go through the discarded material in multiple dumpsters and take what they wanted. They were given permission. Fortunately for me, some of these rarities were on original auction pages with prices realized written on them. Many of those auction pages were Kaufmann Auction lot pages, thus I received a phone call that shook me to the core. I was not prepared for what I saw when I flew to see the enormous mountain of recovered "trash."

Who knows what was lost for all time, but what was still there turned out to be millions of dollars-worth of material – literally enough to fill multiple warehouses. After seeing just a



little bit of material the couple had rescued – a \$20,000 cover here, a \$10,000 stamp there (for individual items) –I went directly to the family, not having any idea what happened. The family's attorney contacted me and put a legal stop to the lamentable ransacking. Several years later I was contacted to help properly sort and sell it after the collector died. It was an astounding experience in every way.

This is but one example. Sometimes philatelic trash comes from public buildings, discarded county or state records and so forth. I am aware of several such instances which have produced priceless philatelic treasures.

Furnace Find: the Dawson Hawaiian Missionary Cover

The most famous of all Hawaiian and the United States covers, the rare Dawson cover, shown in Figure 5 (courtesy of Robert A. Siegel Auctions) is universally ranked among the world's most important philatelic items. It bears two different denominations of Hawaiian missionary stamps. It is known as the Dawson cover because it was addressed by William C. Dawson to his sister, Eliza Ann.

Around 1870, occupants of an abandoned building left half-burned old papers and records in a furnace in the stove's belly. The workman given the job of cleaning out the boiler 35 years later knew something about stamps and became intrigued by the presence of unfolded letters and envelopes scattered among the charred papers. Tightly bound, the rare Dawson cover escaped with nothing more than a faint singe at left where the lettersheet was licked by the flames. That singed cover last sold for more than \$2 million.

Historical Societies

Last year, I sold a Confederate cover that had a faint pencil marking in the corner on the front. This turned out to be an accession inventory number. The collector who bought it from

me was an attorney doing research on the correspondence and happened to find it pictured online in a Southern historical society – clearly the very item with the same accession number. Eek!

Obviously, that revelation was rather stomach churning. The dealer who sold it to me was similarly shocked. I know him well and he was selling it for the estate of someone we both knew personally. Neither of us believed this could possibly have been stolen. Fortunately, our faith in him was well founded.

Upon inquiry, the director of the historical society library said it had acquired a collection of papers of which this cover was a part. The well-respected elderly collector, who often went to the library to do research or take them a collection to examine, was interested in the item for his personal collection. The director stated in a sworn affidavit that, “As we did on occasion, we photocopied this cover for the (historical society) collection and gave the original to the stated collector” (name withheld by author). The collector was well known in both collector and local communities; he had donated countless items to this and other state historical societies for decades.

Sold by Descendants

The most common means of material getting into the collector market stream is via relatives who care nothing about great-great Uncle Homer’s old mail. They may keep the letters and sell the envelopes, once they realize there may be monetary value to them. Sometimes we are lucky enough to get the letters too. Frequently, such letters help prove some philatelic aspect of the cover.

Last year, I announced the find of a newly recorded private express mail service. No Civil War express company mail in the region of the Chesapeake Bay had been identified and recorded until then, although delivery of mail is known to have existed in the area along the Union-patrolled river borders.

At the upper-right corner of one cover is manuscript “Paid 25” and at lower left “Per Mr. Jenkins.” To a serious student of Confederate postal history, the 25¢ rate immediately resonates as something unusual. That cover is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 5. The rare Dawson cover is the most famous of all Hawaiian and United States covers; it was part of discarded mail, saved from incineration in 1870.

The penciled June 8, 1862, six-page letter reads, in part:

I take this chance to write you a few lines by Mr. Jenkins, if he can get home safe. He is the man who brings letters to us ... He told me that he would carry this letter to Lottsburg. You can get it when he calls for it ... This man Jenkins charges 25¢ a piece every letter that he brings or carries so I told him that if he would carry this letter to you and bring an answer that I would give him a half dollar and he said he would do so by this means.

The correspondence was sold by an elderly family member almost a decade ago. This family correspondence was acquired more than 1,000 miles from where it originated, and more than 150 years after the Confederate soldier wrote to his wife. Without the letter, the cover would have been much more of a conundrum.

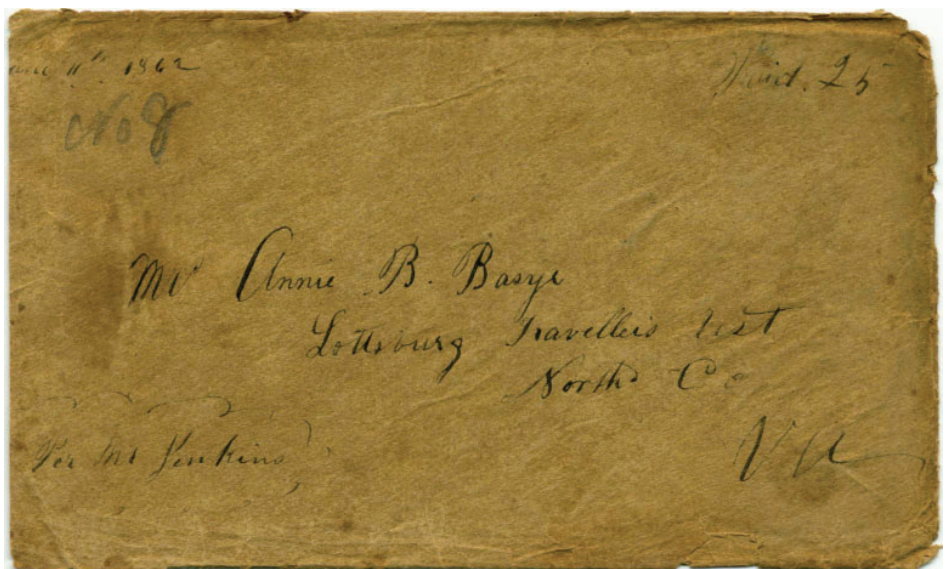


Figure 6. One of only two recorded Confederate Jenkins Express covers from the Chesapeake Bay region; it came onto the market only a decade ago from an elderly family member.

Social Connections

Stamp collectors are, at heart, story collectors and history lovers. Postal artifacts are about how people are connected. Covers provide the most likely avenue to a great story but, often times, off-cover stamps come with riveting stories too.

Two examples of widely-known stamps and their histories are the U.S. 24¢ Inverted Jenny and the British Guiana Penny Magenta. The Jenny is the most well-known of inverts in American philately, while the unique Penny Magenta holds the record for the most money paid for a postage stamp at nearly \$10 million, last sold in 2014; it is currently on display at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum, and will once again hit the auction block this year on June 8.

The only-known sheet of the Inverted Jenny was purchased directly from a Washington, D.C., post office window in 1918; it was immediately recognized as a printing error by the fortunate stamp collector who purchased it. The stamps show the biplane flying upside down.

The Penny Magenta was discovered by a 12-year-old Scottish schoolboy in his uncle's basement in 1873.

Both of these stories have been widely told in the general press and have been the topic of endless articles, television coverage and books.



Figure 7. Kiloware is defined as packages, or mixtures, of postage stamps sold to collectors by the weight rather than by quantity.

Are All Discarded Items Treasures?

Not all philatelic trash is valuable. Likely not a week goes by when I don't tell someone that what they have are either outright fakes or kiloware. If you are not familiar with the term, kiloware is defined as packages of postage stamps sold to collectors by the weight, rather than by the quantity, often in kilograms, hence the name. Kiloware usually consists of used stamps on paper from clipped mail, as seen in Figure 7.

However postal artifacts legitimately make their way into collector hands, we are very glad they do! They enrich our lives and add to our social and historical records. ☐

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Patricia (Trish) Kaufmann was first introduced to Confederate philately in 1965, became active in organized philately in 1969 and became a full-time dealer in 1973. Trish enjoys hearing from readers and may be reached at [trishkauf@comcast.net](mailto:trishkauf@comcast.net).

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