

Mail Service and the Civil War

Mail was a treasured link between Civil War camps and battlefields and “back home.” Recognizing its importance to morale, the armies assigned personnel to collect, distribute, and deliver soldiers’ mail; wagons and tents served as traveling Post Offices. Some soldiers wrote home weekly; some seemed to spend all their free time writing. A letter from home could be tucked into a pocket close to a soldier’s heart, to be read and re-read in moments of loneliness. Many soldiers carried letters in their pockets, to be forwarded to loved ones if they were killed in action.

The U.S. Post Office Department introduced several improvements during the war which made it easier to send and receive mail. Since soldiers sometimes had trouble acquiring postage stamps. If they did get them, they had trouble keeping the gummed bits of paper from congealing into sodden lumps. Soldiers were allowed to mail letters without stamps beginning in July 1861 by writing “Soldier’s Letter” on the envelope; postage was collected from the recipient. In July 1863, postage rates were simplified and in some cases lowered when distance-based letter rate categories were eliminated and all letters given the lowest rate. That same month, free home delivery of mail was introduced in the nation’s largest cities. And in November 1864 the money order system began, making it safer for soldiers and citizens to send money through the mail.

The Confederacy established its own Post Office Department in February 1861, two months before the start of the war, with former U.S. Congressman John Henninger Reagan appointed Postmaster General in March. Reagan sent job offers to southern men in the Post Office Department in Washington; many accepted and brought along their expertise, as well as copies of postal reports, forms in use, postal maps, and other supplies. Prior to the war the cost of mail service in the South was more than three times its revenue. By raising postage rates, reducing service, and practicing strict economy, Reagan made the Confederate Post Office Department self-sustaining by the end of 1863. But blockades and the invading Northern army, as well as a scarcity of postage stamps, severely hampered operations.

The United States banned the exchange of mail between citizens of the North and South in August 1861, although smugglers often carried mail illegally across the lines. Prisoner-of-war mail was exchanged between North and South at designated points under a flag-of-truce. Citizens could also send letters via the flag-of-truce system, although like prisoners’ mail, their letters were read by censors and rejected if the contents were objectionable.

Stamps and the Civil War

In 1861, the cost of mailing a half-ounce letter up to 3,000 miles by the U.S. Post Office Department was 3 cents (77 cents in 2011 dollars). On June 1, 1861, the Confederate Post Office began charging 5 cents (\$1.30 in 2011 dollars) for mailing half-ounce letters up to 500 miles.

To prevent the fraudulent use of the large quantity of U.S. postage stamps held by postmasters in the seceded states, the U.S. Post Office Department redesigned its postage stamps soon after it suspended mail service to the South. The newly designed stamps were distributed to postmasters and customers beginning in August 1861, in exchange for the old ones. Initially Postmasters were instructed to give customers six days following notification in which to exchange old stamps for new ones, after which time the old ones were demonetized (rendered valueless). But the time limit was stretched in some cases to accommodate customers. In New York City, citizens were given about six weeks to exchange their postage stamps.

As the war progressed, coins, which were more highly valued than paper money, gradually disappeared from the marketplace. By the summer of 1862, the lack of coinage posed a serious hardship to trade. Merchants began issuing their own promissory notes, called “shinplasters,” and many people began using postage stamps as small change. Unfortunately, shinplasters were often redeemable only where received, and stamps were liable to crumple and clump together.

A law of July 17, 1862, authorized the use of postage stamps as currency, and beginning in August 1862 the Treasury Department issued special “postage currency” — reproductions of postage stamps on larger, thicker, ungummed pieces of paper, in denominations of 5, 10, 25, and 50 cents. Due to coin shortages the Treasury Department continued issuing paper notes representing fractions of a dollar through 1876, although beginning in October 1863 they were called “fractional currency” and did not feature reproductions of stamps.



Group in front of post office tent at Army of the Potomac headquarters, Falmouth, Virginia, April 1863. Timothy H. O'Sullivan, photographer. www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp2003000179/PP/



Distant view of Belle Plain Landing, Virginia, on the James River, with U.S. Mail wagon, 2nd Corps, Army of the Potomac, in foreground, 1864. www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp2003004840/PP/



Mail wagon for headquarters, Army of the Potomac, at Falmouth, Virginia, March 1863. www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp2003005898/PP/



(Hist #290) Image courtesy Library of Congress
U.S. Mail wagon, 2nd Corps, Army of the Potomac, ca. 1864. The clover painted on the side of the wagon was the insignia of the 2nd Corps: red for the 1st Division, white for the 2nd Division, and blue for the 3rd Division.



Three officers of Company C, 1st Connecticut Heavy Artillery, at Fort Brady, Virginia, 1864. www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp2003000513/PP/

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