



Figure 1: The 24-cent gray-lilac stamp (Scott 36) is tied by a Charleston/S.C./Jan/19/1861 double circle datestamp on a cover addressed to ‘Capt. George Pyke, Ship *Genl. Parkhill*,’ Liverpool, England. This was addressed to a British sea captain who was murdered in a ship mutiny on his return voyage to Charleston.

## A Cover to a Sea Captain — The Victim of Mutiny and Murder

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

The cover in Figure 1 is not beautiful, but it sure tells a story, as many do if you’re willing to look. It is franked with a 24-cent gray-lilac stamp (Scott 36) tied by a Charleston/S.C./Jan /19/1861 double circle datestamp.

The cover is addressed to: Capt. George Pyke, Ship “Genl. Parkhill,” Liverpool, England. It bears a charge box notation at the upper left and on the back is a partial New York “Br. Pkt. Jan 23” exchange datestamp as well as a light red “19” cent credit handstamp.

It was carried by the Cunard Line America from New York January 23 to Liverpool arriving February 4 with a “Liverpool 5 FE” arrival backstamp.

It is an independent state use as South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20, 1860—the first state to do so. The Confederacy was formed February 4, 1861, the day the ship arrived in port.

Newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic reported the mutiny and murder of Capt. Pyke on the vessel

*General Parkhill*. I found period accounts from not only countless United States sources, but also numerous newspapers in England. This is a case where the story is best told by newspaper accounts.

The date of the mutiny and murder follow shortly after the date of cover’s arrival in Liverpool. It was doubtless his return trip to what was by then Confederate states. The first shots of the war were not fired until April 12, 1861, at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

The mutineers were tried in the United States court system. Attorney and CSA specialist Steven M. Roth explains why:

“If the ship was on the high seas when the crime occurred, and if the ship was a U.S. registered ship, the U.S. has jurisdiction without regard to the nationality of the victim or the perpetrator. If, however, the ship was a British registered ship, it would have jurisdiction. Or, if the crime occurred within the territorial waters

of GB no matter where the ship was registered, then England would have jurisdiction to asset its criminal laws. It does not matter whether ship returned to UK or not although GB could try to assert the doctrine that possession (of the ship and crew) is 9/10s of the law.”

To begin the story, the March 15, 1861, edition of *The New York Times* reported:

*Capt. PYKE, of the American ship General Parkhill, had been murdered on board his vessel. The ship left Liverpool on the 25th for Charleston, but when off Holyhead [Wales], a disturbance took place on board between the officers and men, in the course of which the Captain was killed, having been stabbed five times, and the mate was severely injured. The ship had returned to the Mersey, and the crew were imprisoned, pending an investigation.*

The March 20, 1861, edition of *The Daily Dispatch* (Richmond, Virginia) ran the following story:

***Tragedy on Shipboard.***

***—The ship General Parkhill, Capt. Pyke, bound from England for Charleston, S. C., left the Mersey on the 25th ult.:***

*The crew consisted of first and second mates, boatswain, steward, and eleven seamen. It appears that the ship had not got far down the river when some angry words took place between the captain and crew, and two of the crew were flogged. Shortly after they attacked the captain and first mate, killing the former and terribly wounding the latter. The vessel was carried back to Liverpool and the crew were arrested. Captain Pyke was a native of Preston, England, and was about 34 years of age. He was a married man, with a family. After the removal of the body of the unfortunate man to the dead house, the detective officers examined his cabin. They found under the pillow of his bed photographs of his wife and the youngest child, a little fellow about two years of age. In the cabin was also a pair of child's shoes, and attached to them a memorandum reminding the captain that he was to get two similar pairs at a certain shop in Charleston.*

The May 18, 1861, edition of *The New York Times* reads, in part:

***LAW REPORTS.;***

***United States Circuit Court. Before Judge Nelson. MURDER ON THE HIGH SEAS.***

*Samuel Collins, Lewis Featherstone, John Dunlevy and John Kelly, were put on trial charged*

*with murdering Geo. W. Pike, the Captain of the ship Gen. Parkhill. Before commencing the trial, Mr. Smith, the District Attorney entered a nolle prosequi against Kelly, proposing to use him as a witness. One of the crew named Smith was put on the stand and testified that the defendants were sailors on board the ship, which left Liverpool in the morning of Feb 25, 1861; there seemed to have been same difficulty during the day between the Captain and the men, as he as he heard some of the men crying out; in the evening the men were together, and Dunlevy said they were going to stop this work, (by which he understood the Captain's sulking the men,) and that if they struck him he would strike back, and would serve anyone who would not join them in the same way, but witness declined to join them; that after that, about half-past eight o'clock, the men and the Captain had a fight on deck, and he heard, the Captain cry out, "I am murdered," and he staggered to the cabin; the mates came up at the noise of the affray, and was stabbed and fell, but refused to go into the cabin, when Dunlevy came up with a handspike and knocked him down, saying that the mate had tried to kill him, and he would kill the mate; one of Dunlevy's eyes was almost closed at the time, as by blow; the [??] they went into the cabin, and the men called for three cheers, and when the second mate came out they, insisted, upon the ships, going back to Liverpool, and she was put back.*

*One of the police force of Liverpool testified to arresting the men on board the ship and searching them, and finding knives on all of them, there being blood on Collins' knife; that the captain's body was lying on the cabin floor, and the mate was lying his bunk, with pen-knife wounds in his body; witness told Dunlevy, after he was arrested, what he was charged with and he said he did not deny it, and wished he had finished the other; he also told the others what they were charged with, but they said they knew nothing about it.*

*The clothes taken from the captain's body were shown in court; the stab in them was shown to fit Collins' knife, which was smaller than the others.*

*The mate was also examined and testified to the same facts nearly. He also said that he had seen no cruelty on the ship; but that the Captain told him during the day that he gave a man an order, and the man, called him a son of a bitch, and the Captain struck him; that the mate himself struck one of the men with a piece of rattling stuff, in consequence of the same epithet being applied to him. The steward also testified to what he knew of the transaction, and to his finding the Captain lying on the floor of the cabin where he had fallen on entering, and that*

he raised the Captain up, but he only breathed two or three times.

The case it conducted for the Government by Mr. E.D. Smith, the District Attorney, with Mr. Walcoxson and Mr. Wood, and for the prisoners by Mr. Howa.

The case is still on.

The June 4, 1861 edition of *The New York Times* recounted the following of the trial:

***Sentence for Murder.;***

***UNITED STATES CIRCUIT COURT JUNE 3.***

***Before Judge Nelson.***

The three seamen on board the ship *Gen. Parkhill*, convicted of murdering the Captain while on a voyage from Liverpool to this country, were this morning called up for sentence.

James T. Brady, Esq., appeared for the prisoners by request of some of their friends, and requested a postponement of the sentence, as he had not had time since he had been retained in the matter to examine the evidence as he desired. He stated also that Featherstone had, since the exonerated his associates from striking the fatal blow, and he alluded to the fact of the ship's having been since seized as a prize, and the allegation that she had a secession flag on board of her.

Judge NELSON declined to postpone the sentence and the prisoners were asked if they had anything to say why sentence should not be passed upon them. Samuel Collins and John Dunlevy said they were innocent. Featherstone said nothing. The Judge then proceeded to sentence them as follows:

The crime of which you have been convicted was committed on board the merchant ship *Gen. Parkhill*. She was bound from the port of Liverpool, England, to the port of Charleston, South Carolina. The crew, eleven in number, of which you were a part, were shipped at Liverpool. The vessel sailed from that port at about 11 o'clock on the forenoon of the 25th of February last, and before 10 o'clock that evening, and when she had reached but twenty miles from it, you had killed the master, Capt. Pike, by stabbing him to the heart, and left the first mate, Campbell, from stabs inflicted with knives upon his body, and blows upon his head and arms with a handspike, insensible, and from which injuries he barely survived. He received seven cuts on the body, and three blows from the handspike, one of which stretched him on the deck, and another was inflicted after he was down. We have looked into the evidence of the events which occurred on the deck of this vessel during her short voyage, (for she returned to Liverpool after the death of the Captain,

and disability of the first mate,) with great attention and care to discover, if possible, any reasonable provocation in the conduct of the master or mate for your extraordinary and desperate violence, and with the exception of some blows with the hand for disobedience of orders and insulting language we find none. The officers were unarmed, having no weapons about them. Their conduct furnished no grounds for apprehending danger or cruelty. The killing of the captain and the cruel injuries of the mate were not the immediate consequence even of the blows for disobedience and other unseamanlike conduct. Soon after the vessel left Liverpool you confederated to overthrow the authority of the officers, and endeavored also to persuade others of the crew to join you, and threatened violence to them if they refused. You sharpened your knives upon the anchor chains preparatory to the bloody deed, and made the assault upon the officers without their being forewarned or forearmed, and in any situation to defend themselves. As some evidence corroborating the account given by the mate that the few blows inflicted upon you were for disobedience of orders, and insulting language; out of a crew of eleven you were the only persons that had any serious difficulty with the officers; and further, with one exception, the crew refused to join you in your assaults upon the mate, and endeavor to gain possession and control of the ship. As very strong proof of your purpose to get possession and control of the vessel, the witnesses agree that after you had killed the captain, and supposed and believed that you had also killed the mate, you exulted in the idea of having captured her, and did afterwards assume the control and direction as to the port to which she should be brought. By the verdict of the jury, with which the Court is entirely satisfied, you have been convicted of an offence for which your lives are forfeited; and we are compelled to add, that the case, as presented upon the evidence, even when charitably examined, must be regarded as an aggravated one, We sincerely admonish you, therefore, that in the interval between your sentence and execution, you prepare for the great change that awaits you. Think of the cruelties you inflicted upon Pike and Campbell, and of the terrible account which you will soon be called to render to your Maker. Think of the denunciations in your Bible of the murderer, and that there is no hope of salvation in the life to come, to which you hasten, except through repentance, and the forgiveness of your Redeemer. We trust that you will earnestly and faithfully in this way improve the time we extend to you before the execution. (At this point the father of Collins, who was in the Courtroom, burst into

a violent fit of weeping.) It is extended to you that you may thus improve it. It remains only now for the Court to pronounce the sentence of the law, which is, that you and each of you be taken back to the City Prison from whence you were brought, and remain there until Friday, the 26th of July next, and then and there, at the place of execution, between the hours of 12 and 3 on the afternoon of that day, you and each of you be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may the Lord have mercy on your souls.

From the August 10, 1861, *The Daily Dispatch*, Richmond, Virginia:

### **Abe Puts the foot down Firmly again.**

—Mrs. Buckley, a New York Fifth Avenue lady, went to Washington lately — before Manassas was fought, be assured — to procure a reprieve for Collins, Featherstone and Dunleavy, convicted of the murder of George W. Pike, captain of the ship *General Parkhill*.

—The interview between herself and Lincoln is thus described in a letter to the *Boston Journal*. Abe, it will be seen, adheres to his maxim, that it “is necessary to put the foot down firmly sometimes,” notwithstanding he has been admonished so often of the danger of planting his preposterous and cumbersome feet upon hot places:

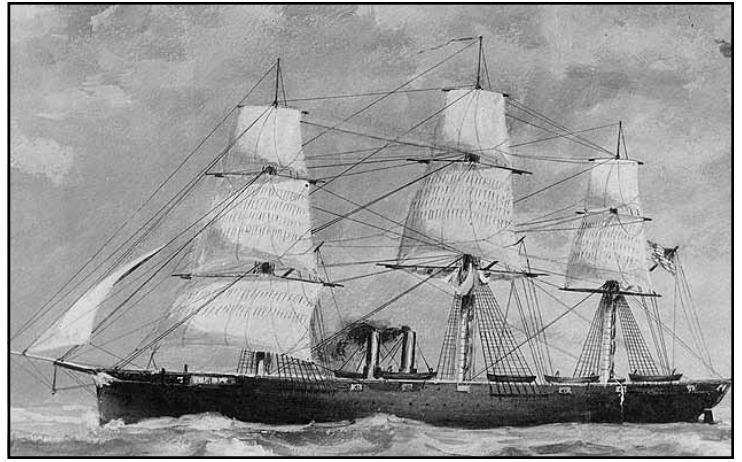
On gaining an interview, she said to the President that she had come to place before him some of the circumstances connected with the case of the unfortunate men imprisoned in the Toombs in New York, and that she hoped—

As she uttered these words, Mr. Lincoln involuntarily started back, and with a manner that expressed the greatest determination and firmness, but altogether void of excitement, said that it would be a waste of time for her to proceed further, as his mind was made up to let the law take its course.

The lady began again to state her case, when Mr. Lincoln exclaimed, somewhat impatiently, that it was enough—they were taken on the Savannah, and that he would never interfere on their behalf.

Thus the subject cover reveals a story that begins with a British sea captain commanding a United States vessel departing England for the Confederate States. When the cover was mailed, South Carolina was an independent state. By the time the ship reached Liverpool, South Carolina was part of the Confederacy.

The ship arrived on February 4, 1861, the date accepted by most as the day the Confederate States of America was formed. This story of mutiny and murder reached the highest level in the United States, President Abraham Lincoln.



Two months after the murder and mutiny, The USS *Niagara* (above) captured the *General Parkhill* at Charleston harbor as it served as a CSA blockade runner.

### **Concluding Note**

There is an interesting concluding note of historical significance to this story. As reported by Douglas W. Bostick in *Charleston Under Siege: The Impregnable City*, the *General Parkhill*, a British ship built in Liverpool, England, was the first Confederate blockade runner to be captured by the USS *Niagara* at Charleston harbor.

The *Niagara* was a steam frigate launched at the New York Navy Yard in February 1855 and was first commissioned in April 1857. The ship laid cable for the first transatlantic telegraph, repatriated slaves to Liberia, carried Japan's first diplomatic mission to the United States before service as a Union blockade ship of southern ports.

The *Niagara*, with Capt. McKean at the helm, arrived off Charleston, South Carolina, on May 10 and two days later captured blockade runner *General Parkhill* attempting to make Charleston from Liverpool.

So, less than two months after Capt Pyke was murdered on the *General Parkhill*, the ship had been converted to a CSA blockade runner and captured. Its ultimate fate is unclear.

The *Niagara* continued to have a distinguished record of captures during the Civil War. The ship was decommissioned after the war and remained in the Boston Navy Yard until sold in May 1885

### **Reference**

Bostick, Douglas W. *Charleston Under Siege: The Impregnable City*. Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2010.

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