



The President's Prerogative

In the past few years I have bought a lot of Confederate material and handled numerous collections. In so doing, I have found an incredibly frightening trend, which probably has always been the case, but seems particularly alarming to me of late.

I desperately feel the need to address the issue that has been disturbing me. Over the years, I have heard of several “near misses” by heirs of collectors, including several thousand covers from the late George Malpass—a past CSA president and great Confederate student—which were left on the curb for the trash collectors and fortunately rescued by a savvy great-nephew just in the nick of time.

But the most chilling incident with which I was involved was only a year ago when I was called to look at material that had been recovered from trash bins by non-collectors. When initially approached, I thought this was something of little consequence, but quickly changed my tune when I saw scans of select covers worth tens of thousands of dollars each.

The actual story is far more horrifying than I am able to share with you for legal reasons, but the sketchy fact is that what amounted to probably hundreds of thousands of dollars of rare material—not just Confederate—was literally tossed in the garbage by the indifferent and uninformed heirs. These included some great Confederate rarities; I am uncertain exactly what has been lost.

I was appalled. The people recovered this material literally from dumpsters along with the garbage and were intelligent enough to recognize the intrinsic value. They began to sift through the trash on a regular basis, continuing to harvest from this source for months—a veritable mountain of valuable material that literally filled the space of a garage to the ceiling. Who knows what they did not rescue!

Second to this horror, is another kind of travesty which, while not the same, may have similar consequences. What I find disturbing is that research information from decades ago is often not kept with the material. Thus I am “reinventing the wheel” whenever I describe a cover for my stock.

A case in point was the recent purchase of a prisoner-of-war cover which seemed so very familiar, yet I was having trouble finding information about the incarcerated soldier to mailed it. In researching another POW cover with a similar problem, I tripped across an article written about the first cover in *The Confederate Philatelist* in 1980 when I was editor of these pages. Not only was a copy of the article not kept with the cover, none of the information on the prisoner was kept either. The cover only showed the addressee, a civilian, and it was not even easy to determine from which prison it was sent. The rediscovered CP article answered all of my questions.

Why oh why aren't we keeping important information with our precious material?

I personally have large notes of instruction on what to do with my research files, some of which represent decades of work, if I die unexpectedly. I guarantee that I'll be rolling in my grave if that research—let alone actual covers, stamps, or literature—is thrown in the trash when I pass on. I encourage you all to leave very detailed instructions with your heirs and with the material itself. It must be memorialized in your estate in writing with specific letters of instruction. I know of at least one collector who is leaving directives that his material be sold at auction and he has stipulated that the auction house must pass along all research to the buyer as a condition of the auction agreement.

In the case of the late George Malpass, his only daughter was well aware of the value, but when she died, the next tier of heirs was—for the most part—clueless. Fortunately, there was one great-nephew who knew and rescued the material from the trash heap—although he had no idea what it was worth. I rendered him virtually speechless with a six-figure appraisal.

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