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Here is a subject philatelists have been enthralled with for over 100 years.



The Confederate Post

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Ordinary looking cover...to the lady who “danced herself to death”?

I bought a seemingly mundane cover recently, but as is often the case behind Confederate covers, it came with a fascinating story. It bears a Confederate 5¢ blue lithographed issue, Scott #4, tied with a Chattanooga, Tenn. cancel. It is addressed to “Miss Mollie S. Sewell, Tazewell, East. Tenn.” and therein lies the intriguing mystery.

At historic Graham Springs, in Harrodsburg, Kentucky there is a curious grave marker in Young Park for an unknown young woman who “danced herself to death”. As early as 1807, springs in this area were used as a spa. In 1827, Dr. Christopher C. Graham purchased the springs. The main hotel for Graham Springs was a brick four-story building that Graham declared could accommodate a thousand patrons. The resort became “the” place to go for rich plantation owners from the deep South. Not only did guests partake of the supposedly healing waters, they also joined in a lively social season that lasted from June until September. Balls and entertainments amused the guests while they drank the mineral waters.

In Graham Springs, there is an old monument describing the unidentified woman buried there who dropped dead on the ballroom dance floor in the merriment of one of the nightly social functions. The crowd that gathered around the beautiful lady was amazed to discover that no one knew her identity, even her escort. All that was known was that she was from the South, as she had signed the guest register with a fictitious name.

Around the turn of the century, the mystery was purportedly solved by a chance conversation. Joseph Adams happened to mention the mysterious lady to James Rupp of Lexington, Kentucky, who had lived in Tazewell, Tennessee as a young boy. Joseph Sewell, then about 40 years old, told Rupp that his wife “danced herself to death

at Harrodsburg”. Her maiden name was Molly Black and she was Sewell’s second wife. Apparently, the Sewells were estranged at the time of her mysterious death and he was on the road in the spirit of wanderlust; some said he was in search of other female companionship as he was known as a ladies man.

According to an early 1900s newspaper clipping in the Harrodsburg Historical So-



ciety library, the mystery lady died before the Civil War, lending a good amount of credence to this is the fact that Graham sold his spa in May of 1853 for \$100,000 to the United States government for use as an asylum for aged and invalid soldiers. The beautiful hotel burned on May 30, 1856, thus ending the last vestige of Graham Springs.

That coupled with the Confederate cover pictured here puts the mystery of “the lady who danced herself to death” back in the unsolved category. Did the Mollie Sewell who was addressed on this cover live during or on past the Civil War, eliminating her from contention as the mysterious lady? Or were there two Mollie Sewell’s in Tazewell? I did an online check of the Claiborne County Census from 1840-1880. The 1890 records regrettably had a broken link. I found neither a Joseph nor Mollie Sewell in the 1840 census. In 1860, there was a 25 year old James J. Sewell listed as a “fox hunter”. There was also a Mary A. Sewell, age 18. In the 1870 census, Joseph J. Sewell was 35 years old with a different

occupation. In 1880, there was a 45 year old Joseph W. (different middle initial) Sewell (right age progression) listed as a lawyer in Tazewell. There was also a wife, Nancy, who was 24 years old. Thus, the mystery remains, as dates, ages and names don’t seem to mesh, even if Mary was known as Mollie.

In a thread on the Tennessee Genealogy & History Queries website, various contributors had found reports that the lady died in the 1840s, the 1850s and even the 1890s (long after the hotel was burned to the ground). There are also reports of a ghost of the young lady, sometimes called “the beautiful unknown”, an apparition who dances in the park. In a 1971 copyrighted book by Kathryn Tucker Windham, Jefferey Introduces 13 More Southern Ghosts, the grave is described as being 125 years old. That puts it into the 1840s time frame.

Usually, the addresses on covers that have illicit background stories are to men with military addresses, as they have the easiest background records to ferret out. The background story behind this cover is unusual in that it revolves around a woman who may forever remain in anonymity. This type of delightful mystery is one of the many especially intriguing lures of Confederate postal history.

For information on the Confederate Stamp Alliance or the forthcoming *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook*, write Trish Kaufmann, 10194 N. Old State Road, Lincoln, DE 19960 or e-mail trishkauf@comcast.net. Information is also available on websites csalliance.org and csacatalog.org.

References:

1. http://www.angelfire.com/tn3/masterdetective2/Old_Mystery1.pdf
2. <http://www.tngenweb.org/queries/east/webbbs/queries/index.cgi?>
3. Ibid.