

# Imprinted Envelopes of the Confederate States

PATRICIA A. KAUFMANN

## Franking Privilege

Franking privilege allows for members of Congress, and their staff, to send mail to their constituents without having to pay postage. This allows Congress the ability to communicate more effectively with their supporters. Depending on the time in history, Congress then paid or pays back the post office with money from the legislative branch. Franking privilege therefore is not necessarily always “Free Franking,” despite this common connotation. Indeed, the term “franking” is derived from the Latin word “francus,” meaning free.

The franking privilege first began in 1660 in Great Britain. The practice carried over to the United States when the First Continental Congress passed legislation in 1775 that allowed free postage for members of Congress as well as other stipulated officials.

While still in practice today, the franking privilege has undergone many reforms. In lieu of postage stamps, congressmen pen-signed their letters with “M.C.” (Member of Congress) following their names. Today, printed facsimile signatures are used, and are generally reserved for official business. Similar franking privileges exist worldwide.

The franking privilege, as authorized under United States law, was abolished by an Act of the Confederate Congress on February 23, 1861. In its place, the Confederate Congress authorized designated officials of the Confederate States Post Office Department (CSPOD) to send free of postage all mail relating exclusively to their official duties or to the business of the Department. Subsequent acts of May 13, 1861, and May 23, 1864, added several more officials to the list who were authorized to send mail free of postage. The new official mail was effective on June 1, 1861, when CSPOD took over postal operations in the South.

## Confederate Imprinted Envelopes

There are three types of imprinted envelopes in the Confederacy: Official (CSPOD), Semi-Official (all Confederate government agencies other than CSPOD), and State. Only the official envelopes of the Confederate Post Office Department could be carried in the mail free of postage, and only when properly endorsed by an authorized official of the CSPOD.

## Official Imprints

At the outbreak of the war, substantial stocks of Nesbitt and star-die envelopes from the U.S. Post Office Department (USPOD) remained in Southern post offices. Although Confederate Postmaster General John H. Reagan ordered the offices in his charge to return their U.S. stamps to Washington, few actually did so.

The early blockade of Southern ports closed off sources of paper and envelopes

from the North and from Europe. Thus, it is no surprise that many U.S. envelopes were not returned to the USPOD as they should have been. Additionally, after June 1, 1861, the U.S. envelopes did not pay any postage in the Confederacy, meaning that Confederate postal officials had little incentive not to use the envelopes for other purposes. Indeed, Confederate postal officials prepared imprints of the various bureaus and offices of the CSPOD on the seized envelopes, although some were imprinted on commercial envelopes as well.

As a side note, early in the war, the United States demonetized all postage, including postal stationery. Southern post offices held substantial U.S. assets in the form of their stamp stocks, and the Confederates could theoretically have brought in some income by selling those stamps to private individuals in the North.

The official imprints of the CSPOD are divided into two groups: those used by the CSPOD in Richmond, Virginia, which was the capitol of the Confederacy for most of the war, and those used by the Trans-Mississippi Agency in Marshall, Texas.

Uses from Richmond are known throughout the war. Uses from the Trans-Mississippi Agency date from May 23, 1864, when the official mail privilege was extended to the agent for the Trans-Mississippi Department and the auditor

of that agency. In use only about a year, these imprints are much scarcer.

The imprint designation types that follow (in parentheses) are from the 2012 *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*. Catalog numbers for stamps are from the 2020 *Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers*.

Shown in Figure 1 is a 3¢ star-die entire (U26) imprinted “Post Office Department, Official Business, Chief of the Contract Bureau” (CON-02c). It bears the signature of H. St. George Offutt, Chief of the Contract Bureau, and is addressed to the postmaster at Leavenworth, South Carolina. The manuscript docketing “Wm. Young Appointment” at top denotes the enclosed contents. The cover is postmarked with a Richmond, Va., circular datestamp and a “FREE” straightline handstamp. In this case it is indeed a free frank.

Figure 2 pictures an “Agency Post Office Dept., Trans-Miss. / Official Business / \_\_\_\_ Agent.” (TRN-03) imprinted 3¢ star-entire to the postmaster of Port Lavaca, Texas. It is signed by James H. Starr, Agent for the Trans-Mississippi Department and postmarked Marshall, Tex., May 20 [1864]. Starr was appointed in February 1864.

Three types of envelopes were used for official imprints: 1853–55 U.S. Nesbitt envelopes, 1860–61 U.S. star-die Nesbitt entires, and plain commercial envelopes. All are of varying sizes and paper color.

### Semi-Official Imprints

In addition to the official imprints of the CSPOD, other departments of the Confederate government prepared envelopes with their own imprints for official business. These are considered semi-official in nature,



Figure 1

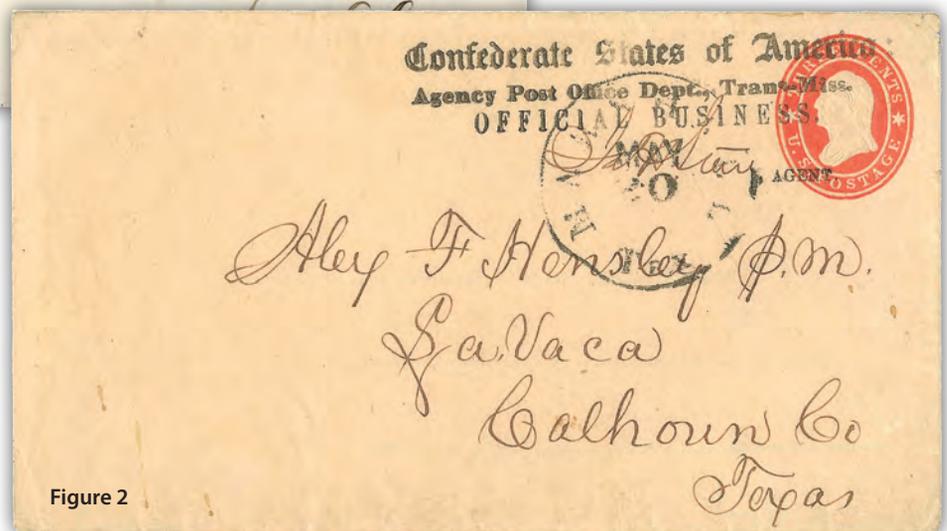


Figure 2

as they required the payment of postage for transmission through the mail system. Even Confederate President Jefferson Davis had to pay postage for mail sent from the Executive Department and President's Office.

The scarce imprinted Confederate Navy Department cover shown in Figure 3 (ND-04) is franked with a 10¢ blue type I engraved issue, which is tied by a Richmond, Va., circular datestamp and addressed to Saw Dust, Columbia Co(nty) Geo.

An unusual captured semi-official from the Confederate States Department of State is shown in Figure 4 (DS-04). "Confederate" was crossed out and changed to "United" and "of Va." was added after "Department of State." It is franked with a 3¢ rose (Scott 65) tied by a cork cancel and postmarked with an Old Point Comfort, Va., double-circle datestamp. It is addressed to Syracuse, New York. This same postmark was used on flag-of-truce mail going through Fortress Monroe, but Figure 4 is a completely U.S. use with no censor markings, as it would have if it was processed flag-of-truce mail.

The CSA Treasury Department imprint (TD-02) in Figure 5 is addressed locally to and from Richmond, Virginia. The drop rate was paid with a 2¢ brown red (CSA 8).

Yes, they had taxes back then too. Figure 6 shows a cover imprinted with "Office of the Commissioner of Taxes" (TD-12) sent from Richmond with a 10¢ greenish blue (CSA 12c) to the State (Tax) Collector in Columbia, South Carolina.

### State Imprints

Various branches of state governments also prepared envelopes with the imprint of their respective offices for official business. Most include the state name in the imprint. Other imprints include only the name of the organization or the organization and town.

Many of these imprints bear no indication of the government of origin, which sometimes makes it a challenge for collectors and catalog editors to easily identify. Until the 2012 CSA catalog, state imprints were lumped with the



Figure 3



Figure 4

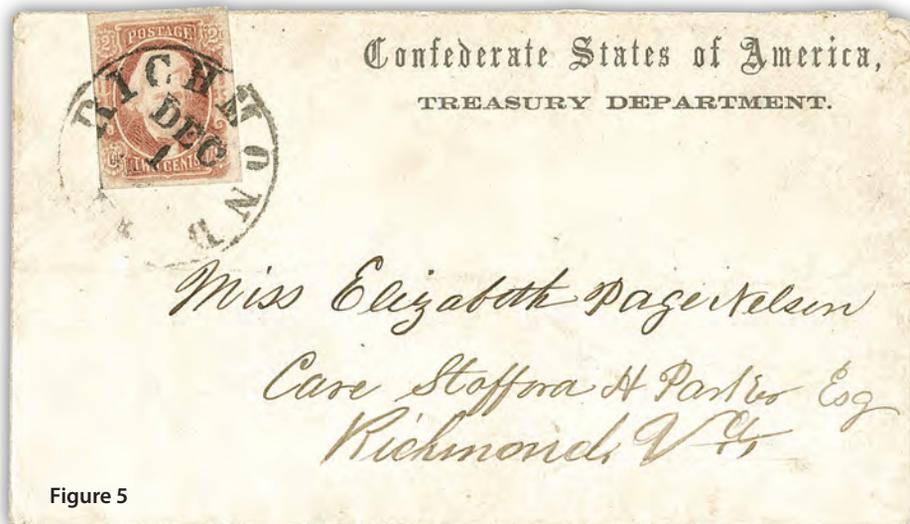


Figure 5

semi-official imprints. Separating state from semi-official imprints was a challenge and required heavy revamping of that section of the catalog, completely redone from prior Dietz catalog listings. Consequently, States listings are not only now correctly differentiated, but there is a third category of State imprints instead of only Official and Semi-



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

official imprints to collect. Many imprint collectors thanked us for that needed effort.

The imprinted cover in Figure 7 shows an illuminated cover from the Office of the Board of Public Works, State of Virginia. It is franked with a 10¢ greenish blue (CSA 11c) tied by a Richmond, Va., circular datestamp. It is addressed to the superintendent at Salem, Roanoke Co(nty), Va.

A pair of 5¢ blue local prints (CSA 7) franks the state imprint cover shown in Figure 8. It was posted at Woodville, Mississippi, and bears a “Head-Quarters, State of Mississippi, Adjutant and Inspector-General’s Office, Official Business” imprint (S-MS-02). In addition, it is forwarded to Laurel Hill, Miss. The original use was apparently carried by favor as indicated by the docketing at the lower left of the cover to that effect. Favor covers were carried by hand and usually noted with thanks in various ways, such as: Politeness of (name), Favor of, Courtesy of, Per, etc.

### Collecting Confederate Imprints

Collecting this area of Confederates can be very rewarding. The covers are well-cataloged by type, although new additions are constantly being added to the CSA catalog post-publication files for the next generation of editors.

Sometimes, imprinted covers come with a bonus of an official printed letterhead, often matching the cover. This is usually a delightful dividend for the collector.

Or, perhaps the imprint is not on the outside but is rather an imprinted circular such as that in Figures 9 and 10. Figure 9 shows the address side of an unsealed circular franked with a 2¢ brown red (CSA 8) tied



Figure 9

by a Charleston, S.C., circular datestamp and addressed to S.J. Hay, Agt., Green Point, C & S RR.

The Figure 10 circular is headed “Confederate States of America, Subsistence Department, Richmond, January 1st, 1865.” It was sent by direction of the Commissary General by order of the Secretary of War, regarding commutation of rations for unassigned retired non-commissioned officers. Samuel J. Hay was a railroad agent for the Charleston and Savannah Railroad, connecting two important port cities.

Types of imprints encompass a wide range of topics. Most heavily, and not surprisingly, there are many types of War Department imprints. They show a breadth of departments that include military districts, cavalry units, subsistence and quartermaster departments, engineer, signal bureau, arsenals and armories, prisoner exchange bureau, ordnance, hospitals, medical directors, surgeon general, Indian Affairs, conscript services, and far more.

Confederate imprint covers are colorful, interesting, and relatively easy to find. Depending on which stamps carried the mail and the specific uses, the average cover can be relatively inexpensive. Rare stamps or unusual uses obviously increase both the interest and the price.

**Acknowledgements:**

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**Further Reading:**

Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown, Jr., Jerry S. Palazolo, Editors, *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, 2012, Confederate Stamp Alliance, www.csalliance.org.

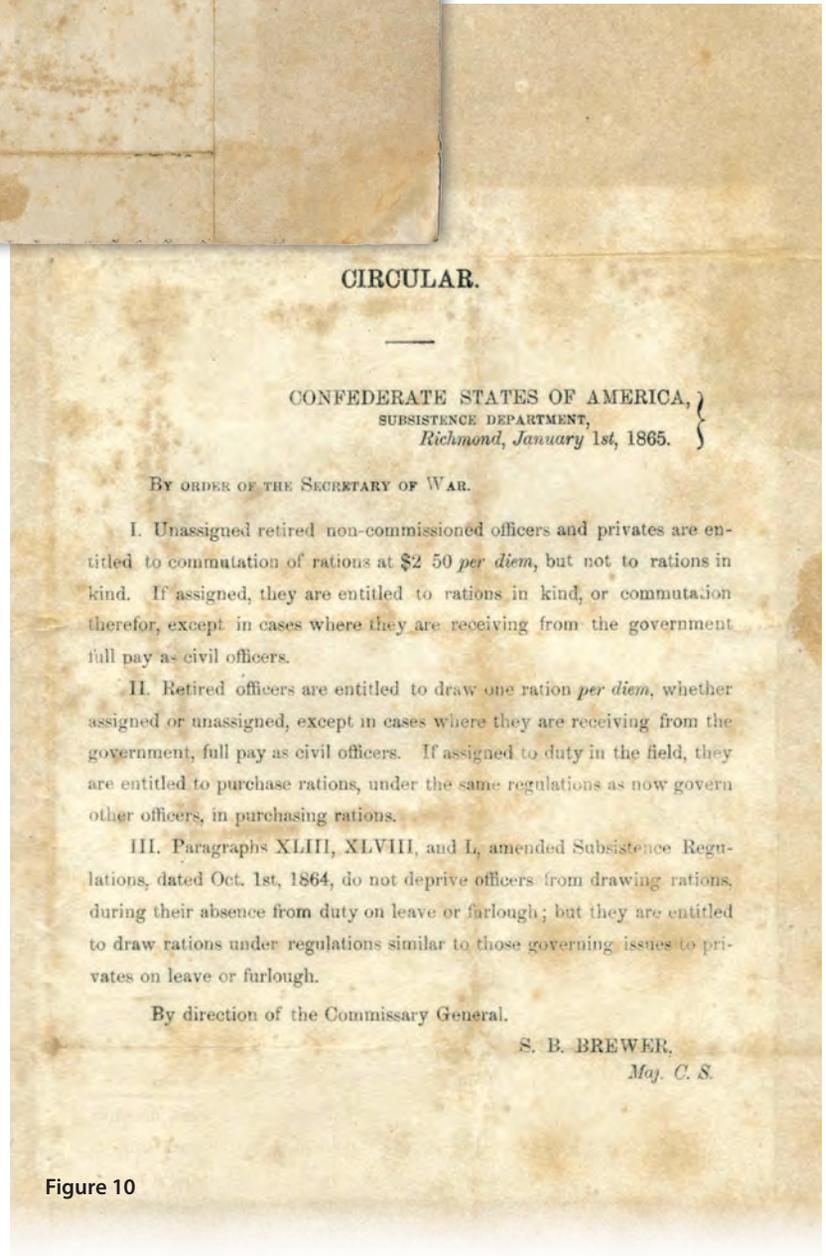


Figure 10

**The Author:**

Patricia (Trish) Kaufmann was first introduced to Confederate postal history in 1965. She became a full-time professional philatelist in 1973 and today specializes solely in Confederates, mostly running her business online. She has been highly active in organized philately since 1970 and is a widely-known philatelic researcher and writer.