



The Civil War Post

Patricia A. Kaufmann

State Abbreviations Were Not the Same During the Civil War

On eBay recently, there was a stamp offered that was described as “Scott 26, United States postage stamp mailed in the Confederate States of America, SOTN postmark Gloucester, MS, Apr 23, 1861. Mississippi seceded from the union in January, 1861.” That item is shown nearby.

I wrote the seller and told him that there was no such place in Mississippi – either then or now – and that most Mississippi abbreviations of that time period were “Mi” or “Miss.” I told him the cancellation was for Gloucester, Mass., and that it was not the first time I’d seen such a mistake made.

Undeterred, the seller then replied that there was a Gloucester, Miss., and that:

“I contacted an expert EBay friend and his reply is below.”

“That is EXACTLY the kind of cancel used in MS and AL in that era. Also, if this were a fake the faker would have dated the cancel before February 18th 1861, when Mississippi was still an “independent country” before the Confederacy was established. The stamp would have been worth a hundred times more.

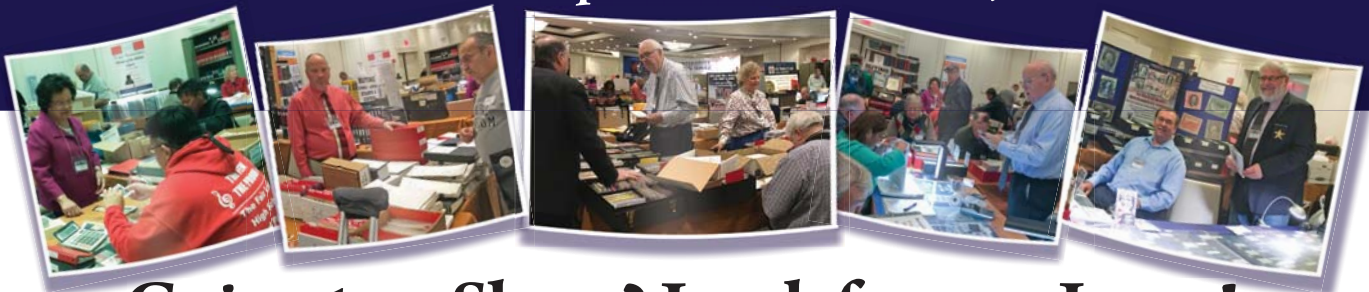
“I have seen MS in cancels of that period many times.

“Ask ‘Trish’ if she ever heard of Gloster or Gloucester Plantation in Mississippi?”

I tried again with the information that follows, but to no avail. I also pointed out that I never called it a fake. I simply said it was not from Mississippi, rather it was from Massachusetts. The canceling device was common to both North and South at that time.

There was not a Gloucester, Miss., post office during the war (nor ever, spelled in that way). It is easy to check in the list of U.S. post offices for that time period, available in a multitude of places. One has been on my desk for roughly 50 years. My first copy fell apart from overuse and I replaced it perhaps a decade ago. I refer to it frequently, as do most serious postal historians.

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There were only three towns listed by the name Gloucester in 1861-62: Gloucester Court House, Va.; Gloucester City, N.J.; and Gloucester, Mass. – the one offered on eBay.

Gloster (spelled differently), Miss., did not have a post office until well after the war. It is not listed by the U.S. Postal Service. It is not listed in the *Confederate States of America Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History* (CSA Catalog). It is not listed in the *American Stampless Cover Catalog*.

Gloster (not Gloucester), Miss., was incorporated on March 11, 1884. Yes, there is a Gloucester plantation in the Natchez area, built in 1800, but that has nothing to do with the postal markings, or lack thereof. The plantation did not process mail.

Again the abbreviation for Mississippi during the Civil War was “Mi” or “Miss” and not “Ms.” The abbreviation for Massachusetts at that time was Ms., not MA, as the USPS abbreviates it today.

There was no standardized postal abbreviation for Confederate state postmarks during the Civil War, although states most commonly used the first and last letters of the state as the abbreviation.



According to the U.S. Postal Service, in 1963, most addressing equipment could accommodate only 23 characters, including spaces, in the bottom line of the address. To make room for the ZIP Code, state names needed to be abbreviated.

The U.S. Post Office Department provided an initial list of abbreviations in June 1963, but many had three or four letters, which was still too long. In October 1963, the Department settled on the current two-letter abbreviations.

At <https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/state-abbreviations.htm>

on the U.S. Postal Service website, there is a table of historical postal abbreviations for all states and different time periods (1831, 1874, 1943, June 1963 and October 1963 to the present).

For Massachusetts, it notes the following: 1831, Ms.; 1874, Mass.; 1943, Mass.; 6/1963, MASS; and 10/1963 to present MA.

For Mississippi, it notes the following: 1831, Mi.; 1874, Miss.; 1943, Miss.; 6/1963, MISS; and 10/1963 to present, MS.

In the stampless section of the *CSA Catalog*, there is not one Mississippi war-period canceling device listed with the state abbreviated as “MS.” None. Not one. There are listings for towns with state abbreviations of Mi, MISS, Miss, and MIS.

Scanning the Internet, books or auction catalogs, it does not take long to find obvious Massachusetts state abbreviations of the period with “MS” or “Ms.”

What I didn’t comment on to the eBay seller was the assertion that, “*The stamp would have been worth a hundred times more [if dated while an independent state].*”

The *CSA Catalog* prices most of the Mississippi Independent State uses at \$300 or \$500, depending on scarcity, while the Confederate State Use of U.S. Postage are valued in the \$250 to \$300 range. So, yes, they are scarcer but hardly “a hundred times more.” And the catalog values are for full covers, not off-cover stamps.

The eBay seller started the bidding at \$19.99. A hundred times that would be \$1,999. I think not. The erroneously described stamp has been listed and relisted. It has been listed with no bids for more than a month as I write this. The seller did not verify the facts I gave him – easily available online. He continues to offer the Massachusetts-canceled stamp as a Confederate Mississippi use.

So, dear reader, caveat emptor. It is always advisable to do your own homework.

Trish is always happy to hear from readers. You may write to her at trishkauf@comcast.net.

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