



Figure 1: A cover smuggled across the lines from the South to Baltimore, where it was posted to San Francisco with a 10-cent green (Scott 68).

The Civil War Post Smuggled Southern Mail to California, Murder, and Scandal

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Confederate mail uses to California are seldom seen and then not by the normal Confederate postal system. Figure 1 shows a cover that spans both Union and Confederate use. It was smuggled from Richmond, Virginia, across the lines to Baltimore, Maryland, where it was posted to San Francisco.

The parents of addressee Clara Crittenden lived in Richmond, where she and her children lived with them for a time. Her father was Reverend Alexander Jones Jr. (1796-1874). Clara was the eldest of 13 children. She and husband A.P. Crittenden together had 14 children, but only eight lived to adulthood.¹

The original letter enclosed in the cover is in the William L. Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was datelined Grenada, Mississippi, October 4, 1863, and was written by one of Clara's sons, James Love Crittenden; the envelope is addressed in his hand.

Figure 2 is a photo of Clara Jones Crittenden with four of her children, circa 1855. At left, James stands with his hand clasped in the lap of a seated sister Laura, wearing a plaid dress; their brother Churchill stands between Laura and his mother; Clara Crittenden sits looking to her right and her daughter Ann is seated



Figure 2: Clara Jones Crittenden with four of her children, ca. 1855. (Clements Library, University of Michigan)

next to her mother at right. The photo is in the Clements Library of the University of Michigan, where the Crittenden family papers are maintained.

The letter did not make its way out of Richmond to Baltimore until January 6, 1864, as evidenced by the

blue Baltimore postmark canceling the 10-cent green, (Scott 68), on the cover. It is backstamped by a San Francisco “Advertised” backstamp on February 18, 1864. It took less time to travel from Baltimore to San Francisco than it did from Mississippi to Maryland.

James Love Crittenden (1841-1915) began his college education at the University of Virginia, but transferred to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, after espousing pro-Union views.

James and his brother, Churchill Jones Crittenden (1840-1864), were sent to Europe in 1862 to escape being drafted in the Union Army, but they jumped ship in Havana, Cuba.

Without their father’s permission, James joined the Signal Corps of the Confederate Army, while Churchill first served as a volunteer aide-de camp on the staff of Gen. John J. Archer in June 1862 before he joined the 1st Maryland Cavalry, CSA, as a private in Company C on August 4, 1862. Churchill was later captured behind Union lines and executed as a spy near Luray, Virginia.² A photo of Churchill in uniform is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 4 shows a letter in the National Archives & Records Administration dated Marietta (Georgia) June 25, 1864. The letter, in which he tenders his resignation, is signed by James as a second lieutenant and signal officer. The docketing on the back states, “It is understood that this officer wishes to enter some other branch of the service.”

He rose to the rank of captain, but I could not determine his disposition after his resignation from the Signal Corps. For a time after the war, James lived in Nevada, but eventually moved to New York to practice law.

Clara Jones Crittenden of San Francisco, California, is a name well known to postal historians familiar with Western mails.

The cover shown in Figure 5 bears a Wells, Fargo & Co., Pony Express 10-cent brown (Scott 143L7). It is a scarce use of the Virginia City pony express 10-cent brown from Nevada and bears handstamped markings of both Wells Fargo’s Aurora and Genoa offices.

In the collection of Larry Lyons, it was sold by Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries in 2015. The cover originated in Aurora, Nevada Territory, and was marked to go by “Pony” to California. The 10-cent stamp was affixed and cancelled at Genoa (northwest of Aurora).

The letter includes two postscripts regarding the Pony Express stamps: “P.S. I send you a couple of Pony Express stamps. If you put one on a letter it will arrive here a day sooner.” and “P.S. 2d. I find tonight that the supply of pony express stamps is out. Howard can get you some at Wells Fargo & Co’s. They only cost 10 Cts. Put one on each express envelope in which you

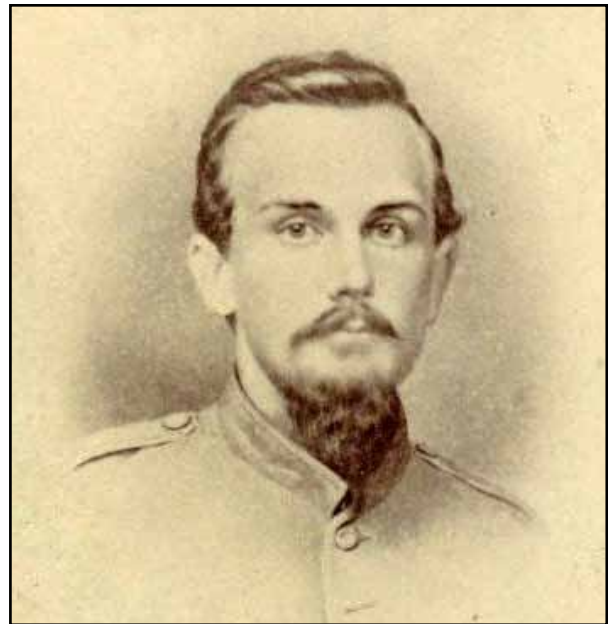


Figure 3: Churchill Jones Crittenden (1840-64) in uniform; he was shot as a spy.

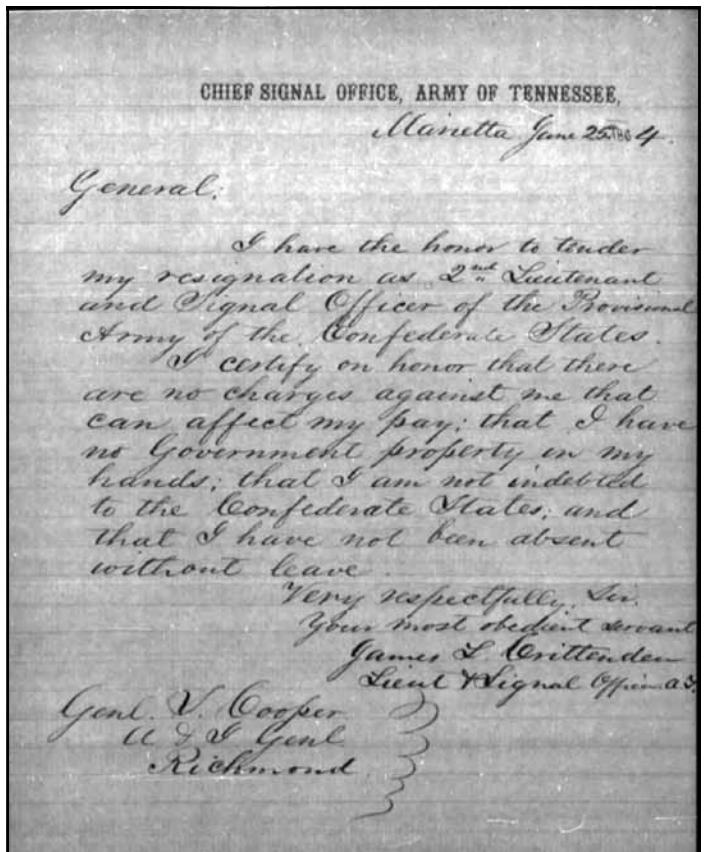


Figure 4: James L. Crittenden’s resignation from the Confederate Signal Corps. (NARA)

send me a letter. And tell Howard to take Dr. Brown an express envelope with pony stamp on it.”

The cover and letter were sent to Clara Churchill Jones Crittenden (1820-1881) by her husband, Alexander Parker Crittenden (1816-1870), while he was residing in Nevada. He is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 5: Wells, Fargo & Co., Pony Express 10-cent brown (Scott 143L7) with markings of both Wells Fargo's Aurora and Genoa offices. (Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries)



Figure 6: Alexander Parker Crittenden.

A.P. Crittenden, as he was known, was a prominent West Coast attorney, a native of Kentucky who graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1836, a classmate of William T. Sherman. He remained in the Army for about a year. Andrew Jackson was a close friend of his family.

A.P. was a pro-Southerner who chose to relocate to Virginia City, Nevada Territory, rather than swear allegiance to the federal government. His wife stayed in San Francisco with their children and the two corresponded frequently while he was away.³

The move to Nevada became necessary after California passed a law prohibiting the practice of law



Figure 7: Murderer Laura D. Fair, as shown in her carte-de-visite

by anyone who would not take the loyalty oath to the United States.

While living in Nevada Territory, A.P. Crittenden began a relationship with his landlady, the thrice-married Laura D. Fair (1837-1919), the beautiful proprietress of the Tahoe House Hotel. She was divorced once and widowed twice.

Owing to family troubles, Col. W. B. Fair committed

suicide in December 1861. They had married in 1859.⁴ Mrs. Fair is shown in Figure 7.

Initially, A.P. represented himself as single widower, but Laura Fair eventually discovered the cad was married. This prompted A.P. to promise her he would divorce his wife—the tired but sadly effective ruse for which women have fallen for centuries.

A.P. kept two residences—one for his wife and one for his mistress. In 1870, Clara made a transcontinental railroad crossing, taking her two youngest children with her to the East Coast and back.

On November 3, 1870, when A.P. left to meet her returning train in Oakland, his mistress followed him. On board the ferry *El Capitan* from Oakland to San Francisco, Laura shot the two-faced scoundrel as he sat with his wife and children. He managed to live another 48 hours.⁵

The sensational trial of Laura Fair lasted 26 days, with the courtroom filled to capacity every day. Among the celebrities attending the trial were women’s rights leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who supported Fair. Her attorney argued temporary insanity caused by a painful menstrual cycle, but the jury was not convinced.

After deliberating less than an hour, they returned with a verdict of guilty of first degree murder. She was sentenced to be hanged on July 28, 1871, the first woman to receive this sentence in California.

The trial was appealed to the California Supreme Court and, in February 1872. The verdict was overturned on grounds of prejudice.⁶

The trial exposed the hypocrisy and double standards of Victorian America where the public overlooked the conduct of married men who took mistresses but condemned those mistresses as sinful homewreckers.

In proof that “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” Laura Fair killed Crittenden when he refused to abandon his wife and acknowledge the parentage of her baby girl as his.⁷ She had left her baby, Lillian Lorraine Hollis (1860-1913) in her room when she went to confront Crittenden.

The following September, the case was retried. It was noted that during this trial Mrs. Fair dressed entirely in black and wore a black veil. This time she was found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity.

Riveting newspaper coverage of the shocking murder and sensationalized trials was extensive from coast to coast.

Endnotes

- 1 Alexander P. Crittenden, *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_P._Crittenden/ Accessed September 30, 2020.
- 2 Robert H. Moore, II, Churchill Jones Crittenden, Find A Grave memorial 48022078, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/48022078/churchill-jones-crittenden/> Accessed September 30, 2020.
- 3 Crittenden family papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/clementsead/umich-wcl-M-2113cri?byte=19481410;focusrgn=bioghist;subview=standard;view=reslist/> Accessed September 29, 2020.
- 4 Thomas S. Duke, “The Sensational Murder of Alexander Crittenden by his Mistress, Laura D. Fair, 1870,” *Celebrated Crimes Cases of America.*” <https://www.historicalcrimedetective.com/the-sensational-murder-of-alexander-crittenden-by-his-mistress-laura-d-fair-1870/> Accessed September 30, 2020
- 5 “The Woman in Black,” *Murder by Gaslight*, <http://www.murderbygaslight.com/2013/04/the-woman-in-black.html/> Accessed September 29, 2020
- 6 Marion S. Goldman, *Gold Diggers & Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode.* Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1981.
- 7 Laura D. Hall Snyder, Find A Grave memorial 114827422, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/114827422/laura-d-snyder#source/> Accessed September 30, 2020

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