

The Telegram Every Wartime Wife Dreads Receiving

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

Unlike later wartime telegrams that politely begin with the dreaded, “I regret to inform you,” the October 13, 1862, telegram shown in Figure 1 tersely states, “Capt. A.F. Dantzler was killed in the battle of Corinth.” The printed “1861” dating on the telegram was contemporaneously corrected to “1862” in pen, as is often seen in post-1861 years.

It must have felt like a club to the head. One can easily envision the scene triggered by the telegram contents and the devastating emotions undoubtedly felt by his wife, Susan, and the consequences for her and their young children.

The telegram is addressed to Mrs. S.A. Dantzler, Paulding (Mississippi) via Enterprise. It is headed Enterprise October 13, 1862, and is signed by E.H. Monger on South-Western Telegraph Company stationery. South-Western Telegraph was controlled by Western Union.

The transmitting envelope, shown in Figure 2, is a Confederate stampless use neatly postmarked by an Enterprise, Mississippi, circular datestamp with a matching handstamped PAID 10 (CSA catalog Type D).¹

Morse (and Vail) Code and Telegraphy

The telegraph transformed long-distance communication. In its day, it can loosely be compared to the revolutionary nature of the Internet and e-mail. Indeed, it was an early form of digital communication developed in the 1830s and 1840s by Samuel Morse and, notably, by others.

The invention of the telegraph is generally attributed to two sets of researchers: Sir William Cooke (1806-1879) and Sir Charles Wheatstone (1802-1875) in England, and Samuel Morse (1791-1872), Leonard Gale (1800-1883), and Alfred Vail (1807-1859) in the United States.

In the United States, the name Morse is most widely recognized because of the dot and dash code that bears his name, although he was but a codeveloper lacking the needed technical skills to complete the task.

It was Morse’s collaboration with Alfred

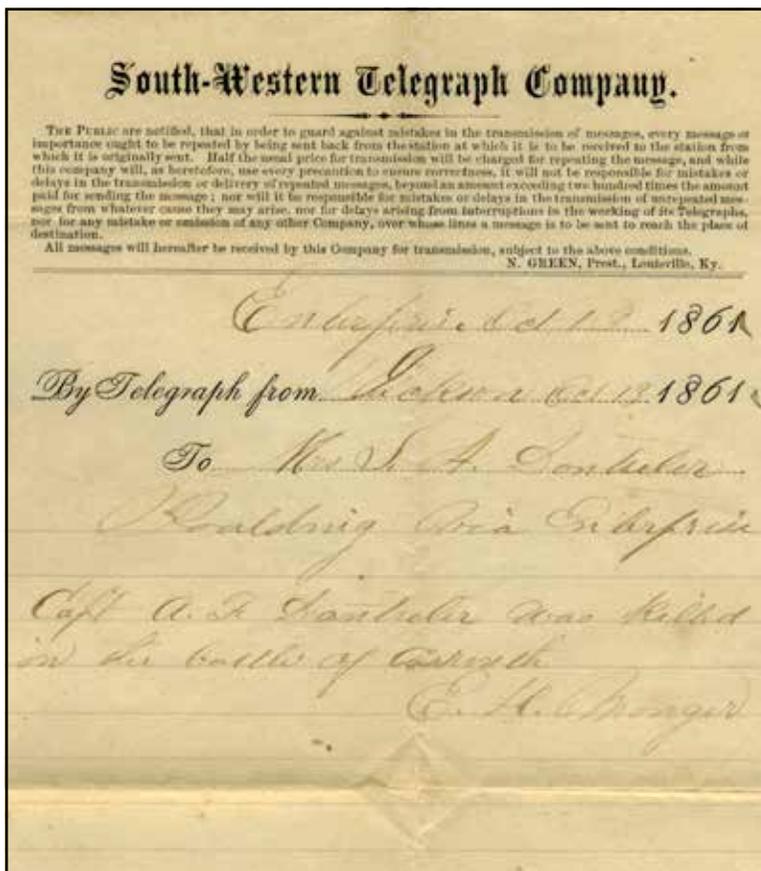


Figure 1: An 1862 telegram informing Susan Dantzler about the death of her husband, who was killed in action at the Battle of Corinth.

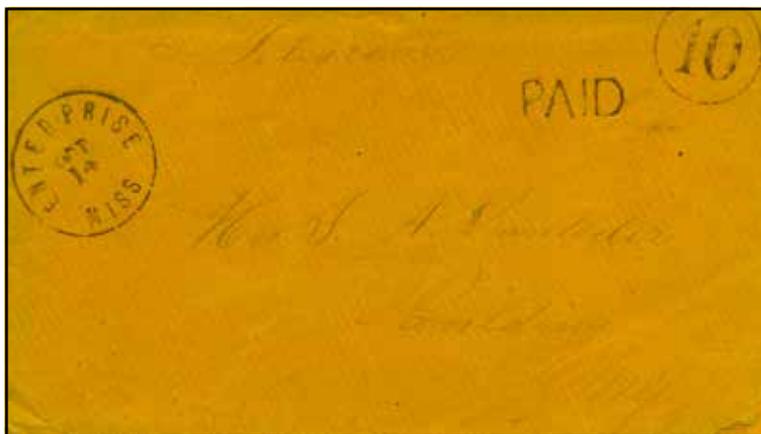


Figure 2: The Enterprise, Mississippi, “PAID 10” stampless cover that transmitted the devastating news of Dantzler’s death to his family via the South-Western Telegraph Company.



Figure 3: Samuel Finley Breese Morse (1791-1872), co-inventor of the code that bears his name. (Library of Congress)

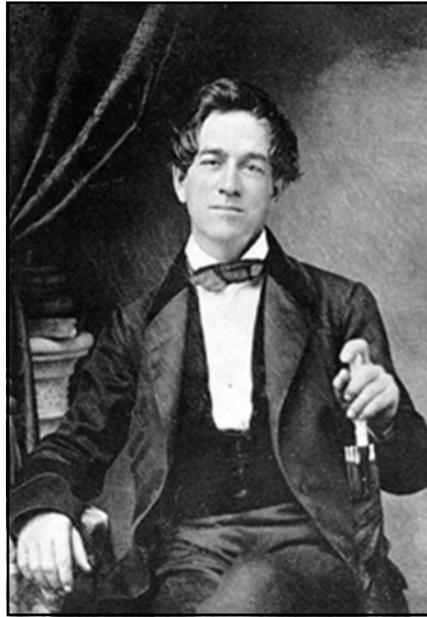


Figure 4: Alfred Lewis Vail (1807-1859) who collaborated with Samuel Morse to create the essential code used in telegraphy.



Figure 5: Absalom Frederick Dantzler (1827-1862).

Lewis Vail that was critical to developing and commercializing the American telegraph system. Among communication historians, there are ardent supporters who argue that either Morse or Vail was the rightful inventor of the code. Full-blown arguments for either side are easily found online or in print.

I will not debate them here, but they are interesting to read. Either way, few dispute that it was an indispensable collaboration.² Photographic portraits of Morse and Vail are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

As explained by Joseph Connor on *HistoryNet.com*, Morse and Vail entered into a written partnership agreement September 23, 1837. Morse filed for telegraph patents in his name.

In exchange for making good on a promise to “put into successful operation” a telegraph system, Vail received a percentage of the venture. Expenses for the project were to be “defrayed by the said Vail,” who agreed to “devote his time and personal services faithfully to this object without charge.”

Vail’s father, a judge in Morristown, New Jersey, put up \$2,000 for his son’s venture (about \$50,000 today). Alfred’s son, Stephen Vail, spent decades trying to secure broader recognition for his father’s contribution. But the better-known inventor, Morse, prevailed in history despite Stephen Vail’s best efforts.

Approximately 6,500 items from the Samuel Finley Breese Morse Papers are housed in the manuscript division at the Library of Congress. They have been digitized and include correspondence, diaries, printed matter, drawings, and more. These trace the sought-after invention and Morse’s participation in the

development of telegraph systems in the United States, as well as other personal endeavors.

Telegraphy in the American Civil War

The telegraph became an important part of Civil War history. For the first time, senior military officials could coordinate strategies across long distances in real time, mostly in code. This modern invention became a critical tool.

Unlike the United States, which used the services of private companies as well as the independently operated military telegraph, the Confederate telegraph service was under the control and direction of the Confederate Post Office Department (CSAPOD).

According to research done by George Jay Kramer for his award-winning exhibit, “Telegraphy in the Confederate States of America,” there are only about 25 postally-used Confederate telegraph covers in private hands, of which his exhibit represented the largest assemblage formed to date.

Telegraph rates revealed in Kramer’s exhibit vary from five to ten-cents per word at the beginning, increasing to fifteen to twenty-five-25-cents toward the end of the war, reflecting the hefty wartime inflation.

On May 21, 1861, the Confederate Congress passed an act that voided the renewal of the Morse patent, thereby depriving the South-Western Telegraph Company of patent protection within the Confederacy.

Absalom Frederick Dantzler

Capt. Absalom Frederick Dantzler (1827-1862, Figure 5), commanded the Jasper Guards (also called

the Jasper Avengers) from Jasper County, Mississippi, Company D, 37th Regiment Mississippi Volunteers, which subsequently became Company K, 37th Regiment Mississippi Infantry.

In military records (Figure 6), he is described as 34 years of age with gray eyes, dark hair, a fair complexion and standing 5'9" tall. He enlisted March 31, 1862.³

Dantzler was killed during the Battle of Corinth, October 3, 1862 (Figure 7). A Currier and Ives handcolored lithographic print of the second day of battle is shown in Figure 8.

Elijah C. Monger (also seen as Mounger or Maunger), was a second lieutenant in the same company who was killed in the same battle and buried in the same well-marked grave under a poplar tree. Both soldiers were exhumed a few months later and moved to the Millsaps-McCormick-Dantzler plot in Jasper County, Mississippi.

Monger was the adopted brother of Susan Dantzler. It is likely that E.H. Monger, who sent the telegram announcing Capt. Dantzler's death, was also related, although I could not find any record of him. This is not surprising due to the plethora of name variations that make soldier identification a challenge.

As is common with this sort of research, I found conflicting information and misinformation at every turn. I found Dantzler's first name of Absalom spelled five different ways. At least the last name always seemed to be consistent.

I found him listed as born in 1824. I found him listed as born in 1827. I found him listed as born in 1828. And I found him listed as born in 1838.

The September 26, 1860, federal census record lists Dantzler as a 33-year-old planter (farmer) of significant wealth. His wife is identified as a 27-year-old housewife with four children ranging in age from a young infant to six years old. They were married in 1851. Clearly, Dantzler was not born in 1838, despite what is inscribed on his gravestone in the family cemetery plot, shown in Figure 9 on the *Find a Grave* website.⁴

In a search of multiple sources, I usually found four

(Confederate.)		
D	37	Miss.
<i>Absalom F. Dantzler</i>		
<i>Capt., Jasper Guards.*</i>		
Appears on a		
Descriptive List †		
of Jasper Guards, Capt. A. F. Dantzler's command, from Jasper County, Miss.		
List dated	<i>Camp Whitfield near Columbus Miss April 30, 1862</i>	
Description:		
Age	<i>34</i> ; eyes <i>Gray</i> ; hair <i>Dark</i>	
Complexion	<i>Fair</i> ; 5 ft. 9 inches.	
Where born	<i>Green. Miss</i>	
Occupation	<i>Farmer</i>	
Enlisted:		
When	<i>March 31, 1862</i>	
Where	<i>Jasper Co.</i>	
By whom	<i>Godwin Nixon</i>	
Period	<i>3 years or war</i>	
Remarks:		
*This company subsequently became Company K, 37th Regiment Mississippi Infantry.		
† From copy (made in the M. S. Office, War Department, in March, 1905,) of an original record borrowed from the Director of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.—M. S. 938010.		
Book mark:		
<i>J. N. Wilkinson</i>		
(659) Copyist.		

Figure 6: A military record for Capt. Abslom (sic) F. Dantzler that reveals his physical description.

(Confederate.)		
D	37	Miss.
<i>Absalom F. Dantzler</i>		
<i>Capt., Co. K, 37 Reg't Mississippi Vols.</i>		
Appears on		
Company Muster Roll		
of the organization named above,		
for	<i>Sept & Oct, 1862</i>	
Enlisted:		
When	<i>March 31, 1862</i>	
Where	<i>Jasper County</i>	
By whom	<i>Capt. Nixon</i>	
Period	<i>3 years</i>	
Last paid:		
By whom	<i>Capt. Shepherd</i>	
To what time	<i>July 31, 1862</i>	
Present or absent		
Remarks	<i>Killed in battle at Corinth October 3, 1862</i>	
Book mark:		
<i>J. N. Wilkinson</i>		
(642) Copyist.		

Figure 7: A military record for Capt. Dantzler showing that he was killed in action at Corinth on October 3, 1862.

children attributed to him. In at least one place, they are noted as having seven children.⁵ It seems highly improbable they had seven children unless she had triplets after the census was taken and early in the war or the other three children lived in another household apart from their parents (read, sarcasm).

To further muddy the waters, a memorial stone on a Dantzler family plot in Heidelberg Cemetery (Figure 10) incorrectly states the date of his death as 1863, which is just plain wrong.

This date is without dispute. The Second Battle of Corinth is well documented as October 3-4, 1862, not 1863. The first battle is referred to as the Siege of Corinth earlier the same year, to differentiate it from the second. With two headstones, apparently in different cemeteries, and conflicting information, I am unsure precisely where Dantzler is buried.



Figure 8: The Battle of Corinth as portrayed on a Currier & Ives handcolored lithographed print.

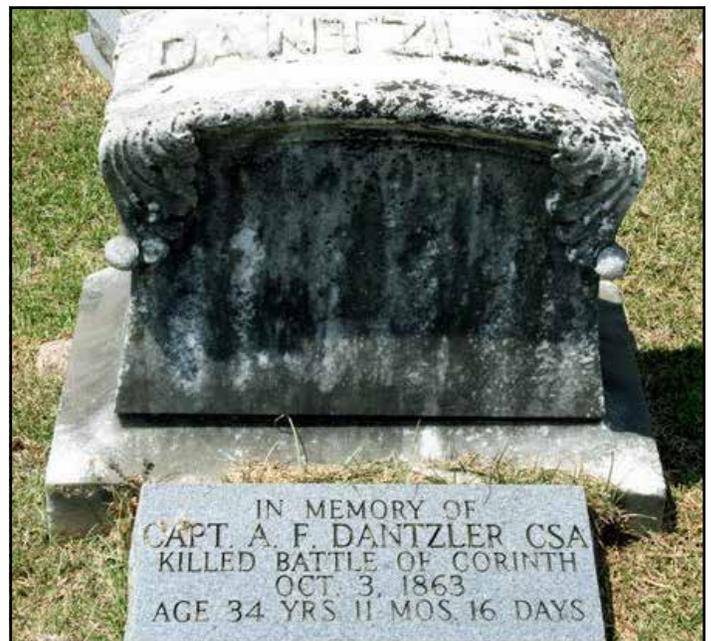
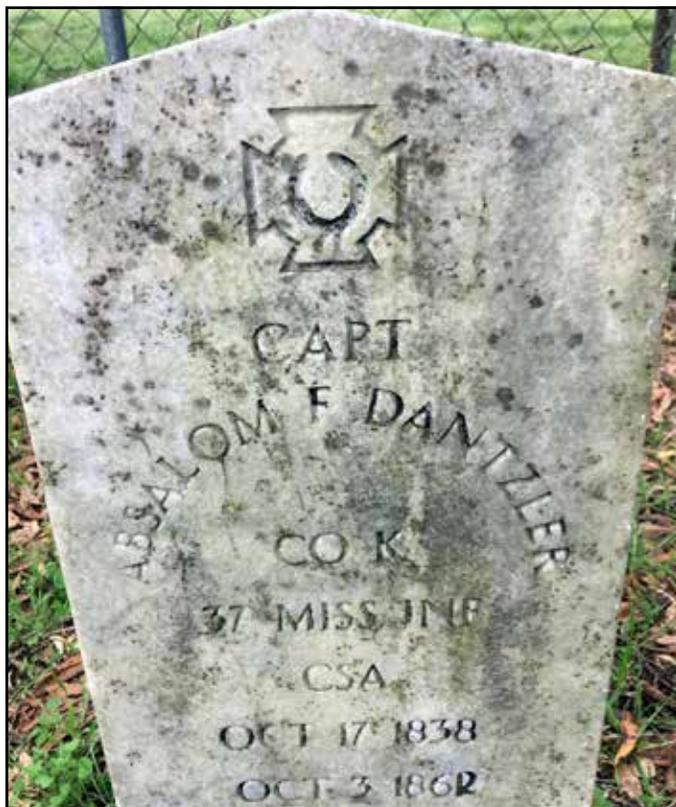


Figure 9 (Left): A gravestone of Capt. Dantzler that incorrectly shows him as born in 1838 (he was born in 1828).

Figure 10 (Above): An incorrectly-dated gravestone for Capt. Dantzler that shows him dying in 1863 instead of 1862.



Figure 11: Capt. Dantzler's sword and belt are displayed in the museum of the Grand Gulf Military Monument Park, Port Gibson, Miss.

Letters between Absalom and Susan Dantzler are housed in the manuscript department of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University. There are letters written while he was in the Mississippi legislature, 1859-1862, and while in the Confederate Army. Letters discuss the workings of the legislature during secession and the beginning of the war, as well as earlier papers that include while he was in California, 1849-1850, taking part in the frenzy that was the Gold Rush. He was an enslaver and a staunch supporter of secession.

Capt. Dantzler's sword and belt are on display in the museum of the Grand Gulf Military Monument Park, Port Gibson, Mississippi, (Figure 11) on the Shiloh National Military Park Facebook page. His name is engraved into the upper portion of the scabbard.

Dantzler's frock coat is on display at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi. The Shiloh Facebook page⁶ also offers the Figure 12 portraits of Susan Anna Millsaps Dantzler and her husband, Absalom Frederick Dantzler.

Dantzler's last moments are recorded in at least two places online. He slowly bled to death on the battlefield from an arterial shot to the chest.⁷

Third lieutenant William McCurdy, who stayed with him until he died (about an hour), wrote Susan Dantzler a week later. According to his account, Absalom, "talked as long as he had breath...perfectly satisfied to die."

Capt. Dantzler asked Lt. McCurdy to tell his beloved wife that he would meet her in heaven.⁸ A few concise words on a telegram forever changed Susan Dantzler's life.



Figure 12: Susan Anna Millsaps Dantzler and husband Absalom Frederick Dantzler, as shown on the Shiloh National Military Park Facebook page.

Endnotes

1 Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown, Jr., Jerry S. Palazolo, editors, *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, (Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2012)

- 2 Joseph Connor, "Morse's Partner Argued He Invented Famous Code – to No A-Vail," Historynet, <https://www.historynet.com/morses-partner-argued-he-invented-famous-code-to-no-a-vail.htm> Accessed November 16, 2021.
- 3 National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington, D.C.; Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Mississippi; Series Number: M269; Roll: 373.
- 4 Cpt. Absalom Frederick Dantzler, Find a Grave memorial 185966666. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/185966666/absalom-frederick-dantzler/> Accessed November 17, 2021.
- 5 Meet Him in Heaven, Shiloh National Military Park/Facebook. Accessed November 17, 2021.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Jim Woodrick, "'Perfectly satisfied to die:' Capt. Absalom Dantzler and the Battle of Corinth." "And speaking of which..." blogspot, http://andspeakingofwhich.blogspot.com/2013/10/perfectly-satisfied-to-die-capt-absalom_3.html Accessed November 17, 2021.
- 8 Shiloh National Military Park/Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/ShilohNMP/photos/a.112884892134839/4497048087051809> Accessed November 17, 2021.

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