

VEXING COVER – A CONUNDRUM SOLVED

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A Vexing Cover

More than a decade ago, I bought a cover at auction described as:
10c Milky Blue, Die A (11a). Tied by "Hillsboro N.C. Sep. 15" circular date-stamp on cover addressed to Hillsboro N.C., stamp affixed over pair 5c Blue Lithograph which has been mostly peeled off, manuscript "Exd & forwarded By Order Col. J. Pickett" (U.S. censor?), note on back "Sept. 12th. I have just received your letter of the 5th. & was glad to hear from you again. L.", Very Fine and vexing cover, it may have been examined by Col. Pickett and sent to Hillsborough with the 5¢ pair, then forwarded by peeling off the old stamps and attaching a new stamp to pay forwarding postage, but there is no forwarding address.

The subject cover is shown in Figure 1. It is a small, commercially-made envelope measuring 2½ by 4¼ inches. The back flap was unsealed to allow for censor examination.



Figure 1. A "vexing cover" that took some research to figure out.

There is nothing I enjoy more than the challenge of a research gauntlet thrown down. The auction writeup describing the cover certainly met that challenge. Although I initially put a lot of work into it, it languished in a long list of unwritten and/or difficult topics. There were a few things I disagreed with in the description.



Figure 1a. A closeup of the cover area with the pair of removed green lithographs and the postmark ending in BORO, identified as TARBORO.

Several things make this use unusual. It bears a pair of early lithographed stamps that were mostly removed from the cover for some unknown reason. I initially thought this might be a twice-used cover, but the unsealed flap indicates a single use. The auction catalog described the stamps as blue (CSA 4); when examined in natural light, they are, instead, unquestionably green (CSA 1).^{1,2}

Over the mostly removed pair of stamps is affixed a Confederate 1863-issue 10¢ milky blue, Jefferson Davis (CSA 11a), Type I, with a partially discernable postmark that clearly ends in BORO. This was identified in the auction catalog as Hillsboro, N.C., to where the cover was addressed. Figure 1a shows a closeup of the stamp area with the removed green lithographs and September 15 (1863) postmark.

The idea of a single circular datestamp (CDS) for Hillsboro immediately rang false to me. The commonly seen CDS during the Civil War is a small blue double-circle postmark measuring 26mm.

There was a large black 34mm single-rim postmark seen as Hillsborough (not Hillsboro) from 1856 to 1859. It was also known before the war in red and blue. Two similar but different types of Confederate Hillsboro, N.C., double-circle postmarks were used from May 27, 1861, (on the unique 3¢ 1861 Hillsboro postmaster provisional) to Feb. 11, 1865. Both types were struck in blue and measure 26mm. These are illustrated in the invaluable online *North Carolina Postmark Catalog*, maintained by the North Carolina Postal History Society.³

There are only a few postmark possibilities in Confederate North Carolina ending in BORO. The known Tarboro postmark of the period in my reference overlays from the 1929 Dietz aligns perfectly with the 31.5mm postmark on the cover.⁴ Military records of the envelope's censor corroborate that identification.

In Edgecombe County, the town of Tarboro is seen spelled as Tarboro, Tawboro and Tarborough. According to the *North Carolina Postmark Catalog*, there were two circular datestamps used during the Confederate period, designated Types 3 and 4. The Type 3 is TARBORO, measuring 31.5mm, which was used from May 4, 1862, to Nov. 23, 1864. Type 4 is TAWBORO, measuring 34.5mm and was used Aug. 15, 1861, to Jan. 2, 1863. The subject cover is postmarked with the Type 3 postmark dated Sept. 15 (1863).⁵

Anna (Annie) Marsh Fowle Welborn

The addressee on the subject cover is Miss Annie M. Fowle in Hillsboro, N.C. After several dead-end leads, I believe with certainty that this is Anna Marsh *Fowle* Welborn (1848-1920).

The mother of Anna Marsh *Fowle* Welborn (Annie, the addressee) was Anna Power *Marsh* Fowle (1808-48) who was the second wife of Samuel Richardson Fowle Sr. (1797-1877), father to both Daniel Gould Fowle (1831-91) and Anna Marsh *Fowle* Welborn (Annie), who were thus half-siblings. Daniel's mother was Martha Barney *Marsh* Fowle (1803-43), older sister to Samuel's second wife, Anna Power *Marsh* Fowle, Annie's mother. It is certainly a confusing family dynamic.

During the war, Daniel G. Fowle enlisted as a Lt. Col. in the Confederate Army, commissioned into Field & Staff, North Carolina 31st Infantry. He was governor of North Carolina from 1888-91.

The Censor Marking

The censor marking reads: "Exd & forwarded By Order Col. J. Pickett." In my opinion, this has nothing to do with redirecting the cover to a different address. Also, there is no forwarding address on the cover. It was simply the terminology used by the censor who was allowing the mail to be passed through the lines (forwarded) after proper examination and posting in Tarboro.

There may have been an outer envelope with U.S. postage affixed, which was discarded at the exchange point in compliance with the military regulations of the day. The letter was likely from a friend or family member separated by the occupation force.

Although there is a remote possibility this could be a rare prisoner-of-war use, military regulations required that prisoners write their name and rank on their mail. While covers are occasionally seen that skipped that step, they are not common. There is no indication of name or rank on the cover. Thus, this mail was almost certainly a civilian flag-of-truce use.

Josiah Pickett

The censor signature is that of Col. Josiah Pickett (1822-1908) born in Beverly, Mass., the sixth descendant of Nicholas Pickett, who landed in Marblehead in 1647. Per military records,⁶ Pickett was a lieutenant in the Worcester City (Massachusetts) Guards in April 1861, a company reportedly in semi-demoralized condition. At enlistment, Pickett's occupation was listed as painter. To be clear, this is *not* the infamous Confederate Maj. Gen. George Pickett of Gettysburg "Pickett's Charge" fame, nor could I find any familial connection.

On Oct. 31, 1861, at age 38, Josiah Pickett organized Company A, 25th Massachusetts Infantry at Camp Lincoln, Worcester, and served as its captain. He accompanied U.S. Gen. Ambrose Burnside's expedition to Roanoke Island, an amphibious operation in early February 1862.

Pickett fought at the capture of New Bern (sometimes seen as Newbern or New Berne) on March 14, 1862. On March 20, he was promoted to major of the 25th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers. He was subsequently promoted to colonel on Oct. 29, 1862. A portrait of a uniformed Pickett is shown in Figure 2.

The regimental history of the 25th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry reports it was on guard and provost duty in New Bern from March 14-May 9, 1862. In April 1862, when the 9th Corps was organized, the 25th became a part of Amory's First Brigade, Foster's First Division. Leaving New Bern May 9, the 25th went to Red House, 13 miles west and did picket duty until June 1, when it returned to New Bern and camped near Fort Totten. On July 24, it went on an expedition to Trenton, on Sept. 15 on another expedition to Plymouth, and Oct. 30 on still another to Tarboro. The regiment remained in or near New Bern until March 18, 1863, when it was sent to Plymouth, N.C., returning to New Bern May 3.⁷

In the spring of 1863, Pickett was in command of the garrison at Plymouth. Military records show him on special duty, with the board of investigation of the 25th Regiment Massachusetts Infantry in July and August 1863.

On July 18, 1863, Union General Edward E. Potter led infantry and cavalry troops from New Bern to destroy the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad bridge at Rocky Mount. The infantry retreated to New Bern. Potter raided Greenville, then sent part of his cavalry to Rocky Mount and occupied Tarboro. The raiders damaged or destroyed bridges, trains, munitions and mills before returning to New Bern on July 23; the Confederates restored rail service by Aug. 1. On July 20, Gen. Potter occupied Tarboro with a battalion of New York cavalymen. Tarboro played an essential role in providing food, medicine and military supplies to Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.

Special Order No. 60 detailed Col. Pickett as Officer of the Day for the Camps and Posts between the Neuse and Trent Rivers Aug. 17, 1863. This put him in the position of examining flag-of-truce mail anywhere along that path.



Figure 2. Josiah Pickett of the 25th Massachusetts Volunteers in uniform.

The record shown in Figure 3 reveals Col. Pickett was “*On detached service Comdg (commanding) Dist. (District) of the Pamlico N.C.*” in September and October 1863, during

the time the subject cover was posted, reinforcing the identity of the postmark as Tarboro.

Important to this postal history analysis, military records indicate Pickett regularly traveled via steamers between Tarboro, on the Tar River, and New Berne, about 75-80 miles south on the Neuse River and connected by Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds. Pickett reports that he delivered 66 prisoners of war to New Bern just about the time this letter was posted on Sept. 15, 1863. This could point to the cover being a unique prisoner-of-war use from New Berne, where there were prisoners known to be housed in two Union prisons. However, no covers have thus far been recorded.

Figure 4 shows a drawing by Herbert E. Valentine (1841-1917). It is among his 184 sketches, diary, and correspondence housed in the Southern Historical Collection at the Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The pencil sketch is titled “*Barracks of the 24th Mass., now occupied by the 23rd Mass. Vols., New Berne, N.C., July 10th - 1863.*” Valentine was a private in Company F of the 23rd Massachusetts Volunteers where he served as a clerk and occasionally drew military maps.

Josiah Pickett was wounded in action at Cold Harbor on June 3, 1864. A 1988 Kurz and Allison print of the Battle of Cold Harbor is shown in Figure 5, courtesy of the Library of Congress. One of Pickett’s many hospital records is shown in Figure 6.

There is a colorful series of medical disability certificates in Pickett’s military records as a result of his wounds, to wit, a gunshot wound of the left hip with a conical ball (Minié ball) entering his left hip and lodging and remaining near the pelvis. The numerous medical statements span several months. They are grim reading; it is clear

P | 25 | Mass.
 Josiah Pickett
 Rank *Col.*, 25 Reg't Mass. Infantry.
 Appears on
Field and Staff Muster Roll
 for *Sep & Oct*, 1863.
 Present or absent *Absent*
 Stoppage, \$ 100 for _____
 Due Gov't, \$ 100 for _____
 Valuation of horse, \$ 100
 Valuation of horse equipments, \$ 100
 Remarks *On detached service Comdg Dist of the Pamlico N.C.*
 Book mark : _____
 (857) *C. Curtis* Copyist.

Figure 3. Military record showing Col. Josiah Pickett on detached service commanding the District of Pamlico, N.C. in September and October 1863 during the time the subject cover was posted.

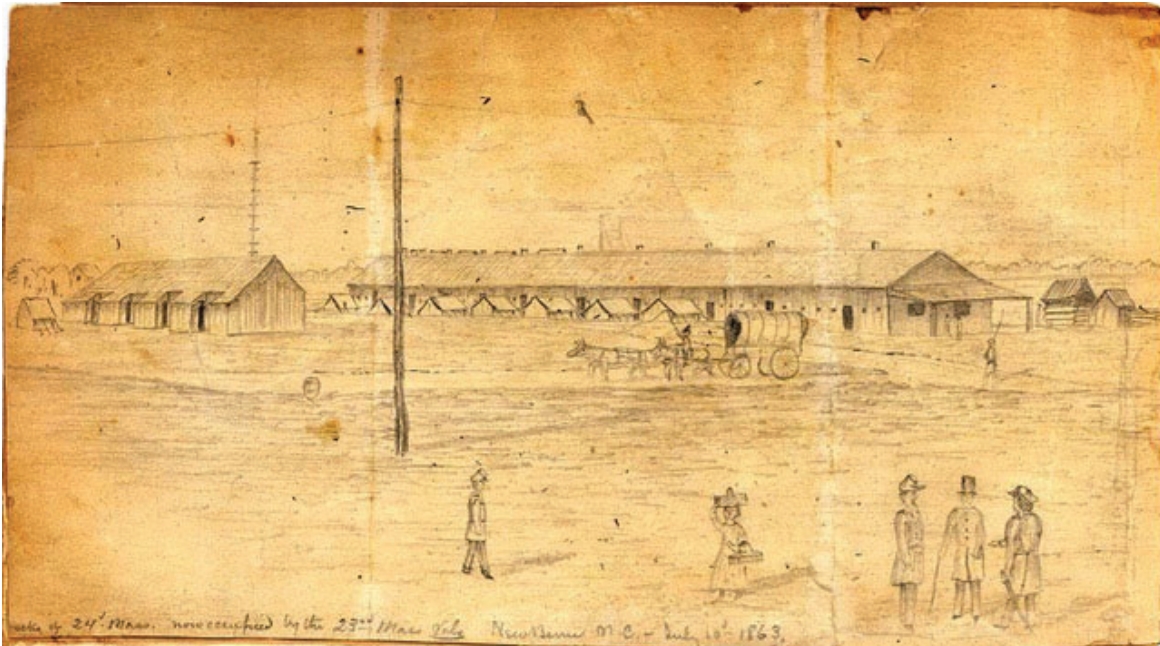


Figure 4. A pencil sketch by Herbert E. Valentine titled "Barracks of the 24th Mass., now occupied by the 23rd Mass. Vols., New Berne, N.C., July 10th - 1863."



Figure 5. The Battle of Cold Harbor, a Kurz and Allison print circa 1888 (Library of Congress).

Figure 6. Hospital record of Col. Pickett, who was severely wounded at the Battle of "Coal" (Cold) Harbor June 3, 1864.

Hospital Number 25411 *Dr. Spqr*

Name J. Pickett

Age 42, Satvithy, Mass.

Married or Single Married

Residence Marston, Mass.

Post Office address of wife or nearest relative Marston, Mass.

Rank Col. Co. Regiment 25th Mass

When admitted June 8th 1864

From what source Field

Diagnosis: (in surgical cases state explicitly seat and character of wound or injury.)

U.S.A. of Left Hip.

Ball entering about two inches posterior to Trochanter major & lodging in the seat of H. Armory Square Washington, D. C.

On what occasion wounded Coal Harbor

Date June 3, 1864

Nature of missile or weapon Lead Ball

Figure 7. Surgeon's certificate showing an application for a leave of absence due to Col. Pickett's severe wound and declaring him unfit for duty; U.S. Internal Revenue express stamp affixed.

Col. Joseph Pickett of the 25th Regiment Mass Regts having applied for a certificate on which to ground an application for leave of absence, I do hereby certify that I have carefully examined this officer and find that he was wounded in the left hip by a minnie ball - the ball still remaining in the pelvis - said wound occurred in the battle of Coal Harbor June 3rd 1864

And that in consequence thereof, he is, in my opinion, unfit for duty. I further declare my belief that he will not be able to resume his duties in a less period than Twenty Five days, from July 13th 1864 and is unable to travel without incurring the risk of permanent disability.

Dated at Marston, this 13th day of July 1864

Approved: A. M. Laroy Joseph M. Bates M.D.
 Surgeon U.S.A. 25th Regt Mass Regts

M. M. Laroy
 A. M. Laroy

* Here the nature of the disease, wound, or disability, is to be fully stated, and the period during which the officer has suffered under its effects.

† Here state, candidly and explicitly, the opinion as to the period which will probably elapse before the officer will be able to resume his duties. Where there is no reason to expect a recovery, or when the prospect of a recovery is distant and uncertain, it must be so stated.

[This certificate to be made out in triplicate.]

he was in significant pain. One such document is shown in Figure 7. They are all affixed with U.S. Internal Revenue Express stamps.

Pickett requested discharge on Oct. 4, 1864, which was approved Jan. 10, 1865. He was brevetted brigadier general on Oct. 14, 1868 (backdated to June 3, 1864), by *General Order No. 84* “for gallantry during the war, especially at the battle of Cold Harbor, Va., where severely wounded.”

A Worcester newspaper account at his death states that at Cold Harbor:

He was deserted by the other regiments of the brigade, and without support, he charged at the head of the Twenty-fifth Infantry. Gen. Pickett was severely wounded at this battle, and his regiment was almost annihilated, sustaining a loss of 73 percent, of killed and wounded. Gen. Bowles, who had charge of the Confederate troops at this battle, later said that not since the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava had a more heroic act been performed (author emphasis). *For bravery and meritorious service, especially on this occasion, Congress gave Gen. Pickett the brevet of Brigadier General in 1864. He obtained a position in the Boston Custom House at the close of the war and later was Postmaster of Worcester, holding that position twenty years.* (Was postmaster 1866-87.)

Josiah Pickett’s gravestone is shown in Figure 8. He is buried in the Worcester Rural Cemetery.



Figure 8. Gravestone of Gen. Josiah Pickett in Worcester, Mass.

From the Springfield Republican, page 5, Jan. 15, 1908:

Gen. Josiah Pickett Dead.

Was Colonel of 25th Massachusetts and Under Military Arrest for Most of His Life.

Gen. Josiah Pickett, one of the most prominent officers commanding a regiment during the civil war, colonel of the 25th Massachusetts regiment, and one of Worcester's most prominent citizens, died at 9 o'clock yesterday morning at his home in Worcester of a general breaking down of his constitution.

During the war Gen. Pickett was placed under military arrest and this was never removed. The adjutant whose duty it would have been to record the arrest was killed in the conflict, and because of the heroism displayed by Worcester's soldier the charges against him were entirely forgotten. He was always rather proud of this distinction and refused to allow any movement to formally release him from the arrest ordered by Gen. Stannard but never carried into effect.

The second paragraph of Pickett's obituary in the Springfield Republican is a bombshell. The story of Josiah Pickett leading one of the deadliest charges of the Civil War while under arrest for insubordination is told online at masslive.com in "The Hero Worcester Forgot."⁸

The march to Cold Harbor began on June 1, 1864, and it was on June 2 the 25th Massachusetts marched in. June 3 was the day planned for a major assault. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's plan was to overrun Gen. R.E. Lee's defenses at Cold Harbor and push on to Richmond.

The orders received by Pickett made no sense to him. He believed it would be a suicide mission. Pickett sent word to Gen. George J. Stannard, the brigade commander, asking for an explanation or new orders. Gen. Stannard angrily replied for him to do as he was told. But Col. Pickett wouldn't let it go. He told an orderly to reply that he could not follow orders he could not understand. Thus Stannard ordered Pickett placed under arrest for insubordination and Pickett was relieved of his command.

The fighting began on the morning of June 3 around 4:30 a.m. in a thick fog. According to an account in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Pickett remarked that:

"He did not propose that a little matter like a difference of opinion between him and the brigade commander should prevent him from taking part in the battle."

The only regiment to obey the orders to advance that day was the 25th Massachusetts. Pickett did not die, but he was gravely wounded. And the vast majority of his men did perish after Josiah "Pickett's Charge."

The Union lost about 6,000 to 7,000 men, either killed, wounded or missing, in 30 minutes that day while the Confederates sustained about 1,500 casualties.

Gen. Grant would later write: *"I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made."* It was a senseless loss.

While a lot of men made the charge on June 3, Pickett's bravery stood out. The letter sent to Gen. Grant recommending Pickett be promoted to general was signed by none other than Gen. Stannard, the commander who had ordered him placed under arrest. A copy of the letter is on file at the Worcester Historical Museum.

According to *battlefields.org*, the two-week advance of Gen. U.S. Grant to Richmond (May 31-June 12, 1864 – the Overland Campaign) was a disaster that cost more than 17,000 lives.

There were 108,000 Union troops engaged and 62,000 Confederates. Estimates were 12,727 Union casualties and 4,595 Confederate. These figures vary depending on the source cited.

Final Words

As is often the case, there are no clues as to the sender of the subject cover, although philatelic instinct suggests it is a classic civilian flag-of-truce use.

This is a perfect example of how history and genealogy assist us in deciphering postal history puzzles. It was an enjoyable research project, albeit with its share of frustrations. A vexing cover indeed, which still leaves traces of mystery.

Acknowledgement: Thank you to both Randy Smith and Scott Trepel for their pre-publication review of this article and invaluable observations and suggestions.

Endnotes

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