

Gen. Robert E. Lee Covers

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One of the crown jewels of Confederate postal history is a field-endorsed (autographed) General Robert E. Lee envelope sent through the Confederate postal system. Such covers are very rare. There are only fifteen known in the hands of private collectors. Why did I decide to spend approximately six months of research to write an article about these wonderful covers? The answer is that I recently had the incredible good fortune to locate and purchase two of these envelopes, which surfaced from two private autograph collections. Both covers were previously unknown to the philatelic world. More on these covers later in this article.

Soon after being confirmed as a General in the Confederate States Army, General Lee endorsed (signed) almost all his envelopes in the top right hand corner "R. E. Lee, Gen'l." One theory is that as a career officer in the United States Army, he was in the habit of doing so because such an endorsement, known as "free franks," permitted him to send mail without paying postage. Even though the postage free privilege was not available to General Lee in the Confederate Army, it is argued that he was a creature of habit. Another theory is that General Lee came to dislike and distrust the sometimes undependable Confederate postal system. As a result, he wanted his correspondence hand-delivered by couriers on his staff.¹ By placing his endorsement on the envelope, General Lee wanted to be sure that the couriers and recipients knew that the correspondence was his and thus accorded the special handling and attention it deserved. My personal belief is that it was probably a combination of both these reasons that led him to endorse his envelopes in his unique manner. In any event, lovers of

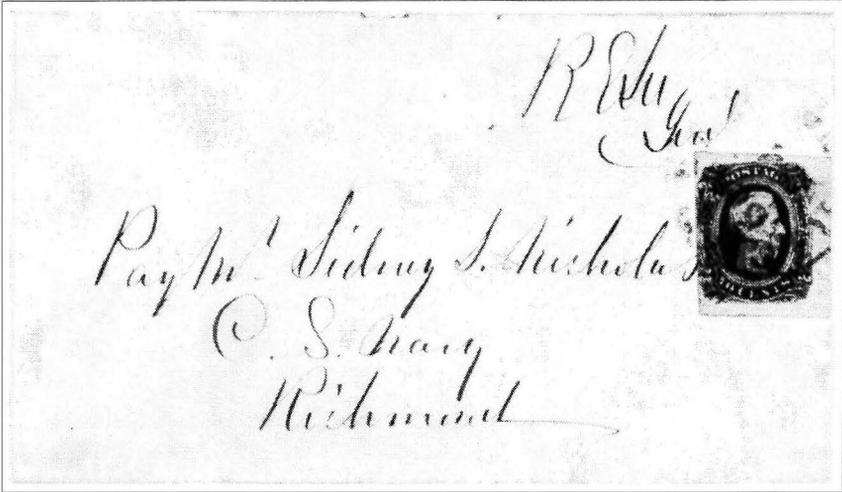


Figure 1. General Lee field-endorsed cover to Assistant Paymaster Sidney S. Nicholas, C. S. Navy, with a Richmond, Virginia, October 24 [1864] postmark.

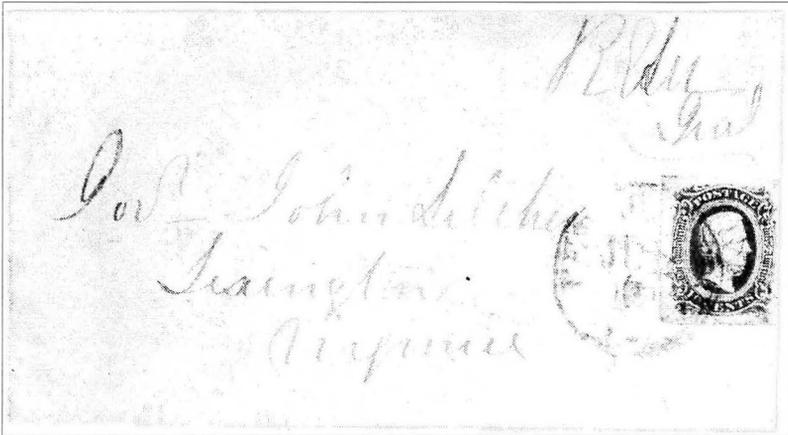


Figure 2. General Lee field-endorsed cover to Ex-Governor John Letcher with a blue Petersburg, Virginia, June 6 [1864] postmark.

Confederate postal history are indeed blessed with General Lee's *modus operandi*.

Two previously unknown General Lee covers have come to light and are now introduced to the philatelic world for the first time. The first (Figure 1) was addressed and signed by General Lee, and sent to Assistant Paymaster Sidney S. Nicholas, C. S. Navy, who served at the Richmond Naval Station from 1862 through 1864. It has a deep blue 10¢ engraved Archer & Daly type b (Scott #12) postmarked Richmond, Virginia, October 24 [1864] (Powell type 5g postmark).

This splendid cover is the only known postally sent, General Lee field envelope with a Confederate States Navy address. Because the envelope was addressed to Richmond and posted at Richmond, it is also an example of an overpaid drop letter – the correct drop letter rate was two cents. At the time he wrote to Assistant Paymaster Nicholas, General Lee was headquartered at Chaffin's Bluff on the James River in Virginia. The fate of the letter and subject of the correspondence are unknown.

The second cover (Figure 2) was addressed and signed by General Lee, and sent to Virginia ex-Governor John Letcher in Lexington, Virginia. It has a greenish blue 10¢ type a engraved (Scott #11) with a blue Petersburg, Virginia, June 6 (1864) postmark. At the time he wrote to Ex-Governor Letcher, General Lee was located at Gaines' Mill, Virginia. It was just weeks before the siege of Petersburg, the campaign that marked the end of General Lee's capacity to maintain military maneuver. Because of this significant military limitation, General Lee remarked to Lieutenant General Jubal A. Early, "It will be a mere question of time".² Regretfully, like the other cover, the fate of the letter and subject of the correspondence are also unknown.

The very fact that almost all of his correspondence was hand-delivered to the various addressees by military courier explains

why so few of his envelopes were sent through the Confederate postal system. If the addressee was not available to receive the correspondence by courier or was at a distant location where hand delivery was not practical, then the envelope was affixed with Confederate postage and mailed at a post office near General Lee's location. As one might expect, two thirds of the 15 known covers were mailed from Richmond, Virginia (six) and Petersburg, Virginia (four).

Table 1 is a census of the known General Lee field-endorsed (autographed) covers sent through the Confederate postal system which are owned by private collectors. The last census was done in 1960 by the late General Van Dyk MacBride who listed only six such covers.¹

In addition to the above census, I am aware of four other postally used General Lee field-endorsed envelopes that are in the collections of the Library of Congress and the Virginia Historical Society. Three are addressed to Mrs. R. E. Lee, General Lee's wife, and one to Miss Mildred C. Lee, General Lee's daughter. Unfortunately, the Confederate postage on each of these envelopes has been either cut out or ripped off. These covers are purposely not included in the census because private collectors do not own them. There are also a few examples of Lee field-endorsed covers that have Confederate postage affixed to the envelope but lack any evidence whatsoever of being sent through the Confederate postal system.

A great deal of research was done to make this article as comprehensive and accurate as possible. It would be an oversight if I did not acknowledge the generous assistance of the following people: Mr. Vaughan Stanley and Ms. Lisa McCown of Washington and Lee University, Dr. John and Ruth Anne Coski of The Museum of the Confederacy, Mr. Graham T. Dozier of the Virginia Historical Society, and the Staff of the American Philatelic Research Library.

**Table 1. An inventory of postally used
R. E. Lee covers in philatelic hands.**

| | Addressee (As Written by Lee) | Stamp | Cancellation | Remarks |
|---|---|--------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Honble Wm Porcher Miles Charleston S.C. | Oval "Paid 5" HSP | Savannah, GA Nov ? (1861) | Siegel 1994 Sale #760A. Forwarded to Richmond, VA. |
| 2 | Mrs. Wm H. Fitzhugh Lee Wm Wickham Esqr, near Hanover Ct House Virginia | #6 Vert. Pair | Danville, VA Aug 23, 1862 | Nutmeg 2000 Sale #27. |
| 3 | Dr. Orlando Fairfax Richmond Virginia | #6 Horz. Pair | Richmond, VA Dec 31, 1862 | Frajola Oct 1992 Sale and Siegel 1997 Sale #795. Article May- June 1992 Confed. Phil. Overpaid drop letter. |
| 4 | Col. S. Bassett French A.D.C. Gov. of Virginia Richmond Virginia | #6 Vert. Pair | Richmond, VA Apr ? (1863) | General Brian and Maria Green collection. Overpaid drop letter. |
| 5 | Hon. Wm. C. Rives Castle Hill near Cobham Depot Albemarle Co. Virginia | #6 or 7 Horz. Pair | Manuscript Junction, VA May 24, 1863 | Original letter with cover. Article December 1951 American Philatelist. |
| 6 | Mrs. Margaret B. Daingerfield Ingleside Amelia Court House Virginia | #11 | Richmond, VA Jun 14, 1863 | Siegel 2000 Sale #822. Article March 1962 Confed. Phil. |
| 7 | Mrs. Robert Ranson Dellwood, near Petersburg Virginia | #11 | Manuscript Madison Run Station, VA Dec 6 (1863) | Siegel 2000 Sale #823. Article 1948 Stamp Specialist, Chartreuse Book. |

Table 1. Continued

| | Addressee (As Written by Lee) | Stamp | Cancellation | Remarks |
|----|--|--------------|--|---|
| 8 | Miss K. C. Stiles Augusta Georgia | #11 | Manuscript Madison Run (Station), VA Jan 8 (1864) | Article May-June 1995 Confed. Phil. Original letter with cover. |
| 9 | Mr. Wm C. Jackson Augusta Georgia | #11 | Richmond, VA Apr 17 (1864) | Article January 1960 American Philatelist. |
| 10 | Gov. John Letcher Lexington Virginia | #11 | Petersburg, VA June 6 (1864) | Blue CDS. See figure 2. Author's Collection. |
| 11 | Paymaster Sidney S. Nicholas C. S. Navy Richmond | #12 | Richmond, VA Oct 24 (1864) | Only known C. S. Navy related Lee cover. Overpaid drop letter. See figure 1. Author's collection. |
| 12 | Mrs. Fairfax Care of Dr. Orlando Fairfax Richmond Virginia | #12 | Petersburg, VA Nov 8 (?) (1864) | Frajola Oct 1992 Sale. Original letter with cover. Article May-June 1992 Confed. Phil. Red CDS. |
| 13 | His Exc'l Wm. Smith Gov State of Va Richmond | #12 | Richmond, VA Dec 3 (1864) | Siegel 1993 Sale #750. Overpaid drop letter. |
| 14 | Danville Female College Danville Virginia | #12 | Petersburg, VA Dec 23 (1864) | Original letter with cover. Article 1946 Stamp Specialist, India Book. |
| 15 | Miss Roberta S. Parker Dinwiddie C.H. Virginia | #12 | Petersburg, VA Mar 21 (1865) | Robert Kaufmann 1987 Sale #49. Original letter with cover. |

Finally, readers are invited to write the author for more detailed information on any cover in this article. Also, if someone should own a postally used General Lee field-endorsed cover not included in the census, please write the author at 1220 Kings Circle, Mechanicsburg PA 17050.

References:

1. MacBride, Van Dyk. "The Autographed Field Letters of R. E. Lee Genl: A Census". *The American Philatelist*, Vol. 73, No. 4, January 1960.
2. Virginia Civil War Commission. *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*. New York, NY: Bramhall House, 1961.

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CSA Authentication Service

Do you have a Confederate cover needing authentication? Use the CSA Authentication Committee. Contact General Trish Kaufmann, 10194 N. Old State Rd., Lincoln DE 19960.

| Value of Item | CSA Member | Non-CSA |
|---------------|------------|---------|
| Up to \$300 | \$20 | \$30 |
| \$300-999 | \$30 | \$45 |
| \$1,000-4,999 | \$60 | \$90 |
| \$5,000+ | \$100 | \$150 |

All fees are in addition to postage and handling of \$5 per "patient" *plus a surcharge of \$5*. Rush service is double the above fees plus overnight delivery at cost.