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Confederate States of America: Postal History

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Today when much is being written and spoken about the current Postal Service, it is doubtful that any of us have paused to reflect upon the consequences of not having any national mail service. Although the service is frequently maligned, consider the problems facing the infant Confederacy as it attempted to organize itself to provide its citizens the necessary governmental services which had previously been furnished by the United States government.

It is not likely that in all of history can there be found another instance comparable to the situation faced by the seceding Southern States. Within weeks following that fateful decision in Charleston, South Carolina, there was established within the Confederacy a government faced with the problems of financing itself; of ensuring the private, the agricultural, the industrial and the trade relations with foreign governments; and, of conducting all the other functions normal to a republican government. The Confederate Postal Service encountered many of these almost insurmountable problems throughout its brief existence.

President Jefferson Davis probably could not have made a better choice as his candidate for Postmaster General than that of John H. Reagan. Born in Sevierville, Tennessee, on October 8, 1818, Reagan traveled the region of the South during his early adult years in var-
ious business ventures. He participated in the Cherokee Wars, was a lawyer and legislator in the Republic of Texas, and was in the United States Congress at the time of secession. When Davis tendered him the cabinet office, Reagan declined twice. Upon the third request by Davis, and under the urging of several of his respected friends in the Confederate Congress, Reagan agreed to accept the position. His explanation for his reluctance was that the people, while under the Federal Government had been accustomed to regular postal facilities. It would require considerable time to reestablish such a service, he felt. In the meantime dissatisfaction would arise on account of the want and necessity of mail facilities, which would most likely be blamed on the head of the department. While he would gladly perform his duty to the Confederacy, Reagan did not desire to become a martyr. The Cabinet members agreed that they must not concede that there was a department of government which could not be organized. It was in this environment, then, that Reagan undertook the establishment of the Confederate Post Office Department.

Knowing that he was ill-prepared for the task of organizing the department, Reagan went to Washington to seek advice from Congressmen with whom he was acquainted and who still held office in the Federal service. Having in hand letters of introduction which he had obtained from his friends, he approached a number of officers of the Post Office Department requesting them to come and accept positions in the Post Office of the Confederacy. They were to bring with them copies of the last annual report of the Postmaster General and every form used by the department, together with the postal maps of the Southern States. All but two of the men whom Reagan sought out brought not only the information which he had requested, but also appointment books containing the names of all the postmasters under his jurisdiction together with their account books.

With this foundation, Reagan and his staff set about...
Jefferson Davis’ First Cabinet
the business of creating a postal system. Three months after his appointment he informed Davis that the Post Office Department was as completely organized as that at Washington and that he was ready to inaugurate the postal service of the Confederacy. The President and Congress promptly granted Reagan the authority which he needed to implement his program. The Department advertised for bids for contracts to acquire mail bags, post office blanks and paper for the same, wrapping paper, twine and sealing wax, circulars, marking and dating stamps, postage stamps and stamped envelopes, and mail locks and keys.²

One of the initial needs of the infant postal service was for postage stamps, and the problem of obtaining them plagued Reagan throughout the life of the Confederacy. It quickly became evident that nowhere in the South was there an engraving or lithographic establishment with the equipment or experience to supply the stamps which were needed. In prewar years, German lithographer, Ludwig, had located in Richmond and in association with Hoyer, a jeweler, had established a modest commercial lithographing firm which was not adequately equipped to undertake the job of furnishing stamps for the Post Office Department. However, the firm got the first contract even though it was known that it would take six months before stones could be made up and production got underway. In the meantime, Reagan told Confederate postmasters to resort to such expediences as handstamping envelopes such as had been the system in the old stampless days.³ Many post offices had old stampers which were again pressed into use; in other cases new ones were made. The postmasters took the money from the patron and handstamped on the envelope the amount paid. In small post offices, the word PAID and the amount were usually written on the envelope in manuscript. Specie soon became scarce and making change was difficult. In those instances, ac-
counts were maintained by post office boxholders with provisions for periodic settlement of the accounts. Envelopes of this period bore the marking PAID 5 or PAID 10, and were accompanied with the annotation CHARGE BOX 67, or something along that line.

The next development, from a philatelic standpoint, came when some of the more enterprising postmasters began to fix envelopes in advance which could be sold to their customers already marked to indicate the postage paid. These have come to be classified as Postmaster Provisionals. Some of them even made, locally, provisional adhesive stamps of their own designs. Most of these constitute the great rarities of Confederate philately, and there are many stamps in this class bringing thousands of dollars in today's auctions.

Meanwhile, Hoyer & Ludwig had gotten into production of stamps in Richmond and commenced making deliveries in the fall of 1861. As the postmasters got supplies of the firm's lithographs, they were used in place of the temporary expedients. The earliest known dates of cancellation of these stamp occurred in October, 1861. Some of the first were rushed to Tudor Hall, an estate in Virginia, where most of the Confederate Army was in camp at that time, and where fifty or sixty thousand soldiers were writing letters to the folks back home. Consequently, many covers may be found bearing the Tudor Hall postmark.

Hoyer & Ludwig also produced a two-cent stamp bearing Andrew Jackson's likeness for use on drop letters, unsealed circulars, and newspapers. This ended their stamp making. It appeared that the making of stamps and money in Richmond was in peril due to the close proximity of Federal troops. Transfers were then made of the stones which Hoyer & Ludwig used for the ten-cent stamps. These were turned over to the printing firm of J. T. Paterson & Co. of Columbia, South Carolina, but who moved to Augusta, Georgia, before printing could be commenced. An interesting
sidelight to the Confederate postal history is that paper was scarce at that time, and homemade envelopes were made of coarse brown wrapping paper, and flyleaves from books and even wallpaper. Envelopes were often turned inside out to be used again.

The lithographed first issues were never fully satisfactory, nor were there ever enough of them. They were but makeshifts until more and better stamps could be produced. Reagan wanted engraved stamps and the Confederate Government had established a gold balance in England through its cotton trade. Many things were vitally needed in the South and of no small consequence was the need for postage stamps. Major Benjamin Ficklin was sent to England to make purchases for the Confederate Army and Navy. He was directed to contract for suitably engraved plates for postage stamps, and for the printing of a supply which would meet the immediate demands, until local printing could be made from the imported plates. Accordingly, a contract was entered into with the firm of Thomas De La Rue & Company of London for the engraving and printing of two denominations, one-cent and five-cents. The completed order was placed aboard the blockade runner BERMUDA, which was captured by Federal warships and taken to Philadelphia where her contraband cargo was ordered sold by the courts. The postage stamps were judged as being of nominal value not beyond their worth as pulp and were ordered sold at that value. The plate, however, was deemed to possess a value beyond that shown on its face and was sold mostly for its souvenir value. Subsequently, the plate was sawed into sections and sold separately. Printings may be found today which were struck from the sections.

A new shipment to replace the lost stamps and plates got through the blockade, and the plates were installed in presses in Richmond and production began. The Richmond printings are easily discerned from the London
Five-cent stamp lithographed by Hoyer & Ludwig, Richmond, Virginia, 1861.

Two-cent stamp lithographed by Hoyer & Ludwig, Richmond, Virginia, 1862.

Ten-cent stamp lithographed by J. T. Paterson & Co., Augusta, Georgia, 1862.

Five-cent stamp engraved and typographed by De La Rue & Co., London, 1862.
prints by their poorer impressions, which resulted from varied supplies of ink and paper both of which were of inferior quality to those used in England.

Late in 1861 John Archer arrived in Richmond from New York. He was a skilled engraver and had been working for the American Bank Note Company. Whether he was enticed to come South by tempting offers is not known. Perhaps he managed to get to Richmond in the hope of accumulating wealth by engraving stamps and currency. At any rate, he appeared on the scene and formed a partnership with a politician named Joseph Daly. The firm of Archer & Daly came into being and their first job was printing from the De La Rue plates. Meantime, Archer was preparing to show what he could do in the way of engraving stamps. He submitted a design to the Post Office Department and was given the contract.

There may have been pressure for more of the ten-cent stamps of Jefferson Davis's profile which were used for the letter rate, and another engraver named Frederick Halpin joined the firm. Both Archer and Halpin engraved new plates of the same general design but the engravers treated the details differently. Halpin used the Archer design and filled in the corners with additional ornamentation. He also changed the shape of Jefferson Davis' hairline. Thus, the Archer design came to be identified as Type I and Halpin's as Type II.

In 1864, Archer lost the contract for supplying stamps to Keatings & Ball of Columbia, South Carolina. Consequently, the stamps printed by that firm are identical in design to those of Archer & Daly. However, the supply of paper, inks, and adhesive was getting very critical by that time. The impressions were coarse, of several shades, and the design generally filled in with excessive ink. In addition to varying quality of the paper, another distinctive feature was the thick, streaked molasses type of glue which was applied.
As a part of the move to replace the lithographed stamps, the Confederate Post Office Department in early 1863 authorized Archer & Daly to engrave a new design for the two-cent denomination which was used for drop letters, unsealed circulars, and newspapers. The design was engraved by Halpin and appeared to be an attempt to copy the United States design bearing a likeness of the bust of Andrew Jackson. The United States issue was printed with black ink while the Confederate issue was printed in brick-red.

Following the two-cent Jackson, Halpin engraved what many consider to be the finest job of all the Confederate stamps, the twenty-cent denomination bearing Washington's likeness. There was no urgent need for a twenty-cent stamp prior to mid-1863, but an increasing shortage of small change indicated that such a denomination could serve to relieve the monetary problem. Bisected copies of the stamp are occasionally found today on envelopes indicating that they were used for the ten-cent letter rate. Though it may come as a surprise to find Washington's picture on a Confederate stamp, one must remember that he was a highly respected Virginian and perhaps the greatest rebel of all.

In all, the Confederate Post Office Department issued fourteen varieties of stamps including a one-cent denomination bearing the image of John Calhoun, which had been ordered from De La Rue & Company, but never used by the Confederacy because there was no need for a one-cent stamp. Supplies of these stamps were probably seized by Federal troops with the fall of Richmond, for the stamps have been available in the philatelic trade for a number of years.

When Richmond surrendered, the executive records of the Confederate Post Office Department were entrusted to clerks for removal to the heartland. Reagan accompanied Davis and the rest of the cabinet and was with them when captured. He and Vice-President Alexander Stephens were imprisoned in Fort Warren in 1865.
Boston Harbor until their parole in October. Following his release, Reagan spent several months traveling between Washington, Virginia, and Georgia, trying to secure Davis's release from prison. He tried to recover the records of his department and retrieve personal property which had been taken from him when he was captured. Returning home to Texas, he found the people too impoverished to pay lawyer's fees and his home in Palestine destroyed. Reagan then took his motherless children to his Fort Houston farm, and tilled the soil for the next two years before returning to law practice.

A sidelight to Reagan's career occurred in the summer of 1866, when he drove his wagon to town one day with some farm tools for repair, and encountered Confederate John B. Hood on the public square. Having been good friends, Reagan offered Hood the hospitality of his humble accommodations. The two men spent several days together during which time they discussed, among other things, Hood's last campaign into Tennessee in the fall of 1864, which convinced Reagan that it was the only military move then available. Success, they concluded, was prohibited by high water in the Tennessee River, which prevented the army crossing at Guntersville. This delay kept Hood from reaching Nashville before General George Thomas occupied the city, and the failure of a part of his army to attack in flank a moving column of Federal troops at Spring Hill, resulted in defeat at Nashville.

During reconstruction, Reagan, practiced law until reentering the United States Congress in 1875 and continued in public service until his death on March 6, 1905. Shortly before he died, Reagan was preparing his memoirs and reviewing the official reports of the Confederate Post Office Department. He found that while the expenditures and receipts of the department were increased as a number of states were added to the Confederacy, the reports showed that the service from the
start was self-sustaining, and that each year there was annually a net increase of receipts over expenditures. Interestingly, the number of officers and clerks in the service was not as great by one-half as for a like amount of service in the United States Post Office Department. As Reagan noted:

It should also be observed that we did not have First, Second, and Third Assistant Postmasters General as in the United States. Our officers corresponding to these were the Chief of the Contract Bureau, the Chief of the Finance Bureau, and the Chief of the Bureau of Appointments. I shall not forego the opportunity—and I trust that my motives will not be misunderstood to observe that there is much in these reports to suggest economy in the Post Office Department of the United States; and I dare say, from recent divulgences, that this is greatly needed. I am informed that a thorough overhauling and revision of mail routes has been made but twice in the United States, once by Dr. Franklin, and once by Postmaster-General McLean. It would be a considerable undertaking, but if gone through with carefully and efficiently it would no doubt reduce the expenditures of the Post Office Department millions of dollars annually.

Reagan evidently was the man for his time. His analysis of the needs of a viable postal service makes it appear that he might also have been the man for our time.

2 *Huntsville Democrat*, April 3, 1861 and later.

3 *Dietz Confederate States Catalog and Handbook*, The Dietz Press (Richmond), 1959, 130-152.