Postal history, revenue stamps tell the story of the Civil War

By Cheryl Ganz

Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in 1860 with exclusively northern and western support incited the Civil War.

The Confederate States of America formed in February 1861, weeks before his inauguration. The split followed sectional feuds over states’ rights and slavery. The bloodiest conflict ever fought on American soil erupted on April 12, 1861.

On May 31, 1861, the Union suspended postal service to the Confederacy and soon issued new stamps, not valid in the Confederacy. The Confederacy responded with a stamp of its own, issued Oct. 16. Whether North or South, mail provided the lifeline between home and battlefront.

To commemorate the Civil War’s 150th anniversary years, the Smithsonian Institution has planned exhibits, public programs, websites, a book, and a three-part television documentary for Smithsonian Network. The National Postal Museum will participate in all of these initiatives. In addition, the museum website, www.postalmuseum.si.edu/civilwar, already offers many resources.

As a highlight, philately of the Civil War will be featured in the new William H. Gross Stamp Gallery, to open in September.

Civil War exhibits debuting in late 2013 will feature postage stamps, mail, revenue stamps and documents, all placed in historical context. These will be accessible in pullout frames, cases and an interactive touch screen.

The National Stamp Collection, a key component of the William H. Gross Stamp Gallery, features a superb Civil War exhibit. It showcases 144 examples of the Union's new postage stamps, stamps used as currency, stamps and mail of the Confederate States of America, mail delivered through the lines, mail that illustrates life on the home front, and mail that expressed patriotism.

During its brief existence, the Confederate States of America issued 13 stamps, all honoring southern heroes. Images of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, dominated the issues, but those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson also appeared, tying southern presidents' legacy to the Confederate cause.

The exhibit also incorporates examples of the era's postal history. During the war, Union and Confederate post offices did not exchange mail, and the Union Navy blockaded Southern ports.

Private companies transferred mail across sectional lines at established exchange points. Confederate blockade runners carried mail among the Confederate port cities and Europe via Havana, Cuba, and Nassau in the Bahamas.

Written correspondence evokes the experiences of families on both sides of the conflict. Strong
emotions stimulated by the issues and current events of the Civil War found expression in the form of illustrated stationery. Both Union and Confederate supporters quickly adopted a variety of covers and letter sheets picturing flags, cannons, leaders, soldiers, and other wartime themes.

An exhibit highlight is a Confederate copper printing plate consisting of 400 subjects bearing the image of Confederate President Jefferson Davis with a 5c denomination.

The plate was ordered by the Confederate States of America and manufactured by De La Rue & Co., Ltd., in London in 1862. It was seized off the Bahamas when the USS Mercedita captured the British blockade runner Bermuda.

In addition to stamps and mail of the Union and Confederacy, the story of the Civil War will be told through revenue stamps.

Effective Oct. 1, 1862, to help finance the Civil War, U.S. Congress initiated a tax program that used revenue stamp taxes on almost all transactions, including personal, official, and business transactions and documents. Commodities such as matches, medicines, perfumes and playing cards were taxed. The tax could be paid with the government’s generic proprietary revenue stamps or with stamps designed with the manufacturer’s logos or iconic imagery, also known as private die proprietary stamps.

Guest curator Ron Lesher, a revenue specialist, worked with NPM curators to develop the U.S. revenue exhibit for the pullout frames as well as the stories for the interactive that showcases the unique George S. Boutwell presentation album of revenue essays and proofs. Over 400 documentary, commodity and duck stamp revenues will be exhibited near a touch screen at which visitors will be able to view every page of the Boutwell album. Interviews and additional images will tell stories about the use of revenues on everyday objects such as photographs and playing card wrappers.

Civil War philately offers a fresh perspective on Civil War history. NPM’s exhibits and website and Smithsonian’s book and documentary will appeal to Civil War history buffs, families, tourists and stamp collectors. The museum will reach new audiences who care about the subject but who previously had never thought about how important stamps and the mail were for the soldiers, families, businesses, organizations and governments.

Cheryl Ganz is the Smithsonian chief curator of philately. The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. For more information visit the museum website at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.

The George S. Boutwell presentation album will go on display in 2013 together with a touch screen interactive to view the inside pages and to learn how revenue stamps helped finance the Union during the Civil War.