

Remembering the War Through the Mails:

Postwar Confederate Patriotic Envelopes and the Reconstruction of Civil War Memory

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At the outset of the Civil War printers in the North and South designed and distributed Union and Confederate patriotic covers. The focus of my research for the last decade, Northern patriotic covers, as in fig. 1 below, promoted the goal of the preservation of the Union and the man most closely associated with that effort, President Abraham Lincoln. The verses, mottos and slogans on these covers make clear that the North fought for a single American union of thirty states and considered the South's attempt to secede treason.

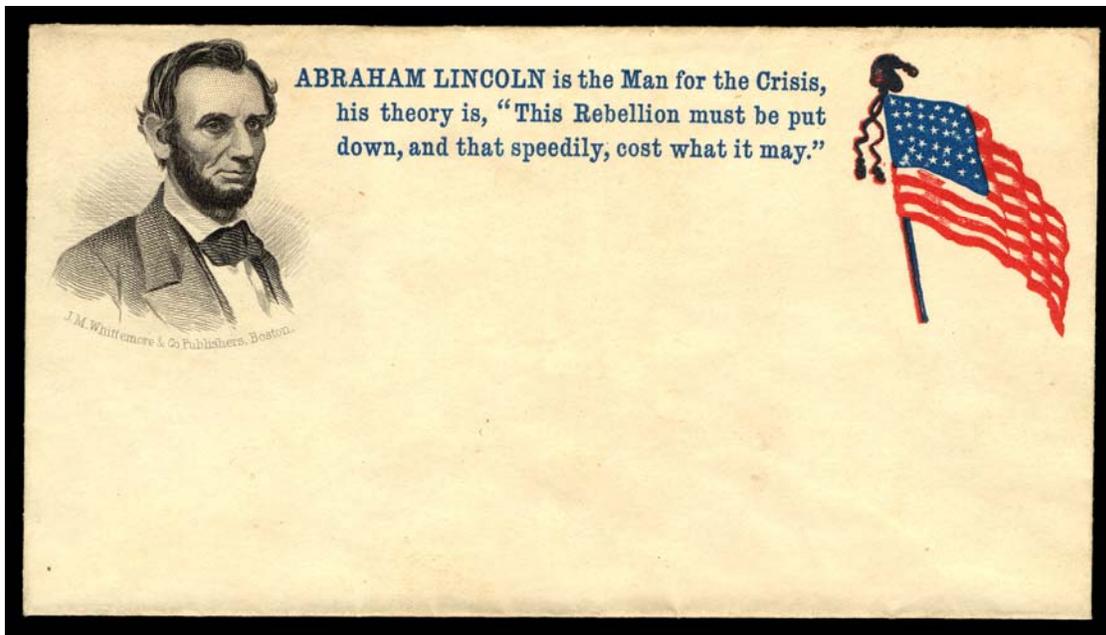


Fig. 1

Southern patriotic covers in contrast promote Confederate national identity and extol the virtues of their new national icon, President Jefferson Davis. The verses, mottos and slogans on Confederate Patriotic covers, as in fig. 2, make clear that the South perceives the war as about the right of the Confederacy to self determination, especially with regard to the institution of slavery. Confederate patriotic slogans stress liberty, freedom, and the rights of the South. They explicitly reference the threat of abolition and the assault by Northern “Vandals” on their country¹.

¹ See William R. Weiss, Jr., comp., *The Catalog of Union Civil War Patriotic Covers* (N.p. 1995), Richard Laurance, comp., *The George Walcott Collection of Civil War Patriotic Covers* (New York, 1935), August Dietz, *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook*, (Richmond, 1929); Herbert C. Skinner, et. al, compilers, *The New Dietz Confederate States Catalog and Handbook* (Miami, 1986); and Benjamin Wishnietsky, ed. *Confederate Patriotic Covers and Their Uses* (Miami, n.d.). My research is encompassed in my manuscript, *Icons of Culture: Civil War Patriotic Envelopes and their Significance* (in progress).



Fig. 2

In the course of my research, I uncovered related groups of patriotic covers. For example, the Spanish American war provoked another round of "patriotism" expressed in part by new cover designs. These covers resemble Union patriotic covers with their flag, American shield, and eagle motifs. Indeed, some printers utilized Union designs explicitly which they updated with the addition of the appropriate number of stars to a Union flag or reference to the battleship Maine. (Fig. 3)

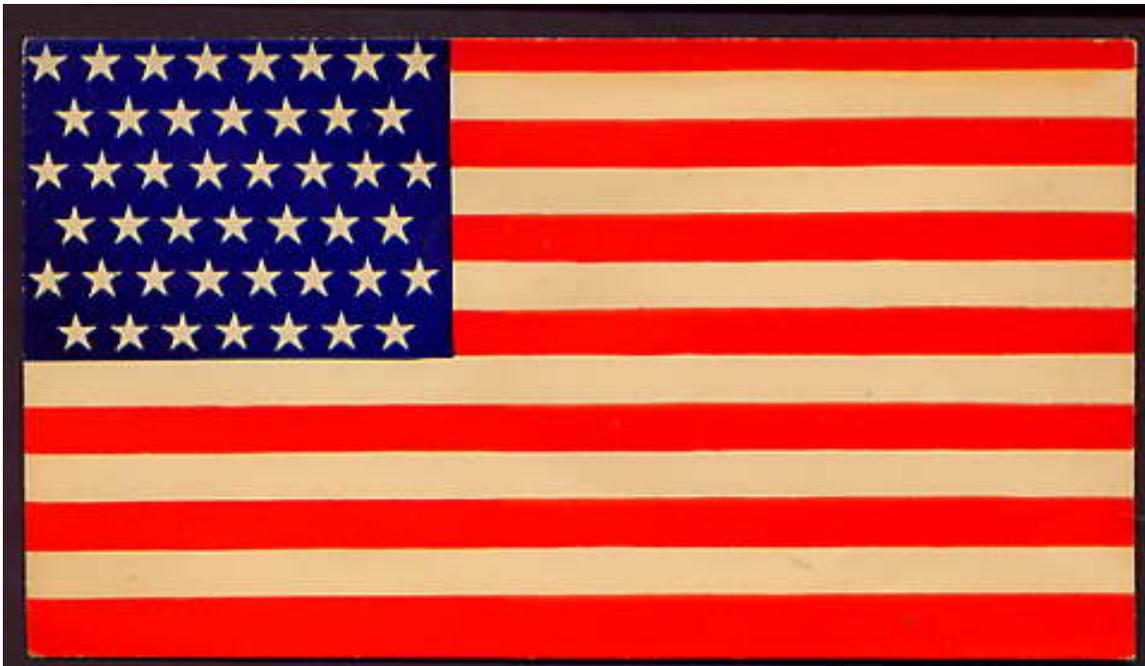


Fig. 3

Turn of the century “encampment” covers created for attendees at Grand Army of the Republic and United Confederate Veteran reunions, Sons of Confederate Veteran covers and veterans pension checks mailed in “patriotic design” covers constitute another design group.(Fig. 4)

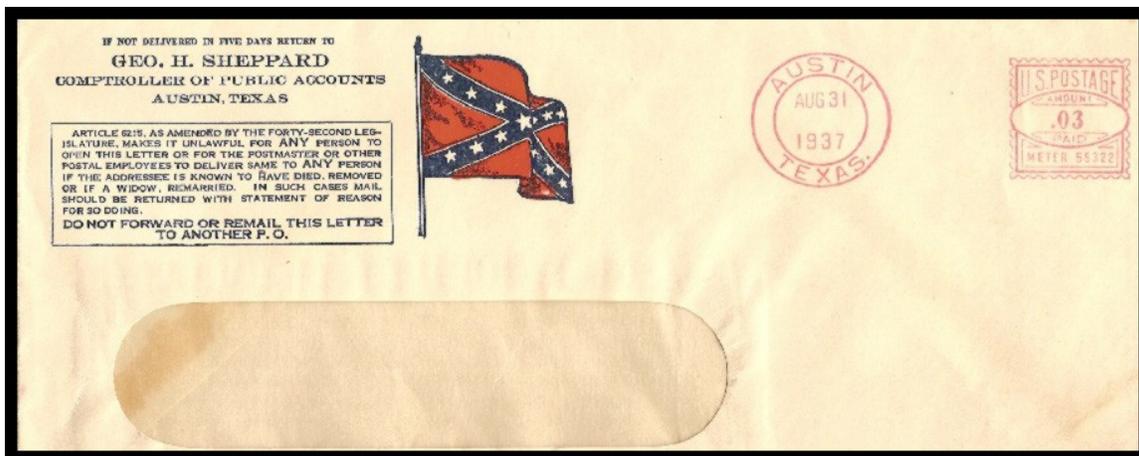


Fig. 4.

In many respects these later covers illustrate and confirm a current body of scholarly literature that emphasizes how Americans, North and South, remembered the Civil War. In the years following the end of the war, as David Blight summarizes it, “Three overall visions of Civil War memory collided and combined over time.” An emancipationist vision sought to establish and preserve black rights. A white supremacist vision sought just the opposite. A reconciliationist model envisioned a healing and reunion among whites both North and South. By the turn of the century the “reconciliationist” memory prevailed by 1900, by which Blight means a reconstructed memory of the past that emphasized the heroic character of the white veteran North and South and eliminated slavery and the African American as either a cause of the war or contributor to its ultimate outcome.²

A group of Confederate patriotic covers represent an interim step in this process of reconstructing the public memory of the Civil War in the South. Similar to genuine patriotics, and sometimes confused with them, postwar Confederate covers served like their counterparts of the 1861 to 1863 era as both envelopes to be mailed as well as souvenir covers to be collected and preserved. Relatively little is known about these covers, their printers or extent of usage in the nineteenth century. They do not appear in the philatelic literature or auction catalogues. Postally unused examples of the covers are nonetheless available from philatelists as well as on the Arago site, and in the American Memory posting at the Library of Congress.

² David W. Blight, **Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory** (Cambridge, Mass. 2001), p. 2. See also Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh eds., **The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture** (Chapel Hill, 2004).

The postwar Confederate patriotic covers fit midway in both content and chronology between the Civil War era patriotic covers and the reconciliation covers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These Reconstruction era covers emphasize the heroic character of the South's resistance during the war, call for continued defiance of Northern plans for reconstruction of the South, and articulate explicit assertions of Southern patriotism and loyalty to a white supremacist and autonomous South.

An unused Jefferson Davis postwar cover, fig. 5, from the Arago site illustrates the genre. Herein a black and white image of Davis rests below four Confederate flags and above cannon barrels and balls. Three bayonet tipped rifles appear, centered above Davis' image. Across the top appear the phrases: "Copyright Secured," "Hon. Jefferson Davis," and "Champion of the South."



Fig. 5

The significance of the images on this cover is only partially expressed by the mottoes. The "Hon. Jefferson Davis" hints at the regard with which Davis is

held in the postwar South as does the image of the man himself: “an image of honor” in the words of Robert Penn Warren.³ Confederate flags constitute “banners” of honor as well. Divorced from the nationalism of the war period, Confederate flags came in the post war era to symbolize first the “Cause” of Southern independence and the honorable sacrifice of the South and particularly of its soldiers in pursuit of Southern rights.⁴ The cannon and balls as well as the rifle and bayonets that form a backdrop to the central images of Davis and the Confederate flags on the other hand hint at the resoluteness of the South in opposition to the consequences of the North’s victory. And the identification of Davis as the “Champion of the South” alludes to his insistence on states rights, a mantra of “the South” which continued to honor its president well into the twentieth century.

While Davis proved to be a powerful and evocative figure in the reconstruction South, the Confederate flag with its seven or more stars and three red or white bars became the dominant symbol of nineteenth century Southern identity. In Fig. 6, for example, a ten star red, white and blue Confederate flag flies right on a flagpole. A blank ribbon flies above, the message in text below: “SOUTHERN RIGHTS WILL BE DEFENDED BY SOUTHERN MEN.’ The design of this cover is unknown with genuine Confederate postal usage and it likely dates instead from the 1860s or 1870s. .

³ **Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back** (Lexington, 1980), 82.

⁴ Robert E. Bonner, **Colors & Blood : Flag Passions of the Confederate South** (Princeton, N.J., 2002), 162.



Fig. 6

During the war representations of the flag on patriotic envelopes served the Confederacy as a symbol of Confederate nationalism. After 1876, Southerners divorced the flag from both its nationalist heritage and the political or social ends for which Confederate soldiers fought. Indeed by 1900 the flag became a tribute to the Confederate soldier who fought valiantly and with honor⁵. In the intervening years, however, especially during the years of official Reconstruction, the Confederate flag symbolized, as in this cover, the South and the region's insistence on Southern autonomy. The text then becomes a call to Southern MEN (emphasis added) to once again defend their region from Northern interference.

⁵ Bonner, *Colors & Blood*, p. 180.

A second similar design flag cover, fig. 7, makes the same point. Here a red, white and blue eleven star Confederate flag flies right from a flag pole. Above the flag appears the simple slogan: "INVINCIBLE." The South of course proved most



Fig 7

vincible during the War. They nonetheless persisted in their commitment to Southern autonomy. Several postwar covers, for example, "warn" the North of their commitment to Southern self determination. Fig 8 illustrates the genre. Herein two Confederate flags and a Confederate shield, often referred to as the "Emblem of the South," dominate the image. Between the flags and above the shield rests a second emblem below a red., white and blue "liberty" cap. Medusa, the Roman goddess of war stands in the center of the emblem with a sword and pike in hand below the phrase "Sic Temper Tyrannus." Translated as

“Thus Ever to Tyrants,” and the phrase John Wilkes Booth uttered as he fled Ford’s Theater following the assassination of President Lincoln, a “downed” Union soldier lies beneath Medusa’s feet. Three slogans appear to the right: “God and Our Native Land,” “A United South,” and “Yankees! Beware!”



Fig. 8

Known only in unused condition, this cover in all likelihood also dates from the 1870s. Dietz does not include it in his **Catalogue** as a genuine Confederate issue. The quality of the printing and the envelope is also superior to that of many war era pieces. The use of the phrase “The United South” differs too from the war time usage of “the Southern Confederacy.” Furthermore, the cover acquiesces to the military outcome of the war, its martial ardor notwithstanding.

The South, the text asserts, however, must maintain its separate identity within the Union, an identity symbolized by the first national flag of the Confederacy.

Several other postwar Confederate covers further illustrate Southern refusal to accept Reconstruction. A red, white and blue cover, fig. 9, bears an image of Miss Liberty wearing a liberty cap while holding an eleven star Confederate flag flying right. The slogan above declares: GOOD FOR Another 'BULL" S RUN."



Fig. 9

Although defeated on the battlefield, this cover affirms, the South remains defiant. And on the fundamental issue of the War and Reconstruction, the South ultimately prevailed by creating a region that enforced pre-Civil War values well into the twentieth century. Between 1865 and 1913, Southern leaders re-established white rule in the South with the acquiescence (or complicity) of many

in the North. They also effectively misremembered the history of the war as they created a “Lost Cause” mythology that simply excluded blacks from the scene.

The postwar Confederate covers considered here contradict that memory of the war. They reflect, explicitly in some instances, the racist ideology of the late 1860s and early 1870s before the South succeeded in reshaping their collective memory. On these covers the issues are still ones of which vision of the Civil War will prevail: an emancipationist model which places slavery and black rights at the center of the War and Reconstruction or a white supremacist one which insists on the preservation of the status quo antebellum.

For example, a yellow and black cover, fig. 10, also unknown with genuine Confederate postal usage, bears the message: “Alabama WILL NOT SUBMIT to NEGRO RULE.” Although not certain, this cover may date from the 1868 presidential election, an election in which Southern leaders called for the repeal of the thirteenth amendment and a return to the “old Constitution” of 1860. In essence, this cover illustrates the commitment of Southerners midway between the War and the end of the century to an explicitly white supremacist model of reconstruction.



Fig. 10

A second postwar flag, fig.11, more subtly makes the same point. Printed on the white bar of a Confederate eleven star flag appears the phrase, “THESE COLOURS DON’T RUN.” Although similar to genuine Confederate patriotics, this particular phrase does not appear on postally used Confederate covers. Actual Civil War era Confederate covers also use the American rather than English spelling of the word colors. Nor do I think it mere coincidence that the word “Colours” appears on the white bar of the flag. The cover can easily be read as these WHITE “COLOURS DONT RUN.”



Fig.11

These postwar Confederate covers are arguably more consistent with genuine Confederate patriots' sentiment than the later Southern reconciliationist covers. They focus on the issues central to the onset of the war as articulated on genuine Confederate patriotic covers in the 1861- 1863 era. The Confederate stars and bars in 1861 and in the 1870s symbolized the central issue of the War and Reconstruction – the place of slavery and African Americans in the Southern social order.

Near the end of the War the Confederate "Southern Cross" design flag replaced the "Stars and Bars." By the end of the century, and at the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, the former dominated. That flag symbolized the triumph of the reconciliationist model of Southern Civil War memory, i.e. a memory that emphasized the "Lost Cause" and the gallantry and

heroism of Southern whites, civilian and soldier, during the war. The “Southern Cross” design with its more muted tone regarding blacks and black rights also came to dominate twentieth century Southern popular culture rather than the stars and bars image of the 1861-1863 period and the era of Reconstruction. Although the “Southern Cross” too has a heritage of racial supremacy, it came to symbolize for Southern whites an apolitical “Lost Cause” and the heroic contributions of its soldiers and citizens. This emphasis explains in part its popularity in the 21st century South and the current “flag debate” ongoing in various states.

Although the “Southern Cross” is the dominant symbol of the South and the “Lost Cause” in contemporary culture, the “Stars and Bars” and the covers that carried that image during the Reconstruction era are nonetheless important. They contribute to our understanding of Southern flag culture. They illustrate an interim stage in the development of twenty and twenty first Southern flag culture largely overlooked by historians. Although they are aware of the racial basis for the opposition to Reconstruction, in their discussions of Confederate flags historians move too quickly from the Confederate flag of secession to the twentieth century flag of tribute to the veteran and the lost cause. In the process they understate the importance of the Confederate flag in its stars and bars incarnation as a symbol of Southern defiance, resistance and racial superiority.

More broadly, it seems clear that historians can benefit by including in their research and scholarship not only traditional letter sources, but the envelopes that carried those letters. Nineteenth century historians would gain additional

insights from a consideration of postal materials including Union and Confederate patriotic envelopes as well as postwar “Southern” envelopes as they explore topics such as the popular culture of Nineteenth century America, the print culture of that same America, and broader studies of Public Memory – be it of the Civil War or World War II as both those conflicts generated an outpouring of “patriotic envelopes” largely overlooked to date by my colleagues in the profession. They should do so because the covers and envelopes illustrate and communicate to twenty first century readers in a way that text alone cannot. Historians of American Memory, of the Civil War, and of popular culture should integrate these visual records into their text.

Sources of Figures

1. Smithsonian National Postal Museum
2. Smithsonian National Postal Museum
3. Personal Collection of the Author
4. Courtesy Dr. John L. Kilbrough, Philatelist, Ft. Worth, Texas
5. Smithsonian National Postal Museum
6. Courtesy James F. Taff, Philatelist, Sacramento, Ca
7. Courtesy James F. Taff, Philatelist, Sacramento, Ca.
8. Courtesy James F. Taff, Philatelist, Sacramento, Ca.
9. Courtesy James F. Taff, Philatelist, Sacramento, Ca.
10. Courtesy James F. Taff, Philatelist, Sacramento, Ca.
11. Courtesy James F. Taff, Philatelist, Sacramento, Ca.