HISTORY OF THE CONFEDERATE STATES POST OFFICE (1)

BY J.W. SCOTT
(The American Journal of Philately, Vol 4, June 20, 1871)

It is now over eighteen months since I gave a description of all the Confederate provisionals, that were then known to have been issued by the different Southern postmasters. In the course of my opening remarks, I stated that there were probably dozens of these stamps that had never been described in any of the philatelic journals, or ever been seen by any prominent collectors. I am happy to add, however, that subsequent events have proved the truth of my assertions, the publication of that article being doubtless the means of bringing several of these interesting stamps to light. I now propose to give the most complete history of the Confederate States Post Office, possible, but unfortunately for causes explained hereafter, the article cannot be pronounced complete, although no expense has been spared to make it as perfect as possible.

So that my readers may be able to see what ground I have been over, and what my means of information are, I shall briefly state the way I went to work, and give the results from each trial, hoping that some collector will be able to see my errors, and so achieve better results, or at least find some untrodden field in which to operate; for whatever is to be done in this line, must be done quickly, as every day lessens the chance of success.

My first trial before publishing the article on “The Confederate Provisionals,” was by writing to our extensive list of customers in the South, asking each one what locals they had in their collection, and a description of each; by this means, I gained considerable information, but scarcely enough to pay the expense and vexation caused by persons describing stamps which I recognized as counterfeits or humbugs as soon as I saw them; for strange as it may seem, the trash advertised as Confederate fac-similes, have apparently found a large sale in the South, and are to be seen in nearly every small collection in that section of the country. One rather amusing instance is worth relating, as it shows that all statements rather by persons not experienced collectors, should be taken with considerable grains of allowance. A gentleman residing in Nashville, informed me that he had a five cent stamp of that city, but not knowing if it was genuine, he took it to Mr. McNish, with whom he was acquainted, and asked his opinion concerning it; Mr. McNish at once pronounced it genuine, and endorsed his name on the back; sometime after, it was shown to me, and I recognized it as one of the twenty-five cent packets of fac-similes. Mr. McNish doubtless has never heard of such a thing as his stamps having been counterfeited, and as he recollected that his stamp had a figure 5 in the middle, and his name on, considered it genuine at once.

I next took to writing to prominent citizens of the South, editors of newspapers, &c., but with still less success. I also interviewed Mr. H. St. George Offutt, Postmaster-General of the Confederacy, but could only learn from him that he had turned over all the papers and records of his office to the authorities when he was taken prisoner; these were contained in eleven large boxes, and included among other valuable papers, two complete sets of official reports. These, he thinks, it would be impossible to duplicate; but thought they could be found among the rebel archives in Washington, and inspected; but being unable to spare the time, and as I considered the article needed, did the best I could with the help of my friends.
My third effort made in conjunction with the firm, redounded more to our joint interest than the particular object I had in view. We printed an extra edition of twenty thousand Journals, each one of which was furnished with an extra four pages of advertisements, specially directed to post masters, in large type, and offering them one dollar each for all the Confederate stamps they could get, other than those issued by the government. These were directed to every postmaster in the seceded States. These brought in a few of the common ten cent stamps, accompanied by a note requesting us to send the same number of dollars by return mail; but we did not succeed in getting a single local out of the lot. This was a loss of over one thousand dollars, the postage alone costing four hundred.

Determined to get the stamps if there were any to be had, I started on my fourth experiment in connection with the firm, and caused the following advertisement to be inserted in all the Southern papers for various terms:

IMPORTANT NOTICE – J.W. SCOTT & Co. pay $100 each either used or unused, for the Stamps issued by the Confederate Postmaster of this town, in 1861. Address, J.W. SCOTT & Co., dealers in Old Stamps, 34 Liberty Street, New York City.

Liberal prices paid for all Confederate Stamps.

It will be seen by the above, which was worded the same in every case, that we presumed that a stamp was issued in every city. This was done to call attention to the advertisement, as persons would be likely to ask their friends if they had ever heard of such a thing, and so bring it before persons who might not otherwise have seen it. This speculation cost almost as much as the last, but it paid better, through it we purchased several good lots of the first issue of the Confederacy; but we only succeeded in getting one local, and that was a blue Mobile, and it had a large corner torn off.

Determined not to be beat after the heavy loss I sustained, I set to work to devise some new method of obtaining the desired information, and after careful study of the names of the various Provisional Confederate, and comparison with official records, concluded to put into operation the following plan: I first obtained all the known locals, and found that none had been issued by any Postmaster who in 1859, had returned a less revenue to the government than $40 – so concluded it would not be worth the expense of writing to officials doing a less business than this. After all the preliminaries had been settled, I procured a supply of three sizes of stamped envelopes, the two larger sizes being printed “if not delivered in 10 days, return to J.W. Scott, 75 Nassau Street, New York City.” I next had printed by the Autographic Lithographic process the following circulars:

75 Nassau Street, New York, May 20th, 1871.

Dear Sir:

I have lately heard that during the time you were Postmaster under the Southern Confederacy, you issued a postage stamp for use in your city, and being greatly interested in the postal affairs of the confederacy, (in fact am now writing the history of its postal department) would deem it a great favor if you would oblige me with all the particulars in your possession, and a specimen of the stamp or stamps if possible; would be willing to pay any necessary expenses for the papers, or purchase any of the stamps. If you know of any other Postmaster who issued stamps during the same period, would be greatly indebted to you for their names &c. The only apology I can make
for thus troubling a stranger, is the wish to enlighten individuals who are deeply interested in everything connected with the “lost cause.”

Hoping you will find time to reply to this.

I am your obedient servant,

J.W. SCOTT

P.S. – Will take pleasure in sending you a copy of the work as soon as published.

This together with one of the smallest sized envelopes, address “J.W. Scott, 75 Nassau Street, New York City,” was securely sealed in one of the larger envelopes, and this again was enclosed in one of the largest envelopes, with the following circular, and addressed to every Postmaster in each of the seceded states, who had returned a larger revenue than forty dollars to the government in 1859.

75 Nassau Street, New York, May 20th, 1871.

Dear Sir:

You will confer a favor on the undersigned by addressing the enclosed letter to the gentleman who was postmaster of your city in the year 1861, or if deceased to his heirs, and if you do not know his or their residence, by returning it to me, as it contains papers of importance.

By giving this your early attention, you will much oblige.

Your obedient servant,

J.W. SCOTT.

In about four days the answers began to come in, but it was a melancholy sight to see the numbers that came back with the second seal unbroken, and endorsed “all dead;” the excitement and privations attending the war, were too much for men who had already past their prime. Every letter as it came in was entered in a book, which formes (sic) a valuable “Confederate post office directory,” a work, which unfortunately was never completed during the war, this book will be of great service, in case any one should attempt to fabricate fictitious locals, as we have the autograph letters of hundreds of southern post masters stating that they never issued stamps. We should like to publish the replies of each gentleman, but it would take up more room than most of our subscribers would wish, we shall, howeve(r), give a few extracts, showing the various styles of replies. Some we received with our circulars enclosed tore up, others, simply returning them without replying, one ignorant “Carpet Bagger” returned both circulars (showing that he had opened the letter that he was simply requested to address) endorsed, Go to ******* you ******* rebel. Some sent the letters as directed, and then wrote and informed me where they had sent them, but as was to be expected, I found all classes of men amongst the present post masters. In regard to the former ones, some instead of answering my questions, wrote four pages of letter paper, to explain to me that they had always been union men, and only left the office because they were compelled to. Others would write long wretchedly written letters, explaining what they lost by the war. Others gave me a vast amount of useful information, which will be embodied in these pages. Most informed me that I had been misinformed, and that they had never issued any stamps, or ever heard of anyone who had. One gentleman (?) wrote “You must be a ******* fool if you think every southern post master had
nothing to do but make stamps.” Some politely hinted that I was either a fool or a knave, but they did not know which, anyway they could not help me any. But what is of more interest to collectors, I have received descriptions of many provisionals that I had never before heard of, all of which will be fully described in their proper order. I am sorry to say that some information that is embodied in this article, has obtained surreptitiously by other publishers, but as they cannot complete the information they have attempted to give, it is but a matter of small amount.

One cheering piece of information to persons in moderate circumstances is the fact, that I have succeeded in obtaining the dies of some of the stamps, and discovered a large quantity of another, which will place some varieties at least of these interesting stamps within the reach of all.