UNION OCCUPATION MAIL

Exhibit Synopsis

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This exhibit tells the story of how Union soldiers' mail, from occupied towns and areas in the South, was processed during the American Civil War. At the beginning of the war the US Navy moved to blockade the Atlantic coast, the Gulf coast, and the Mississippi River, and the US Army commerce between the Confederacy and European countries. The army also occupied a number of towns in Tennessee in order to provide a northern line of containment and a base for a thrust into the heart of the South. When some of these towns were occupied, the local post offices were taken over by the military and reopened to process soldiers' mail. These are called occupation post offices.

Types of occupation offices - There were three types of Union occupation post offices in the seceded states:

- those that operated before the war and were taken over by the Confederate postal system after June 1, 1861, and were subsequently established as occupation offices after being captured by Union forces; an example is Nashville.
- those that operated before the war and continued without interruption by the Confederate system; an example is Key West.
- those that did not exist before the war but were opened because of their strategic location; an example is Ship Island.

Occupation start and end dates - Although the Civil War began with the firing on Fort Sumpter on April 12, 1861, actual Union occupation was already happening by that time at a few Florida Forts, but the first occupation post office was not ordered until May 30, 1861, because the USPOD was still operating in the South until that time. US Mail was suspended in the South on May 31, 1861, and the Confederate Post Office Department began operations on June 1, 1861. The war ended in mid-April 1865 in the east and as late as early June 1865 in the west as various Confederate armies surrendered. However, occupation did not end until combat troops withdrew, usually by early summer 1865, and this is about the time occupation post offices transitioned to civilian control, although some did so earlier. In some cases, towns changed hands several times, so their dates of occupation were intermittent throughout the war

Operation of the offices - Occupation post offices were established for soldiers' and sailors' mail only. Civilian mail was prohibited with a few exceptions such as prisoner of war mail. The offices were run by occupation postmasters, most of whom were appointed by the US Post Office Department, although there were a few military appointments. These postmasters were supervised by Special Mail Agents who were involved in the opening of most of the offices and who sometimes ran the offices themselves. The occupation post offices were staffed by literate soldiers who were trained to process soldiers' mail and weed out civilian mail which was sent to the Dead Letter Office. Soldiers' mail was usually collected by quartermasters or company "postmasters" and consolidated up the chain of command, then taken to the occupation post office. US postage rates were in effect although enlisted men (not officers) could send letters without prepayment by stamps and with postage due to the addressee if properly endorsed by an officer. Occupation mail could be sent to a northern post office, another occupation post office, or (rarely) a foreign destination. Occupation mail was taken north to be entered into the

US postal system in a variety of ways from horseback to mail wagon to railroad to riverboat to steam ship.

Occupation covers - A typical occupation cover has a war-dated postmark from a southern town with US franking and rates. There are some covers in the exhibit which do not adhere strictly to this definition, but they are from occupied areas and their importance is explained. Postmarking devices were usually supplied by the USPOD, but small, short-lived, or newly-opened offices had to be creative at times. Some covers may show irregularities or a lack of strict adherence to regulations, but communication was slow, workers were inexperienced, and there was a war going on. Postmaster General Blair deemed soldiers' letters to be of the highest importance, stating that these letters might contain soldiers' final thoughts before making the ultimate patriotic sacrifice, so the USPOD and the military did everything possible to ensure that the mail got through.

Organization of the exhibit - The exhibit is divided into two sections, "War in the East" and "War in the West," and it is further organized by campaigns, expeditions, and initiatives within these sections. It begins with the earliest occupation post offices in Florida and proceeds geographically and chronologically to the end of the war. The exhibit is complete in that it includes all the accepted occupation post offices. Scarce and rare postmarks (including color) are indicated by cover backing (blue = <20 and red = <10 reported). A green dot in a heading indicates a notable cover or usage, such as prisoner of war or transatlantic. Within the context of this exhibit, occupation mail is from the 11 seceded states only. It does not include mail from border states (Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, Restored Virginia and Maryland), northern states, or territories.

Sources - My primary sources for information on Civil War postal history are the writings of Richard B. Graham, George N. Malpass, and James W. Milgram, as well as my personal and original research as an author and editor of the 1861 section of the *Chronical of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues* for 20 years. My most reliable source of Civil War history is the four volume "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War," because it was written by actual participants. The internet, in the twenty-first century, has made it easier to find regimental rosters and histories, and the USPS website contains some good information on postmasters although it is incomplete and further digging is often required. Year dates of covers are determined in a number of ways – postmarks, docketing, enclosures, soldier's letter endorsements, senders' names and their regiments (based on docketing, addressee names and destinations), known correspondences, known postmark styles, and known history. Scarcity of postmarks is based on experience of studying auctions, dealers' stocks, and private collections, although it is always possible that a newly discovered correspondence or an old collection could turn up many examples of a previously-considered rare postmark.

Collateral and highlights - I mixed in a few pieces of mail-related collateral material, such as maps and photos, that help to tell the story. Highlights of the exhibit are prisoner-of-war mail, adversity covers (including wallpaper), provisional postmarks, demonetized stamps and transatlantic and other foreign-bound covers.

Acknowledgement - My interest and much of my knowledge about Civil War postal history comes from my relationship with the late Richard B. Graham who was my neighbor and my

mentor for many years. He preceded me as the 1861 section editor of the *Chronicle,* and we had many enjoyable discussions at his home, usually with him showing and telling and me listening.