

## Ligon's Prison (Two Covers for One Letter)

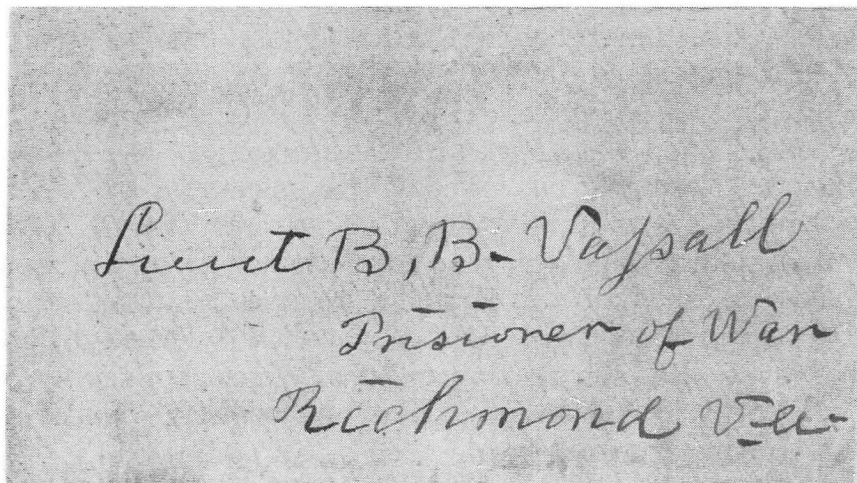
Galen D. Harrison

**T**he tobacco warehouse of Mr. John L. Ligon was the first building in Richmond, Virginia, to be utilized as a prison by the Confederacy. The first battle at Manassas produced many prisoners, a good portion of whom were hastily thrust into Mr. Ligon's warehouse. A number of covers exist from Ligon's Prison. In my recent book, *Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War*, I indicated 34 covers either to or from Ligon's had been reported.<sup>1</sup> Since that book went to press, an additional cover has come to light. That cover is the subject of this article.

First a little background. It is probably safe to assume most people interested in Civil War history are familiar with Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross. While certainly not so well known as Clara, other members of the Barton Family also left their mark on history, in this case, specifically on postal history.

About 1856, Stephen Barton, a brother to Clara Barton, moved from Massachusetts to Hertford County, North Carolina, where he set up a business manufacturing plough handles, as well as other lumber products. Hertford County is situated in the northeastern portion of the state just across the line from Southampton County, Virginia. Barton settled in what had been for some time known as Riddicksville, although the post office there had been discontinued in 1852. On February 26, 1856, the

post office was reopened with a name — Bartonsville. Lewis W. Spaulding was named postmaster. According to *North Carolina Post Offices and Postmasters*, on April 10, 1857, L. Barton, Jr. replaced Spaulding as postmaster at Bartonsville.<sup>2</sup> On May 14, 1857, Barnard Barton Vassall was appointed Bartonsville's postmaster. Vassall, incidentally, was a nephew of Clara Barton, and therefore, a nephew of Stephen Barton. Vassall did not remain long as postmaster of Bartonsville, however. Instead, he returned to Massachusetts to engage in other pursuits. Before he left, however, he used two different styles of markings on envelopes to indicate his position as postmaster. Vassall used a straight-line handstamp "B.B. VASSALL" to cancel stamps, and he used a manuscript "B.B. Vassall P.M." postmark. Upon Vassall's departure, Stephen Barton resumed the duties as postmaster. It might be interesting to note that both Vassall and Barton used a circular date stamp made by Zeveryly.



**Figure 1.** Handcarried letter to Lt. Vassall, being held in Ligon's Prison, Richmond, Virginia.

At the outset of the war, Barnard B. Vassall was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the 15th Massachusetts Infantry. The unit's first major engagement was on October 21, 1861, at the battle of Ball's Bluff, a disastrous defeat for Union forces. Lieutenant Vassall was captured along with several others, and he soon found himself a resident of Ligon's Prison, which still held many of the First Manassas prisoners. By January 1862, Vassall, still at Ligon's, had written at least twice to his cousin, Samuel R. Barton in North Oxford, Massachusetts. Samuel R. Barton was Stephen Barton's son, and he, like Vassall, had returned to Massachusetts after living in North Carolina for a short while. One of the first two covers from Vassall to Samuel R. Barton is illustrated in *Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War*.<sup>3</sup>

In January 1862, while still at Ligon's, Vassall received the cover illustrated in Figure 1. Rather unassuming in appearance, it nevertheless contained a fascinating letter headed "Bartonsville, (N.C.) Dec. 31, 1861". The letter was from Stephen Barton, who incidentally had been appointed as Confederate postmaster of Bartonsville. Why Postmaster Barton did not send this letter by mail is a matter upon which we can only speculate. Perhaps he felt his letter might be viewed with suspicion for a Confederate postmaster to be writing to a prisoner of war. That might also explain why the letter begins, "Dear Sir" and makes no mention of the Uncle-Nephew relationship of the two men. Neither did he request his letter be forwarded to his son in North Oxford, Massachusetts, although the "Please give my love to all inquiring friends" at the end may have been intended as a subtle hint.

The letter illustrated in Figure 2 is quoted (original spelling intact) as follows.

Bartonville Dec 31 1861

Dear Sir

Your kind and interesting letter of the 20th but mailed the 27th reached me yesterday. My health is, and has been as good during the last season as could be expected. Mr Brown and Kelley are yet both stopping with me. My machinery has not been steady in operation since last June. My sales have been more limited than I had hoped, but I think they have been as good as could be expected under the circumstances. My crops have been most abundant, I have on hand a beautiful supply for the coming year. A large proportion of the men in this vicinity are in the war more than fifty that have formerly been in my service are there. Some of them have been killed others have been wounded or made prisoners, but as I keep has been the most fatal. Some of them that were well acquainted with E. A. Willis while here have written to their friends that they saw and recovered the mangled body lying on the battle field at (Nash's) point. I am much concerned and am to you say nothing of how much you me to hope that it is a mistake. I have given my love to all my friends. I am Sir B. B. Vassall

Yours truly D. S. Barton

**Figure 2. Letter received by Lt. Vassall while at Ligon's prison. He later forwarded it North to make it a through-the-lines letter.**

*Bartonsville Dec. 31, 1861*

*Dear Sir*

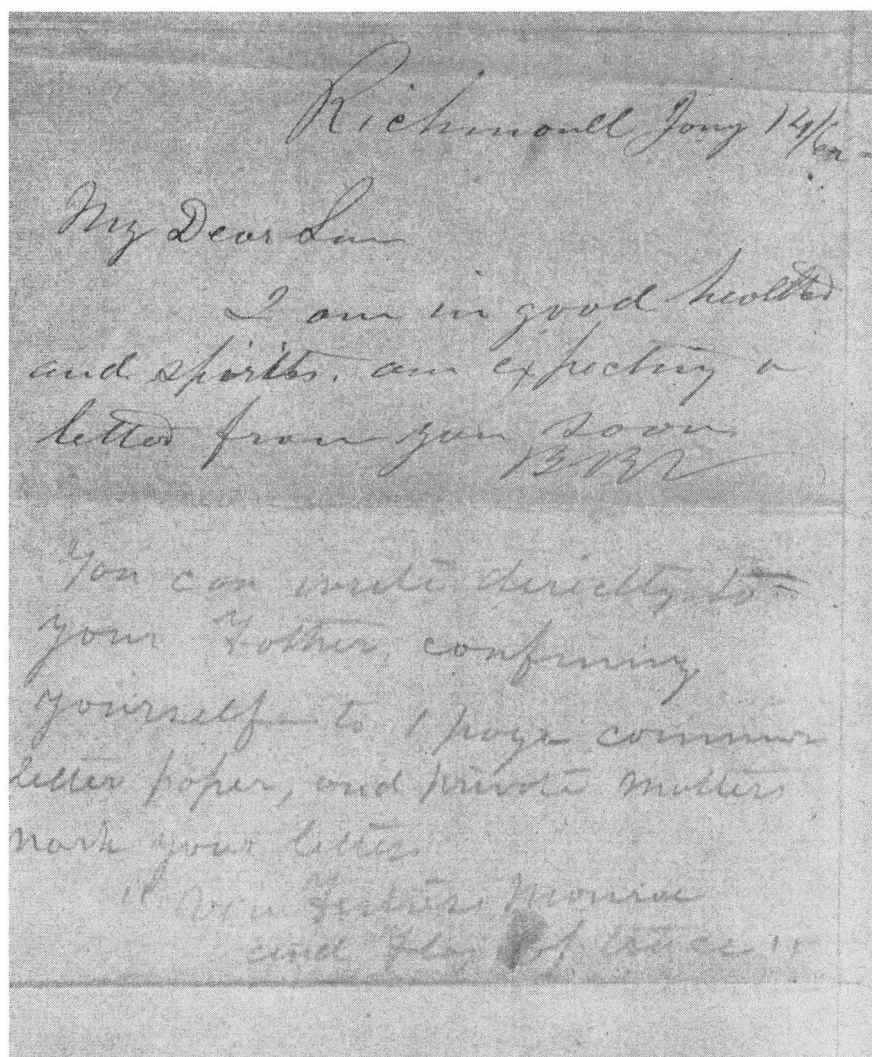
*Your kind and interesting letter of the 20th but mailed the 27th reached me yesterday. My health is and has been good during the last season as could be expected. Mr Brown and Kelly are yet both stopping with me.*

*My machinery has not been stedily in opperation since last June. My sales have been more limited than I had hoped, but I think they have been as good as could be expected under the circumstances. My crops have been most abundant, I have on hand a bountiful supply for the coming year. A large proportion of the men in the vicinity are in the War, more than fifty that have formerly been in my service are there. Some of them have been killed others have been wounded or made prisoners, but sickness has been the most fatal. Some of them that were well acquainted with E. J. Willis while here have written their friends that they saw and recognized his mangled Boddy laying on the Battle field at Manassas Junction which caused me much anxiety. You say nothing of him which leads me to hope that it is a mistake. Please give my love to all inquiring friends.*

*Lieut B.B. Vassall* *Truly yours S. Barton*

Checking the 1860 census for Hertford County, North Carolina, it is clear that Barton's lumber business was indeed a thriving concern. More than 40 people were listed as connected with his operation. Lieutenant Vassall probably knew each of the men his uncle mentioned in the letter. All of them are listed on that 1860 census. Kelly,

for example, was a 60-year-old brick mason. E. J. Willis was, or had been, a 20-year-old laborer in Barton's employ.



**Figure 3.** The second letter, written on the reverse of the original missive by Lt. Vassall and forwarded to his cousin in Massachusetts, makes this a very unusual through-the-lines cover.

Upon receipt of this letter, Vassall wrote his own short note on the back. His note, shown in Figure 3, reads as follows:

Richmond Jany 14/62

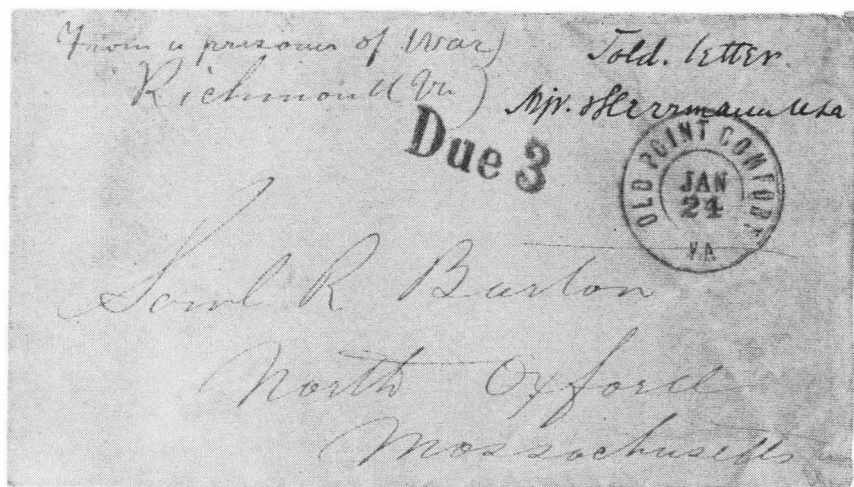
My Dear Sam

I am in good health and spirits, am expecting a letter from you soon.

BBV

You can write directly to your Father confining yourself to 1 page common letter paper and private matters.

Mark your letters "Via Fortress Monroe and Flag of truce"



**Figure 4. This cover, enclosing the two letters shown earlier, was sent by Vassall at Ligon's to his cousin in Massachusetts.**

Vassall enclosed this double-sided letter in a cover addressed to his cousin, Samuel R. Barton at North Oxford, Massachusetts. The cover, shown in Figure 4, passed through Old Point Comfort, Virginia, on January

24, 1862, and was rated Due 3 at that office, after having been certified as a "Soldier's Letter" by Major Charles John vonHerrmann, a member of the federal general Wool's staff. In less than 30 days, Stephen Barton's letter was delivered to his son, Samuel R. Barton, by what surely has to be considered a most roundabout means.

The rarity of this usage can't be over emphasized. In *Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War*, I mentioned other out-of-the-ordinary methods of communications between individuals North and South, but I know of no other example of a Southern citizen writing to a prisoner being held in the South, and then having that letter forwarded to a relative in the North.

**Epilogue:** Lieutenant Vassall survived his prison ordeal but suffered personal embarrassment, however. While still in prison, he read in his home town newspaper that he had been requested by the line officers of his regiment to resign his commission. He tendered his resignation immediately upon his release. Stephen Barton was not so fortunate. According to one source, troops of the Third New York Cavalry raided and burned much of his property in April 1865, *after* General Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Barton was arrested and imprisoned at Norfolk, Virginia. His sister Clara worked to secure his release from prison, but he died shortly after his release. On February 23, 1866, almost 10 years from the day the post office became Bartonsville, its name was changed to Riddicksville once again. A county history of Hertford County fails to mention either Bartonsville or Stephen Barton.

*Continued on Page 204.*



## ERRATA

A number of errors unfortunately crept into the July-August 1998 issue of *The Confederate Philatelist*.

Jim Milgram's "What is the Latest Known Confederate Cover?" (pp. 143-148): On page 147 the first sentence of the second paragraph should read, "What has to be the latest known use of a Confederate stamp, but one which does not properly pay postage is shown in Figure 6."

Jim Monroe's "Two-Cent Green Gutter Strip Discovery" (pp. 151-153): Incorrect year dates were listed in both figures. Figure 1 should read: "Strip office 2¢ green lithographs is postmarked Holly Springs, Mississippi, December 31, 1862, on a cover to Minden, Louisiana." Figure 2 should read: "A soldier's due cover from the same correspondence as the previous figure. It is postmarked Grenada, Mississippi, December 11 [1863]."

Several errors were also made in the listing of CSA and NAPEX '98 show awards on page 166, based on erroneous information supplied to the editors:

The CSA Trophy was awarded to Tony Crumbley;  
Bill Bogg Memorial Award went to Galen Harrison  
Richard Krieger Award was given to James Bowman;  
Roger Weill Award went to Gen. Harry McDowell;  
A. Earl Weatherly Award was given to Richard Norton.

***Continued from page 187.***

**Notes and References:**

1. Harrison, Galen D. *Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War*. Confederate Stamp Alliance, 1997 Hereafter known as *Prisoners' Mail*. p. 95.
2. This most likely is an error. It should read S. Barton, Jr. The letter "S" was frequently misread as the letter "L". Stephen Barton, Jr. customarily signed his name as S. Barton, Jr.
3. Stroupe, V. et. al. Editors, *North Carolina Post Offices and Postmasters, Colonial to USPS. Volume 2*. North Carolina Postal History Society. 1998.
4. Harrison, *Prisoners' Mail*. p. 96.
5. Stroupe. *op cit*.
6. U.S. Census of 1860 for Hertford County, North Carolina.
7. Samuel R. Barton papers, Perkins Library, Duke University.
8. Stroupe. *op cit*.