

## The Hole in the Floor

*Galen Harrison*

Since publication of *Prisoners' Mail from the American Civil War*<sup>1</sup>, I have had occasion to speak to various groups interested in subjects dealing with the aspects of what many still call "the late unpleasantness." Among the things that I always try to stress are the facts that "mail" took a variety of forms. I like to show examples of mail that was smuggled out of prison in uniform buttons. When speaking of mail smuggled in this manner, I always mention Willard W. Glazier, author of *The Capture, the Prison Pen, and the Escape*.<sup>2</sup> Glazier described in detail how two-piece metal uniform buttons were taken apart and used to carry letters out of the prison.

Not long ago, while I was attending one of the regional APS shows, I was making the rounds looking for items of interest. One of the dealers had just one POW cover to show me, a rather modest cover to a POW at Libby Prison. Although I have several Libby covers, I added the cover to my collection. As seen in Figure 1 (next page), the cover is addressed to Lt. W.W. Glazier, Prisoner of War, Libby Prison, Richmond, Va. The postmark is that of Troy, N.Y., dated December 19, 1863, with a 3¢ 1861 tied to the envelope by a grid cancel. The flap is embossed with a fancy "B," which may possibly relate to his mother's maiden name, Bolton. There is no indication of Confederate postal usage. This is quite normal, particularly for mail directed to prisons in Richmond. The mail was handled by courier from the Flag of Truce Boat to the War Department, then from the War Department to the prison. Glazier was a Lieutenant in the 2nd New York Cavalry, a unit known as the Harris Light

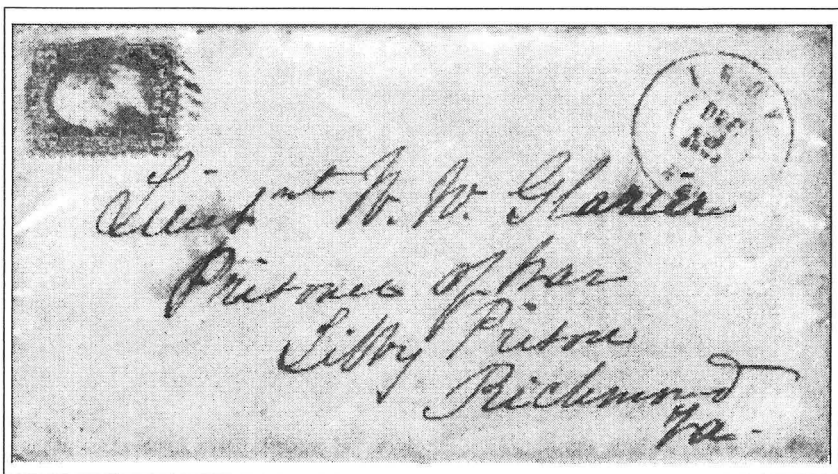


Figure 1. Prisoner-of-war letter to Lt. Glazer at Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia.

Cavalry. He was captured October 16, 1863, at the battle of Buckland Mills, Virginia. It should be mentioned that the 2nd New York Cavalry was part of Kilpatrick's command.

More recently, I obtained the cover in Figure 2. I had listed this folded letter in my database as being from Richmond, but I did not know from what prison. The letter reads as follows,

*"Richmond March 14th*

*Friends at home this morning finds me in Prison but enjoying myself as well as circumstances will admit. This is the tenth day I have been here. I am well so do not trouble yourself about me. I am as ever your son always truly. Clark C. Knowlton Prisoner of War."*

At the National Archives, I learned Clark C. Knowlton was a Private in Co. F, 5th New York Cavalry. His military



**Figure 2. Prisoner-of-war cover and letter from Private Clark Knowlton, 5th New York, a prisoner at Libby Prison. The cover bears the endorsement, “by flag of truce boat/Prisoner of war.”**

file indicated he was captured at Stevensville, Virginia, on March 3, 1864 and confined at Richmond March 5. This would confirm his statement to his “Friends at home” that his letter was written on his 10th day in prison. But what prison? There were clues, the first being the dates involved. The dates coincide with the ill-fated (depending on one’s point of view) Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid. The place of capture was also an important clue. Stevensville was probably less than five miles from where Colonel Ulric Dahlgren, co-commander of the raid, was killed late on March 2nd. Dahlgren and his men rode into an ambush set up by what were mostly home guards; Dahlgren was killed, and his men scattered into the night. About 60 of them, including Private Knowlton, were rounded up the following morning and taken to Richmond as prisoners.<sup>3</sup> They were placed in a punishment cell in Libby Prison.

At this point a very brief review of history might be in order. The Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid began as the idea of General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick came up with a plan for a surprise raid into Richmond for the express purpose of freeing the prisoners in Libby and Belle Isle Prisons. He envisioned the freed prisoners burning the city, and ultimately bringing about the end of the war. Now, not to get involved in an argument over their authenticity, papers were either found on, or planted on Dahlgren's body. These papers called "for Union soldiers to destroy Richmond and kill Jeff Davis and cabinet on the spot."<sup>4</sup> When these papers were made public there was an outcry for the blood of the captured raiders. Fortunately for all concerned, and according to several different sources, the captured raiders — both officer and enlisted — were confined in a punishment cell in Libby Prison rather than face execution as was demanded by many outraged citizens.<sup>5</sup>



Glazier described the treatment of the captured raiders, "Officers, enlisted men, and negroes are crowded together in filthy cells and not allowed to communicate with other prisoners. Their rations are much less than ours and even of an inferior quality." Glazier went on to explain that the cell used for the raiders was directly under the room he occupied. Because the officers felt sympathy for the raiders, they cut a hole in the floor, through which they were able to communicate and to pass a portion of their rations. One source claims Colonel Thomas

Rose, who had headed up the Libby Prison Tunnel project, was responsible for cutting the hole in the floor.<sup>6</sup> Glazier illustrated the hole in the floor in his book (Figure 3).

Beyond writing his prison experiences, Willard W. Glazier was an interesting character. By age 15, he was a trapper in the woods of upper New York state. He saved his money and used it to gain an education. He attended Gouverneur Wesleyan Seminary, and then State Normal College. During the Civil War, he was in 60 battles, and spent 14 months in various Confederate prisons. He escaped three times; on the third occasion he successfully reached Union lines. He rode horseback from Boston to San Francisco in 1876, a trek requiring 200 days. In Wyoming he was captured by Indians, but escaped and finished the journey on one of their ponies. Later he wrote *Ocean to Ocean on Horseback* describing his adventure.<sup>7</sup> He was also a bit of an explorer. On an expedition in 1881, he located the true source of the Mississippi River. He returned in 1891 to that site, a lake now known as Lake Glazier. He organized and was provisional colonel of an Illinois Volunteer regiment in the Spanish-American War in 1898. In 1902 he explored the coast and interior of Labrador.<sup>8</sup>

Private Knowlton was removed from the dungeon-like cell under Libby in due time, but he remained in Richmond until May 31, when he was sent to Andersonville, Georgia. He escaped from prison on March 1, 1865, having been a prisoner almost exactly one year.

#### References:

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3. Schultz, Duane. *The Dahlgren Affair*. W.W. Norton & Co. New York. 1998.

4. *Ibid.* p.152.

5. Schultz. *op cit.* p. 175-6; Glazier. *op cit.* pp. 90-3; *Daily Richmond Examiner*, Mar. 8, 1864; *Daily Richmond Enquirer*, Mar. 7, 1864.

6. Furgurson, Ernest B. *Ashes of Glory*. Vintage Books. New York. p. 254

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8. *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*. James T. White & Co. N.Y. Vol. 5 pp. 284-5.

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