

## *The John A. McAllister Civil War Envelope Collection*

By June 1861 an “Envelope Mania” had taken hold of the Union, which, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, was an economic boon for engravers, stationers, and printers who had “no cause to complain of a lack of business” while others struggled to adjust to the new wartime economy.<sup>1</sup> This collecting fad was made possible by recent innovations to methods of graphics printing. Civil War-era printers in the North fed the frenzy by producing patriotic, sentimental, and satiric illustrations that covered the entire fronts of wrappers and rendered them nearly unusable as anything other than collectors’ items. Consequently, many of these pieces never made it into circulation, but rather were saved in the scrapbooks of “collectors of curiosities” like Philadelphian John A. McAllister (1822–1896), who gave his collection of Civil War ephemera to the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1886.<sup>2</sup>

These envelopes, engraved and lithographed with images of soldiers engaged in heated battle, African American slaves depicted as human contraband, and the stoic visage of Abraham Lincoln, appeared within weeks of the start of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Over six thousand envelope designs flooded the market during the war; the majority (about four thousand) between 1861 and 1862. These “queer devices” (as described by the *Inquirer*) that proved an economic windfall for Northern stationery printers and purveyors not only document the politics of the nation, but also provide valuable information about mid-nineteenth-century consumer and visual culture and the social and technological changes that impacted it during this critical period in our nation’s history.

John A. McAllister voraciously collected ephemeral material documenting the culture of the war-torn country. He may well be the gentleman described by the *Inquirer* who had “no less than four hundred different varieties [of envelopes], and . . . is ready to purchase new lots, or exchange with Collectors abroad for duplicates.”<sup>4</sup> In all, McAllister

<sup>1</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 29, 1861.

<sup>2</sup> The John A. McAllister Collection of Civil War Era Printed Ephemera, Graphics and Manuscripts, <http://www.librarycompany.org/mcallister/>.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Boyd, *Patriotic Envelopes of the Civil War: The Iconography of Union and Confederate Covers* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 29, 1861.

collected over seven thousand of these envelopes, many of which illustrated the volatile themes of gender, race, and sectionalism.

The large number of envelopes in the McAllister Collection attests to their ubiquity and to the visual literacy of society by the 1860s. The designs suggest that mid-nineteenth-century Americans had a sophisticated comprehension of graphics. The envelopes employed symbolic vignette images—such as a Jim Crow–like caricature representing the South—to instantly convey, visually and emotionally, volumes about the causes and understandings of the war. These ephemera, an early form of political propaganda, contained images that ranged from the commonplace (symbols of patriotism, such as liberty, flags, eagles, and military scenes) to the provocative (allegorical imagery of a white baby nursing on a black mammy’s exposed breast). In addition, Victorian-era touchstones of popular culture, such as the Niagara Falls tightrope walker Blondin or a camera obscura, served as inspirations for these visuals, which were conceived and perceived as iconographic messages rather than as mere illustrations.

Not all of the envelopes in the McAllister Collection are illustrated, nor were all primarily for collecting. The use of these envelopes, as well as their imagery, tell us much about the culture of the wartime North. The collection contains an interesting series of envelopes printed with women’s addresses. A brief inscription on the back of one (probably by McAllister) notes that for a fee, a bureau would send men in the military these envelopes commissioned by “women who were desirous of corresponding with soldiers.” These preprinted pieces of stationery served as a not-so-veiled nineteenth-century version of a dating service that was an offshoot of the “correspondence craze” prompted by personal newspaper advertisements by Union soldiers.<sup>5</sup> These deceptively mundane pieces of ephemera add another dimension to scholarly studies about the changed gender roles during the Civil War.

The marketing of the envelopes tells us even more about the rules of Civil War society. To produce the wide array of imagery to satisfy the appetites of consumers of illustrated envelopes, printers often co-opted, duplicated, and made slight variations to designs already in circulation, and, consequently, they did not include an imprint on their pieces. Others, like noted Philadelphia publishers Samuel C. Upham and King

<sup>5</sup> Nancy L. Rhoades and Lucy E. Bailey, eds., *Wanted—Correspondence: Women’s Letters to a Union Soldier* (Athens, OH, 2009).



Civil War envelopes from the John A. McAllister Collection. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

& Baird, originated their own designs and advertised their wares through circulars and specimen sheets. The printers' advertisements, which detail wholesale prices and capture marketing rhetoric, document the economics of a nineteenth-century fad.

Civil War envelopes provide a variety of evidence about the visual, consumer, and political culture of their era. This rich source of political propaganda expands our understanding of the lives of wartime consumers caught by eye-catching visuals, printers who sold patriotism for a profit, and women who bent the rules of courtship. These ephemera that caused the Civil War-era printer to have "no cause to complain" do the same for the contemporary researcher seeking insight into the mores of a society in upheaval from war.

*The Library Company of Philadelphia*

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