

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

BY CATHERINE M. WRIGHT, *Curator*

The breadth and depth of The Museum of the Confederacy's collections are well-known, but the ongoing research to learn more about them is not. The objects and documents are rife with mysteries still to be solved and the Museum staff increasingly is employing modern techniques to solve them. In recent years, we have conducted forensic research on, among other things, the blood-stained battle flag of the 26th North Carolina Infantry and two dolls supposedly used to smuggle medication through the blockade. This article is the first in a new series that will highlight the innovative work that has helped reveal the rich stories behind the Museum's artifacts.



This glass vial measures only 1 3/16" long by 0.5" wide at the base. Inside is a rolled piece of paper 1.5" in length (when unrolled, measuring 6.5" wide by 2.5" long), tied with a string, and a lead .36-caliber pistol bullet.



Conservator Scott Nolley gently heated the bottle to loosen the wax or salts that sealed the cork to the glass.

At one point or another, everyone dreams of sending a message in a bottle, and wonders just how far her message would travel. But you may not ponder how long it would take for such a message to arrive. And what if the bottle remained sealed for over one hundred years before anyone opened it?

The Museum of the Confederacy was recently on the receiving end of just such a message. Since 1896, a small glass bottle has been exhibited, but never opened. The bottle contains a .36-caliber lead pistol bullet and a slip of rolled paper tied with a linen thread, the opposite end of which protrudes from the cork stopper.

Curiosity finally got the better of the Museum's Collections staff, and they determined to open the bottle. Little did they know that removing the cork was just the beginning of a fascinating process of discovery that would bring the bottle and its contents to the attention of the world.

THE DONATION

When the Museum opened its doors on February 22, 1896, it generated a flurry of interest in artifacts relating to the Civil War. Museum founders began collecting in the early 1890s, but the Museum's official opening and subsequent public interest ensured a flood of donations.

Among these early donors was William A. Smith (1840-1905), a native Virginian and graduate of the Virginia Military Institute who also briefly lived in New Orleans and Baltimore. During the war, he had served as captain, and had been appointed assistant adjutant general to Walker's Division, Texas Troops. He decided to donate a single relic from the war, a message in a bottle, and sent it through Mrs. Robinson Taylor of Comorn, King George County, Virginia.

The 1896 ledger entry, apparently taken from Capt. Smith's statement, reads:

Dispatch in a medicine phial with lead sinker sent by Genl. Jos. E. Johnston to Genl. Pemberton at Vicksburg in 1863. When the scout arrived at the Mississippi River, Vicksburg had fallen & the dispatch was brought back to Capt. W. A. Smith, AA, Genl. Walker's Division, Texas Troops. (The misplaced key to this dispatch will be sent in as soon as recovered).

The misplaced key has not been found among the Museum's papers, so it seems it was never found or donated. The bottle was placed in the Virginia Room, and has been exhibited ever since.

OPENING THE BOTTLE

The bottle was anything but interesting to most museum visitors, who for many years have been able to see it resting on a small pedestal in the “Vicksburg” case of The Confederate Years exhibit. Less than two inches long, it did not seem particularly intriguing...that is, unless one considered the unread message.

Museum staff had wondered about the contents of the bottle for years. It seemed tempting to tug on the white cotton thread protruding from beneath the cork, but there were curatorial concerns. The thread might snap; the cork could crumble; the bottle might break; the message could disintegrate.

In August 2008, the Collections Department staff decided to have the bottle opened—if it could be done without damaging the artifact. They decided to have a conservator attempt this, as a conservator would have the appropriate tools and familiarity with materials.

On behalf of the Collections Department, I contacted Scott Nolley at Fine Art Conservation of Virginia. He had previously conserved several objects for the Museum, and more importantly, had worked on a project at Colonial Williamsburg that involved opening hundreds of old corked bottles. He agreed to examine the bottle to determine if it could be safely opened.

Nolley scrutinized the bottle in December 2008, and found the only deterrent to opening the bottle was the cork adhering to the glass. He speculated that this was due to the cork being waxed shut, or possibly where salts from the glass bottle migrated to the cork. To loosen the bond, he employed a deceptively low-tech solution: slowly heating the bottle, then using a scalpel to release the cork around the edges (like a cake from a pan). Using a pair of jeweler’s micro tweezers, he then gently removed the message from the bottle.

READING THE MESSAGE

The tightly-rolled message was transported to Richmond Conservators of Works on Paper. First they slipped the message out of the string tied around it, which allowed them to gently flatten the slip of paper over the course of one week. They opted not to use humidification, which can assist in flattening, because the moisture would encourage corrosion of the iron gall ink. They digitally photographed the message and emailed the photo to us in January 2009.

The message, unseen for nearly 150 years, *seemed* to read:

July 4th

SEAN WIEUIZH DTG CNP LBNXGK OZ BJQB FEQT
FEQT XZBW JJOA TK FHR TPZWK PBW RYSQ
VOWPZXGG OEPF EK UASFKIPW PLVO JKZ HMN
NVAEUD XYE DWRJ BOYPA SX MLV FYYRDE LVPL
MEYSIN XY FQEO NPK M OBPC FYXJFHOHT AS
ETOV B OCAJDSVQU M ZTZV TPJY DAW FQTI
WTTJ J DQGOAIA FLWHTXTI QMTR SEA LVLFLXFO.

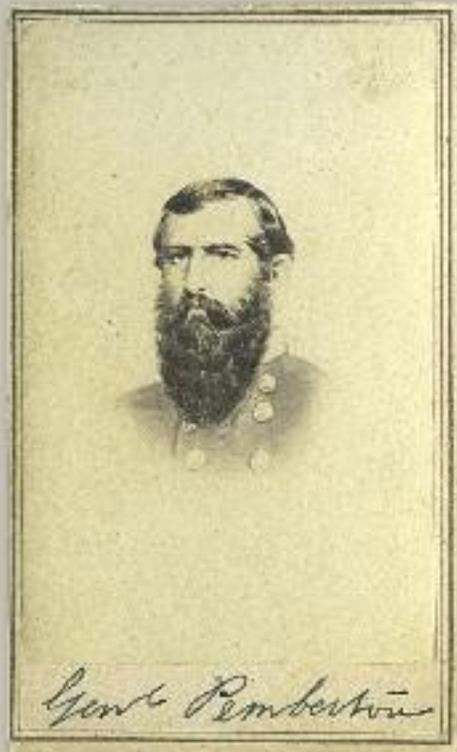
My initial confusion turned to excitement as I realized it was a secret code. We learned it was a Vigenère cipher, which uses polyalphabetic substitution along with a key word found on a table or disc. This explained the reference to a “misplaced key.”

The Museum enlisted two cryptologists to help break the code: David W. Gaddy, a retired U.S. Army cryptologist and award-winning historian of the Confederate secret service; and Commander John Hunter, information officer with the U.S. Navy. The two men worked independently to crack the code.

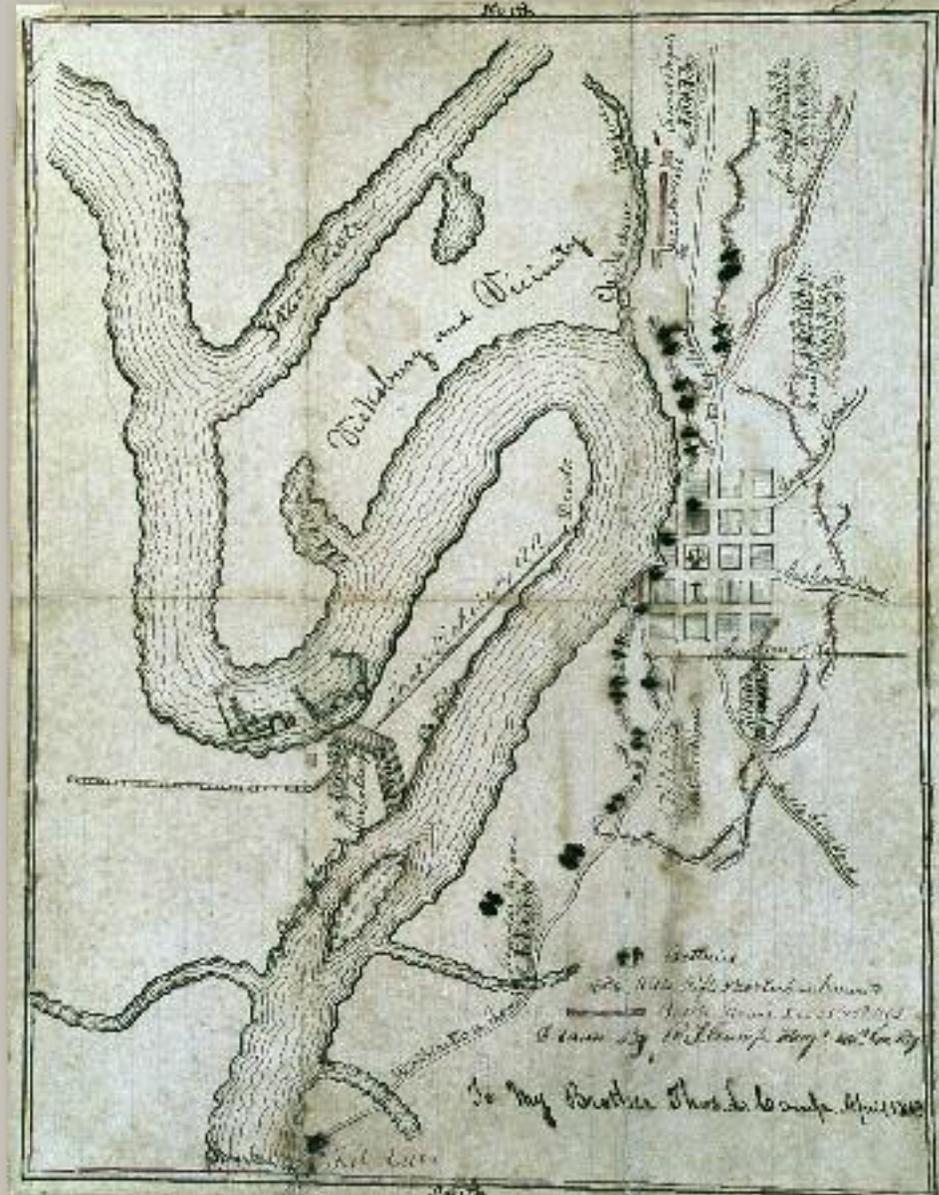
Hunter worked on the mystery during his free time while deployed on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific. Gaddy, who possesses a



The bottle with removed cork and message—out of the bottle for the first time in 146 years.



Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton (1814-1881) was a Northern-born Confederate general whose leadership was ill-starred. Placed in command of a demoralized army and a vital post in October 1862, he was unable to prevent the capture of Vicksburg or save the army that defended it. Carte de visite by E. & H. T. Anthony, NY.



Alan Thompson

Confederate forces under Pemberton were forced into a hopeless defense of Vicksburg on the east side of the Mississippi River. Walker's Greyhounds were encamped on the west side of the river, unable to offer any aid. Major Raleigh Camp of the 40th Georgia Infantry, an officer in the Vicksburg garrison, drew this map in April 1863 a month before Grant's troops laid siege to the city.



Commander of the Confederate military department that included Vicksburg, Gen. Joseph E. Johnston (1807-1891) did not believe his army was strong enough to attack Grant and relieve the siege. He hoped that if Pemberton could not save Vicksburg, he could at least save his army. Carte de visite by C. R. Rees & Brother, Richmond, VA.

copy of the key used to encode the message, did not need to “crack the code,” but simply read the message in about an hour, struggling primarily with the clarity of several of the characters. Both men reached the same result.

The decrypted message (correcting sloppy or erroneous characters) read:

July 4th

Gen'l Pemberton, you can expect no help from this side of the river. Let Gen'l Johnston know, if possible, when you can attack the same point on the enemy's line. Inform me also and I will endeavor to make a diversion. I have sent some caps*. I subjoin despatch from Gen. Johnston.

Although the bottle's donor had specified that the message was sent from Johnston to Pemberton, the contents of the message seemed inconsistent with that information. It is doubtful that Johnston would have referred to himself in the third person. Nor does the reference to “this side of the river” make any sense in Johnston's context.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Museum contacted several historians to provide context and help unravel the mystery. Edwin C. Bearss, chief historian emeritus of the National Park Service, is an authority on the Vicksburg Campaign. Richard Lowe, professor of history at University of North Texas, wrote a prize-winning study of a command that seemed to be emerging as a critical part of the story.

The bottle's donor had said that he served on the staff of "Gen'l Walker." This was Maj. Gen. John G. Walker, the stern-eyed commander of a division of quick-moving Texans nicknamed "Walker's Greyhounds." In early 1863, he was caught in a command tug-of-war between his superiors, Edmund Kirby Smith and Richard Taylor. In January, Smith had been named commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department, with Taylor as his subordinate—but Taylor acted nearly independently.

As a result of countermarching commands, the effectiveness of Walker's Greyhounds was wasted. In June and early July 1863,



Maj. Gen. John G. Walker (1821-1893) served in the Department of North Carolina, led a division at Sharpsburg, and in November 1862 transferred to the Trans-Mississippi Department, where he commanded the largest division of Texans in the Confederate army. Hand-colored photograph.

Walker was mired in a Louisiana swamp on the west side of the Mississippi River. Soon one-third of his men were unfit for duty, due to what Walker termed "excessive heat of the weather, deadly malaria of the swamps, [and] stagnant and unwholesome water." All this time, they were stationed within just a few miles of besieged Vicksburg—but on the wrong side of the river.

The plight of Vicksburg held sway over North and South in the late spring of 1863. The city commanded the high bluffs along the Mississippi, and as such was key not only to controlling a primary transportation route, but also to uniting the eastern and western halves of the Confederacy. Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant made Vicksburg his target that spring, and while his Army of the Tennessee pushed toward the city, it simultaneously pushed Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton's forces into a protective arc around the city.

The Federals outnumbered the Confederates two-to-one, but Pemberton's men held them off well enough to force a siege. Within a few weeks, the city residents were reduced to living in dirt caves dug into hillsides, and eating shoe leather or wallpaper-paste soup.

The Confederates were desperate to assist Pemberton, but there seemed little hope of providing reinforcements from either Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's army east of Vicksburg or Walker's

Greyhounds on the west bank of the river. In fact, Walker scoffed at Smith's recommendation to find a way into Vicksburg: "I consider it absolutely certain, unless the enemy are blind and stupid, that no part of my command would escape capture or destruction if such an attempt should be made." The message in the bottle reflects Walker's belief that his Greyhounds could do nothing to alleviate Pemberton, but suggests some optimism in a coordinated attack with Johnston.

By the time the message was sent, even this glimmer of hope was extinguished. On July 3, Pemberton contacted Grant regarding a possible surrender. After some negotiating, it was agreed to surrender Vicksburg and parole Pemberton's men. The following morning—celebrated as Independence Day by the Federal troops—the Confederates furled their flags and turned over the city.

The message bearer arrived at the Mississippi River, and realized the city had fallen. What sparked this realization is unknown to history. Perhaps the absence of a Confederate flag upon the staff provided the clue, or an unusual sound—or silence—from the city. In any case, the courier did not toss the bottle into the river, for the lead bullet to sink into the muddy depths. He carried it back to Walker's camp and turned it over to assistant adjutant Capt. Smith, who tucked it away, the contents not worth reading or the bottle not worth reusing—but, luckily for the Museum, important enough for him to keep.

BOTTLE FEVER

Richmond-based Associated Press reporter Steve Szkotak wrote an article on the message that first appeared on December 25, 2010. It was promptly picked up by newspapers and other media outlets across the country and around the world, and continues to be republished by various websites and magazines. I gave interviews to local and national media outlets, including CNN and NPR's "The Takeaway," and the story even appeared on the CBS Evening News.

The public proved its interest in this fascinating story by stampeding to the Museum's website. While the average day in 2009 saw 338 unique website visitors, on December 26—the day the article ran in the greatest number of newspapers—the Museum received 9,130 unique web visitors. (The total for Dec. 25-27 was a whopping 20,187!)

The Museum is incredibly fortunate to have such fascinating artifacts that lend themselves to creative investigation and that attract international attention to our collections and our work. We are delighted to have started the 150th anniversary year of the Civil War with such a big bang.

When you're next in Richmond, be sure to visit the Museum, tour "The Confederate Years" exhibit, and see the bottle with the message. It looks the same as it has for its many years on display. But now we know what the message says and, if you listen carefully, you might hear the door slamming on the Vicksburg garrison. 🚪