Volume 8, No. 2 Spring 2015

Carroll History Journal

Historical Society of Carroll County, Maryland

Dear Readers,

With the widespread use of texting and email, writing letters has gone out of fashion. However, there was a time when hand-written letters were the primary means of person-to-person communication. This issue of the Journal brings you two articles on letter-writing by members, Sam Brainerd and Jay Graybeal. Both articles may prove eye-opening to readers, as they tell of unique styles of correspondence that emerged because of the peculiar circumstances of the day. Letters such as these also give us a peek into distinctive eras and places and serve to reinforce the value of primary sources to our understanding of history.

Frank J. Batavick
Editor

Criss-Cross Letters Have a Chequered Past

By Samuel T. Brainerd

Museums store artifacts; libraries store documents. The distinction seems so obvious that we seldom think to question it. But every now and then the line between the two becomes blurry. Sometimes, for instance, documents can be artifacts, too. Our archives at the Historical Society of Carroll County contain a number of documents that double as artifacts. Specifically, there are several old letters down there that look like the example in Figure 1, letters in which the handwriting goes horizontally across the page as usual, but then also covers the sheet vertically. The writer clearly wrote the first part, then turned the page ninety degrees, and wrote again. Why?

In this first example, John Barnett, from Belfast, Ireland, wrote on Sept. 20, 1815, to Carroll County's Clotworthy Birnie, from whom he had received a letter the previous April. Birnie was a prosperous farmer near Taneytown who had emigrated from Belfast only five years earlier with his wife and eight children (see Mary Ann Ashcraft, "Starting Over," *Carroll History Journal*, Winter 2011). John Barnett considered himself Birney's peer, as can be seen by the subjects he wrote about.

> *I do little in the Jockying now, but your old friend Arthur is still working away as You left him, & is got very rich. . . . You have the advantage of me respecting an encrease of family since you left this [country], we have had only One, now four years old, & Mrs B. says she has stop'd payments, however I am perfectly content on that score.*

Barnett wrote about more weighty subjects, too. On the economy, he said, *"There have been more bankruptcies in Belfast within the last 18 Months than have been for a Century before."* Speculation

"had completely got the better of sound Judgment & prudence so far, as to drive Men of weak minds with too much avarice, altogether out of their depth." On foreign affairs, he showed himself to be a staunch supporter of Napoleon:

> *Our Wise & benevolent Government, aided by the magnanimous allies & friends of Brittain, all Justly intitled to the appellation of the liberators of the human race, . . . are now giving liberty to the French, by depriving them of a Man they like* [i.e., Napoleon], *the greatest who ever appear'd upon the Earth in our days, & forcing upon them a weak imbecile old Dotard* [Louis XVIII], *both in body & intellect.*

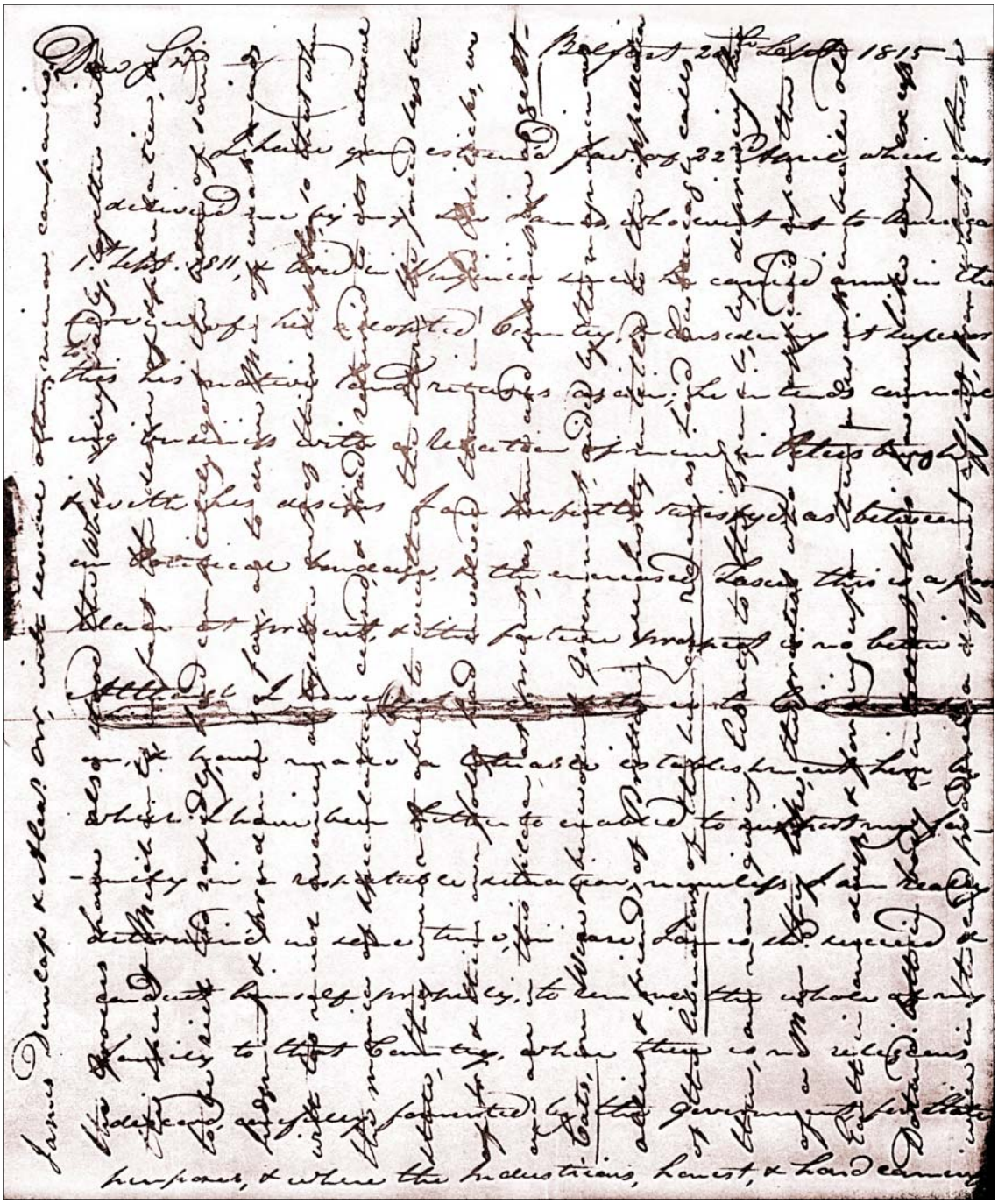

Figure 1

Barnett's main purpose in writing was to convey some important personal information. His son James, who had emigrated to Virginia in 1811, had "*carried arms in the service of his adopted Country, & considering it superior to this his native land, . . . intends commencing business with a relation of mine in Petersburgh.*" Barnett asked Birnie to expect a visit from James after taking care of some business in Baltimore: "*It is to recover £81-odd due to me by a Man who now resides there, in good circumstances (as I am inform'd).*" James would then deliver some papers Birnie had requested concerning property he still owned in Ireland:

> *The Papers . . . are now well executed as Mr Ramsey took very great pains to adhere to the directions given by your Agent, & I hope they will serve the purpose you expect. Mr Ramsey refused accepting any money but says if ever you & he*

> *meet he will take a glass of any thing the place can produce for his trouble, & he wishes you every success—*

In closing, Barnett assured Birnie that his land would continue to furnish income:

> *I entertain no idea of your eventually losing any rent for the time past, on that place, as I think the Assignee is accountable, . . . however Mr Napier* [Birnie's agent] *you know is easy alarm'd but you may rest satisfy'd no execution of mine shall be awanting for your interest—*

Figure 2: Portrait of John Keats by William Hilton the Younger. Courtesy of PD-Art.

Here is the question that concerns us now. Why, if the subjects were so important to Birnie, did Barnett resort to an odd writing format that made it so much harder to read the information?

It is difficult to begin researching this type of letter without a specific name for the form. The word criss-cross comes to mind, but modern dictionaries don't provide much guidance. The website Dictionary.com defines crisscross as 'having many crossing lines, paths, etc.' Merriam-Webster.com adds the interesting information that the phrase comes from Christ-cross and dates its first use as a verb to 1818, with the adjective form coming later in 1840.

Older dictionaries are more helpful. Although the 1925 *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* does not say much about crisscross ('Disposed in crossing lines'), it does suggest a synonym: *crossed*. Sure enough, under Cross, the sixth definition finally describes the sort of thing we see in Barnett's letter to Birnie, namely, 'to write lines across (what has been written); to write (a letter) in this way'. Better yet, that citation provides an example from literature: " *'Augusta was crossing a note to her bosom friend.'* A. Trollope." The source for that citation is Trollope's 1861 novel *Barchester Towers*. The context depicts a tranquil domestic scene: *"Her daughters were around her. Olivia was reading a novel, Augusta was crossing a note to her bosom friend in Baker Street* [Sherlock Holmes?], *and Netta was working diminutive coach wheels for the bottom of a petticoat."* In its definition of "cross," *The Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] adds a citation from a letter written in 1850 by Jane Welsh Carlyle: *"A letter* [came] *this morning from Mrs. Macready, two little sheets all crossed!"*

Those two examples come from several decades after the letter to Clotworthy Birnie and suggest a more feminine practice, unlike the more practical, informative letter from John Barnett. Fortunately, the OED provides a much earlier citation, one that gets us back to Barnett's era, in its source for the verb criss-cross. In a letter dated March 14, 1818, the 22-year-old poet John Keats wrote to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds and asked him to imagine a longer letter than the one he had time to write: *"I wish I had a little bit of innocent Metaphysic in my head, to criss-cross the letter. . . . If you think for five minutes after having read this, you will find a long letter and see written in the Air above you, Your most affectionate friend, John Keats."*

Apparently Keats crossed his letters often. The editor of a modern edition of Keats's letters warns readers that a shortcoming of printed transcriptions of hand-written letters *"is the inability of modern typography to capture what Keats called the 'chequer work' of a 'crossed' letter. To save on postage, Keats frequently turned the sheet of paper on its side and added another page of writing across the path of the first."* Such was Keats's skill that he would construct visual puns in which, in one example, the crossed text dips into the lines exactly where the word "*dip*" appears. *"In cases like this where the medium plays a significant role in the message, the modern scholarly edition is helpless to render the unique features of Keats's 'living hand.' "*

It is a shame we can't see Keats's clever letters ourselves, but at least we now know another term for crossing a letter: *chequer-work*. And that leads us to other interesting examples of the form. Jane Austen, in her popular novel *Emma*, wrote in 1815:

> *I really must, in justice to Jane, apologise for her writing so short a letter —only two pages you see —hardly two —and in general she fills the whole paper and crosses half. My mother often wonders that I can make it out so well. She often says, when the letter is first opened, 'Well, Hetty, now I think you will be put to it to make out all that chequer-work.'*

So now we are back to the main issue. Why use this method of letter writing if it can present such a barrier to easy reading? According to the British Postal Museum, the answer has to do with the use to which postage was put in Britain during the Napoleonic era. The cost of the war against the French emperor was so high that the British government resorted to a number of methods to raise money. Not only did they raise taxes, they also instituted a complex set of rules regarding postage. Letters were charged according to the number of pages they contained and the distance they were to travel. Add a sheet and one doubled the cost. Three pages tripled it. Moreover, it was the letter's recipient who paid, so no wonder the concerned, frugal, and polite letter writer crossed his or her letter. Some writers were so economical that they triple-crossed their letters, adding a diagonal set of lines to the horizontal and vertical ones!

Not surprisingly, mechanisms for raising revenue do not always disappear after the need that created them is satisfied. Such was the case with British postal rates and helps explain why Clotworthy Birnie could receive, as late as 1829, long after the end of the Napoleonic wars, another crossed letter, this time from one Matthew Steele of Lancashire, England. (Figure 3) It is clear from Steele's four-page letter, one page of which was crossed, that he was not a close friend of Birnie's, as John Barnett had been. Theirs was more of a business arrangement. Steele had recently sold Birnie some cattle, which he shipped to Maryland, and had received word back that the bull had died.

> *On receipt of your Letter enforming me of the misfortune of the Bull going out I went out to the Person who I purchased them from and let him see your Letter. he promised to let me have my Choice of four that he let me see in case your Heffer had not a Bull Calf. he is a very reputable Man and said if I took one from him he would consider your loss in the Bull in the fine he would charge. . . . I am only sorry that the Bull died as he was as Beautifull a Creature as I ever seen.*

Steele did chat about his personal life a bit:

> *Mrs Steele enjoys the best of Health. we have now a very Sweet Cottage in the Country 1½ Miles out of Town with a good Garden and close by the river Mercy where every Ship that passes in or out of Liverpool we may count the people on Deck. . . . I have been makeing very well in My Business for some years past but in 1828 was the best I ever have experienced. . . . I am truly thankfull to God for his goodness to me in placing me and mine in our happy State here. I know that I am a little Gay for a Man of my age. that is I am fond of Horse racing and ever was but untill lately I had not the means or time to endulge in it. . . . I do not like to have Crossed Letters my self therefore conclude my Dear Sir wishing You every happyness in this life.*

The British postal system was ripe for reform. As rates had continued to rise, members of Parliament, who were exempt from paying postage, began to act as middle men for their friends who needed letters sent. Other people resented how the privileged could duck the charges and clamored for reform. Finally, in 1837 Sir Rowland Hill published a pamphlet advocating pre-payment as a way of curbing the abuses. Instead of charging the recipient an amount based on the number of pages and the distance involved, the sender—indeed, all senders, without exception—would pay a low fee up front to mail a letter.

Eliza Leslie, a mid-century writer on etiquette, summed up the effect of the new postal system on chequer-work in her *Behaviour Book: A Manual for Ladies*:

> *Crossing a letter all over with transverse lines is obsolete. It is intolerable to read, and there is no*

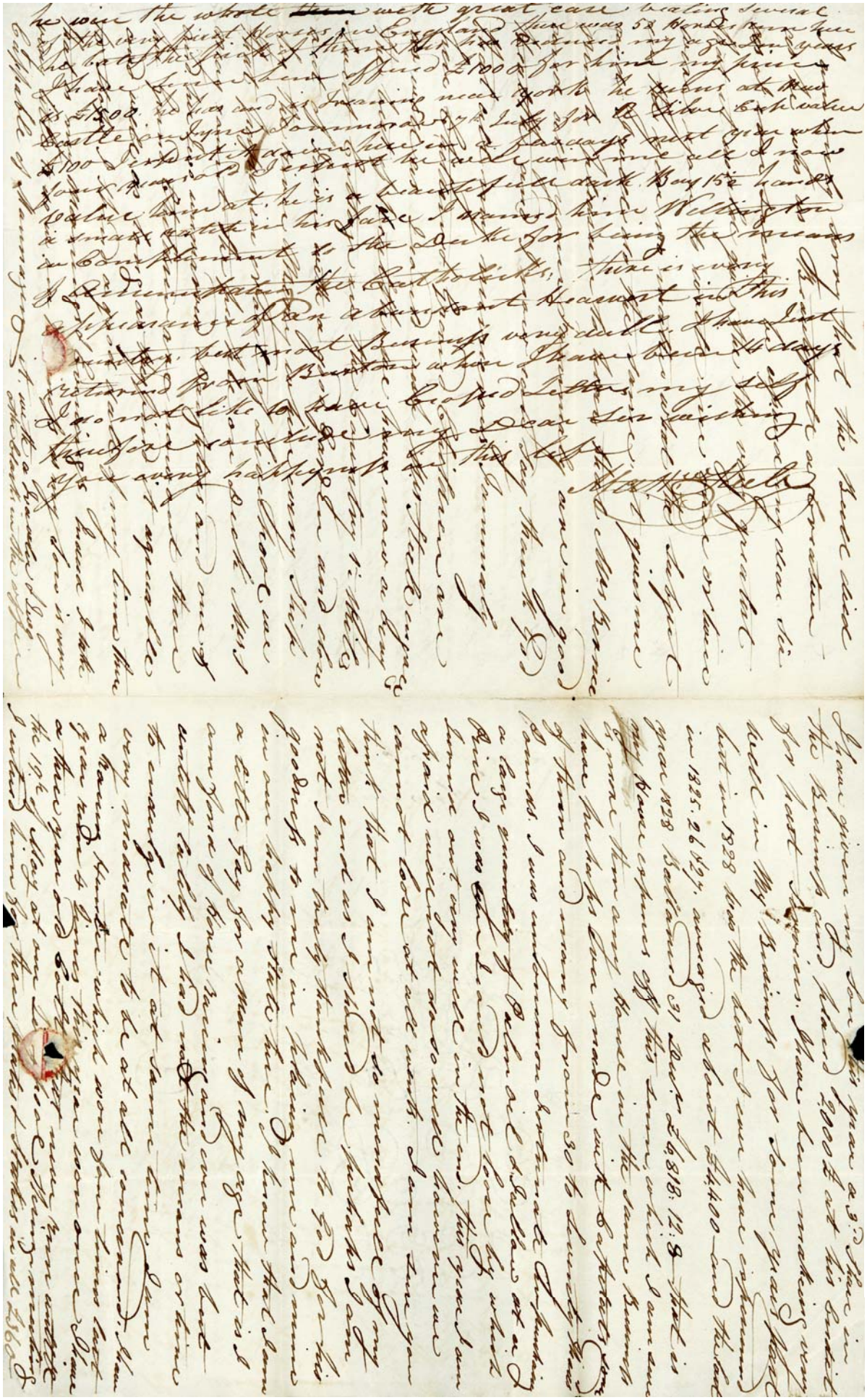

Figure 3

> *excuse for it now, when postage is so low, and every body pays their own.*

Yet the habit of crossing letters did not disappear overnight. Even if hard-nosed businessmen abandoned criss-crossed letters in favor of readability, the more stylish and creative world of women's correspondence refused to let the practice go. Lord George in the 1827 novel *Almack's* protested:

> *I have often wondered what the deuce women can find to write about: such crossed sheets! one ought to be paid for deciphering their chequer-work.*

Women reproved themselves when they could not give it up. Mary Ritford wrote in 1870 in *Our Village*:

> *I had fallen into a silly fashion of crossing, not uncommon amongst young ladies; so that my letter, first written horizontally like other people's, then perpendicularly to form a sort of chequer-work, then diagonally in red ink,—the very crossings crossed!—and every nook and cranny, the part under the seal, the corner where the date stood, covered with small lines in an invisible hand, the whole letter became a mass of mysterious marks, a puzzle like a Coptic inscription.*

Finally, around the turn of the 20th century, after a barrage of etiquette advice—*"Crossing a letter is quite unpardonable"; "Crossing a letter spoils the appearance of good caligraphy"; "Crossing a page . . . makes the writing hard to read and produces an unpleasant impression"*—people began to look upon it with nostalgia as a thing of the past:

> *Another bundle of torn, faded, and often weather-stained papers came out of my grandmother's box. They are the love-letters of a young pioneer . . . very different from the love-letters a girl would write to-day—these closely-crossed sheets traced in a delicate, pointed handwriting, and expressed with a quaint sobriety, a certain sweet stiffness which gives them an odd charm savouring of the last century, of Jane Austen, and the days of short waists and beaver hats—all curiously out of keeping with the savage passions let loose in the bush.* [*My Australian Girlhood*]

Today, as instant messaging and status updates have replaced even email, the very words chequer-work and criss-cross letters have faded from our usage, leaving us to marvel at the examples of the lost art of hand-written letters we find in our Historical Society's archives.

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About the Author: Sam Brainerd received his doctorate in American History from the University of Maryland in 1998 and began a career as an historical editor, studying the thousands of letters left by Charles Carroll of Carrollton. After giving a Box Lunch Talk on Carroll's son Charles in 2004, Sam was invited to join the Board of Trustees of the HSCC and form a Publications Committee. He served as editor of the *Carroll History Journal* through 2014.

V-MAIL: SOLVING A WEIGHTY PROBLEM

BY JAY A. GRAYBEAL

Figure 1: *Be with him at every mail call: V-Mail is private, reliable, patriotic.* Courtesy of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center.

The armed forces have long understood the positive impact that receiving and sending mail has on service personnel. They have also struggled with the task of delivering the vast quantities of mail to and from soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines.

During World War II, mail was important for morale but had to compete with critical war materiel for space on board transport ships heading to the various theaters of war. To solve this problem, the War Department developed V-Mail, short for Victory Mail. A writer used a pre-printed letter sheet that included spaces for the addresses and a one-page message. The message was censored and sent to a center for microfilming. The rolls of microfilm were then sent overseas where each letter was printed at 60% of the original size, inserted into an envelope and delivered to the recipient. The National Postal Museum described the savings: "The 37 mail bags required to carry 150,000 one-page letters could be replaced by a single mail sack. The weight of that same amount of mail was reduced dramatically from 2,575 pounds to a mere 45." With millions of men and women in uniform, the saved tonnage was enormous.

The first mention of V-Mail in the Carroll County press appeared on the front page of *The Times* newspaper on July 24, 1942:

THE USE OF V-MAIL

Persons in the United States desiring to use the special letter-sheet (V-Mail) envelopes, may obtain same at your local post office or from your rural letter carrier.

These special letter sheets are to be used only to and from the armed forces outside the continental United States.

The postage of V-Mail letters sent by others than members of the armed forces is 3 cents each when transmission to ports of embarkation by ordinary mail is desired. Such messages may be sent as Air Mail at the rate of 6 cents each. Postage must be prepaid by stamps affixed.

The address on V-Mail intended for members of the armed forces stationed outside the continental United States must include the rank or rating of the addressee, the unit to which attached, and the APO or naval address through which the addressee receives mail.

No more than three V-Mail letter-sheet envelopes will be furnished any patron at one time or in any one day.

Members of the armed forces stationed abroad will be furnished without charge V-Mail letter-sheets through the War and Navy Departments and will deposit their V-Mail letters in designated mail depositories in Army or Navy post offices, without the payment of postage.

The newspaper article was part of a larger effort to promote the use of V-Mail. The War Department also oversaw the production of patriotic posters hung in public and work places. One example, *Be with him at every mail call: V-Mail is private, reliable, patriotic,* shows a young woman composing a letter with a group of GIs receiving mail in the background. It was produced by the Army's Recruiting Publicity Bureau for the War Department in January 1945. (Figure 1)

The Historical Society owns several collections of letters sent by servicemen. Each collection includes more traditional mail than V-mail, suggesting the servicemen preferred writing longer letters or that perhaps there were issues in obtaining letter sheets or processing V-Mail. Unfortunately, the collections do not include any V-Mails received by the servicemen from loved ones at home.

An example of a completed V-Mail letter sheet survives in the papers of Yeoman First Class Robert Luther Erb, Jr., of Westminster. (Figure 2) The front side shows a Christmas message with a sketch of Erb's ship, the USS *Mona Island* in place of a written message, along with a censor stamp and the sender and recipient addresses. (Figure 3) Illustrated V-Mails were often provided to service personnel. The reverse includes instructions, a censor stamp, addresses, and the postmark of December 13, 1944. (Figure 4) Erb enlisted in the Navy on December 8, 1942, and his service took him to Cuba, the Gilbert Islands, Panama, the Marshall Islands, and Okinawa. He was honorably discharged on April 6, 1946.

Technician Fifth Class Ralph Grant Brown, formerly of Westminster but then living in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, was drafted and on November 2, 1942, was inducted into the Army (Figure 5) He initially trained as an infantryman but was transferred to an ordnance unit and trained to repair motor vehicles. Most of his service was with the 120th Ordnance Company (Medium Maintenance) in the southwest Pacific.

Figure 2: Yeoman First Class Robert Luther Erb, Jr.

The earliest V-Mail in the Brown collection, dated April 19, 1943, was sent to his mother, Mrs. George R. Brown who lived near Westminster.

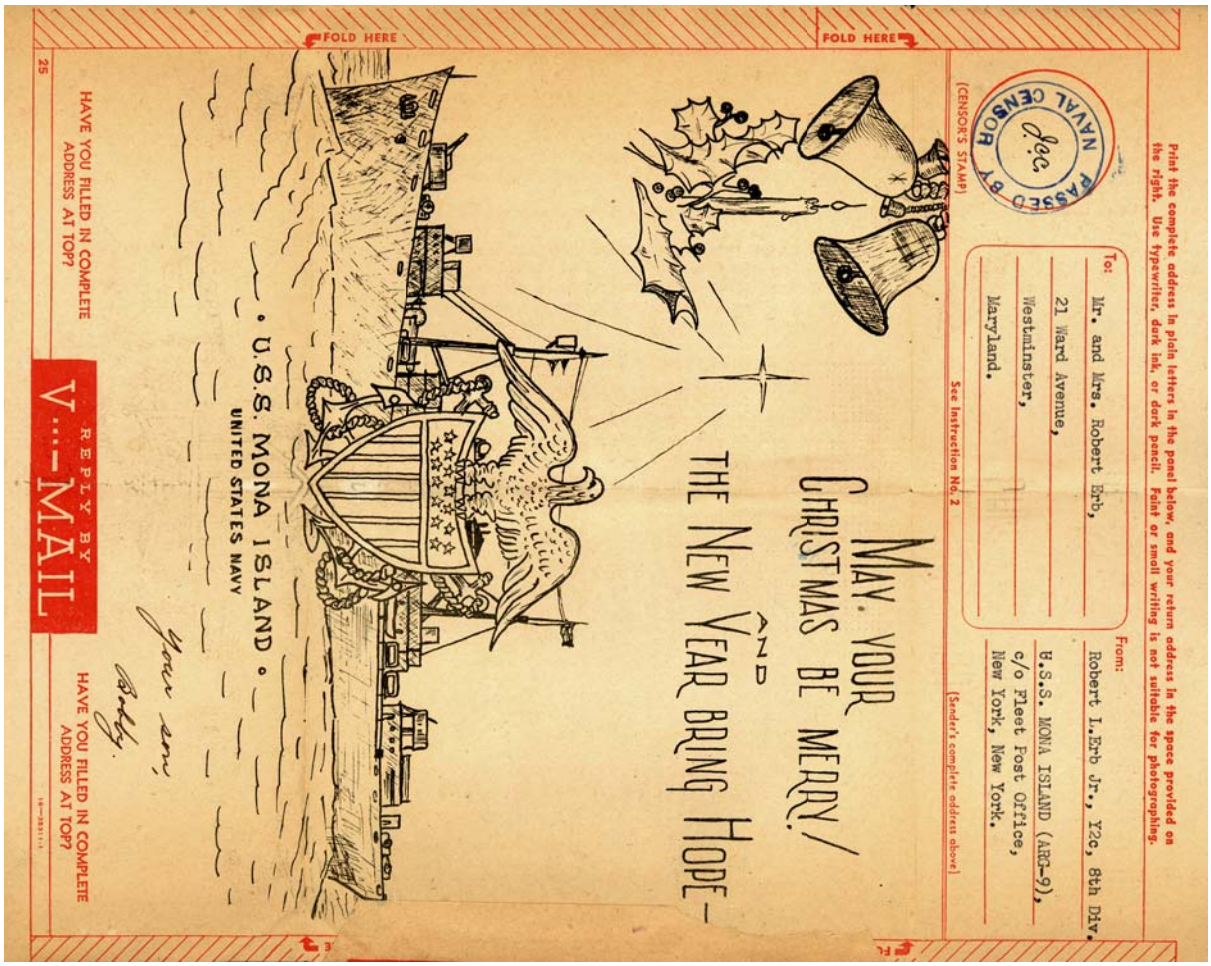
Dear Mother,

I am on an Island in the South West Pacific. The Natives here are all black.

The boat trip to here was terrible but I didn't get sea sick. Here on the Island it rains at least 1 hour every day. We live in tents. Mother is Henery still in the States yet or has he been sent across? I hope he is still in the good old U.S. and never has to come over here. People back home have no idea what it is like over here or they would never be any strikes back home in the mills and factories. Well Mother I am well, I hope I can stay that way too. How is everyone back home? I have a new A.P.O. number instead of 3535 it is 913 all the rest of the address is the same.

Mother all V mail gets here first even faster than air mail. Mother I have crossed the Equator and also the dateline and "boy" was it hot and it is very hot here, the only things I wear is shoes and a pair of pants no shirt or any thing else it doesn't even get cold at nights it just stays hot. Mother I don't have much time to write but you keep in touch with Violet and just incase anything does happen let her know.

With love from your loving Son Ralph



Figures 3 and 4: V-mail letter sheet from Yeoman First Class Robert Luther Erb, Jr.

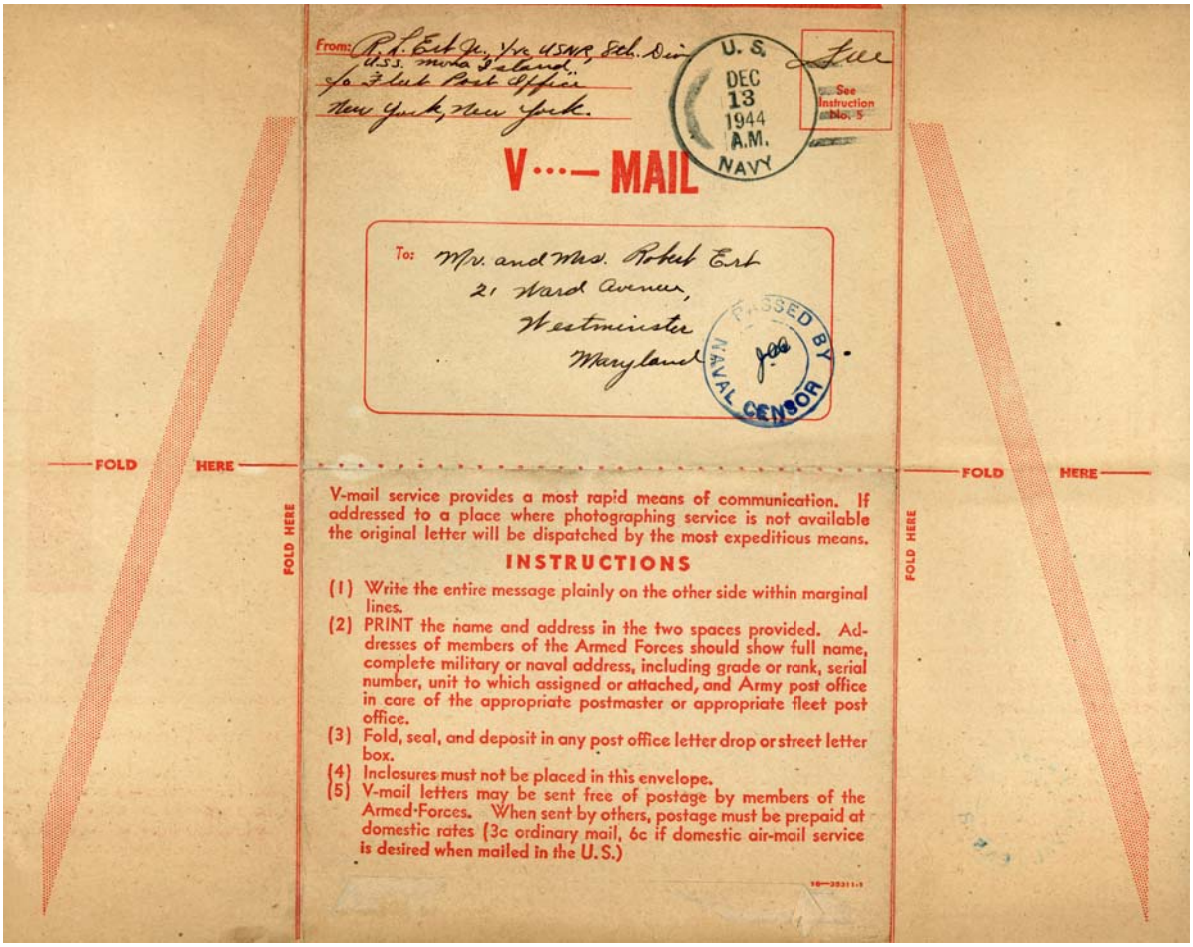


Figure 5: Technician 5th Class Ralph G. Brown

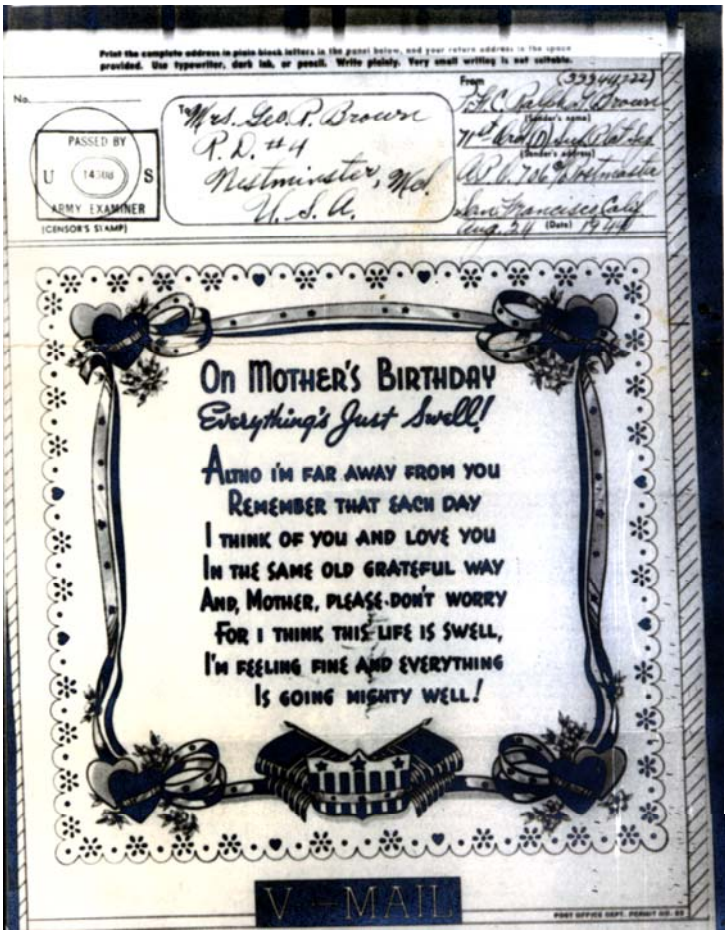


Figure 6: Birthday Card V-mail from Ralph G. Brown to his mother. The original letter was not straight when it was photographed so it appears crooked on the final V-Mail. The V-Mail is 5.25" high x 4.5" wide.

Mrs. Brown received a typed letter from her son's chaplain, First Lieutenant Hiram D. Stephens, dated May 9, 1943, and written "In The South Pacific," describing his duties and the importance of mail to the soldiers:

> *You no doubt have never stood around a group of men at the daily "Mail Call" and watched those young men who received letters go away with a happy contented smile, and then watched, on the other hand, those that have not received any thing for seferal days go away with heads bowed and a "they forgot me" expression on their faces. It is pathetic. Please do not neglect to write, although you may not have received an answer from your last letter. If you are not receiving mail as you should, because of neglect, we will do our best to see that your loved one writes more often.*

Ralph Brown wrote to his brother, Charles, on May 19, 1943:

> *Hell Charley,*
>
> *Well boy I hear you are now working on liberty ships, well be sure and build them right because I may come home on one of them you are helping to build and I don't want to get half way across and that baby break into because there is a lot of water to cross between here and home. Charley remember the night we all got drunk and killed and fried and tried to eat Lockard's old rouster, and the time I gave Barney and Coane the ride? Boy they were the good old days. Charley you may be working hard and long hours now but the first week I am home you won't be because you, Helen, and Violet*

and I are going to go on a trip together for the week and I hope you know why too don't you? Charley yesterday I got 8 letters from her at one time. Well Charley you and Helen write as often as you can and I will do the same say hello to all for me.

Your ole Pal Ralph

Brown's ordnance unit moved from the Fiji Islands to the southern Philippines in January 1944. He described the new conditions in a V-Mail to his mother dated January 19, 1944:

Hello Mother,

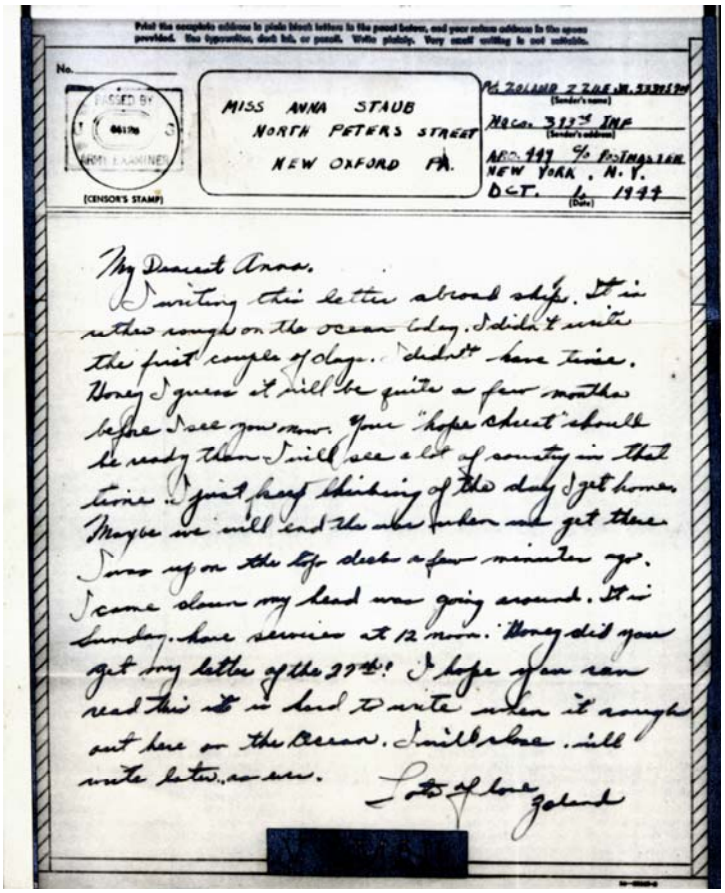
Well I am on another Island now and it sure is a change from Fiji Isles at least when we went to bed there we could sleep but here the Japs like to make us hit our fox holes, I have been in several bombing raids since I have been here but I am still O.K. and all in one piece, Mother I though[t] Fiji had jungles but they are nothing like we have here and I never knew there were so many different kind and as many of them. We can tell a Jap plane by its sound, their motors sound like my old Ford and we can hear them coming miles away and maybe we don't dive in our fox holes even tho they are half full of water we go in just the same and damn glad to have a hole to get in. Mother tell the family that I can't write to all of them now but you keep in touch with Violet as I am only writing to the two of you.

So long with love Ralph

A final example in the Brown collection shows another way V-Mail was used to send an illustrated message, in this case, a birthday card. The unit chaplain was often responsible for providing the letter sheets and encouragement to the soldiers. (Figure 6)

Brown participated in the Northern Solomons and Southern Philippines Campaigns and was honorably discharged on January 3, 1946. He married his sweetheart, Violet B. Duffy, exactly one week later.

Zoland Zachariah Zile, Jr., born in Taylorsville, was drafted and inducted into the Army on November 25, 1942. He was initially trained as an infantryman and also received radio training. He was assigned to the 395th Infantry Regiment, 99th Infantry Division. and sent overseas to the European theatre on September 30, 1944. His collection includes only one V-Mail, a letter dated October 1, 1944, to his sweetheart, Anna Staub, of New Oxford, Pennsylvania (Figure 7):


MISS ANNA STAUB
NORTH PETERS STREET
NEW OXFORD PA.

[CENSOR'S STAMP]

NEW YORK, N.Y.
OCT. 1 1944

My Dearest Anna.
I writing this letter aboard ship. It is rather rough on the ocean today. I didn't write the first couple of days. I didn't have time. Honey I guess it will be quite a few months before I see you now. Your "hope chest" should be ready then. I will see a lot of country in that time. I just keep thinking of the day I get home. Maybe we will end the war when we get there. I was up on the top deck a few minutes ago. I came down my head was going around. It is Sunday, have services at

Figure 7: V-mail letter from Zoland Z. Zile, Jr., to Anna Staub, dated October 1, 1944.

My Dearest Anna,

I [am] *writing this letter aboard ship. It is rather rough on the ocean today. I didn't write the first couple of days. I didn't have time. Honey I guess it will be quite a few months before I see you now. Your "hope chest" should be ready then. I will see a lot of country in that time. I just keeping thinking of the day I get home. Maybe we will end the war when we get there. I was up on the top deck a few minutes ago. I came down my head was going around. It is Sunday, have services at*

12 noon. Honey did you get my letter of the 27th? I hope you can read this it is hard to write when it [is] *rough out here on the ocean. I will close, will write later, as ever.*

Lots of love Zoland

Figure 8: Zoland Zile and Anna Staub on their wedding day, June 22, 1946.

Technician Fifth Class Zile's untested division was assigned to what was considered a quiet sector in the Ardennes in Belgium. The Germans launched a surprise attack on December 16, 1944, and the 99th Infantry Decision suffered heavy casualties in what became known as the Battle of the Bulge. Zile was wounded on December 17 but was still in action two days later when he earned a Bronze Star Medal. He was with his unit through the Rhineland and Central Europe campaigns and honorably discharged on January 15, 1946. He married Anna in New Oxford on June 22, 1946. (Figure 8)

The use of V-Mail provided an efficient way for families to correspond with service personnel around the world. The surviving V-Mails are a legacy of the men and women who served their nation during World War II and a prized part of the historical society's manuscript collection.

About the Author: Jay Graybeal was the curator and director of the Historical Society from 1988-2002. He has worked for the U.S. Army since 2002 and is the Chief Curator of the Army Heritage Museum, U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Jay is currently a member of the Historical Society's Board of Trustees and chairs the Collections Committee.

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