

A Spectacular Lincoln Cover

By: Bob Lewin



It is always a privilege to have the opportunity to hold a rare and spectacular philatelic item – to be able to acquire it is like finding that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. And when the item presents challenges that require original research, it becomes even more special. I was fortunate enough to have such an experience at a local stamp show when one of my favorite cover dealers showed me the first day cover shown here. It was addressed to “M. Culver, 520 Forest Ave., Royal Oak, Mich.” and postmarked in Washington, DC on October 20, 1938.

The “oohs” and “aahs” from my companion quickly drew a small crowd, and soon several hundred years of collective philatelic experience were analyzing the cover. No one had seen anything like it. Although portions of the cover – the bridge and hillside – at first appeared to be a photograph, magnification proved that the entire cover was hand painted in exquisite detail. Perhaps the artist used one of the special one-hair brushes used by those who paint miniatures. The cameo of Lincoln’s head, in particular, is simply amazing, while the colorful, remaining artwork produced an overall design that is stunning.

Further examination made it clear that the cachet was painted *after* the block of four Lincoln stamps had received an official “First Day of Issue” cancellation. Yet the cover appeared to be entirely “of the period,” and additional research has verified that it was most certainly serviced by the artist with the intent of painting the cachet shortly after the cover was canceled, traveled through the mails, and was delivered. I have studied early hand-painted cachet makers extensively and published articles on the topic,¹ but I had never seen hand-painted artwork of this quality prior to 1979, when Freda Dickey-Weaver did her first cachet for Scott 1787.²

As I wrote my check to the dealer with shaking hands, the questions raised by the experienced group around me flooded my thoughts. Who created this masterpiece? Was the “Culver” addressee related to the Union soldier shown to the left of Lincoln’s cameo? Would I ever be able to figure it out?

¹ See, Bob Lewin, “The Magnificent Covers of Ejgil J.S. Halvorsen,” *First Days*, Vol. 52, No. 8 (December 1, 2007): 11–27; Bob Lewin, “Ejgil J.S. Halvorsen – Our Greatest Pioneer,” *First Days*, Vol. 55, No.8 (December 1, 2010): 11–31.

² Halvorsen, Dyer, Knapp, Laffert, and perhaps a few Art Cover Exchange artists are known to have been painting cachets by 1938, but none were this good. Likewise, nobody since then has painted cachets with this style and quality. Clearly, we had an undiscovered artist.

Analysis began with the soldier identified on the cover as “Martin Van Buren Culver / 16th Regt. Conn. Vols. USA.” Using a trial subscription to Ancestry.com, I was able to track him down. Martin V. Culver, of Rocky Hill, CT,³ enlisted as a private in Infantry Company A, Sixteenth Regiment Infantry, Connecticut Volunteers on August 18, 1862. He was captured on April 20, 1864, was a Prisoner of War at the newly constructed Camp Sumpter, Georgia, remembered as the infamous Andersonville Prison.⁴ Martin survived the horrors of Andersonville, and mustered out of the Army at the war’s end from Newbern, North Carolina on June 24, 1865.⁵

However, my elation quickly turned to frustration as Martin’s trail turned ice-cold. Plenty of Martin Culvers showed up in the records, but none was the Connecticut Civil War veteran. Still, at least I had managed to validate that a portion of the cover was accurate. Perhaps the addressee was the artist, I thought, as I gave up and went to bed.

Our minds will do wonderful things for us, if we let them. I awoke with the strong feeling that I had seen the hand-writing of the address with the Culver name somewhere. I attacked my copies of *First Days*. Sure enough, near the top of the stack, was the April 15, 2010 issue, with a first day cover addressed to Miss Shirley Culver at the same address in Royal Oak and in the same handwriting. It, too, was postmarked in Washington, DC, but two years earlier on December 15, 1936. The beautiful artwork had many similarities to my Lincoln cover, and with such lovely penmanship, surely Miss Shirley was my artist – it was just a matter of finding her.

Back to Ancestry.com, and a little work soon produced gold. The 1930 Census listed a Shirley Culver at 520 Forest Ave., Royal Oak, Michigan; however, she was only five years old!⁶ The rest of the information on the census schedule filled in the blanks. Shirley was the daughter of Harold and Nettie Culver. Harold L. Culver, head of household, was the son of a Connecticut-born father and a Canadian-born mother. Bingo! After the Civil War, Martin fell off the U.S. grid when he went to Canada, fell in love with a Canadian woman, married, and fathered Harold. Thus, Miss Shirley Culver was the granddaughter of Martin V.B. Culver, Civil War veteran.

³ This is most likely the scene of the bridge and hillside depicted on the cover.

⁴ Built to hold 10,000 Federal prisoners, at its most crowded the prison stockade housed 32,000 men. Of the more than 45,000 Union soldiers who were interned there during its fourteen months of existence, 12,920 died of disease resulting primarily from poor sanitation, malnutrition, overcrowding and exposure to the elements.

⁵ See www.Ancestry.com, *Catalogue of Connecticut volunteer organizations, (Infantry, Cavalry, and Artillery) in the service of the United States, 1861-1865* (online database).

⁶ See www.Ancestry.com, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Population Schedule*.

The last piece of the puzzle was a gift. Harold's occupation was listed as "Engraver in a Union Shop." Being familiar with the work of Czeslaw Slania, the world's foremost engraver of postage stamps, I concluded that, as an engraver, Harold clearly had both artistic skill and the ability to work in minute detail. It seems reasonable to assume that he serviced the Lincoln cover with the intent to honor his father, and preserve a piece of family history for his daughter. Shortly after the serviced cover was delivered,⁷ he carefully painted the cachet, and the cover remained in the family until recently.⁸

Based on the artwork and the handwriting, as well as the time frame, it is probable that he also painted the four First Day covers issued for the Army-Navy series in 1936 and illustrated in the 2010 article by Eric Wile in *First Days*.⁹ But regardless of what other cachets Harold may have created, this Lincoln cover remains an outstanding example of philatelic artwork, and the journey of discovery for this cover makes it very special indeed.



⁷ By 1938 it was not unusual for a cachet artist to paint a serviced cover after it was delivered intact. After all, why spend the time on artwork if there was a chance that the Post Office would damage or deface the cover? Dorothy Knapp, for example, did most of her covers in this fashion.

⁸ Nettie Culver, Harold's wife and Shirley's mother, passed away on December 12, 1991, one month shy of her 104th birthday.

⁹ Eric Wile, "Helping Someone in Need," *First Days*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (April 15, 2010): 11–13.