

**Guide to the Fort Monroe Telegrams, 1862
MS0413**

**The Mariners' Museum Library
At
Christopher Newport University**

Contact Information:

The Mariners' Museum Library

100 Museum Drive

Newport News, VA 23606

Phone: (757) 591-7782

Fax: (757) 591-7310

Email: library@MarinersMuseum.org

URL: <http://www.MarinersMuseum.org/library>

Processed by Bill Edwards-Bodmer, May 2010

DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY

Repository: The Mariners' Museum Library

Title: Fort Monroe Telegrams

Inclusive Dates: 1862 February

Catalog number: MS0413

Physical Characteristics: 2 telegrams

Language: English

Creators: United States. Military Telegraph Corps; Wool, John Ellis, 1784-1869; O'Brien, Richard H., 1839-1923; O'Brien, John Emmet

SCOPE AND CONTENT:

This collection consists of two telegrams from Fort Monroe in February 1862. The telegrams offer a unique look into Union operations in southeastern Virginia in early 1862 before the famous Battle of Hampton Roads.

The first telegram, 34 lines, was most likely from General John Wool, commanding officer at Fort Monroe at the time, to General George McClellan, commander-in-chief of Union forces. McClellan had sent Wool a message on February 21, 1862 informing Wool that the *Monitor* would arrive at Fort Monroe shortly and asking Wool how many troops he would need to take Norfolk and Yorktown. The 34 line telegram in this collection is most likely Wool's response to McClellan's inquiry. In the telegram, Wool stated how many troops and batteries, along with horses and harnesses, he would need for such operations. He also stated that he would need the cooperation of the Navy in taking the two cities. This telegram was most likely written sometime in the period of February 21-22 and, as it appears to be a response by Wool to McClellan, it would be an outgoing telegram.

The second telegram, a 7 line message written on the back of the first telegram, was also composed in February 1862 and relates to a planned prisoner exchange between General Wool and Confederate General Benjamin Huger. Wool informed Huger on February 13, 1862 that he had been authorized to confer with Confederates to formulate a plan for the exchanges. On February 20, Huger informed Wool that General Howell Cobb, brigade commander in the Department of the Peninsula, had been designated to meet with Wool to discuss the prisoner exchange. This telegram relays the same information as Huger's February 20 message to Wool. The telegram was also most likely written sometime in the period of February 21-22 and appears to be outgoing as well.

The heading "Burmah" at the beginning of the second telegram is a line designation code telling the telegraph operator how many lines would be in the decoded message. This particular code word was used by Military Telegraph Corps operators in 1862 and appears in several different coded messages included in the Official Record. While the word "Andes" in message does not appear in known code lists of the two Federal cipher codes used by telegraph operators in 1862, it does appear in a private code used by William H. Heiss of the American Telegraph Company and it refers to General Wool.

At the time these telegrams were composed, the telegraph operator at Fort Monroe was Richard O'Brien, and his assistant was his younger brother, John O'Brien. These telegrams are most likely written in the hand of one of the O'Brien brothers.

This collection is organized into a single series, arranged chronologically

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Accession Number

MS0413

Accession Date

2008

Restrictions

The collection is open to all researchers.

Publication Rights

Copies of any materials may not be reproduced, published, or distributed in any form without the expressed permission of The Mariners' Museum.

Preferred Citation

Fort Monroe Telegrams, 1862, MS0413, The Mariners' Museum Library

Note to Users

Due to the fragile and rare nature of the collection, researchers are requested to handle the materials with caution and in accordance with prescribed archival practices. When using these materials, please preserve the original order of the collection.

BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL SKETCH

The U.S. Military Telegraph Corps was initiated in the first days of the Civil War. Secretary of War Simon Cameron sought the aid of Thomas A. Scott of the Pennsylvania Railroad in creating the service. He in turn enlisted the help of David Strouse of the American Telegraph Company, who extended his company's lines from Pennsylvania to the War Department in Washington, DC. Formal executive sanction of the Corps came in October 1861 from Abraham Lincoln. Congress permitted the establishment in January 1862, and the President took control of all telegraph lines in the United States. The Corps trained all its operators and all but 3 of its officers. Technically, the Corps was under the control of the Quartermaster's Department but practically reported to the Secretary of War. Telegraphy from the field was initially under the Signal Corps but was transferred to the Military Telegraph in February, 1864. When the Civil War ended the Military Telegraph supervised the restoration of commercial telegraph lines in the South, but then control was relinquished both in the South and in the North to private companies. The Corps was disbanded, and the last officer left his duty station at the War Department in 1869.

John Ellis Wool was born in 1784. A veteran of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, Wool was responsible for keeping Fort Monroe in Federal hands at the outbreak of the Civil War. He commanded the Department of Virginia from Fort Monroe until June 2, 1862.

Richard O'Brien was born in Ireland in 1839. He came to the United States with his family in 1851 and began work in telegraphy with the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1856, quickly rising to chief operator. At the outbreak of Civil War, O'Brien sent to Washington, DC and became one of the founding members of the U.S. Military Telegraph Corps. In November 1861, O'Brien was assigned to Fort Monroe. Shortly thereafter he was joined by his brother John and the two O'Briens ran telegraph communications at the fort. Later in life, John O'Brien published his memoirs entitled *Telegraphing in Battle: Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Scranton, Pa. :[The Raeder Press, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.] 1910).

William H. Heiss was a superintendent for the American Telegraph Company and was tasked with constructing an underwater telegraph cable that ran between Fort Monroe and Cherrystone Point on the Eastern Shore. This cable was completed in March 1862. He was also tasked with completing an underwater line between Fort Monroe and Norfolk after the surrender of Norfolk in May 1862.

FILE GUIDE

Folder 1 Correspondence, February 1862

1862, Fort Monroe

Two page, 34 line telegram most likely written in the period February 21-22, 1862.

Undated, Fort Monroe

7 line telegram written on the back of the second page of the first telegram. This telegram was most likely written in the period February 21-22, 1862.

Transcription:

Burmah

General H. Cobb is authorized to arrange with Andes the exchange of prisoners Andes has notified General Hugher that he will confer with General Cobb on the subject on Tuesday at 12 o'clock etc. etc.

MATERIALS REMOVED

No materials have been removed from this collection.

SOURCES CONSULTED

- The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume IX.* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883.
- The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series II, Volume III.* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898.
- The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies, Series I, Volume VI.* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897.
- Plum, William Rattle. *The Military Telegraph during the Civil War in the United States.* New York: Arno Press, 2000.
- Sifakis, Stewart. *Who Was Who in the Confederacy: A Comprehensive, Illustrated Biographical Reference to More than 1,000 of the Principal Confederacy Participants in the Civil War.* New York: Facts on File, 1988.
- _____. *Who Was Who in the Union: A Comprehensive, Illustrated Biographical Reference to More than 1,500 of the Principal Union Participants in the Civil War.* New York: Facts on File, 1988.

SUBJECTS

Cobb, Howell, 1815-1868
 Fort Monroe (Va.)
 Heiss, William H.
 McClellan, George Brinton, 1826-1885
 Military telegraph-Virginia-Hampton Roads (Region)
 United States-History-Civil War, 1861-1865-Naval operations
 Prisoners of war-Virginia
 Peninsular Campaign, 1862