

Philatelic Genealogy: Writing Home to Missouri in World War I¹

By James R. "Jim" Miller²

About two million American soldiers, sailors, and Marines served with the American Expeditionary Forces (A.E.F.) in Europe from 1917-1919 during and just after World War I.³ An equal number served in the military in the United States.⁴ Surviving envelopes and postcards document their service and help fill gaps in World War I records due to the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center.⁵ This paper presents three postcards and an envelope sent to Missouri from France, and an envelope and letter sent within Missouri. Basic genealogical data on the sender and recipient are provided, as well as where the author found each postcard and envelope. As with any source of genealogical information, old envelopes and postcards must be studied in combination with other sources before reaching any conclusion.

Mrs. H. Selby of Kirksville, Missouri received a military "carte postale" (postcard, in French) from "Pvt. [Private] P.O. Sully, Co. [Company] F, 354th Inf[antry]" in August 1918. The postcard begins "Dear Mother" and is signed "Paul."



Figure 1A

Figures 1A and 1B: 1918 French military "carte postale" from the 354th Infantry, A.E.F. to Kirksville, Missouri with sender's name and military unit, illustration of a French cannon and flags of six allied nations, and military postmark (Author's collection)

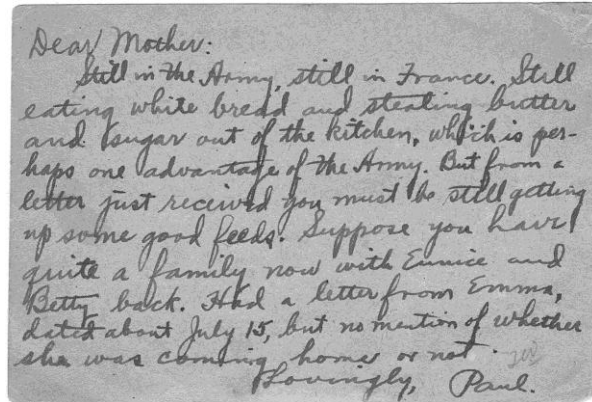


Figure 1B

Ella (Mrs. Hiram) Selby and her son Paul O. are in Kirksville in the 1910 U.S. census.⁶ The postcard, which is illustrated with a French cannon and the flags of six allied nations, has a military postmark and a censor's stamp and signature, applied after an officer read the postcard to assure it did not include information that could be useful to the German army if it fell into their hands.⁷ The postcard text mentions Eunice, Betty, and Emma. Paul had sisters named Eunice and Emma, but Betty is yet to be identified.⁸ Paul O. Selby probably obtained this postcard from a French soldier. He survived the war and is shown as a World War I veteran in the 1930 U.S. census.⁹ This postcard was purchased on eBay® for \$10.

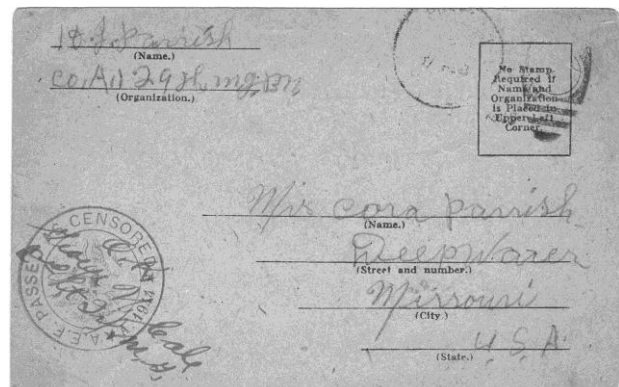


Figure 2A

Mrs. Cora Parrish of Deepwater, Missouri received a postcard from Henry J. Parrish, "Co. A, 129th M.G. Bn. [Machine Gun Battalion]" in February 1919.

A Cora Parrish and her son “James H.” are in Deepwater in the 1910 U.S. census, and an on-line family tree shows the name of Cora Parrish’s son as Henry James.¹⁰ The postcard was provided by the U.S. military and is formatted to limit the postcard’s contents to date, location, organization, state of health, and soldier’s name. Henry Parrish writes that he is in Chonville, France and “in the best of health.” The postcard has a military postmark and a censor’s stamp and signature. Henry J. Parrish survived the war and is shown as a veteran in the 1930 census.¹¹ This postcard was purchased on eBay® for \$6.

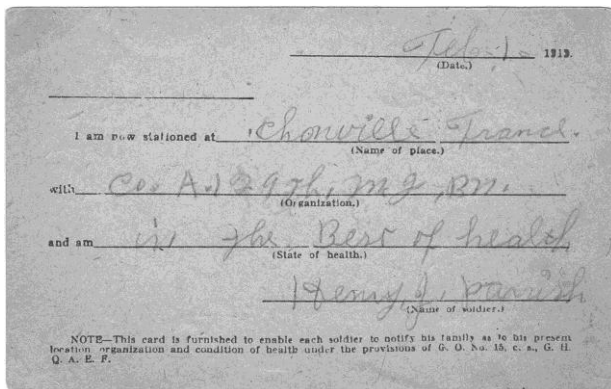


Figure 2B

Figures 2A and 2B 1919 U.S. military postcard from the 129th Machine Gun Battalion, A.E.F. to Deepwater, Missouri with censor’s stamp and signature, military postmark, and contents limited to sender’s name, military unit, location and health status (Author’s collection)

Joseph A. Maxwell of St. Louis, Missouri received a carte postale from Private John Maxwell in Libourne, France in March 1919.



Figure 3

Figure 3: 1919 “carte postale” from Libourne, France to St. Louis, Missouri with sender’s name, rank and military unit, censor’s stamp and signature, and military postmark (Author’s collection)

A Joseph and John Maxwell, brothers, are in University City (just outside St. Louis) in the 1920 U.S. census, with Joseph working as an advertising agent, consistent with the address on the postcard.¹² John Maxwell writes that he is enjoying his time in France. The postcard has a military postmark and a censor’s stamp and signature. “Soldiers Mail,” written in the upper right, was accepted in place of a stamp on mail sent by overseas military personnel from 1917 to 1920.¹³ Following his name, John Maxwell has written “Casual D., M.T.C. B.S #2” which may stand for Casual Detachment, Motor Transport Corps, Base Section 2.¹⁴ In current military terms, soldiers in a casual unit are in transit or awaiting assignment.¹⁵ The front of the postcard has a picture of a bridge in Libourne, France (viewable on *Philgen.org*, search on Libourne). John Maxwell survived the war and is shown as a veteran in the 1930 census.¹⁶ This postcard was purchased on eBay® for \$3.50.

Mrs. G.W. Teasdale of St. Louis, Missouri received an envelope from John W. Teasdale, “1st Lt. [Lieutenant], 803 P. Inf. [803rd Pioneer Infantry]” in April 1919.



Figure 4

Figure 4: 1919 envelope from the American Officers’ Hotel, Paris, France to St. Louis, Missouri with sender’s name, rank and military unit, censor’s stamp and signature, “Officer’s Mail”, and military postmark (Photograph courtesy of bellesite, an eBay® vendor)

A Mamie W. (Mrs. George W.) Teasdale and her son John W. are in St. Louis in the 1920 U.S. census at the address written on the envelope.¹⁷ The envelope has “Officer’s Mail” (also accepted in place of a stamp), a censor’s stamp, and the sender’s signature as censor, as officers censored their own mail.¹⁸ The envelope is from the American

Officers' Hotel in Paris. The 803rd Pioneer Infantry was one of thirteen infantry units with white officers and African American soldiers.¹⁹ John W. Teasdale survived the war and is shown as a veteran in the 1930 census.²⁰ This envelope was found for sale on eBay® with a starting bid of \$12 by a vendor who has given *Philgen.org* permission to use his photographs.²¹

World War I military service usually began at a U.S. training facility. R.H. Ramsey of Leadwood, Missouri received an envelope from Pvt. R.F. Ramsey at the Central Y.M.C.A. in St. Louis, Missouri in October, 1918.

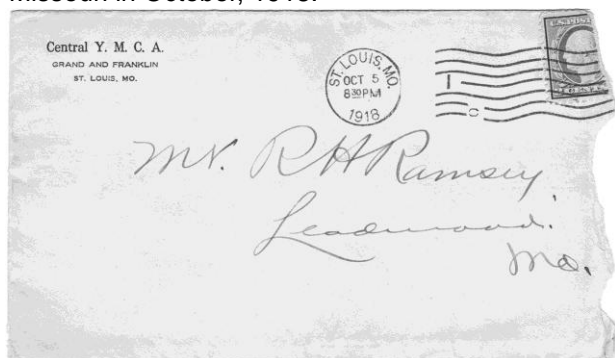


Figure 5A

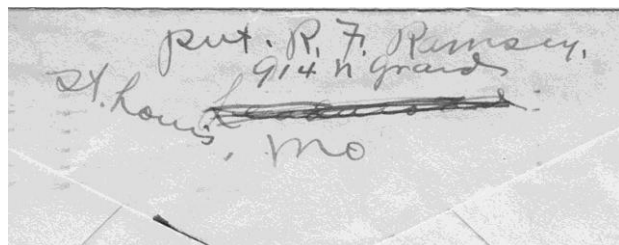


Figure 5B

Figures 5A and 5B 1918 envelope from Central Y.M.C.A., St. Louis, Missouri to Leadwood, Missouri with sender's name and rank from back flap of envelope (Author's collection)

A Robert H. Ramsey and his son Robert F. are in Irondale (four miles southwest of Leadwood) in the 1910 U.S. census.²² The enclosed letter speaks of quarantine and persons being taken to Jefferson Barracks Hospital, suggesting it was written during an influenza outbreak. Robert Ramsey's letter refers to his captain, being on guard, and the possibility he "will ship." While Robert Ramsey appears to be in military service, he is not shown as a veteran in the 1930 U.S. census.²³ This envelope and letter were purchased on eBay® for \$5.

This article shows how postal history documents our ancestors' World War I experience. The military rank, unit numbers, and locations written on these postcards and envelopes may help in finding additional information on their military service. One envelope and letter suggest the person's 1930 U.S. census listing is incorrect as regards his military service. Anyone interested in philatelic genealogy and in helping to add more Missouri envelopes and postcards to the *Philgen.org* website is encouraged to contact the author.²⁴

¹ The author thanks bellesite (an eBay® vendor) for use of a photograph, the genealogists who posted on-line family trees and responded to email and message board queries, Michael P. Miller for help with scanning, and Lisa Birsinger for database and website support.

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³ Wikipedia, "American Expeditionary Forces" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Expeditionary_Forces, accessed 5 January 2011).

⁴ Anne Leland and Mari-Jana "M-J" Oboroceanu, Congressional Research Service, *American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics*, (<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf>, accessed 18 November 2010).

⁵ Walter W. Stender and Evans Walker, "The National Personnel Records Center Fire: A Study in Disaster," *The American Archivist*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (October 1974), pp. 521-549 (on-line at <http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html>, accessed 6 January 2011).

⁶ 1910 U.S. census, Kirksville Ward 1, Adair County, Missouri, Enumeration District [hereinafter ED] 3, p. 1A (written), National Archives and Records Administration [hereinafter NARA] series T624, roll 766. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

⁷ "War Letter, Censorship!" (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/warletters/sfeature/sf_censorship.html, accessed 5 January 2011).

⁸ 1910 U.S. census, Kirksville Ward 1, Adair County, Missouri, ED 3, p. 1A (written), NARA series T624, roll 766. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

⁹ 1930 U.S. census, Kirksville Ward 1, Adair County, Missouri, ED 1-1, p. 15A (written), columns 30 and 31, NARA series T626, roll 1,174. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁰ 1910 U.S. census, Deepwater Ward 1, Henry County, Missouri, ED 91, p. 6A (written), NARA series T624, roll 783. "Roots & Branches, Past & Present" family tree, owner: humber_1; sources cited include U.S. and state censuses. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

¹¹ 1930 U.S. census, Santa Paula, Ventura County, California, ED 56-14, p. 11B (written), columns 30 and 31, NARA series T626, roll 228. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

¹² 1920 U.S. census, University City, St. Louis County, Missouri, ED 134, p. 62A (written), NARA series T625, roll 946. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

¹³ Theo. Van Dam, editor, and War Cover Club, *The Postal History of the AEF, 1917-1923* [hereinafter *Postal History of the AEF*], (State College, Pennsylvania: American Philatelic Society, 1980), pp. 13-14.

¹⁴ Wikipedia, "Motor Transport Corps (United States Army) (World War One)" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motor_Transport_Corps_\(United_States_Army\)__\(World_War_One\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motor_Transport_Corps_(United_States_Army)__(World_War_One)), accessed 16 January 2011).

¹⁵ Department of Defense, "Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms" (http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf, accessed 16 January 2011), see casual (p. 47) and transient (p. 378).

¹⁶ 1930 U.S. census, Saint Ferdinand township, Ferguson Ward 2, St. Louis County, Missouri, ED 95-96, p. 2A (written), columns 30 and 31, NARA series T626, roll 1,226. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁷ 1920 U.S. census, St. Louis Ward 23, Missouri, ED 457, p. 18A (written), NARA series T625, roll 959. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁸ "War Letter, Censorship!" *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), pp. 113-114.

²⁰ 1930 U.S. census, St. Louis Ward 23, Missouri, ED 96-138, p. 8B (written), columns 30 and 31, NARA series T626, roll 1,240. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

²¹ bellesite, an eBay® vendor.

²² 1910 U.S. census, Irondale, Washington County, Missouri, ED 146, p. 12A (written), NARA series T624, roll 826. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

²³ 1930 U.S. census, Jefferson City Ward 3, Cole County, Missouri, ED 26-10, p. 19B (written), columns 30 and 31, NARA series T626, roll 1,184. Viewed on *Ancestry.com*.

²⁴ Reprints of articles on philatelic genealogy that use old envelopes and postcards as a genealogical source are viewable on *Philgen.org* (<http://philgen.org>, look in the Main Menu for a list that begins with American Ancestors).
