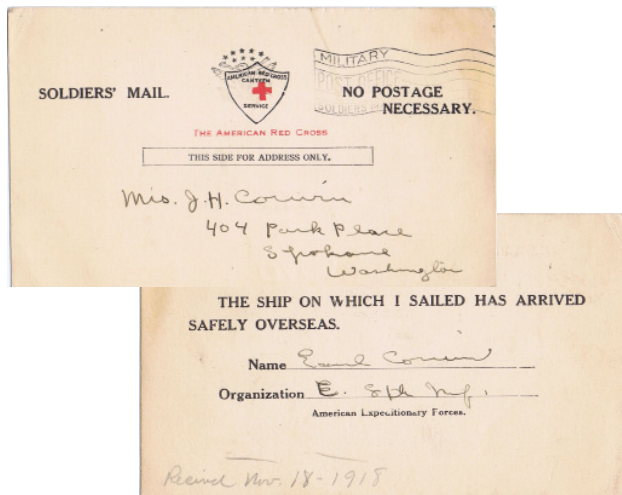


# PHILATELIC GENEALOGY UPDATE: Writing Home to Washington during World War I

By James R. Miller

About two million American soldiers, sailors, and Marines served in Europe from 1917 to 1919 with the American Expeditionary Forces (A.E.F.) during and just after World War I.<sup>1</sup> Surviving postcards and envelopes document their service and help fill gaps due to the 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center.<sup>2</sup> This paper presents a postcard and five envelopes sent to Washington by soldiers during their military service, with basic genealogical data on the sender and recipient. The article shows how old envelopes and a postcard let us glimpse our ancestor's wartime experience. The locations served, and the military rank, service role, unit names and numbers written on these envelopes and the postcard may help in finding additional information on their military service and provide information that is unavailable elsewhere. Figures 1 to 5 were purchased by the author on eBay® for \$3.75 to \$10 each, and Figure 6 is from an online postal history vendor from whom Philgen.org <<http://philgen.org>>, the philatelic genealogy website and database, has permission to use photographs.<sup>3</sup>

*"Mrs. J.H. Corwin" of Spokane, Washington received a postcard from Earl Corwin "8th Inf[an]try" on "Nov. 18, 1918."*



A Mary S. (Mrs. James H.) Corwin is in Spokane in the 1920 U.S. census at the street address written on the postcard.<sup>4</sup> Earl Corwin, son of James H. Corwin, applied for a U.S. passport in 1920 and stated that he lived at the address written on the postcard.<sup>5</sup> The post-

card, provided by the American Red Cross, was sent following the safe arrival in Europe of Earl Corwin's troop ship.<sup>6</sup> German submarine attacks on U.S. troop and cargo ships were a threat throughout the war.<sup>7</sup>



*"Mr. Sig. Torklep of Tacoma, Washington received an envelope from "J.A. Torklep, Co[mpany] C 161[st] U.S. Inf[an]try" postmarked 22 May 1918."*

Sigurd and John Arnt Torklep, both living at the street address written on the envelope, registered with Selective Service in 1917, and Arnt and "Segard Turklep," brothers, are in Tacoma in the 1910 U.S. census.<sup>8</sup> John Arnt Torklep was killed at the Battle of Belleau Woods on 26 June 1918 and is buried in the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery.<sup>9</sup> The envelope, provided by the Y.M.C.A. (Young Men's Christian Association), has a censor's stamp, applied after an officer assured that the enclosed letter did not indicate the soldier's exact location, anticipated troop movement, unit morale, or other information that could be useful to the German army.<sup>10</sup>

*"Mrs. Ross A. Gridley" of Seattle, Washington received an envelope from "Pvt. [Private] Ross A. Gridley, Co[mpany] D, 23rd Eng[ineers]" postmarked "19 Aout [August, in French] 1918."*



## Writing home..., continued

An Erma C. (Mrs. Ross A.) Gridley is in Seattle in the 1920 U.S. census, and the couple is in the 1930 U.S. census with Ross A. Gridley shown as a World War I veteran.<sup>11</sup> The envelope has "Soldiers Mail" written in the upper right, which was accepted in place of a stamp from 1917 to 1920 on mail sent by military personnel from overseas, as well as a censor's stamp and censor's signature.<sup>12</sup> The "706" in the military postmark is now known to correspond to Chaumont, France.<sup>13</sup>



"Mrs. Wm. Copenspire" of Walla Walla, Washington received an envelope from "Pvt.

[Private] Frank E. Copenspire, Co[mpany] C, 6[th] U.S. Eng[ineers]" postmarked on 22 June 1918.

A Lillie Marie (Mrs. William) Copenspire, and her son Frank Edward Copenspire, are in Walla Walla in the 1920 U.S. census at the street address written on the envelope.<sup>14</sup> The envelope, also provided by the Y.M.C.A., has a censor's stamp and signature, Soldiers Mail, and a military postmark. The "702" in the postmark corresponds to Paris, France.<sup>1</sup>

"Mrs. Dorothea(?) Bickford" of Seattle, Washington received an envelope postmarked 27 December 1918 from "Ernest L. Bickford, Capt[ain] M.C. [Medical Corps], American Red Cross Hospital 9."



An Ernest L. Bickford, physician, is in Seattle in the 1900 U.S. census.<sup>16</sup> American Red Cross Hospital 9 was equipped by the Red Cross, staffed by the U.S. Army, and was located at 32 Boulevard des Batignolles in Paris.<sup>17</sup> The envelope, provided by the Y.M.C.A., has a military postmark and a censor's stamp and signature, signed by the sender because he was an officer.<sup>18</sup> Dorothea Bickford may have been Ernest L. Bickford's wife.



"Mrs. A. Capistran" of Moxee City, Washington received an envelope from "Sipley H. LaBree, Pvt [Private] Medical Dep[artmen]t" postmarked 29 July 1919.

Rose (Mrs. Alcide) Capistran and her son "H. Sipley LaBree" are in Moxee City in the 1920 U.S. census.<sup>19</sup> The envelope, provided by the Y.M.C.A., was sent from Siberia, which is shown in both the censor's stamp and the military postmark. U.S. troops served in Siberia from 1918 until 1920.<sup>20</sup>

Many more envelope and postcard photographs involving Washington residents are available. Other envelopes and postcards may reveal our ancestors' immigrant origins, political and social interests, work, and recreation.<sup>21</sup> Anyone interested in philatelic genealogy or in adding new envelope and postcard photographs to Philgen.org is encouraged to contact the author.

### Notes

1. Wikipedia, "American Expeditionary Forces" (<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Expeditionary\\_Forces](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Expeditionary_Forces)>: accessed 26 Sep 2011).
2. 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 (online at <<http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/fire-1973.html>>: accessed 26 Sep 2011).

## Writing home . . . , continued

3. Jim Forte Postal History (<<http://www.postalhistory.com>>: accessed 26 Sep 2011). The author has no financial interest in this website.
4. 1920 U.S. census, Spokane Co., Washington, population (pop.) schedule, Spokane, ward 5, Enumeration District (ED) 268, sheet 1B (penned), dwelling 22, family 22, James H. Corwin; digital image, Ancestry.com (<<http://www.ancestry.com>>: accessed 26 Sep 2011); citing National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) microfilm publication T625, roll 1,942. Street address is 404 Park Place.
5. U.S. passport application of Earl Corwin, number 182,304, New York Co., New York, issued 10 March 1920; digital image, Ancestry.com; citing Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925, NARA M1490, roll 1,098.
6. Theo. Van Dam, editor, and War Cover Club, *The Postal History of the AEF, 1917-1923* (Postal History of the AEF), (State College, Pennsylvania: American Philatelic Society, 1980), 17.
7. Wikipedia, "U-boat Campaign (World War I)" (<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U-boat\\_Campaign\\_\(World\\_War\\_I\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U-boat_Campaign_(World_War_I))>: accessed 26 Sep 2011).
8. "World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918," digital images, Ancestry.com; Sigurd Torklep and John Arnt Torklep, Pierce Co., Washington; citing World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918, NARA microfilm M1509; no roll cited; 1910 U.S. census, Pierce Co., Washington, pop. schedule, Tacoma, ward 2, ED 226, sheet 6B (penned), dwelling 120, family 141, John Turklep; digital image, Ancestry.com; citing NARA T624, roll 1,663. Street address is 1709 South Sheridan Avenue.
9. American Battle Monuments Commission (<<http://abmc.gov>>: accessed 26 Sep 2011), "World War I" database, "Torklep John A."
10. William Howard Taft and Frederick Harris, *Service With Fighting Men, Part 1* (Ohio: Association Press, 1922), 284; "War Letter, Censorship!" (<[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/warletters/sfeature/sf\\_censorship.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/warletters/sfeature/sf_censorship.html)>: accessed 26 Sep 2011).
11. 1920 U.S. census, King Co., Washington, pop. schedule, Seattle, ward ("precinct") 2, ED 66, sheet 13A (penned), dwelling 362, family 395, Ross A. Gridley; digital image, Ancestry.com; citing NARA T625, roll 1,925; 1930 U.S. census, Marion Co., Oregon, pop. schedule, Salem, ward 2, ED 24-56, sheet 12A (penned), dwelling 207, family 315, Ross A. Gridley; digital image, Ancestry.com; citing NARA T626, roll 1,948.
- Ross A. Gridley's service in World War I is shown in columns 30 and 31 of the 1930 U.S. census.
12. Van Dam, *Postal History of the AEF*, 13-14.
13. Van Dam, *Postal History of the AEF*, 83.
14. 1920 U.S. census, Walla Walla Co., Washington, pop. schedule, Walla Walla, ward 1, ED 124, sheet 2B (penned), dwelling 37, family 38, William Copenspire; digital image, Ancestry.com; citing NARA T625, roll 1,943. Street address is 618 Whitman Street.
15. Van Dam, *Postal History of the AEF*, 83.
16. 1900 U.S. census, King Co., Washington, pop. schedule, Seattle, ward 7, ED 109, sheet 24B (penned), dwelling 395, family 444, Ernest L. Bickford; digital image, Ancestry.com; citing NARA T623, roll 1,745.
17. Van Dam, *Postal History of the AEF*, 2nd edition (Fishkill, New York: The Printer's Stone, Ltd., 1990) 127-129.
18. "War Letter, Censorship!" (see note 10 for details).
19. 1920 U.S. census, Yakima Co., Washington, pop. schedule, Moxee, ED 203, sheet 6A (penned), dwelling 106, family 110, Alcite Capstran; digital image, Ancestry.com; citing NARA T625, roll 1,945. H. Siple LaBree is shown as Alcite Capstran's stepson.
20. Van Dam, *Postal History of the AEF*, 165-169.
21. For examples of other types of genealogical information available from postal history, please visit <<http://philgen.org>>, and in the Main Menu click on NEA, American Ancestors, Minnesota Case Study, Nebraska, North Dakota, or Seattle, Washington for examples showing immigrant origins; on Central NY, Georgia, Maine, South Carolina, or Western Pennsylvania for Civil War service; on Kansas for examples of real photo postcards; on Iowa WWI, Missouri WWI, Western Pennsylvania WWI, or NGS for First World War service; or one of the other state names for a general survey.

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### Biosketch

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