

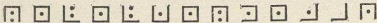


Association des Réservistes du Chiffre et de la Sécurité de l'Information

Un code américain de 1863

A REBEL CIPHER DESPATCH.
ONE WHICH DID NOT REACH JUDAH P. BENJAMIN.
BY DAVID HOMER BATES.

THERE appeared in the *New York Herald*, in the month of July, 1896, an article headed, "CRYPTOGRAPH SOLVED," in which was given a key to certain cabalistic characters on an old tombstone in Trinity Church Yard. The full inscription reads thus:



Here lies
deposited the body of
JAMES LEESON
who departed this life on the 28th day of Sep-
tember 1794.
Aged 38 years.

The hieroglyphics at the head of the tombstone, when translated by the method shown in the *Herald* article, reveal the motto, "Remember Death," and by analogy the remaining letters of the alphabet are discovered by the writer of that article, who deserves great credit for his perspicacity.

The reading of the *Herald* article recalled to my mind certain rebel cipher despatches in 1863, which I helped to translate, and in which the same hieroglyphics were used. These despatches were written in New York by J. H. Cammack, an agent of the rebel government, and were enclosed in an envelope addressed to Alexander Keith, Jr., Halifax, Nova Scotia, to be forwarded by him to Richmond, Virginia. One of them was addressed to Judah P. Benjamin, and the other to Benjamin H. Hill, members of Jeff Davis's cabinet. As soon as possible I confirmed my recollection by referring to my war records, and as the history of these rebel ciphers has never been written, except briefly, I determined to give the facts to the public, believing them to be of general interest.

First let me speak of the United States Military Telegraph Staff, to whose members were intrusted all the more important military and state despatches transmitted from and to the government at Washington during the civil war. W. R.

Plum, in his history of the Military Telegraph, says, "To the statement that, in no case did the enemy ever succeed in deciphering our messages, let us add that neither did any Federal cipher-operator ever prove recreant to his sacred trust, and we have in a sentence two facts that reflect infinite credit upon the corps."

Plum further says that "Colonel Thomas A. Scott, Assistant Secretary of War and General Manager of Military Railroads and Telegraphs, called to his aid four operators from the Pennsylvania Railroad line. These operators reported at Washington on April 27, 1861, traveling *via* Philadelphia, Perryville, and Annapolis. Their names were David Strouse, D. H. Bates, Samuel M. Brown, and Richard O'Brien." This was the nucleus of the United States Military Telegraph Corps, which rendered such important service to our government during the civil war. The outlines of the history of that war were sketched by the telegraph.

Strouse was appointed superintendent, Brown was stationed at the Navy-Yard, O'Brien at the Arsenal, and the writer at the War Department, where he remained until after the close of the war as manager and cipher-operator, two of his associates being Mr. Charles A. Tinker and Mr. Albert B. Chandler, who have long occupied high official positions in the commercial telegraph service of the country.

Two cipher-operators were required to be at their post of duty during the daytime, holidays and Sundays not excepted, and, as a rule, until eleven or twelve o'clock at night.

On the fateful night of April 14, 1865, we remained all night for the purpose of transmitting Secretary Stanton's graphic bulletins to the newspapers, giving the details of Lincoln's assassination and of the scenes at his death-bed.

The Federal cipher codes were very simple and yet absolutely secret, arbitrary words being used to represent proper names, and also many ordinary words and military phrases. The words of the

entire body of the despatch, after being concealed in this manner, were then arranged in one of over a thousand possible combinations, the particular combination being indicated by a key-word, and as each combination had several key-words, it was not necessary to use the same one twice in succession. As a feature of the combination blind words were interspersed at regular or varying intervals, which, in translation, were of course discarded. When finally prepared for transmission the despatch was wholly unintelligible to the transmitting or receiving operator, and no case is recalled of the enemy having translated a Federal cipher despatch. On the other hand, many of the rebel cipher despatches, which fell into our hands by capture or through our spies, were translated by our cipher-operators, and thus important military information was secured by our commanding generals.

The rebels, instead of adopting a plan similar to ours, which was at once secret and speedy, made use of the crude plan of transposing the letters of the alphabet in various ways. I remember that when John Wilkes Booth was captured there was found in his vest pocket a copy of the identical alphabet square which formed the basis of many of the rebel ciphers.

In some cases the hieroglyphic plan was adopted by the rebels, and it was this method which was followed in the instances referred to below.

As the chief feature developed by the fortunate translation of these two ciphers was a plot for the seizure by rebel emissaries of two ocean steamers after leaving New York Harbor, it is well to recall that during the latter part of 1863 there was very great excitement in the North occasioned by the activity and aggressiveness of the rebel navy, and by the fact that both England and France were allowing rebel ships to be built and equipped in those countries. The newspapers were full of accounts of damage done to our shipping by the rebels, and it was feared that by means of a sudden dash they might even capture and set fire to one of our seaport cities before suitable help could arrive. Slidell, the rebel envoy, was in Europe trying to secure recognition, and while he did not accomplish this result, he did obtain practical aid and comfort from English and French ship-builders. Gun-boats, iron-clad rams, and

war-ships had been purchased by the rebels, and were already on the high seas, and others were then building in England under the quasi protection of the authorities. Years afterwards, in the Geneva award of \$15,000,000, the United States received definite acknowledgment of the fact that England, in allowing the *Alabama* and other rebel war-vessels to be fitted out in English ship-yards, had violated our treaty rights.

The state correspondence between the United States and Great Britain in 1863 shows how serious and critical the conditions were, for on September 4 of that year our minister at London, Mr. Charles Francis Adams, after repeated protests addressed to the British government, received a note from Lord Russell, Prime Minister, stating that "her Majesty's government are advised that they cannot interfere in any way with these vessels"—referring to certain iron-clad rams already completed by the Lairds at Birkenhead, and which were about to sally forth to prey upon our commerce. Minister Adams answered Lord Russell instantly in these words: "It would be superfluous for me to point out to your lordship that this would be war."

In France the situation was equally grave, for Slidell was in close touch with the French cabinet, and especially with Emperor Napoleon, the latter having in a private interview promised that certain iron-clad rams and corvettes, which were building at Bordeaux and Nantes for the rebel navy, should be allowed to sail. The Emperor also gave to the French ship-builders like assurances.

On this side of the Atlantic the capture of the city of Mexico, in June, 1863, by French troops, and the selection, in August, of Prince Maximilian of Austria as Emperor of Mexico, by the hastily convened assembly of notables, were events of grave importance to us, and seemed likely to have an immediate and favorable influence upon the fortunes of the Confederate cause.

Secretary Seward, in September, 1863, instructed Minister Dayton to convey to the French government the views of President Lincoln, which pointed to the maintenance by the United States of the Monroe doctrine even at the risk of ultimate war with France, if the latter persisted in imposing a monarchy upon Mexico.

In October the reply of the French government was received, to the effect that "the sooner the United States showed itself satisfied, and manifested a willingness to enter into peaceful relations with the new government in Mexico, the sooner would France be ready to leave," etc.

This disturbance of our foreign relations was creating intense anxiety in the North, and the public mind was further roused by various movements of rebel vessels, including freebooters and pirates, as well as those acting under regular commission.

For instance, in September, 1863, a plot was laid by the rebels to seize the steamer *Michigan* on Lake Erie, and to make use of her to liberate several thousand rebel prisoners near Sandusky. Fortunately this failed in execution, but attention was strongly drawn to the latent possibilities of such movements, and the newspapers contained daily references to the subject, so that the excitement in the public mind was running high. In December of that year the United States steamer *Chesapeake* sailed from New York for Portland, Maine, and when several days out from land, rebel emissaries, who had shipped as passengers, assaulted the officers and crew, overpowered them, and seized the vessel, which was then headed for the Bay of Fundy. The cruise of these pirates was not continued, however, because some of the crew stole the cargo and decamped.

But a far bolder plot was being hatched in New York city, having for its immediate object the seizure of two large ocean steamers when one or two days out by rebel agents, who were to ship as passengers or crew. The scheme included also the shipment as freight of crates, packages, and hogsheads, ostensibly containing merchandise, but which in reality contained guns, small-arms, ammunition, etc., for the use of the pirates after they had overpowered the loyal crew and obtained control of the ship.

It will be readily seen that, at the time referred to—December, 1863—the seizure of two ocean steamers, and their conversion into privateers, would create dismay and consternation in the North, and would perhaps be followed by the capture of many small craft, merchant vessels, and government transports, and possibly the destruction of some of our seaport cities.

Meantime the rebel government was actually having a large and varied issue of Confederate bonds engraved and printed almost within sight of the old tombstone in Trinity Church Yard, and communications on the subject of such bonds were passing to and fro between the rebel government in Richmond and its agents in New York city, the medium of these communications being the very same hieroglyphics which were carved on that old tombstone nearly one hundred years before.

These deep-laid plots were fortunately revealed to the Federal authorities in time to prevent their fulfilment. The date set for the seizure of the two ocean steamers was Christmas, 1863, and only four days previous to that time the first of the two rebel ciphers was translated by the trio of War Department cipher-operators, and the Assistant Secretary of War, Mr. Charles A. Dana, started for New York at 7.30 P.M. the same day to confer with General Dix, and before the date set for the seizure of the ocean vessels the rebel plotters and agents had been spotted, a watch set upon their movements, and within a week they had all been arrested, and millions of rebel bonds seized and destroyed, instead of being used in England and France to help pay for the rebel ships of war then being built in those countries.

The history of these two rebel ciphers is as follows:

They were each enclosed in an envelope addressed to Alexander Keith, Jr., Halifax, Nova Scotia, and were mailed from New York city; the first one being dated December 18, 1863, and the second one four days later.

United States Consul Jackson at Halifax had previously reported that Keith was in frequent communication with rebel blockade-runners and with rebel agents in the United States. The mails were therefore being closely watched, and when Abram Wakeman, postmaster, discovered the envelope bearing Keith's address, which was dropped in the New York post-office on December 18, he promptly sent it to the Secretary of War, who, on seeing that the enclosure was in cipher, turned it over to the War Department clerks, who vainly puzzled over the mysterious signs for two days. On the third day the important document was turned over to the telegraph department and

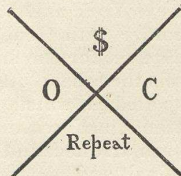
placed in the hands of the trio, who set to work with a determination to do what the War Department clerks had failed in doing.

Horace White, now editor of the New York Evening Post, was a clerk in the War Department at that time, and may have tried to solve the puzzle.

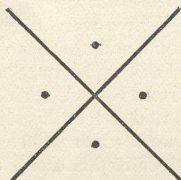
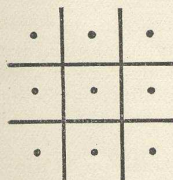
In my boyhood days I was for a short period employed in the store of John Horne and Company, Pittsburg, and as one of their cost marks was based upon the thirteen prime characters taken from the two geometrical figures shown below, I was thus able to discern, perhaps more readily than my associates, the slight differences between the several characters of that series.

The basis or foundation referred to is as follows—the Arabic numerals and the dollar and cent mark being shown in their respective places :

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9



By placing a dot in each of the thirteen spaces, all the letters of the alphabet can be represented by the above signs, thus:



the first thirteen letters being shown without the dot, and the other thirteen with the dot. Thus — stands for A, — with a dot for B, and so forth.

The close resemblance between these symbols and those on the Trinity tombstone will be readily apparent.

In the rebel cipher letter the two words "before this" are represented by signs taken from the series last above shown, and as the letter e occurred twice, we followed the clew, but with only limited success.

Meantime my associates had found other clews, there being, in fact, at least ten sep-

arate and distinct series of cipher characters used in the Keith letter. Cammack, however, made the vital mistake of confining himself to only one series for any given word. Had he varied the series of symbols, taking the characters from two or more different series to represent each word, the result of our efforts might have been far different. Together we labored for hours, at first with only a few detached words being revealed, but little by little the whole letter was deciphered.

The following is an exact copy, and is all we had to work from :

Handwritten cipher message in a secret code, consisting of various symbols, numbers, and letters.

After we had translated the above hieroglyphics, the following is what appeared:

N Y Dec 18 1863

Hon J P Benjamin Secretary of State Richmond Va Willis is here The two steamers will leave here about Christmas Lamar and Bowers left here via Bermuda two weeks ago 12000 rifled muskets came duly to hand and were shipped to Halifax as instructed

We will be able to seize the other two steamers as per programme Trowbridge has followed the Presidents orders We will have Briggs under arrest before this reaches you Cost \$2000 We want more money How shall we draw Bills are forwarded to Slidell and re- cts recd. Write as before

[Signed] JHC

Two days after we had interpreted the first cipher despatch, another one, dated December 22, and also enclosed in an envelope bearing Keith's address, was placed before us, and was quickly translated.

This communication proved to be of almost equal importance, referring as it did to the fact that Confederate notes and bonds were being engraved and printed in New York city.

The second cipher was prepared in the same way as the first, and its translation is as follows:

NEW YORK Dec 22 1863

Hon Benj H Hill Richmond Va

DEAR SIR—Say to Memminger [Secretary of the Treasury] that Hilton will have the machines all finished and dies all cut ready for shipping by the first of January. The engraving of the plates is superb.

They will be shipped via Halifax and all according to instructions.

The main part of the work has been under the immediate supervision of Hilton who will act in good faith in consequence of the large amount he has and will receive. The work is beautifully done and the paper is superb. A part has been shipped and balance will be forwarded in a few days.

Send some one to Nassau to receive and take the machines and paper through Florida. Write me at Halifax. I leave first week in January. Should Goodman arrive at Nassau please send word by your agent that he is to await further instructions.

Yours truly
(Signed) J H C

The following telegrams to the War Department, during the week following Mr. Dana's visit to General Dix, will show that no time was lost in hunting up the rebel gang and placing them under arrest:

NEW YORK, 1 P.M., Dec. 29, 1863.

Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War:

I have this morning seen evidence which affords good ground for the belief that the United States . . . here is probably in full partnership with the rebel operators of this city. From long personal knowledge of the individual I have no doubt he is perfectly capable of such treasonable conduct.

C. A. DANA.

NEW YORK CITY, Dec. 30, 1863.

Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War:

The man inside the Bank Note Co. reports that the work is not being done there. He says they are capable of it, and informs me they have a branch establishment at Montreal, and that there is no doubt but the work is being done there.

Send the proper person to Montreal and Rouse's Pt. In my opinion the plates will come through to Albany, and the Western Road to Boston, and by Cunard steamer to Halifax. ROBERT MURRAY, U. S. Marshal.

NEW YORK, 5.30 P.M., Dec. 31, 1863.

Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War:

I have arrested Hilton, and his partner and foreman, and secured the plates for the rebel bonds, also 5's, 10's, 20's, and 50's, Confederate notes.

I have arrested the lithographer and printer, and taken possession of Hilton's premises, and the lithographer's, and placed a guard over them until the morning, and I have no doubt I shall get the machinery also.

ROBERT MURRAY, U. S. Marshal.

NEW YORK, January 1, 1864.

E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War:

I secured machinery and dies this morning at 2 A.M., together with several millions of dollars in bonds and notes of various denominations. I am after the maker of the machinery, and will get him. From an intercepted letter I learn that Cammack is in Havana.

ROBERT MURRAY, U. S. Marshal.

One result of our successful work in unravelling the rebel ciphers was personal in its character, but not the less interesting to the trio, for on Christmas day General Eckert, our chief, notified us that the Secretary of War had authorized him to make a substantial increase in our salaries from December 1.

Alexander Keith, Jr., the man to whom the rebel cipher despatches were enclosed, continued to act as rebel agent at Halifax until the close of the war, and then disappeared from public view, only to turn up in 1875 as Thomassen, who was blown up on the dock at Bremerhaven, Germany, by an infernal machine, which had been placed in a crate or box of merchandise for shipment to the United States. The supposition at the time was that he was engaged in the nefarious scheme of insuring packages of little value shipped on transatlantic steamers, and one of which at least on each steamer contained an infernal machine, set to operate in mid-ocean and sink the vessel and cargo, Thomassen then collecting his insurance. Not long before his tragic death several ocean vessels, including the *Boston*, had sailed from port never to be heard from again.

My associate in the War Department, Mr. Charles A. Tinker, was ordered to Halifax in the autumn of 1864, to watch Keith's doings, and from his observations it was generally concluded that Keith was capable of any crime in the calendar. Mr. Tinker has told me of his belief in the identity of Keith and Thomassen.