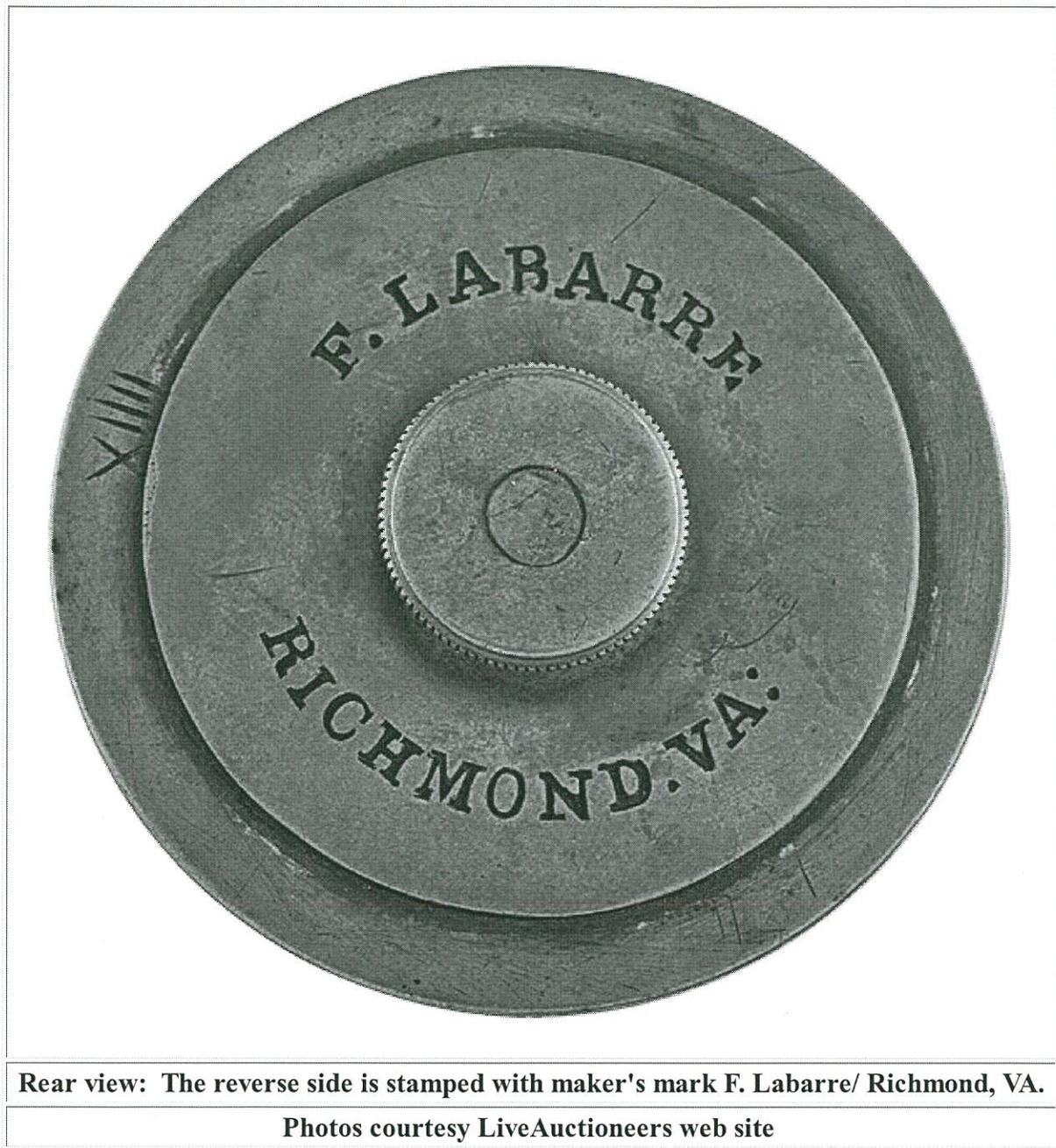


CONFEDERATE CODE DISC

The Confederate Code Disc was based on a centuries old system known as the "Vigenere System" but called the Vicksburg System by the Confederate States of America.



Front view: Brass mechanical wheel cipher consisting of two concentric discs that share a common axle, each with the 26 letters from the Latin alphabet written out clockwise. Outer disc approx. 57mm dia., inner disc approx. 41mm. The inner disc is stamped at center CSA / S.S. (Confederate States of America Secret Service).



Rear view: The reverse side is stamped with maker's mark F. Labarre/ Richmond, VA.

Photos courtesy LiveAuctioneers web site

Only five are known to have survived. One of the original cipher discs was given to the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond VA. by Major Graham Davis who, as assistant adjutant to General S.G. French, used it to encipher and decipher messages for his commander. Cipher discs were probably made at the request of E.P. Alexander who, in 1861 was ordered to establish a Confederate Signal Corps.

The Crypto Museum Web site provides additional details about the code disk.

"An extremely rare decoding device used by the Confederates to encrypt secret messages throughout the Civil War. It was created by gold and silver worker, Francis LaBarre, ca 1862. At the start of the war, LaBarre (b. 1818), who was working in Washington, DC, fled the city for Richmond, Virginia where he was contracted by the Confederate Army to produce brass cipher devices as well as other medals. LaBarre

enlisted in the Confederate Army as a private on April 22, 1861, in Alexandria, VA, and was mustered into Co. H of the 7th Virginia Infantry. Within a year, he was discharged on May 14, 1862, but during his time in the army, LaBarre's official military occupation was listed as "plater." He is referenced as a "tinner" in an 1864 Baltimore City Directory as well as an 1870 Baltimore census. Only a handful of Confederate cipher discs known to exist".

(Provenance: From the Collection of Philip D. Sang)



This replica of the Confederate Code Disc was created by Precision Etchings and Findings Inc of Warwick, Rhode Island to the precise specifications of Donald E. Markle, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The disk is seen here atop its velvet carrying pouch and is a faithful replica of the original.

Contributors and Credits:

- 1) George Mace <gmace8(at)comcast.net>
- 2) Crypto Museum Web site



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Exceptionally Rare Confederate Cipher Disc

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Estimate: \$10,000 - \$15,000

Description:

Exceptionally Rare Confederate Cipher Disc

Brass mechanical wheel cipher consisting of two concentric discs that share a common axle, each with the 26 letters from the Latin alphabet written out clockwise. Outer disc approx. 57mm dia., inner disc approx. 41mm. The inner disc is stamped at center CSA / S.S. (Confederate States of America Secret Service). Reverse stamped with maker's mark F. LaBarre / Richmond, VA. Housed in 4.75 x 6.625 in. book-style presentation case produced specifically for the disc by the Lakeside Press, Chicago, spine labeled in gilt Decoding Device - C.S.A. Secret Service.

An extremely rare decoding device used by the Confederates to encrypt secret messages throughout the Civil War, created by gold and silver worker, Francis LaBarre, ca 1862. At the start of the war, LaBarre (b. 1818), who was working in Washington, DC, fled the city for Richmond, where he was contracted by the Confederate Army to produce brass cipher devices as well as other medals. LaBarre enlisted in the Confederate Army as a private on April 22, 1861, in Alexandria, VA, and was mustered into Co. H of the 7th Virginia Infantry. Within a year, he was discharged on May 14, 1862, but during his time in the army, LaBarre's official military occupation was listed as "plater." He is referenced as a "tinner" in an 1864 Baltimore City Directory as well as an 1870 Baltimore census. (Information obtained from the Crypto Museum Website and GenForum Website, October 16, 2014.)

One of a handful of Confederate cipher discs known to exist, this

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Confederate Cipher Disc

Polyalphabetic cipher disc

The Confederate Cipher Disc was a mechanical wheel cipher consisting of two concentric discs, each with the 26 letters of the Latin alphabet, that was used for the encryption of secret messages of the Confederacy during the American Civil War (1861-1865). It was created by Francis LaBarre, a gold and silver worker, and was based on the Vigenère Cipher.

The Confederate Cipher Disc is made of brass. The outer disc has a diameter of approx. 57 mm, whilst the inner disc measures 41 mm. On each of the discs, the Latin alphabet is written out clockwise in the usual order (A-Z). The discs share a common axle, so that the inner disc can be rotated. The image shows a printed replica.

The smaller disc carries the text **CSA SS**. **CSA** stands for *Confederate States of America*, whilst **SS** is most likely the abbreviation of *Secret Service*¹. At the rear is the inscription **F. LaBarre** (the creator) and **Richmond VA**.

Not many real Confederate Cipher Discs have survived and there are only five known to exist today. Two of these are in the hands of private collectors, one is part of the collection of the Smithsonian Institute and two are at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond (Virginia, USA).



1. It is sometimes suggested that the letters **SS** on the inner disc stand for *Signal Service* rather than *Secret Service*, but this is unlikely, as the official name at the time was *Signals Corps*. *Secret Service* should not be confused with the current *United States Secret Service* that was established in 1865 to suppress counterfeit currency and is now responsible for the American President's security.

Francis LaBarre

At the rear of the disc is the text **Richmond VA**, the home town of the confederacy in Virginia (USA). It is now the home of the Museum of the Confederacy where its history is kept alive. Also at the rear of the disc is the name of the creator Francis LaBarre who, before the Civil War, was a gold and silver worker. In the early 1860s, he fled as a Washington DC refugee to Confederate Richmond, where he was contracted by the Army to make medals and brass cipher devices [2].

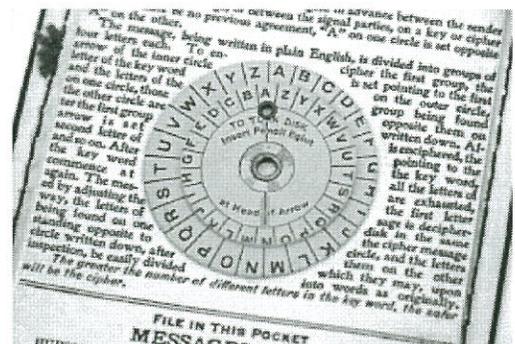
LaBarre was born in 1818 and was enlisted in the Army at the age of 39. During the Civil War he was in Company H of the 7th Infantry Regiment Virginia, that was made up of volunteers from Washington DC & MD. His official military occupation was *plater*. LaBarre had a wife Mary (from New York) and two children Bianca and George. He reportedly committed suicide in 1871 [2].

Spanish-American War

The same cipher disc was used in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, when a paper-based version of it was included in the Giddings Field Message-Book. It was a small A6-size booklet with a green leather cover and a short pencil.

Messages written down on a message pad, were encrypted with the cipher disc and then filed in a pocket of the book.

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Replica

In recent years, good looking - relatively accurate - replicas of the Confederate Cipher Disc have been made. They are now for sale in the gift shop of the NSA's National Cryptologic Museum (NSA) in Fort Meade (Maryland, USA). They are also frequently offered for sale on Ebay. Please check the images below for more details on this high-quality replica.



References

1. David Winfred Gaddy, *Francis LaBarre, Confederate Artisan*
Military Collector & Historian, Vol. 57, No. 3 - Fall 2005, pp. 124-125.
2. Francis LaBarre, born 1818
GenForum, internet forum on Genealogy.

Further information

- [Vigenère Cipher](#)
- [Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond \(Virginia, USA\)](#)
- [Search for replicas of the Confederate Cipher Disc on Ebay](#)
- [Other hand ciphers](#)
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