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Thaddeus Lowe: His Confederate Adventure

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Thaddeus S. Lowe:

HIS CONFEDERATE ADVENTURE

From the earliest times, mankind has dreamed of taking to the air as birds do. With the development of the balloon by the Montgolfier brothers in France in 1783, this dream was partially realized, but, in contrast to a bird which can control most aspects of its flight, man's flight at that time was at the mercy of the winds since powered flight was more than a century into the future.

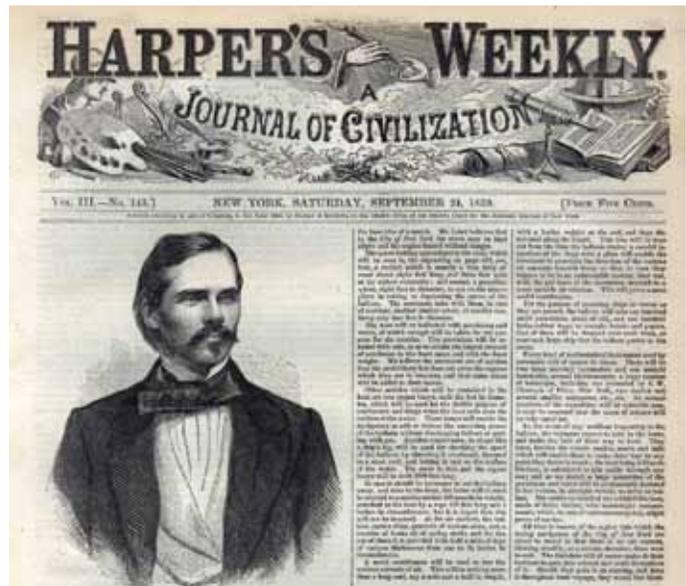
Many balloonists theorized that altitudes above the earth could be identified where the winds were unfaillingly blowing in a given direction, west-to-east, for example, thus permitting a balloonist some modest control over the balloon's direction. One such individual was Thaddeus Sobieski Constantine Lowe (1832-1913), well known by the late 1850s for his theories in meteorology and his ballooning activities.

BY BILL SCHMIDT

"Different Systems of Sailing in the Air" (Harper's Weekly, Jan. 2, 1864)



Lowe in his balloon, Intrepid, at the battle of Fair Oaks, Va., on June 1, 1862. Note Lowe's formal dress and decorated basket.



"Professor C. Lowe" at age 27 (Harper's Weekly, Sept. 24, 1859)



This map shows Lowe's flight path on April 21, 1861. His destination was Washington, D.C., but he landed in Unionville, S.C.

Going South by Heading East

In April 1861, Lowe was in Cincinnati to test out his theory that air currents in the upper atmosphere moved from west to east. On the evening of April 19, Lowe, dressed in evening clothes, a tall silk hat, and a Prince Albert waistcoat, arrived at a formal banquet honoring a prominent member of the community. Shortly after arriving, Lowe was notified that the winds had become favorable for his test and he hurriedly left the banquet. At 4 a.m. on April 20, still in his evening clothes, he took off in the direction of Washington, D.C., in his balloon, the *Enterprise*, with water, coffee, foodstuffs, blankets, navigational and scientific equipment, and many copies of a special edition of the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, which had been hurriedly printed announcing his flight.

As Lowe's balloon moved eastward, it encountered the Allegheny mountains, which caused the balloon to drift in a far more southerly direction than Lowe had intended. While passing over Virginia, Lowe heard cannonading as Virginians were celebrating their secession from the Union. After a nine-hour flight during which the balloon rose to height of ca. 24,000 feet, Lowe landed in a very rural area of South Carolina, a bit outside of Unionville (now Union).

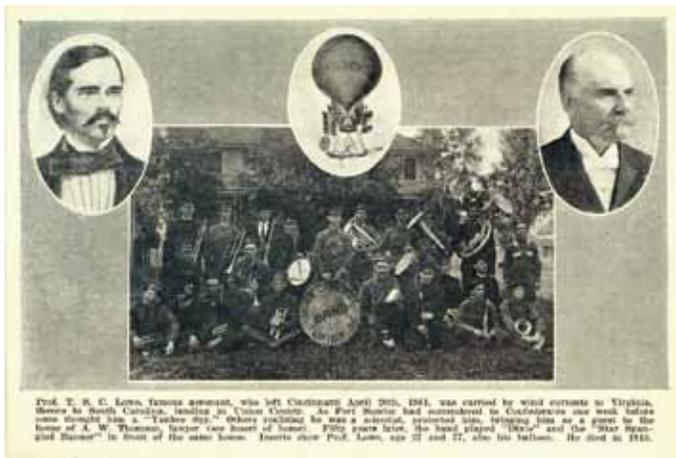
Space Alien, Yankee Spy, the Devil?

Shortly, a crowd of unfriendly, armed locals surrounded Lowe. Since none of those in the crowd had ever seen a balloon, some thought Lowe was a devil or a creature from outer space. Others were certain that he was a Yankee spy with skills too dangerous to be turned loose who thus should be killed. Calmer heads prevailed, however, and Lowe, along with his balloon, its wicker basket, and its contents

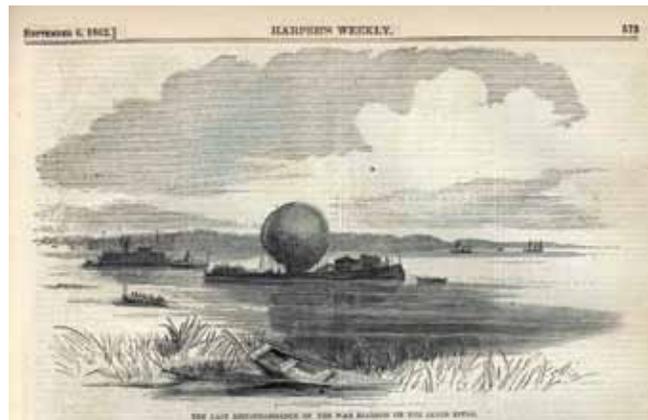
were taken into Unionville. In town, the hotel landlord, a Mr. Black, recognized Lowe, whom he had seen doing balloon experiments in Charleston the year before, and confirmed Lowe's identity. Showing the crowd the Cincinnati newspaper that had been printed at 3 a.m. that morning further convinced the crowd of Lowe's amazing journey, and he was treated as a celebrity. He was wined and dined, shown off around town, and, the next day, placed on a train for Columbia, S.C., from which point he planned to board a train for the North.

Upon arriving in Columbia, however, Lowe was again accused of being a Yankee spy and taken to jail. Brought before the mayor and several councilmen a short time later, Lowe explained the scientific nature of his work. Given that the mayor and his colleagues were still skeptical, Lowe was brought before the president and several faculty members of South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina) who were familiar with his work and who vouched for him. All apologized to Lowe for the harsh treatment that he had received, and it was unanimously agreed that he should both be freed at once and given a passport to ensure his safety on his trip north. Due to the chaos that the war had created, it took Lowe five days to make his way back to Cincinnati.

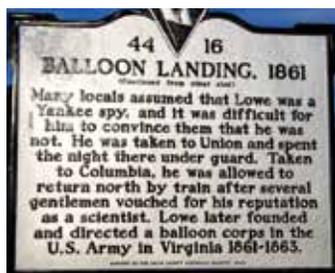
Commenting in the May 16, 1861, issue of the *Carolina Spartan* about the "success" of his flight, Lowe asserted that, had his balloon had a capacity of 10,000 more cubic feet, he would have been able to fly a mile higher than he did and thus would have avoided "the influence of the mountains and local currents" and thus "could have landed on the sea coast in a due east direction from my starting point in less than six hours."



Postcard owned by the South Caroliniana Library showing two portraits of Lowe, a balloon, and the Union County Band



"The Last Reconnoissance (sic) of the War Balloon on the James River" (Harper's Weekly, Sept. 6, 1862)



"Balloon Landing, 1861" S.C. highway marker number 44-16, erected in Kelton, S.C., in 2009 by the Union County Historical Society



This Oct. 16, 1862, document requisitioning "Forage for Public Horses, in the service of Prof. Lowe's Balloon Company," was signed twice by "T.S.C. Lowe, Chief of Aeronautics, Commanding Balloon Corps." (From the author's collection)



Shown here is an unused patriotic postal cover picturing "Professor Lowe's Union Balloon." (From the author's collection) Such decorative envelopes were popular during the Civil War and depicted many aspects of the conflict.



"Professor Lowe making a balloon ascension on a reconnoitering (sic) expedition to Vienna" (Harper's Weekly, Dec. 14, 1861)

United States Balloon Corps

Shortly after his arrival in Cincinnati, Lowe's supporters arranged for him to travel to Washington, D.C., where he met in the White House with President Lincoln and Smithsonian Secretary Professor Joseph Henry. Henry, a Lowe supporter, forcefully told the president that he considered Lowe the country's leading authority on aeronautics. In the days following the meeting, Lowe gave numerous demonstrations of balloon capabilities, including a balloon ascension from the White House lawn from which Lowe sent Lincoln a telegram, the first telegram ever sent from a balloon. Convinced of the military usefulness of balloon reconnaissance, Lincoln personally escorted Lowe to the War Department offices and oversaw the creation of the Balloon Corps with Lowe as its director. Lincoln remained in

the office while the general of the armies, Winfield Scott, dictated Lincoln's instructions to the appropriate military personnel.

With the Balloon Corps established, Lowe's attention turned to its implementation. In the days before trucks and pressurized helium canisters, large, horse-drawn wagons were used to transport the items comprising the corps: the balloons and passenger baskets; barrels of sulfuric acid and iron filings, the mixing of which produced the hydrogen gas used to inflate the balloons; the hydrogen generators in which the acid and filings were mixed to produce the gas; the personnel assigned to the corps; and the supplies for the men and "balloon train" horses.

Incline on Mt. Lowe, near Pasadena, California.—22.



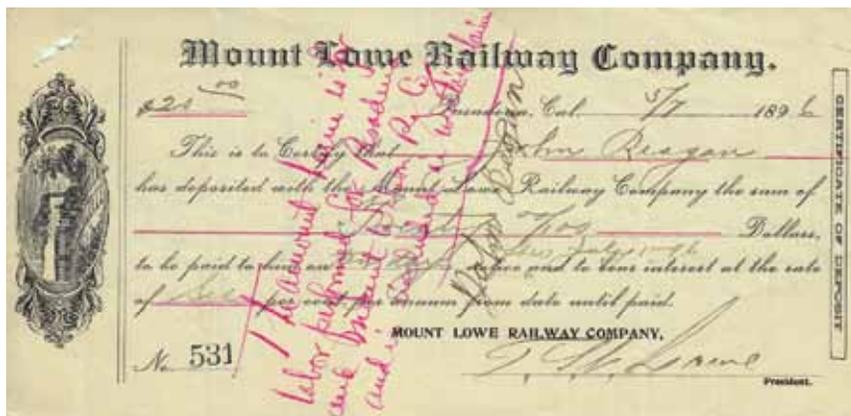
"Incline on Mt. Lowe, near Pasadena, California"

"Most Shot at Man in the Civil War"

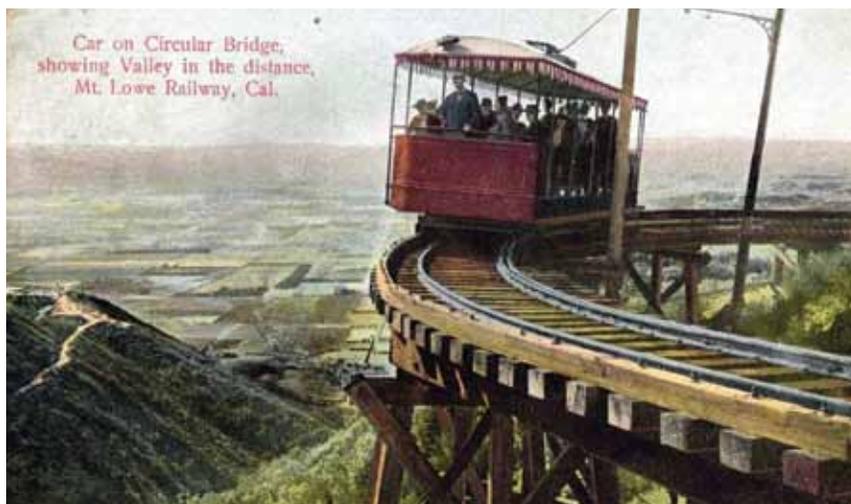
During the war, Lowe performed many ascensions for the military, thus providing much important information to the commanders on the ground. Given the Balloon Corps' now-recognized contribution to the war effort, it is considered to be the first incarnation of the U.S. Air Force. While aloft, Lowe was out of range of Confederate cannons, but he was within range during ascent and descent, and thus a target of Confederate cannon fire. In this context, Lowe is considered to be "the most shot at man in the Civil War."

Lowe was always anxious to try out new ideas. During the Peninsula campaign (May–June, 1862) he made some observations from balloons that he had installed on a coal barge, the *George Washington Park Custis*, on the James River. Therefore it could be said that he created the world's first aircraft carrier.

For reasons beyond Lowe's control, the Balloon Corps was not terribly successful. In effect, it ceased to exist after the battle of Chancellorsville in early May of 1863. Shortly after that, Lowe left government service. There were numerous reasons for the Corps' failure and Lowe's departure, chief among them the resistance of the Army's "old guard" to new ideas, an attitude which largely contributed to Lowe's inability to procure the manpower and materiel needed to truly be successful.



Mount Lowe Railway Company pay voucher dated May 7, 1896, and signed by T.S.C. Lowe (From the author's collection)



"Car on Circular Bridge, showing Valley in the distance, Mt. Lowe Railway, Cal." (Postcard from the author's collection)

Postwar Successes

Many foreign governments took notice of the aerial reconnaissance techniques Lowe developed, and soon after his departure from the Union Balloon Corps, several countries, including France and Great Britain, offered him a military commission if he would create a balloon corps for them. He declined all such offers. Rather, he went on to a distinguished career in science and business, building on his work and achievements prior to the Civil War. Developing products based on the ideas in his many patents, Lowe became a very successful and wealthy businessman. Living in the Pasadena, Calif., area during his last years, Lowe was the principal in the construction of a popular electric traction railway and resort area on Echo Mountain, renamed Mt. Lowe, a peak within the Sierra Madres outside of Los Angeles. Over the years, the railway and associated buildings experienced a series of natural disasters, and the enterprise was abandoned completely in 1938.

—Bill Schmidt is a longtime supporter of the University Libraries who has designated the libraries in his will to receive the majority of his estate, including all items from his extensive collection of books and historical documents.

May 7, 1861

PROFESSOR LOWE'S BALLOON VOYAGE

HE FRIGHTENS THE CHIVALRY OUT OF THEIR WITS! THE PROFESSOR ARRESTED FOR A SPY

Prof. T.S.C. Lowe made a balloon ascension from Cincinnati on the 20th of April, starting about 5 o'clock in the morning. He passed over parts of Kentucky, the Cumberland Mountains, and part of Virginia. He thus describes the latter part of his trip:

Feeling uneasy, lest I should get out of the current formed by the mountains, I discharged a quantity of ballast and again ascended, with the hope of clearing them to the North. I continued to discharge weight and let off gas until I attained an elevation of 25,500 feet above the sea. Here the thermometer fell to 10 degrees below zero; the water, fruit, and other things froze, and it required all the clothing and blankets I had to keep me warm.

It was now 12 o'clock, and I could distinguish the blue ocean in the Eastern horizon. Not having sufficient ballast to remain at that great altitude, the balloon gradually sank down to within twelve thousand feet of earth. Here, the current was a little South of East, again, and knowing that the coast in that direction was an uninhabitable swamp, and being desirous of landing near a railroad, I concluded to descend and look out a good place. I heard the firing of cannon, and concluded I was near some village; and on nearing the earth, over a plantation, caused great consternation among the inhabitants, who seemed to be entirely unacquainted with such a scene, and it was some minutes before any one could be persuaded to approach; and when they did they would not render me any assistance but threatened destruction to the "hellish" contrivance that had frightened them so; but I learned of them that I was in the township of Spartanburg, near the line of North and South Carolina. They would not believe that I had sailed from the State of Ohio that morning and informed that they would be very thankful if I would leave, and ordered the negroes to let go of the ropes they were holding.

Being desirous of getting near a Railroad, I threw out a bag of sand and commenced to ascend. At that moment one of the bystanders, seeing the bag of sand fall, sang out, "Hello, stranger, come back; I reckon you have lost your baggage." I arose 7,000 feet, and there remained until I was wafted some twenty miles further to the east, which occupied about half an hour more, during which time I heard many discharges of what I took to be muskets. Not knowing, but being apprehensive that the globe over my head was the object of the fire, I prepared for making all the signals possible when I should again near the earth, but while I was thus elevated I had no fear, for it was impossible to send a ball within a mile of me.

When within half of mile of the earth, I heard loud cries of terror, and saw people running in all directions; but I was determined to land for good this time, let come what would, and in five minutes more the anchor took a firm hold in a short scrub oak, and the car gently touched the ground. Thus fast, the globe, gently swinging to and fro, presented a very life-like appearance. I soon noticed some heads peeping around the corner of a log hut that stood near by, and in which there seemed to be persons in great distress. I called to them to come and assist me, at which they took no notice, until I threatened to cut loose and run over them, after which two white boys, three old ladies, and three negroes, in a body, ventured within twenty feet of me in company with a stalwart-looking young woman, six feet high and well proportioned, and took hold of the edge of the car. I inquired what was the matter in the house, and was told that several old persons were praying, as they thought the day of judgment had come.

In a few minutes men with muskets began to collect, but seeing women, children and negroes surrounding the air traveler, there seemed to be no use for firearms; so I discharged the gas unmolested, and packed up the machine

ready to leave. By this time several more rough looking fellows arrived and threatened destruction to the "devil" that could travel through the air—one adding that he had followed it ten miles, and had shot at it six times without any effect.

The tall young woman aforesaid assured me that there was no danger, for all the men then in the neighborhood were cowards, as all the brave ones had gone to the wars, notwithstanding they all declared they were not afraid; however, promising to give myself up when I arrived at the village, they consented I should leave under a guard of nine men. Procuring a team we started for Unionville, a village nine miles distant, and arrived that evening, halting in front of a stone building with a small checkered window. A council was then held with the jailer, who positively refused to allow any such animal as they described to come into the building.

I was then taken to a hotel, and soon found persons of intelligence, who assured me that I was among friends. Here I remained over the Sabbath, and was called upon by many persons of fine education, who informed that of all the places in the South, at the spot where I landed the inhabitants were the most ignorant for they could neither read or write.

The next morning I started en route for home, but news had reached Columbia, the capital of South Carolina, that a man had brought papers from Cincinnati, Ohio, only nine hours old, I was therefore at first arrested on suspicion of being a bearer of dispatches.

This brought together a number of learned and scientific gentlemen, who at once knew me by reputation, and saw my position, and I was immediately released and furnished with a passport by the Mayor of Columbia. From this time until I reached Cincinnati, no more impediments were placed in my way.