

# **“A Savory Scandal”: The Shocking Betrayal of Trust by Lieutenant Henry W. Howgate, U.S. Army Signal Corps**

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## ABSTRACT

Lieutenant Henry W. Howgate (1835–1901) joined the Signal Corps in 1862, just after its formation, and served through 1880. He was highly commended for his signal service during the American Civil War. His success in the field gained him an important role in the organization during peacetime. Howgate helped establish the Signal Corps as a vital organization for national weather service and communications. He was also instrumental in promoting U.S. scientific research in the polar regions. As chief disbursement officer, his financial fraud and the twelve-year manhunt to bring him to justice have overshadowed his legacy. This article provides a more thorough examination of Howgate’s role in the Signal Corps and his deeds and misdeeds.

*Keywords:* Henry Howgate, Signal Corps, Cameron Hill, Lady Franklin Bay, Polar Regions, Adolphus Greely, Nellie Burrill, Pinkerton Agency

# **“Un escándalo sabroso”: La impactante traición a la confianza del teniente Henry W. Howgate, Cuerpo de Señales del Ejército de EE. UU.**

## RESUMEN

El teniente Henry W. Howgate (1835-1901) se unió al Cuerpo de Señales en 1862, poco después de su formación, y sirvió hasta 1880. Fue altamente elogiado por su servicio de señales durante la Guerra de Secesión estadounidense. Su éxito en el campo de batalla le valió un papel importante en la organización en tiempos de paz. Howgate ayudó a consolidar el Cuerpo de Señales como una organización vital para el servicio meteorológico nacional y las comunicaciones. También fue fundamental para promover la investigación científica estadounidense en las regiones polares. Como jefe de tesorería,

su fraude financiero y la persecución de doce años para llevarlo ante la justicia han eclipsado su legado. Este artículo ofrece un análisis más exhaustivo del papel de Howgate en el Cuerpo de Señales, así como de sus actos, tanto buenos como malos.

**Palabras clave:** Henry Howgate, Cuerpo de Señales, Cameron Hill, Bahía Lady Franklin, Regiones Polares, Adolphus Greely, Nellie Burrill, Agencia Pinkerton

## 《一桩令人作呕的丑闻》 美国陆军通信兵中尉亨利·W·霍格特令人震惊的背叛

### 摘要

亨利·W·霍格特中尉（1835 - 1901）于1862年加入美国陆军通信兵团，当时该兵团刚刚成立，他一直服役至1880年。他在美国内战期间因其出色的通信工作而备受赞誉。他在战场上的成功使他在和平时于该兵团中担任要职。霍格特帮助将通信兵团打造成为国家气象服务和通信的重要机构。他还积极推动美国在极地地区的科学研究。然而，作为首席财务官，他的财务欺诈行为以及长达十二年的追捕行动掩盖了他的功绩。本文将更深入地探讨霍格特在通信兵团中的角色及其功过是非。

关键词：亨利·霍格特，通信兵团，卡梅伦山，富兰克林夫人湾，极地地区，阿道弗斯·格里利，内莉·伯里尔，平克顿侦探社

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**H**enry Williamson Howgate was born on March 24, 1835, in Leeds, West Yorkshire, England. At the time, Leeds was at the center of the British wool industry, and Howgate's parents labored as woolen cloth and carpet weavers. Through the 1840s, the borough was plagued by the ills of the industrial age, soot and pollutants from factories, mills and foundries, and its less-well-off citizens suffered from health and sanitary difficulties. Perhaps seeking a better life,

the Howgate family relocated to the United States when Henry was still an infant. For the next several years, Howgate's parents continued their trade in Albany and western New York State. At the age of ten, with his mother, Henry moved to Macomb County, southeastern Michigan.<sup>1</sup>

Little is known of his early years, beyond that he settled in the township of Armada, Michigan, an agrarian community some 50 miles north of Detroit.

Howgate worked as a farmer, carpenter, and a "joiner" (a skilled woodworker). Howgate was known to be highly ambitious, resourceful, and a problem solver, possessed with what one acquaintance termed "practical common sense." In January 1855, the handsome young man with a captivating personality, married Cordelia Day. Cordelia was one of four daughters of Uriel and Olive Day, early pioneer settlers in Macomb County. The young couple spent the next few years in Armada with a growing family. A son, Charles Edward, was born in 1855, and a daughter, Ida, in 1859.<sup>2</sup>

On July 30, 1862, as the fighting between the North and South looked to be a protracted affair, Howgate answered President Lincoln's call for additional manpower, enlisting with the Twenty-Second Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Evidently a well-regarded twenty-seven-year-old, Howgate gained a commission as a second lieutenant. The regiment, made up of mostly farm boys and laborers, was mustered for duty in Pontiac, Michigan on August 14, 1862. Howgate's service as a line officer was short-lived. On November 17, he transferred to the army's newly established Signal Corps and was one of its earliest members. He was promptly commissioned first lieutenant on December 31, 1862.<sup>3</sup>

Both the Union and Confederate armies developed and deployed signal corps during the American Civil War. With large scale combat actions and sprawling battlefields, the need for real-time communication in the field was vital. Beating drums and blaring bu-



Henry W. Howgate while residing in Washington, D.C. after the Civil War. Howgate was well-remembered for his charming personality and friendly demeanor that quickly put people at ease. [U.S. National Archives]

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gles and trumpets have become iconic symbols in the armed struggle between the states, and conspicuous elements in storylines and movie scenes. However, the vision of one man, Albert J. Myer, spearheaded a separate and markedly different means of effective field communication. His efforts would lead to the formation of a distinct branch of technology for the army.

A physician by profession, Myer had endeavored to improve a means of communication by the deaf through the use of finger-taps to form letters similar to Morse code. His efforts would lead him to devise a signaling system employing a similar code for the military but forming letters using flags by day

and torchlights by night. (The system was initially called "wigwag" due to the seemingly erratic waving of the flags to the untrained eye). Based on line of sight from mountaintop vistas and overlooks (and even ships), the system enabled communication over distance among allied troops. By way of example, large flags (6' by 6') could be visible at eight miles, and much farther under the right atmospheric conditions (field glasses and telescopes were used over long distances).<sup>4</sup>

A basic method of encryption was used to send messages. For example, in the two-code number system, a number corresponded to a letter (such that "1-2" could represent "A"). The number "1" was made by waving the flag to the signalman's left and the number "2" to the right. Messages could be enciphered by means of a cipher-disc that rearranged numbers associated with letters. The Signal Corps also effectively made use of the field-telegraph during the war, but the more mobile flag system proved useful in combat when telegraph lines were unavailable and when lines were severed.<sup>5</sup>

Though his accomplishments would later be overshadowed by his misdeeds, Howgate proved adept at field communications and a highly competent officer in the Signal Corps. His educational background is unknown, but he was evidently intelligent and scientifically inclined, as Signal Corps officers were subject to examination in reading and writing, composition, arithmetic, chemistry, science, surveying and topography.

By 1863, the Union army had begun to make significant gains in the western theater. With Grant's victory at Vicksburg, the Union Army looked to forge a potential pathway to Atlanta through Chattanooga, Tennessee. Howgate saw action in this theater, most notably at the battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga and during the Atlanta Campaign. His position with the Signal Corps did not spare him from the risks of line soldiers, however. Holding conspicuous positions of reconnaissance near battle lines led to at least an equal or greater chance of capture or death.<sup>6</sup>

During the Battle of Chickamauga, Lieutenant Howgate maintained an important signal station on nearby Lookout Mountain relaying orders and scouting enemy troop movements. At considerable personal risk, Howgate manned the station until forced by shelling to move to a prominent hill known as Cameron Hill, at the western limit of the Union defenses at Chattanooga.<sup>7</sup> One historian characterized Howgate's signal station atop steep Cameron Hill, "the most important communications post" to the Army of the Cumberland (the hilltop was leveled in 1963). From Cameron Hill, during the Battle of Missionary Ridge, Howgate relayed vital information about troop movements to Major General George H. Thomas at nearby Fort Wood. Theodore R. Davis, an artist travelling with the Union forces who was stymied by "the difficulty of showing our almost surrounded position in a sketch," gained permission to view the situation from Howgate's signal station at the summit of Cameron Hill. His sketch dramatically illustrates

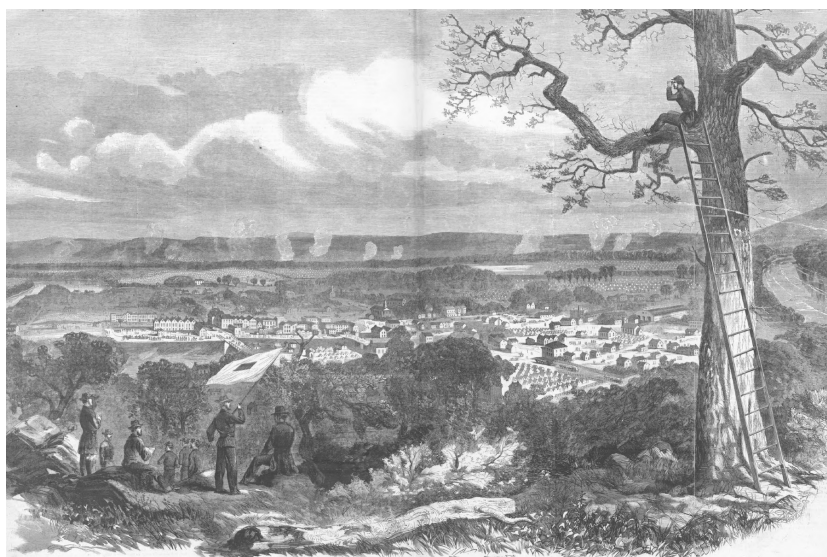
the advantageous position from which Howgate’s signalman could observe a sweeping view of the enemy camps and the entire town and its environs.<sup>7</sup>

When operations recommenced in early 1864, Howgate’s party followed the advancement of Union forces to Atlanta, establishing makeshift stations as they marched. Howgate performed a key role by managing to intercept and decipher signals sent by Confederate signal posts. In recommending Howgate for a brevet, Major General Thomas commended Howgate’s “talent in deciphering the enemy’s signal codes and keeping me constantly advised as to every message transmitted by the enemy and thereby rendering most valuable services to the whole Army.”<sup>8</sup>

Thereafter, Howgate was assigned to the staff of Major General Henry W.

Slocum, as part of the left-wing supporting Sherman’s March to the Sea, then through the Carolinas, for which service he was commended by Slocum. Major General Slocum wrote to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton that Howgate served “faithfully and energetically” under his command. Howgate’s services to Slocum extended beyond those of the Signal Corps however, with Slocum adding that Howgate performed as “aide-de-camp” to Slocum and “was of great service to me, particularly at the Battle of Bentonville.”<sup>9</sup>

After war’s end, Howgate mustered out of the Signal Corps on June 20, 1866, one of the last Signal Corps officers to do so. During the term of his service, Howgate had proved his courage, frequently holding his station while exposed and under fire, all the time du-



Howgate’s Station on Cameron Hill. Typically, one or two officers and from four to six enlisted men manned a signal station, often gaining elevation through ladders and makeshift platforms in the absence of fixed structures. Besides observation and messaging, stations were used for mapping, photography and sketching. [*Harper’s Weekly*, 7(361), November 28, 1863, 764]



Lieutenant Howgate (back row, second from left) with the staff of Major General Henry Slocum. Howgate officially served as chief signal officer under Slocum's command, but Slocum reported that Howgate provided great assistance unofficially as an aide-de-camp. [Medford Historical Society Civil War Photograph Collection]

tifully performing his signal duties. For gallant and meritorious services (i) at the Battle of Chickamauga and in the campaign through Georgia, Howgate was brevetted captain, and (ii) in the Atlanta Campaign he was brevetted major.

Thereafter, Howgate settled for the more mundane position as postmaster in the city of Romeo, Michigan (“a suggestive name” when associated with Howgate’s later escapades, one reporter would sarcastically note). Postmasters held positions of trust and were entrusted with money. Interestingly, as if presaging the future, Howgate was compelled to resign the position on February 16, 1867 over “defaults” (shortfalls in funds). Howgate failed to return the funds after repeated demands, and following legal threats, a surety had to make good on Howgate’s \$518.00 in-

debtedness to the government. On October 22, 1867, Howgate re-enlisted in the Regular Army. Through the support of Major General Thomas, he gained a commission as a second lieutenant (attached to the Twentieth Infantry) and was again assigned to the Signal Corps. His proven signal service during wartime and Thomas’s backing gained him a position as an assistant to Brigadier General Myer at the headquarters in Washington, D.C.<sup>10</sup>

Howgate proved equally adept at peacetime Signal Corps initiatives. Recognizing the meteorological observation capabilities of the Signal Corps, Myer lobbied Congress for the use of military signal stations to collect weather information and disseminate that data across the country by means of telegraphs. In early 1870, the Signal Corps was granted that author-

ity, and its mission and funding were greatly expanded. Howgate was closely involved with its activities from its inception. Captain Garrick Mallery and Lieutenant Howgate were responsible for negotiating government rates with private telegraph companies for the use of their lines to send messages and reports, a significant portion of the branch's budget. In November 1870, the Signal Corps telegraphed its first weather "bulletin," to various cities and ports, based on observations from twenty-four stations. Professor Cleveland Abbe, a meteorologist, was hired in 1871 to prepare weather forecasts and "weather probabilities" were distributed daily covering eight regions of the country.

Once operational, Myer had also quickly ceded to Howgate supervision of the day-to-day operations of sixty nationwide signal stations and expanding. In that multifarious and time-consuming role, Howgate trained and supervised station operators, assured the accuracy of instrumentation deployed, ensured receipt of daily meteorologic data in proper form for compiling and publishing as weather reports, forecasts, and maps. Myer may have been the founder of what would ultimately become the U.S. Weather Bureau in 1891, but in that first decade, particularly the initial five years, Howgate was the workhorse who helped shape it into an effective and well-run organization. Alexander Ashley, a civilian assistant who worked closely with Howgate at the offices of the Signal Corps, similarly remarked that for the first two years of the Signal Corps, Howgate "was constant in

his efforts to aid the General [Myer] in developing the [Signal Corps] Services, often (I might say almost constantly) giving from 16 to 18 hours a day of close study and hard work."<sup>11</sup>

One newsman also praised highly Howgate's administrative responsibilities during those first few years:

In this new field of action Captain Howgate has made a brilliant record. His superior abilities, his unlimited resources of mind, and his indefatigable industry found ample opportunities for display .... If the success of the Weather Bureau be due to one man, that man was Captain Howgate. Untiring in his labors, he stayed at his desk not only during the day time, but remained there during the greater part of the night. In the infancy of the service when things did not run as smoothly as they do now, his mind was entirely absorbed in the success of the service. Frequently he went after midnight from room to room and gave directions or cheered the employees by a kindly spoken word, and so increased the zeal of his workers.<sup>12</sup>

As to Howgate's diverse duties, Myers had nothing but praise for Howgate in his 1871 annual report noting that "to the rare fidelity and energy of this officer the successful management of the past year is largely due." In March 1873, to Myer's frustration Howgate was ordered to report to his company

in the field. By means of a lengthy and forceful appeal to the Adjutant General highlighting Howgate's importance Myer succeeded in retaining Howgate at the Signal Corps. Myer wrote that besides Howgate's "indispensable" operation of the day-to-day activities of the office, on behalf of the Signal Corps Myer relied fully on Howgate to lead all the rate negotiations with the commercial telegraph companies. By 1876, Myer could rightly boast that the Signal Corps had become the "acknowledged centre for meteorological information on this continent." The agency had proved invaluable for the multitude of local daily weather reports and storm and flood warnings that it provided for the benefit of the young and expanding nation. It had also implemented miles of permanent telegraph lines.<sup>13</sup>

Recognizing that with the increase in the number of stations (more than 150), one person could no longer handle all those functions, in 1876, Howgate's responsibilities were divided among several officers. Curiously, however, Howgate lobbied Myer hard to be granted responsibility for Signal Corps payments. Myer capitulated, and on July 25, 1876, Howgate assumed the position of "property and disbursement officer," invested with significant and, only belatedly learned, virtually unchecked authority.<sup>14</sup>

Howgate avidly pursued other interests on behalf of the Signal Corps beyond his usual functions. In 1872, Howgate served on the four-man naval board of examiners to investigate the Arctic disaster of the *U.S.S. Polaris*.

The *Polaris* expedition was an ill-fated attempt to reach the North Pole under the command of the eccentric explorer Charles Francis Hall. Anxious to obtain meteorological data from the arctic regions to assess its potential impact on the continental weather patterns, the Signal Corps had assigned one of its recently trained observers, Sergeant Frederick Meyer, to the expedition. Howgate had also spent considerable time interviewing Hall before his departure as his interest in the region deepened. The expedition however ended in a tragic failure. After Hall's death upon reaching winter quarters, the *Polaris* became nipped in the ice. While abandoning the vessel, half the crew became separated from the ship and stranded on a drifting icefloe until fortuitously rescued, as were the balance of the crew.

On the heels of the *Polaris* disaster, with an innovative mindset, Howgate began to devise his own plan for Arctic discovery. Howgate concluded that the best way to conduct scientific observations and exploration in the Arctic was by establishing a temporary "colony" at Lady Franklin Bay in the upper end of Smith Sound to be manned by Inuit families. This colony, manned year-round, would thus enable lengthier periods of observations and permit earlier starts to exploratory sledge journeys. Howgate petitioned the U.S. Congress for an appropriation of \$50,000, but the bill was stalled repeatedly. Still optimistically expecting to receive the necessary monies, in August 1877 Howgate assembled an advance "preliminary" party to the main expedition, privately outfitted at a cost

of \$10,000. It was reported that a substantial contribution was generously made by the railroad baron Jay Gould, but it seems possible that Howgate had used fraudulent Signal Corps funds. This preliminary expedition, which was transported by the 56-ton whaler *Florance*, spent the winter of 1877–78 organizing stores and Inuit support in Cumberland Sound on the southern end of Baffin Bay for the main expedition for Lady Franklin Bay.<sup>15</sup>

Delays beset Howgate's follow-up plans and it was not until 1880 that he could marshal the funds and government support for his "colony" proposal based at Lady Franklin Bay. Unfortunately, the fate of the expedition was sealed even before it left Washington, D.C., when Howgate purchased the 200-ton sealing steamer, *Gulnare*, to transport the party to its destination. Lacking a Congressional appropriation, the lion's share of the *Gulnare's* purchase price came from Howgate's misappropriation of Signal Corps funds, though unknown at the time. With U.S. military personnel committed to the expedition, the U.S. Navy demanded an inspection by a board of naval officers who immediately condemned the vessel. Consequently, the expedition became Howgate's personal quest as he set about to remedy the *Gulnare's* deficiencies.

The expedition's command was originally offered to Lieutenant Adolphus W. Greely with the Signal Corps, but Greely prudently declined after the ship was condemned. Inspired by the explorer-soldier General John C. Fremont, Lieutenant Gustavus C. Doane,

Second Cavalry, received permission to accept the command over the objections of Commander-in-Chief of the Army William T. Sherman. Unfortunately, the *Gulnare*, which was expected to challenge ice floes in some of the most treacherous seas of the world, proved completely unseaworthy. After reaching Greenland, Doane was advised by whalers that the ice in Davis Strait had been particularly heavy that year. With an utterly unfit ship, a shortage of coal and an unfavorable turn of the weather, Doane elected to return to the states.

As fate would have it, as Howgate pushed his Arctic endeavors, the U.S. Government finally managed to place its support behind an expedition to Lady Franklin Bay when international polar interest culminated in the scientific program known as the First International Polar Year. The concept had originated with the scientist-explorer Karl Weyprecht, who believed that simultaneous scientific observations from multiple locations would produce more meaningful results and foster a spirit of cooperation rather than competition in the Arctic. As a result, eleven nations established research locations in the Arctic as part of the program. With the benefit of Howgate's own efforts, it was logical that the Signal Corps would take charge of the U.S. contribution. As originally proposed by Howgate, the Signal Corps supported two International Polar Year expeditions, one to be located at Lady Franklin Bay, the second to be stationed at Point Barrow, Alaska. Howgate's friend, Lieutenant A. W. Greely would command the expedition



The members of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition. Most of the members were recruited from frontier military posts on the Northern Plains on the belief that the climate acclimated them for arctic work. [Library of Congress]

to Lady Franklin Bay, and Lieutenant Patrick H. Ray would lead the station at Point Barrow. Both expeditions departed in the summer of 1881, with rumors floating about as to Howgate's financial malfeasance.<sup>16</sup>

While bearing a heavy load, Howgate could find time for a significant diversion. Her name was Miss Nellie Burrill. By all accounts, Nellie Burrill was an attractive, well-educated and respectable young lady residing in the small railway town of Dewitt, Nebraska. Whether Nellie was blonde, brunette, or even red headed, however, varied by source. Her father, Hadley P. Burrill, a Nebraska politician, used his influence with U.S. Senator Algernon S. Paddock to gain Nellie a position as a clerk at

the U.S. Department of the Treasury in Washington, D.C. (she was employed in the Treasury's office of mutilated and redeemed currency). Ironically, at the time she left Nebraska in 1875, a local Omaha newspaper proudly boasted that Nellie Burrill "will do her fair share towards maintaining the good standing of the state's feminine representatives here." In Washington, the lovely nineteen-year-old woman caught the eye of then forty-year-old Henry Howgate, who found every reason to visit the Treasury offices. Howgate was immediately smitten by Nellie's beauty, charm, and polite conversation. The two quickly became a pair.<sup>17</sup>

At the Signal Corps offices, Brigadier General Myer had placed complete

trust in Howgate, who had performed indefatigably during the nascent years of the department. According to one report, Myer was “an easy-going old soul, and Howgate ran things to suit himself.” As early as 1876, at about the time Howgate’s duties changed, Myer was noted as a bit enfeebled. Later, he suffered from nephritis (inflammation of the kidneys) and heart trouble, and he may have even taken more of a back seat. Howgate took advantage of the situation by embezzling vendor payments. According to the press, Howgate managed his fraud by having Myer unknowingly sign fraudulent vouchers for payments to telegraph companies and other third parties. As disbursement officer, Howgate issued checks payable to the identified payee or bearer, such as “Western Union Telegraph Co. or bearer.” Howgate then endorsed and presented the checks to a Treasury clerk, misappropriating the funds to Howgate’s own account.<sup>18</sup>

With these embezzled funds Howgate spent lavishly, purchasing real estate, securities, and an expensive house, furnishings and clothing for Nellie Burrell. A cabin in the woods of Virginia was built and comfortably outfitted by Howgate as a gun club for use by Howgate and his friends. A large tract of land near Lake George in Florida (named the “Howgate Tract”) was to be a planned community. With a taste for antiquarian books, Howgate amassed a large collection of rare books (with a particular focus on travel and exploration). A large portion of his embezzled funds would go toward funding his polar endeavors, including the pur-

chase and outfitting of the *Gulnare*.

Howgate had previously purchased a modest home on Fourteenth Street where his unknowing and dutiful wife Cordelia and daughter Ida lived in blissful ignorance. From his married home, he was known as a “hospitable host, where he posed successfully as a model husband and father.” Though often entertaining on a grand scale, when scrutinized about the source of his newly displayed financial wealth on his government paygrade, he claimed he had fallen into a large inheritance or made a killing in real estate or mineral speculation.<sup>19</sup>

Howgate, however, led a double life, spending more time at the attractive residence he acquired on Thirteenth Street for Nellie. No expense was spared for the two-story home, considered one of the finest in Washington (for years after it was known as the Howgate Mansion). According to multiple reports, the home was furnished in “ornamental splendor.” With a long face, Howgate would advise Cordelia that signal office duties required him to travel to Philadelphia, New York, or elsewhere, but Howgate would then spend those long stretches with his mistress.

Cordelia eventually discovered both the mistress and the abode. While Nellie and Henry were both absent the house one afternoon, the outraged Cordelia entered the residence and completely ransacked it, emptying drawers and shredding every aspect of the mistress’s wardrobe. Rather than causing a change of heart on Howgate’s part, with the affair now public, Howgate con-

tinued the romance, flaunting Nellie through conspicuous daily walks.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most sensational aspect of Howgate's activities was the so-called "Tippity-Wichity Club," an informal coterie of friends organized by Howgate. Rumors abounded that men of high standing were counted as members, including associates in President Hayes's administration, Congressional legislators, and prominent men of the judiciary. In 1879, with his ill-gotten funds, Howgate had purchased a private island escape named "Tippity-Wichity Island" (previously known as Lynch Island). The ten-acre islet is situated in the center of St. Mary's River, an arm of the Potomac River with its mouth near Chesapeake Bay.<sup>21</sup>

The island getaway and its well-furnished "Tippity-Wichity" clubhouse, also known as "Happy Land," was a rich source of gentlemen's entertainment. The clubhouse building was in fact a Signal Corps structure that Howgate had ordered dismantled and removed from its location in Washington, D.C. and reassembled and repainted on the island. If that was not shocking enough, the island could be reached by the luxuriously furnished and well-manned steam yacht, *Storm Signal*, that Howgate had also purchased with ill-gotten funds. Both the clubhouse and the yacht were elaborately fitted with fine silver, crockery, linen, and carpeting. Catered riverboat parties were held aboard the *Storm Signal* and the clubhouse was known for drinking, gambling, and debauchery. The *Washington Times* reported that as

for the clubhouse, "the stories of the orgies which Capt. Howgate improvised equal in extravagance anything told in the annals of Roman decadence."<sup>22</sup>

With the death of General Myer on August 24, 1880, Howgate's fortunes took a decided turn for the worse. Adjutant General of the U.S. Army, Richard S. Drum, was immediately tapped as Myer's temporary replacement. Drum, a first-rate administrator, immediately began to take a hard look at the workings of the Signal Corps and quickly instituted some needed reforms. Interestingly, by early September, press reports were circulating that Howgate had been suspended by Drum due to mismanagement of funds as disbursing officer. Drum publicly denied the claims, stating that Howgate had been relieved from those duties to alleviate his workload and that there were no charges pending. Nonetheless, it appears that there was more to Howgate's personnel change.

At the same time, Howgate continued to lobby hard for the position of chief signal officer, in part believing it could cover his defalcations. Despite his experience, Howgate stood virtually no chance of gaining the position as his rank alone, that of first lieutenant, was below the grade considered appropriate (that of colonel or higher). Nonetheless, Howgate received the backing of several Congressmen, trade associations, meteorological committees and even Signal Corps observers in field stations, all beneficiaries of his knowledge and efficient management. In the end, on December 8, 1880, William Babcock

Hazen was promoted from colonel to brigadier general and appointed Chief Signal Officer by President Rutherford B. Hayes. In the face of Hazen's appointment, Howgate immediately resigned.

Resignation did not forestall the inevitable, however. On August 16, 1881, while Howgate was treating his rheumatism in mineral baths at the popular health resort in Mount Clemens, Michigan, he was arrested on criminal charges of embezzlement. Unperturbed by his arrest, a confident Howgate left with the marshal for Washington, D.C., without incident, claiming that he "could easily explain matters when the time came." At the same time, newspapers broke the salacious reports of his affair with Nellie Burrill, and Washington had its scandal of the year.<sup>23</sup>

By the time of his arraignment, the government had uncovered \$40,000 of misused funds with the expectation that far more would follow. Despite protests by his lawyers, bail was set at that amount. Curiously, Howgate still maintained a cadre of supporters and well-wishers, mostly individuals who had benefitted from his unbounded largesse. They made boisterous appearances at several early court hearings, smothering him upon his entrance and departure. Bond was posted by the businessmen (and Howgate friends) William W. McCullough, Notley Anderson, and William B. Moses, all of whom had profited from Howgate's misdeeds. McCullough and Anderson had built and sold houses to Howgate, and Moses, a retailer, was the purveyor of the lavish furniture, carpets, and

furnishings for Howgate's properties. Within weeks, the fraud was further reassessed at \$101,257 and still growing, as the government filed a civil action to collect that amount and seized Howgate's properties. Though investigators later claimed that the fraud could not have been pulled off without internal assistance, no other person was ever charged.<sup>24</sup>

After his release, Howgate quickly made his way to New York City ostensibly for business, but fears were raised that he had fled the jurisdiction. Rumors floated that he had made for Canada, a South American republic or even the Sandwich Islands. With his bondsmen exceedingly anxious, Howgate finally returned to Washington, D.C. and was promptly imprisoned. In the meantime, additional indictments for embezzlement and forgery followed, largely covering the period from February 1879 through July 1880. Though the magnitude of the defalcation drew wild speculation (as high as \$600,000), in 1886 Hazen admitted that \$237,000 had been confirmed stolen (later raised to some \$370,000, though even that amount is likely an understatement). The sum was enormous considering that the annual appropriation for the Signal Corps was approximately \$500,000. (By way of comparison, \$370,000 in 1881 was the equivalent of \$11,750,000 in 2025 dollars). With the additional charges and a demand for an additional \$30,000 bond, Howgate's friends, already jittery about Howgate's flight risk, refused to step forward. As a result, Howgate was remanded to the district jail on October 4, 1881. He was held in cell No. 2 in the

block known as “Murderers’ Row,” the holding pen where Charles Guiteau and other notorious criminals were imprisoned awaiting their fate.<sup>25</sup>

Remarkably, on Christmas Day 1881, Howgate received a generous gift from the court, permission to spend dinner with his family under supervision of a marshal. (None of the other 130 inmates were granted such privilege). One newspaper looked aghast at the release, noting “the fact that Howgate eats Christmas dinner with his family gives the *Journal* the blind stagger.” Even more remarkable, Howgate was similarly granted that privilege on New Year’s Day to hold a reception for his family and friends.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, on April 12, 1882, Howgate petitioned to be allowed to be released to retrieve some papers necessary for his defense and to see his daughter who was home from Vassar College for the Easter break. His attorneys claimed the papers were “absolutely necessary.” Judge Andrew Wylie granted a two-hour supervised leave, to be accompanied by a deputy marshal. Wearing a threadbare gray suit, Howgate was escorted to his home. Deputy Marshal Charles H. Dewing (or Dowling) accompanied Howgate into the home and dining room. At one point, Howgate asked permission to retrieve some papers upstairs. He exited the dining room, and returned several minutes later after bathing, having changed into a smart black business suit (which evidently raised no suspicions) and carrying a bundle of papers.

With Howgate’s time nearly ex-

pired, he then remarked that he had forgotten a few other items, and walked back upstairs (other reports state he went onto the rear veranda with Ida). In any event, when he did not return in 10-15 minutes according to Dewing, the marshal asked daughter Ida where her father was. She responded to the effect of: “Father has gone out for a short walk.” After a brief frantic search, the embarrassed marshal immediately ran to the nearest telephone to alert the police to Howgate’s disappearance. Seriously hobbled by rheumatism and a lame right leg from a wagon accident, the easily recognizable fugitive somehow managed to elude the dragnet and disappeared into the night.<sup>27</sup>

Not surprisingly, critics ruthlessly ridiculed the marshal’s laxity. There was as much outrage over Dewing’s failure as for Howgate’s trickery. In fact, Howgate garnered some public sympathy for having been jailed for as long six months without a trial. Over the following weeks, months and years that Howgate remained on the run, all sorts of fanciful theories were tendered as to how and where Howgate had disappeared. At the time, it was reported that Howgate exited a rear window onto an alley that ran to G Street (some said by sliding down a drainpipe). Some stated that Ida serenaded Marshal Dewing who fell “captive to her siren-like voice,” or by playing beautiful piano music, while Howgate made good his escape. Others theorized Howgate had made it to the Potomac River (which he knew well) and boarded the waiting *Storm Signal* to Virginia. Some thought he had the use of an accomplice awaiting

with a fast carriage to whisk him to the train station. All thought he had pre-arranged to meet up with Nellie, which proved not to be the case. In 1895, Howgate confessed to a friend that he had no plans for escape at the time. He simply walked out the front door when Dewing’s back was turned and hastily made his way down the street.<sup>28</sup>

The Department of Justice, stung by the escape, immediately issued a reward of \$500 for his recapture (later increased to \$1,000 as the manhunt dragged on). Nonetheless, Howgate managed to elude his pursuers for nearly 13 years. Howgate was far from unheard from during that period though, leading to lingering questions as to the aggressiveness of the manhunt in the face of credible sightings and knowledgeable reports as to his whereabouts.<sup>29</sup>

Hazen claimed the Signal Corps had no funds to secure his capture, so the U.S. Secret Service was tasked with the manhunt. Shortly after the escape, newspapers reported Howgate was in Syracuse settling some property matters. In March 1883, Howgate and a woman meeting the description of Nellie were tracked to New Orleans, but slipped out of the city before agents could capture him. On April 10, 1883, a year after his escape, the *Washington Critic* reported that Howgate had been spotted in plain view on a street in the District of Columbia by a former Signal Service employee (who wished to remain anonymous) accompanied by one of his creditors. In what became a recurring theme, though spotted often (and disclosed after the fact), Howgate’s

friends were not prepared to turn him in. The failure of the Secret Service led Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln to employ the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The private detective agency had been founded in 1850 and was noted for its legwork in tracking down outlaws and fugitives. With an extensive network, Pinkerton agents followed leads as far south as Florida to as far north as Canada in search of Howgate.<sup>30</sup>

In Nebraska, Nellie’s home state, Howgate’s fleeting presence was confirmed by the agency. In November 1883, Howgate stayed several weeks in Nebraska City with his Signal Corps mate Albert S. Cole, then a real estate lawyer. Alerted to his visit after the fact, Pinkerton detectives spent considerable time interviewing Cole. The former signalman was a cagey character, providing evasive answers as to his contacts with Howgate. Howgate had held a voucher for \$3,500 for pemmican he claimed to have purchased for the *Gulnare* expedition (perhaps with Signal Corps funds). Cole took an assignment of the note (at a steep purchase discount), taking a chance that he could procure full payment from the government. Cole claimed that he had taken deeds to several properties owned by Howgate (though the Government could never prove as much). Cole, a rather unscrupulous character according to Pinkerton, refused to provide any details as to Howgate’s whereabouts without the assurance of a payout of at least \$5,000, which was refused.<sup>31</sup>

In a lengthy piece published by the *Omaha Daily Bee* in 1894, a report-

er claimed that Howgate had made the acquaintance of a lawyer in Beatrice, Nebraska (through a friend in Nebraska City, perhaps Cole), where he was spotted by several individuals who knew him well. With that prominent Beatrice attorney, Howgate was said to have transferred a deed for 40,000 acres in Florida into the attorney's name (or Nellie's name), to avoid seizure by the government. Coincidentally, Howgate had published an advertising brochure, entitled "The Howgate Tract on Lake George" touting property in that region of Florida. Nellie's father, in close communication with Nellie while she was with Howgate, was evidently the recipient of money from Nellie. Perhaps more than coincidence, in 1879, Nellie's parents acquired property and relocated to Orange City, on or near the Howgate Tract.<sup>32</sup>

For a time in the fall of 1883, under the alias of H. W. Harrison, Howgate worked as assistant editor for *The Iron Port*, a weekly newspaper in the city of Escanaba, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The obliging editor knew full well the identity of his employee, who worked a full three months before leaving Escanaba. Almost taunting the authorities, a week after Howgate had slipped away, a sympathetic editorial went so far as to remark that H. W. Harrison had "made many friends and strengthened the ancient bonds between himself and us . . . but the pressure of his own affairs called him away and we could best but bid him 'God Speed.'"<sup>33</sup>

Major A. W. Greely, one of Howgate's closest friends, was involved in

one of the more unusual Howgate incidents. Greely returned from the ill-fated Lady Franklin Bay Expedition in July 1884. Besides Greely, only five of 25 men survived the ordeal after relief ships failed to reach them in two successive years. The expedition did return with impressive scientific results on behalf of the Signal Corps. Greely learned to his surprise that Howgate was a criminal fugitive. When Hazen learned that Greely had bestowed Howgate's name on several geographic locations during the expedition, Hazen was incensed and immediately requested Greely to strike them. News of the retraction, well-publicized at the time, quickly reached Howgate. In October 1884, Howgate emerged, at least by letter, reaching out to his friend Greely. Through his letter to Greely (sent by Ida Howgate from Cleveland), Howgate felt the need "to break silence now however from a sense of duty to my family," in order that Greely could work to preserve at least Ida's arctic placename, "whose loyalty and noble self-devotion in these days of trouble have done much to brighten them." Greely quickly advised Chief Signal Officer Hazen and Secretary Lincoln of the communication. A second letter was also received by Greely from Howgate (again through Ida in Cleveland) requesting a loan of \$100 to \$500. In an act of poor judgment, Greely neglected to advise Lincoln and even responded to Ida, informing her that his financial condition prevented him from proffering the loan.<sup>34</sup>

At the Signal Corps, Sergeant Otto Holtnorth had been a primary investigator unearthing the Howgate



Henry W. Howgate from about the time of his disappearance in 1882. Reports from those who met him while on the run found him similar in appearance. [U.S. National Archives]

fraud. The defalcation and Howgate's embarrassing escape had left Holtnorth "brooding over the affair as a matter personal to himself," noted the *National Republican*. Believing that Greely had been in communication with Howgate, in a brazen act, Holtnorth surreptitiously entered Greely's office, pried open his desk drawer and copied the two letters from Howgate. Secretary Lincoln was advised as to the matter, at which time Holtnorth, to his chagrin, learned that Greely had already disclosed the first letter to Lincoln (and once advised of the second, Lincoln claimed it was of no consequence). Nonetheless, Lin-

coln dispatched Holtnorth to Cleveland to try to effect Howgate's arrest, but Holtnorth failed to find the fugitive. Worse for Holtnorth however was his discharge "for cause" from the service for his rifling of Greely's papers. Greely himself took some criticism for the affair, mainly for responding to the second letter. He also placed himself at considerable political risk within the service for publicly standing by Howgate as a friend, acknowledging that it was Howgate who had placed him in charge of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition. Greely remarked to the press that "if I had been in condition to do so

I should have made the loan, as Capt. Howgate was a friend of mine and I don't like to see a man kicked when going down hill."<sup>35</sup>

On September 27, 1894, Howgate was finally captured in New York City by private detective Andrew L. Drummond, previously a Secret Service agent and chief of the New York City district. According to Drummond, word had been received by Drummond from U.S. Secretary of Agriculture J. Sterling Morton that Howgate was operating as a rare book dealer in the city. An agent familiar with Howgate was sent to help identify him. After unsuccessfully canvassing bookstores, the agent spotted Howgate at an auction. The agent then tracked him to a popular antiquarian bookshop located at No. 80 Fourth Avenue, operating under the assumed name of "Harvey Williams." Detective Drummond approached the fugitive as he exited the shop asking, "How are you Capt. Howgate?" Howgate responded, "I am alright." Thus, Howgate was arrested after almost 13 years on the run. When Howgate asked to return to his store to close it up, remembering Howgate's escape years ago, Drummond refused (to which Howgate is said to have laughed heartily).<sup>36</sup>

Far from being a piece of dogged detective work, Howgate claimed that he had been publicly strolling the streets of New York City and operating his bookstore for eight years. "Hardly a day or night has passed that I haven't recognized and been recognized by people in Washington," he boasted. He had even served as a juror on several occasions.

In 1901, he went as far to state that "I had not been in New York long before I met many of my associates in the Government service .... Many of them would come to my house and dine with me." He was living at No. 195 West 10<sup>th</sup> Street, with an attractive woman known as "Mrs. Williams," later identified as Nellie Burrill. According to Howgate, "I could have been arrested at any time during these years. So the impression which I am told prevails that I was not really wanted seems to me to be pretty well warranted." Curiously, as early as August 1890, the *New York Times* had reported that Howgate was living in the city under an assumed name.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, rumors had resurfaced that his presence had been well-known and ignored due to the efforts of highly placed confederates who had every reason to suppress the affair and their own involvement. One paper noted that "the influences behind Howgate were so potent that until now he has lived in immunity." That Drummond had captured Howgate only two weeks after his dismissal from the Secret Service does seem more than coincidental. Adding fuel to the fire, in 1891, when advised that his dismissal was imminent, Drummond was alleged to have "worked the Howgate racket" to keep his successor from the office, by holding out the promise of Howgate's arrest indefinitely but not delivering.<sup>38</sup>

In February 1895, the case of the U.S. Government against Henry Howgate began some 15 years after the events for which he was charged. Loyal daughter Ida, tastefully dressed

in black, sat attentively with her father throughout the trial, and was occasionally seen to give him a kiss. Howgate's first trial on two indictments ended in a verdict of "not guilty." To convict Howgate required a finding that Howgate was a "fugitive from justice," to extend the statute of limitations for his crimes. Several jurors were unconvinced that Howgate met that definition considering the repeated public reporting of his whereabouts. Howgate's luck ran out on a second trial on additional charges. In April 1895, he was found guilty of multiple counts of falsification and forgery and sentenced to eight years in the Albany Penitentiary, reduced to six for good behavior.

Howgate was a model prisoner, appropriately serving as librarian and in the hospital. He was released on January 1, 1901, at the age of 65. In poor health at the time of his release, he died as the result of a stroke at the home of Ida Howgate on June 1, 1901. As for Ida Howgate, after her Vassar graduation and several years teaching, in 1886, like Nellie Burrill, she accepted a clerkship with the Treasury Department by which she supported her mother and Henry after his release. The sole asset of Henry Howgate's estate was a \$2,000 life insurance policy payable to Ida. The Department of Justice seized the pro-

ceeds of the policy, limiting Ida's recovery to the \$668.66 paid in premiums. In 1902, Cordelia Howgate was finally awarded a pension for Henry's military service at \$8 per month. She died on October 14, 1907. Ida Howgate died on May 3, 1942. With regards to Ida, Adolphus Greely had honored Henry Howgate's plea, retaining the placename Ida Bay on Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic in recognition of Ida's loyalty and self-devotion.<sup>39</sup>

Howgate's striking change from faithful servant to financial fraudster has never been fully explained. Whether the love of Nellie Burrill led Howgate down the path of self-destruction remains a mystery. Most commentators at the time quickly seized on the premise and it certainly sensationalized the story. Though Howgate certainly spent lavishly upon his mistress, spending on his personal lifestyle was equally as extravagant. Howgate's financial transgression as postmaster in Romeo, small as it was, exposed a character flaw. That shortcoming, coupled with unfettered access to Signal Corps funds, and a strong desire to flatter a mistress, underwrite a polar expedition and to otherwise savor the fruits of wealth so freely available for taking, were evidently temptations too great to resist.

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