

## *Fabulous Firsts:* **France** (January 1, 1849)

by B. W. H. Poole

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It was nearly nine years after the introduction of English stamps that the first French stamps made their appearance. For many years prior to their issue postal reform had been discussed but until the Republic was established on the ruins of the monarchy in 1848 no practical steps were taken to remedy the antiquated methods then in force.

At that period the single letter rate was 30 centimes for distances under about twenty-five miles and it increased to a maximum of 1 franc 20 centimes to cover the entire mainland. In the autumn of 1848 a law was passed to introduce uniform postage, the rate being fixed at 20c on a single letter not exceeding 1/4 ounce in weight extending throughout France and including Corsica and Algeria. The new law was to come into effect on January 1, 1849, and clauses in it stipulated the use of postage stamps of 20c, 40c and 1fr for defraying the new rates of postage.



*20c black on yellowish, Sc. 3, on cover from to Leblanc, tied by a Mezieres en Brenne January 1, 1849 post-mark—the first day of issue for French postage stamps.*

Messrs. Perkins, Bacon and Co., who were manufacturing the stamps used in England, were approached by the French Government but as the price of line-engraved

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stamps was high and it would take at least six months to fill the order, negotiations fell through. Application was then made to J. J. Barre, chief engraver to the Mint in Paris, but, though he offered to engrave a die for the stamps, he declined to undertake their manufacture. He recommended that M. Hulot, another engraver at the Mint, should be entrusted with the work, and that it should be carried out by the electrotype process which Hulot had successfully applied to the production of 100fr banknotes when the Bank of France was at its wits ends to supply notes of small denomination during the monetary crisis caused by the recent revolution.

About the middle of September, 1848, Barre submitted a design showing a head of Ceres, as emblematic of Liberty, enclosed within a neat frame suitably inscribed with name and value. This was immediately approved and Barre was instructed to proceed with the engraving of the die, and at the same time Hulot was authorised to purchase the necessary equipment for manufacturing the stamps and to have the machines installed in a part of the Mint set aside as a stamp factory. From the original die, secondary dies were made for each denomination required, and from these electrotyped casts were made for the printing plates. Hulot at first made his plates the size of a sheet of stamps—that is 300 casts arranged in fifteen rows of twenty each—but later on he divided the sheets into a certain number of panes, which enabled him to get by with smaller plates.

The 20c in black and the 1fr in red appeared on January 1, 1849, and Hulot was so successful in carrying out their manufacture that all post offices in France received supplies of the lower value in ample time to place them on sale on the official first day of issue and the vast majority of offices also had supplies of the 1fr. The 40c for the double rate, not being in urgent demand, was not issued until February of the following year.

After a time it was found that black was a rather unsuitable color for a stamp in common use owing to the difficulty of seeing the obliteration and in March, 1849,



20c black on yellowish, Sc. 3, on a fumigated cover to Bourgoin with “Corp Expeditionnaire d’Italie Qt. General” August 30, 1850 postmark. The cover was surcharged 5c because of the increase in postal rates of July 1, 1850, from 20c to 25c.

an official circular appeared announcing the color would be changed to blue. No 20c blue stamps, however, were ever issued as the Post Office, alarmed at the falling off of revenue, decided to change the rate on single letters to 25c and this new value was ordered printed in blue. The new rate went into effect on July 1, and as Hulot was rather doubtful of having sufficient of the new stamps ready by when the new rate went into effect he made provision for such an emergency by printing a large number of 20c stamps in blue and surcharging them “25c” in red. However, the new stamps were ready by the proper day and the stock of surcharged stamps was destroyed though, as usual, a few copies were kept by some of the officials as souvenirs.

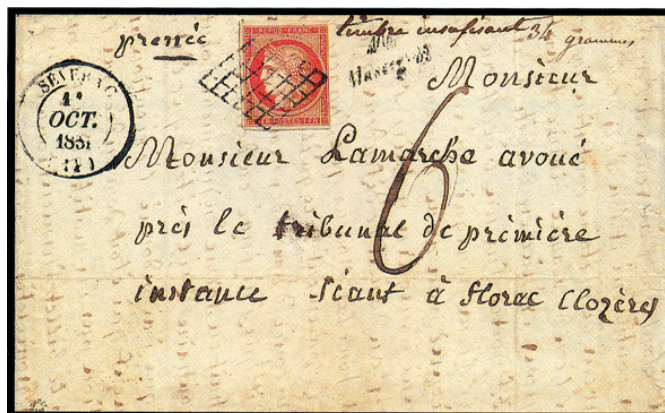


Unissued 25c red surcharge on 20c blue first printing

In the meantime the rate on single letters to Belgium had been fixed at 40c (see page 4)—the same as the double rate on domestic letters—and this somewhat hastened the manufacture of this value which, as we have already stated, was issued in February, 1850. As the color chosen for this denomination was orange or orange red, the postal authorities feared it might possibly be confused with the 1 franc, the early printings of which were in a somewhat similar color (page 4). Consequently all franc stamps in the lighter color were called in and instructions were given to



Two halves of the same 40c orange, Sc. 7e, paying the 40c rate to Belgium tied to cover by one black diamond grill cancel, also with matching Mezieres February 1, 1851 postmark. It is believed that the postal employee at first believed the rate was 20c for a distance to 30 kilometers. With a lack of 20c stamps, he cut a 40c in half. Then, realizing the distance was 65km, requiring 40c, he affixed the other half to the cover.



1fr. bright vermillion, Sc. 8, on cover to Florac with Severac October 11, 1851 postmark and "46/Massegros" two line handstamp to right of the stamp. The cover was surcharged 60c because the postman apparently mistook the 1 franc stamp for a similarly colored 40c.

the printers to issue future supplies in darker shades.

At that period the rate on local letters—that is, those posted and delivered within the same country postal district—was 10 centimes (see page 5) while prepaid letters posted and delivered within the city of Paris were charged 15c (page 5).

To provide stamps for defraying these rates, which had hitherto been paid in cash, a 15c value was issued on July 23, 1850, and a 10c one on Sept. 12 following, the former being in deep green and the latter in various shades of bistre.



10c bister, Sc. 1, postmarked "OR" (Origine rurale). The "OR" handstamp was first used in 1836. These hand stamps were furnished to country postmen and had to be used by them on letters that were delivered to them by hand during their rounds, or later collected by them from the boxes.



15c green, Sc. 2a, paying the Paris local rate; however, the cover was missent to Highland, Ill. (lower left c.d.s.), then resent to Paris. The Highland Sep. 15 (1850) date stamp is crossed out. The cover bears a red "Outre-Mer/Le Havre" October 25, 1850 date stamp and "PP" of Paris.

All the stamps of this series were issued imperforate and they were printed on white wove unwatermarked paper provided by the well-known firm of Lacroix of Angouleme. Before being used for printing the paper was covered with a preparation which Hulot stated was a preservative against a lithographic transfer being possible for illegitimate purposes. Whether this was the real object or not is open to question but the application of this surfacing prevented

the paper from absorbing the printing ink and resulted in the beautiful impressions characteristic of these early French stamps. The tinting was yellowish for the 10c, 20c, 40c



and 1fr, greenish for the 15c, and bluish for the 25c. Sometimes the tinting was so lightly done that it is impossible to detect it and in the case of many of the 20c value the paper seems to be perfectly white. A supply of this same value was printed on paper distinctly buff and this can easily be distinguished as the color goes right through. The 25c is also known on yellowish paper with the color a distinctly greenish blue.

*25c blue on bluish tete-beche pair, Sc. 6c, on a cover from Lyon to Valence Sur Rhone with Lyon February 12, 1851 postmark.*

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*A spectacular cover bearing 14 copies of the 1fr dark carmine, including a tete-beche pair, Sc. 9a, lower left in a strip of seven, plus two 15c and a 40c upper left.*

All values appear in numerous shades and in the case of the 1fr some of these are of considerable rarity and value.

One shade of pale vermilion—known as “vervelle” from

the name of the first owner of the sheet—was never issued though it is eagerly sought for by specialists. Specimens in this color come from an ungummed sheet of remainders found among the papers of the printer many years ago.



*1fr. "vervelle" issue, Sc. 8c (no longer listed)*

In all values, except the 40c, a tete-beche variety is found and some of these pairs are amongst the world's greatest known rarities. On the 15c, for instance, only one such pair is known and we believe only one pair each of the vermilion and orange shades of the 1fr exist. These varieties were caused by one of the electrotype moulds being placed upside down in each plate. It seems to have been done deliberately and no explanation has ever been tendered other than it was probably a "fad" of M. Hulot.



*Indicating that the tete-beche positions were intentional is this 20c orange brown trial color plate proof, Sc. 3TCP, block of six with the lower right stamp inverted.*

An interesting variety of the 40c is known with one or both of the numerals "4" wider than normal. The variety is said to be caused by the accidental insertion of two 30c cliches in the bottom row of the plate of 300 of the 40c stamps. This was noticed before any stamps were printed from the plate and the offending "3"s were reengraved. One of the stamps has the wide 4 on both sides and the other on one side only. The latter, of course, is due to the fact

that one of the numeral “4”s so closely copied those on the rest of the plate that it has no special characteristics

Some time after these stamps were obsolete the Post Office Department and high government officials were besieged with requests for specimens. Consequently in 1862 reprints of all values were made, including the unissued 20c in blue, and while these were, presumably, good for postage very few seem to have been used. As the reprints are worth considerably less than the unused originals and some



*1862 20c Reissue, Sc. 4d (no longer listed)*

of them are rather hard to identify, the wise collector will only purchase unused originals from dealers who are qualified to know them definitely. No tete-beche pairs have been found in these reprints though the variety of 40c with wider “4” is known.

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