

75 Years Ago in Stamps:

Plate Reconstruction

by Stanley B. Ashbrook (*From STAMPS Magazine, January 25, 1936*)

At the recent Convention of the American Philatelic Society at Washington, a gentleman who was introduced to me said: "I do not understand why you specialists have to plate a stamp. Do you do this for the sole purpose of trying to work out something the same as a jig-saw puzzle?" It had never occurred to me that a mature collector could look on plating in such a way. I made up my mind then and there that I would write these notes so that collectors in general would get a better idea of the work. No doubt many collectors have only a pretty vague idea about the work of the ultra-specialist, and the whys and wherefores of plating. Apparently, quite a few are under the impression that plating is, indeed, much the same as working out a jig-saw puzzle and just about as important, except that puzzles probably strain your eyes less. Not that I have anything against puzzles—or for that matter, against those who like to work them out, but such work has nothing in common with stamp plate reconstruction.

As my plating experience has been confined solely to early United States stamps, all references in these notes relate to the reconstruction of the plates of certain values of the 1851 and 1857 issues. Those who take their stamps seriously wish to learn all they can about their specialties, and to know certain early United States stamps, it is necessary to reconstruct the plate or plates. In no other way can one get so much information of his study.

Prior to 1894, our stamps were not printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, but by private bank note engraving companies. The printers of our first stamps, the 5¢ and 10¢ of 1847, held the Government contract for four years. Another company then held the contract for the succeeding ten years. Both of these companies have long been out of existence, their records destroyed. Very few, if any, records exist in the Government files at Washington to assist students of these stamps in their work. Practically all that is known regarding our 1847, 1851 and 1857 issues has been learned from the stamps themselves, and, I believe, a great percentage of the information we have is directly due to the reconstruction of some of the plates.

All students of early United States, I am sure, marvel at the wonderful work accomplished by Dr. Carroll Chase and the wealth of information he has placed at the disposal of present and future specialists. Chase was the pioneer in the plating of early U. S. and blazed the way for present-day ultra-specialism. It was through him my interest in the 1-cent of 1851-1857 was aroused, and for years we were closely associated in our joint work. No one has a better appreciation than I of the work he accomplished, and the difficulties he surmounted. Much of his knowledge of the 3-cent of 1851 and 1857 was obtained through his reconstruction of the plates. He was ever seeking information through his plate reconstructions, and not the mere pleasure of working out jig-saw puzzles. Each and every 3-cent stamp he acquired became a separate and distinct personality to him, whereas before they were all only duplicates, shifted transfers, cracked plates, unusual recuttings, etc. Varieties that had been previously neglected began to take on a new air of importance, and as a result, are now considered desirable minor varieties. He learned when the different plates were made and put to use, and when they were retired; when certain plates were altered, by the re-entering of the transfer roll or retouching by hand or both; when certain plates cracked; in what years the various shades of ink were used; and from which plate's such printings came.

I do not mean to infer all such information was gathered solely through his plate reconstructions. He also made a study of cancellations, and his knowledge on this subject, combined with his plating, enabled him to give us practically all that is today known about this interesting stamp. A study of cancellations and plating are necessarily a joint work.

Today one can gather together several hundred copies of the 3-cent, obtain a copy of the Chase book on the "3-cent 1851-1857" and start to work. Anyone doing this will get a real taste of stamp specialism. In time, one will find his several hundred copies are not just duplicates of a rather common U.S. stamp, but that each and every copy has certain characteristics.

The Chase story of the 3-cent is not complete by any means, and anyone taking up the study of this stamp may discover some variety Chase never had the good luck to find. There is always the possibility of adding further to our store of philatelic knowledge.

Some people, especially those of the jig-saw puzzle school of thought, will ask what is the good of all this information. Primarily, I think the good from such work comes in placing before those that seek knowledge of our stamps as much information as it is possible to get together. What a contrast, for example is there between the information available to the student of our stamps and that available to the student of the stamps of Great Britain. Books on the latter have been published based on records in the files of the original engravers and printers. Such records show a history of such stamps, as for example the first Penny Black and its successor, the Penny Red, from the various stages of the engraving of the original die on down through the years when these stamps were superseded by a new issue. These records tell when certain plates were made, on what dates they were put to press and the number of impressions taken on each day. The British student plates these stamps and the knowledge he gains from his reconstructions, combined with all the old records of the printers, gives him a very accurate and authentic history.

Not only is the American student striving to gather together a true story of our stamps for this purpose alone, but also to a certain extent to lessen the danger of fraudulent items escaping detection, as will be explained later.

The 1-cent of 1851-1857, has for many years been my favorite stamp and study. In my humble opinion, no other United States stamp furnishes such a wide field for specialism, because of the various types, transfer rolls, reliefs, plates and cancellations. Before certain plates of this stamp were reconstructed, we knew little, if anything, about this interesting stamp, aside from the valuable information regarding it as furnished in Mr. Luff's book.

In the nineties, the catalog only listed two types, but as the years went by several more were added. We then had a Type I, II, III and IV. Certain stamps were bought and sold as Type I, whereas they were not this type as we know it today. No distinction was made between the scarce Type III and the semi-scarce Type IIIA of today's listing. The common Type V perforated stamp had no other classification than that accorded the rare perforated Type III or the scarce perforated Type IIIA.

The reconstruction of the plates gave an individuality to each stamp from the two hundred positions of each plate, and enabled

students of these stamps to tell a true story of the various plates. For example, instead of Imperforate Type I stamps, there became only one Type I imperforate stamp, it being discovered that only one position on one of the imperforate plates furnished a stamp that had the complete design as it existed on the original die. Forthwith, this particular stamp, known as 7R1E, took on special significance because it was the only stamp coming from the four imperforate plates that fulfilled the description of "the complete design" as described in the catalog.

If we eliminate certain trial printings, proofs, sample stamps, etc., that are at present listed in the catalog as "stamps that were regularly issued," one will find that the 1-cent 1851, Type I, is the rarest of regular United States stamps. Plate reconstruction discovered this rare stamp and gave it its proper standing.

I will cite several examples to show how plating does help to thwart the fakir. Following this profession is a type commonly referred to as a "painter." He can, with great skill, repair a rare stamp that is damaged, by adding margins, and perforations, and then "paint in" the missing portions of the design. Some of these "painters" are so clever that their work practically defies detection. This statement may bring a smile to some of my friends in the East who are recognized experts on such things. Be that as it may, I am quite sure that some of this work has no doubt slipped by some of the best of them, because I have known of examples where only the plating of a "rare" stamp showed it up for what it really was. In this respect, I recall making enlarged photographs of a rare Mauritius "painting" for the late Arthur Hind. This fake bore the guarantee of a world-famous expert. It was more than clever, and its discoverer informed me it had probably taken the "painter" nine or ten months to make it.

One so skilled in this work can really accomplish wonders, but I defy him to get his work by one who is familiar with a stamp that is "painted" and supposed to have come from a plate, every position of which is so very familiar to him. This statement is made with certain reservations that will be explained later.

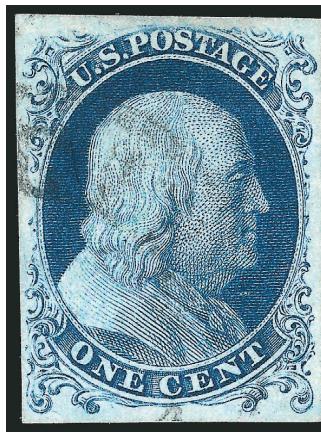
I recall offhand an especially good "job" that was done on a 1-cent 1851, a "beautiful" copy of the scarce Type IA, which was submitted to me several years ago by a prominent Eastern collector.

The real Type IA stamp is a subtype of the Type I. It is, without doubt, a rarer stamp than the catalog price indicates. The reason for this is, first, it comes from Plate 4, a plate that was not made until some time in March of 1857. Issue of the 3¢ Perforated stamps had started in early March (not February) of 1857, but no 1¢ stamps were issued perforated before the middle or latter part of July, 1857. Therefore, imperforate sheets from this plate were only issued for several months. In addition, two other plates were being used at this time. Second, the Type IA stamps come only from nineteen positions in the bottom row of Plate 4. Thus, its scarcity.

The transfer roll used to rock in this plate had six reliefs, one of which we call the "F" Relief, which was the only one containing the true Type IA design; that is, with the design of the stamp complete at the bottom (as on the original die), but with the top ornaments cut away and the top line broken. (Incomplete at top.) This "F" Relief was used only to rock in the sixth and tenth horizontal rows of the plate.



1851 1¢ Blue Type I, Sc. 5



1857 1¢ Blue Type Ia, Sc. 6,
top ornaments and outer line
partly cut away

However no stamps coming from the sixth row are like those coming from the tenth row, because the former do not show the full "F" Relief design. This is because the transfers in the sixth row were "shorted" at the bottom, and, in addition, the spacing beneath this row was "cleaned" up and certain remaining parts of the short transferred designs were erased. Sixth row stamps, therefore, do not show the complete design (as it existed on the Relief) at the bottom, but the majority of these twenty positions are identical with the 10th row stamp in every other respect. Sixth row stamps classify as Type III, or IIIA, types far less scarce than the IA stamps.

When the above-mentioned stamp was submitted to me, I noticed it had rather a peculiar look. I immediately tried to find the position in the bottom row where it should come from by comparing it with each of the nineteen positions of my reconstructed plate. It did not come from any of these positions and yet to all appearances it was a Type IA. On the contrary, I found it came from a certain position in the sixth row, which had no full design at the bottom. The "painter" had done a very clever job of "painting in" the "full scrolls," "balls" and the "full curves," so characteristic of a Type IA stamp. Of course, other tests could have been applied to prove the stamp was a "painting," but in this case, the plating of the stamp proved it was a fake.

I do not agree with some, who are of the opinion that the mere plating of a doubtful stamp would prove conclusively it is a faked copy. For example, last fall I had an early United States stamp submitted to me for my opinion. I was unfamiliar with the plating of this stamp, but two students who had reconstructed the plate pronounced the stamp a fake. I was not so sure they were right because the "painting" job was along a line which I have devoted much careful study. I refer to "Re Entries," more commonly called "Shifts," or "shifted transfers." It was claimed the remarkable "shift" on this stamp had been "painted in." I understand one specialist took five minutes to plate the stamp and after this much study, unqualifiedly pronounced it a "fake" because the position from which he said it comes on his reconstructed plate does not show any shift.

Through photographic enlargements I feel rather positive I can prove the stamp is absolutely genuine and is not a "painted" copy.

Mention is made of this to explain why it is not my belief that plating is always a positive proof in detecting certain kinds of "faked jobs."

I have had examples submitted that purported to be the very rare 1-cent 1851, Type I, 7R1E, where the "painter" had attempted to duplicate the lines of this full design stamp, even to duplicating the shifted transfers that identify this stamp.

Such of these as I have seen, I am glad to state have not been very clever, for evidently the "painter" had no real 7R1E to work from. In all probability, he used as a guide for his work my illustration of this stamp in my booklet on the 1-cent 1851-1857.

(This is the first of two articles on Plate Reconstruction by Stanley B. Ashbrook.)

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[The second article will be reprinted in a future issue of Mekeel's & Stamps. JFD.]

75 Years Ago in Stamps:

Plate Reconstruction, Part 2

by Stanley B. Ashbrook (*From STAMPS Magazine, February 1, 1936*)

(Continued from February 4, 2011 Mekeel's & Stamps)

At one time, years ago, I was engaged in the reconstruction of all the One Cent plates (thirteen in all) together with the two plates of the Ten Cent 1855-1857. This involved some 3,000 positions on the fifteen plates. As a side issue I was also working with Major Tracy on the reconstruction of the 12¢ 1851, Plate #1 and also on the Confederate "Frame Line" plate. In this work, I was compelled to borrow many items from other collections to further my study. To keep a record of such, for future reference, I resorted to the aid of photography. Through the years I have thus managed to gather together quite a large accumulation of reference material for ready study. From time to time I run across items I borrowed years ago, and frequently it is hard to recognize them in their present shape due to the work of the repairer and painter.

Not very long ago I had submitted to me a "very fine unused" horizontal strip of three of the One Cent 1851, Type 1 A. The strip had "full gum" and was described as "Mint." The price asked was quite fancy, to say the least. I did not like the "gum," but I am no judge of this branch of philately. By referring to my record I found I had a photo of this same strip, made back in 1918. At that time it was pen cancelled. Collectors who prefer unused U.S. should be experts on gum, for no doubt the gum on many early U.S. which are "unused" have gum that never saw the shops of Rawdon Wright Hatch & Edson or Toppan Carpenter Casilear & Co. Personally I prefer my "earlies" cancelled, for is it not more humiliating to be fooled by a mess of fake gum than by a cleverly faked cancellation?

An amusing incident happened last winter. I was working on my reconstruction of the 10¢ 1855-1857, Plate #1, and a prominent Eastern dealer loaned me a pair of the Type I perforated. This is the "full shell" stamp coming only from the bottom row of this plate. Just 20 positions. These stamps are extremely difficult to plate, and I am always glad to turn up a pair or strip I have never before examined. I plated the pair, and in doing so, I found a notation on my plate, listing a photograph of a strip of three I had plated for Dr. Chase many years ago. Turning the strip over I found the plating positions noted in the well known handwriting of Chase. This excited my curiosity so I looked up my photograph. Much to my surprise, I found the pair before me was from the original Chase strip of three. The pair had nice perforations all around, apparently perfect, but the Chase photo showed the stamp at the left was slightly damaged and the strip had a straight edge at the bottom, but not touching the design. Someone had acquired his former Chase strip, had removed the damaged stamp, and inserted fake perforations at the bottom, making to all appearances a very attractive item. I wrote my friend down East and told him the strip had fake perforations at the bottom, and I expected him to come right back and request me to prove my assertion, which I was thoroughly prepared to do. Instead

he wrote me that he was very glad to learn about the "restoration," and that in looking up his purchase of the pair, found he had bought it in its present condition at a certain New York auction sale, and that the catalog described the present condition. I was disappointed he accepted my opinion with so much faith, but my disappointment in not having the opportunity to prove my assertion was compensated by his apparent confidence in my ability to expertize holes in paper, something I will admit is entirely out of my line.

Many collectors have the idea that if a dealer guarantees a stamp to be genuine, it is genuine beyond any question of a doubt. This is not always true because no human is infallible. Even the best of experts differ at time, and even the best are sometimes deceived. The following incident is an example of how a repaired horizontal strip of three of the 10¢ 1855 recently fooled me.

Last Spring a collector sent me an item, which was on a small piece of the original cover and tied to same with a genuine town post mark. The stamps to all appearances were Type II, but none of them had the guide dots in the upper left margin. This indicated a "top row strip." Now it so happens that the twenty top row positions of this plate (#1) are rather difficult to plate, hence I am always glad to see any pairs or strips containing positions from this row. As these "tops" contain no guide dots, the "plater" must depend entirely on what meager plating marks he can discover, to identify each position.

I attempted to place this strip but was unable to find a single identifying mark. I was quite enthused over the item because I thought it possible I had discovered an unknown strip from the top row of the plate in its very rare "first condition." Explaining why I wished to acquire the strip I eventually persuaded the owner to dispose of it to me at a price that was quite high. The more I worked on the strip the more mysterious it became, and this caused me to become suspicious and I soaked the strip from the piece of cover. In so doing I found the whole top margin had been faked and the tops of the designs carefully "painted" in. Not thinking it necessary, the painter had omitted the guide dots. When I was at last convinced it did not come from the top row I had no difficulty in finding the correct positions in the body of the plate.

In this instance my plating really discovered and proved this fake. It is possible the "job" might have been discovered without the aid of a knowledge of the plate, by some of our experts, but all I can state is that it was as clever a piece of work, as I have ever discovered. That is, it was before I soaked it.

Where material is not exceedingly scarce a plate can be reconstructed in a reasonable time, but when the stamp is a rare stamp the



10¢ 1855-57 Type I,
Sc. 31, Pos. 99R1,
with curl in left X



CSA 10¢ Frame Line, Sc. 10

work is apt to be drawn out for many years.

Back in 1917 I became interested in the Confederate "Frame Line" stamp. Every copy I examined was entirely different, due to much recutting of the design on each position on the plate. I was quite optimistic at that time and set to work to reconstruct the plate. I had no idea whether the plate was one of 100 stamps or 200 stamps. In the first few years I met with practically no success but I had patience and an intense interest. Along about 1925 I despaired of ever being able to get any further than I was at that time. I seemed to be up against a blank wall. Edward S. Knapp had worked with me through the preceding years on the plate and by that time we had become convinced the plate consisted of but 100 designs as we had been able to find 100 different positions but no extra ones. Interest lagged and the work was laid aside, and on my part this was done with the conviction the plate could not be reconstructed simply because the necessary material was not available.

Some months ago, I went back to the old work with the determination I would finish the job. At present I am much pleased to state that I am now on the last lap of this interesting problem. I have definitely located 79 positions on the plate (out of 100) and am optimistic enough to believe the other 21 orphans will fall into their proper positions in the next year or perhaps sooner.

A stamp collector can get a world of pleasure from his stamps, but only one who has worked out an original plate reconstruction can appreciate the real thrill philately can give him. To me, the supreme thrill in philately is discovering something new in a plate reconstruction. Some bit of knowledge that no one heretofore has discovered. As an example, let us consider the rare Confederate Frame Line stamp. The average collector, perhaps, has never seen a copy of his interesting stamp and to the average specialist a Frame Line is just another Confederate stamp. But to Mr. Knapp and myself there are 100 different Frame Lines, and we know each by a name, or an actual plate position number. And perhaps again the question might be asked, "What is the good of all this long drawn out work?" After all, in this particular case is it not simply a "jig-saw puzzle?"

This question perhaps I will some day answer when I publish the result of our joint work on this remarkable stamp. August Dietz in his book *The Postal Service of The Confederate States of America* refers to the stamp, as "Philately's Man with the Iron Mask."

There is no question but what plate reconstruction gives one a knowledge of his specialty, that can be acquired in no other manner, but plating requires good eyesight and a strong glass. Constant observation of many copies of the stamp one is plating fixes in the mind every detail of the design. A stray pin dot, scratch, or the slightest suggestion of a "shift," etc., etc., immediately stand out, because any of these are foreign to the design, hence if consistent, become "plating marks," which enable the plater to eventually locate the plate position.

The following incident will illustrate how a knowledge of the plates, for example of the 1851-1857 issue, is useful in immediately detecting faked cancellations or faked covers.

I recall a rare foreign rate cover I examined a few years ago. Among the stamps was quite a fine copy of the 12¢ 1857. Now the 12¢ perforated stamps were printed from two plates, one, Plate #1, made in 1851, and the other, Plate #3 made in 1860. It has been my experience that comparatively few collectors of early U.S. can tell the difference between stamps of the two plates, but to anyone who has devoted time to the study of this interesting stamp, the differences are very apparent. This cover was used in 1858, yet the fine 12¢ on the cover, was from Plate #3 not made until 1860. Supplies of the 12¢ Plate 3 stamps were in Southern Post Offices at the outbreak of the

Civil War, hence we find the 12¢ Plate 3 is probably more common unused than used. Certainly an unused copy from this plate is not hard to obtain. The question is, how did this particular stamp get on this cover? A careful examination showed the cancellation had been "Painted" in, not a very difficult feat for the faker, using black ink on a black stamp. Evidently the original 12¢ stamp was damaged and spoiled the looks of the cover, and so it was removed and an unused stamp from a plate not made until 1860, was substituted on a cover used in 1858. The rate of the cover was correct, hence the conclusion the original was a damaged 12¢ from Plate One.

Perhaps some of my readers believe it is a bad idea to thus bring to light the shady practices of the philatelic underworld. Publicizing the fakes and fakers, some believe, tends to discourage collectors in general. I have no apology to offer, because I believe all of us who have the future good of philately at heart ought to do everything in our power to eliminate the crooks from our midst. We cannot accomplish this by shutting our eyes to the questionable things that come under our observation.

In conclusion may I add that I trust those who have had the patience to follow me through these notes, have been rewarded to some extent with a better understanding of the "whys and wherefores of Plate reconstruction."

To those who have looked upon such work with derision I can assure them it really is a very fascinating and wholesome occupation.



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