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NPL Research FLAT PLATE U.S. AIR MAIL SPECIAL DELIVERY CENTER-LINE BLOCKS

Charles Neyhart

A while back, Steve Chown mentioned that he had a center-line block of Scott CE2, the 1936 bi-colored second air mail special delivery stamp. I was skeptical at first, thinking that this couldn't exist. Steve promptly sent me a scan of his center-line block, reproduced below. Clearly, the four stamps are intersected by red vertical and horizontal lines with perforations through these lines too boot!

The *Scott Specialized* lists a CE2 center-line block at a slight premium over a margin block but substantially less than a plate block. Nonetheless, these blocks are highly collectible.

This baffled me at first, and it took me a while to puzzle out how this "center-line block" came to exist. Fortunately, the NPL had suitable resources to help me start to sort this out.



Scott CE2

FLAT PLATE LAYOUT

Early stamp printing at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing used presses that printed from a flat plate placed on the bed of the press. Typically, the layout of these plates for the smaller definitive issues had 400-subjects divided by a set of vertical and horizontal guide lines into four quadrants of 100-subjects. These guide lines, which were engraved on the printing plate, served two functions: (1) to orient the siderographer when transferring the stamp design from the transfer roll to the plate, and (2) to align the printed sheet properly for perforating and slitting the sheet along the guide lines into post office sized panes of 100 stamps. [Larger commemorative-sized stamps used a similar plate layout except there were 200-subjects divided by the vertical and horizontal guide lines into post office panes of 50.] Since stamps were entered onto the plate contiguously, slitting the sheet into panes created

the great bugaboo of flat plate printed stamps – a straight edge on those stamps located adjacent to the guide lines.

Thus, a center-line block, due to the way flat plate printed stamps were finished, could not, technically, exist on a post office pane. The only way a center line block could be created would be to cut the center out of a complete sheet of 400 stamps [or 200 commemorative-sized stamps]; yet, full sheets were not generally available to the public.

A notable exception to this USPOD policy was the 1935 Special Printings issued imperforate in complete sheets to appease collectors and others who had protested then-Postmaster General Farley’s practice of presenting complimentary printed sheets to favored government officials. Of the 20 stamps in the Special Printings [Scott 752-71], 19 were flat plate printed, and 14 of these could, if wanted, be used



Scott 771

to create a center-line block. The best known of these are the National Parks Year issue. The first air mail special delivery stamp was included in the Special Printings, but was assigned Scott 771 rather than the original Scott CE1 for the perforated stamp. The second air mail special delivery stamp was not included in the Special Printings, so this was not the source of Steve’s center-line block.

PRINTING BI-COLOR STAMPS

CE2 was printed in two colors: red for the frame and blue for the Great Seal vignette.¹ Due to printing technology available at the time, this would have required two printing plates, one for the frame and another for the vignette, and two separate runs on the flat plate press.

The first bi-color air mail stamp was the 1918 definitive-sized 24-cent “Jenny,” Scott C3, printed with a carmine rose frame followed by the Jenny vignette in blue. Both the frame and vignette plates were made up of 100 subjects [10 x 10] and the frame plate had a guide line between the 5th and 6th vertical rows and another guide line between the 5th and 6th horizontal rows. However, these sheets of 100 were not slit along these guide lines to produce post office panes; rather, the full 100-subject pane was distributed to post offices. Thus, it was possible to secure a true center-line block for Scott C3.²

The second bi-color air mail stamp was the oversized 1928 11-cent “Beacon,” Scott C11. This was also printed with a carmine frame followed by a blue vignette, and both the frame

¹ CE2 was printed in two colors to add distinction to the stamp and to ensure the attention of postal clerks to provide both services intended: air mail and special delivery. [Scott CE1 was printed in a single color.]

² Both Scott C1 and C2, single color stamps, were produced in the same manner as Scott C3 and both produced center-line blocks.



No center line block in a post office pane.

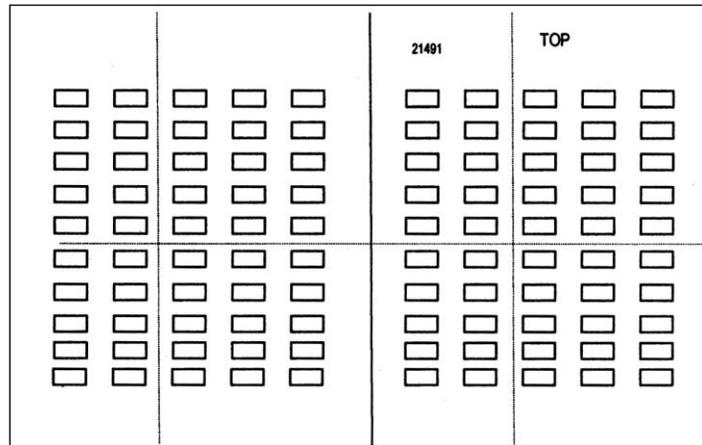
and vignette plates were made up of 100 subjects [10 x 10] and the frame plate had a guide line between the 5th and 6th vertical rows and another guide line between the 5th and 6th horizontal rows. However, to create post office panes of 50, the pane of 100 was slit along the horizontal guide line, which eliminated the possibility of securing center-line blocks.

THE PLATE LAYOUT FOR CE2

The frames for CE2 were printed first in sheets of 100 in two side-by-side panes of 50. The panes of 50 were laid out 5 wide by 10 tall. The two panes were separated by a 1½-inch wide gutter. A vertical guide line was printed in this gutter.

Each pane of 50 frames had two additional lines – one vertical and one horizontal. The vertical line ran between the 2nd and 3rd rows of stamps; the horizontal line ran between the 5th and 6th rows of stamps. In early printings, these additional lines had an arrow at the top and bottom. On later printings, the arrows were dropped. These additional lines are central to the question of whether CE2 has a “center-line” block.

The frame plate layout for CE2 appeared as follows:



Notice the solid center line between the panes of 50. This is the line used to guide the slitting of the sheet into two post office panes of 50. More importantly, note the additional vertical line between the 2nd and 3rd rows of stamps and the horizontal line between the 5th and 6th rows of stamps on each pane of 50.

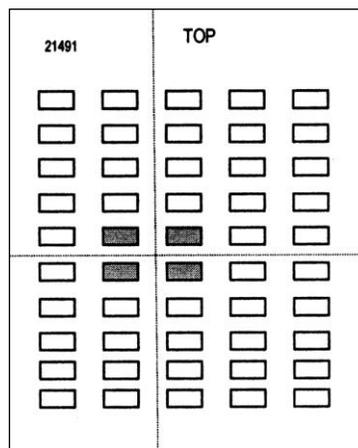
After the 100-subject frame sheet was printed, it was slit along the gutter’s vertical guide line into two panes of 50 before printing the vignette. The vignette plate for CE2 was composed of 50 subjects, 5 wide by 10 tall. The BEP first adopted this reduced vignette plate size with

the second plate layout of the 1931 Yorktown issue, Scott 703, as a strategy to contend with paper shrinkage in the frame panes.³

THE CE2 CENTER-LINE BLOCK

To print the design's vignette, the panes of 50 subjects containing the already-printed frames were now put to press to receive printing impressions from the 50-subject vignette plate. Once printing was completed, the panes had to be perforated in both directions using the standard two-step perforating process then in use at the Bureau. Because the position of the engraved area varied somewhat on each printed pane due to uneven paper shrinkage, accurate registration of perforations required some form of sight gauge or marker as a guide on the pane. Since there was no true vertical center line on this pane of 50 stamps [you can't evenly divide 2 into 5], the additional vertical line between the 2nd and 3rd rows of stamps was used to align the pane with the perforating heads and to feed the panes into the perforator. The horizontal line between the 5th and 6th rows served the same purpose for the horizontal pass through the perforator.

A complete printed and perforated post office pane of CE2 had 50 stamps and the two additional lines. These two lines no longer appeared as solid colored lines on the pane because of the perforating process. You can probably now figure out how a "center-line block" can be created here. This center-line block would comprise stamps 22, 23, 27, and 28 on both the left and right panes of 50 and can be seen as the shaded area in the plate diagram below.



Notice that the block is technically not a center-line block as we usually understand it, since it does not represent the "center" of anything; rather it is merely the four stamps surrounding the intersection of the two additional printed lines on the plate.

³ The first plate layout for Scott 703 had both frame and vignette plates of 100 subjects. Registration between the frame and vignette was exceedingly uneven when the vignette was added during the second pass through the press. This led to the redesign of the plate layout, i.e., 100 subjects for the frame and 50 subjects for the vignette, which then became the norm for bi-colored stamps printed on the flat plate press.

Two year later in 1938, the BEP produced its last flat plate bi-colored air mail stamp, Scott C23. The frame and vignette plate layouts for this stamp were identical to those of CE2. A center-line block appears below [also courtesy of Steve Chown].



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- John N. Hotchner, “Perforating of United States Postage Stamps – The Hole Truth,” **United States Specialist**, Vols. 59 and 60 [1988 and 1989], 12 parts.
Max G. Johl, **United States Postage Stamps, 1902-35**, Quarterman [reprint], 1976.
Ralph L. Sloat, **The Airmail Special Delivery Stamps of the United States**, [BIA, 1977].

ADDENDUM – AUGUST 2010

I was remiss in not including the bibliography from the article “Cuban Air Mail Stamps – The Key West Connection” in the August issue. These are the resources used to prepare that article.

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Walter Curley, **Charles A. Lindbergh, A Biographical & Philatelic Study**, Cardinal Spellman Philatelic Museum, 1963.
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Windhorn & Langley, **Yesterday’s Key West**, Langley Press, 1973.

The stamps and covers illustrated are from the author's collection. The photo of PAA facilities at Key West [ca. 1928] is courtesy of the History Dept., May Hill Russell Library, 700 Fleming Street, Key West, FL 33040. The photo of the Augustin Parla Memorial is by the author.

For a finely researched and comprehensive bibliography of Cuban philatelic literature, see: **Annotated Bibliography of Cuban Philatelic Literature – Internet Edition** [2008] by Ernesto Cuesta. This can be accessed from the website of the International Cuban Philatelic Society, www.philat.com/icps.

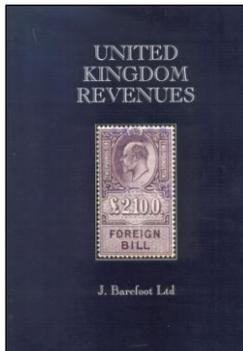
LIT ADDITIONS

NPL has recently been the beneficiary of three major donations of philatelic literature – **Tom Current**, **Bayard Mentrum**, and **Janice Weinstock**. The titles added to the NPL Collection from these donations will be serialized in future issues of *Book Reports*. In addition, beginning with the November-December issue, LIT ADDITIONS will become a regular feature of each bi-monthly issue.

The following titles have been added, through donation and purchase, to the NPL Collection during the period April 1 through August 30, 2010. Donors are noted in brackets.

American Philatelic Congress, **Congress Book 1969 and 1970**. [Roy Teixeira, WPL]

J. Barefoot, **United Kingdom Revenues**, 5th, 2010.



Fred Baumann, **A Specialty Guide to Postal History**, The Stamp Collector, 2002 and 2003.

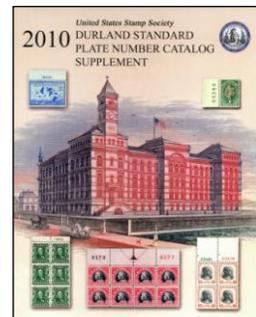
Alan Bradley, **The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag**, Delacorte Press, 2010. [Bill Seymour]

W. Wallace Cleland, **2010 Supplement to Durland Standard Plate Number Catalog**, United States Stamp Society, 2010. [Charles Neyhart]

Eastern Auctions, **The "Crossings" Collection of Premium Quality Postage Stamps of British North America**, Auction Catalog, 2010. [Stephen Gong]

Lars Fimmerstad, **The Treskilling Yellow**, Argumentor, 2004. [Michael Dixon]

Flash, The quarterly Journal of the Federation Internationale de Philatelie, September 2009 - [Michael Dixon]



Robert Furman, **Comprehensive Catalogue of United States Stamp Booklets**, Krause, 1999.

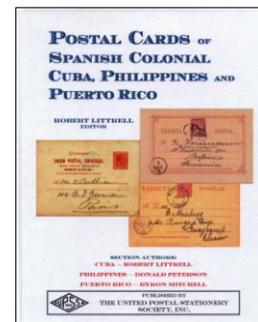
Stanley Gibbons, **Collect Aircraft on Stamps**, 2nd, 2009. [Doug Sponseller]

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Robert Littrell, **Postal Cards of Spanish Colonial Cuba, Philippines and Puerto Rico**, United Postal Stationery Society, 2010. [United Postal Stationery Society]



David McCullough, **The Path Between the Seas** (Creation of the Panama Canal), Audio Book, Simon & Schuster, 2003. [Ron Sumner]

Ernest A. Mosher, **Mourning Covers: The Culture and Postal History of Letters edged in Black**, Author, 2003.

Alan H. Patera, **Pend Oreille County, Washington**, Pacific Northwest Postal History Society, 2010. [PNWPHS]

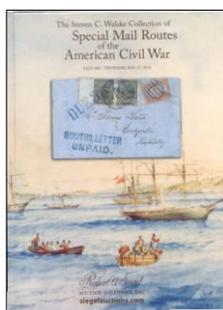
Oregon Precancel Club, **Oregon Local Precancel Denomination Price List**, 1995. [Ed Kane]

Kristin Patterson, **WESTPEX – The First 50 Years**, WESTPEX, Inc., 2010. [Ed Jarvis]

Franceska Rapkin, **Guidelines for Successful Exhibiting**, British Philatelic Federation, 1985. [Michael Dixon]

David Savadge, **William Bomar's Postal History Markings and Postal History of United States Expositions**, 3rd, CD, Author, 2007.

Karl H. Schimmer, **Porte de Mar**, Mexico Elmhurst Society, 1987.



Secretary of the Interior, **Official Register of the United States: Volume II, The Post-Office Department and the Postal Service**, 1887. [Charlotte Cushman, PHF]

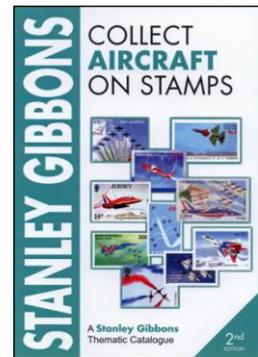
Siegel Auction Catalogs with Prices Realized: [Ralph Nafziger]
985: **Louis Grunin Collection of Illustrated Covers**, April 2010
986: **John Wesley Thomas Collection of U.S. Post Offices in China**, April 2010

988: **Steven C. Walske Collection of Civil War Special Routes**, May 2010
990: **Steven R. Belasco Collection of Vending and Affixing Perfs**, June 2010
991: **Philip R. Beutel Collection of Booklets and Savings Stamps**, June 2010

Spink-Shreve Auction Catalogs with Prices Realized: [Ralph Nafziger]
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Joseph Hackmey Collection of New Zealand, Part II, May 2010

Robert Stendel, **U.S. Domestic Postal Card Regulations, 1984-1885**, United Postal Stationery Society, 2010. [United Postal Stationery Society]

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Richard F. Winter, **Understanding Transatlantic Mail, Vol. 2**, w/ color CD, American Philatelic Society, 2009.

In addition, NPL received missing issues of the following philatelic journals as listed in [Filling Holes](#) on the Home Page: **Collectors Club Philatelist**, **German Postal Specialist**, **Jack Knight Air Log**, and **United States Specialist**. [Roy Teixeira, WPL]

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Contact: P.O. Box 6375, Portland, OR 97228-6375
(503) 284-6770 nwpl@qwestoffice.net www.nwpl.org

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