

Book Reports

WINTER 2016 Volume 13, Issue 1



STAMPS DELIVER KNOWLEDGE

Printing Early High Value Multi-Colored U.S. Documentary Stamps

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I have long been partial to the four high value bicolor U.S. postage stamps from the 1869 Pictorial series, with a particular interest in the printing method used by the National Bank Note Co. I have studied them carefully and even written about them. To be able to print these and other multi-color stamps, colors had to be separated in some fashion such that each part of the design to be printed in one color appears only on one printing base.¹ A frequently used method of color separation, line engraving intaglio printing, was used to produce the 1869 Pictorial bicolor stamps. This required a separate printing plate for each color.²

Three high value multi-colored U.S. revenue stamps, today dubbed the “Persian Rug” stamps due to their ornate designs, and numbered Scott R102, R132 and R133, have drawn new attention beyond revenue specialists.³ R102 was part of the First Issue of revenue stamps; the two



[Courtesy of Siegel Auction Galleries]

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others were part of the Second Issue.⁴

These elaborate oversized stamps were issued to make the payment of large tax bills more convenient. To date, there are technical questions about how these stamps were produced. These will be examined here.

¹ L.N. Williams identifies two methods of color separation: (1) mass separation and (2) process separation.

² More modern printing presses, e.g., the Giori press, can apply different colors to parts of the stamp design using a single printing cylinder. .

³ See, for example, Michael Mahler, “Documenting the Legendary Persian Rug,” *American Philatelist* (September, 2015), pp. 834-42.

⁴ A proof of a proposed \$5,000 denomination was pulled during the Third Issue in 1872, but no stamps were printed.

BACKDROP COMMENTS

Butler & Carpenter, security printers in Philadelphia, won the contract to design and print the first U.S. revenue stamps effective August 8, 1862.⁵ The First Issue, 1862–71, comprised 102 different stamps, Scott R1–102. Originally, stamps could only be used for the payment of the tax on the particular article specified on its face, e.g., Life insurance stamps for paying taxes on life insurance contracts. The largest denomination was a \$25 Mortgage stamp.

The rule that stamps had to be used with reference to their title was rescinded on April 30, 1864 as impractical. Also, the Revenue Act of 1864 removed tax limits on property, e.g., deeds, mortgages, and increased tax rates thereon. This cemented the viability of using higher denomination general purpose ‘U.S. Internal Revenue’ stamps.

For most of the duration of the First Issue, the Treasury Department was concerned about the potential loss of revenue from cancel washing and subsequent reuse of the stamps and, later, by counterfeits. Fraudulent reuse was discussed regularly from as early as 1863 and confirmed counterfeits were discovered in 1869. Consequently, the second generation of revenue stamps, Scott R103–R133, replaced the First Issue in an effort to eliminate fraudulent stamp reuse and to foil stamp imitation.

While producing the First Issue revenue stamps, Butler & Carpenter also submitted competitive bids to the U.S. Post Office Department to produce the 1869 Pictorial series – bids which were rejected. In response, Joseph R. Carpenter engaged in a bitter protracted public battle with the Department that ultimately proved unsuccessful.⁶ Nonetheless, it seems that Carpenter could not help but to have been informed by the breadth of methods being proposed and discussed to solve the same problems facing the 1869 Pictorial series, including the use of bicolor stamps.

During 1869–71, Carpenter acquired three patent rights that, collectively, were expected to produce the Second Issue revenue stamps that would be printed using two or more colored inks, one indelible the other soluble, applied by two or more intricately engraved male and female plates with forms fitted together in interlocking fashion to yield perfect registration, on treated paper with silk threads, in a single printing operation.⁷ But things got changed up a bit before regular production.

FIRST ISSUE – \$200

The \$200 stamp, Scott R102, was first printed July 7, 1864 in green and red colors. Printing was eight stamps per sheet in two vertical strips of four. From 1864 until 1871, 6,556 stamps were issued. The stamps were originally perforated, but a small number of copies are known imperforate. An example is shown as Figure 1.

⁵ John M. Butler died October 30, 1868; the firm continued as Joseph R. Carpenter.

⁶ Evidentiary correspondence from this dispute is included in H.R. Doc. No. 445, 42nd Cong., 3rd Sess. (1873–74) pp. 53–57. (*Congressional Serial Set*).

⁷ These patents were: (1) **John Earle & Alfred B. Steel**, Patent No. 92,593, “Improvement in Printing Revenue Stamps, Etc. in Two or More Colors,” July 13, 1869; (2) **George T. Jones**, Patent No. 101,020, “Improvement in the Manufacture of Revenue and Other Stamps,” March 22, 1870; and (3) **James M. Willcox**, Patent No. 115, 005, “Improvement in Paper for Bank Notes, Bonds, Etc.,” May 16, 1871. Earle & Steel were engravers employed by Butler Carpenter & Co. These patents are reproduced in: George L. Tappan, *et al*, *An Historical Reference List of the Revenue Stamps of the United States* (Boston Philatelic Society), pp. 68–76.

This \$200 bicolor stamp predates the Pictorial series postage stamps by five years. At first glance, the registration between the two colors looks quite good, but closer examination reveals otherwise. In this case, though, some of the mis-alignment was hidden in plain sight by visually simplifying the colorless portions in the overall design – see Figure 3. These stamps were line engraved intaglio printed using two colors of indelible ink applied by two printing plates.

The process began with the entire design being engraved onto a soft steel master die. Altered transfer rolls made from the master die in which the parts of the entire design would be isolated would then be used to lay down two new dies, one for each color. These dies would be used to make new transfer rolls to enter the designs on the two separate printing plates. Accordingly, to print a sheet of stamps would require two separate passes on the press. This same process was later used by National Bank Note Co. to print the 1869 bicolor stamps, except that vignetting lines were added to both the frame and vignette plates in an attempt to disguise mis-registration in the 1869 bicolor stamps.⁸



Figure 1
Scott R102c – perforated.
(Courtesy Smithsonian's National
Postal Museum)

Printing line engraved intaglio stamps on the flat bed press with steel printing plates using a transfer process developed in 1800 by Jacob Perkins required moistening the paper to better accept the ink and, upon drying, the paper would shrink. Plus, pressure from printing would physically distort the paper. When printing the \$200 stamps, this process would be repeated for printing the second color. This added more of the pressures that affected the size and ink absorption of the paper. With that limitation in mind, the red plate, because it had a smaller area, was probably printed first as there would be less initial distortion.⁹



Figure 2
Mis-registration between the red and green portions of the design can be seen in the curved ribbons around the portrait medallion and in the denomination roundels in the two examples.

⁸ The 15-, 24-, and 90-cent stamps (Scott 118, 119, 120 and 122) had these added lines. The 30-cent and the 15-cent reprint (Scott 121 and 129) did not.

⁹ It is not known if the paper, dried and pressed after the first printing, was re-sized before the second printing. See: James H. Baxter, *Printing Postage Stamps by Line Engraving* (Quarterman Publications, Inc.), p. 129.

Inasmuch as the stamp was first issued in 1864, its design was probably not directly influenced by potential revenue loss due to fraudulent reuse. Rather, the large size, bicolor appearance and elaborate engine-turned ornamentation suggested a stamp of high stature and one that also would probably draw the attention of and scrutiny by examiners and agents.¹⁰

SECOND ISSUE – \$ 200 & \$500

Preproduction testing revealed that the single-step interlocking plate arrangement patented by Earle & Steel was too time consuming and costly to be of use and was abandoned prior to the start of general production. Thus, stamps of the Second Issue, all of which were multi-colored, were printed using the conventional Perkins transfer method, but which portended potential problems with color registration. Most stamps of the Second Issue, Scott R103–R131, were printed in the same two colors – indelible blue for the frame and fugitive black for the central medallion. Joseph R. Carpenter paid a royalty to George T. Jones for his patented formula for the black ink. The frames varied in design; the central medallion was a portrait of George Washington. The paper used was the treated “chameleon” paper patented by James Willcox. Second Issue stamps R103–R131 were issued September 1, 1871.

The Second Issue also included a revised \$200 (Scott R132) and a new \$500 (Scott R133) general purpose documentary stamp. As before, these were issued to facilitate payment of large tax amounts. Most notably, these stamps were printed in *three* colors. The stamps are shown in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3

Scott R132. Issued Nov. 11, 1871.
Colors red, blue & black. 36½ x 69 mm.
446 sold.
(Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries)

Printing the two intricately engraved tricolor stamps might have benefitted by perfecting the Earle & Steel single impression method of interlocking plates, which, presumably, would have produced perfect registration among colors. But, instead, both stamps were intaglio printed using the conventional multiple impression transfer process.

Adding a third color plate to the printing operation would surely exacerbate the stresses on the paper, which would affect its size and ability to properly absorb ink. This would multiply the registration problems. Through persuasive analysis, Thomas Kingsley worked out that Joseph R. Carpenter chose to mitigate poor color alignment by employing three single subject printing plates, one for each color, and then printing only one impression of each plate on a single die-sized sheet.¹¹

There are no known stamp multiples and all copies have margins on all four sides. There are no plate numbers.

Figure 6 shows each single-subject printing plate used to print Scott R132. These plates were created by separating the three different colored portions from the full design on the master die using transfer rolls and removing unwanted design elements, laying down the three intermediate dies from those rolls and using those to make the three single subject plates. The printing order of the three colors

¹⁰ Butler Carpenter & Co. long considered its strong engraving ability, including varying proprietary engine turned lathework patterns, as an intrinsic foil against reuse and imitation.

¹¹ Thomas C. Kingsley, *The Legendary Persian Rug* (Castenholz & Sons), 1993.

was: Blue, Red and Black. Note here that the Red plate also includes three engraved imprints on the side margins. These imprints were part of the issued stamps, but fell outside the perforations.¹²

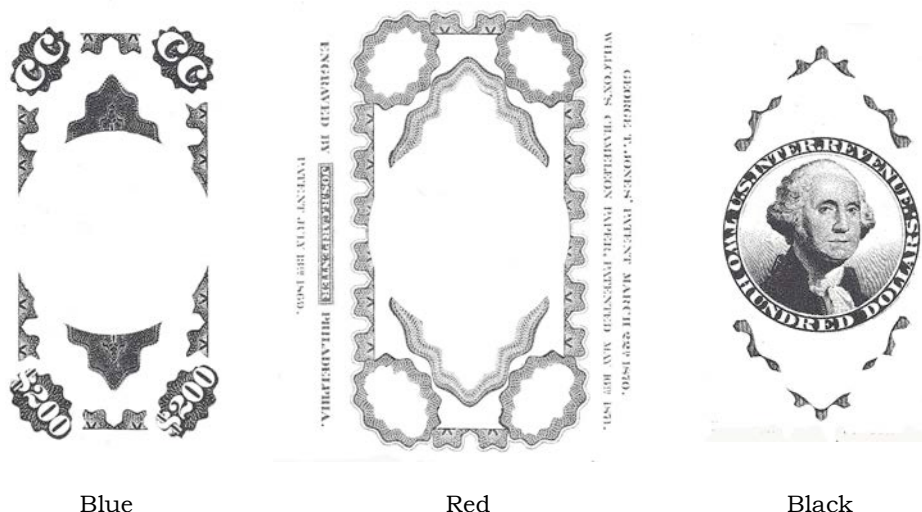


Figure 4

The three portions of the \$200 tricolor stamp – red, blue and black.
(Kingsley, pp. 30-31)

Given the elaborate tri-color design of the \$200 stamp, the potential for registration problems cannot be ignored. Non-statistical sampling from auction catalogs, dealer stocks and online stamp sites suggests that almost one-half of the stamps exhibited some mis-alignment among colors. This was most easily seen where the black central medallion extends into the left or right surrounding colorless circle. This unintended encroachment was never so egregious, as to be rejected, but those were probably culled prior to stamp deliveries. Of course, if the portrait medallion was off, all other black parts would be out of alignment, but this can be seen only if one looks closely by tracing the “river” pattern in the design.

The tricolor \$500 stamp, Scott 133, was produced using the same methods as producing the \$200 stamp and done so for the same reasons. Single subject stamps were printed on die-sized sheets using three colored inks, all indelible, applied sequentially from three engraved plates made from altered transfer rolls from the master die in three separate press impressions. As he did with the \$200 tricolor stamp, Kingsbury illustrate a used example of the \$500 stamp



Figure 5

Scott R132, Issued Oct. 3, 1871
Colors red orange, green & black. 52 x 100 mm.
204 sold.
(Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries)

¹² Imprints added to the Red plate are: (1) George T. Jones' Patent March 22th 1870,' (2) Willcox's Chameleon Paper, Patented May 16th 1871,' and (3) Engraved by Joseph R. Carpenter Philadelphia / Patent July 13th 1869.' The patent referred to in (3) was the Earle & Steel patent.

with intact side imprints falling outside the perforations. The imprints on the \$500, though, were engraved on the Black plate.

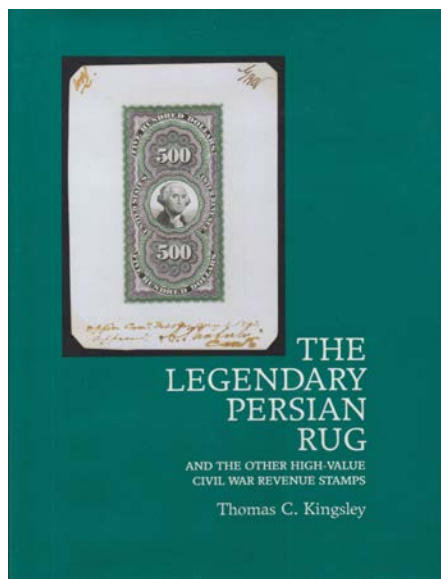
ASSESSMENT COMMENTS

The quality of printing the high value multi-colored documentary stamps of the Second Issue was rather high despite the inherent drawbacks of Perkins' traditional intaglio transfer process.

There is no recorded data regarding spoilage rates, particularly for the tricolor stamps. The second Issue \$200 and \$500 were approved May 6, 1871, but not issued until October 3, 1871 (4-months later) and November 11, 1871 (5½-months later), respectively. Production simply may have been tediously time consuming, but there was probably a period of experimentation with the single subject plates and printing one stamp per die-sized sheet or variations thereof. In the end, the registration on the tricolor stamps was not noticeably worse than that for the bicolor Second Issue stamp.

Then there is the matter of the Earle & Steele method of printing multi-color stamps in a single printing operation. Little information about this is found in the financial literature, although its potential benefit may have been great.¹³ The patented design of interlocking male and female plates, designed to provide perfect registration among colors, apparently failed to fit into the regular production schedule of Second Issue stamps. Even with fewer moving parts, the method was inefficient and overly costly.¹⁴

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Among the library's recent acquisitions (see page 8) is "The Legendary Persian Rug and other High-Value Civil War Revenue Stamps" by Thomas Kingsley (Castenholz & Sons, 1993). This book offers further details on these highly prized stamps, along with numerous color illustrations. The book is now on the shelves and available for checkout.



¹³ The method is not found in Williams, Ftn. 1. George Brett did make note of 'interlocking plates' in "The Development of the U.S. 15c 1869 Design Types," *The Essay-Proof Journal*, 4th Quarter, 1992, p. 150.

¹⁴ Ironically, Earle appears to have served as project manager for the \$500 stamp.

Stumper Answer



The Stumper from last issue related to this portrait of Henry Clay, which appears on the longest single stamp ever issued by the U.S. government. The question was to identify the type of stamp and explain why it was so long.

We had no guessers this time, perhaps because of the obscure nature of the stamp. This is a series 1883 cigar tax revenue stamp for 500 cigars, listed in the Springer catalog as TC120B. A full image of the stamp is shown at the right, reduced by about 50 percent. Its actual length is nearly 18 inches.

The Bureau of Engraving & Printing produced these stamps. This is the highest “denomination” of the series, with progressively shorter (but no less ornate) revenues issued for 250, 200, 100 and 25 cigars. The reason for their impressive lengths is that each stamp was wrapped around a cigar box in order to seal it. This is also the reason few of these stamps survived intact – nearly all were cut in one or two places before being removed.

Some years earlier, the engraved portrait of Henry Clay also appeared on a rare piece of U.S. currency, a \$50 Treasury Note first issued in 1869.



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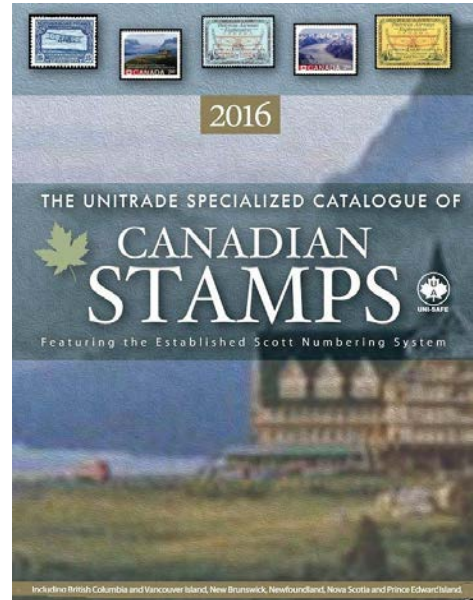
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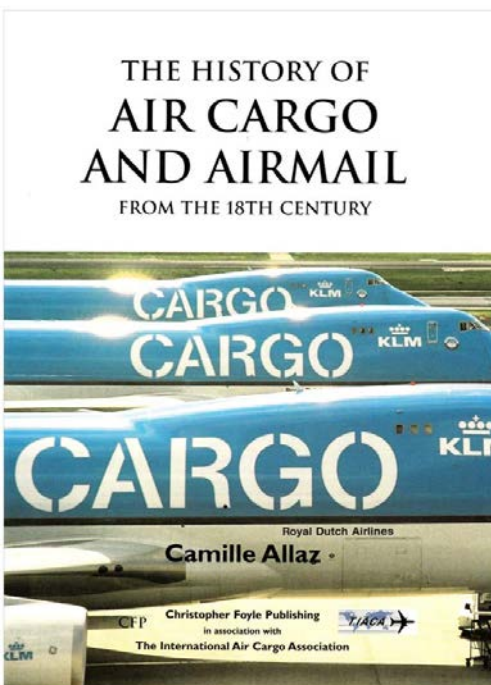
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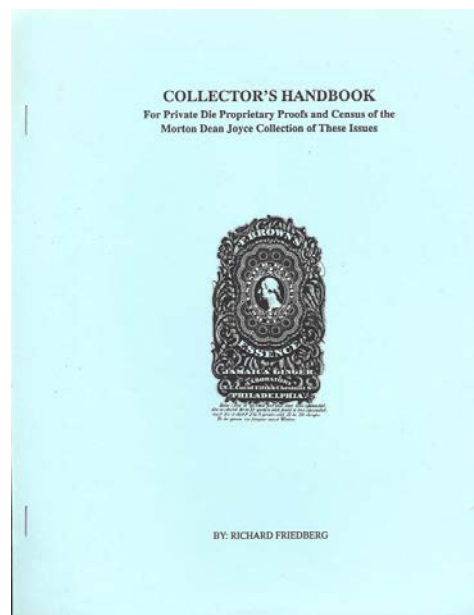
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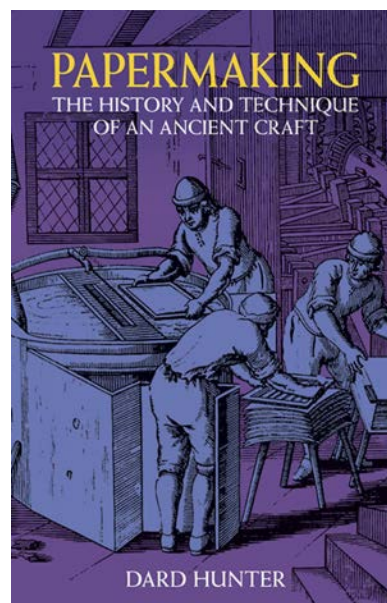
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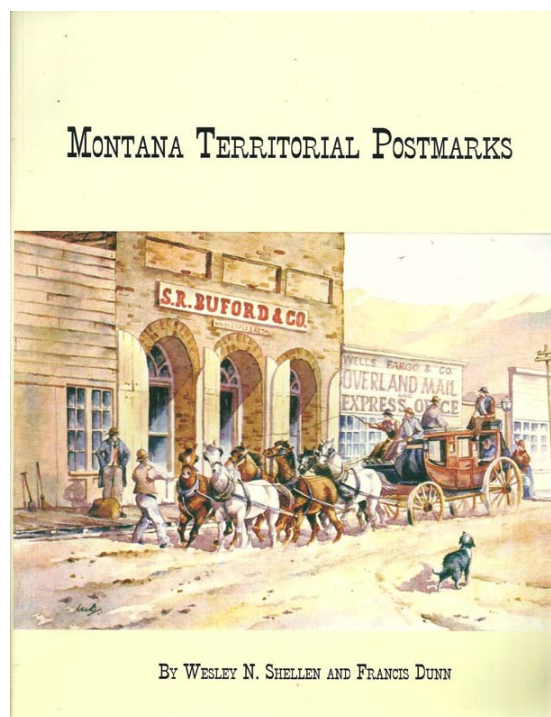
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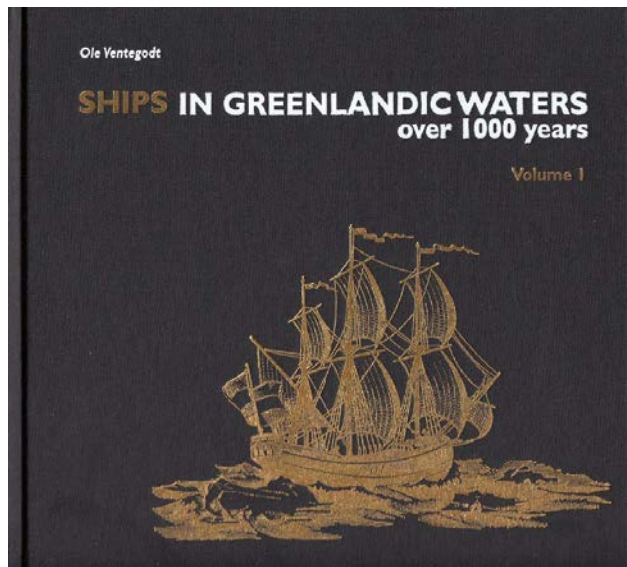
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Edifil	Catalogo Unificado de sellos	1989	\$10.00
Eustus	Australian Air Mail Catalogue	1934	\$10.00
Gibbons	Balkans, Part 3, 1980 Ed.	1980	\$10.00
Gibbons	Great Britain, Queen Elizabeth Decimal Issues, Vol. 4	1981	\$15.00
Gibbons	China, 4th Ed.	1988	\$10.00
Michel	Asien 1991-2 (A-J), Ubersee Band 5	1991/2	\$45.00
Michel	Handbuch-Katalog Rollenmarken Deutschland	1982/3	\$33.00
Michel	Osterreich-Spezial	1983	\$70.00
Minkus	Scandanavia Baltic Countries	1981	\$20.00
Rosen	Catalogue of British Local Stamps	1974	\$18.00
Sanabria	Air Post Catalogue, 1957 ed.		\$45.00
Schweiz	Helvetia: Switzerland Liechtenstein	1981	\$10.00
Schweiz	Luftpost-Handbuch	2000	\$10.00
Thorp	Bartels Catalogue of Stamped Envelopes and Wrappers of US	1943	\$17.50
Tucker	United States Slogan Postmark Catalog	1938	\$10.00
Unitrade	2007 Unitrade Specialized Catalogue of Canadian Postage	2007	\$20.00
Woo	China - Red Revenue 3c Surcharge	1972	\$15.00
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