

The Five Cent U.S. Error

by R. McP. Cabeen (From Mekeel's Weekly, May 18, 1918 with images added)

Foreword

Among the numerous philatelic errors which have been issued since the introduction of postage stamps, perhaps none has created greater surprise and encouraged more thorough search than have the misplaced 5 cent designs in Plate 7942 of the current 2 cent value.

I believe this group of errors to be the most startling of any so far produced, for it would not seem possible to enter an incorrect value design in an intaglio plate. Such things have happened before in lithographed stamps and in those printed from plates made up of movable clichés, but the very methods employed in making up the plates of these makes it a simple matter to mix values, or "colonies," and to invert designs. Entering the impressions on a steel plate from a transfer roller is a slow and laborious process, requiring careful watch at every step, and when the process is once started, the operator finishes the plate without removing it from the press, nor is the transfer roller removed except it shows signs of excessive wear. It is hardly probable that any one has anticipated an error of this sort, while in the case of bi-colored stamps, we always look forward to the "inverts" which are apt to occur.

Errors may roughly be divided into five groups: Errors of (1) design, (2) make-up of the plate, (3) printing, (4) perforation and (5) errors in the use of the stamp.

1. Errors in the original design, while of interest, may not be rare, since the entire issue, or a great part of it, may show the error, and it is generally referred to as a certain "Type" of the stamp.

2. Errors in the make-up of the plate include inverted designs, missing designs, design of wrong value or country and minor errors in spacing of designs. All of these errors are met with in plates made up from movable clichés, but are very infrequent in engraved plates for recess printing.

3. The most common errors in printing are the double impression, printed on back as well as on the face, the error in color, and the inverted frames or vignettes of bi-colored stamps.

4. Errors in perforation seem bound to occur whenever stamps are perforated.

5. Errors in the use of stamps, real errors, not philatelically made copies, are without the sanction of the postal authorities and are usually regarded as curiosities only.

Errors of group 1, as explained, generally affect the entire issue, those of group 2 affect at least the first printing and this may run into the thousands of sheets with one or more errors to the sheet, and those in the third class are made only on one or



Sc. 467, the 1916-17 flat plate perf 10 5¢ in a double error block of 12 with Sc. 463 2¢ stamps



Sc. 485, the 1916-17 flat plate imperf 5¢ in an error block of 9 with Sc. 482 2¢ stamps

a very few sheets. The errors of group 4 may not occur in more than one sheet, while those of group 5 occur as single copies.

The error with which we are concerned is of greatest importance as an error, since it occurred at the most technical and precise stage in the manufacture of the plate, but it does not necessarily follow that it is a rarity, as that condition depends to a great extent upon the visible supply.

Since this error is a misplaced design, to show it conclusively and to quiet thoughts that it might be a color changeling, it is necessary to preserve it with

the adjoining two cent stamps, if not in the original post office sheet, at least in a block.

CHAPTER I. Discovery and History.

Many fantastic stories have been written regarding the discovery of the errors, one of the interesting ones being to the effect that a Virginia postmaster complained to the Post Office Department that the presence of the 5 cent stamps in the sheet of two's made his accounting more difficult, and especially so since they were in red, and not in blue. We have the authority of Mr. Fitch, Chief of the Stamp Division, P.O. Dept., for the statement that the errors were discovered in Christiana's Drug Store, Postal Sub-station No. 79, at the corner of 9th Street and Pennsylvania Ave., in Washington. Dr. Barrett, who has charge of the Drug Store, took a copy of the error to Mr. Fitch.

Immediately there was issued by the Department the following notice and instruction which were printed in the Official Bulletin of May 3rd, 1917 :—

MISPRINTED 2¢ STAMP.

Office of the Third Assistant Postmaster General,
WASHINGTON, D. C.

May 2, 1917.

1. Postmasters and others connected with the Postal service are notified that a quantity of 2¢ have been inadvertently produced from printing plates of the 5¢ denomination, and some of these stamps were issued to postmasters before the error was detected.

2. The stamps are red, but bear the numeral 5 instead of 2.

3. The misprinted stamps will be found in sheets of 2¢ stamps bearing the number 7942 in the margin. Not all sheets numbered 7942 contain the misprinted 2¢ stamps, [and] some of these sheets have one and other sheets have two.

4. Postmasters and stamp clerks who discover any of the misprinted 2¢ stamps in stock will withdraw them from sale, and the postmasters will send them to the 3rd Asst. Postmas-



A plate number block of 1916-17 2-cent stamp, Sc. 467. Plate #7942 was the plate that produced the 5¢ errors.

ter General, Division of Stamps, with a statement of the quantity for redemption at 2¢ each, the rate at which they have been issued. The misprinted stamps have all been issued by the department to postmasters since March 6, 1917.

Misprinted 2¢ stamps presented at post offices by the public will be redeemed at 2¢ each and sent to the Department.

(Signed) A. M. DOCKERY,
3rd Asst. Postmaster General.

The first paragraph of this notice is so misleading that many post office officials were looking only for sheets of fives in red, and so a considerable quantity were sold before their mistake was noticed.

The Post Office Department at Washington did not have the time nor the inclination to open all the packages stored in the vaults and search them for errors, as this would have entailed much work in recounting and in replacing sheets; so they depended on the postmasters to return them as they were found.

In the postoffices the sheets were rather carefully examined, and it was not possible to buy an original package of 500 sheets without it having been examined for errors.

Considerable space in the newspapers was devoted to items concerning the errors, the prices offered and the discoveries made. A notice in the *Chicago Tribune* advised readers to watch their current mail for the red fives. The *Public Ledger* of Philadelphia commented at some length on account of the advertisement of a dealer to pay \$25.00 a copy. Many finds were made, some, perhaps, with the knowledge and help of postal clerks, and the quantities which came on the market resulted in a swift decline in the prices. At the first discovery, fabulous amounts were offered for copies, one of the first stamps having been offered for \$5,000.00, with no takers. However, prices ranged well above \$100.00 for some time, but at the present seem to stick fairly close to the catalog quotation of \$3.00 or \$4.00.

Among those found and returned to Washington were twenty-one sheets with double error from Hudson, N. Y., 41 sheets from St. Paul and 75 from Minneapolis. The Chicago Postoffice received a great number of errors, one lot of over 2,000 sheets being viewed by several collectors. Considerable speculation prevailed as to the probable disposal of these particular errors, but it is safe to assume that they were returned to Washington, for sheets soon began to pass across the postoffice counter with the errors carefully removed. One of these sheets is before me now, a beautiful sheet, perfectly centered, useful for postage to be sure, but as uninteresting as an expurgated classic book.

These detached errors were pasted on stiff cards in lots of 100 for ease in accounting.

Some seven hundred full sheets of 400, imperforate, containing the errors, were found in the Chicago Post Office and returned for redemption. A few imperforates are known to be in the hands of collectors. I may safely state that no imperforate sheets with errors were issued to the public at Chicago, and any bought in the west came from some other city.

The *Philatelic Gazette* states that an endeavor was made to obtain the 700 imperforate sheets for the Red Cross, that they might sell them at auction, and devote the proceeds to war work, but the Post Office Department did not allow the plea, taking the stand very wisely that it would be a poor policy to commercialize their errors.

A number of errors must have been used in the ordinary course of business, but few seem to have been noticed. This is not unusual, for few collectors pay attention to their current mail, and it even happened that a collector's remittance to a dealer included a copy of the error. One stamp was redeemed at the St. Paul office by a conscientious purchaser.

On May 15 the Post Office Department sent out the following notice in regard to the disposal of redeemed copies:—

Order 332. All of the 2¢ postage stamps misprinted 5¢ that are returned to the Department by postmasters for redemption under instructions of the 3rd Asst. Postmaster General dated May 3, 1917, shall be recorded and destroyed.

The distribution of these stamps began a few days after March 6th, and, since no attempt was made to locate the errors in the Department vaults, continued as long as any were on hand. The principal distribution ceased on or about May 2nd after which time the plate was no longer used.



A 1916-17 perf 11 5¢ rose error, Sc. 505, on a cover to Dietz Printing Co. which was owned by August Dietz, the authority on Confederate States stamps and covers. As the Richmond, Va., cancel is dated Jan. 5, 1919, this would be a different cover from that mentioned above.



The 5¢ rose error (Sc. 505), left stamp in a pair with normal, c. 499, used on a Registered cover with 1¢ and 10¢ values from Columbus, Ohio to Sydney, Australia.



The 5¢ Rose double error (c. 505), the two center stamps in a block of six with Sc. 499, on Registered cover from Philadelphia to Cambridge Mass., with "Philadelphia (Sta. 19) Aug. 14, 1917" backstamp

CHAPTER II. Making the Plate, and a Description of the Three Errors.

My readers are familiar with the various steps in the manufacture of a plate for recess printed stamps, but to refresh the memory of some, I may say that a die is engraved in reverse on a block of steel, which is afterward hardened; next, a hub of soft steel is rocked back and forth on the die until it bears a positive copy of the stamp design with raised lines on its surface, corresponding to the color lines on the stamps. This hub, or transfer roller, is in turn hardened and placed in a heavy press above a soft steel plate and rocked back and forth until each of the 400 designs which go to make up the plates of the current stamps, has been entered on the plate.

It is not physically possible to measure the exact amount of rocking necessary to produce a perfect design or impression in the plate, so before hardening it for use, a proof sheet is always carefully inspected for defects. In the case of Plate 7942, the inspector marked three impressions as too faint and ordered them removed and new impressions entered.

The surface of a plate made from a transfer roller is not perfectly flat, since no metal is removed in the rocking process, it follows that the steel displaced by the raised design on the roller is forced to rise slightly above the original face of the plate in the spaces between the projecting parts of the design on the roller. By very careful manipulation of burnishers and engraving tools, as well as by hammering the plate on the back, the original impression may be almost if not quite worked out and removed. The three faint impressions were in this manner removed from Plate 7942, and it was again placed in the transfer press. When the transfer worker applied for the roller to re-enter the three designs, he received by mistake the roller for the 5¢ value.

He no doubt had been used to getting exactly what he asked for, and perhaps never gave it more than a casual look. Even had he done so, it is not likely that he would have detected the mistake, for the numeral 5 on the roller is not unlike the reversed 2 on the plate, and unless he was keen, it would still have got by. Aside from the numerals and one other difference, the designs are identical, being made from the same master die. I think it worthy to mention



A perf 11 single, Sc. 467, with portions of eight surrounding 2¢ stamps, Sc. 463



One of two known single frankings of the 5¢ carmine perf 10 error (Sc. 467), paying the 2¢ postage rate from Lowell Mass. May 25, 1917 to Canaan N.H.

here, not having seen it noted before, that the word cents on the 2¢ design is 10.5 mm. long, and on the 3¢ to 50¢ designs it is 11.5 mm. long. The numerals on the 2¢ value are wider than on the other values and are also taller. Perhaps the numerals as designed in 1908 were considered a trifle small, and when figures were added to the 2¢ value in 1912, they were intentionally given more prominence.

I have no hesitancy in saying that I believe no inspection was made of a proof sheet after the plate was altered. Had any inspection at all been made, it would have been concentrated at the points marked on the first proof. It is not customary nor necessary for a second check to be made of a corrected proof or drawing, except at those places where inaccuracies showed up in the first proof. I do not want to believe that an inspector, no matter how tired from overwork on Liberty bonds and other war issues, could look at a certain impression, compare it with a marked one on the other proof and pass it with fives instead of twos in the corners. Still, if he were testing it for depth of color only, he might give the portraits a glance to see how the thinner lines showed up, and so miss the details of the design.

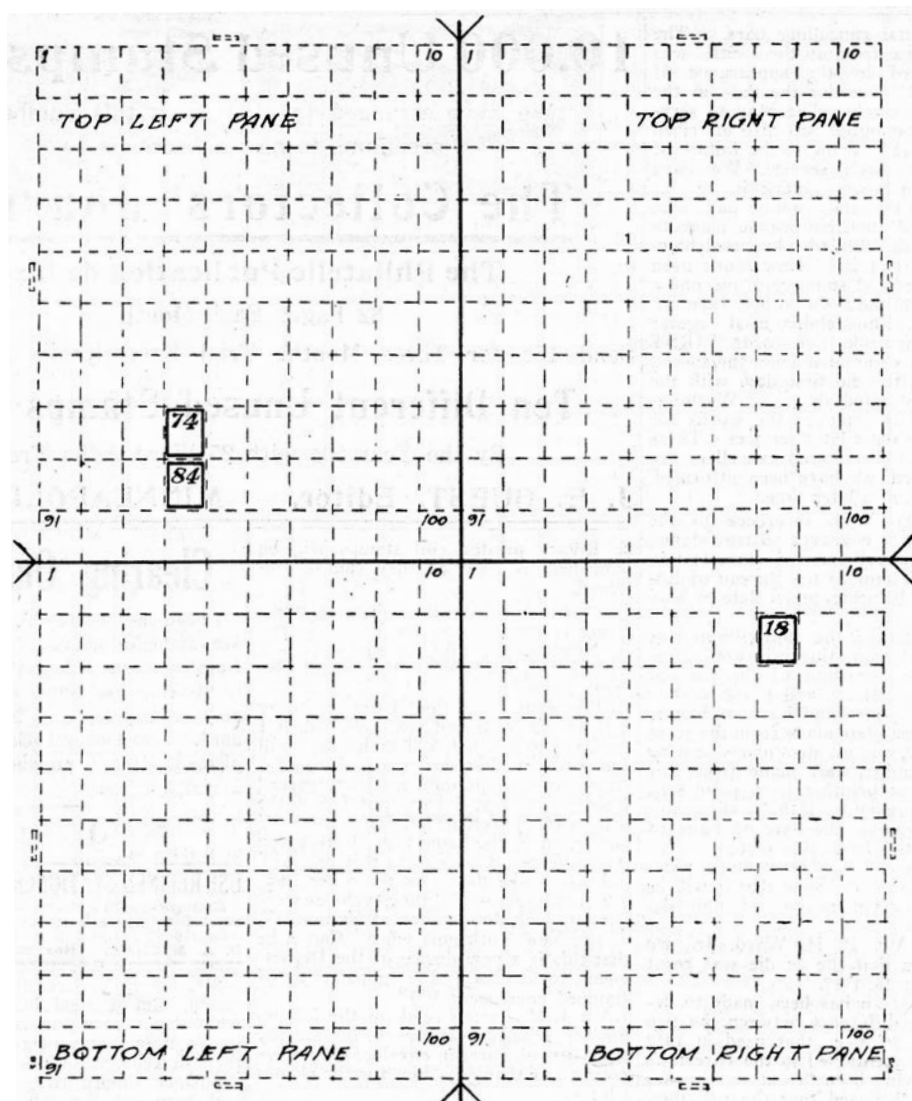
However it may have happened, it slipped over, and the plate was approved and hardened and on March 7th was put to press. From this date until May 2nd, when the errors were discovered, there had been printed from this plate 49,563 sheets of 400 subjects, making four times that many post office sheets. It has been stated that all of these were accounted for as having passed through the perforating room, but if that is true, in view of the discovery of over 700 imperforate sheets, some of them passed through the perforating room very fast.

The three errors are located in two panes only of the full sheet, two errors being in the top left pane and one error being in the bottom right pane. Those in the upper pane are numbers 74 and 84, and that in the lower pane is number 18.

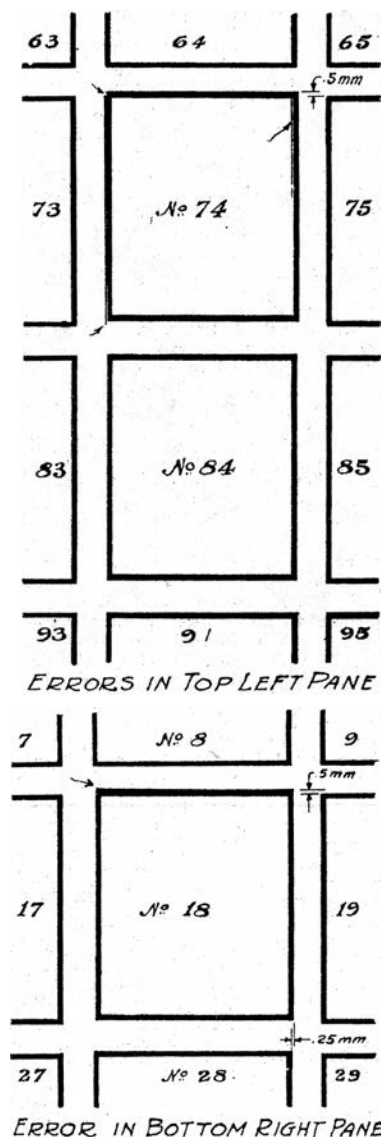
Each of these three re-entered designs shows some trace of the original entry, or of the work incidental to removing it; also each is slightly out of its true position. Risking some criticism, I will also say that the fives are slightly stronger in color than the adjacent twos. This may be due to one or both of the following:—A five cent transfer less worn than the two cent roller and so cutting deeper and wider lines, or traces and lines of the first entry caught a little ink and widened certain lines.

The portrait shading is stronger as are some lines in the hair, and the leaf veins and the shading in the ribbons are more noticeable in the 5¢ than in the 2¢.

No. T[op] L[eft position] 74 has thick frame lines, and is about .5 mm. above the normal position and slightly to the right. The extreme left line of the previous design shows quite clearly beside



Position of the Errors on the Full Sheet



the frame of the new design, and extends from about .5 mm. below the lower, left corner to a point .5 mm. below the upper left corner. There is a similar line at the right, but inside the outer frame, which extends from the top downward to about the center of the design.

There is a line of color across the P of POSTAGE and dots of color on most of the letters of the word CENTS, and several horizontal lines cross the colorless ellipse in its lower left quarter. The adjoining stamp on the right has a thin irregular left frame line, perhaps damaged in the process of erasing.

No. T[op] L[eft position] 84 also has thick frame lines, but it is not more than 35 mm. above true position at the bottom. The upper right hand part of the G of POSTAGE is missing or smudged, and there is a spot of color below the E which nearly obliterates the background lines. There are two short vertical nicks in the top of the N of CENTS.

No. B[ottom] R[ight position] 18 is .5 mm. above normal position and almost .25 mm. to the right. It has a very thick frame at the top, at just a trifle above the frame, which sloping downward to the right, immediately joins the frame. Most of the left end of a separate line is letters of U.S. POSTAGE show slight traces of doubling, and there are dots on the C and N of CENTS and on the right hand 5.

The two stamps below, Nos. 28 and 38, are above the normal position and lean lightly to the right.

With these differences, even though minor, it is possible to differentiate between the three errors, and should any one make a color changeling from an ordinary five, the defects which it lacks would expose the fraud.

The errors were printed on unwatermarked paper only; however, if there are no paper varieties there are some perforations to be collected. The perforating machines gauging 10 were being replaced by the 11 gauge machines at the time of this printing, and consequently we have both perforations occurring, so far as we know, in about equal numbers.

No sheets have been discovered with compound perforations; a block of the double error with compound perforation would command a fancy price!

Several hundred imperforate sheets have been discovered and removed beyond the grasping hands of collectors, but with the undeniable proof of their having been issued, it is possible that a few copies may be found used, either plain imperforate or with the Schermack No. 3 perforation.

In cancelled copies, three varieties may be met; two of these are known and the third may some day turn up.

1st. Used unwittingly in the course of business, preferably with date prior to May 2nd to guarantee non-philatelic usage.

2nd. Precancelled. A sheet containing the double error is known precancelled Chicago.

3rd. Used with full knowledge of the stated value in payment of five cents postage, preferably abroad to a country to which only the five cent rate applies.

CHAPTER III. Data on Printings, and Check List.

As previously stated, 49,563 full sheets were printed before Plate 7943 was cancelled on May 2nd, 1917. We are indebted to Mr. Joseph B. Leavy through the *Philatelic Gazette*, for the information that 6,166 panes each of those containing the errors were found in the perforating room, and that 6 panes of each were placed in the Government collection. Deducting these from the total printing, leaves 43,391 panes of each variety with a total of 130,173 errors issued to the post-offices, or then in the vaults. Deduct from this number 23,021 copies returned for redemption up to and including April 4, 1918, and there remain 107,153 copies available to the public. This makes no allowance for sheets thrown out by the inspectors or sheets spoiled in the perforating room. Considering that a great many collectors will not be satisfied with anything less than four blocks or sheets—a total of six errors—to show the single and the double errors in both perforations, the visible supply is greatly reduced. Although the errors are at present selling at a low price, and are priced at \$3.00 and \$4.00 per error for perforation 11 and 10 respectively, it would seem that when philatelic relations are renewed overseas, and when less strenuous times arrive, there will be a demand for the errors that is bound to cause a substantial increase in the prices.

In the following check list, I have attempted to list all the possibilities whether they are known or not. (Those which have not been chronicled May 1, 1918, are marked with an asterisk.) 1917 5¢ red—wrong value in plate of 2¢ stamps.

Unused.

Perf. 10, Double error; Single error.

Perf. 11, Double error; Single error.

Imperf., Double error; Single error.

*Schermack. 3 plate positions (double error would be separated in coiling.)

*Compound Perf. Double error. Single error.

(4 varieties possible, 10x11 and 11x10.)

Used.

3 plate positions for perf. 10; perf. 11; imperf.; X Schermack; and for X compound perforations. Precancelled.

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