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THE KNAPP SHIFT—U.S. PHILATELY'S GREAT CONTROVERSY

WADE E. SAADI

The purpose of this article is to examine the 10¢ 1847 stamp known as the "Knapp Shift" and to render an opinion as to its incarnation and/or genuineness. It sold last year at Robert A. Siegel sale #775, and has been brought back in to the public eye, after a relatively long respite. The shift first appeared in the mid-1930s, and was purchased by the famous collector, Edward S. Knapp. Without delving very deeply into its most colorful past, a brief account of its history is essential to appreciate what follows. From the onset, the stamp was steeped in controversy. Some experts of the time felt certain the shift was an anomaly and authentic. Others were convinced it was a counterfeit, while some did not know what to think, largely because, although they felt it may be genuine, they could not explain its singular existence. What is unarguable is the significant controversy surrounding this stamp since its appearance. Philately's finest minds of the time were at odds with each other over their convictions about this stamp.

Siegel offered the Knapp Shift as lot #414, in its April 23rd, 1996 sale. The description stated: "...Pos. 23L with striking and enigmatic doubling of the design at top and bottom...Unique."

The Philatelic Foundation certificate #0300244, which accompanied lot #414, dated 2/13/96, states the stamp was submitted as "USED, 'Knapp Shift', Double Transfer," and that the Foundation was of the opinion that "It is a genuine stamp with a small thin spot but it is not a genuine shift."

On the pro side of the original debate was Stanley Ashbrook, one of philately's greatest platers, and an avid believer of the shift, as was its then owner, Mr. Knapp. On the other side of the fence was Elliott Perry, a student of equal renown, who had actually performed the original plating of the 10¢ 1847 more than 10 years prior. Both coalitions had supporters of reasonable stead. Lester Brookman's opinion of the shift, published in Volume I of his *The 19th Century Postage Stamps of the United States*, was that it constituted "...the most interesting single 10¢ '47 in existence...a most remarkable example of an offset from a slip sheet." While serious philatelists have long debated the authenticity of certain frankings, rates, cancellations and markings, rarely if ever have they been unable to agree on the genuineness of an apparent double transfer found on an off-cover, relatively available stamp.

Prior to examining the Knapp shift, my opinion as to its authenticity had always been one of doubt. Solitary plate varieties naturally come under scrutiny, but being unique in itself is not condemning. However, being the lone example without a logical explanation raises serious questions. First, the apparent doubling on the stamp is quite evident and clearly visible to the naked eye, almost unmistakable. It is unlikely confirming copies are waiting to be discovered, and, since its debut in the 1930s, none have.

Second, the stamp clearly plates to position 23L, so the supposed shift would have to have come from a later rendition of that same position, say perhaps after a re-entry. But unlike the 5¢ 1847 plate, which wore greatly during its use, there have never been any signs of tired impressions on the 10¢ stamp, so what would the need be for re-working the plate? Even the very latest uses of the stamp show relatively little wear. Again, all of this skepticism was developed in the absence of ever having had the actual stamp to study.

The first step in the process of evaluating the stamp would be to determine whether the shift was genuine, and then, if so, what could have caused it to appear on position 23L.



Figure 1. Early photograph of the Knapp Shift (Ashbrook?); photo has a slight diagonal crease in the lower right corner due to handling over the years, which is not present in the original.

Upon viewing the stamp at the auction house the day before the sale, I was unable to ascertain if the doubled lines were legitimate. There was not a strong enough light source for the higher magnifications required to scrutinize the doubling. I was permitted to take the stamp overnight to continue the inspection.

Use of 50 watt narrow-beam quartz lighting with a stereo microscope proved to be telling. All of the lines of the shift were expertly drawn in with a viscous ink that emulated engraved lines. The color of some of the lines was just dissimilar enough to differentiate them from those on the actual stamp. When compared to real examples of the known 10¢ double transfers, it was made all the more obvious. Furthermore, all of the attributes supposed to be in position 23L were still there; an impossibility if there had been a re-entry. To help make the counterfeit more believable, the forger had painted red canceling ink over parts of the forged lines, making it appear the lines were there before the stamp had been used.

The skill necessary to accomplish this forgery leads me to presume that only a person with the adroitness of an engraver could have drawn these lines. Someone took a 10¢ 1847, from position 23L, possibly canceled, then drew in lines to simulate a double transfer and added red ink over parts of the drawn in lines. In doing this, they created one of philately's greatest forgeries. □

THE KNAPP SHIFT REVISITED

PHILIP T. WALL

(Editor's Note: Mr. Wall wrote the following evaluation of the Knapp Shift prior to the 1996 Siegel sale. It's an exceptional analysis, which employs different methodologies than those used in the preceding article to reach the same conclusion. The two independently written articles complement each other, and should be read in conjunction.)

Lester G. Brookman once wrote that the Knapp Shift is the most interesting single 10¢ stamp in existence.¹ With this I wholeheartedly concur. At one time in the late 1970s I owned over 200 off-cover copies of Scott No. 2, and in addition I have examined over the years another 150-200 copies. None of these 350-400 stamps has for me the fascinating intrigue of the Knapp Shift.

This controversial stamp entered the philatelic world in 1935 in a very unobtrusive manner, having been part of a stuck-down collection of U.S. stamps purchased by a stamp dealer located on New York's Madison Avenue.² When the dealer, Paul Albertis, worked up the collection for stock he noticed the 10¢ 1847 with the big shift and set it aside to show to his regular visitor and customer, Edward S. Knapp, a wealthy New Yorker. Knapp was one of this country's most avid collectors in the 1930s and when he saw this unusual stamp he quickly purchased it for around \$100.

A second copy of the 10¢ 1847 stamp with the same characteristics as the Knapp Shift has never been found. It is unique.

Knapp was eager to publicize his new prize and proudly showed it to the leading collectors and dealers of his era. Most of these viewers quickly pronounced it as a new double transfer, but when Elliott Perry and Frank R. Sweet were independently able to plate the stamp as coming from position 23 on the left pane a controversy erupted like nothing seen before or since in American philately.³

¹Lester G. Brookman, *The United States Postage Stamps of the 19th Century*, Vol. I (New York: H.L. Lindquist Publications, Inc., 1966), p. 68.

²Creighton C. Hart, "More About the 'Knapp Shift'," *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Whole No. 73), p. 11.

³Excerpt from a two volume collection of letters written to Edward S. Knapp, 1935 - 1937.