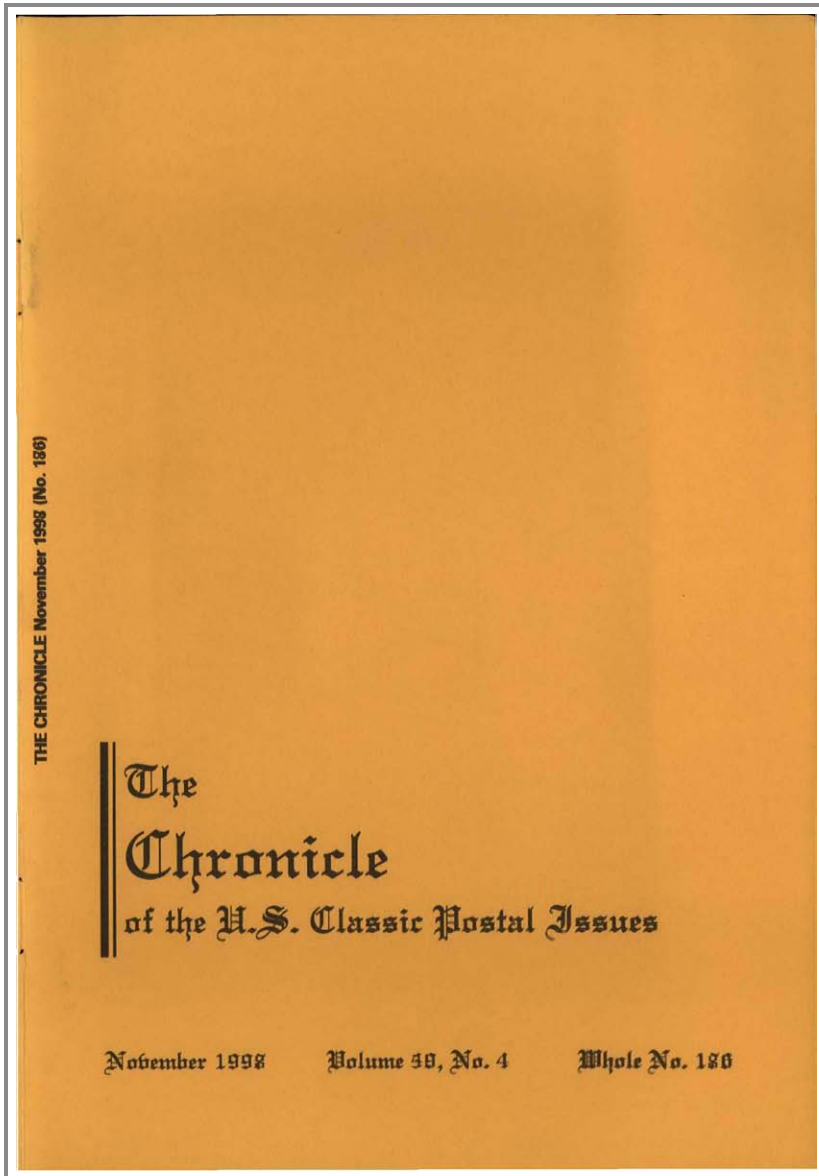




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Author(s): Richard M. Morris



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**THE RELIEF BREAKS OF THE TWO CENT WASHINGTONS:  
THE AMERICAN BANK NOTE COMPANY ISSUE OF 1890,  
SCOTT #219D AND 220  
RICHARD M. MORRIS**

In 1935 F.E. Stanton, Jr. began his booklet *Relief Breaks on the 2¢ Stamp of 1890* with these words: "No other United States stamp produces the array of plate varieties that is found on the 2¢ 1890, and nothing is more interesting than the many series of broken reliefs in which this stamp abounds."<sup>1</sup>

They are indeed easy to find, as he goes on to suggest, and out of 1,500 random copies purchased in bulk to begin my own search, I found all but about 5% of the relief breaks Stanton recorded. I have found the rest, and new ones, since.

But my philatelic mind is plagued with the question: *Why this Issue?*

Three and one half billion 2¢ green Washingtons of the 1882-88 Issue (Scott #213) were printed from no less than 130 plates, yet no such abundant relief breaks exist in this issue by the American Bank Note Company (ABN). What happened in that company's production of the 1890 Issue?

The 2¢ Lake of 1890 (Scott #219D) was issued in a quantity of 100 million from 18 plates which have been identified (and certainly others were used), and no relief breaks had been reported at the time of Stanton's article. I have a copy on cover of a Lake Red, dated July 23, 1890 which has a relief break L described by Stanton as "a.k.a. Davis's Delight." I also have five singles in the Lake shade and one in Carmine Lake. No other breaks have been recorded on the 219D, though many double transfers and shifted transfers exist. It is not until the carmine and scarlet shades appear in the reds that the relief breaks seem to explode. (Scott #220). Six and one quarter billion of these stamps were printed, from 270 plates reported by the *Durland Standard Plate Number Catalog*.<sup>2</sup>

Using the same basic design, with triangles added to the upper left and right corners and with minor changes, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) printed nearly 22 billion 2¢ reds in triangle Types I, II, III on unwatermarked and watermarked paper.<sup>3</sup> Yet this First Bureau Issue, using basically the same die design, displays no such preponderance of relief breaks.

Why then, in this Issue of 1890 by a company of good reputation?

In current literature I have found nothing which even hints at an answer to this perplexing question. Let me therefore suggest a possible answer, or perhaps an opinion, which may or may not be an answer, and may or may not be original.

First, what is a relief break? The making of a plate, with its process of die, transfer roll (or relief) and plate, is well known, and is thoroughly described in the introduction to the Scott catalog. One of the persons who first began to categorize the relief breaks was C.W. Bedford. He said,

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<sup>1</sup>F.E. Stanton, Jr., *Relief Breaks on the 2¢ Stamp of 1890* (Hollis, N.Y.: Arnold F. Auerbach, 1935).

<sup>2</sup>*Durland Standard Plate Number Catalog* (Reston, Va.: Bureau Issues Association, Inc., 1997).

<sup>3</sup>In the 1999 Scott catalog editions, the 1898 Type IV red Washington (Scott #279B) has become a part of the newly-designated 1897-1903 issue. Concurrently, triangle Types I, II and III have been redesignated as Types A, B and C.

On the transfer roll which transfers the stamp design from the die to the plate, the design stands out in relief. Every little fine line which was cut into the die in recess stands out on the transfer roll as a little thin ridge of metal. It is these little ridges of metal on the roll that press into the blank plate and leave the design in true duplicate of the lines on the die. Four hundred times on one plate, for many plates these little reliefs or ridges are repeatedly forced into the plate metal at high pressure. It is surprising that more of the little ridges do not break off.

As is to be expected, reliefs wear out or break and must be discarded for new reliefs made from the same die. Also there were probably several transfer rolls made with from one to five reliefs on each roll. Several of these reliefs crumbled or broke, possibly from being over-tempered, during the entering of no one knows how many plates.<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps not helpful to become more technical than this for the purpose of this article. Suffice it to say, in the intaglio process of printing, the transfer relief step is critical, as is quality control or inspection of plates readied for printing.

Production problems plagued this 1890 Issue from the beginning. The original color chosen for Scott #219D was labeled LAKE. Hitherto, this was simply a term signifying a step in the production of a type of pigment. The color of the dye used in this process and the amount of whitener, or lack of it, which was used produced a shade which was very deep and proved, in this instance, to be relatively unstable. It was given the name LAKE by the philatelic community. The color also proved unacceptable to the general public and articles in the press appeared in criticism of it. Thus, as the Post Office Department stated, an "improved quality of color for the 2-cent stamp was adopted on May 12, 1890," the carmines of Scott #220.<sup>5</sup>

With the Issue of 1890, the engravers with the ABN Co. moved from the production of a large stamp 20x25½ mm to one which measures approximately 19x22 mm. I say approximately because the dimensions of the Scott #220 stamp vary greatly depending upon how the grain of the paper lay in the printing. 116 plates were 200 subjects and the grain of the paper was horizontal. The remaining 156 plates were 400 subject plates and the grain of the paper was vertical. Added to this, some of the stamps were printed on porous paper using brown gum, and for a short time some were printed on crisp white paper using white gum. Factoring in the amount of moisture present in the printing process, the result is a stamp whose dimensions vary from 19x22½ mm to 19½x22 mm, with combinations in between. Size is very inconsistent in this issue.

But be that as it may, a smaller stamp was the challenge, and the design in general was not modified greatly from the preceding larger 2¢ Washingtons in brown or green. This did not appear to be a problem, because transfers from original ABN dies were used for the First Bureau Issue (with triangles added to signify a design change.) We know this because die flaws are present in the 1894 Triangle Type I unwatermarked 2¢ Washington with the dot in the middle of the "S" of "cents" as it also appeared randomly in the 1890 issue. This is not a position dot as has been suggested by some, but one of four die flaws present on the 1890 plates. The flaw was removed on Triangle Type II stamps of the First Bureau Issue to reappear, strangely, in a few plates in 1895-97 Triangle Type III stamps which have come to be labeled by specialists as Type IIIa. So, the basic design remained stable and free of relief breaks while under production by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, but not so with the American Bank Note Co.

The contract with the ABN was due to terminate soon after the end of 1893. It became obvious that the contract was not going to be renewed because advertisements were

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<sup>4</sup>C.W. Bedford, as quoted in Stanton, *op cit*.

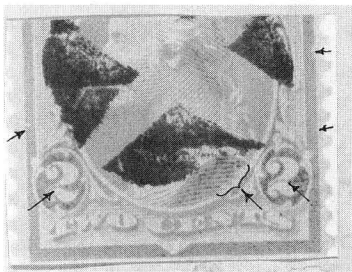
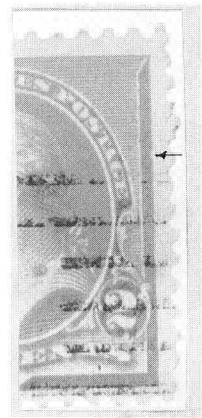
<sup>5</sup>United States Postal Service, Stamps Division, *United States Postage Stamps* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 21.

everywhere in October 1893 for engravers and other technical persons to work for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. When new contract proposals were solicited, ABN was second lowest bidder to Charles Steele of Philadelphia. When the amount of the bids became known, ABN protested the awarding of a contract to Steele, who in turn entered a protest. The dispute was settled by BEP entering a lower bid and being awarded the “contract.” (Since two government agencies cannot enter into contracts, the arrangement was called an “agreement” between the Postmaster General and the BEP to produce the new stamps.) A more complete description of all this can be found in the first of a series of articles by Kenneth Diehl in *The U.S. Specialist*.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say, I believe the ABN Co. had little invested interest in the production of the 2¢ Washington at this mid-point between the beginning of the process of producing #220 and turning over its dies and stock in June 1894 to the BEP and the Post Office Department. It is interesting to note that stamps on cover dated 1892 and the two years following begin to show multiple relief breaks. None before that date, in my own study, show such breaks, with the exception already noted: the small relief break in the #219D lake.

At this point in time it would appear that transfer reliefs were beginning to show considerable wear. Key personnel had left for other jobs. I believe that what probably happened was that second-level personnel were brought up to manage and supervise production. Furthermore, there was not strong incentive to monitor quality, with politics being what it was, and the production of #220 began to deteriorate.

The delicate frame line of the design on the right of the stamp began to break up at line (from top right) 7 and 8, 29 thru 33, 36,40 thru 44, 65, 67, 69, 77 and 78. All these have ends broken off and are thereby shortened. These are to be found in Reliefs C and D as illustrated by Stanton. The same kind of breaks begin to appear in the left frame line as well, but are fewer in number.

A second vulnerable position in the transfer relief are the 11 lines of color which make up the shoulder of the portrait. They are listed 1 thru 11 from top to bottom. The principal break is found in the end of the 5th shoulder line which progressively disintegrates and is cataloged in 14 different combinations of breaks coupled with changes in other parts of Relief E. All 11 shoulder lines break up in various places in Relief C and K.



In the recording of Relief C the breaks are so numerous that as many as 33 breaks on one transfer relief are noted and can be found on a single stamp. I have a single copy, postmarked 1892, with only the 42nd right frame line broken. This break begins the breakdown which is Relief C.

“Cap on left 2” is perhaps the most commonly known relief break, and has been noted in stamp catalogues for years. Its development was also progressive and I have illustrated it through 15 stages from its beginnings as a halo over the “2” to a full sharply pointed rectangular cap in its final stage. This probably began as a cracking under the surface of the transfer relief which slowly erupted, causing the break as we know it to occur.

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth Diehl, “The 2¢ Stamps of the First Bureau Issue,” *The U.S. Specialist*, Vol. 65, No. 12 (December 1994), pp. 532-41.

I recently obtained 50 copies of #220c (known as “cap on both 2s”). This was the first time I was able to look at a significantly large quantity to make any observations. I checked the cap on the left “2” and found that it followed the same progressive break as I found in the stamps with only the cap on the left “2” (#220a). Putting them in that progressive order I then looked at the cap on the right “2,” expecting to see that break to be progressive also. To my surprise, the cap on the right “2” remained constant in width and height with rounded corners (unlike the cap on the left “2” which in its final stages had pointed corners and had widened.) This suggests to me that a clean break occurred on the transfer relief at the right “2.” In fact on a few copies a faint red line can be detected between the cap and the top of the right “2” which is probably the remnants of metal left as the break occurred.

Since the left cap *never gets any higher* than the right cap it probably means that the left “2” continued to deteriorate until it reached an equal depth with the clean break on the right but continued to disintegrate from within as it broadened. Because so little has been written about the breaks since Stanton’s work, it is hard to know whether this is new information. If others have additional information on the breaks it would be helpful to hear about their findings.

In and out of the catalogues during the years has been mention of the controversial “cap on right 2.” Does it exist or doesn’t it? There are two positions of “cap on right 2” which exist and I have both of them. However it is doubtful that this is a relief break, but rather from the diffuse profile it would appear to be a printing flaw similar to that which appears on the 1¢ (#219) of this same issue (the “candle flame” variety, with elongated areas without ink on both the right and left serifs on one or both of the “1s”). This was caused by careless wiping of the plates.

C.W. Bedford, who predated Stanton in the study of the small 2¢ Bank Note Issue of 1890, wrote an article in 1932 which summed up the findings of a group with whom he worked known as the Shift Hunters. “Thanks to the cooperative endeavors of over 100 Shift Hunters, who have worked together for nearly three years, so many similar shifts have been found on the 2¢, the 15¢ and the 30¢ stamps of 1890 that we can now say with surety that most of these varieties and very probably all of them are due to careless or inaccurate applications of the transfer roll to the plate.”<sup>7</sup>

Bedford’s remark bears out my own conclusion. Transfer reliefs were breaking down from 1892 on. Repairs were not being made. Quality control was lax. Someone at the top didn’t seem to care. And today we have this super-abundance of transfer relief breaks (as well as a multitude of double transfers, shifted transfers, etc.) which excite the specialist and amuse the collector, but the reasons still confound us all. □

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<sup>7</sup>C.W. Bedford, “Notes on Shifted Transfers - 2¢ 1890,” *The American Philatelist*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (October 1932), p. 5.