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Article: Plating the 5¢ 1847 Block of 16

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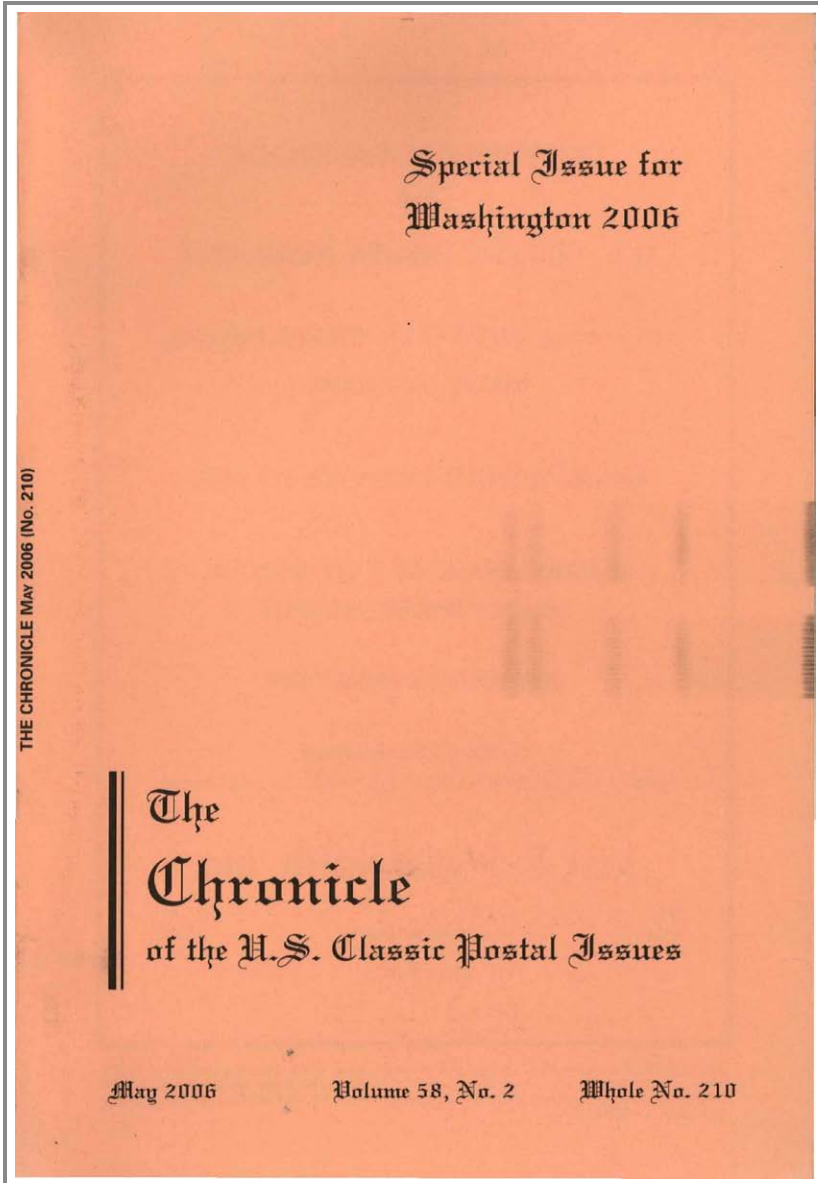


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PLATING THE 5¢ 1847 BLOCK OF 16

WILLIAM H. GROSS, RA 3888

The discovery in 1997 of the proof sheets of the right pane of the 5¢ and the left pane of the 10¢ 1847 issue has been of great advantage to collectors of our country's first general postage stamps. Through the courtesy of the owner of these sheets, Arthur Morowitz, and the National Postal Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, the U.S. Philatelic Classics Society has been able to offer enlarged high-resolution photographs of these spectacular sheets, which are ideal for plating purposes. Ordering information is available at the Society website, www.uspcs.org.

Full panes such as these proof sheets are especially useful for plating, primarily because they identify every individual impression according to its position without having to go to the normally arduous work of plating. Rarely are full sheets available for the early classic issues of the United States. Often even large multiples are few. The student who first plates an issue must start with a multiple or multiples where the plate positions can be known with certainty. Then by using other multiples which overlap this known multiple, new positions can be logically determined, which in turn can be overlapped with other multiples to identify other new positions until all the positions in a pane finally have been identified and confirmed. This is the way Elliot Perry reconstructed the 10¢ 1847 plating in the early 1920's, much to the surprise of many who thought the first issue U.S. stamps would never be plated. The newly discovered proof sheet of the left pane of the 10¢ adds nothing in terms of the identification of positions that was not already discovered by Perry, other than to confirm his work.

The same cannot be said for the 5¢ value, which has never been fully plated. Though work has been done on it over the years only some of the positions have been positively identified. The discovery of the proof sheet of the right pane immediately and definitively identified all positions in that pane. This makes it considerably easier for work to progress on completing the plating of the left pane. All left-pane multiples can now be easily identified because they can quickly be known not to have come from the right pane.

There is another great advantage to these full sheets that is not found with reconstructions that are done in the normal way. Compared to modern issues, early stamps were frequently laid out on the plate in a very inexact way. Modern issues, through advanced printing technology, are very evenly spaced. The rows all line up and everything is very straight. Not so with the issues of the first 10 to 20 years of stamp production.

The two 1847 proof sheets show how inexactly laid out this issue was. Spacing between stamps varies to some degree. Even the alignment of the rows can vary, not so much in their overall straightness, but individual stamps within a row can often be seen to be somewhat out of line. Even more often, individual positions are laid down slightly askew in relation to the overall general straightness of the rows, being rotated slightly in one direction or the other from the precise perpendicular.

This was dramatically illustrated when we were doing plating work on the 1847 issues preparing my collection of "United States Classics, 1847-1869" for exhibition. In the collection is a mint block of 16 of the 5¢ red brown, the largest known multiple of Scott #1 that has been recorded either mint or used (Figure 1). Despite its long history of being part



Figure 1. 5¢ Red Brown mint block of 16, positions 21-24, 31-34, 41-44, 51-54R. This is the largest recorded multiple of Scott #1, unused or used.

of famous collections, such as those of the Earl of Crawford, Senator Ackerman, Philip H. Ward and Ryohei Ishikawa, this block had not been plated with certainty. If it turned out to be from the right pane, plating could now be accomplished with the use of the enlarged photographs from the National Postal Museum.

One of the first things we noticed was that portions of the left margin appeared large enough to potentially be a portion of the sheet margin. This was confirmed by the lack of guide dots in the left column. All positions except the ten positions in the first vertical row at left of each pane show a guide dot near the point of the central leaf in the central ornament on the left of the surrounding frame design. Stamps without the guide dot must come from the left vertical row. This established that this indeed was a marginal block, making the plating of the block much easier because this limited the possibilities considerably.

Another thing we noticed was that going from left to right each succeeding stamp seemed to be a little higher than the preceding stamp, apparently stair-stepping up hill. To check this alignment we put a straight edge in line with the bottom frame of each of the top three left-row stamps and extended lines across the block to see how the stamps lined up. This crude measure seemed to confirm what we suspected about the impressions going up hill from left to right. We then did the same alignment procedure on each of the rows of the proof sheet (Figure 2). We found that the top five rows showed this same alignment characteristic, but the bottom five rows of the sheet were pretty much in line (except for row nine). This meant that the top three rows of our block had to fit somewhere in the top



Figure 2. Top left corner of the right pane proof sheet showing the apparent misalignment of the rows by extending a straight line from the bottom frame line of the first stamp in each row. The bottom block of 16 in this proof multiple represents the same position in the sheet as the mint block in Figure 1.

five rows of the sheet. We also noted unusually close vertical spacing between the first and fourth stamps of rows four and five. This quickly identified our block as rows three through six, positions 21-24/51-54. Minute engraved details and blurs in the margins confirmed our identification.

Further study of the alignment of the 5¢ pane reveals that our observation that the rows were going up hill was not really accurate and more an optical illusion caused by the limited size of our block, which did not allow us to properly observe the whole layout of the sheet. When graphic tools are used to measure the straightness of the rows and overall plate layout, the rows are actually quite straight and the layout reasonably symmetrical. What caused the illusion of misalignment of the rows of the block of 16 was really the orientation of the individual impressions. We found that the first stamp of the first five rows, and many of the next four stamps to the right of each of these, were rotated slightly clockwise to the perpendicular and the overall layout of the plate. Thus when you extend a line using the bottom frame line of the first stamp it projects lower and lower with each row. On the other hand, if all the misaligned individual designs were rotated slightly counter clockwise to correspond with the direction of each column, everything would appear to be reasonably straight. Nevertheless, the use of alignment had been the major technique that we employed to identify the block on the plate, which would have been impossible if we had not had an entire intact pane to compare it with.

We now knew that this block was from the right pane and could be plated without question as coming from positions 21-24, 31-34, 41-44 and 51-54. The ease with which we were able to do it was largely due to the excellent photographs prepared by the National Postal Museum. Our plating process was done mainly by alignment and spacing, which is usually only possible when comparing full panes or very large multiples. A normal plate reconstruction made up of singles and maybe a few multiples would not have shown us the alignment clues that made this task so easy. Of course, since every impression on the plate differs in its details, we still could have used a plate reconstruction of singles to make the proper identification. Since we were plating such a large block from the left edge of the sheet, that would not have been a particularly difficult task for an experienced plater. However, our experience here illustrates that for anyone desiring to do plating of the 1847 issue, these photographs are a very useful tool. ■

United States Stamp Society

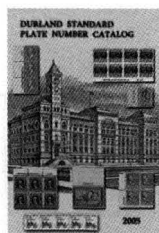
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