

Five-Cent 1871 Proprietary Revenue Stamp with Center Inverted: A Major United States Philatelic Rarity

by Brian M. Bleckwenn

[Editor's Note: Recently, The Philatelic Foundation expertized the only known copy of Scott # RB5c. In this issue we are pleased to present an exclusive article by noted philatelist and author Brian M. Bleckwenn. Mr. Bleckwenn is a collector and student of classic U.S. revenue stamps. He is recognized as one of the country's leading authorities on this complex and sometimes neglected area of philately.]



PFC # 217,464. Unique copy of 5-Cent Proprietary Revenue Stamp of 1871 with center inverted (Scott # RB5c).

The five-cent 1871 Proprietary on violet paper with center inverted is a major United States Rarity in every sense of the word. Issued nearly one hundred and twenty years ago, only one example of this stamp has ever been discovered. It is one of very few "key" stamps blocking a complete collection of Classic United States Revenue Stamps or a complete collection of Major United States Errors. The far better known 1869 Pictorials with Inverted Centers and the famous 24¢ Inverted Jenny Airmail are all relatively commonplace when compared to this stamp's true rarity.

I am unaware of when it was discovered or by whom. It was unknown when the so called Boston Revenue Book (1) was published in 1899; it was unknown to Elliott Perry in 1918 when his monograph "United States Revenue Stamps" (2) was published under the pseudonym Chris West, and it was unknown to revenue collector/authority Henry L. Dean in the 1920's and 1930's when his series of scholarly articles appeared in *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News*. From 1971 to 1989, collectors have had a glimpse of this stamp on only two occasions. The Weill Brothers displayed it at their exhibition of rarities during ANPHILEX (the 75th Anniversary of The Collectors Club of New York) held in New York City, November 26-December 1, 1971. Its only other appearance came during the dispersal of the Weill's United States Revenue holdings by Christie's on November 8, 1989. It is presumed that this stamp was acquired by the Weill brothers when they purchased the famed stock of Philip H. Ward, the noted Philadelphia professional philatelist. Unlike most other U.S. major rarities, it was offered without the usual list of provenances. This implies that it may never have resided in a major collection prior to its acquisition by Mr. Ward, who had a long and distinguished career. It is also not known to have been sold by the Weill's during the many years they possessed the stamp.

The 1871 Proprietary stamps were engraved and printed by Joseph R. Carpenter, the Philadelphia firm that also held the contract for the 1871-1871 Documentary Stamps referred to as the Second and Third Issues. The same firm, known as Butler & Carpenter prior to John M. Butler's death on October 20, 1868, had held the contract for the First Issue of United States Revenues which encompassed both Documentary and Proprietary titles.

The First Issue's \$200 denomination stamp, issued in July of 1864, was the nation's first bicolor perforated and gummed stamp, following the introduction of bicolor stamp designs for the 1861 Postal Stationary Issue and preceding the famed 1869 Pictorial postage stamps by five full years. Problems with chemical removal of manuscript cancellations from First Issue revenue stamps and counterfeiting of at least two First Issue values (1¢ Proprietary and \$3 Manifest) led to the production of the bicolor Second and Third Issues and the 1871 Proprietaries.

Some very innovative patents were granted and utilized for the production of these revenue stamp issues. The first, by John Earle and Alfred B. Steel (Letters Patent No. 92,593, dated July 13, 1869), was entitled "Improvement in Printing Revenue Stamps, etc., in Two or More Colors." It provided a method for printing two or more colors in "perfect" registration in a single printing operation. The patent also called for the use of different inks in the production of revenue stamps, one of which was to be indelible, the other fugitive, so that any attempt to clean cancellations would be easily detected. It should be noted that Messrs. Earle and Steel were engravers in the employ of Joseph R. Carpenter.

Another related patent, by George T. Jones (Letters Patent No. 101,020, dated March 22, 1870), entitled "Improvement in the Manufacture of Revenue and Other Stamps," called for the printing to be done in two different color inks, one soluble under the action of alkaline agents, the other soluble under the action of acids, so that the exposure of the stamps to either acids or alkalines would noticeably deface the stamp.

A third patent, by James M. Willcox (Letters Patent No. 115,005, dated May 16, 1871), was entitled "Improvement in Paper for Bank Notes, Bonds, etc." This referred to the "Chameleon" paper used for these issues which was imbedded with blue and red silk fibers sensitive to either acids or alkalines. The 1871 Proprietaries were also printed on tinted papers (violet or green) which offered the same protection against removing cancellations.

The Earle and Steel method of printing bicolor stamps in a single printing operation was determined to be too time consuming and, therefore, too costly. Had it been employed, no inverted centers would exist on Second and Third Issue Revenues and 1871 Proprietaries. The method of locking together the separate plates for the vignette and frame design would have prevented the printing of stamps with inverted centers. The adoption of the traditional two-pass method of printing for the separate colors allowed some sheets to be rotated during the printing process, resulting in inverted centers.

The specific printing innovations used for these revenue issues help in the expertization of those with inverted centers. Because the stamps were printed with separate passes through the press for each color, the vignette designs usually slightly overlap the frame designs. A mechanical cut out of the vignette design would not be able to reproduce this slight overlapping of both colors. The nature of the silk fibers present in the paper also serve as a valuable expertizing tool. One should be able to follow each silk fiber from the frame portion of the design into the vignette medallion. Finally, any attempt to bleach out the vignette and print a fraudulent inverted vignette will invariably trigger the safety features of the chameleon paper. A good magnifying glass, a strong light source and a dipping tray are all that are needed to expertize these major U.S. Errors.

The 5c 1871 Proprietary stamp on violet paper was first issued on September 2, 1871. Only one Plate (Plate # 14) of 170 subjects (17 x 10) was prepared. The total number issued on violet paper was 548,910, with an additional 220,892 issued on green paper. (3) Since most of these stamps were used to pay the tax on proprietary articles (patent medicines, matches, cosmetics, perfumes, playing cards, etc.), they were usually discarded along with the packaging, unlike the revenue stamps which payed taxes on documents which were often preserved for many years due to legal necessity. The almost immediate destruction of the proprietary stamps drastically reduced the number of specimens available for later generations of philatelists. It also explains the demise of the remaining Inverted Center Errors of this value printed. It should also be pointed out that the lower denomination proprietary stamps paid the proper tax on the vast majority of proprietary articles, resulting in a drastically reduced need for the higher denomination stamps. The number of 5c Proprietary stamps issued (769,802) is extremely low when compared to the quantities of the 1c (122,441,928), 2c (41,873,098), 3c (17,310,912) and 4c (30,241,803) denominations. (4)

All of these factors combine to make the 5c 1871 Proprietary stamp with Center Inverted a legitimate World Class Rarity.

Endnotes

(1) George L. Toppan, Hiram E. Deats, Alexander Holland, *et al.*, *An Historical Reference Listing of the Revenue Stamps of the United States* ("The Boston Revenue Book"), Salem, Mass.: Newcomb and Gauss, 1899.

(2) Chris West (*nom de plume* for Elliott Perry), *United States Revenue Stamps* ("The West Booklet"), Portland, Maine: Severn-Wylie-Jewett Co., 1918.

(3) Toppan, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

(4) *Ibid.*, pp. 97-99.