Varieties of United States Official Stamps:
90¢ Navy Short Transfer and 3¢ Treasury Double Impression

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One of the rewards of collecting in a neglected field such as the United States official stamps of 1873-1884 is the heightened chance of making new discoveries. Over the years, my own interest has been primarily oriented towards cancellation studies. Not until recently have I begun to study the plate and printing varieties, in part because these stamps - despite the haste in which they were produced - were actually printed with great uniformity. Through general osmosis and some patient coaching by other collectors, I have become able to recognize most of the more obvious varieties, such as the 15¢ Interior, 12¢ Navy, 6¢ State and 24¢ Treasury double transfers, the 10¢ State and 30¢ Treasury short transfers, the 6¢ Navy line through "N", and the l0¢ Navy plate scratch. All of these plate varieties are detectable by the naked eye, and all are now listed in the Scott specialized catalogue, thanks in part to articles that appeared in this section under the previous editor.[1] A number of other varieties - chiefly double transfers - have been found by eagle-eyed specialists, but no master listing has ever been published. The most comprehensive guide we have is a series of articles, department by department, that appeared in "Official Chatter", the house organ of Rollin C. Huggins, Jr. between July, 1987 and October, 1992. The 2¢ Executive foreign transfer of the 6¢ Agriculture, a subtle variety first described by Admiral Combs, sounds spectacular in theory, but in my experience, it is difficult to appreciate what you can't see.[2] Still, as they say, even a blind chicken pecks a piece of corn once in a while.

In Figure 1, we illustrate an unused 90¢ Navy stamp which has the unusual distinction of containing both plate and printing flaws, alongside a normal plate proof for comparison.[3] Preprinting paper creases of this one millimeter width are seldom encountered on the regular official stamps. They are also sometimes found on the 2¢ and 6¢ 1875 special printings of the Executive set. Unlike the regular issue Bank Note stamps and most other classic U. S. postage and revenue stamps, preprinting paper creases on official stamps are almost invariably horizontal. The

[1] See Alfred E. Staubus, "Short Transfer Variety on the 10¢ State Department Stamp", pp. 47-51, February, 1991, Vol. 43, No. 1, Whole No. 149; Staubus, "Double Transfer Variety on the 90¢ Interior Department Stamp", pp. 200-204, August, 1991, Vol. 43, No. 3, Whole No. 151; Staubus, "The 12¢ Navy Department Double Transfer: Plate Position 50, pp. 272-274, November, l991, Vol. 43, No. 4, Whole No. 152; Rollin C. Huggins, Jr., "That Elusive Crack", pp. 204-207, August, 1992, Vol. 43, No. 3, Whole No. 155.

[2] W. V. Combs, "2¢ Executive Official: A New Double Entry", pp. 900-901, *The American Philatelist*, September, 1962, Vol. 75, No. 12. The catalogue erroneously lists this variety as a double transfer.

My thanks to Lester C. Lanphear, III for photographing all items in this pair of articles.

explanation for this phenomenon is fairly straightforward. In intaglio printing, the plates were ordinarily fed lengthwise on the flat bed under the impression cylinder, in order to get more even pressure from a longer pass. Disregarding the sheetlets of the Department of State dollar values, 90 of the 99 plates used to print the official stamps were one hundred subject plates, narrower in width than in length. Unlike two hundred subject plates, these were fed top to bottom through the press. Most preprinting paper creases occur perpendicular to the direction of printing, when on rare occasions the dampened paper buckled under pressure and doubled over on itself, in effect ironing the pleat into place and preventing ink from being transferred to the masked portion. The only official multiple I know of which demonstrates this is an imperforate right margin block of four of the 2¢ Navy greenish black trial color proof on wove paper in the Robert L. Markovits exhibit collection.[4] Uncharacteristically, the preprinting creases affecting three stamps in this block are mainly vertical, but in two places they taper to a point, suggesting that such flaws were sometimes internalized and extended only across a few stamps.

On closer examination of the 90¢ Navy stamp, it is also apparent that a portion of the frame design, outside the six-pointed star in the upper left corner, is missing. At first glance, it occurred to me that this might be an example of an incomplete print where the thickness of the overlapped paper resisted being pressed fully into the incised plate. Later, another collector happened to ask me in passing if I owned a copy of the 90¢ Navy short transfer variety. After being prompted that Rollin C. Huggins, Jr. had identified an example of this variety in his collection, I checked my reference photocopy and found there a matched set of blocks taken from the upper left corner of proof sheets on India paper. The short transfer variety clearly occurs at
position 1. Reexamining my own stamp, it was immediately obvious that not only did the missing portions of the design match, but the wing margins to the left and top, showing no trace of the adjoining stamps' framelines, confirmed that this copy was also from position 1.

In figure 2, courtesy of Lester C. Lanphear III, we reproduce the top plate number and imprint strip of six for the 90¢ Navy stamp, cropped from photographs taken from the plate proof sheets once owned by the Earl of Crawford and Congressman Ackerman. This illustration confirms that the 90¢ Navy short transfer at upper left variety actually occurs at both positions 1 and 5, with the incompleteness of design being more exaggerated at position 1. Incidentally, at position 14, a much less pronounced weakness in the upper left frame line also occurs. According to Baxter, almost all short transfers, especially those incomplete at the top, are caused not by a partial rocking in of the relief roll at that position, but instead by a failure to ease off pressure on the return pass at the position above, allowing the transfer roll to rotate

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Although plate proofs in greenish black exist both imperforate and perforate and have been known for years, they are still not listed in the catalogue.

onto the previous entry and iron out a portion of the design.[5] This theory, while plausible, would obviously not cover partial short transfers affecting a corner of the stamp and occurring in the top row of such plates as the 90¢ Navy. Instead, I would follow Staubus, who in his article on the 10¢ State short transfer, cited Ernest A. Kehr's explanation that such varieties were caused by a siderographer's overzealous burnishing out of excess metal ridges forced up along the forward edge of the transfer relief as it rocked onto the plate.

The 90¢ Navy short transfer at upper left is a constantly recurring plate variety, unchanging for every stamp from positions 1 and 5, which deserves to be listed in the catalogue. At present, I know of only two other used copies, one in the collection of Rollin C. Huggins, Jr. and the other in the collection of Alfred E. Staubus. Between July 1, 1873 and July 1, 1879, only 12,270 90¢ stamps were requisitioned by the Navy Department, meaning that at most 246 examples of this variety were issued. Many copies were postally used on packages and lost to philately, so this variety is undoubtedly quite scarce now. Still, because it is so obvious and unmistakable once one knows what to look for, I am confident that it is only a matter of time before more examples are discovered and reported.

In Figure 3, we have the discovery copy of the 3¢ Treasury double impression, along with a normal plate proof for comparison. Baxter distinguished among three different varieties: a slipped or "kiss" impression, where the damp paper on the inked plate shifts slightly prior to printing; a true double impression or double print, where an already printed sheet is run in error through the press a second time; and a pulled impression, when a printed sheet is improperly removed from the plate, causing the still wet summit of the ink ridges to shift and smear. He also remarked that the appearance of a slipped impression can result when the impression cylinder irons out a paper buckle or air bubble, although more often this results in a crease.[6] Other students use the term "kiss" impression to describe the outcome when the corner or side of a sheet, in being lifted off the plate, slips back down and touches or "kisses" the plate again, resulting in a faint, usually partial second impression. The term "slurred print", seldom encountered in this country, has been coined to describe a stamp where some linear duplication of the design was caused by the paper "cockling, flapping or moving during the actual printing."[7] It has been theorized that the appearance of a double impression can be simulated by a double offset, where still wet ink from a freshly printed sheet is transferred to the back of

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James H. Baxter, *Printing Postage Stamps by Line Engraving*, The American Philatelic Society, 1939, pp. 60-61.

Baxter, op. cit., p. 118.

L. N. & M. Williams, *Fundamentals of Philately*, The American Philatelic Society, Inc., 1971, p.132.

another sheet placed on top of it, and then retransferred back to the original.[8] It has also been suggested that some double impressions may result from stamp paper having been used to blot a portion of an insufficiently wiped plate: then, instead of being discarded, this blotted paper was inadvertently run through the press. Historically, double impressions, with their dizzying, out-of-focus appeal, have long been considered major printing errors worthy of separate catalogue listings, whereas slipped and pulled impressions, with their less dramatic fuzzy or smeared appearance, tend to be dismissed as interesting oddities. Regrettably, I have not been able to locate a well-illustrated analysis explaining in a scientific fashion how to tell one variety from another on classic United States stamps, and some students remain deeply skeptical as to whether it is possible to definitively attribute most examples of these varieties to a specific printing misadventure.

Among the various experts I consulted, the consensus of opinion was that the term "double impression" should be reserved to describe only those stamps where pressure from the cylinder caused two separate and distinct misregistered printings of the image.[9] In the classic scenario, the printer's assistant confuses an already printed sheet with blank stock and places it face down on the reinked plate: when run through the press again, the result is two equally strong but misregistered impressions. However, I am told by advanced students that the appearance of two equally strong misregistered impressions is a very rare phenomenon in U. S. philately. In most of the recorded examples on regular issue Bank Note stamps, either one impression is strong but incomplete, or else it is weak and complete.[10] In the latter case, which is typical for most printed-on-both-sides varieties, a more plausible explanation is that the printing began with an initial weak impression, caused by a partially inked or overwiped plate or by insufficient dampening of the paper. Even though this was not accountable "security paper" per se, once this

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Jerome S. Wagshal, "Some Comments on Plate and Printing Varieties on 19th Century Stamps and the Expertization Process", *OPINIONS V, Philatelic Expertizing - An Inside View*, edited by Elizabeth Pope, The Philatelic Foundation of New York, 1988, p. 42. However, if as has been suggested tissue was interleaved between freshly printed stacked panes as early as 1869, then it is extremely unlikely a double offset could have occurred on the Bank Note stamps. Likewise, the sharp pregumming offsets sometimes found on the back of official stamps would have been caused, not by ink being transferred between stacked wet sheets, but by a blanket transfer resulting from an inked plate being run through the press without paper and leaving a legible impression on the cylinder blanket, which was was then transferred in reverse onto the back of the next sheet.

I am indebted to Jerome S. Wagshal, Calvet M. Hahn, Bernard Biales and Eliot Landau for sharing their thoughts on intaglio printing and the likely causes of double impressions. I am especially grateful to Eliot Landau for his meticulous review of an earlier draft of this article.

In examining photographs of seven different double impressions on the 3¢ Bank Note regular issue, I found five of them to be quite similar, showing a light first impression vertically misregistered from a second strong impression. My sources were Calvet M. Hahn, "The National Bank Note Issues", The Collectors Club Philatelist, September-October, 1989, p. 315; Hahn, "Salmagundi", op. cit., March-April, 1989, pp. 114-116; Wagshal, op. cit., p. 43-47; and photocopies of the Levi records, courtesy of Mr. Wagshal.

weak impression was noticed, an attempt might still have been made to salvage the paper by proceeding with a second printing, either on the front or back. Judging from the poor quality control exercised over the grilling of stamps during an era of widespread government corruption, the same lax standards may well have applied to misprinted or misperforated stamps.[11] A double impression created in this way would have a weak first impression and a second strong impression, the latter slightly misregistered horizontally, vertically, and even in rotation from the former. Of course, extreme misalignments, resulting in two-headed monsters, would ordinarily be discarded as printer's waste.

In another sequence of events, as the printer turns the power wheel and the traveling bed bearing the plate is forced under the impression cylinder, he might notice that an air bubble or paper buckle is preventing the paper from seating properly. He could then back the plate out, smooth the paper down, and make another pass, without lifting the sheet and reinking the plate. Since the same reservoir of ink in the engraved grooves would be expended to produce both impressions, a gradient from dark to light might be observed on the first false or ghost impression, and a reverse gradient from light to dark on the second. The ink used to print these stamps had a thick, paste-like consistency, and only a portion of the ink in the grooves was actually transferred to the paper on a single impression. Such a process might yield only a row or two of double-printed stamps from the top or leading edge of the plate, and these stamps would be less dramatic both in degree of misregistration and in the intensity of their images, than double impressions produced by pulling the paper and reinking the plate. However, if the printer had backed out the plate in order to lift and reposition a misaligned sheet of stamp paper, then the two impressions could be radically offset. At this time, no definitive nomenclature has been agreed upon to distinguish among these various types of double impressions.

Having said all that, I hesitate to speculate exactly how the 3¢ Treasury double impression was produced. Perhaps a whole sheet was printed in this way, perhaps only a row or two. One impression is weak throughout, while the other, shifted .3 mm. upwards, is consistently strong. The doubling is most evident across the top of the letters of "TREASURY" and also in the upper part of Washington's profile, where the horizontal lines of the shaded vignette background impinge onto his nose and forehead. The illusion of horizontal misregistration is caused by vertically superimposing one oval forehead over another. The double frame line at the bottom of the strong impression is intrinsic to the die itself, and the weak impression extending beyond it is very faint. The certificate of authenticity issued for this stamp by the Philatelic Foundation (#0267798, 12/31/92, " O74 VAR, used double impression") mentions a light diagonal crease at the top. This may be significant, in as much as at least one of the other regular issue Bank Note double impression

[11] Eliot Landau, "Letter to the Editor", The Collectors Club Philatelist, September-October, 1989, pp.

varieties also shows a horizontal crease, giving credence to the notion that a paper buckle might have spoiled the first impression.

This 3¢ Treasury double impression variety is less dramatic than the well-known 3¢ War double impression (O116 b), an example of which is shown in Figure 4 (PFC #0128332, 3/8/84, courtesy of Lester C. Lanphear, III), alongside a normal plate proof for comparison. I know of at least three examples of this variety, all of them unused, all presumably from the same sheet and possibly from the same row. Here, the first impression fades quickly from top to bottom, while the second impression, shifted .8 mm. upwards, has a reverse gradient, from light at the top to strong at the bottom. Consequently, the resulting image appears to be .8 mm. shorter than a normal stamp. Had the second impression been shifted downwards, the image would have been elongated by .8 mm.

A double impression of the 6¢ Post Office stamp has been authenticated but never listed in the catalogue. The catalogue does list a double impression variety for the 2¢ Post Office stamp (O48b), but most of the purported examples I have seen show only a fuzzy bleeding in the bold numeral "2" and in the wording "OFFICIAL STAMP.", which seems more typical of excess welling ink rather than a true double impression. The *ne plus ultra* of all official double impressions is of course the unique 90¢ Navy, ex-Colonel E. H. Green, currently in the exhibit collection of Robert L. Markovits, shown in Figure 5.[12] In this spectacular stamp from the right hand sheet margin, the first partial impression is very strong and offset 3.5 mm. from the complete second impression out into the selvage. Conventional explanations for double impressions are useless when confronted with a stamp like this. Aside from the blotting paper theory advanced earlier, the only possible interpretation I can offer for this error is that the paper was misaligned horizontally and the plate fed sideways into the press; then, after only the right side of the first vertical row of stamps was printed, the plate was backed out and the paper lifted and repositioned correctly. Such an explanation might also apply to the most spectacular of all Bank Note double impressions, a 3¢ green regular issue (147b), where the first strong impression, complete except for the top 20%, is offset a staggering 5 mm. south and 1 mm. west of the second complete impression. This tall stamp, tied on a cover to Westport, New York, is clearly from the bottom row of the sheet, since the perforating gauges were ordinarily set wider around a sheet's perimeter. Of course, a sheet with only one row of wildly misprinted stamps would stand a much better chance of escaping destruction as printer's waste.

Figure Captions

Figure l. 90¢ Navy short transfer with preprinting paper crease, and normal plate proof.

Photograph courtesy of Christie's, June 12, l991, Lot # 910.

Figure 2. 90¢ Navy plate proof imprint and plate number strip.

Figure 3. 3¢ Treasury double impression and normal plate proof.

Figure 4. 3¢ War double impression and normal plate proof.

Figure 5. 90¢ Navy double impression.