

# **A Guide to Grading and Expertizing United States Stamps**

*An Illustrated Guide and Discussion  
of PSE's Grading System and Various Issues  
Pertaining to Expertizing U.S. Stamps*



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction to Grading U.S. Stamps</b> . . . . .	3
<b>The Grading System</b> . . . . .	5
1. Determining Soundness . . . . .	6
Table of Soundness . . . . .	7
A Discussion of Relative Soundness . . . . .	9
2. Determining Centering . . . . .	10
The Centering Scale . . . . .	12
Centering Standards - Photo Plates . . . . .	17
3. Combining Centering and Soundness . . . . .	18
4. Eye Appeal . . . . .	18
5. Gum Condition . . . . .	21
6. Jumbo Stamp Designations . . . . .	22
7. Revenue Stamp Grading . . . . .	25
8. Grading of Blocks . . . . .	26
<b>Table of Final Grades.</b> . . . . .	27
<b>Expertizing U.S. Stamps</b> . . . . .	28
1. Identifying the Correct Scott No. . . . .	29
2. Unused or Used? . . . . .	31
3. Gum and Hinging Status . . . . .	32
4. Reperforation . . . . .	34
5. Other Faults that Arise After Issue . . . . .	39
6. Faults Which Arise During Production . . . . .	40
<b>The Staff of PSE</b> . . . . .	47

## GRADING U.S. STAMPS

In late 2001, Professional Stamp Experts presented to the philatelic community a grading system for United States Postage Stamps. For the first time, all attributes of a stamp — centering, soundness and eye appeal — were incorporated into a single grading model, and a method for arriving at a single net grade for a stamp was established.

In the ensuing eight years, this model has been discussed with many of the nation's leading dealers and collectors. PSE has examined and graded over 160,000 stamps, and carefully observed where the system worked, and where improvements were needed. If there were inconsistencies, changes were made.

In the spring of 2002, PSE began publishing *The Stamp Market Quarterly*, a guide to the market value of the most collectible U.S. stamps. This was followed in 2003 by establishment of the *PSE Set Registry*, where the nation's finest sets can be listed and compared, and the *PSE Population Report* in 2005, listing by grade the quantities of stamps graded by PSE. In late 2005, the Philatelic Foundation in New York adopted PSE's numerical scale for the grading of U.S. stamps and in 2006, Scott Publishing Co. also recognized that scale. During 2007 and 2008, the nation's leading auction companies began to feature an increasing number of third-party graded stamps in their sales, reflecting the growing adoption of an impartial standard for evaluation the condition of stamps.

This booklet will examine how U.S. stamps are graded, and present PSE's model for fairly and impartially evaluating single U.S. stamps and coil pairs.

### What is Grading?

Grading is the process of grouping stamps of a given Scott number and state, (e.g., Used, Mint OGnh, Mint OGph, etc...) with a similar fair market value into discrete categories. For example, a used Scott No. 1 worth in the \$175 to \$225 range would fall into the "Good" category, one that might sell in the \$300 to \$400 category would be "Fine," a \$550 to \$650 copy might be graded "Very Fine" and a \$4,000 example would likely qualify as "Superb." Because mint stamps are usually worth more than used stamps or because some lower grade *used* stamps are worth more than higher grade *mint* examples (e.g., Scott No. 39) or because of the large premium afforded to "never hinged" stamps, comparisons are only valid among stamps of the same state.

It is important to appreciate that a stamp can achieve the grade of "Fine 70" through two very different paths. The stamp can be completely sound (faultless) and have its design close to the perforations on one or two sides. Conversely, the stamp may have near perfect centering, yet have a fault such as a crease, a thin, or a small tear, and still have a net grade of "Fine."

What grading actually attempts to say is that *the two stamps have approximately equal market value*. Not to all collectors at all times, of course, but across the broad market there should be informed buyers

willing to pay a “Fine” price for either stamp within a reasonable length of time. There would of course be collectors who would not want a faulty stamp *at any price*. There are other collectors who are interested in a well-centered front, and would consider an XF-Superb centered stamp with a thin to be well worth a “Fine” price.

Despite the aura of precision that the use of numerals lends to grading, it is important to keep in mind that grading remains both an art and a science. Grades are essentially *ranges* of condition, and any given grade contains both “low end” examples that just made the grade, to “high end” examples that just missed the next higher grade.

In reality, there is a far greater difference between the *worst* XF90 and the *best* XF90 than there is between the *best* XF90 and the *worst* XF-Superb 95. This is easy to see. Take a Scott No. 231 for example (a two cent Columbian) and imagine arranging all copies that exist from worst to best. Then draw lines between the grade ranges separating the 90s from the 95s, the 95s from the 98s, etc... The two stamps on either side of the 90/95 line are essentially the same stamp! In fact, a number of stamps on either side of the 90/95 line are probably nearly indistinguishable. Yet, several hundred stamps may separate the worst XF90 from the best XF90. This is an important concept to understand.

Add to this the fact that two different people would almost certainly not arrange all these stamps in the same order and that even you yourself may not arrange these stamps in exactly the same order if you had to do it a second time. In essence, while grading is the best attempt to place a relative rank on a stamp’s condition and value, it is by no means absolute. Two experts may have legitimate differences of opinion, and those stamps near the dividing line between grades are particularly vulnerable to disagreement.

However, do not interpret the above to imply that grading is a futile endeavor. The vast majority of grades assigned to stamps would meet with agreement from impartial third parties, and independent, unbiased third-party grading remains far and away a collector’s best insurance they are receiving fair value for their money.

### **What Stamps are Not Graded?**

PSE generally does not grade multiples from sheet stamps or coil strips of three or more stamps. See the Grading of Blocks in Section 8 for more detail on grading of multiples. PSE also does not grade REPERFORATED, ALTERED, FAKE or COUNTERFEIT stamps. Items which fall into these categories include mid-19th century used stamps with removed cancels to simulate unused stamps, fake early coils, 19th century proofs which have been altered to resemble issued stamps, fake Scott No. 461s or Scott No. 519s and outright counterfeit stamps.

Finally, PSE does not grade DAMAGED stamps, i.e., ones which are grossly faulty or extensively repaired. Market values for these types of stamps are very small, if they even exist.

## THE GRADING SYSTEM

A number of diverse factors come into play when determining the grade of a stamp, and any system that compresses these factors into a single numerical (or adjectival) grade is necessarily complex. However, such challenges are not unique to stamps.

The grading of sportscards attempts to balance such diverse attributes as edges, corners, surfaces, centering and registration quality, all of which must be weighed to arrive at a single, numerical grade. Similarly, rare coins have attributes such as strike, surface preservation (marks, scratches), luster, and toning (eye appeal), all of which must be considered when determining a final grade. Difficult? Yes. Controversial? At times. Impossible? No.

The preliminary grade of a stamp has two components:

### **SOUNDNESS**

*(the presence or absence of faults)*

*and*

### **CENTERING**

*(the balance among the four margins)*

This concept of combining soundness and centering is the heart of the PSE grading system. For faultless stamps, the preliminary grade is the same as the centering grade. For stamps with faults, the PSE Grading System is an attempt to model the value that the marketplace assigns to stamps with faults.

PSE appreciates the fact that all collectors will not view faults equally. What to some might be a “fatal flaw” would to others be “no big deal,” at least insofar as their willingness to add the stamp to their collection.

It is a fact that a significant majority of pre-1890 U.S. stamps and a majority of 1890-1920 stamps have a fault of some sort. To shrug off that portion of the market with statements like “*faults decrease the value of a stamp*” and “*let the market determine how faulty stamps should be valued*” begs the question and leaves all but *fully* knowledgeable collectors at a severe disadvantage.

A third component, **Eye Appeal** (color, impression, freshness and cancellation) allows for some adjustment of the preliminary grade to arrive at the final grade.

For mint (unused) stamps, a notation is made of the gum condition. That notation follows the grade of the stamp, and is not usually a factor in determining the grade. It does however, play a major role in determining the fair market value of a stamp.

## 1. Determining Soundness

The soundness component evaluates the overall condition of the stamp. Faults, both major and minor, are the key determinants. The stamp is examined for creases, thins, color fading, toning spots/stains, tears and reperforation or other alterations. The severity of any or all faults is taken into consideration.

Because a stamp can be faultless, or have any number of faults in any combination, we have set up a chart that shows how a variety of faults affect the soundness rating. See the Expertizing Section for a detailed discussion of the various kinds of faults (both natural and man-made) which go into the determination of soundness.



## TABLE OF SOUNDNESS

<b>Faultless</b>	The stamp is completely sound, free of all faults.
<b>Extremely Minor Fault</b>	<p>Minor gum skips or short gumming on NH stamps</p> <p>Minor natural gum bend</p> <p>Tiny natural paper inclusion not visually distracting</p> <p>Guideline on perf tips of one side</p> <p>Natural surface wrinkle on the face of a rotary press stamp</p> <p>Vignette significantly shifted on bi-color stamps</p> <p>Corner perf tip crease</p> <p>Tiny, light toned spot</p> <p>One shorter perf, about half normal length</p>
<b>Very Minor Fault</b>	<p>Gum skips or short gumming (+/- 0.5 mm) on NH stamps</p> <p>Light natural gum wrinkle / gum crease</p> <p>Significant natural paper inclusion visible on front</p> <p>One light perf disc indent</p> <p>Guideline prominent on one or two sides</p> <p>Heavy natural surface wrinkle</p> <p>Corner perf crease</p> <p>Light toned area</p> <p>One shorter to short perf, less than half normal length</p> <p>Natural unpunched perforation</p> <p>Light gripper marks on coils</p> <p>Small light ink backstamp</p>
<b>Minor Fault</b>	<p>Natural gum wrinkle / gum crease</p> <p>Large natural paper inclusion</p> <p>Large gum skips or short gumming (&gt;1.0 mm) on NH stamps</p> <p>Very short or nibbed perf</p> <p>Small corner crease or light crease</p> <p>Ink backstamp</p> <p>Toning spot</p> <p>Tiny thin — about 1 mm</p> <p>Perf disc indent that clearly thins the paper</p> <p>Tiny tear — less than 0.5 mm</p> <p>Small pinhole</p> <p>Slight color fading</p> <p>Significant gripper marks on coils that thin the paper</p> <p>Two or three very minor faults</p>
<b>Fault</b>	<p>Heavy natural gum wrinkle / gum crease</p> <p>Small thin (1-4 mm) or two tiny thins</p> <p>Small (about 1 mm) tear</p> <p>Body crease</p> <p>Pulled perf (below the bottom of the holes)</p> <p>Larger pinhole</p> <p>Small stain</p> <p>Small repair (e.g., added perf, painted over surface scuff)</p> <p>Natural straight edge</p> <p>Two or three minor faults or combination of minor and very minor faults</p>

## TABLE OF SOUNDNESS CONTINUED

<b>Major Fault</b>	<p>Heavy crease or two creases          Large thin, two small thins or three tiny thins          Large tear or two small tears          Large stain          Repair (e.g., filled thin, filled pinhole, added corner)          Natural straight edge on two sides          Several faulty, clipped pulled or short perfs          Two or three faults, or combination of minor faults</p>
<b>Severe Fault</b>	<p>Severe crease or multiple creases          Deep thin or multiple thins          Multiple tears          Significant repair of a major fault or of more than one fault          Two or three major faults or combination of other faults</p>

### Ungradable Stamp Categories

<b><i>Damaged</i></b>	<p>A damaged stamp is one where there are multiple major or severe faults or where extensive repairs (such as rebacking) have been made or where a portion of the stamp is missing.</p>
<b><i>Altered</i></b>	<p>An altered stamp is typically one that has been reperfected to improve its centering or to eliminate a natural straight edge, or had a cancel removed to simulate a more valuable unused stamp, or had a cancel added to create a more expensive used stamp. An altered stamp does <i>not</i> change the Scott number.</p>
<b><i>Fake</i></b>	<p>A fake stamp starts with a genuine item, and is modified in an attempt to create a different, more valuable item. Examples would include fake coils or perforated stamps made from genuine imperforate stamps, and fake imperforates made by trimming the perfs from genuine stamps. Also fakes made by modifying the design of less expensive stamps, grilled stamps made by adding a fake grill, and stamps created from cheaper proofs. A fake stamp is made with the intention of changing the Scott number.</p>
<b><i>Counterfeit</i></b>	<p>A counterfeit stamp is an entire fabrication. It is privately printed or drawn to resemble a genuine item but lacks the characteristics of a genuine stamp. Counterfeit stamps have no Scott number.</p>



## A DISCUSSION OF RELATIVE SOUNDNESS

When PSE originally designed its grading system for U.S. stamps, the intention was to employ a single standard for evaluating all stamps regardless of age or issue save for leniency on margin sizes for the 1857 issues and certain narrow margined 1861 issues. Over the past eight years or so, PSE has graded over 160,000 stamps, and PSE graded stamps have traded extensively in the marketplace, both at auction and private treaty sales.

One aspect of grading that often arises, concerns extremely or very minor faults. Extremely minor faults such as a shorter perf, a tiny natural inclusion or a minor natural gum bend, are not mentioned in an opinion, but do lower the grade. Very minor faults such as a light perf disc indent or small gum skips on a never hinged stamp not only lower the grade, but also are mentioned in our opinions.

As our experience with grading has evolved, it turns out that such faults affect the appeal and marketability of an otherwise 98 or 100 grade stamp more than that of an otherwise faulty 30 or 50 grade stamp. A natural gum bend might well lower the value, and thus the grade of a nearly perfect stamp whereas that same gum bend would not materially affect the value and grade of a stamp that also had two thins and a pulled perf.

Similarly, PSE's view of such faults may differ depending whether the stamp is a modern stamp (such as a Famous Americans issue) or one from the mid-19th century (such as one of the 1869 issues). Most modern stamps are quite common and most survive in sheet quantities. There is no reason for a collector to have to settle for even a very slightly faulty modern stamp when completely sound examples can be had for little effort. Consequently, a collector will have little tolerance for even an extremely minor fault on a grade 95 or 98 stamp.

Conversely, 19th century stamps are now more than 100 years old, were produced with more primitive methods and have cycled through probably half a dozen collections on average, so collectors cannot expect even 98 or 100 grade stamps to be pristine perfect.

Accordingly, PSE may be a little tougher on extremely minor faults or very minor faults for a modern stamp than for a 19th century stamp. What PSE would "call" on a modern issue might simply be factored into the grade on an earlier issue and not be mentioned on the certificate.

## 2. Determining Centering

A stamp whose design is well centered within four nearly equal margins is aesthetically more pleasing than one that is “off” on one or two sides. Because of this, stamps with perfect, or near perfect centering have traditionally sold for more money than those that are visibly off center.



*Cancellation issues aside, there should be little disagreement as to which stamp is preferable.*

Since the perforation process occurs after printing, a very slightly misaligned sheet may result in the perforations being closer to the design on one or two sides. Grading the centering of a stamp is complicated by the fact that improving production methods over the past century and a half have resulted in more accurate and precise perforating techniques. Consequently, what may be above average centering for an early issue may be only average or even below average for a modern issue.

Traditional discussions of centering have usually broken stamps into three categories; poorly centered issues (typically 19th century), median-centered issues (early 20th century) and well-centered issues (later 20th century). While this approach is certainly logical and reflective of technological progress, it is flawed in the sense that what may be “Very Fine” for one issue is only “Fine” for another.

The expertise needed to know which issues are typically poorly centered is considerable, and confusion often results on the part of the novice, and even the intermediate buyer. PSE therefore strives to apply only one centering standard for all U.S. stamps. While that is a worthy goal, the plate layouts of the earliest perforated stamps make this absolute standard impractical.

The first perforated issues of 1857 to 1861 (Scott Nos. 18-39), and their corresponding reprints of 1875 (Scott #40–47) were originally designed as imperforates, and the physical space between the stamps on the plate was sometimes not even as wide as the diameter of the perforation holes. As a result, the perforation holes sometimes touch the design even on well-centered examples.

Aside from the first perforated issues of 1857-1861, PSE attempts to evaluate most of the remaining U.S. stamps using a single, consistent criterion. In this way, the standard can remain steady, and the listed market values can adjust appropriately.

The reasoning behind this can perhaps be more easily understood using a non-philatelic example. Assume for example, a rare antique car is being offered—let's say a 1911 Buick. All the known 1911 Buicks (including this car) are in terrible condition. But, this particular one is the least beat up, and the best one known. Should the car be described as being in “Excellent” or “Near Mint” condition? Of course not. Simply because it is nice for a 1911 Buick does not change its actual condition. It might accurately be described as “only fair, finest known.” Those who want an example of this car will therefore bid accordingly, and the car may realize a handsome price. Even if 1911 Buicks are rare, its rarity *does not affect its grade or condition*.

Using a philatelic example, the PSE centering standard for Scott No. 596, a rare and typically poorly centered stamp is consequently the same as that for Scott No. 595, a stamp that comes in the full range of centering. In this way, superb centering is just that, and there is no such thing as a Scott No. 596, “Superb” for issue. The inconsistency and confusion resulting from a “relative” scale is obvious. According to the PSE centering standard, the best-centered Scott No. 596 in existence is only Fine, but the market retail price for this centering can still exceed \$100,000.

We do note however, that some issues beginning in the mid 1950s were laid out with unequal vertical and horizontal margin sizes. PSE attempts to take that fact into consideration when grading these issues.



*A block from the first perforated issue, showing the very narrow vertical space between the stamps.*

## THE CENTERING SCALE

### Perforated Stamps: 1861 and Later Issues

#### Gem

A gem centered stamp will have four visually equal size margins and the margins will be at least slightly larger than the average margin size for the issue. Collectible U.S. stamps have widely varying average margin sizes, ranging from 0.5mm (Scott No. 330) to 1.5mm (Scott No. 909). Even after a careful examination, it will be difficult or impossible to visually pick a margin smaller or larger than the other three. It will be a “boxed” stamp.

The plate layouts for many stamps are such that the vertical and horizontal spaces between designs are not equal. In such cases therefore, the lines of vertical or horizontal perforations will have to be shifted from their “normal” positions to yield a gem centered stamp.

#### Superb

If a stamp is visually perfectly centered, but the margins are of only average or very slightly below average size, the centering grade will be lowered to Superb. Otherwise, Superb centering will be nearly perfectly centered. One margin may be very slightly larger or smaller than the other three, or a line of perforations may be slightly out of parallel with the design, or equal top and bottom margins may differ a bit from equal left and right margins. At first glance the stamp may look to be “boxed” as it can be difficult to identify differences of 0.05mm on small margin stamps and 0.10 or even 0.15mm differences on large margin stamps.

#### XF-Superb

A stamp that is nearly perfectly centered, but with slightly smaller than average size margins, the centering grade for otherwise Superb centering is lowered to XF-Superb. For stamps with average or above average margins, regular XF-Superb centering may be just slightly off in one or two directions. Visual examination will indicate that one or two margins differ very slightly from the others. More allowance is afforded for vertical imbalance than horizontal imbalance.

#### Extremely Fine

Extremely fine centering will be off in one or two directions, but only slightly more than with XF-Superb centering. Still unquestionably premium centering, but easily seen to be a bit out of balance.

#### VF-XF

A Very Fine to Extremely Fine stamp will appear slightly off center in one or two directions at first glance, but will unquestionably be better centered than most examples. The margins will be full with room to spare.

#### Very Fine

A Very Fine stamp will be clearly off center on one or two sides, but the framelines will not be close to the edge on any side. All four margins will be unquestionably full, and well clear of the perforations.

#### Fine-Very Fine

Visually, with the unaided eye, the perforation holes are easily seen to be clear of the design, but one or two margins will be narrow. For stamps with rectangular frame lines like the large or small Banknote stamps, the first Bureau issues or the Washington-Franklin stamps, the minimum margin should be approximately 0.4mm. For small margin stamps such as the Jamestown issues or later rotary press regular issues, the minimum margin may be a bit smaller.

#### Fine

Fine centering is when the perforation holes on one or two sides come very close to the design, but some white space remains visible to the unaided eye. For white space to be clearly visible without magnification, it must be at least 0.2mm wide. With 10X magnification, one can discern margins as small as 0.1mm, but to the unaided eye a 0.1mm margin will appear to have the perforation holes touching the frameline of the design.

#### Very Good

The perforations actually touch, appear to touch or very slightly cut into the frameline of the design. By measurement, the minimum margin ranges from about 0.1mm to -0.1mm.

#### Good

The perforations cut well into the design, and some portion of the design is lost. By measurement, the perforation holes cut at least 0.2mm into the frameline or the design.

**Very Poorly Centered Stamps** — Stamps with exceptionally poor centering, where a significant portion of the design is lost and the perforations cut deeply into the stamp cross into the “freaks and oddities” area, and may actually begin to enjoy increased demand and value from collectors who value such anomalies.

## THE CENTERING SCALE CONTINUED

### Imperforate Issues

There are two different kinds of imperforate issues. First, there are the 1847-1856 classic imperforates, Scott Nos. 1-17, and then there are all the early 20th century imperforates ranging from Scott No. 314 up through the Farley imperforate Scott No. 771.

The margins for all the imperforates can exist in a huge range of sizes and can be cut parallel to the design or on a very significant slant. If the margin sizes of any stamp differ greatly, or are cut on a slant, PSE grades the centering according to what the stamp would look like if it were cut (blocked off) in such a way as to maximize its centering appearance. For example, assume that the left margin is triple that of the right. If it could be cut down to equal the right margin, and such a move would then yield a centering grade of 90, then PSE will assign a centering grade of 90.

Generally, collectors prefer imperforate stamps to be rectangular. Accordingly, if one or more margins have a significant slant, then PSE will block off part of the margin or margins to optimize the centering, and assign a grade based on that “idealized” appearance.

Having said that the centering grade of any imperforate is based upon an optimized appearance, the centering of a Scott No. 11 cannot be graded in the same way as for a Scott No. 371. For centering standards for the 1847-1856 classic imperforates, readers are referred to the photographs in the center section of this guide. For these stamps, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Grading the centering of the early 20th century imperforates is much like that for their perforated counterparts, but the margin sizes must be larger for all centering grades of 70 and higher.

Many 20th century imperforate stamps have been cut from multiples so that they have very large margins. PSE has adopted the following centering standards for these extremely large, “hand-made” stamps:

#### Centering Grade

#### Description

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| <b>100J</b> | Must show part of the design on all eight surrounding stamps, or part of the design of five surrounding stamps with the fourth margin having a Plate number.         |
| <b>100</b>  | Margins cut to the frameline of, but not into the surrounding stamps. A fourth margin could be from a sheet edge if at least equal in size to the other three sides. |

In the past, PSE has given 98J centering grades to stamps which show parts of the design of five surrounding stamps, with the fourth margin being from a sheet edge at least equal in size to the other margins. PSE has also given that grade to corner margin singles with parts of the design of the three adjacent stamps showing.

Since such stamps could easily be cut down to make ordinary 100 centering, they will now be graded 100. There will no longer be a 98J centering grade for these imperforate stamps.

- 98** All four margins clearly larger than one-half the space between the stamps on the sheet.
- 95** All four margins roughly equal to one-half the space between the stamps on the sheet. PSE does not assign a 95J centering grade for 20th century imperforates.
- 90** All four margins generous, but slightly smaller than one-half the space between the stamps on a sheet. PSE does not assign a 90J centering grade for these imperforates.

For photographs of actual stamps, the reader is again referred to the photographic guide in the center of this booklet.

## **First Perforated Issue 1857-1861 and the 1875 Reprints**

Issued in 1857, the first U.S. perforated stamps were printed from the same plates as the previous 1851 imperforate issue. The stamps were arranged so closely on some of these plates that there was really no room for a row of perforations between them. Particularly affected by this problem are Scott Nos. 19-23, 25, 27-29, 31-34 and 36. Scott Nos. 18, 24, 26, 30, 30A, 35, 36b and 37-39 were produced from new plates, which increased the spacing somewhat. Even these however, still had the designs rather closely spaced and even well centered stamps still have miniscule margins.

The reprints for four of the denominations of the 1857 issue stamps were made from the same plates as the regular stamps and new plates were prepared for the other four denominations. Except for the new 1¢ plate (Scott No. 40) the margins for all of these reprints are quite small.

Photographs illustrating how PSE grades the centering of these issues may be found in the center section that follows.



## Coil Singles, Pairs and Line Pairs

Starting in 1908, the United States began to issue stamps in coil rolls. These first, experimental coils were made from the 1902-1903 regular issues and consisted of 1¢, 2¢ and 5¢ values perforated 12 horizontally and 1¢ and 2¢ values perforated 12 vertically. These early coils generally did not come well centered. Even though scarce to rare, PSE does not grade these any differently than later, more common coils.

The early, experimental coils were followed from 1908 to 1922 by various 1¢, 2¢, 3¢, 4¢, 5¢ and 10¢ Washington-Franklin coils perforated 12, 8.5 or 10. Subsequently, the lower values of the 1922-1925 regular issues, the 1938 Presidential and the 1954 Liberty regular issues were issued in coil form. Additionally, in the early period, a few imperforate coils were issued and several firms issued privately-perforated coils. Coil rolls continue to be in widespread use today.

Grading the centering of the government coil single stamps at grades of Fine and below is basically the same as for fully perforated sheet stamps. Close to touching on one side or two adjacent sides is Fine. On the other hand, at the higher grades, some differences exist. While for a perforated sheet stamp, Gem centering requires four larger than normal, visually equal margins, a coil single requires only that the two perforated margins, and the two imperforate margins be larger than normal and visually equal. It is not required that the perforated margins and the imperforate margins be equal to each other.

Invariably, the perforated margins on Gem centered coils will be smaller than the imperforate margins. A number of example coil singles in all centering grades are illustrated in the photo section that follows.

Grading the centering of coil pairs and line pairs introduces additional considerations. There are three factors: the size and balance of the perforated side (or end) margins, the centering of the perforations in the middle gap, and finally the size and balance of the two imperforate margins.

For the centering grades of Very Fine and below, PSE uses similar criteria for coil pairs as for single sheet stamps or coil singles. Thus, if the design is very close to touching, the centering grade for most coil pairs is Fine. Some rotary press coils however, have small gaps between the designs so their perforated margins always will be small. At XF and above, the criteria for coil pairs are different.

Gem centering requires equal (and larger than normal) perforated side (or end) margins, essentially perfect centering of the perforations in the middle gap, and equal (and larger than normal) imperforate margins. Grading between Fine and Gem requires a subjective judgment regarding the relative importance of the three coil pair centering factors. PSE has graded thousands of coil pairs, and has an extensive photo reference collection to insure consistency.

The reader is again referred to the photo plate section that follows for example coil pairs and line pairs in the various centering grades.



# CENTERING STANDARDS

## Imperforates 1847-1856 Scott Nos. 1-17

Superb 98



XF - Sup 95



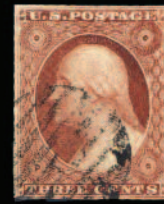
XF 90



VF - XF 85



VF 80



### 3. Combining Soundness and Centering

After having evaluated the two major components of a stamp, (soundness and centering) the preliminary grade of the stamp may then be established. These two factors interact with each other to yield the following grades:

SOUNDNESS	CENTERING										
		Gem	Sup	XF-Sup	XF	VF-XF	VF	F-VF	F	VG	Avg
	Faultless	100	98	95	90	85	80	75	70	50	30
	Extremely Minor Fault*	95	95	90	85	80	75	70	60	40	30
	Very Minor Fault	90	90	90	85	80	75	70	60	40	30
	Minor Fault	85	85	80	75	70	60	50	40	30	20
	Fault	75	75	70	60	50	50	40	30	20	10
	Major Fault	70	70	60	50	40	30	30	20	10	10
	Severe Fault	60	50	40	30	30	20	20	10	10	5
	Ungradable	PSE does not grade Damaged, Altered, Fake or Counterfeit Items.									

\*The fault will not be mentioned in the opinion.

Grades in the shaded area may be increased one level if the faults are all non-visual.

<b>100</b> Gem	<b>60</b> Very Good-Fine (VG-F)
<b>98</b> Superb (Sup)	<b>50</b> Very Good (VG)
<b>95</b> Extremely Fine-Superb (XF-Sup)	<b>40</b> Good-Very Good (G-VG)
<b>90</b> Extremely Fine (XF)	<b>30</b> Good (G)
<b>85</b> Very Fine-Exely Fine (VF-XF)	<b>20</b> Fair-Good (FR-G)
<b>80</b> Very Fine (VF)	<b>10</b> Fair (FR)
<b>75</b> Fine-Very Fine (F-VF)	<b>5</b> Poor (PO)
<b>70</b> Fine (F)	

After the preliminary grade has been determined, we can now take up the issue of Eye Appeal, which can affect both mint and used stamps, though in slightly different ways.

## 4. Eye Appeal

Even though soundness and centering are the primary components of a stamp's grade, there are several other factors that must be considered such as the color, size, impression and overall "freshness" of the stamp as well as the cancellation on a used stamp. These factors have a definite effect on the market value and hence, the grade of a stamp.

The eye appeal of a used stamp deals primarily with the cancellation. While some collectors specialize in odd, unusual or fancy cancellations, the majority of collectors prefer a lightly cancelled stamp with as much of the original design showing as possible. A heavy, dark cancellation that obliterates the design of the stamp is certainly less desirable than a light cancel that affects only a small portion of the stamp.

The final grade of a used stamp may be increased up to 15 points for an extremely light, or pleasing cancellation with a fresh overall look. Used stamps with an obliterating cancellation and a tired look may be reduced in grade up to 25 points and with a pen cancel up to 35 points, though the typical adjustment is less.

The eye appeal of an unused stamp deals with its color, size, freshness and impression. The final grade may be adjusted either up or down based on the visual impact these factors have on the stamp. Particularly impressive color, size, freshness or impression can add up to 10 points to the grade, while unusually dull, small or poorly impressed stamps can lose up to 15 points. The following tables summarize these eye appeal adjustments.

### EYE APPEAL ADJUSTMENT – Used Stamps

Adjectival	Description	Adjustment
Light	Neat, face-free ordinary cancel or clear, well-placed premium cancel.	Up to +10 points
Neat/Clean	Average cancel.	None
Heavy	Heavy cancel.	Up to -10 points
Very Heavy	Very heavy cancel—much of design obscured	-10 to -15 points
Obliterated	Design obscured by cancel	-15 to -20 points
Pen Cancel	Stamp canceled by lines from an ink pen	Up to -30 pts
Color, Size Impression	Better or worse than usual color, impression, size and/or freshness.	Up to +/-5 points

### EYE APPEAL ADJUSTMENT – Mint Stamps

Color, Size Impression	Better or worse than usual color, impression, size and/or freshness.	Up to +10 or -15 points
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After the adjustment for eye appeal, the stamp has its final grade.

## Eye Appeal - Cancellations



Light Cancel up to +10



Neat/Clean Cancel No Effect



Heavy Cancel up to -10



Very Heavy Cancel -10 to -15



Obliterated -15 to -20



Pen Cancel Up to -30

## 5. Gum Condition

An unused stamp is evaluated for the existence or preservation of the gum on the reverse side. The widespread custom of hinging stamps placed into albums has taken a considerable toll on the population of post office fresh, never hinged stamps, and a substantial portion of extant stamps bear some “scars” of this practice. Decades of handling or environmental hazards have also affected the gum condition of many stamps and some 19th and early 20th century stamps now have only a fraction or none of their original gum intact. The condition of the gum will appear as a modifier, after the final grade.

Note that minor flaws such as natural gum skips, bends or creases are accounted for in the overall condition or soundness of the stamp. The gum condition modifier refers to the presence or absence of the gum itself and whether or not the stamp has ever been regummed or hinged.

Adjectival	Description	Abbreviation
O.G. Never Hinged	Original gum, never hinged	OGnh
O.G. Previously Hinged	Original gum, previously hinged	OGph
O.G. Hinged	Original gum, hinged*	OGh
Disturbed O.G.	Disturbed original gum	DOG
Part O.G.	Some of the original gum remains	POG
No Gum	Essentially none of the original gum remains	NG
Regummed	The stamp has had new gum applied	RG
No Gum As Issued	The stamp was originally issued without gum	NGAI

\* This designation is given if there is a hinge remnant or the gum has been heavily affected by a hinge removal.



OGnh

OGph

OGh



## 6. Jumbo Stamp Designations

Stamps that exhibit much larger than normal sized margins for the issue are referred to as “jumbos” and PSE makes an assessment to determine whether the stamp merits a “J” (Jumbo) suffix after the grade. Stamps with unusually large margins for the issue are often valued well in excess of normal margin copies, so some recognition of that state is integral to the grading process. PSE recognizes only “J” margins at grades of F70 or higher.

To receive a jumbo designation from PSE, the average margin size for the stamp must be at least 0.2mm more than the average of all stamps with the same Scott number. For normally small margined stamps, the 0.2mm figure is a big difference on a percentage basis. For example, the normal average margin on a Scott No. 588 is about 0.63mm, so a 0.2mm larger measurement is 32% bigger. For a large margin stamp such as a Scott No. 617, the 0.2mm larger measurement would be only about 17% bigger.

For modern stamps which are “stroke” perforated, the distances between the lines of perforation holes are always the same, so these stamps (such as Scott Nos. RW54 through RW74) can never be awarded a jumbo designation.

Shown below and on the next page are several stamps that PSE has awarded a jumbo designation.



*Scott No. 1 100J*



*Scott No. 15 95J*



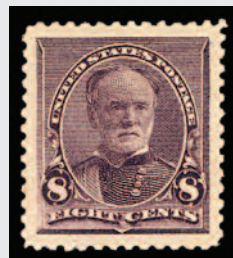
*Scott No. 78 98J*



*Scott No. 117 95J*



*Scott No. 215 95J*



*Scott No. 225 98J*



*Scott No. 230 95J*



*Scott No. 295 90J*



*Scott No. 390 90J*



*Scott No. 399 80J*



*Scott No. 518 85J*



*Scott No. C15 95J*



*Scott No. E3 98J*

A stamp whose centering is awarded a jumbo designation and has a fault is downgraded according to the SOUNDNESS/CENTERING grid just as with normal margin stamps. Thus, for example, a 95J centered stamp with a Very Minor Fault is assigned a grade of 90J or a 98J centered stamp with a Minor Fault is assigned a grade of 85J.

Below 70 we do not use the jumbo designation. Thus, for example, there is no such thing at PSE as 50J centering, and a 90J centered stamp with a major fault is assigned a grade of 50, or maybe 60 but not 50J.

Below are images of six beautifully centered Scott No. 210 stamps with the centering grades that PSE would assign to them. The differences between the stamps are in margin size. The stamp at the top left has Gem 100 Jumbo centering. Its margins are nearly two and a half times the size of the XF 90 centered stamp at the bottom right.

These images show that just as margins that are extra large will result in a jumbo designation, smaller than normal margins will result in an otherwise very high centering grade to be lowered. Slightly larger than normal margins which fall short of the threshold for a jumbo designation can likewise sometimes result in a small boost in the centering grade, particularly if the stamp is near the threshold of the next higher grade. PSE has employed this size adjustment for a number of years.



*Centering grades for Scott No. 210s with varying margin sizes*



## 7. Revenue Stamp Grading

There are many differences between revenue stamps and postage stamps but all are a part of our hobby. Since PSE is often asked to expertise these stamps it follows that PSE should also grade these items.

The major differences in grading Revenue stamps vs. Postage stamps can be summed up thus:

1. **Basic production differences**
2. **Cancels**

Basic production differences refer to the standard format of issue for some revenues and their methods of perforation. Some stamps were issued in sheets as were postage stamps while others were only issued in smaller units where every stamp will have at least one straight edge.

In PSE's normal grading system, a straight edge affects a stamp's grade as a full fault (based on collecting preference and the market value difference when compared to a fully perforated example). This will still apply to those revenue stamps issued in sheet form where most examples exist with perforations or rouletting on all four sides.

In certain cases such as the high face value Stock Transfer stamps, where each stamp has a serial number, it can be determined which edges should lack perforations. As there can be no fully perforated examples, the straight edges therefore do not affect the centering grade adversely.

Some revenue stamps used rouletting to facilitate separation. Examples here would be Narcotic Tax stamps or the Documentary battle-ship stamps. When dealing with these issues they often visually appear very similar to straight edges and therefore the deduction for a straight edge may be reduced based on eye appeal. Some values here also do not exist without a natural straight edge and would be treated as mentioned above.

Cancels vary widely on Revenue stamps and so here we will look to the proper method of cancellation for guidance.

Manuscript cancellation, destruction or defacement of these issues was standard. For this reason, where manuscript cancels are proper, there is no eye appeal grade reduction as there would be with a postage issue. Keeping with this line of thought then, a handstamp cancel merits + 5 points eye appeal and printed cancels get + 10 points.

Perforated initials are a very visual method of cancellation and as such will lower the grade as a fault would. This may be mitigated by an eye appeal adjustment up to + 15 points when only a tiny portion of the stamp is affected.

Cut cancels have a wide variation from almost invisible and internal to nearly bisecting the stamp. This is more subjective in eye appeal and more intertwined with soundness than other cancels. Based on how cut cancels affect the soundness of the stamp then deductions may range from a minor fault to a severe fault. Neat cut cancels that look like hand stamps may receive up to + 10 points eye appeal.

Some issues were left uncanceled. An example here might include Playing Card stamps. In this case an example with full gum is treated as unused and without gum is treated as used.

Punch cancels were also used for some stamps. This is the most damaging of the cancellation methods and as such will be treated as a severe fault in regards to the grade.

## 8. Grading of Blocks

Grading blocks of four and plate blocks combines the principles of grading single stamps and coil pairs. For the simplicity of discussion, “block of four”, “plate block” and “booklet pane” are referred to as a “block” unless specific attributes are being discussed as the principles for grading will be the same. Blocks submitted for grading must be a block of four, a plate block or a booklet pane as defined by the Scott catalog description. Each block submitted for grading will be evaluated as a single unit. This means that individual stamps within the block may be better or worse than the overall grade of the block.



*A center line Block of 4 of Scott No. 573 grading XF-Superb 95*

An initial centering grade will be determined by evaluating the outer margins of the block of stamps as with the grading of single stamps. This grade can then be modified up or down as dictated by the alignment of the perforations within the block as with the grading of coil pairs. Full top margin plate blocks will receive + 5 points to the grade as this position is generally the most attractive and desirable plate position.

Faults on blocks will be evaluated as they would be for single stamps regarding how it affects the market value and will affect the block grade accordingly. The absence of selvage on a booklet pane will affect the grade just as a straight edge would on a single stamp.

The final grade will combine the centering, soundness and eye appeal to arrive at a single grade for the block.

TABLE OF FINAL GRADES		
Numerical	Description	Abbreviation
100	Gem	Gem
98	Superb	Superb
95	Extremely Fine - Superb	XF-Sup
90	Extremely Fine	XF
85	Very Fine - Extremely Fine	VF-XF
80	Very Fine	VF
75	Fine - Very Fine	F-VF
70	Fine	F
60	Very Good - Fine	VG-F
50	Very Good	VG
40	Good - Very Good	G-VG
30	Good	G
20	Fair - Good	FR-G
10	Fair	FR
5	Poor	PO

GUM MODIFIERS & OTHER TERMS	
Modifier	Description
OGnh	Original gum, never hinged
OGph	Original gum, previously hinged
OGh	Original Gum, hinged
DOG	Disturbed original gum
POG	Partial original gum
NG	No original gum
RG	Regummed
NGAI	No gum (as originally issued)
J	Jumbo - unusually large margins
Mint	Unused or new stamp - never cancelled
Used	A used stamp - cancelled for postage or use

## EXPERTIZING U.S. STAMPS

Expertizing United States postage stamps is a multi-faceted undertaking requiring consideration of, and judgments about several different and sometimes diverse factors. A complete expertizing job consists of the following determinations, listed in order of importance:

1. Identifying the correct Scott Catalog number (or a fake if that is the case).
2. Is the stamp genuinely unused, or genuinely used? Cancellations (particularly for classic 19th century stamps) have occasionally been removed, or where used examples are more valuable, fake (and non-contemporary) cancellations have been added.
3. If unused, is the gum original? If so, is it never hinged?
4. If the stamp is genuine, has it been reperforated? Many scarcer stamps and coils have been “created” by adding fake perforations so the ability to correctly identify genuine perforations takes on added importance.
5. Identify faults that arise after issue. These include faults such as tears, creases, pinholes etc... as well as repairs of the same.
6. Identify faults that arise during production, such as natural gum skips, bends and creases, perf disc indents, paper inclusions and the like.

Anyone who has perused the Scott Specialized Catalog knows that for certain stamps such as Scott Nos. 1, 7 or 24, expertizing can require specialized knowledge of details that go above and beyond simple identification of the Scott number. Even correctly differentiating between Scott Nos. 10 and 11 can sometimes require detailed knowledge of the printing plates, since the definition of a Scott No. 10 is that it comes from Plate 0, 1 Early, 1 Intermediate, 2 Early or 5 Early. This cannot always be determined simply by the color shade of the stamp since the difference between certain Scott No.10 orange browns and certain Scott No.11 brownish carmines can be very slight, particularly after more than 150 years of environmental change.

Expecting any one individual to be able to proficiently expertize *all* aspects of *all* U.S. stamps is neither realistic nor possible. Being an expert requires a broad, even if incomplete knowledge that comes from a study of the literature as well as years of handling and studying genuine stamps. Additionally, it requires the ability to recognize one's limitations, to access the right expert sources, to ask them the right questions and finally to synthesize all inputs into a sound final opinion.

Qualified experts can sometimes disagree, and a crucial part of expertizing involves weighing the various arguments and arriving at a consensus opinion based on each expert's particular strengths and specialties.


Let us consider, in turn, each of the six determinations noted above.

## 1. Identifying the Correct Scott Number

Identifying a stamp's correct Scott number is typically a very straightforward task. There are, however, many important situations where expert knowledge is required and informed opinions can differ.

First and foremost, a fake or counterfeit stamp must be differentiated from the real thing. Some sources of fakes include:

- a. Fake 19th century stamps made from proofs, with fake perfs and fake gum. An example would be making a fake Scott No. 127 from a Scott No. 116P3.
- b. Fake grills applied to ungrilled stamps, e.g., making a fake Scott No. 141 from a Scott No. 152.
- c. Fake coils or fake sheet stamps made by perforating cheap imperforate stamps, e.g., making a fake Scott No. 349 coil pair from a Scott No. 344 vertical pair, or making a fake Scott No. 519 from a Scott No. 344.
- d. Fake coil stamps made by trimming perforations from cheaper sheet stamps, e.g., making a fake Scott No. 445 coil pair from a Scott No. 426 horizontal pair.
- e. Fake sheet stamps made by adding fake perforations to cheaper coil stamps, e.g., making a fake Scott No. 591 from a Scott No. 603 or making a fake Scott No. 578 from a Scott No. 597.
- f. Fake imperforate stamps made by trimming the perfs from cheap perforated stamps, e.g., making a fake Scott No. 315 from a Scott No. 304, or making a fake Scott No. 534B from a Scott No. 528B.
- g. Fake 1869 reissues made by pressing the grill from regular issue 1869 stamps, e.g., making a fake used Scott No. 125 from a used Scott No. 114.
- h. Fake Kansas-Nebraska overprint stamps made by adding an overprint to a cheaper regular issue stamp, e.g., making a fake Scott No. 679 by adding an overprint to a Scott No. 642.
- i. Fakes made by scraping away, or painting in parts of the design on another stamp, e.g., making a fake Scott No. 539 by scraping away parts of a Scott No. 540, or making a fake Scott No. 16 by painting in a recut line on a Scott No. 14.



There are very few individuals who have the knowledge of, and experience with grills, perforations, overprints etc... and have, in addition, the ability to consider all of the possibilities and logically come up with the correct Scott number calls.

Apart from fakes, sometimes getting the correct Scott number involves knowledge and judgment about various papers, color shades, the presence or absence of a watermark, or some combination of these factors. Examples of such situations include:

- a. Distinguishing Special Printings from Regular Issues, e.g., is it a Scott No. 199 or a 189, or is it a Scott No. PR40 or a PR16?
- b. Separating Scott No. 491s from 454s, or Scott No. 456s from 493s or Scott No. J59s from J52a's.
- c. Separating the blue paper issue Scott Nos. 357 to 366 from the regular issue Scott Nos. 331 to 340 on experimental papers or papers that have been altered.
- d. Differentiating stamps by shade when the Scott Catalog assigns different numbers, e.g., Scott No. 67 from 67a, Scott No. 78 from 78a, or Scott No. 634b from 634.
- e. Separating single line watermark and unwatermarked perf 10 Washington-Franklins in those cases where the watermark may be only at the very edge of the stamp or may be weak or hard to find, as on a yellow stamp. PSE employs a Video Spectral Comparator (VSC) machine which will often bring out a watermark that does not show clearly when the stamp is immersed in watermark fluid.

In all these identification instances, having available reference copies of stamps known to be genuine will be extremely helpful.

## 2. Unused or Used

Nothing is more difficult to expertize than a group of fifteen or twenty supposedly unused 19th century classic stamps, none of which are particularly fresh and most all of which are regummed or have no gum and various faults.

Sometimes a removed pen cancel can still be seen with the unaided eye, or with the use of ultraviolet light. In other cases, the Video Spectral Comparator making use of a variety of light frequencies, will bring out a removed pen or handstamp cancel as shown in the example scans below:



*A Scott No. 188 as seen with the unaided eye (left) and through the VSC (right).*

If there is no clearly removed cancel, but the stamp is not fresh, lacks patina and has some soiling specks, it will likely receive a “used” call from Professional Stamp Experts. If, on the other hand, the stamp is fresh, has good patina, shows no sign of a cancel under UV light or under the VSC, and has no soiling spots, it may well get an “unused” call.

If the Scott Catalog values for an unused, no gum stamp and a used stamp are \$9,500 and \$1,050, respectively (as in the case of a Scott No. 67) deciding on an unused call is neither easy nor trivial. If there is gum, which may or may not be original, then the expertizing decision can become even tougher.

Unfortunately, as with fake stamps, many of the certificates for stamps submitted as unused that are returned with used, removed cancel calls are discarded, and the stamps are recirculated. While this practice certainly contributes to an ongoing stream of business for expertizers, it is regrettable that these usually will be sold at levels far in excess of their true value and end up in collections once again.

On the other side of the unused / used line, an expertizing group must be cautious when considering any supposedly used stamp if the used value exceeds the unused value. As an example, PSE receives many supposedly used Scott No. 39s. Almost all of these are seriously faulty and the cancels are deemed to be fake. Fakers are even known to have removed a pen cancel from an early classic stamp and added a fake fancy handstamp cancel.

In addition, one must be careful about certain late 19th century and early 20th century stamps with neat, light cancels. This is particularly true when there is a substantial premium for used examples compared to an unused, no gum example in the same grade. Certain individuals have obtained old, genuine cancelling devices or have had replicas made, and have used them to “cancel” unused, no gum coil pairs and line pairs, and other items.

Certain 20th century stamps are rare in legitimate, used condition. One must be especially cautious about used Scott No. 315s, 461s, 519s, 539s and the like. For example, one sees lots of trimmed, used Scott No. 304s masquerading as used 315s. One even occasionally sees genuine Scott No. 519s or 539s with added cancels. PSE once examined a genuine Scott No. 539 block of four with a fake cancel. It might seem surprising that someone would take an *already* valuable unused stamp or block and risk adding a fake cancel to make it appear even *more* valuable, but if the apparent premium is sufficient there are some who will do it. When in doubt, follow the money.

### 3. Gum and Hinging Status

PSE's opinions regarding gum will state one of the following seven conditions:

- Original gum, never hinged
- Original gum, previously hinged
- Original gum, hinged
- Disturbed original gum (may be preceded by the modifier “slightly”)
- Part original gum (may be preceded by “large,” “small” or “trace”)
- Regummed
- No gum (or No gum as issued)



Determination as to whether the gum is original or not requires a familiarity with the typical characteristics of original gum on different issues. Complicating the task, of course, is the unsurprising fact that the appearance (color, texture, thickness etc...) of original gum may vary considerably from issue to issue and even may vary on a single issue. Add to this the environmental effects of storage over many decades, and you have what may be a complex and difficult determination.

Some examples of how original gum characteristics can vary from issue to issue will illustrate the differences that exist. Original gum on the 1875 reissues of the 1861-66 issues and the 1869 pictorials has a characteristic yellowish-brown crackly appearance. The Scott Catalog states "white crackly." While it may have been white in 1875, it generally has a yellowish brown or bronze cast today. Original gum on the Columbian issues is totally different, often having a texture such that the surface is broken by what appear to have been tiny air bubbles. Original Pan American gum will invariably show one or more horizontal and/or vertical rows of light circular dots the size of perforation holes. Absent any sign of these perf dots, the regum caution flag should go up. These rows of perf dots are also seen on many other stamps from the 1894-1908 period.

If the gum on a stamp (pre-1890 in particular) is badly disturbed, it may be difficult to impossible to determine whether or not it is original. One should never assume that gum with a hinge mark or remnant indicates original gum. The regum practitioners sometimes add hinge marks or remnants hoping to fool the buyer who believes all regum jobs are smooth and complete.

To our knowledge, there are no books or references which would enable one to learn enough about gum to be able to expertize with any consistency. Experience is essential, and there is no substitute for observing and studying thousands of stamps. The best that any expertizing committee can do is to have at least three such experienced individuals who will attempt to reach a consensus when a difficult call is required.

While regummed stamps present a variety of appearances, the single most common characteristic is a flat, dull appearance to the gum. If you compare a regummed and an original gum Washington-Franklin stamp side by side under a good light, you will see that the regummed stamp typically has a duller, more lifeless appearance.

Another technique that collectors may employ to protect themselves against certain regum jobs is to examine the perf holes and perf tips of suspect stamps with a 10X or higher glass under a strong light source. Some regummers often leave gum residue on the paper fibers extending from the perf tips and around the hole edges. Original gum is always applied *before* perforation so the holes and perf tips will not have adhering gum.

During the mid 20th century, the average premium for never hinged stamps vis-a-vis their hinged counterparts was in the 10% to 25% range. Beginning around 1975, that premium began to climb steadily. By the late 1990s, never hinged high grade stamps were selling at premiums from two times to five times the prices for hinged copies. Recently, those premiums for high grade stamps have doubled again, and now are typically three to ten times as much. For extremely high grade, inexpensive stamps, even those figures can be low, with never hinged examples bringing up to 100 times the price of a hinged copy.

The stamp market's focus on quality and never hinged gum has increased the pressure on the expertizing services to make the correct call regarding gum condition. What may have been a relatively minor decision forty years ago has now taken on enormous importance. With such a financial incentive, one must be aware that the gum mechanics have been working overtime to disguise previous hinge marks. They also will be constantly improving and refining their techniques, as the payoff for success continues to widen.

## 4. Reperforation

Stamp doctors have been reperforating stamps for over 100 years and the practice shows no signs of abating. If anything, as premiums for high grade, well centered stamps continue to rise, the reward for a successful “chop job” follows suit. As you are reading this, chances are someone, somewhere is reperforating a U.S. postage stamp.

Since 1857, most U.S. stamps have been perforated to facilitate separation. The so-called *gauge* of the perforation holes is roughly the number of holes (or perforation teeth between the holes) per two centimeters. This measure has varied over the years, starting with gauge 15 in 1857, changing to 12 in 1861, then to 10 in 1914 and generally to 11 in 1917. Some coil stamps were perforated at gauge 8-1/2 between 1910 and 1914 and there are exceptions such as Scott No. 536 perforated at 12-1/2.

Starting in 1919, certain rotary press printed stamps were issued with differing horizontal and vertical gauges. Perforations described as 11X10 for example, indicates a stamp with a gauge of 11 across the top and bottom, and a gauge of 10 along the sides. This “mixed” perforation gauging continued through the 1970s.

All of these stamps were “line” perforated. This involved separate passes for the horizontal and vertical perforations. The result was that the perforation holes in the two directions do not connect up at the crossing points or corners. All perforated stamps listed in the SMQ were line perforated except Scott Nos. RW54–RW74. These modern duck stamps were “stroke” perforated in such a way that both the vertical and horizontal perforations were done at the same time resulting in holes that connect perfectly at the crossing points.

Unlike “line” perforated stamps where the distances between the lines of perforation holes can and do vary widely, “stroke” perforated stamps have the same distances between the lines of holes.

The line perforation technique employed wheels (or drums) of male pins that rotated as the paper passed through, punching the holes at a slight angle. Genuine holes sometimes have a slightly oval shape with one slightly rough inner edge and some light crimping of the paper at the opposite edge. The rough inner edge is characterized by protruding paper fibers. The crimping is referred to as a “pressure ridge.” These hole characteristics are rather difficult to duplicate. A knowledge of the characteristics of the rough inner edges and pressure ridges found on various issues often allows experts to distinguish genuine perforations from fakes. A keen eye is needed however, and very few experts are proficient.

The differing characteristics of the holes found on reperforated stamps suggests that various reperforating devices are used. The crudest method



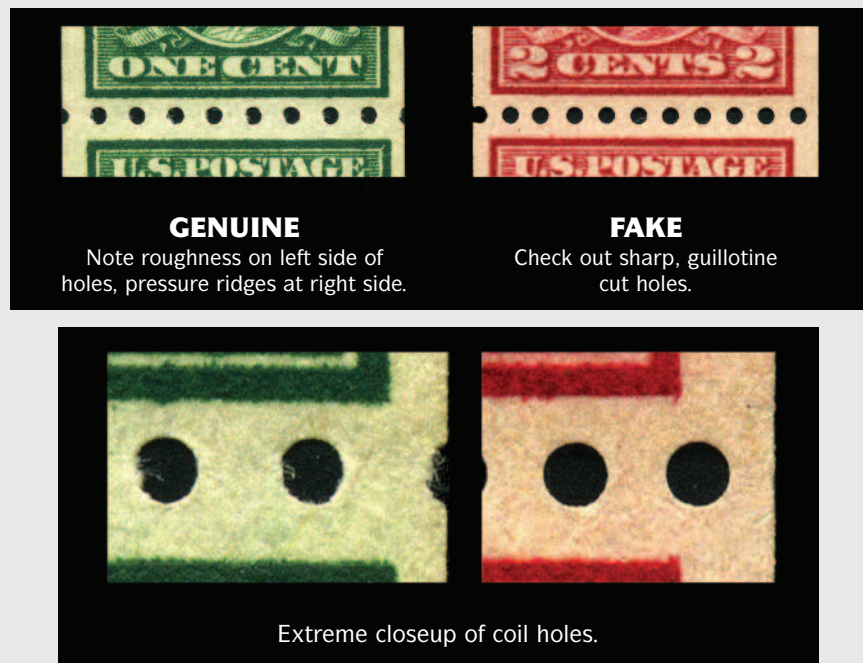
involves punching each hole individually, and usually results in holes that are slightly out of alignment. They may also exhibit some variation in the spacing between the holes. Shown at left is a Postage Due stamp crudely reperforated at the right.

More sophisticated methods employ devices which punch all the holes at the same time and operate much like a three-hole punch found in most offices. Such devices bring the punching pins down perpendicular to the paper and cut sharp-edged holes. If not “manicured” in some way, these holes are fairly easy to identify. The scans

shown on the following page illustrate both genuine and obviously fake holes from coil pairs.

Anyone who understands the difference between the holes of these two scans should be able to correctly spot a vast majority of the fake 1¢ and 2¢ flat plate coil pairs from Scott No. 390 through 444 made from imperforate Scott No. 383s, 384s, 408s and 409s. Genuine examples of these perf 8-1/2 and perf 10 coils nearly always show strong pressure ridges, so spotting the fakes is usually *relatively* easy. Unfortunately, most collectors, and even most dealers cannot tell the difference and well over half the coils of this type that PSE examines are fakes made from imperforate sheets or imperforate coil rolls. Even with single stamps, where one has only half the hole to examine, the difference between the two is usually fairly obvious.

It is important to note that *even though the perforation holes are completely genuine, the coil may still be a fake* since fake coils can also be made by trimming the perforations from one or two opposing sides of genuine sheet stamps. In fact, that is the only way that fake Scott No. 445-447 coils can be made since there are no single line watermark imperforate 3¢, 4¢ or 5¢ stamps to work with.



The single line watermark perf 10 Washington-Franklin sheet stamps were printed in sheets of 400 that consisted of four panes of 100 separated by horizontal and vertical guide lines. When perforated, the sheets were cut apart along the guide lines into four panes of 100 leaving natural straight edges along the guideline edges. Fake coil pairs or singles can be made by taking examples with natural straight edges and trimming the perfs from the opposite side. Alternatively, one could trim two opposing sides (top and bottom, or left and right) from interior examples.

Identifying these fakes is easy if the faker leaves traces of trimmed perf holes, or doesn't trim in straight, parallel lines. Even when there are no hole traces and the edges are parallel, if the width, or height between the cut edges is significantly smaller than usual for genuine coils, PSE generally will call the item a fake. For example, a 3¢ single line watermark perf 10 coil pair with a height of only 24.0 mm will likely be called a fake made from a trimmed pair of Scott No. 426s.

If the holes are razor-sharp and perfectly round, then even a perf 12 fake coil is relatively easy to spot. Unfortunately, the pressure ridges on genuine perf 12 coils are often not pronounced, especially on line pairs

where the guide line seems to reinforce the paper. While the same basic principals apply to expertizing perf 12 coils as perf 8-1/2 and perf 10s, the degree of expertise required is considerably higher as the telltale evidence of hole characteristics and pressure ridges can be more subtle. One must additionally have experience and knowledge about the color shades of genuine coils and which fake coils can be made from which booklet panes.

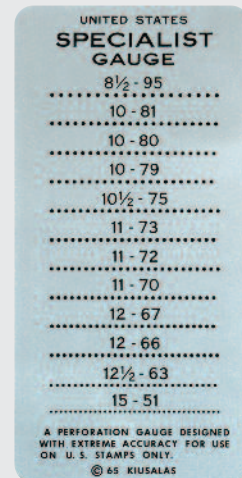
Because reperforation of stamps is so widespread and because it has been going on for so long using so many varying techniques, consistently and accurately determining when it has occurred is one of the most difficult aspects of an expertizer's job. Here is a partial checklist that an expert looks for when determining whether or not a stamp's perforations are genuine:

1. Hole spacing on parallel sides must be the same, and should be reasonably close to the standard for the issue as given on the U.S. Specialist Gauge (shown at right) made by Richard Kiusalas in 1965.

The gauge identifies twelve perforation gauges ranging from a hole spacing of 0.051 inches (15.44 holes per two centimeters or perf 15 as noted in the Scott Catalog) to 0.095 inches (8.29 holes per two centimeters or perf 8-1/2 in Scott). If the perfs on the left side of a stamp are 1/3 hole short of the gauge from top to bottom from paper shrinkage, the perfs on the right side should *also* be 1/3 hole short. It is a given that the reperforators have had devices manufactured to precisely the Kiusalas measurements. Accordingly, if the left side is 1/3 hole short and the right side is exactly on gauge, it may well be reperforated at the right side and not at the left.

Anyone who has gauged a large number of early stamps knows that paper expansion or contraction over the past 50 to 150 years can cause the height or width of a stamp to vary by as much as 0.5mm or so, or 1/2 the approximate diameter of a perf hole. So, while genuine perforations often match the Kiusalas gauge, the perforations may still be genuine even if they vary a bit up or down from the gauge.

2. Hole sizes should be about the same as given on the Kiusalas gauge; i.e., about 0.7mm diameter for perf 15 stamps and about 1.0mm diameter for the others (although certain of the Columbian stamps for example, occasionally may have one or both lines of holes only 0.9mm diameter). Even with only half holes to examine (as on a single stamp), an experienced expert can still see if the holes are either too large or too small.

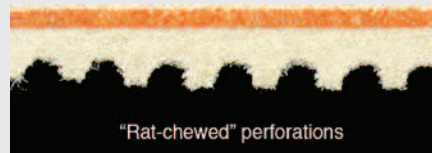




3. If under magnification, the perf tips can be seen to have been filed down or teased out, the reperf alarm bell should go off since normally separated perforations will never appear filed. The filing is usually done on the front (but occasionally on the back) in order to “rough up” the ends of the perf tips if they were once part of a natural straight edge. Shown at right is a stamp reperforated at the top with filed perf tips. At the same time, stamps were sometimes scissor separated along a line of perforations, so that one must be careful not to automatically assume that such an edge was reperforated along a natural straight edge.



4. Suspicion should arise if the edges around the half perf holes have been picked by a pin to roughen them up. These holes can be described as “erose” and at worst, can appear as if a rat chewed along one edge of each hole along an entire side of a stamp.



5. If it appears that the gum around the hole edges on the back has been scalloped, it is a warning sign of a stamp mechanic attempting to clean fresh gum away from hole edges and/or wanting to roughen up the hole edges so that they will no longer appear sharply cut.
6. If more than one perforation hole is clearly out of line or off gauge then additional examination is warranted. One hole being off can just be a wild perf that can occur when a perf pin gets bent. (See photo at right.) If several holes are off though, it almost surely indicates a reperforing job.
7. If under magnification the very end of the perf tips on one side look as if they have been pinched parallel to the edge of the design frameline, that side may well be reperforated. These pinched perf tips must be caused by a reperforing tool that tightly holds the edge of the paper while the new holes are being punched.
8. Plate layouts for nearly all U.S. stamps have been mapped, and as a consequence, it is known which stamps have genuine perforations on certain guide lines and which ones came only with natural straight edges along certain other guide lines. If one can see even traces of a guide line on perforation tips where there never were genuine perforations, then it is a sure sign of reperforation.



## 5. Other Faults That Arise After Issue

The identification of faults such as tears, creases, thins, pulled perfs, stains, toned spots, facial scrapes or the repair of these faults such as closed tears, filled thins, added or extended perfs or painted over facial scrapes is a necessary part of third-party expertizing. These faults can range from minor to major, but all have some effect on the value (and hence the grade) of the stamp.

While the identification of faults or repairs requires one to be careful in one's examination of the stamp, it generally does not require any special knowledge. Most faults can be found with no more than a good magnifier and strong light, looking at the back of the stamp after it has been immersed in watermark fluid and watching the stamp dry slowly after removing it from the fluid. In addition, faults and repairs often can be highlighted with PSE's Video Spectral Comparator machine or even just UV light.

Repairs are made to improve the appearance of a stamp or to hide a fault. Some are amateur efforts, easily detectable by even a novice. Others are made by professional "mechanics" or "doctors"—some of whom work on their own stamps, some of whom are employed by individuals or firms and some of whom offer their services on a freelance basis. In addition to repairing faults, they usually work on gum and do reperforating as well.

The work done by true professionals requires extremely careful examination and occasionally the use of other forensic equipment such as the Video Spectral Comparator or a strong ultraviolet light. Even with such assistance, experts will occasionally have differing opinions as to whether a repair such as the addition of a perforation tip, has taken place.

Some very minor faults are barely detectable, and should have only a small impact on the value of a stamp, yet their mere mention on a certificate will render the stamp unsalable to many, and may result in a deeply discounted market value.

For example, if one takes a 10X or stronger magnifier and examines the entire surface of a classic U.S. stamp under a strong halogen light source, there will often be a tiny light toned spot which would not be visible to the unaided eye. If a third party expertizing organization called each and every such tiny fault, no matter how trivial, the hobby would be badly hurt. One of the key responsibilities of a third party service is to strike the proper balance between what is "callable" and what is not, and to do so consistently.

It should come as no surprise that dealers (in general) want services to be lenient. Discriminating collectors on the other hand, would prefer a more rigorous evaluation. Achieving a consistent standard that both protects buyers yet allows dealers to earn a living is a delicate balancing act. PSE is committed to accomplishing that goal.

## 6. Faults Which Arise During Production

Some of the more perplexing, and sometimes contentious, issues faced in the expertizing and grading of U.S. stamps involve “production faults” which were present at the time of issue. These include:

1. Natural gum skips or short gumming on never hinged stamps
2. Natural gum bends, creases or wrinkles on flat plate stamps
3. Natural paper inclusions
4. Natural paper folds
5. Natural straight edges
6. Perforation disc indent thins
7. Natural paper transparencies
8. Blind perforations
9. Guidelines on perforated stamps
10. Scissor blunted perforations on Scott No. 167-177 stamps
11. Natural surface wrinkles on the face of rotary press stamps

All of these production faults were present at the time the stamp was first sold. They are not like paper tears, creases, thins, stains, reperforations or repairs which have occurred during the lifetime of a stamp but, like these other faults, they generally lower the value of a stamp and hence affect its grade.

We will discuss each of the eleven listed “production faults” in turn. Some will object to calling them faults. For example, one could ask, “How can a natural straight edge be a fault? That is the way the stamp was made and sold.” We don’t want to get involved in fault semantics, but it is widely appreciated that a natural straight edge lowers the value of a stamp. Otherwise why have so many straight edged stamps been fraudulently perforated? If a government perforated stamp has later had perforations trimmed off on one side everyone would agree that such has created a fault and would lower the value of the stamp. Whether we call preissue problems “faults” or something else, the bottom line effect is the same.

### Natural Gum Skips

The gum on U.S. stamps was not always applied with perfect uniformity. It is not extremely uncommon to find unused, original gum, never hinged stamps, particularly pre-1925 issues, which have one or several tiny spots, less than 1mm in size, where there is no gum. On some issues such as the Graf Zeppelin air mail issues, Scott Nos. C13-C15, or the first duck stamps, Scott Nos. RW1-RW20, gum skips are rather common and can be more numerous or larger.

At PSE, we have had never hinged RW1 duck stamps which had several such skips and, in addition, a vertical gum skip line more than 1mm wide running all the way up the center of the stamp. As another example one might encounter a never hinged Washington-Franklin stamp that came from the top row of a sheet where the gum did not get applied all the way up to the top



edge of the top row stamps. This stamp could have 2 or 3mm of missing gum all along the top edge.

Anyone who says that the gum skips on the RW1 stamps or the short gumming on the Washington-Franklin stamp don't matter must be the person who is trying to sell the items. Simply put, in today's never hinged mania, it does matter if the gum skips become distracting. One or two or even three tiny specks can be accepted, but make it a whole bunch of small specks or one big skip and it matters.

For example, consider a superbly centered Washington-Franklin stamp that is fully gummed but has a faint, brushed out gum disturbance from a previous hinge behind the upper left corner. Suppose this area is 2mm high by 4mm wide at the top left edge. This stamp is now previously hinged and has a value far less than if it were never hinged. Can anyone say that the same stamp with a 2mm high short gumming all the way across the top of the stamp is worth the full never hinged price?

PSE's policy for never hinged stamps depends upon the severity of the gum skips or short gumming. One or two teeny tiny gum skips are ignored. A few tiny skips or slight short gumming are taken as an Extremely Minor Fault while larger or numerous skips or significant short gumming are taken as a Very Minor Fault. In both of these cases the grade is lowered, but mention on a certificate occurs only for a Very Minor Fault. Gum skips or short gumming do not affect the grade of previously hinged stamps.

### **Natural Gum Bends, Creases or Wrinkles**

On flat plate printed U.S. stamps the gumming process sometimes caused gum bends, creases or wrinkles. Gum bends, creases and wrinkles are all in the same family being commonly used terms for increasingly severe distortions of the gum and paper.

A gum bend is just that, the paper and gum have a troughlike bend, usually in a diagonal rather than a vertical or horizontal direction. When the stamp is immersed in lighter or watermark fluid there will be no dark line along the length of the bend and there may or may not be a slight white flashing as the fluid dries more quickly along the bend. While collectors prefer stamps without gum bends, if they are minor the value will not be significantly affected. A minor natural gum bend may or may not be considered an Extremely Minor Fault but will never be mentioned on a certificate.

A gum crease will dip as a dark line in the fluid and will flash white as the fluid dries. Such occurs because the paper fibers become creased which can be seen on the front of the stamp. A gum crease can exist on any flat plate stamp, but certain issues are more prone than others, including Scott Nos. C13-C15 and RW1-RW12. If a gum crease dips dark and flashes over a significant length PSE will call it and will lower the stamp's soundness grade. This is especially so if there are multiple gum creases which sometimes occur. Like gum bends, gum creases often occur in diagonal directions.

Gum wrinkles are in the same family, but they are slightly different than gum bends or creases. A gum wrinkle can occur anywhere on a stamp, can

be of any length and commonly does not extend in a straight line. Like a gum crease, a gum wrinkle may also dip as a dark line and flash white as the fluid dries. Like its close relative the gum crease, a significant gum wrinkle will affect the paper and can be seen on the front of the stamp. Light gum wrinkles or creases are Very Minor Faults and heavier ones are considered to be Minor Faults.

### **Natural Paper Inclusions**

U.S. stamps occasionally have one or more natural inclusion specks embedded in the paper. These vary in size, color and location. They effectively lower the value of a stamp if they are visually objectionable and so the color of the stamp can also be a factor affecting the visual effect.

The worst situation is that of a 1 mm or larger black inclusion showing on the front side of the paper, on a light colored (say yellow) stamp, and in a location which is fully visible (in a margin or a part of the design that has no ink). Change to a black colored stamp with the inclusion in an inked portion of the design, or change the location to the back side of the paper so that it is not visible from the front, or change to a light colored inclusion and to a tiny size and the inclusion is no longer objectionable.



It is a judgment call whether PSE will mention a natural paper inclusion on a certificate of authentication or will downgrade the soundness of a stamp if it is to be graded.

As for natural paper inclusions, one of PSE's most important situations involved an inverted Jenny, Scott No. C3a. Purchased in an Eastern auction it was submitted to PSE along with two very old PF certificates, neither of which mentioned a prominently visible natural paper inclusion in the white space in the center of the stamp.

The inclusion was not mentioned in the auction description although it had been mentioned in the previous two auction descriptions where the stamp was sold. After considerable discussion PSE decided to mention the natural paper inclusion on its certificate and, apparently, the purchaser returned the stamp based on this mention, notwithstanding that the auction catalog color photograph clearly showed the inclusion.

### **Natural Paper Folds**

Some of the very early U.S. stamps were printed on paper sheets that had tiny pre-printing crimped paper folds. Years after printing and use these crimped folds could be pulled apart thus leaving a strip up to perhaps 1 or 2mm wide which would have no printing ink. These folds can run in any direction on any early stamp, but we have seen more examples on Scott No. 1

than on any other issue. Typically these folds are inclined vertically. They are not common and while they necessarily incorporate paper creases, they are collected by a very small group of specialists. No such stamp has ever been submitted to PSE for grading and so no PSE policy exists regarding how we would assess soundness.

Plain certificates of authenticity for the few such stamps that have been submitted for expertization simply have mentioned the paper fold.

### Natural Straight Edges

Starting with Scott No. 18 in 1857 and continuing up through Scott No. 856 in 1939 almost all of the U.S. perforated sheet stamps which were printed on flat plate presses were issued in panes which contained one or two non-perforated, natural straight edges. There were a few exceptions, notably Scott Nos. 118-122, 523, 524, 547, 573, 620, 621, C13-C15, C18, several of the Official stamps, and some of the Reissues and Special Printings that were issued beginning in 1875.

Collectors generally frown on straight edged stamps so they are relatively uncommon today, most surviving examples having had fake perforations applied to make them more saleable to unsuspecting collectors.

It is easy to identify sheet stamps with natural straight edges and such can be mentioned on a certificate of authenticity, but the question remained how PSE should account for such stamps in its grading system. Today our system calls for stamps with one natural straight edge to be assigned a soundness fault grade equivalent to that of a crease, small thin or small tear. This is admittedly a rather approximate analysis and it too severely punishes jumbo, straddle margin, pre-1890 stamps, but in most instances it leads to a final stamp grade reasonably in touch with the SMQ listed value.

### Perforation Disc Indent Thins

A perforation disc indent occurred when a perforation disc got impressed into the back or front of a stamp. Where this has occurred it often has been impressed so heavily that it effectively thins the paper over the entire circular area of the disc although the disc itself usually is no longer present.



We do not know exactly how perf disc indents occurred, but we suppose that it happened when sheets or panes of flat plate printed stamps, after gumming and perforation, were heavily pressed to flatten them for subsequent handling. We presume that in this process the occasional stray perforation disc got pressed into the stamp. Whatever, the end result is a tiny compression in the stamp that occurred in the production process. PSE considers one light perf disc indent that does not effectively thin the paper as a Very Minor Fault and one that clearly thins the paper as a Minor Fault.

The perforated stamps produced by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in the period from 1894 to about 1908 often have one or more horizontal and/or vertical rows of perforation imprints on the gum. Such are so common on the Pan American issue stamps that if they do not exist one wonders if the stamp has been regummed. These light imprints, while not in any way faults, had to have been caused by some light pressing operation which the Bureau performed on stacks of slightly misarranged, perforated sheets while the gum was still somewhat pliable.

The perforation disc indent thins came from singular stray perforation discs under much heavier pressure. One sees them most often on Washington-Franklin issues, on such as a Scott No. 537, and on 1922 Regular Issue stamps. Although not common, they are not rare and it is always a letdown when one exists on an otherwise very high grade stamp.

### **Natural Paper Transparencies**

Occasionally the stamp paper has a natural transparency which is entirely internal. Such is like a watermark only it is not part of any watermark letter. Unless the transparency exceeds 2 or 3mm in size or is not completely internal and affects the design or gum PSE does not consider it a fault. Transparencies that are a problem are rare.

### **Blind Perforations**

Occasionally a perforation pin would be broken or out of line with a female receptacle resulting in a blind, or missing, perforation hole. Blind perforations, like short perforations, are visually distracting. While one would never be mentioned on an ungraded PSE certificate it would be considered as a Very Minor Fault when PSE is in the process of grading a stamp. No doubt many previously blind perforations have been so professionally punched out that it is virtually impossible to detect them.



## Guidelines on Perforated Stamps

Many of the plates which were used to print pre-1935 U.S. stamps contained vertical or vertical and horizontal guidelines. When the printed sheets were perforated and cut into panes for issuance at post offices the guidelines most often existed at the cut natural straight edges, but for some issues there were perforations along the guideline.



The line pairs of flat plate coil stamps, of course, came from guidelines along a regular perforation line, but such also occurred in some sheet stamps. Examples of sheet stamps which had perforations along guidelines include:

- Vertical perforations along a guideline  
Scott Nos. 294-299, 328-330, 523, 524, 547, 571-573, 620, 621, C1-C3, C13-C15, C18, PR114-PR125.
- Horizontal perforations along a guideline  
Scott Nos. 268-272, 274-278, 280-284, 285-293, 310-313, 323-327, 341, 342, 422, 423, 460, 478-480, 518, 523, 524, 547, 573, 620, 621, C1-C3, C13-C15, C18, E5, E6, J38-J44.

When a single perforated stamp has a guideline prominently showing along an edge (or even worse along two adjacent edges) its eye appeal is degraded and its value is lessened for the vast majority of collectors. Accordingly, PSE considers such to be a naturally occurring Extremely Minor or Very Minor Fault depending on the prominence of the guideline. Such guidelines would never be mentioned on an ungraded certificate. If only traces of a guideline remain on a few perf tips, such are ignored.

## Scissor Blunted Perforations on Scott No. 167-177 Stamps

The special printings of the 1873 regular issue stamps were produced in 1875 by the Continental Bank Note Co. The regular issues were available at all post offices, but the special printing stamps could be obtained only through special order to the Third Assistant Postmaster in Washington D.C. As stated in the Scott Specialized Catalog, "although perforated, these stamps were usually cut apart with scissors (before being sent to purchasers). As a result, the perforations are often much mutilated and the design is frequently damaged." Since these special printing stamps were especially prepared for stamp collectors it is surprising that this mutilation occurred just before selling



the stamps to the collectors and dealers. Can you imagine the screaming that would occur if such were to happen today?

Severe scissor trimmed perforations on this set of stamps would not be mentioned on an ungraded PSE certificate; however, they would be considered as faults if a stamp were to be graded. Accordingly, most of the few Scott No. 167-177 stamps would not receive a high grade. For example, the best Scott No. 167 in existence likely would receive only a PSE grade of F-VF 75, the same grade that would be given to an equivalent Scott No. 156.

PSE recognizes that some dealers believe that a different, more lenient set of standards should apply to these stamps.



### **Natural Surface Wrinkles**

On rotary press stamps such as Scott Nos. 859-893 or C25-C31, the production process sometimes caused one or more surface wrinkle lines on the face of the stamp parallel to the gum breaker ridges. When present, these wrinkles can be light or heavy, the latter dipping as a dark line in fluid and flashing white as the fluid dries. Such wrinkles are generally not visible in direct light but jump out in oblique reflected light. Depending on the severity of the wrinkles they may be ignored, or considered as either Extremely Minor Faults or Very Minor Faults.

### **Conclusion**

In the second half of this booklet, we have presented a brief synopsis of what is involved in expertizing U.S. postage stamps. Given the extent and breadth of U.S. philately and given all the chicanery of stamp “doctors” over the years, it should be obvious that doing quality third-party expertizing is a serious undertaking.

There are hundreds, if not thousands of serious stamp collectors and dealers, many with highly specialized knowledge about certain details. There are only a few individuals though, who have handled and studied a broad range of stamps and who have been in the expertizing trenches and can consistently do high quality general expertizing. If one adds grading to the equation it should be clear that doing the job correctly and consistently takes knowledge, experience, effort and a systematic approach to the undertaking. Every amateur collector can be his own stamp grader, but doing it for the record, over months and years, is another matter entirely.

Over the last few years, PSE has established itself as the leading third party expertizing and grading service for U.S. postage stamps. We are committed to continuing at that high level of product and service for many years to come.

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09114 Rev 8/09