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**THE DIE VARIETIES
OF THE NESBITT
SERIES OF UNITED
STATES ENVELOPES**

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The Die Varieties of the Nesbitt Series of United States Envelopes

EAN 8596547130932

DigiCat, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

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"Variety is the spice of Life". This aphorism, if applied to collectors of the dies of the early United States envelopes, changes with kaleidoscopic rapidity into: "Varieties are the bane of collectors". The truth of this statement is borne out by the fact that, though the die varieties of the Nesbitt issues are one of the most interesting phases of American philately, the amount of our knowledge concerning them is surprisingly small.

If we recall that many of these dies have been in existence for half a century, embracing all issues prior to 1870, and thus, in comparison with modern issues, are hoary with age, that they have been collected for decades by ardent lovers of United States envelopes, our surprise is heightened.

The honor of the first attempt at describing the various Nesbitt die varieties and making this knowledge public property belongs to an English philatelist of rare ability, the late Gilbert Harrison. While this confers great credit upon the latter, it is an humiliation to American philatelists that this page of our own history was left to be written by an English student. Even so, this work[\[A\]](#) did not appear until fully forty years after the Nesbitt dies were first issued.

It is, likewise, true that Messrs. Tiffany, Bogert and Rechert in their "Historical Notes"[\[B\]](#) undertook to rescue the Nesbitt die varieties from an ignominious oblivion, and for this they are also entitled to praise, but up to the most recent time, the great body of collectors did not possess a

guide-book, a "Philatelic Baedeker," which would enable the timorous traveler to proceed into the unknown country with a feeling of perfect safety.

Naturally the question arises: What is the reason for this state of affairs? Why have the Nesbitt die varieties been relegated to an entirely unmerited obscurity?

Unless I am greatly mistaken the answer is that the large majority of collectors believed the subject to be fraught with difficulties. Add to this both the lack of a catalogue and of any systematic exposition of the early die varieties, and it is easy to comprehend why the bugbear has continued to the detriment of United States philately.

However, thanks to the good services of the Scott Stamp & Coin Co., and the J. M. Bartels Co., this wrong impression has been largely removed and the future collector of the Nesbitt dies has a rich and inviting field now open for his favorite pursuit. Moreover, henceforth no collection lacking these important die varieties can lay a claim to a full degree of completeness, and this remark refers equally to those who collect entire envelopes or cut square specimens. Indeed, of the two the latter is by far the larger gainer, because these varieties appear on comparatively few "knives" or shapes of envelopes.

Assuming that not many collectors, either young or old, have busied themselves with die varieties a few remarks about the method or way of studying them, gained from practical experience, may not be out of place.

Of course, I do not intend to give specific rules here. These will be in order as soon as we take up a special issue.

It is true that die varieties may be found in half a dozen different ways, but it is equally plain that if we can use a uniform method, applicable to all, we shall be far better off. Although this fact is self evident, such a method was unknown when the writer commenced the study of the Nesbitt die varieties. Recognizing, however, the value of some simple means, various methods were pursued until, after numerous disappointing failures, the solution of the problem was found by means of line prolongation and the use of a unit distance measurement.

As in redrawing a die the engravers of the Nesbitt envelopes have endeavored merely to reproduce the stamp in its general features, the result is that the spacings between the letters, the form of the letters, their size, and the size of the entire stamp may all be subject to many changes. Owing to this nonchalant procedure, and referring now to the very first issue, the engravers have left to posterity not less than ten different heads of the "Father of our Country" which can readily be seen on fine specimens. For the same reason there are ten dies of the 3 cent red, commonly known as Die 5 or E, which are further characterized by the "T" of "THREE" having a long cross stroke. This die was redrawn and the long cross stroke of "T" changed into a short line. The alteration added twenty varieties, among which are some highly interesting and valuable specimens.

Suppose we select the "T" of "THREE" for our starting point and, noting that that letter is found in various positions, slanting to the right or left, or standing nearly vertically, we lay the edge of a fine piece of paper along the

outside of the downstroke and thus virtually prolong the "T" line downward. Next we carefully note where that prolongation touches a letter in the lower label. If we find that in a number of dies the line touches the "N" of "CENTS", we have probably established a general class. Continuing our inquiry we may note that the "T" line falls outside of the "N", perhaps touches the "T" or may even cut the "S" of "CENTS"; a clear indication that we have other die varieties.

The above, I believe, illustrates sufficiently what is meant by a system of line prolongation.

Another great help is furnished by the use of a uniform distance measurement. For convenience take ten millimetres and, setting a divider at that distance, commence with the "T" of "THREE", selecting as our starting point the left end of the horizontal cross stroke of "T". Assume that, in our first specimen, the end of the ten millimetre line touches the end of the first "E", in the second it may fall between the two "E"s, while in a third the same distance reaches outside the final "E". In this simple and comparatively easy manner, we have ascertained three important classes.

Knowing our main classes, the next step is to study a number of dies of the same general class for sub-varieties, using again one or both of the methods with which we are now well acquainted.

In this manner order is brought out of apparent confusion, and if we work carefully, and are willing to have a little patience, the final success will pay well for all our trouble. Indeed the mental training gained by this work is

very valuable and will assist us greatly in the knowledge of other stamps or dies.

So far I have not spoken of the various forms of watermarks employed by Nesbitt, nor of the tresses, or seals, found on the flaps. These are of importance to the collector of entire envelopes, but are a negligible quantity for those who prefer to get the die varieties as cut square specimens.

As it is evident that the purpose of the present work is to enable the great body of collectors of United States stamps to become well acquainted with the early Nesbitt varieties, hitherto considered the exclusive property of the specialist, I suggest to the publishers that supply our need in the way of stamp albums to prepare a couple of extra pages, showing the die and its main varieties. A friend of the writer, an enthusiastic collector of cut square specimens, has adopted this plan and it is certain that if any of our readers had an opportunity to see how attractive and interesting these pages appear, they would not hesitate to do likewise.

Perhaps this suggestion will be heeded by the album publishers. If so, there will soon spring up special groups of collectors of the early Nesbitt Die Varieties.

In conclusion I desire to express to Messrs. J. M. Bartels, Edward H. Mason and Geo. Rauh, all of Boston, my sincere thanks for the valuable aid which they have rendered me in preparing this work.

Mr. Bartels has worked with me continuously in my investigations into the intricacies of these dies; Mr. Mason has placed his grand collection of United States envelopes unreservedly at my disposal, besides aiding me in many

other ways, and it is to Mr. Rauh that I am indebted for the very fine and conscientiously executed drawings of the various, heads of this series.

VICTOR M. BERTHOLD.

Boston, Mass.

Feb. 1905.

Footnote

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[A] The—Nesbitt Stamped Envelopes—and Wrappers—of the—United States of America,—with descriptions of the varieties of the dies,—and fifteen full-page illustrations—by—the late Gilbert Harrison.—Edited and completed—by—E. D. Bacon.—Published as a supplement to the "London Philatelist",—by M. P. Castle, —Vice-President of the Philatelic Society, London,—1895.

[B] The—Stamped Envelopes.—Wrappers and Sheets—of the United States—by John K. Tiffany, R. R. Bogert,—and Joseph Rechert.—A Committee of the National Philatelic Society,—New York—1892.—Published by—The Scott Stamp & Coin Co. Limited.—12 East 23rd St.

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It is strange that the Yankee, who is generally so quick witted in all matters pertaining to trade and commerce, has been comparatively slow in recognizing the value of the stamped envelope for business purposes. As a matter of fact, the famous Mulready and its numerous caricatures had been used in Great Britain for nearly a dozen years when the Thirty-second Congress, on Aug. 31, 1852, authorized the issue of stamped envelopes in the United States.

The next we hear of the matter is a short line in the Report of the Postmaster-General, dated December 4, 1852, which reads: "Such envelopes as are authorized are now in preparation and will soon be issued." And, in February of the following year, the *Scientific American* mentions the interesting news that "G. F. Nesbitt has shown to the Postmaster-General an embossed stamp for prepaid envelopes which has been accepted, and the manufacture will at once proceed. Such, however, is the labor and care required for their production, that none will be ready for delivery before the middle of next April."

The much heralded novelty of the Post Office finally appeared July 7, 1853. At least, this date is certified to by the National Intelligencer of the *Washington Journal*, which, in describing the envelopes just sent out for distribution, states: "they are as yet but of a single size and of the three cent value." It also adds that the addition of the Nesbitt seal is an outrage.

Without entering into further details, it is of general interest to note that, up to 1869, Geo. F. Nesbitt & Co., of New York, continued to furnish the United States Post Office Department with envelopes.

Recalling the fact that Nesbitt originated the dies; that the machinery for embossing was very crude compared with our modern apparatus, collectors must concede that his work deserves great credit.

The question, however, of superlative interest to philatelists is: why has Nesbitt produced such a large number of dies or die varieties? The answer is simple: Pressed hard by the Department to manufacture several

millions of envelopes, a gigantic task in the early days of stamp making, and lacking our present means of reproducing working dies from the matrix, he undoubtedly used his best effort; i.e. he probably ordered a number of engravers to reproduce the original die, and, in the hurry of the work, little attention was paid to exactness. This would seem a very plausible explanation, and in the absence of any official data let us permit the above assumption to stand.

Whatever may be the facts in the case, one thing is certain; the varieties exist and have been a source of trouble to many collectors of United States envelopes. With wider knowledge and on better acquaintance, it is certain that in future they will prove a most interesting branch of United States philately.

DIE I.



Short labels with curved ends close to the letters.
10 loops in left side ornament and 9 in right.

TEN HEADS—TWELVE VARIETIES.

In accordance with the instructions of the United States Postal Department, the first issue of United States envelopes was to represent a profile of General Washington after Houdon's famous bust. No doubt the spirit of the engraver was willing, but the "flesh was woefully weak."

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to affirm that the head, or heads, of Die I (or A) are as far from Houdon's masterpiece as the sun is from our planet. Moreover, on a close inspection we find a lot of curious and noteworthy details which seem to indicate that the artist, or artists, had peculiar ideas of the manly beauty of the "Father of our Country."

Certainly, various national types are represented and the expression runs the gamut of meekness, aggressiveness, stolidity, stupidity and boozy hilarity. As a rule an artist would be satisfied to ornament the eye of his subject with one eyebrow, but several of the profiles of Die 1 have two, and in a position which would bewilder the student of anatomy. Another startling feature is the sidelock, which sometimes grows upon the eyebrow. And finally we are forced to conclude that the tonsorial artist who attended Washington performed queer tricks. In one die one-half of the head appears void of hirsutic covering. Well, perhaps this was the summer season! I must not forget to mention that on one side of the nostrils appears a Phrygian cap, probably an indication of the republican spirit of the United States. In conclusion the writer recalls a good joke by a gentleman prominent in philatelic circles. After a perusal of the above paragraphs he expressed himself that the bust of Washington of Die 1, instead of being "after Houdon" was a "Hoodoo", and there is a great deal of truth in the witticism.

Owing to the antiquity of the first issue of Nesbitt dies, collectors must not expect to find an abundance of mint specimens. Of course they are the exception, but in many used envelopes the head is impressed with sufficient

clearness to permit identification, and the cuts accompanying the dies, being photographic reproductions of pen drawings by an artist, will be found a valuable aid. Indeed, as far as the varieties of Die 1 are concerned, a thorough knowledge of, or acquaintance with, the various heads is necessary to avoid confusion, especially as the inscription in several labels is similar and not unfrequently the lettering is quite indistinct.

If the question is asked why a unit distance measurement is not applied to differentiate these varieties, the answer is that the spacing of the letters of the inscription is nearly alike. Of course the slant of the letters differs. Such differences as are helpful and noticeable will be mentioned. The system of line prolongation, for example, the downward prolongation of the "T" of "THREE", discloses certain groups in the writer's opinion, but the differences obtained thereby are not of sufficient practical value for establishing groups. For a quick and reliable identification of these varieties an intimate knowledge of the heads is required.

It having been decided to reproduce the heads, the question arose: Shall we draw every feature and every detail, or is it preferable to indicate merely such portions of the face as are different in the various dies? Evidently, many minor points could be omitted without in any way detracting from the usefulness of the drawings. Indeed, the adoption of this plan permitted the artist to emphasize and to bring out more strikingly such features as constitute the real differences.

There are three prominent features in each of the ten heads. The first is the side-lock, which may be either single

or double, straight or hooked, short or long. Second in importance is the distance between the end of the side-lock and the ear-lobe. Even a casual observation shows that the distance between the ear-lobe and the end of the side-lock varies greatly; very wide, near and close. The third feature is the lowest front-lock, which, by the taste or art of the die cutters has been, like man, "wonderfully and fearfully made", short or long, thin or full, single or double. In good specimens the eyebrow constitutes a valuable adjunct, and in all dies where this feature plays a prominent part it will be noted. Finally the attention of the collector is directed to the fact that only Head 1 shows Washington with circularly cropped hair, or, as the barber would express it, a "Dutch clip". This head was used for varieties 1, 2 and 3, the first being a rather scarce article. If the student fixes his attention on the above three main features, and does not attempt to get the entire ten heads fixed in his mind at a glance, it will be found that the task of differentiation is not at all a burden even to the youngest collector of cut square specimens. A certain amount of patience is, however, required; likewise a certain amount of willingness to be taught, but the collector possessing these two virtues—and it is one of the crowning glories of stamp collectors to be both studious and patient—will soon have the various Nesbitt heads of Washington engraved upon his memory.

Taking the distance between the end of the side-lock and the ear-lobe as our main feature, the various heads may be grouped into three distinct classes:

CLASS I. Distance between side-lock and ear-lobe very wide.

Heads 1a, 3, 4, 6, 7.

CLASS II. Distance between side-lock and ear-lobe near.

Heads 1, 2, 8.

CLASS III. Side-lock close to ear-lobe.

Heads 5, 9, 10.



HEAD I.



I.

A long side-lock commences a short distance above the corner of the eye, but stops quite a distance from it. Together with the side-lock commences a heavy lower lock which slants across the ear-lobe, leaving the lower half exposed. There is a considerable space between the end of the side-lock and the ear-lobe. The entire hair ends in a nearly horizontal line. Two folds in the garment on the right side of the neck.



[HW: See Appendix
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Variety 1:—"CENTS" close to outer oval line. "CE" on level and far apart. "C" quite a distance from curve. "N" and "T" wide apart at base. "S" close to curve. The final "E" of "THREE" is somewhat lower than the first "E", dips to the right, and is close to the curve. "T" of "Three" is also close to curve. Many of the white envelopes are on horizontally laid paper.

Variety 2:—"THREE" near outer oval line. "T" further from curve. "RE" wider apart at top than in Var. 1, and "HR" slightly nearer than in Var. 1. The distance between "EN" and "NT" of "CENTS" is very wide. "S" far from curve. "CE" wide apart.

HEAD Ia.