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VAMPs with Double Private Perforations — Compound or Confounding Combinations?



Privately perforated U.S. coil stamps of the 1907 to 1927 era, fondly known as VAMPs — Vending and Affixing Machine Perforations — are among the most thoroughly studied and documented issues we have. After fifty-eight years, the seminal work on these stamps is still George P. Howard's 1940 book *The Stamp Machines and Coiled Stamps*. But the author himself continued to report new discoveries for many years after his book was published, and scholarship on the subject, including spirited debates, has never ceased.

On January 1, 1943, Howard organized the Vending and Affixing Machine Perforations Society. One year later, he published that organization's *Bulletin No. 1*, which included his recommended method of classifying Schermack control perfins, a listing of all known precanceled privately perforated coil stamps, and a roster of the society's 174 members. Among them were nearly all the leading lights of U.S. philately from that era. The VAMP Society had its own expertizing service consisting of Howard and George P. Sloane, with Sidney D. Harris as chairman; Sales Department; and auction sales.

In October 1944, the VAMP Society merged into the Bureau Issues Association and thereafter has existed as a BIA committee (today chaired by VAMP expert Steven Belasco). Its later reports have been published in *The Bureau Specialist*, the BIA's monthly journal (now titled *The United States Specialist*), which means they are much more accessible than the information published in the VAMP Society's mimeographed *Bulletin*, but nevertheless attract fewer readers than study Howard's 1940 monograph.

Sometimes a researcher's job is both to uncover the neglected work of

earlier scholars and to study and interpret new discoveries. So it is with some of the most obscure privately perforated U.S. coil stamps.

One puzzler for Howard was a group of coils that have two different types of private perforations — Schermack Type III slot perforations combined with gauge $12\frac{1}{2}$ or $12\frac{3}{4}$ or 13 ordinary round-hole vertical perforations — applied to the same imperforate stamp. An unused horizontal pair of 2-cent George Washington stamps of 1912 (Scott 409) with this combination is shown in Figure 1.

The earliest reference I could find to these stamps was published almost ninety years ago. Robert J. Wagner wrote to *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News* (July 31, 1909):

I received an auction catalog from a Chicago firm, and while I threw the catalog away I saved the envelope. A couple days ago I came across the envelope and noticed the stamp looked odd. On examination I found the stamp a 1c 1908, evidently part perforated, perforations between sides, with the Schermack notches cut in the sides. The notches compare exactly with strips of the Schermack stamps. Have you heard of any part perfs. used in this machine?

In the philatelic argot of 1909, ordinary perforated coils were called "part perforated" stamps.

No answer to Wagner's question appeared in subsequent issues of *Mekeel's*, so the original stamp remained a mystery. His report does establish that this

type of compound perforation was known on the imperforate 1-cent green Benjamin Franklin stamp of 1908 with double-line watermark, Scott 343, very early in the history of coil stamps.

The cover in Figure 2 has the same combination of private perforations on a 2-cent Washington stamp of 1908, Scott 344, another very early usage. The enlarged photo of the stamp shows an indentation in the lower left Schermack perforation slot characteristic of a Mailometer machine's advancing mechanism.

The latest stamp issue reported to have this combination of perforations is the Type II 3-cent violet Washington stamp of 1917, Scott 484, shown in Figure 3. On this example, the duplex cancel suggests a usage on a bulky envelope or parcel, such as Wagner's 1909 catalogue mailing. Another collector has six examples of these double private perforations canceled with double-oval parcel devices of Chicago, including a line pair and a strip of three, on the 2-cent Washington issue of 1912, evidently a similar usage.

The latest example reported on cover is a 3-cent Washington on a commercial envelope of Innis, Speiden & Company, canceled at New York City



Figure 1. An unused horizontal pair of 2-cent Washington coil stamps of 1912, Scott 409, sports two types of private perforations — holes with gauge 13 spacing, and Schermack Type III slot perforations.

on January 9, 1919. A matching cover from the same firm canceled November 7, 1918, suggests extensive use of stamps with double private perforations on ordinary letter mail by that firm.

Three cents was the World War I war tax domestic letter rate. The pre-war two-cent rate was restored on July 1, 1919, so it is possible that some of the unwatermarked 2-cent Washington stamps (Scott 482) with double private perfs reflect even later usage. Nevertheless, existing covers span nearly a decade.

In a chapter of his 1940 book titled "Double Private Perforation" (page 55), Howard considered several theories proposed to explain these stamps. H.L. Lindquist had offered this solution in a 1913 letter to the author:

They were originally perforated for use by the International Co., who sold out to Schermack without having placed their product on the market. The Schermack Co. then re-perforated the stamps to fit their machines, but found the connection was too weak and were obliged to sell them to consumers for ordinary use.

Howard refuted this analysis as follows:

At first glance the 13-gauge perforation does resemble the perforation of the International Vending Company of Baltimore, particularly in the fact that it is not always at right angles to the coil edge. But the 1908 perforation of the International Company was 12½-gauge and not 13. Moreover, the International Company went out of business in 1909....

As for the second part of the explanation: — if the double-perforated coils were found unfit for Mail-om-eters in 1913, similar items would not have appeared in later years. Yet the same double perforation exists on a 2c stamp on cover from Mt. Ver-



Figure 2. This 1909 cover reflects a very early usage of double private perfs on a machine-affixed 2-cent Washington stamp, Scott 344.

non, New York, cancelled August 23, 1915. In 1916 the double perforation was used on commercial covers from Pater-son, New Jersey, — one cover cancelled June 10th and another November 15th. An August 1916 cover of this same company shows the ordinary Schermack Type III stamp. All these stamps are the pale rose shades current in 1915–16. The latest known use of the double perforation was on a 3c Die II of the 1917 issue, used by a New York concern in mailing a Christmas catalogue. These uses in later years will certainly not fit [Lindquist's] explanation.

Howard ended the chapter with two of his own possible solutions:

With no facts to substantiate my theory, I should like to suggest that these were Schermack coils to which the 13-gauge perforation was added. It would then be possible to tear stamps from the coil, or to use the coil in a machine which separated the stamps by means of the perforation. Since the Mail-om-eter could not handle a cover of more than 5 inches in width, to mail any larger envelope it would be necessary to apply the stamps by hand or with a small hand machine. Most of these, such as the Standard Mailing Machine, operated by tearing the stamp from the coil at the perforations. Then too, it might be that certain users discarded their Mail-om-eters for



machines using Bureau coils, and had their remaining Schermack coils perforated for use in the other machines. It is even possible that the Mailometer branch in New York at various times corrected the feeding fingers in use to adapt them to Bureau coils, and re-perforated whatever coils the user had on hand.

If Howard had read Wagner's 1909 report in *Mekeel's*, he might have leaned more strongly toward the first of his possible explanations. Later evidence favored his second suggestion.

More than half a century ago, a young collector named Wesley Crozier [see sidebar] sent Howard some stamps with double perforations. Howard's May 17, 1944, letter to Crozier reinforced the latter idea.

The slant on some of your perfs. is similar to the International perf of 1908–09 (but that measures about 12¼). There seem to have been several uses of a secondary perf. with Scherm. III: — 1913, 1915, 1916, 1917–18 (3¢). Of course many Scherm. machines were adapted for gov't coils long before private perfs. went out. I surmised that if a company with Scherm. machine were changed to take Bureau coils, and the company still had some Scherm. coils, they would send them to some nearby printer, binder or jobber who could do perforating, and get them perf'd. Hence the second perf. might vary.

By 1946, Howard had gathered further discoveries of double private perforations, including the 2-cent carmine

Abraham Lincoln Memorial commemorative coil, Scott 368, in a separated strip of three, used in late 1909. With that he added a third possible explanation of these stamps in the February 1946 issue of *The Bureau Specialist*.

In the case of the No. 368 listed above, my guess is that they came from a Schermack Vending Machine. In June 1909 J.J. Schermack was bought out of the Affixing Machine Co. and turned his attention to vending machines. The philatelic press that fall reported that he was using Schermack Type III stamps in the vending machines "and anticipates the issuance by the P.O. Dept. of the Mailometer Type II perforation, or something similar. When this is accomplished he expects to use the stamps in his machine in whatever form they are supplied by the government" (*Philatelic Journal of America*). The Bureau rejected the M-O-M II perforation in the fall of 1909, and Schermack adapted his vending machine for Bureau coils, which he has used ever since. The 368s were probably Schermack III coils that had not yet been used at the time he adapted the feeding device to a fine gauge perforation.

For later stamps exhibiting double perforations, he reiter-

ated his previous explanations. Either they had been adapted for use in manual stamp affixers "such as the Standard or Multi-post," for application to bulky envelopes that would not feed through a Mailometer machine, or else they were modified for use in Mailometer equipment that had been altered to accept government coils. "Most of this work was done after July 1914 when the 2c Rotary Press coil came out. The last die-hards in the Chicago area had to change over after December 1927, when the Bureau stopped issuing flat plate imperforate stamps."

Newer evidence adds support to Howard's vending machine theory as the origin of some double perforated coils, and much later than he had thought. Figure 4 shows a 1-cent green Washington stamp of 1912 (Scott 408) with double private perfs on a tourist's post card, mailed at New York on January 16, 1914. The picture side shows railroad tracks on a curve in a subway tunnel. The American Philatelic Expertizing Service certified this stamp and cover as genuine in 1995, after another expert committee had declined an opinion on it.

The owner consigned it to a Lowell S. Newman auction in September of that year. Despite faults in both the stamp and the post card, it sold for \$1,050 plus a buyer's premium — an indication of both the scarcity of such material, espe-



Figure 3. The latest stamp issue known with combination Schermack Type III and gauge 13 perforations is the Type II 3-cent Washington of 1917, Scott 484.

cially on cover, and its desirability to specialists.

In my opinion, all three of Howard's explanations for double private perforations have now been supported with adequate evidence. The challenge now is to find additional examples of each.

Thanks to collectors Charles Wood of Michigan, George Wagner of Illinois, Mick Hadley of Nebraska, and APS president John Hotchner, for sharing material from their collections, and to New Jersey stamp dealer Wes Crozier for his memoir.

braska, and APS president John Hotchner, for sharing material from their collections, and to New Jersey stamp dealer Wes Crozier for his memoir.

Footnote on VAMPs

In my August 1997 *AP* column (page 702) on VAMPs, I included privately perforated coils with Rosback gauge 12-67 stroke perforations of the Covell Corporation, and the 1-cent green George Washington stamp of 1917, precanceled "NEW YORK, N.Y.," with gauge 14 private perforations, used by the Boy Scouts of America executive council in 1922.

In an October 1997 letter to the editor (page 908), Steven Belasco objected to listing Covell perforations as VAMPs, and questioned whether Boy Scout private perfs should be included. "The perforations included in this category were all created to be used in either a vending machine or an affixing machine, and some of each company's proprietary coils were used in such a machine," he wrote.

It is clear from the VAMP Society's 1944 *Bulletin*, which used the term "private perforations" throughout, that the VAMP acronym was adopted playfully, as I wrote. But it is also true, in support of Belasco's point, that George Howard did not use his VAMP term frivolously. In the December 1944 *Bureau Specialist* he wrote:

"Private Perforations" is too broad a term and could mean any perforation not applied by



Figure 4. The 1-cent Washington stamp with double private perforations on this 1914 tourist's post card shows evidence of having been dispensed by a stamp vending machine, probably at a train station or subway stop.

The Mysterious Compound Perfs

by Wesley A. Crozier

I was 19 years old, an enthusiastic stamp collector, a member of the then-prestigious Monmouth County Philatelic Society, and an avid reader of philatelic publications, including *Stamps* magazine. I had begun to comprehend the differences between U.S. "look-alike" stamps and had become interested in coils, colors, and types. Thus, I was a sitting duck for the ad that appeared in *Stamps* fifty-one years ago.

The ad offered "intact bundles of 100" of old U.S. 2-cent red stamps. The stamps had been received by a Catholic mission in Western Canada, soaked, sorted, bundled (and tied with silk thread), and then simply stored — there being no market at that time for such common stamps. A small stamp dealer on West 43rd Street, New York City, had learned of the existence of this hoard and purchased everything.

Within a week after seeing the ad, I found my way to that dealer's office, a small second-floor layout, and, sure enough, there were two huge boxes (or barrels) filled with those original bundles, just as advertised. The price was right for a young man with limited resources, and I went home with 300 bundles.

The sorting was exciting! The 2-cent reds in the bundles were from the years 1908 to 1920. I found all of the 2-cent red types, all of the coils, all of the imperfs, and numerous private perfs. I especially was fascinated

by the private perfs, as I had been unfamiliar with them.

I returned to that dealer's office in New York a number of times, buying a larger quantity on each trip. Before I was finished I would acquire hundreds of thousands of 2-cent reds.

As my sorting continued, I discovered something that puzzled me. The now-familiar Schermack Type III stamp had additional vertical perforations gauge 13. A short while later, within a single original bundle, I found three of these. By comparing them, I realized that this had been a strip of three, and that the workers at the mission had separated the stamps for stacking in the bundle. Eventually I found several other examples of this mysterious compound perforation.

About this time, George Howard's fine reference book, *The Stamp Machines and Coiled Stamps*, was published. I acquired it and searched through it for clarification of the compound perfs, but Howard's explanation was inconclusive (see page 55, his book). I wrote a letter to Howard, reporting my discoveries and asking if he could supply further information. His reply, dated May 17, 1944, was inconclusive, and stated that the vertical perf 13 might be closer to gauge 12½. He and I agreed that the perf 13 vertical perforating was always at an angle, which varied from slightly off the vertical to the extreme seen on the reconstructed strip of three.

the government: — brokers' and dealers' roulettes, sewing-machine perforations, etc. We are interested only in those "private" perforations which were applied to imperforate stamps to make coils usable in certain stamp-vending and stamp-affixing machines.

Most significant to me is that the two styles of private perforations in my column to which Belasco objected actually do fit Howard's wording of the VAMP definition. Both types of perforations made them usable in the Schermack "Natural Method Stamp Affixer" pictured in my December 1993 column, and in the several types of manually operated affixers Howard thought might have been dispensers of the dou-

ble-perforated coils.

I think it is virtually certain that the Boy Scout coils were used in this way, because their history mirrors the usage of Schermack double perforations on bulky mail. Boy Scout headquarters used Mailometer equipment to apply coil stamps with Schermack Type III private perforations on their large mailings. Gauge 14 coils probably were manufactured for use in a manual affixer on mailpieces that would not feed through the automatic machine.