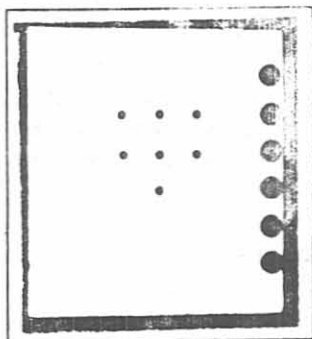


of these were used by Chicago mass mailers.

## A Note on "Blind" Schermack Control Perfins

By Ken Lawrence

Chicago gave birth to coil stamps in 1906, when the first imperforate sheets of 1-cent and 2-cent Series 1902 and 1903 postage stamps were shipped from Washington, so that tinkerers who were trying to build stamp-affixing machines could assemble the stamps in rolls. The most successful machine was developed by ex-Chicagoan Joseph Schermack, who established his mailing machine business in Detroit. Even after that, many of the most important related developments occurred in Chicago, such as the proprietary perforations of the John V. Farwell Company, on stamps affixed by Schermack and Mailometer equipment.



Some Schermack stamp-affixing machines were adapted with a device to punch the stamps with control marks as they were being affixed, and many

In 1908, the Post Office Department authorized the use of perforated insignia on postage stamps as a private security device. Chicago firms were among the first to use perfins.



Control perfin no. 48, shown here on a 2-cent red George Washington stamp, Scott no. 384, was used by the Kabo Corset Company of Chicago. (According to the Perfin Club catalog number system, it is Schermack no. 19, but that is an arbitrarily designated number that is not based on intrinsic features of the control perfins, and does not include all of them that are known.) Courtesy of Atholl S. Glass.

Stamps with perforated control marks are listed and priced in the Vending and Affixing Machine Perforations back-of-the-book chapter of the *Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps*. In every case, they are priced much higher than the corresponding private-perf stamps without control perfins. But Scott does not differentiate among the perfin patterns as perfin specialists do. Some are scarcer and more valuable than others.

George P. Howard, whose 1940 book *The Stamp Machines and Coiled Stamps* is the definitive work on the subject, published a system for identifying Schermack control perfins in the February 1945 *Bureau Specialist*. Except for two experimental varieties (one an 8-hole diamond, the other

a 12-hole open square), the controls are based on a nine-hole square grid, three rows of three. Howard numbered them, and then coded the variety of a given perfin according to the missing holes, reading from the front of the stamp, oriented normally, not from the back as other perfins usually are described.

Thus, his	1	2	3
	4	5	6
	7	8	9

basic grid could yield a stamp with any number of holes from one to nine. If position 3, say, was not punched, that was a No. 3 perfin. If positions 2, 6, and 7 were not punched, that stamp would be a No. 267 perfin. If only position 3 was punched, the stamp would be perfin No. 12456789. Those would look like these patterns:



Control No. 3



Control No. 267

Control No. 12456789

During the Washington-Franklin Committee forum at the Bureau Issues Association meeting in October 1993 at Saint Louis, several members commented on the occasional problem in identifying Schermack control perfins caused by "blind" or omitted holes.

Howard had warned about this as long ago as the February 1945 issue of *The Bureau Specialist*: "In

checking what appear to be new combinations of holes, examine the face of the stamp under a glass; cases are known where 2 or 3 pins did not punch through the paper, but show up as 'blind perforations' when magnified."

I found a possible example of this problem on a cover that I described in a December 13, 1993 *Linn's* article. It is a code 34678 perfin (certified as such by the American Philatelic Expertizing Service), but has faint evidence in raking sunlight of another indicated punch at position 4. If present, it would be an unreported number 3678. Although 3678 had not previously been reported, it is a logical combination.

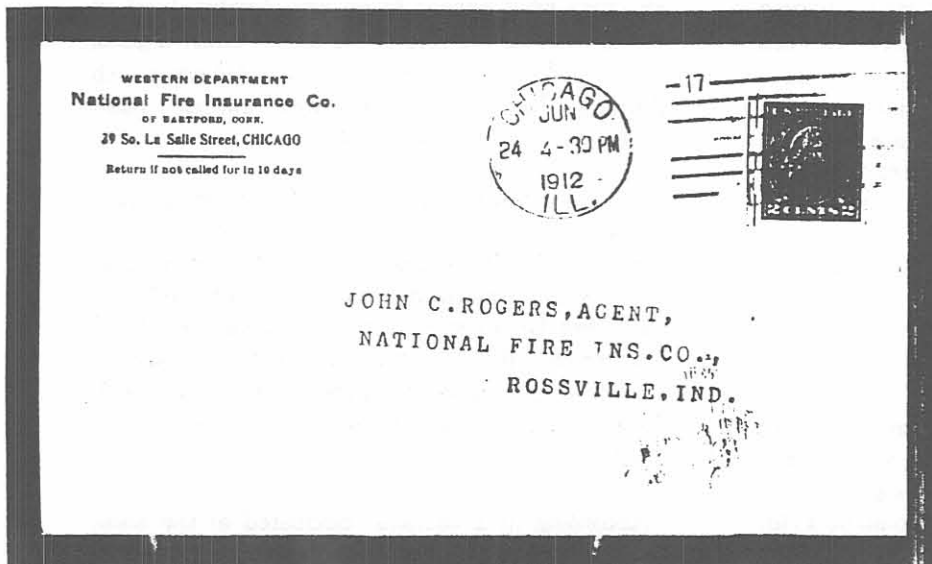
According to a checklist circulated at the Saint Louis meeting by Mundelein collector Atholl S. Glass, Babson Brothers is the identified user of codes 37, 378, and 34678. Al Glass later acquired code 34678 Schermack 2-cent red stamps on 1911 covers with Burlington Watch Company and The Insurance & Fidelity Company corner cards, both also previous known users of code 37 Schermacks.

If the original device used by the mailer for Babson and the others was coded 37 (or possibly just 7, another known but unidentified Schermack control perfin) the missing code in this sequence is either 3468 or 3678, if the machine lost one punch at a time through breakage or wear. By the same logic, the known but unidentified codes 3456789 and 23456789 could be continuations of the same vanishing punch sequence.

I have searched issues of *Perfins* and *The Perfins Bulletin* for reports on Schermack control perfins going back to the earliest report in 1948, and George Howard's *Bureau Specialist* reports for the years 1945 to 1948. I think the evidence supports this explanation.

The February 1972 issue of *The Perfins Bulletin* reported two examples of Schermack III 3-cent violet Washington stamps of 1909, Scott No. 345, with code 37 control perfins. The editor wrote, "It has generally been believed that while the Schermack Type III private perforations with Mailometer code holes are known on the 1c and 2c values of the 1908 series (Scott's 343 and 344), they are known on the 3c value only for philatelic purposes. Vernon Stroupe (#882) has two copies, however, and both are postally used. Vernon writes as follows:

"Last February I found a postally used 3c (Scott 345) with the Mailometer code 37. It was clearly



Control perfin no. 69, shown here on a 2-cent red George Washington stamp on cover, Scott no. 409, was used only by the National Fire Insurance Co. of Chicago. It is no. 24 in the Perfin Club catalog. Courtesy of Atholl S. Glass.

struck Chicago, Ill., with an oval canceler with 77 in the center. A few weeks ago I found another example. It is a better copy than the first, clearly struck with a Chicago oval, but this time the center numeral is 87. It too was dispensed from Mailometer machine 37.' "

Karl Lougee reported another 3-cent code 37 stamp in the September 1975 issue. In the June 1978 issue, C. Schoeps reported a code 37 control perfin on a Schermack III 5-cent blue Washington, but with the catalog number given as No. 345; Richard L. Mewhinney believes the mistake was in calling it a 5-cent blue, and that it really was a 3-cent No. 345. Larry Weiss reported "a 37 pattern on #345" in the July-August 1979 issue. Al Glass has seen eight code 37 perfins on 3-cent No. 345 stamps, canceled by Chicago double-oval devices; he has one with 59 in the center.

George Wagner recently acquired an oversize Babson Brothers cover with a code 37 3-cent No. 345 stamp, canceled by a double-oval Chicago device with 72 in the center.

Scott No. 346, the 4-cent brown George Washington stamp, exists with the 12-hole open square experimental Schermack control perfin, shown by James P. Ehrbar in the February 1979 *Perfins Bulletin*, and reported much earlier by George Howard. Richard Mewhinney reports two

additional examples, possibly the same stamps that were reported to me by Al Glass. Larry Weiss also reported one. I have another, certified as genuine by the American Philatelic Expertizing Service. Based on the Scott listings, this is the scarcest stamp with a Schermack control perfin, priced at \$1,250 in the 1995 edition.

The significant thing about all these reports is that such usages (thick, heavy, and possibly large envelopes) might be expected to damage the perfin punches, or to knock them out of alignment. The punches were positioned just ahead of the stamp-affixing area of the Schermack machine. The machines were designed to feed odd-sized cards and envelopes, not just one-ounce letters, but there must have been limits to the punishment they could endure.

As evidence of the Schermack or Mailometer machine's versatility, I have a cover that is 5½ inches tall, with a Schermack III 1-cent green Washington No. 408 for third-class postage, used in Chicago in April 1912. Al Glass has a 5¼-by-8-inch advertising postcard franked with a No. 314 Schermack 1-cent, canceled 1909 in Chicago. These prove that George Howard was mistaken in his belief that five inches was the maximum envelope height that a Schermack machine could accept.

We know that Babson Brothers or other users of the same machine were sending out mass machine-addressed third-class or possibly fourth-class mailings. The 3-cent frankings would have been quite heavy: up to three ounces if fourth-class samples of merchandise, or six ounces if third-class printed matter -- thus probably quite thick -- and proportionately larger and heavier if franked with 4-cent or 5-cent stamps. Squeezing these envelopes through that equipment at high speed certainly would have caused greater wear than ordinary letter mail. (Naturally, the heaviest and thickest mailings would have been stuffed after the stamps were affixed, but mailing machine operators tend to squeeze as much through as the machine will accept.)

Such usages would not have been common. Only about 300 sheets each of the 3-cent and 5-cent 1908-9 Series were issued imperforate for

affixing-machine use. Somewhat more than double that many of the 4-cent value were issued, but those could have been used on second-tier two-ounce first-class mail as well as on fourth-tier four-ounce fourth-class or eight-ounce third-class mail. (The Universal Postal Union international surface letter rate was 5 cents per ounce at this time, effective October 1, 1907, but the theoretical possibility that 5-cent Schermacks could have been used on international letter mail is nonsensical to pursue. No international letter mailings of sufficient quantity to justify using machine-affixed coils have been documented.) Babson Brothers, Insurance & Fidelity, or Burlington Watch may have been the only significant commercial users of 1908 Series 3-cent Schermacks, and 5-cent if they exist.

Those mailings may also have broken, worn down, or knocked out of alignment the control perforating pins, and thus may account for the sequential disappearance of holes on Schermack III stamps with these users' punch codes. Dick Mewhinney dates code 37 covers from April 1910 through February 1911, and code 34678 covers from April through June 1911; Al Glass has documented code 34678 through December 1911, and George Wagner has a February 1912 Babson cover with a machine-affixed coil stamp that has no control perfin. Dick and Al believe that pin breakage is a possibility, but not misalignment. Al doesn't think the envelope's bulk was a factor, because the perfin operation preceded the affixing. I have worked on enough office machines to have my doubts; supposedly unconnected parts frequently cause problems where theoretically they should not.

Unfortunately the literature on the postal history of private-perf usage on heavy third-class and fourth-class mail is thin to nonexistent, but similar usage during the same period has been studied and documented by precancel specialists. Catalog mailings franked with hand-affixed precancels did not have the dimensional restrictions of machine-affixed stamps, so they are also known with scarce usages of even higher denominations, such as the ELGIN, ILLS. 15-cent Series 1898 stamp, No. 284, as well as the 1-cent through 5-cent and 10-cent Second Bureau Issue precancels. Elsewhere, electrotype precancel overprints on Second Bureau Issue stamps ranged all the way up to the \$5 value. There's also the evidence of the 3-cent Orangeburg coil, Scott No. 389, which was used on thick oversize envelopes that contained Bell & Company patent medicine samples. No one tries to argue that precancel overprints on Second Bureau Issue stamps higher than two cents in denomination are philatelic, so I'm not sure where the idea originated, cited

above, that blames stamp collectors or dealers for 1909 3-cent Schermacks. I would not expect them to be common, but their usage would have been typical on samples of merchandise, catalogs, Christmas calendars, and the like.

This essay has benefited from criticism by Al Glass, Dick Mewhinney, George Wagner, and Larry Weiss of four earlier drafts. I would welcome further information, discussion, and criticism.

Ken Lawrence  
P.O. Box 8040  
State College, PA 16803-8040

This article originally appeared in the August 1995 issue of *Illinois Postal Historian*. It is reprinted here with the permission of Ken Lawrence and Leonard Piskiewicz, Editor *Illinois Postal Historian*.