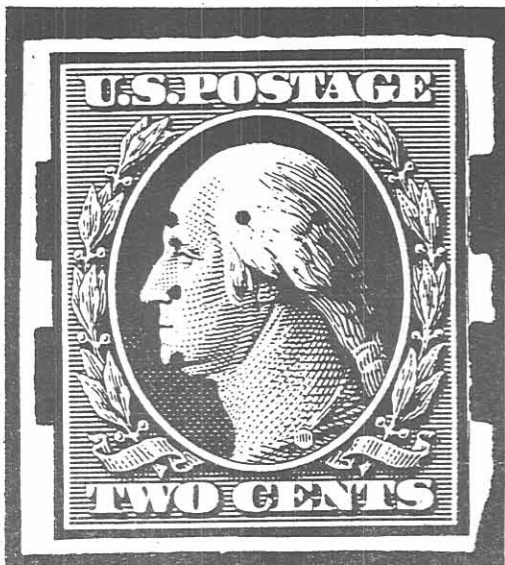


Control Perfins

Atholl S. Glass (#2840)



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Introduction

This paper is written as a preliminary report on several years of studying U.S. Private Perforation Control Perfins. It has taken me through private collections, endless dealers' stock and the literature. As the investigation deepens it becomes more evident that "preliminary" is the correct word to describe this article as the field of study is open enough that major discoveries are still possible.

I hope to encourage you to seek additional data to help fill gaps in the knowledge in this control perfin area. Any help will be appreciated and will be included in future revisions.

What are Perfins?

When you were a novice collector you probably remember throwing "holey" stamps away for being defective. Now these perfin (perforated initials or insignia) stamps are collected by a widening circle of collectors. Perfins were allowed on U.S. stamps by Postal Law and Regulation of May 8, 1908. They were restricted in size to an overall design of 1/2-inch square and holes no more than 1/32-inch in diameter.

Perfins, generally consisting of letters numbers and logos, are used to "brand" company-owned stamps to hopefully limit pilferage and add a little distinction to mailings. Although much of today's mail is franked by indicia or meter, perfins are still used by institutions and governmental agencies where detached offices, while requiring their own mailing facilities, do not have sufficient mail volume to warrant a postal meter.

The organization for collectors of perfins is The Perfins Club, Inc. The Club Catalog¹ of U.S. Perfins lists some six thousand different patterns. Most of these were applied to sheet stamps, but there is a smaller group of recognized pattern which are on Schermack perforated coil stamps.

The Schermack Company

The Schermack story is central to our study of control perfins. From the late 1890s there was a growing market in vending machines to sell small items such as candy bars. The convenience to the public of having postage stamps readily available through vending machines became obvious. It could also be profitable if the stamps were sold at a small premium over face. Concurrently there was an increase in advertising mass mailings which required an efficient method of sealing and stamping letters.

Several companies developed vending and stamp affixing devices² The Joseph J. Schermack Company of Detroit was the most commercially successful of these companies³. The company invented and produced an electrically-operated envelope sealer and stamp affixing machine⁴. It operated at about ten thousand envelopes per hour. Eventually some nine hundred machines⁵ were in operation.

The Schermack sealer-affixer used government-issued imperforate stamps. In 1906 the U.S. Post Office Department began issuing imperforate stamps in printing sheets of 400. This was in response to requests of vending and affixing machine manufactures for a stamp to run in their equipment. The then-current Perf. 12 was too fine to withstand the rigors of the affixing process. Each manufacturer applied perforations to the government-issued imperfs to fit his machines needs.

Schermack's method of converting the 400-stamp imperforate sheets to his requirements was as follows: the left selvage was trimmed from the sheets close to the stamps. The right selvage was trimmed about 5 to 6 mm from the stamps. Then



A typical Schermack Type III perforation coil stamp.

the left edges of the stamps were moistened and adhered on top of the right edge of a trimmed sheet⁶ This process was repeated until 150 sheets formed a strip 3,000 stamps long by 20 stamps high. This coil was then fed through a stroke-perforator which punched out the characteristic Schermack type III slot perforation one vertical row at a time. Variations in feeding the coil resulted in stamps of slightly different widths between perforations. Blocks of this perforation now in collectors hands were cut from the coil at this point in the production cycle as a favor or for sale to an interested collector.

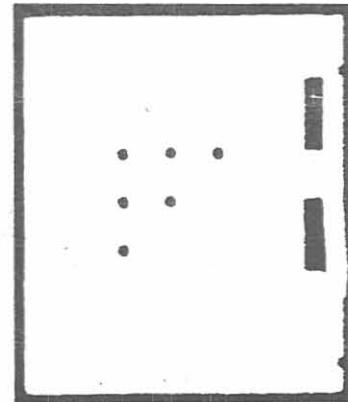
This long sheet coil was now run through a slitter and coiled into twenty 3,000 stamp rolls. Top and bottom selvage was discarded. Resulting rolls were sold at fifty cents over face value. Later, as the P.O. produced its own coils with coarser perforations, it was found that coil stamps bought from the local post office ran satisfactorily through the affixing machine. By late 1927, the last user of Schermack coils was the City of Chicago Water Department. Schermack sealer-affixers continued in service for a few years thereafter but were superseded by Pitney-Bowes meters. Government coil stamps, which were applied by Schermack affixers, can be identified by straight vertical separation cuts and also by confirming previous machine use by the user company.

Control Perfins

The popularity of perfins (remember the 6,000 known patterns) opened a marketing opportunity to

affixing machine manufacturers. Although coiled stamps were locked into the affixer and were automatically counted as they were applied, the apparent advantage of having one's own perfin was still attractive. Bennett D. Straight stepped in to fill this perceived need with his invention of a device to perfin coil stamps during the sealing affixing process. His mechanisms produced control perfins. Straight's patent application of October 9, 1910 was granted February 9, 1915 (#1127543). Ironically the patent was approved about a year after the device was taken out of service.

During the development of Straight's perforator two patterns were tested -- an experimental eight-hole diamond and later a twelve-hole square pattern. The final commercially accepted model produced a nine-hole square pattern in which the elimination of perforating pins would result in a great number of unique identifying perfin patterns.



Control perfin. Stamp image was photographically dropped out to show control perfins. This is pattern 689 according to numbering system of missing perfins.

Important to understanding control perfins is the fact that perfins were applied singly to the stamp immediately before being severed from the coil. The single stamp was then moistened and adhered to the sealed envelope. Multiples of control perfins do not exist and unused singles are invariably without original gum and resulted from missed cancellations. Two unused gummed strips are known to exist with the right stamp perfined and the balance of the strip without perfins. Such strips were probably created by stopping the affixing process in mid-cycle and then removing the remaining coil from the affixer.

While commercial mass mailings by control perfin users consumed great quantities of stamps and envelopes, relatively few remain for collectors today.

Commercial and advertising mail was then as now viewed as "junk mail" and was quickly discarded.

How to Identify Control Perfins

To catalog and identify control perfins the following conventions were proposed by George P. Howard in the February 1945 Bureau Specialist and have since become the accepted standard

Stamp is viewed face and head up.

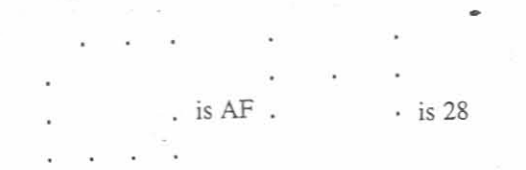
Twelve-hole experimental pattern is lettered.



Nine-hole pattern is numbered:



Each control perfin is then identified by the missing holes, Thus:



Ninety-one different⁷ nine-hole patterns have been found to date. My records identify 38 companies using control perfins. There are instances where the same perfin pattern has been found on different corner card covers. There is also the probability of a mailing service or printer using its control perfin-equipped sealer-affixer on mailing jobs received from various companies.

To further complicate identification there is the fact of perforating pin breakage which resulted in two or more patterns from the same machine or company. Some examples of this condition are Babson Bros. perfin patterns 37, 137 and 34578, and Kabo Corset Company's 48 where pin breakage resulted in 1245678 leaving only two perforating pins, 3 and 9, still punching. High-speed mass mailings contributed to wear and finally pin breakage.

Recently George Wagner discovered perfin 37 on a Scott #345 commercial cover from Babson Bros. Prior to this discovery it was suspected that 345 with Schermack perfs was of philatelic origin. All 345 control perfin stamps have Chicago oval hand cancels with different numbers (59, 72, 77, 87) inside the oval indicating that several 3¢ mailings may have been made.

The rarest of control perfins is a twelve-hole 4¢ Scott 346 which catalogs at \$1,250 in the 1996 *Scott Specialized*. I am aware of the existence of twelve singles; none are known on cover. Among the rarities is the diamond eight-hole experimental on Scott 343 and 344 where only one cover each of the 1¢ and 2¢ is known.

Conclusion

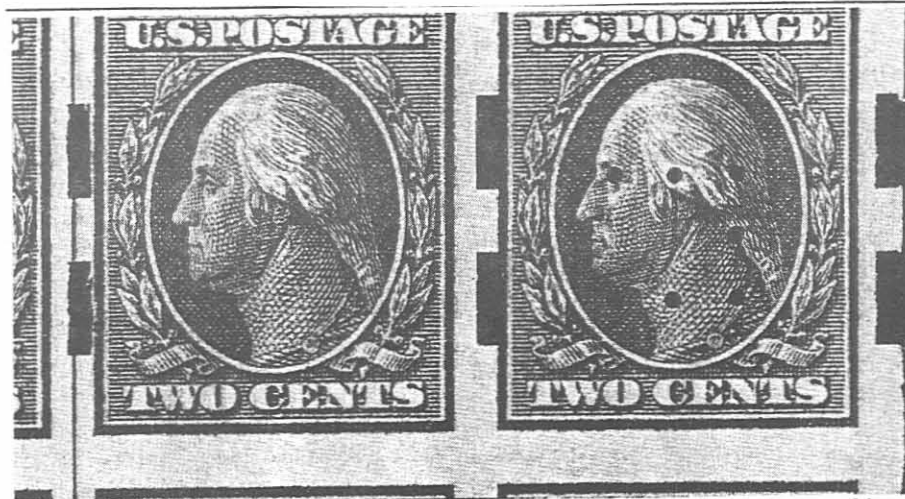
I hope that the preceding article will encourage you to examine your collection and accumulations of Washington-Franklins for examples of control perfins. Due to the small size of the perfin holes, which are frequently overprinted with a cancellation, these stamps are not easy to spot, but they do represent an era of mail handling which is of historical interest to philatelists. Should you find any examples of control perfins I will appreciate receiving a listing of single stamps by Scott number and perfin pattern number and a photocopy of any covers. All new information will be incorporated into a future article on control perfin usage. Your comments and Suggestions will also be appreciated and will be answered promptly. You may write either to me or the Editor. Atholl S. Glass, 383 Banbury Road, Mundeleine, IL 60060-1108.

1. *Catalog of United States Perfins*, Balough and Balough (1979), The Perfins Club.

2. These companies are listed in Scott U.S. Specialized Catalog as having issued vending and affixing machines perforations: The Attleboro Stamp Co.; The Brinkerhoff Co.; International Vending Machine Co.; The Mailometer Co.; The Schermack Co.; U.S. Automatic Vending Co..

3. *The Stamp Machines and Coiled Stamps*, George P. Howard (1943) H.L. Lindquist Publications, pp. 34-41. This book is the bible of private perforation collectors. Howard was an active student in this area and had the advantage of knowing and corresponding with the then still living principal people involved in vending and affixing machine development.

(Please turn to page 113)



Strip with control perfins on right stamp only. One of two known strips. Affixer was stopped just before perforated stamp was applied to envelope. (Photo courtesy of Bill Hatton)

4. After a management disagreement, Joseph Schermack sold his interest to former partners who renamed the company The Mailometer Company. Subsequently the Schermack sealer-affixer was sold with only a nameplate change as the Mail-om-eter sealer-affixer. For this reason the name Schermack is used in this article although the actual machine may have carried a Mail-om-eter nameplate.

5. James Baird has in his library a 1917 ad of Mailometer Co. listing some 900 "satisfied users." Perhaps there were additional users who were less than satisfied.

6. The coiling process resulted in only two plate numbers per sheet surviving and, with the exception of the right end of the coil, numbers are covered by the paste up.

7. The *Catalog of U.S. Perfins* identifies 76 patterns. Fifteen additional patterns are known in collections but not listed in the 1979 edition. Catalog revision is underway and may list some or all of these recent discoveries.