



NPL Research
U.S. PLATE NUMBER CHECKLIST
Charles Neyhart

Periodically I encounter collecting situations in which plate number data is important. In those cases, I have made good use of a not-well-known publication available in the Library: *U.S. Plate Number Checklist*. If you collect varieties, you will find this publication useful and, in some cases, indispensable. I'm likely to use the *Durland Standard Plate Number Catalog* and other supporting data sources in conjunction with the *Checklist*.

THE CHECKLIST

The *U.S. Plate Number Checklist* is a compilation of production data on every stamp printing plate prepared by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, beginning with plate number 1.¹ Work on the *Checklist* began as early as 1895 when J.W. Scott Co. of New York published the first list. Eventually, responsibility for the *Checklist* was assumed by the Bureau Issues Association, now called the United States Stamp Society, who also publishes the *Durland Catalog* and the journal *The United States Specialist*. The full *Checklist*, covering Bureau plates 1 – 40,000, was last copyrighted in 1990, and was most recently updated in 2008. It is presented in two blue binders located in the SPR [Stamp Production] shelf of the NPL Collection.

The *Checklist* is arranged on two facing pages, that is., data for a specific plate number extends across both pages. Below is a sample left-hand page from the *Checklist*.

Plate #	BIA rep	Impt	Denomination, type	Subj	Scott #, Wmk, Perf			Sid Init	Fin Init	Coils Varieties, Comments
					SL 12	SL impf	SL 10			
6300	16	IX	2 ¢	400	406	409	JIG	CHR	409E	
6301	16	IX	1 ¢	400	405	408	CIR	RD	412	
6302	16	IX	2 ¢	400	406	409	JCN	WES	411	
6303	17	IX	"	"	"	"	"	CHR		
6304	16	IX	"	"	"	"	JAM	HWW		
6305	15	IX	1 ¢	400	405		CIR	CHR	410	
6306	24	IX	2¢ Panama Pac	280	398		WMcA	JWB↑		

Focus on plate number 6306 in the last row of the sample page. Moving across the page, 24 examples of plate 6306 were confirmed by BIA members. Plate 6306 had Imprint style IX,

¹ The Bureau, which held the U.S. stamp printing contract from 1894 to 2005, numbered its printing plates consecutively based on the date a plate was "assigned" to be made.

which meant that no Bureau imprint appeared in the marginal selvage. Plate 6306 printed the 2-cent Panama-Pacific stamp. It was laid out in 280 subjects [14 x 20]. The printed stamps were perforated gauge 12 and printed on paper with a single-line watermark. The Scott catalog number is 398. The siderographer's initials are WMcA [William A. McAleer]; the plate finisher's initials are JWB [Joseph W. Butler] pointing up. This was not a coil or an overprint on U.S. possessions or revenue stamps; no peculiarities were noted about the stamps printed from this plate.

Below is the corresponding right-hand page for plate number 6306, which focuses on production-related dates.

Plate #	Assigned	Dates on which plate was:				Melted	Impressions to 1918	Comments
		Certi- fied	to Press	Cancel- led				
6300	12-14-12	1-2-13	2-11-13	4-23-13	2-4-14	132,125		
6301	12-17-12	12-30-12	2-25-13	"	"	94,506		
6302	"	1-3-13	2-14-13	"	"	107,850		
6303	"	1-6-13	2-5-13	4-5-13	"	91,476		
6304	12-18-12	1-9-13	1-10-13	3-5-13	"	68,475	ap2	
6305	12-19-12	1-7-13	3-3-13	4-30-13	"	88,650		
6306	"	12-23-12	12-23-12	2-27-13	"	63,000	ap2	

Plate 6306 was assigned to be made December 19, 1912; the plate proof was certified December 23, 1912; and the plate first went to press on the same day. The plate was dropped from the press and cancelled February 27, 1913. Plate 6306 was destroyed by melting February 4, 1914. Plate 6306 produced 63,000 impressions [which when multiplied by the 280 subjects on the plate yields 17,640,000 stamps]. The comment 'ap2' indicates that the plate was at press two separate times between December 23, 1912 and February 27, 1913.

PANAMA-PACIFIC ISSUE

I first used the *U.S. Plate Number Checklist* when researching the 2½-cent Bunker Hill coil from the Liberty series [See *Book Reports*, November 2007]. I was questioning, along with other researchers, why the catalog value for the 'small hole' coil was so much greater than that for the 'large hole' version. Reference to the *Checklist* provided a partial answer, namely that twice as many large hole stamps were printed.²

For this article, the research question involves validating the longstanding catalog value differentials between the two perforation versions of the Panama-Pacific commemorative issue, Scott 397-400A and their varieties, Scott 401-404.

The Panama-Pacific International Exposition, held in San Francisco, opened February 20 and closed December 4, 1915. The U.S. Post Office Department agreed to provide advance promotion of the Exposition by issuing a four-stamp commemorative series in 1-, 2-, 5- and 10-cent denominations. Planning for the stamp series began in mid-1912 and the 1-, 5-, and

² As noted in the cited *Book Reports* article, the fact that all of the small hole coils were precanceled also played a role in the eventual availability of that stamp to collectors.

10-cent denominations were issued January 1, 1913, a full two years before the scheduled opening of the Exposition.³ The 2-cent was issued later in January.⁴ The 10-cent denomination, originally printed in a hard-to-see orange yellow color was replaced quickly with a darker orange version in August 1913; this is cataloged 400A.

The original issue, Scott 397-400A, was perforated 12, the then standard Bureau gauge. The brittleness of gauge 12 perforations was proving problematic with users of ordinary stamps, thus, the USPOD ordered a change to a coarser gauge 10 perforation in 1914. The change also applied to the commemorative Panama-Pacific issue, resulting in the unique varieties, Scott 401-404. The Bureau changeover was done gradually, one perforating machine at a time; thus, we do not know the exact changeover dates for the Panama-Pacific issue. The first stamp with perforation gauge 10 was the ordinary definitive Scott 424 issued September 5, 1914.⁵



The USPOD did not regard the perforation change to the Panama-Pacific stamps as a “new” issue; thus, there was no changeover announcement. Bureau records are silent on when the perforation change took effect and no separate count was kept by the Bureau of the respective perforation totals printed.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Panama-Pacific Issue

	Scott Perf. 12	Issue Date [EDU]	Scott Perf. 10	Issue Date [EDU]	Number of Plates	Initial Order
1-cent	397	1-1-1913	401	[12-21-1914]	16	80 mil.
2-cent	398	[1-17-1913]	402	[1-13-1915]	27	150 mil.
5-cent	399	1-1-1913	403	[2-6-1915]	4	8 mil.
10cent	400	1-1-1913	404	[8-27-1915]	4	5 mil.
	400A	[11-12-1913]				



Some conventional sources estimate that roughly equal numbers of perforated 12 and perforated 10 stamps were issued. This assertion is difficult to accept for a variety of reasons. Moreover, the assumption of equal numbers does not, a priori, square with the catalog values for these stamps as shown in Table 2 below [using 2010 MNH catalog values].

³ Max Johl gives different dates than Scott: 1-cent, 12-26-1912; 5-cent, 12-13-1912; and 10-cent, 12-26-1912. See: *The United States Commemorative Stamps of the 20th Century*, Vol. 1 [1947].

⁴ The original design inscription for the 2-cent denomination was erroneously engraved ‘Gatun Locks’ of the Panama Canal instead of the correct ‘Pedro Miguel Locks.’ Twenty to thirty million Gatun Locks stamps were printed before the error was discovered. These were destroyed by the Bureau and the design inscription changed to ‘Panama Canal.’ Proofs of the Gatun Locks stamps exist.

⁵ The means by which the Bureau conducted the changeover led to the compound perforation anomalies: 12 x 10 and 10 x 12.

TABLE 2
A Comparison of Catalog Values

	Perforated 12		Perforated 10	
	Scott	CV	Scott	CV
1-cent	397	\$40	401	\$60
2-cent	398	\$40	402	\$170
5-cent	399	\$160	403	\$390
10cent	400	\$270	404	\$1,750
	400A	\$450		

ANALYSIS

I used *Durland* to identify the plates used to print the Panama-Pacific issue and then transferred the printing data for each identified plate from the *Checklist* into a spreadsheet for analysis. [A side note: The power-driven flat plate presses used at the Bureau were usually mounted up with four plates at one time. With limited exception, all four-plate sets used in the Panama-Pacific issue remained intact for their printing history.]

The 1- and 2-cent denominations [Scott 397/401 and 398/402] were each printed from multiple four-plate sets. For each individual plate, the *Checklist* designates the appropriate Scott number [e.g., 1-cent: either 397 or 401], except for those plates used to print both perforation versions, in which case it lists both Scott numbers. While it was a relatively simple matter to confirm that output from the early plates were perforated 12 and that from the late plates was perforated 10, I needed to make certain assumptions to estimate the ‘split’ for those plates that printed both versions. Because the common plates were at press multiple times, I linearly interpolated to arrive at estimated dates for which these plates were at press, and then compared each date to a generalized cut-off date of 3-months prior to the issuance of each perforated gauge 10 stamp.⁶ Stamp output from an estimated ‘at press’ date prior to the cut-off date was considered part of the perforation 12 series; output from an ‘at press’ date after the cut-off date was treated as being part of the perforation 10 series.⁷

The 5- and 10-cent denominations [Scott 399/403 and 400-400A/404] were each printed with single four-plate sets. The *Checklist* gives the date that each plate set first went to press and the date each set was dropped from the press. Here, I supplemented the *Checklist* printing data with annual stamp shipping data [July 1 thru June 30] reported by the Bureau. For the 5-cent denomination, 40 percent of the total was shipped through 6-30-1914, seven months before the issuance of Scott 403. Thus, all of that was assigned to the perforation 12 series. The additional 30 percent shipped between 7-1-1914 and 6-30-1915 is allocable



⁶ The 3-month cut-off date is an arithmetic compromise between the USPOD drawing down the supply of the perforated 12 stamps and the gradual pace of the mechanical changeover to gauge 10 perforations.

⁷ The individual dates a plate was at press and the printing output for each time at press are available in *Historical Record of Post Office Plates* [up to plate 6328] and *Record Book of Postage Stamp Plates* that were once maintained at the Bureau. Their present location is not known by the author.

to both perforation series. This split was made by using a linear assignment of those amounts shipped prior to the cut-off date, in this case November 6, 1914, to the perforation 12 series [4-months worth] and the remainder to the perforation 10 series. A similar technique was used for the 10-cent denomination.

Based on the forgoing, the relative percentages ‘assigned’ to the perforated 12 and perforated 10 versions are given in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Percentages of Output Assigned to the Panama-Pacific Stamps

	Perforated 12		Perforated 10		Shipped
	Scott	% of Total	Scott	% of Total	
1-cent	397	75	401	25	334,796,926
2-cent	398	83	402	17	503,713,086
5-cent	399	50	403	50	29,088,726
10cent	400	67	404	33	16,968,365
	400A				

As to difference between Scott 400 and 400A, the USPOD made the request for a color change April 9, 1913 and the first of Scott 400A were shipped August 25, 1913. Estimated based on shipping data, 44 percent of the stamps were Scott 400 and 56 percent were 400A.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the potential effects of ‘smoothing’ assumptions underlying the methodology herein, the allocation of printing totals to the two perforation versions of the Panama-Pacific issue by and large support the higher catalog values for the varieties, Scott 401-404. There is evidence that there were fewer, and some times considerably so, of the perforated 10 stamps printed, with the possible exception being the 5-cent denomination, Scott 403.

Other reasons, though, commingle with the production of fewer stamps to explain why there seem to be fewer perforation 10 stamps available to collectors, each of which attempts to account for why those stamps were generally overlooked by collectors and dealers when they were issued, including: [1] the perforation 12 stamps were in production and circulation for two years prior to the issuance of the perforated 10 stamps while the perforated 10 stamps were only current for one year or less.⁸ [2] The ‘glow’ of the issue may have worn off by the time the perforated 10 stamps were issued. [3] The USPOD did not, as a matter of policy, identify and promote the perforated 10 stamps as a ‘new’ issue. [4] The USPOD simply may have ordered fewer stamps later in the known limited life of this commemorative issue.



‘Gatun Locks’ Error

⁸I am not aware that the POD called back unsold stamps at or shortly after the close of the Exposition. Such an action would have reduced the number of perforated 10 stamps available.

HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

NPL has benefited recently from fortuitous arrangements with other philatelic libraries to fill holes in its runs of periodicals. The American Philatelic Research Library, Western Philatelic Library, Rocky Mountain Philatelic Library and Postal History Foundation have kindly provided NPL with a wide assortment of missing issues from their duplicate periodicals. [Recall that NPL did a similar thing with its duplicates from the Jerry Matson donation.] As a result, NPL was able to add issues to the following journals: *BNA Topics* [Canada], *Bureau [U.S.] Specialist*, *Canadian Philatelist*, *China Clipper*, *Chronicle of U.S. Classic Postal Issues*, *Coil Line*, *Collectors Club Philatelist*, *German Postal Specialist*, *Israel Philatelist*, *Japanese Philately*, *London Philatelist*, *Mexicana*, *Philatelic Communicator*, *Precancel Bee* [New to NPL], *Precancel Forum*, *Precancel Optimist* [New], *SPA Journal*, *Topical Time*, *Trans-Mississippi* [New] and *Weekly Philatelic Gossip*.

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Contact: P.O. Box 6375, Portland, OR 97228-6375
(503) 284-6770

nwpl@qwestoffice.net

www.nwpl.org

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