

**DEPARTMENTAL SPECIAL PRINTINGS:
MORE THAN ONE OVERPRINT PLATE****WILLIAM E. MOOZ AND ROBERT MUSTACICH**

The study and collection of the 1875 special printings of the United States Departmental stamps is rife with interesting questions and possibilities. Just think, there are 92 face-different stamps, of which 27 were sold in quantities less than 100. Despite this, there were four printings, and no less than four errors. The stamps have been intensively studied, but some tantalizing questions remain. This study focuses on one of those questions.

The first printing of these stamps was of 10,000 of each of the denominations lower than \$2. That accounts for 100 sheets of 100 stamps per sheet, or 8,800 sheets. To prevent the use of these stamps by the general public, each stamp was overprinted with the word SPECIMEN. The overprint was accomplished by typesetting a plate with the word SPECIMEN in 100 places, and then using this plate to overprint the previously prepared sheets of stamps. The plate was rather like a common rubber stamp that has 100 words on it.

When the overprint plate was typeset, the compositor made an error in Position 21, by setting the type to read SEPCIMEN instead of SPECIMEN. Apparently all sheets of the Agriculture, Justice, Navy, Post Office, State and War Departments were overprinted with this plate, and each of these sheets contained the SEPCIMEN error at Position 21. Sheets of the Executive, Interior and Treasury Departments did not contain the error.

As philatelists began to collect these stamps, at least two 2¢ Interior stamps were discovered that showed the error. This situation has been explained in several ways. Combs states "Inasmuch as at least one full sheet of the 2¢ Interior is known without the SEPCIMEN error, it is generally agreed that the error was discovered and corrected while printing this denomination."¹ Combs goes on to say that "Perry has seen a complete sheet of 100 2¢ Interior with the error, and he possessed a sheet of 100 without the error."²

The reasoning in the literature is consistent with the supposition that only one overprint plate was used in overprinting the 8,800 sheets of stamps, and that that plate was corrected during the overprinting process by correcting the spelling error in position 21. Nowhere in the literature is it suggested that more than one overprint plate was prepared and used. This study addresses that assumption.

We have previously used advanced methods for image comparisons to compare individual overprints looking for evidence of plate corrections. These methods remove color and provide automated alignment of individual overprints. However, plate-wide comparisons can be done with the simpler method of aligning digital transparencies. A transparent image of one multiple can then be overlaid onto the image of another multiple so that the overprints are aligned. If the same overprint plate was used on the test multiple as in the transparent image, the overprints should match exactly.

**1¢ AGRICULTURE/1¢ WAR OVERLAY
SHOWS PERFECT ALIGNMENT OF OVERPRINTS**

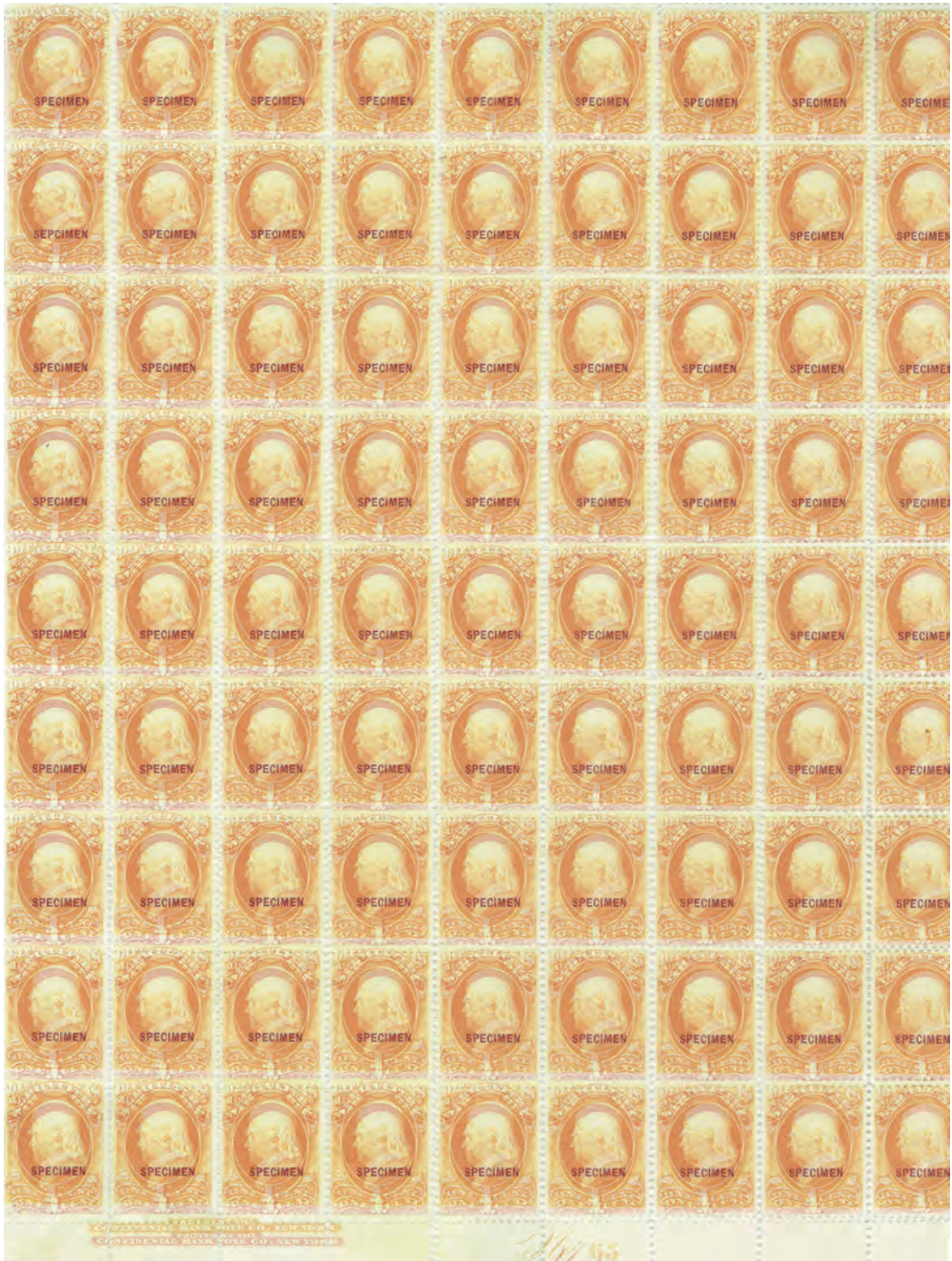


Figure 1. Overlay of partial sheets of 1¢ Agriculture and 1¢ War Department overprints showing exact matching of the overprints. The same overprint plate was used for both.

We first tested this idea by making a transparent image of a 1¢ Agriculture sheet containing the SEPCIMEN error. This was then superimposed on a sheet of the 1¢ War Department that also contained the SEPCIMEN error. The overprints matched exactly, showing

**1¢ AGRICULTURE/1¢ WAR OVERLAY:
ENLARGEMENT OF UPPER LEFT QUADRANT**

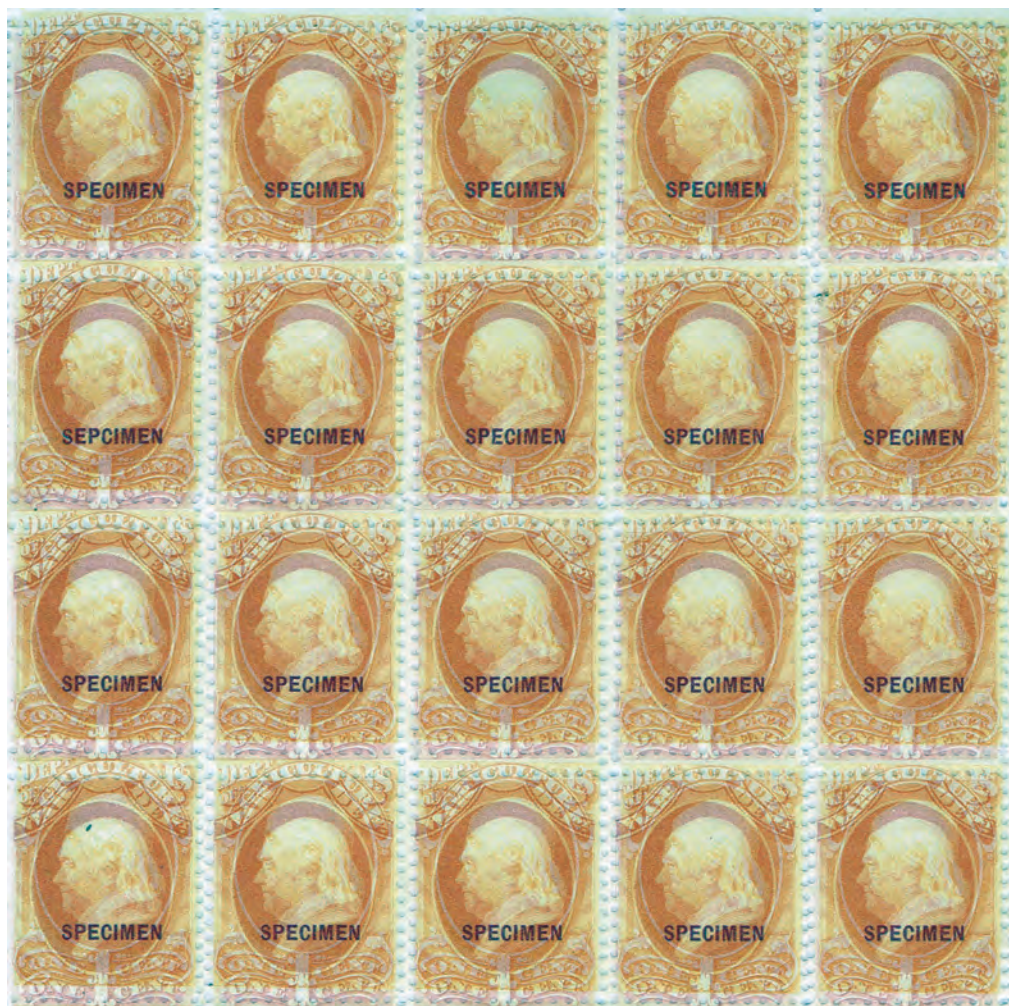


Figure 1a. Enlarged view of the upper left 20 stamps from the Figure 1 overlay, with contrast enhanced, illustrating the very high quality of the overprint matching. In all positions, the black overprints align perfectly, so that the word "SPECIMEN" appears as a single imprint.

that the overprint plate used on both the 1¢ Agriculture and 1¢ War were identical. This match is shown in Figure 1. The Figure 1 image shows only part of the sheet. It appears to be cropped at top and at right because the full sheets were too wide to fit our scanner; but this in no way diminishes the accuracy of our observations.

Figure 1a shows an enlarged view of the upper left quadrant of the Figure 1 image. It shows in even greater detail the high quality of the match observed over the entire sheet. There can be no question: the SPECIMEN overprints on these two sheets, one Agriculture and one War, were printed from the same plate.

**1¢ INTERIOR/1¢ WAR OVERLAY
SHOWS IMPERFECT ALIGNMENT OF OVERPRINTS**



Figure 2. The overlay of the 1¢ War Department and 2¢ Interior with the best overall alignment of the overprints still shows extensive mismatch throughout the two sheets.

Next a transparent image of a 2¢ Interior sheet (without the SPECIMEN error in Position 21) was superimposed on the 1¢ War sheet (which contains the error), and it was clear that the overprints on the Interior sheet were created from a different plate. Figure 2 illustrates this comparison. Most of positions fail to match, some quite markedly.

**1¢ INTERIOR/1¢ WAR OVERLAY:
ENLARGEMENT OF UPPER LEFT QUADRANT
SHOWS MISALIGNMENT OF OVERPRINTS**

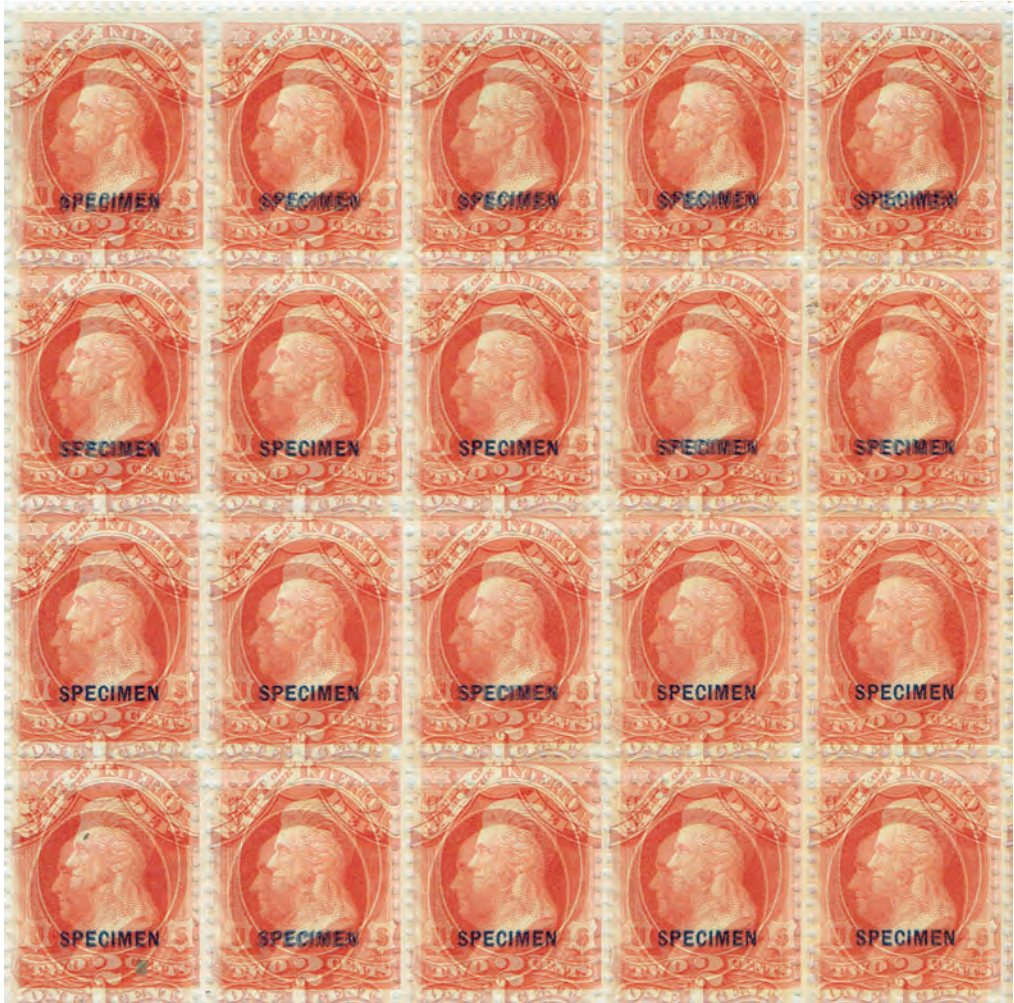


Figure 2a. Contrast-enhanced view of the upper left 25 stamps in Figure 2. While certain overprints can be made to match each other over the sheet, others remain far from alignment. The mismatches in the top row are especially pronounced. Instead of single images, the overprints appear fuzzy and out-of-focus, indicating two different overprint plates.

Figure 2a shows the upper 20 stamps from Figure 2. The poor matching is quite profound in the upper row. This failure to match proves that the Position 21 error was not corrected during the printing of the Interior overprints. In fact, a completely different overprint plate was used to create the overprints on the 2¢ Interior stamp sheet that does not show the SEPCIMEN error.



Figure 3. Overlaying the 2¢ Interior sheet onto a large irregular block of the 1¢ Treasury stamp shows excellent matching of the overprints.

To continue this analysis, the transparent image of the 2¢ Interior sheet was then laid successively on each of two large 1¢ Treasury multiples, and in each case the match was exact, showing that the same overprint plate was used on both the 2¢ Interior and 1¢ Treasury sheets. These matches are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

The Executive Department also does not show any SEPCIMEN errors, and this was the last test we made. A large 2¢ Executive multiple was located and a transparency of this was superimposed on the 2¢ Interior test image. We expected to find that these overprints would be from the same plate, but this could not be confirmed, as positions 2, 3, 4, 13, 14,

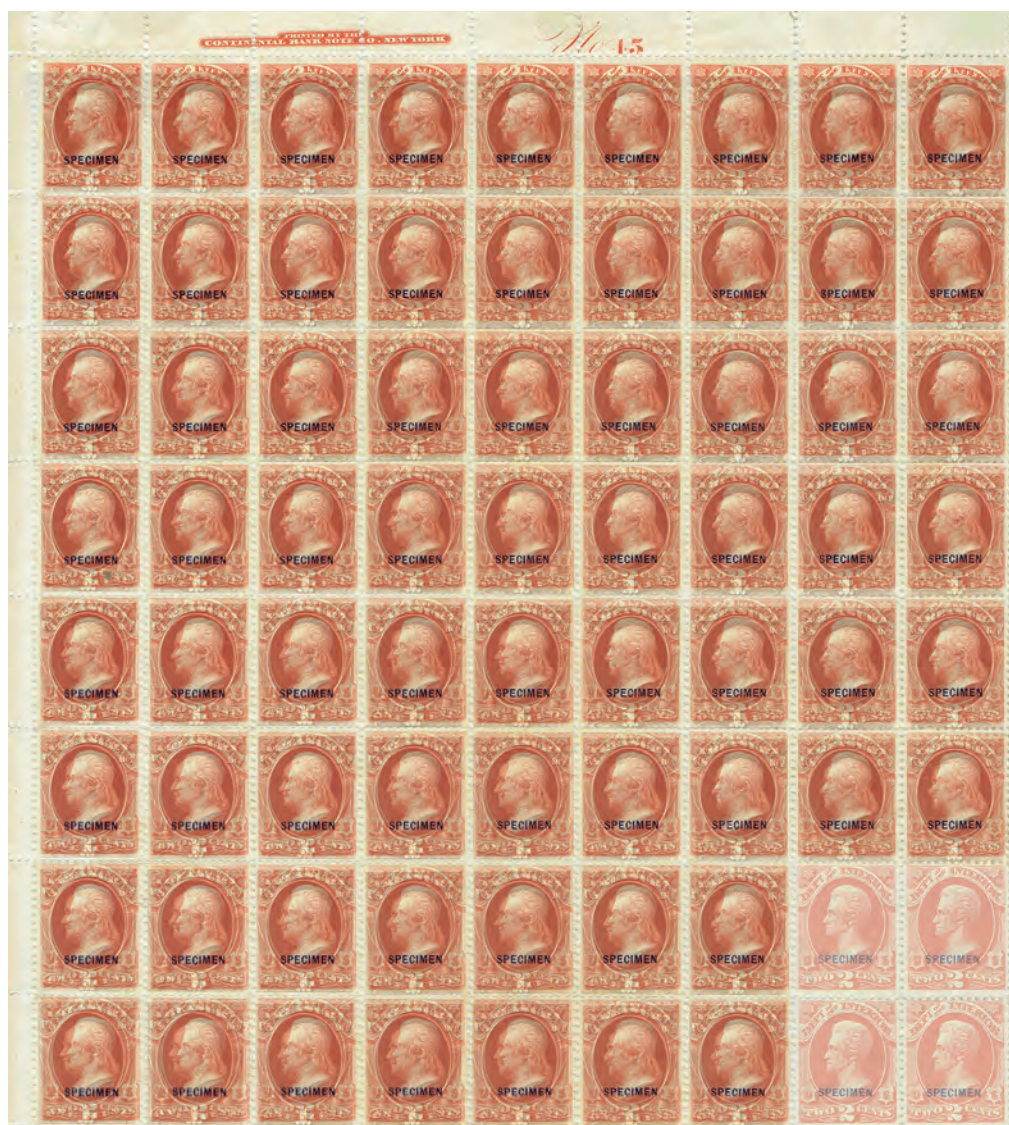


Figure 4. Overlay the 2¢ Interior sheet on to another large 1¢ Treasury multiple: Again, the result is a very close matching of the overprint placements. No question, the same overprint plate was used to create both the Interior and Treasury stamps.

15 and 16 did not superimpose perfectly. This overlay shown in Figure 5 (next page), with the margin imprints in proximity, was the best alignment we could find in testing different possible overlay positions. There are mismatches in most positions. Those in Positions 13-16 are especially profound. In Figure 5a we show an extreme enlargement of the overprints from Positions 14-16, from which the underlying color of the stamps has largely been removed. This more clearly shows the extremity of the displacement.

Conclusion

The tentative conclusion of this study is that Combs' anecdotal explanation of the 2¢ Interior SEPCIMEN is incorrect. A different overprint plate was used than that which con-



Figure 5. An overlay of the best alignment achieved with the 2¢ Interior and a 2¢ Executive multiple showing positions 2, 3, 4, 13, 14,15 and 16 mismatches



Figure 5a. An enlargement of three of the overprints (Positions 14-16) from the overlay image in Figure 5, with the underlying stamp colors electronically enhanced to show as clearly as possible the displacement of the superimposed overprint images. The displacement is almost one millimeter both north and east.

tained the SEPCIMEN error. This different overprint plate was also used on the 1¢ Treasury Department stamps. We assumed that this different overprint plate would also have been used on the Executive Department, but the test did not confirm this, showing instead that a third overprint plate was also used. Therefore at least three different overprint plates were prepared and used on this issue.

Endnotes

1. W.V. Combs, *U. S. Departmental Specimen Stamps* (State College, Pa.: American Philatelic Society, 1965), pg. 37.
2. See Elliot Perry, "Specimen Errors on Department Stamps," *Stamps*, Feb. 11, 1933, pg. 303. ■

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