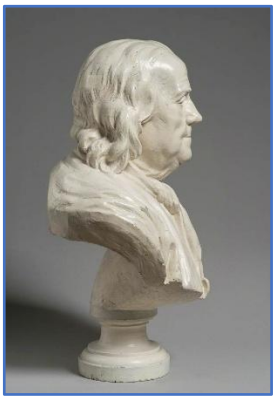
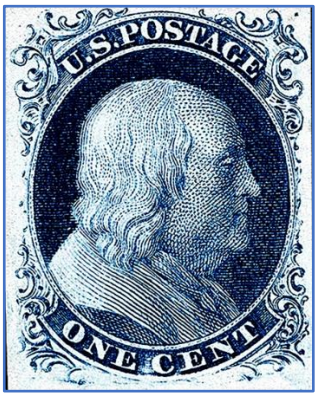
I Have the Blues

By: Mike Smith

Yes, I really do. What I am referring to are the first one-cent postage stamps the United States Post Office (USPO) commissioned for production to deliver domestic mail. These, of course, are the blue Benjamin Franklin issues which dominated the early classic era from 1851 through 1861 inspired from a bust crafted in 1777 by French sculptor Jean-Jacques Caffieri (1725 – 1792). The first postage stamp ever issued in 1840 by Great Britain is famously called the Penny Black. I'd like to think of the first U.S. 1-cent issue as the *Penny Blue*!





Most collectors probably have one of the more common versions of this stamp in their collection. Advanced collectors may have several, but most do not have them all. Through an Act of Congress on March 3, 1851, a one-cent fee was required to pay postage effective June 30, 1851, for delivery of newspapers, circulars, drop or local letters, and in some cities starting in 1856, a carrier fee. They were first issued as an imperforate gummed stamp between 1851 and 1857 and printed by Toppan, Carpenter, Casilear & Co. Once perforating machines became available, the USPO changed over to a 15.5 perforated gummed stamp printed by Toppan, Carpenter & Co. producing stamps from 1857 until 1861 (Casilear retired in 1854).

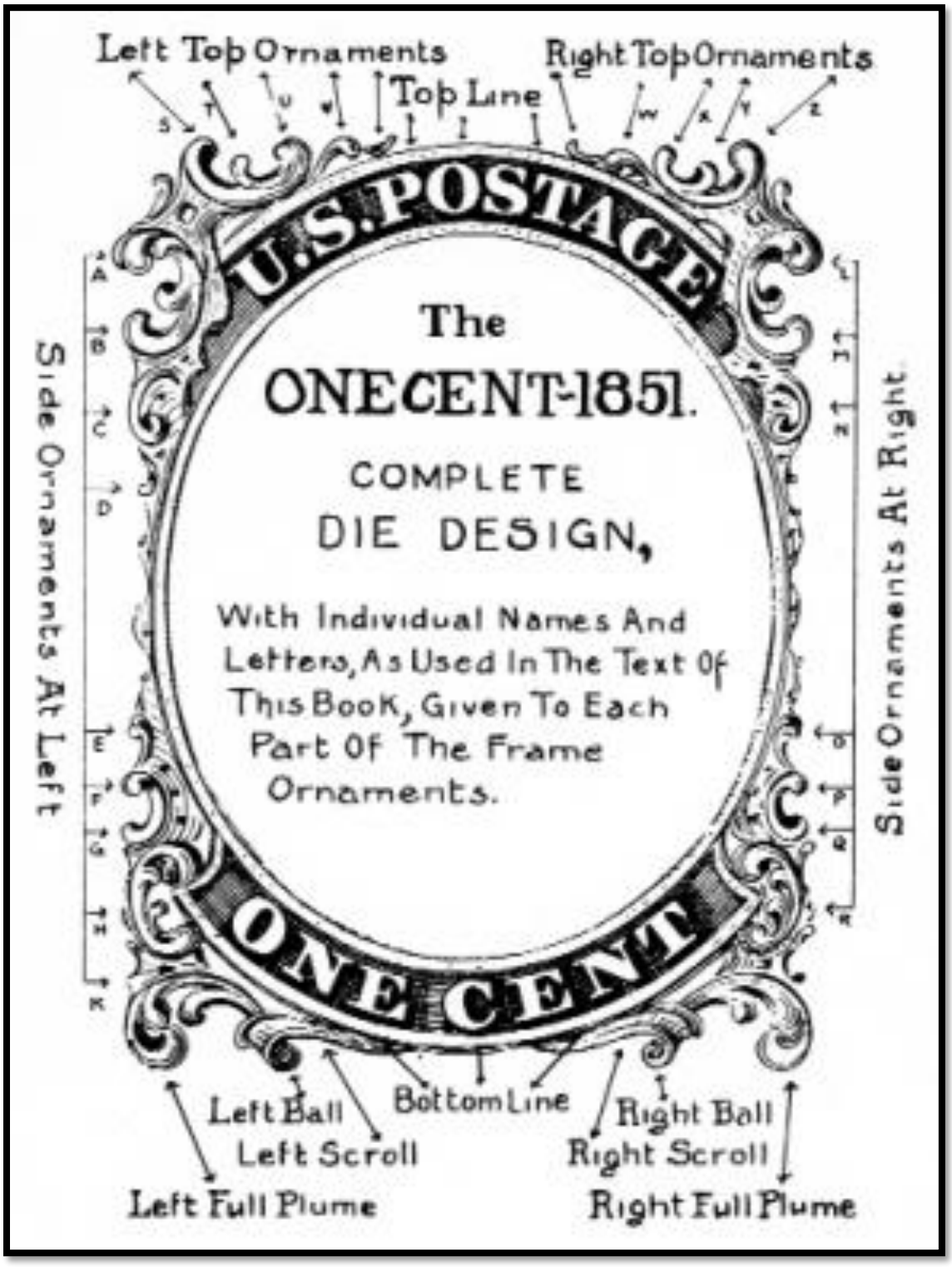
Due to the nature of the technology, craftsmanship, tools of the trade, space constraints and other limiting factors in the mid-1800s, producing stamp consistency was a challenge. As a result, many types and varieties arose in order to "fit" the individual subjects within the space constraints of the plate. In fact, many books detailing these nuances have been published by experts who spent countless hours researching the history of the printing of these stamps, specifically Stanley B. Ashbrook. Back then, nobody cared, but to the student philatelist, ah! Plating nomenclature is defined as the position number on the plate, the right or left side, the plate number and if applicable for Plate 1, early or late state. For example, 7R1E means the stamp subject is from the top row, 7th position on the right pane of Plate 1 Early.

So, let's dive into this mess just a bit. The imperforate issues comprise Scott numbers 5, 5A, 6/6b, 7, 8, 8A and 9. The perforated issues comprise Scott numbers 18, 19/19b, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24. Both were printed on plates consisting of 200 subjects. These plates were divided into two panes of 100, a left and a right pane. Each pane was laid out in a 10 x 10 matrix with 10 rows and 10 columns starting with the top left being position# 1 and the bottom right being position #100.

A total of 12 steel plates were made to print all of the 1-cent Franklin issues over the 10-year period; however, they saw varying amounts of usage and not all of them were pressed into service. In fact, Plate 6 was damaged in production and destroyed before any stamps were ever printed. Other plates saw limited use while others were used extensively. Plate 1 endured heavy wear and subjects were re-entered/recut resulting in Plate 1 Early and Plate 1 Late. Plates 1 through 4 were used to print both imperforate and perforated stamps, whereas Plates 5 through 12 (less Plate 6) were exclusively used for the 15.5 perforated issues.

The purpose of this article is not to recreate the detailed work of others, but to highlight at the top level the plates that produced the different types between the imperforate and perforated stamps utilizing examples from my collection, where available.

It was the intent of the USPO and the printer to create a complete die design that included the full elaborate ornamentation and scroll work as pictured below. That is in a perfect world. In reality, the manufacturer was forced to trim the design by burnishing away parts of the ornamentation to accommodate the extremely tight fit of the individual subjects onto the plates. This yielded less than desirable results, but for the future of philately, a subject of interest and collectability! The fit was so tight that for the imperforate stamps, only one position in 1,000 contains the desired complete design (Scott# 5, position 7R1E).


Left Top Ornaments
Top Line
Right Top Ornaments
U.S. POSTAGE
The
ONE CENT-1851.
COMPLETE
DIE DESIGN,
With Individual Names And Letters, As Used In The Text Of This Book, Given To Each Part Of The Frame Ornaments.
ONE CENT
Side Ornaments At Left
Side Ornaments At Right
Left Ball
Left Scroll
Bottom Line
Right Ball
Right Scroll
Left Full Plume
Right Full Plume

The matrix table below illustrates the Plates used to create the various types and their correlation to the primary Scott catalogue numbers for these stamps. As you can see, the same types exist across both the imperforate and perforate stamps (except type V and Va which exist as perforated only). Refer to the image above to help understand the nomenclature of the design characteristics in the table.

In a few cases, new plates (Plate 1 Late "1L"– reworked in 1857, Plates 11 and 12) were created for the perforated series to resolve some of the early production challenges learned with imperforate issues. However, plates 2 and 4 were still used "as-is" for the perforated stamps. This resulted in translating the same nuances (problems) of some of the imperforate types to the perforated series. Plate 3 was the only original plate that was not used to print perforated stamps. A clear case of creating a new plate to preserve printing characteristics is Scott #18. Plate 12 was created to allow more spacing for the subjects and added perforations, thus allowing the complete design to be printed onto the paper.

U.S. Scott Catalogue Number, Type & Plate Number Matrix

1-cent Franklin Issues of 1851 - 1861

Type	1851 - 1857 Imperforate		1857 - 1861 Perforated 15.5		Design Characteristics	Special Examples
	Scott #	Plate No.	Scott #	Plate No.		
Type I	5	1E	18	12	Complete design	Scott# 5 only occurs in position 7R1E
Type Ib	5A	1E	None	N/A	Complete at top and sides, bottom balls, scrolls and plumes largely complete	Scott# 5A only occurs in positions 3-6R1E and 8 & 9 R1E (6 & 8 R1E have less erasure and command premiums)
Type 1a/1c	6/6b	4	19/19b	4	Incomplete at top, complete at sides and complete at bottom (Scott# 6 & 19) or largely complete at bottom (Scott# 6b & 19b)	Scott# 6 & 19 only occur on 18 positions of bottom row of both panes. Scott# 6b & 19b only occur on positions 91R & 96R on bottom row
Type II	7	1E, 1L, 2, 3, 4	20	1L, 2, 4, 11, 12	Complete or largely complete at top, largely complete at sides, incomplete at bottom	
Type III	8	1E, 2, 4	21	2, 4, 12	Top and bottom outer curved lines outside labels broken in middle, largely complete at sides	Scott# 8 & 21 - only position 99R2 is from Plate 2 (contains large breaks and commands a premium)
Type IIIa	8A	1E, 2, 4	22	2, 4, 11, 12	Top or bottom outer curved lines outside labels broken in middle, largely complete at sides	Scott# 8A & 22 - Only position 100R2 is from Plate 2
Type IV	9	1L	23	1L	Outer lines recut at top and/or bottom, largely complete at sides	
Type V/Va	None	N/A	24	5, 7, 8, 9, 10	Top and bottom outer curved lines outside labels broken, side ornaments partly cut away	Scott# 24 Type Va only comes from Plate 5 and has nearly complete side ornamentation

1E = Plate 1 Early
1L = Plate 1 Late

This matrix is a top-level view of the different types of 1-cent blue Franklins created during the pre-Civil War era. As mentioned, there are numerous reference books, articles and other forms of documentation that are available to those interested in a deeper dive into this topic. You will find everything from very specific examples of plating variations, recutting, transfers, reliefs, you name it. So, if this is your cup of tea, have at it!

What better way to show the various types between the imperforate and perforated 1-cent blue Franklin stamps than with actual photos! With the exception of Scott# 5 and 6 (credit goes to Siegel auctions) these are from my collection. For the purposes of article space, Scott# 5A is not shown since there is no perforated counterpart. Furthermore, Scott# 6b and 19b (Type 1c) are not depicted as they are minor listings in the Scott catalogue. I will show samples of Scott# 24 Types V & Va even though there are no imperforate varieties of these types.

Type I - Complete design



Scott# 5



Scott# 18

Type Ia - Incomplete at top, complete at bottom and sides



Scott# 6



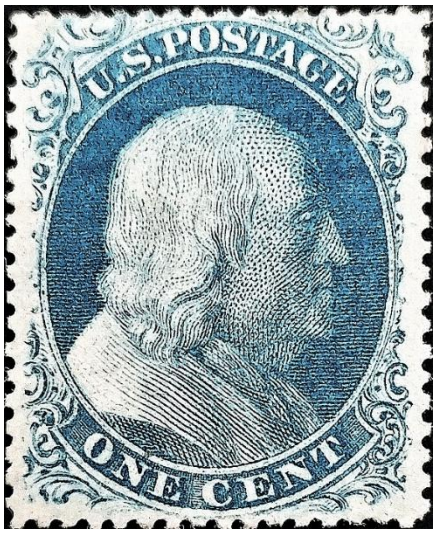
Scott# 19

Type II - Complete or largely complete at top, largely complete at sides,



incomplete at bottom

Scott# 7



Scott# 20

Type III - Top <u>and</u> bottom outer curved lines outside labels broken in middle, largely complete at sides



Scott# 8 (position 99R2)



Scott# 21

Type IIIa - Top <u>or</u> bottom outer curved lines outside labels broken in middle, largely complete at sides



Scott# 8



Scott# 22

Type IV - Outer lines recut at top and/or bottom, largely complete at sides



Scott# 9



Scott# 23

Type V (perforated only) - Top and bottom outer curved lines outside labels broken, side ornaments partly cut away
Type Va, Plate 5 (perforated only) - same except has mostly complete side ornaments and darker blue color)



Scott# 24 (Type V)



Scott# 24var (Type Va)

As I mentioned at the beginning, most collectors have an example of the common varieties of the 1-cent Franklins. That being Scott# 9 and #24 respectively. Much debate has occurred in the past from the philatelic community about Scott assigning major catalogue numbers to all these varieties seeing as they were all intended to be the same. In fact, Scott seems to have defied their own rules when assigning major catalogue numbers in this case. At best, the different types should have been assigned numbers such as 5a, 5b, 5c… and the same for the perforated varieties. It is what it is. The choice is up to the collector what intrigues them and what they care to collect. As you have heard time and time again, there is no right, or wrong, way to collect. That is what makes this hobby fun!

In summary, I wanted to expand my fellow collectors' knowledge about these important early U.S. classics without muddying up the waters too much. If I have kept your interest to this point, I would refer you to the many resources available to all collectors on the Internet, public libraries and the American Philatelic Society's Research Library (APRL).

References:

1) Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries website, reference section, https://siegelauctions.com/enc/pdf/1c1851.pdf
2) 2026 Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps & Covers, Identifier of Definitive Issues section and individual catalogue listings, Amos Media, October 2025
3) The Swedish Tiger United States stamp identifier website, https://www.theswedishtiger.com/united-states-postage-stamps-menu.html