

THE U.S. 3¢ 1851 STAMP: NEWLY DISCOVERED PLATE FLAW ON 91R1L

CHARLES J. DICOMO

I have found a previously unrecorded plate flaw on Position 91R1L of the 1851 3¢ stamp (Scott 11A). The flaw is positioned approximately 5 millimeters below the lower frame line in the bottom margin. It appears as a prominent dot with a surrounding aura of color.

While searching for 3¢ stamps to upgrade my reconstruction of the late state of Plate 1, I spotted this stamp, shown as Figure 1, on eBay in a lot described only as “11A.” The stamp has a wide left margin with centerline and guide dot, a wide bottom margin, as well as a light three-line manuscript cancel allowing for clear examination of all the salient plating features. I noticed what appeared to be stray ink in the lower margin.

Upon receipt of the stamp, I confirmed the position as 91R1L by comparing the subject copy to my own 3¢ 1851 reconstructions, and to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum black and white photographs of the Carroll Chase plate reconstructions.¹ The stamp is a Relief B from the bottom or 10th row, with both inner frame lines recut at left and right, the typical gouged-out upper right diamond block seen on Plate 1L stamps, a weaker left outer frame line, and no other salient plating features to call out. It was easy to identify

Figure 1. At left, a newly discovered plate flaw (arrow) in the bottom margin of Position 91R1L of the imperforate 3¢ Washington stamp.

Figure 2. Below, the plate flaw from the Figure 1 stamp greatly enlarged. A bold dot in the center is surrounded by an aura of color.



the position due to the prominent centerline at left in the margin dividing the left and right panes. I then more closely inspected the lower margin and the extra markings. The plate flaw is located in the sheet selvage, about five millimeters below the lower frame line, aligned beneath the break between the CE of CENTS. It shows as a prominent dot of color surrounded by a diffuse aura. Figure 2 shows the flaw, enlarged eight times. It resembles a miniature spiral nebula.

Chase does not appear to have recorded this variety in his monographs or in his books, nor in his notes along the left edge of his plate reconstruction. Chase was very meticulous in describing accidental marks of color that might result from plate defects. I suspect that when he did his work, his reference copies from the 91R1L position did not have sufficient margin below the design to show this flaw.

As with any new plating discovery, confirmation is required to prove the feature is part of the plate, not just stray ink unique to that particular stamp. In examining my archive of 3¢ 1851 imperforate stamps, I came across another example of 91R1L with wide left and bottom margins. Happily, this second copy exhibited the same prominent dot of color with the surrounding aura, in the same location beneath CE, approximately 5 mm below the lower frame line. A scan of this stamp is shown as Figure 3 and an enlargement of its flaw is shown as Figure 4. The flaw just survived the trimming of the bottom selvage, providing confirmation that this marking is a consistent feature of this state of the plate.

At this point I contacted plating colleagues in the USPCS 1851 study group to share scans and to seek more information. Specifically, had anyone come across this variety before? And could they check their holdings for examples of position 91R1 in any plate state?

Camaraderie is alive and this outreach paid off. An important finding was that this constant plate flaw does not exist on the Intermediate state of 91R1. Courtesy of route agent Robert J. Lampert, Figure 5 shows a stamp from the same position from the intermediate stage of the plate (91R1i) with sufficient margin below the design to show no dot and no aura. While an example from the early state of the plate with sufficient lower margin has not yet been seen, it's safe to postulate that this flaw does not appear on the early state, since it is not evident on the intermediate. Research has revealed that there was no strengthening of the frame lines during the re-entry on Plate 1 Early that created Plate 1 Intermediate.²



Figure 3. At left, another large-margin stamp from Position 91R1L. The bottom selvage is just deep enough to show the same flaw (arrow), confirming that this is a constant plate variety.

Figure 4. Below, the plate flaw from the Figure 3 stamp. This shows denser inking than the example in Figure 2, but the similarities are striking and recognizable.

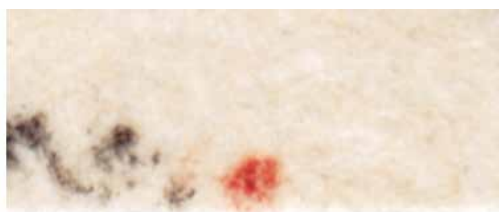




Figure 5. A stamp from the same position (91R1) from the intermediate state of the plate. The bottom margin is amply wide, but it shows no evidence of the flaw. The conclusion must be that the flaw was created sometime after the Intermediate stamps were printed but before the printings from the late state of the plate.

Route agent Charles Temple pointed out that in the “New Amsterdam Collection of United States Sheets,” sold by Cherrystone Auction Galleries on October 3, 2019, lot 2002 was an unused 1851 3¢ sheet of 100 from the right pane of Plate 1L. Close examination of the online digital image shows that the plate flaw is visible (barely) in the trimmed-down margin below the 91R1L position.

What could have caused this variety? A possible explanation is a glancing blow from an unknown implement. The central dot might have been created by a direct strike and the aura may have been caused by deflection. It is important to keep in mind that the plate at that point had not yet been hardened.

We do not know just when this damage to the plate occurred. The assumption is that it happened in early October 1851, when Plate 1i was being reentered to create Plate 1L. However, the damage could have occurred earlier or later. While none of the 91R1i examples examined has the plate flaw, and all of the 91R1L examples examined show it, the sample size is small. If a reader has an alternative theory, or information to add, I would welcome an email.

We will never know the true cause of the dot and aura plate flaw on 91R1L. Nonetheless, it is satisfying that after more than a century of study and hundreds of published pages by very astute philatelists, new constant varieties like this one can still be identified on the 3¢ 1851 stamp.

Special thanks to Elliot Omiya for his critical review, insight and expertise. Additionally, appreciation goes to Robert J. Lampert for sharing digital scans of his stamps and to Charles Temple and Gary Schrader for various hypotheses on the possible causes of this variety. I also want to thank the other members of U.S. Classics Study Group, who consistently share their research in an open forum. Any errors or omissions are my responsibility alone. I can be reached at charlesdicomo@gmail.com.

Endnotes

1. U.S. 3¢ 1851-1857 Plate Reconstructions, as prepared by Carroll Chase, 26 11”x14” black and white photographic reproductions, Smithsonian Institution, National Postal Museum, Photographic Services, Washington, D.C.
2. *The 1851 Issue of United States Stamps: A Sesquicentennial Retrospective*, edited by Hubert Skinner and Charles Peterson, USPCS, New Orleans, 2006. ■