

The Lost Plate

New Acquisition of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

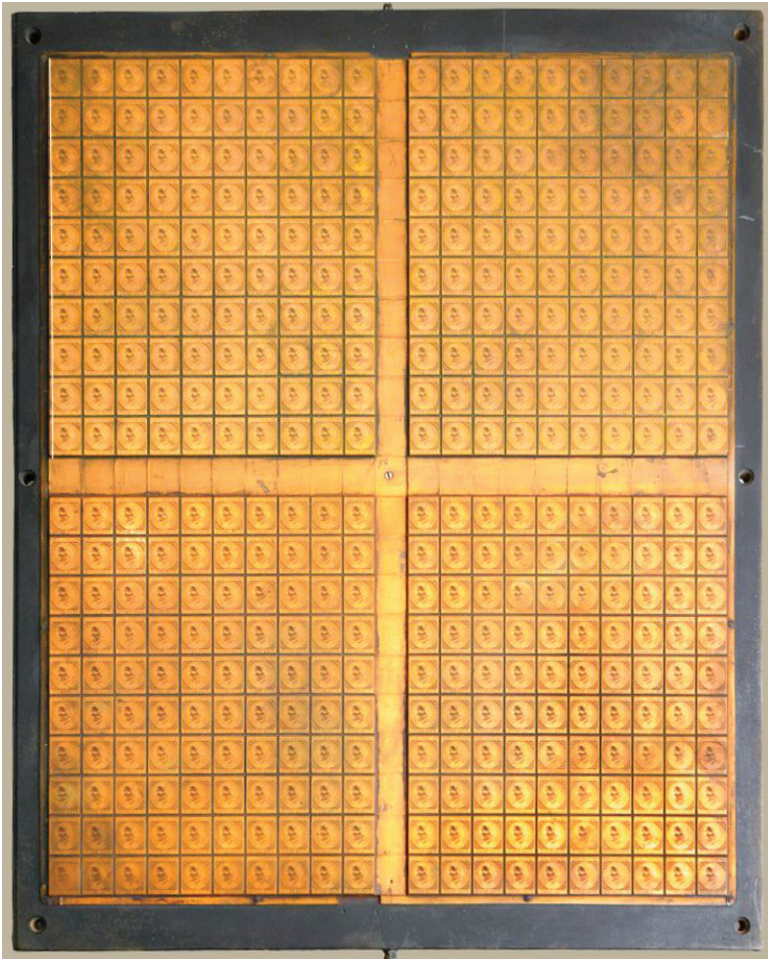


Figure 1. The Confederate copper printing plate consisting of 400 subjects bearing the image of Confederate President Jefferson Davis 5¢ denomination. The plate was ordered by the Confederate States of America and manufactured by De La Rue & Co., Ltd. in London in 1862. It was captured off the Bahamas when the British blockade runner *Bermuda* was captured by the *U.S.S. Mercedita*. From there, it was taken to Philadelphia to Prize Court. This plate was never used to print stamps by the Confederacy. Image courtesy of Smithsonian National Postal Museum.

The Smithsonian National Postal Museum was delighted to acquire the fabled Confederate lost stamp printing plate from the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia in April 2011. (Figures 1 and 1a) This is most fitting during the first year of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War. The Franklin Institute had the plate on display for a number of years while it was actively building a philatelic collection. Subsequently, the institute deaccessioned and disposed of most of its postal-related objects, finding that philately was no longer consistent with its educational mission.

The acquisition, preservation and display of the Lost Plate are made possible by CSA member Vince King and his wife Becky of Denton, Texas. (Figure 2) The plate was unveiled in a private showing on June 6, 2011 at a reception of the Council of Philatelists, still in its shipping container. Its first public viewing will be at the opening of the new William H. Gross Gallery in March 2013.

“This spectacular acquisition will be a centerpiece in the display case of the three-dimensional objects from the National Philatelic Collection to be featured in the new William H. Gross Stamp Gallery,” said Cheryl R. Ganz, Chief Curator of Philately. “The 5-cent plate provides a wonderful connection to the first philatelic object ever collected by the Smithsonian Institution—a pane of the Confederate States of America’s 10-cent blue Jefferson Davis stamp.”

How the “Lost Plate” became lost

On April 27, 1862, the calm off Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas was shattered by cannon fire. The American Federal warship *Mercedita* drew along side the British steamer *Bermuda*, a blockade-runner, and a boarding party swarmed her decks. Two boxes of postage stamps bearing the likeness of Confederate President Jefferson Davis were thrown overboard by the captain’s brother, who was an officer on board. This was a vain attempt to disguise



Figure 1a. A close-up of a portion of the Lost Plate. Image courtesy of the Franklin Institute.

Figure 2. The acquisition, preservation and display of the Lost Plate are made possible by CSA member Vince King and his wife Becky of Denton, Texas. The Kings posed with the Lost Plate, still in its shipping container, on June 6, 2011, at a reception of the Council of Philatelists in a special preliminary viewing at the National Postal Museum. Its first public viewing will be at the opening of the new William H. Gross Gallery in March 2013.



the vessel's purpose and destination. The boxes sank to the bottom of the sea, but they were only a part of the consignment of twenty-four cases of roughly five million stamps printed for the Confederate States of America by the prominent printing company, Thomas De La Rue & Co, Ltd.

The British blockade runner *Bermuda* carried the third order of stamps from De La Rue, their order "C", which was shipped on February 20, 1862 by Fraser Trenholm and Co., owners of the vessel, on her second run across the Atlantic. The *Bermuda* had arrived safely at Bermuda on March 19, 1862, and remained there for five weeks either awaiting orders or, more likely, awaiting favorable conditions to make a break for Charleston. On April 24, 1862, she slipped out of St. George's and made her way southwest to the northern Bahamian island chain of Abacos where she was spotted a few days later by the *Mercedita* who fired a shot across her bow, boarded her, and took her to Philadelphia as a prize of war. Such arrests were common among the islands during the Civil War when British vessels attempted to run the tight Union blockade of the Southern ports.

The presence of the remaining De La Rue stamps along with ink, stamp paper, and cutlery engraved "Jeff Davis, our first President, the right man in the right place" - openly addressed to Charleston - sealed their fate. There was no denying their destination.

Prize courts were common in the 17th through 19th centuries during times of American or European naval warfare. A prize court has jurisdiction over all captures made in war on the high seas. A prize court could order the sale or destruction of the seized vessel and the distribution of any proceeds to the captain and crew of the seizing ship. Today, pursuant to Title 10 of the United States Code, the United States district courts have exclusive jurisdiction in prize

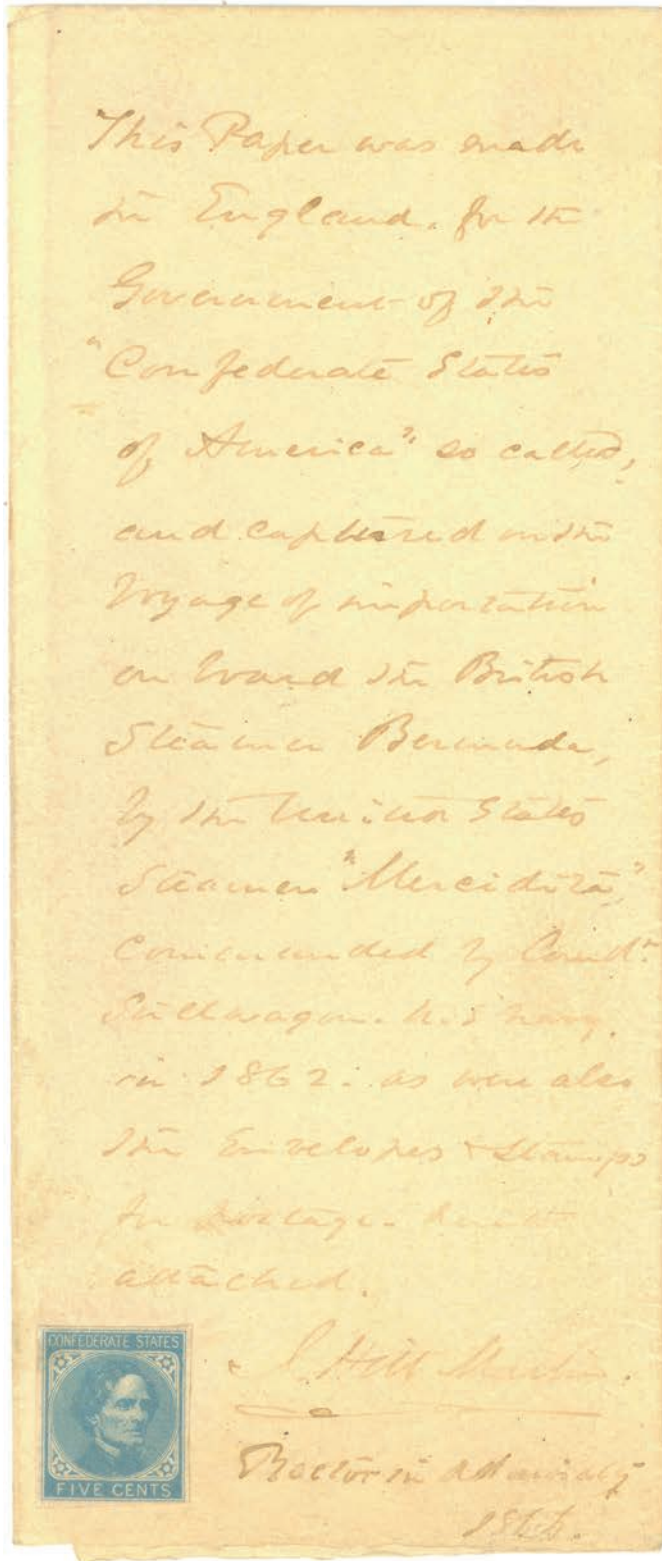


Figure 3. For a long time, the only known documented copy from the Lost Plate was a single stamp affixed to paper from the same shipment and with a hand written note from the Proctor in Admiralty in 1866 attesting to its origin from the capture of the Bermuda. Image courtesy of Leonard H. Hartmann.

began on August 12 and the concluding arguments were heard four days later. However, the court did not condemn the steamer until March 5, 1863 almost a year after her capture. The vessel was then purchased by the Union Navy and fitted out as a supply and dispatch vessel in the West Gulf Blockading Squadron.

Because of the delay in the court, some of the value of the Bermuda cargo was lost by deterioration. Most of the cargo was sold, but the stamps were ordered destroyed. The Court allowed some stamps to be saved and given to the U.S. District Attorney's office and other Officers of the Court. No information has been discovered as to the disposition of the Confederate printing plate at that time.

A single copy from the Lost Plate Shipment

For a long time, the only known documented copy from the Lost Plate Shipment was a single stamp affixed to paper from the same shipment and with the following transcribed hand written note:

"This Paper was made in England for the Government of the "Confederate States of America" so called, and captured on the voyage of importation on board the British Steamer Bermuda, by the United States Steamer "Mercedita": commanded by Comdr. Stellwagen, U.S. Navy, in 1862 as were also the Envelopes & Stamps for postage hereto attached.

*J. Hill Martin
Proctor in Admiralty
1866"*

This single Lost Plate copy is now in the hands of noted Confederate philatelic scholar Leonard H. Hartmann and this and other images from his collection are provided by him for this article, for which I am most grateful. (Figure 3)

A Block of 70 from the Lost Plate Shipment

A block of 70 from the Lost Plate shipment is now in the hands of Leonard Hartmann, who has actively sought out these De La Rue relics. (Figure 4) A spoil of war, the block was glued to cardboard with the hand written text transcribed as follows.

The hand written note with the block reads:

"These stamps were captured with the British steamer steamer 'Bermuda' by the U.S.S. 'Mercedita' Capt Stelwagon while attempting to run the Blockade of Charleston Harbor.

"The 'Bermuda' was brought by her prize crew into the Port of Philada., libelled as prize & finally condemned as such.

"The cargo of the 'Bermuda' was a very valuable one, consisting of dry goods, stationary, cutlery, etc.

"The records of the U.S.D. Court at Philada shows an inventory & appraisalment of the Cargo including a large number of cases of Confederate stamps. The prize commissioners were directed by Judge Cadwalader to destroy the stamps.

"This order was obeyed with the exception of a few that were distributed among the U.S. Dist Atty & other officers of the Court.

cases, but due to changes in the nature of naval warfare, no prize cases have been heard since the statutes were adopted in 1956.

The ship's log yielded the information that she had run the blockade before and her captain admitted that her cargo was intended ultimately to reach the rebel States. Comdr. Henry S. Stellwagen, *Mercedita's* commanding officer, seized *Bermuda* and sent her to Philadelphia under Lt. Trevett Abbot and a thirty-man prize crew.

After arriving at that port on May 3, the ship was arraigned before the United States District Court at Philadelphia. Proceedings



Figure 4. This block of 70 of the 5¢ Jefferson Davis stamps was a spoil of war printed in England from the fabled Lost Plate; it was glued to cardboard with hand written text below. Image courtesy of Leonard H. Hartmann.

These stamps were captured with the British steamer steamer "Bermuda" by the U.S.S. "Merida" Capt Stelwagon while attempting to run the Blockade of Charleston Harbor. The "Bermuda" was brought by her prize crew into the Port of Philadelphia, labelled as prize & finally condemned as such. The cargo of the "Bermuda" was a very valuable one, consisting of dry goods, stationery, printing, &c. The records of the U.S.D. Court at Philadelphia shows an inventory & appraisement of the cargo including a large number of cases of Confederate stamps. The prize Commissioners were directed by Judge Cadwalader to destroy the stamps. This order was obeyed with the exception of a few that were distributed among the U.S. Dist. Atty & other officers of the Court. The Bermuda was captured about 1863. The records of the Court will give the date accurately.

*J.W.C.
Oct 25th 1899.*

*The Bermuda was captured about 1863. The records of the Court will give the date accurately (sic).
J.W.C.
Oct 25th 1899"*

Leonard discussed this historic block at length in *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues* in August 2004. Initially, he was perplexed by the 1899 date on the aforementioned handwritten

note with the block. He first did research on Judge John W. Cadwaladar, the judge in the Bermuda Prize Court case, whose initials appeared at the bottom and who died in 1879. Further research into the family revealed other Cadwaladers with John in their family names. He was never fully satisfied with the results of his research, but it would stand to reason that, if the document was forged, an 1860s date would have been used instead of 1899.

In close examination, Leonard noticed that the Bermuda stamps were not perfectly aligned vertically. The stamps are noticeably askew. This is a complete contradiction to the fact that the De La Rue printing plates on which the CSA #6 stamps were made was well executed and the individual stamps in proper alignment, as well as other De La Rue plates such as those for the Richmond print (CSA #7) printed from a De La Rue plate, and the 2¢ and 10¢ Altered Value printings. There was little doubt, however, that the block is completely genuine.

Leonard made exacting measurements in centimeters of existing De La Rue blocks in comparison to the Bermuda block, trying to verify and quantify his observations. He measured the blocks on the diagonal from the stamp outside corners with a Dietzgen Excello rule. He found that there was a variation of 0.15 cm, indicating that the Bermuda block is not exactly a rectangle. The Lost Plate from the Bermuda shipment shows perfect alignment and was not the plate used to print these stamps.

Figure 5 shows an original shipping envelope from De La Rue, undoubtedly evidence in the Prize Court case. Image courtesy of Leonard H. Hartmann.

Philip Ward expresses elation and dismay

For almost 90 years, the printing plate was lost to public view. It sat in the basement of an unidentified Philadelphia historical society for an unknown period of time until it was discovered in 1954 by Major Thomas Coulson, then Director of Museum Research of the Franklin Institute in that city.

Philip H. Ward, Jr. (1886-1963), a highly successful Philadelphia stamp dealer, announced the find of the plate in *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News* in the October 22, 1954 edition. He quotes a letter from Major Coulson of the Franklin Institute to Ward as follows:

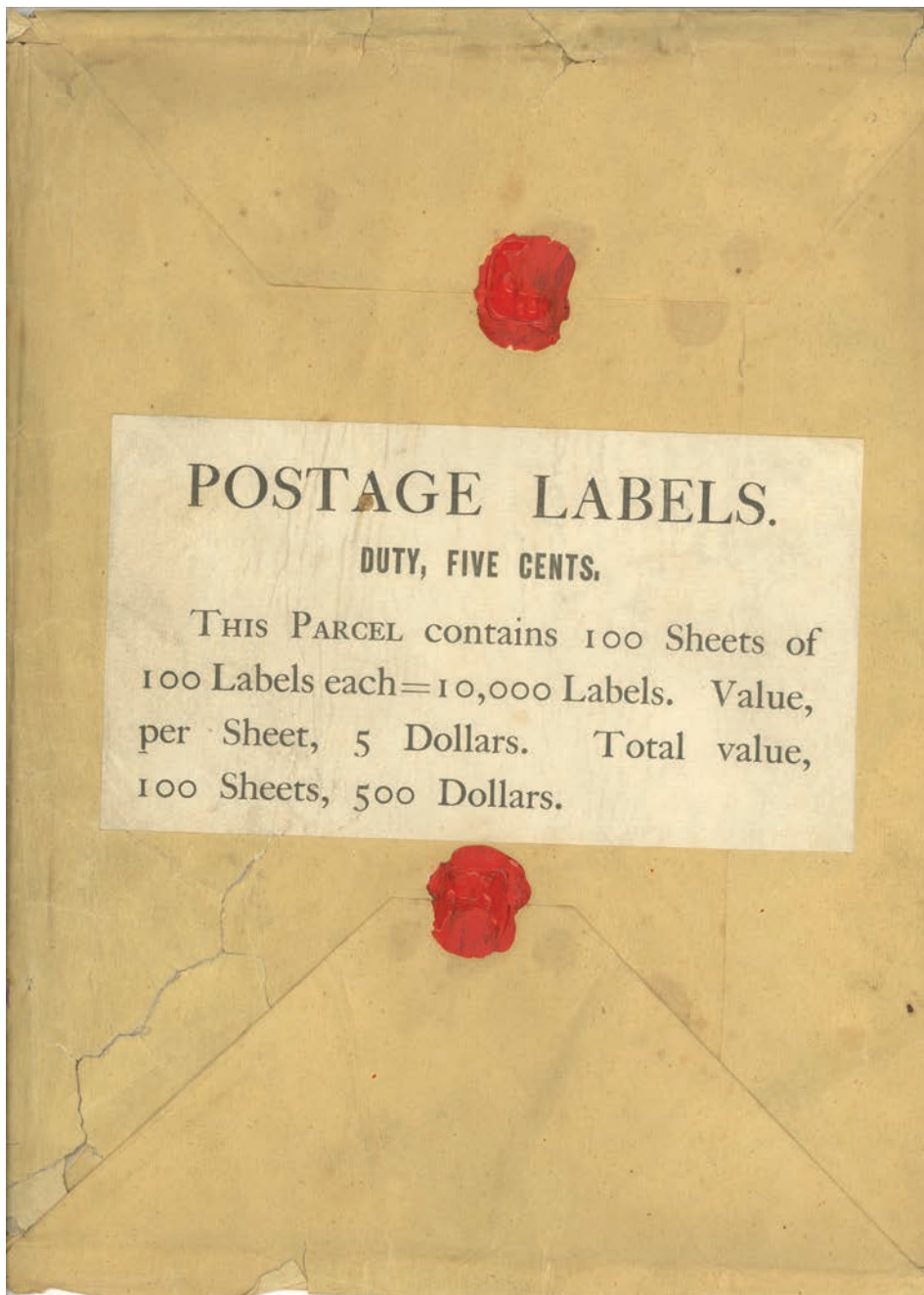


Figure 5. An original shipping envelope from De La Rue, undoubtedly evidence in the Prize Court case. Image courtesy of Leonard H. Hartmann.

“Not until I returned to the Institute and removed the accumulation of dust did I observe that this was the plate of the Confederate stamp.”

“The curator of the historical society could give me no information on the source of the plate, neither donor, nor date of acquisition, nor how it came into their possession.”

Ward stated that it was in a wonderful state of preservation and that there was no doubt it was prepared for printing stamps of the Confederacy. Ward, of course, immediately contacted August Dietz, Sr. who was also understandably excited with the discovery.

Dietz sent a reply to Ward on October 12, 1954 saying, in part:

“You might check on the electro and its iron base (if it is so mounted for printing); it should weight around 84 pounds – practically a duplication, in every way, of the four-pane electro plate of the TWO CENTS, which I possess. Your plate, therefore solves another of the ‘mysteries’ that has surrounded the plates, and I congratulate you on this great Confederate discovery!”

Ward, in the *Mekeel’s* article, went on to say,

“Reprints have been made in blue, purposely somewhat different from the issued stamp, and in black, in limited quantities. Some of the impressions have been retained in full sheets of 400 and some cut into panes of 100 with margins on all sides, as sold in the Post Offices of the Confederacy. The plate itself will become a part of the philatelic exhibit of the Franklin Institute, where it may be seen with reprints of the stamp. Col. T[om] W[hite] Crigler, of the Confederate Stamp Alliance, examined the plate while recently visiting Philadelphia.

“The sale of the reprints will be for the sole benefit of the Institute and monies received will be used in adding to the Institute’s collection.”

Stamps Magazine picked up the story shortly after *Mekeel’s*, quoting much of the information put forth in Ward’s initial announcement, but making it more of a news story by reporting that there was a great deal of discussion concerning the find of the plate among the members of the Confederate Stamp Alliance during the October 8-10, 1954, convention in Richmond. The general feeling

“At the suggestion of a colleague I had gone to a local historical society’s headquarters to examine some electrical apparatus that was for disposal. In leaning over an obstruction, a rough table, to look at this, I had to balance myself by laying a hand on a flat surface. Having finished my examination, I was astonished to find the palm of my hand covered with a thick layer of dust. Looking at the place where my hand had lain, I could see the imprint on my hand on what looked to be a copper plate with an engraving on it. Closer examination revealed the engraving to be that of a postage stamp.

“I could not perceive what the stamp was, but my curiosity was immediately aroused and I offered to take the plate if it was available for disposal. The curator readily agreed. I think he was relieved to find someone willing to relieve him of the ‘junk’. He was so pleased that he most willingly consented to assist in carrying it down to a waiting car.



Figure 6. The Ward private printing in blue.



Figure 7. The De La Rue printing (CSA #6)

Trish Kaufmann poses with the Lost Plate, still in its shipping crate, in the vault of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. Trish is a member of the Council of Philatelists with the Museum, assigned to the Research Committee.



of the Confederate collectors was that, while they were elated at the finding of the plate, they found the making of reprints questionable to the best interests of philately.

Van Dyk MacBride, then Vice President of the CSA, wrote to *Stamps Magazine* and stated that stamps “in the blue shade of the originals” were being printed from this plate and sold to the public which “has caused dismay and concern.” He stated that no matter how good the stated objective, the production of these reprints “is both regrettable and amazing.” He went on to say that “Perhaps little objection could be made to those printed in black, but those in blue can serve only to confuse collectors and to provide a ready means for the faker to pursue his trade in the future.”

Prominent students of the time appear to have been split in their opinion on whether the private printings should have been made in blue. Collectors, dealers and philatelic organizations including the CSA and American Stamp Dealers Association officially protested and urged Ward to abandon the plan, but their entreaties fell on deaf ears. Dietz, on the other hand, felt there was no harm done by printing the stamps in blue. He was joined in that view by Stanley B. Ashbrook who felt that the stamps were still relatively common and cheap and that the printings in blue would do little harm.

On a more current note, I personally believe the protesting students were correct. I continually see the Ward private printings (which really are not properly termed “reprints”) on eBay and in non-specialist dealer stocks identified as 5¢ London prints. To my consternation, I’ve even had such dealers argue with me that they are “the real thing.” To a serious Confederate student, the difference is evident from the very “flat” appearance of the Ward private print and shows none of the fine detail of any of the authentic stamps. The horizontal lines surrounding the portrait are almost completely filled. The Ward printing in black is obviously not a problem. The Ward private printing in blue (Figure 6) is shown here in comparison to the De La Rue printing. (Figure 7)

The *Stamps Magazine* article concluded by saying,

We have endeavored to present both sides of this question, as expressed by those particularly interested in Confederate stamps. Some consider it a ‘tempest in a teapot’; others view it with serious and earnest alarm. For our part, it looks to us like one of those questions on which there will always be two widely divergent views, but certainly, no one questions the good intentions and motives of those responsible for the new printings. All are pleased with the finding of the plate and the dramatic circumstances leading to its discovery.

During the 1950s, Ward donated to the Smithsonian Institution a valuable assortment of U.S. Carriers and Locals, foreign stamps, inverts and errors, and U.S. 1883 Special Printing stamps. He was a world-famous philatelist celebrated for buying stamps that were rare and classic specimens.

In conclusion

The original engraved die from which the 5¢ printing plates were made was retained by De La Rue and is today in the British Library in London. Although this shipment of stamps was confiscated, others managed to get through the blockade. Of the total printing invoiced - 12,405,000 5¢ stamps - only 7,405,000 were received by the CSA; 4,855,000 on the Bermuda were captured and ordered destroyed by Federal court order. There is a slight discrepancy in numbers noted.

The De La Rue Day Book entry (folio 108) on January 30, 1862, shows charges to CSA agent Major Benjamin F. Ficklin for 5 million 5¢ postage stamps, 24 reams papers, 18 lbs. blue fugitive ink and 1 printing plate for C.S. Postage Stamps containing 400 multiples mounted on Cast Iron plate. The John Drinkwater monograph to the 18th Philatelic Congress of Great Britain shows this order shipped the same day and arrival in Richmond was confirmed by Postmaster General John Reagan. A second shipment sent February 11, 1862 also arrived in good order. The third order contained the Lost Plate, stamps, and supplies sent on the *Bermuda*. ☒