

NATURAL STRAIGHT EDGES ON 19th CENTURY U.S. STAMPS

Natural straight edges occur on almost all perforated 19th century United States postage stamps. They occurred because the press plate had more subjects, for manufacturing efficiency, than was convenient to distribute to post offices.

It is important to distinguish between natural straight edges and removed perforations. Natural straight edges are an artifact of stamp manufacturing and count only as a natural flaw. As such, they only diminish the value of a stamp by 35-50% and in some cases can actually enhance the value of a stamp (about which more later). By contrast, removed perforations count as an extremely serious defect which occurred as damage to the stamp. Removed perforations diminish the value of a stamp by 80-95% and result in a stamp which is a space-filler at best.

Most 19th century United States stamps were printed from 200-subject plates, which we'll call Configuration A. Here's what the plates looked like:

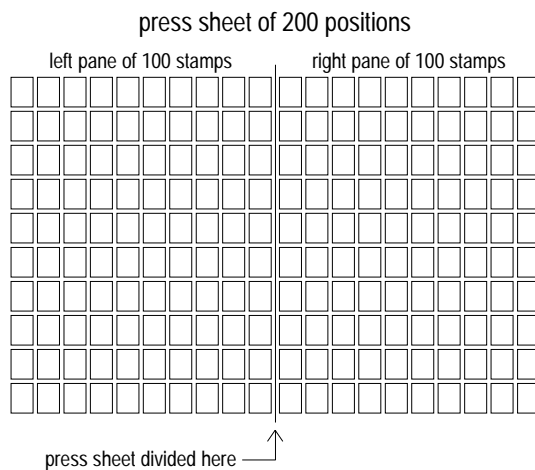


Figure A: Plate Configuration A.

Large sheets of paper received 200 impressions at once on the press. These large press sheets were then gummed. Once the gum dried, they were divided into two panes of 100 stamps each (arranged 10 x 10). These panes were then perforated, bundled and sent to the U.S. Post Office stamp transfer agent for distribution to post offices.

Philatelic students have adopted a standard method of referring to positions of stamps on these plates. The leftmost first stamp in the first row is called "1L" (position 1 of the left pane). The stamp right next to it is called "2L." And so it goes, through 3L through 10L. Then the first stamp in the second row is called "11L." This numbering continues until the tenth stamp in the tenth row, which is called "100L." The first stamp of the right pane is called "1R." Once again this numbering continues to 100R, the tenth stamp of the tenth row of the right pane.

In nearly every case with the 200-subject sheets, the two panes were divided using a guillotine cutter. (There are some exceptions. For instance, sometimes the 1c. 1857 issues were perforated along the centerline, as were some of the 10c. 1857 issues. But most were cut apart.) The cutter made a very straight cut which is impossible to duplicate with scissors. And this cut always resulted in a straight edge at left or right. None of the stamps printed from Configuration A plates ever had straight edges at top or bottom. Here's a schematic (not to scale) of how a Configuration A 100-stamp pane was perforated:

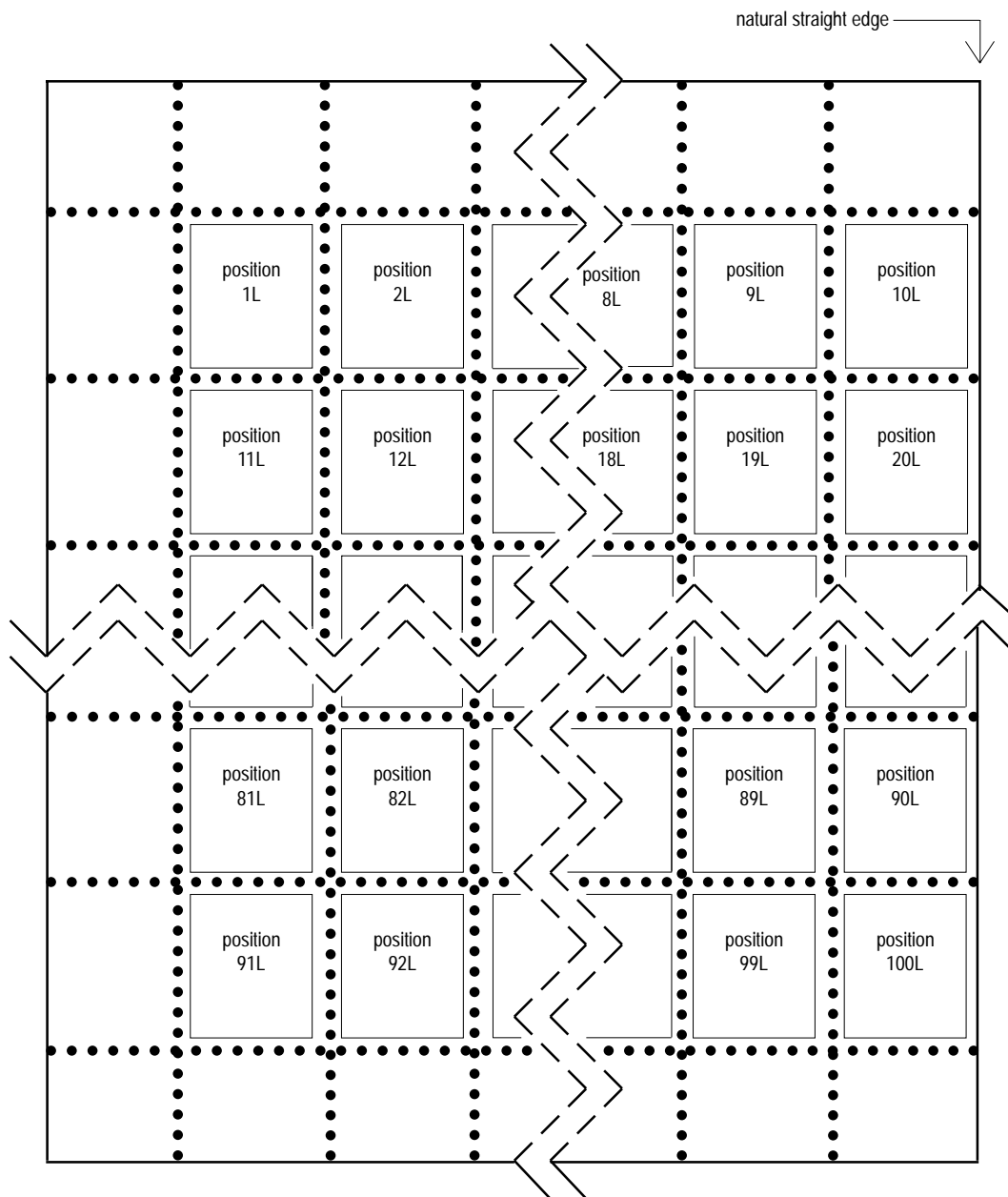


Figure B: Left pane showing fully perforated selvage and straight edge at right.

The edge-of-sheet selvage (unprinted margin) was generally good sized (an inch or more) and was always fully perforated. As you can see, 90 of the stamps on the pane were fully perforated. The ten positions which had natural straight edges at right were positions 10L, 20L, 30L, 40L, 50L, 60L, 70L, 80L, 90L and 100L. The right pane was mirror-image, with the straight edge on the left. Again 90 positions had full perforations. Those with the natural straight edge at left were 1R, 11R, 21R, 31R, 41R, 51R, 61R, 71R, 81R and 91R.

Very often the stamps around the selvage (1L-10L, 11L, 21L, 31L, 41L, 51L, 61L, 71L, 81L and 91-100L on the left pane and corresponding positions on the right pane) had their perf wheels set extra large, to hide the bad centering in the rest of the pane. This is the source of the jumbo stamps which realize such huge prices.

The marks used to show where to cut the press sheets apart varied. Sometimes there was a single straight line, running from the top to the bottom of the plate. Some plates had double lines. Some plates had small vertical dashes at top and bottom showing where to cut. By the 1869 issue, the dividing marks were little arrows or “V”s between the 10L-1R and 100L-91R pairs. These last markings can command a price premium over ordinary straight-edged stamps. On some issues, these can even command a premium over the normal, perforated-on-four-sides stamps.

There were other plate configurations used for 19th century United States postage stamps. But they were cut apart and perforated in much the same manner as the 200-subject plates. The 300-subject plates used for the smaller 1869 denominations had two 150-position panes that were left and right panes also. Again, natural straight edges only occur at left and right on these issues.