

Chapter 1

An Overview of Plates 1-41303

In 1894, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) was selected by the Post Office Department to begin printing United States postage stamps. The Bureau was already the nation's security printer and was printing currency, revenue stamps, and other official documents.

The Bureau had a policy of putting serial numbers on its printing plates and it decided to begin a new series of plate numbers which we can call the postage stamp plate number series. Plate number 1 in this new series was assigned to print the 2c Washington sheet stamp, series of 1894. The series of 1894 is also known to collectors as the First Bureau Series.

Collectors of that time were greatly interested in this new series and began to avidly collect the plate numbers as singles and strips. Collector interest in plate numbers seemed to slacken around 1900 but with the start of the 3rd Bureau series in 1908 (the Washington-Franklin series), collectors once again began saving plate numbers. Plate blocks were being saved by more collectors and collecting of plate blocks in matched sets became popular in the 1930's and remained very popular until the 1970's. Major problems then began to surface for plate number collectors. New printing presses were being introduced which resulted in odd size plate blocks which were not popular. The 9 color Huck press used so many printing plates and produced so many plate number combinations that many collectors gave up the plate number chase. Collectors were used to accurate and timely plate number information from the BEP and the Post Office Department and this information became sporadic, incomplete, and with many obvious errors.

The United States Postal Service (USPS) replaced the Post Office Department in 1971 and the plate number information situation worsened. Collector disenchantment grew. The USPS apparently was sensitive to collector complaints about plate block sizes and the new plate numbering system in 1981 was the result. The new system replaced the normal 5 digit plate number on the printed product with a code number so that, for each new stamp, printing plates would be numbered sequentially starting with number 1. Each one of the printing plates still had a 'real' 5 digit plate number in the plate number series. In 1985, the Bureau decided to discontinue the postage stamp plate number series since the last stamp to use the 5 digit numbers was now obsolete. Plate number 41125 on the \$1 Americana stamp was the last 5 digit plate number generally available to collectors. Plate number 41303 printed the 22c Seashell booklet pane with plate code number 2. If you have a copy of this plate number, you have a copy printed from plate number 41303, the last plate number in the postage stamp plate number series. Subsequent postage stamp plates were given numbers from the Bureau's miscellaneous series. The only 'real' plate numbers collectors see these days are plate

numbers on the annual hunting permit stamps and these plate numbers are in the BEP's miscellaneous series of plate numbers. And these real plate numbers ended with the 2001 hunting permit stamp.

I began collecting stamps as a teenager in 1957 and did as many collectors do by buying a single, plate block, and first day cover of each new US stamp. I was fascinated by the plate numbers, especially since dealer's price lists showed plate blocks being worth more than plain blocks, so I thought they had to be something special. A part-time dealer near my home introduced me to matched set collecting. I discovered the Crane matched set plate block price list which was widely used as a trading basis at that time. I became a member of the Bureau Issues Association (BIA) and obtained back copies of their monthly publication, the BUREAU SPECIALIST / UNITED STATES SPECIALIST. A series of articles in the late 1950s and early 1960s included a plate number survey with the intent to identify the scarce plate numbers in the plate number series. I discovered there were many collectors who were interested in collecting all the different plate numbers that might exist. I gradually became interested in such an impossible project and was still chasing plate numbers 60 years later. The lack of official information starting around 1970 was discouraging but the innovations at the Bureau added interest and still made continuing the chase fun for me. I viewed the new plate numbering system in 1981 with disappointment since I did not want the real plate numbers to disappear. Since then, I have discovered the interesting challenges with the new system and I pursue these numbers.

Plate number collectors owe a real debt to past and present members of the Bureau Issues Association (BIA) for their work in compiling the BIA's Plate Number Checklist of plates 1-41303. They were able to ferret out much of the missing information and today we now know the subject of each of these plate numbers. The BIA publishes the DURLAND STANDARD PLATE NUMBER CATALOG, an indispensable reference source for the plate number collector. Many BIA members have given much time and effort to increase our knowledge about plate numbers and their efforts have really added to the enjoyment of the hobby. I would encourage anyone interested in plate numbers, or United States stamps in general, to join the USSS. Appendix A lists plate number publications I have used and their sources.

As a collector of the plate number series, I am curious about what is available to the collector. Of these 41303 plate numbers, how many are available to collectors? I wanted the answer to that question and I decided to use a computer to digest information from the BIA checklists and the Durland catalog and from back issues of the UNITED STATES SPECIALIST, the BIA's (now the United States Stamp Society) monthly journal. What I discovered will be detailed in subsequent chapters of this book. I will examine each group of 1000 plate numbers and provide a chart detailing, for each stamp, the number of plate numbers assigned, plates sent to press, plates available to collectors, and plates unreported. I will discuss some of the plates I find most interesting. I will look at major subject areas such as the regular issues, commemoratives, and other groups of stamps that were printed in the postage stamp plate number series. Charts for these groups will also be provided so that plate number collectors will be able to see what is available in each of these categories and you might find it fun to check your own holdings to see how many of these plate numbers you

own. I made scans of the album pages of my collection of 30,000+ different plate numbers and these are in plate number order so as you read a chapter you can see most of the plate numbers. Obviously, since this narrative covers such a large time period, large groups of stamps, and 41,303 plate numbers, only the surface can be skimmed. The intent is to provide the reader with just a taste of information and collecting possibilities available in these 41,303 plate numbers. These last 60 years spent searching for plate numbers have been fascinating, fun, and a real adventure for me. As we tour the BEP's postage stamp plate number series, you may discover new challenges for yourself. We will next take a look at the first 999 plate numbers in the series.