

## The Orangeburg Coil – By Alex Gill

One of the most sought after 20th Century United States stamps is the Orangeburg coil stamp, Scott number 389. On January 11, 1911, the Post Office Department issued a 3-cent coil stamp specifically for use by the Bell Pharmaceutical Company in Orangeburg, NY. As part of the Washington-Franklin series, these stamps were flat plate printed in deep violet color on single line watermarked paper and perforated 12 vertically. Since these stamps were produced in law quantities and used for ordinary commercial mass mailings and the fact that philatelists at the time did not know of their existence is what contributes to their rarity.



*A genuine Orangeburg coil pair  
(Image Courtesy of  
The Philatelic Foundation)*

The Bell Pharmaceutical Company specialized in the manufacturing of patent medications and used these stamps to send product samples to physicians. As these stamps were used for mass mailings, they were subject to the first-class cancelling machine in Orangeburg, NY and a traditional wavy-line machine cancel was applied. As such, today's existing used examples contain faults to some degree including creases and tears. In the Washington-Franklin series, no other 3-cent Washington coil stamp was perforated the same way or issued as a vertical coil. Later in 1911, Scott Number 394 was issued as the first regularly issued 3-cent coil offered to the public. While it shared some printing similarities such as a single line watermark, it was perforated 8.5 not the rare 12 variety.

For philatelists, this stamp is an extremely rare variety and highly unlikely to appear in an unsorted mixture. As the stamp is rare, it should never be bought or sold without a certificate of authenticity. Today, only 2 unused singles and six unused pairs are known to exist. If used, examples are found with a wavy-line machine cancel, normally used on first class mail. However, two certified used strips of three were cancelled with an Orangeburg, NY postmark. Most likely, these stamps were used on packages or larger mailings unable to pass through the first-class cancelling machine. Unfortunately, as Orangeburg coils were not identified by collectors when first issued, there is no official account of the total amount of stamps that were made.



*A glass medicine bottle from the Bell Company in  
Orangeburg, NY (Image Courtesy of Babybottles.com)*

It has been determined that no coil stamps exist on double line watermarked paper as evidenced by a letter from the 3rd Assistant Postmaster A.M. Dockery who stated that no coil stamps were produced on such paper. For the few examples that have been found with double line watermarks, they have been determined to be outright fakes or have private perforations from the International Vending Machine Company, which would have been made by a company that had gone out of business by the time these stamps were first printed, thus making them fake.

It is possible to create counterfeit Orangeburg coils from Scott No. 376 which is also perforated 12 by trimming the top and bottom margins and can be convincing if the starting stamp had large margins with a wavy line machine cancel. An important factor in the certification of Orangeburg coils is that on many stamps the design is smaller than other flat plate coil stamps issued at the time. The design should be centered toward with bottom with a measurement range of 23.5mm to 24.2mm tall compared to the standard 25mm tall designs for the period.