

CIA Invert Stamp by Alex Gill

Although most philatelists know the infamous Inverted Jenny, another famous inverted stamp was discovered in 1985. The \$1 Colonial Rushlight Holder stamp was a part of the Americana Series, a series of definitive stamps issued between 1975 and 1981 with the \$1 stamp issued on July 2, 1979. The stamp's error comprises of the lamp candle holder and the candle outline and text inverted relative to the flame. Like other stamps for the time, the stamp was printed in sheets of 400 with individual panes of 100. As a result, three additional panes of inverted stamps once existed but have not surfaced.

In spring of 1986, the only known pane of this error was unearthed. Like other definitive stamps, the McLean, Virginia post office had been selling the \$1 stamp for an extended period. Sheets were sold with the error going unnoticed. One pane of the error stamps was purchased by an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who was tasked with purchasing postage for the agency. The employee purchased a sheet of 100, but the sheet was incomplete with missing selvage and five stamps. It wasn't until later when another CIA employee who needed postage for mailing that the error was discovered. Curious, the employee shared the discovery with eight other colleagues and all nine employees agreed to retain the all error stamps for themselves and purchased 95 normal stamps in exchange for keeping the errors.

Curious about the stamps, the employees showed their discovery to Ike Snyder, a stamp dealer in nearby Annandale, Virginia and Snyder refereed the group to New Jersey based Jacques C. Schiff, Jr. Schiff and the employees agreed to a deal: each of the nine employees retained one stamp each and Schiff would purchase the balance and a damaged single stamp for a reported \$25,000. As part of the transaction, Schiff agreed to keep the deal confidential but later announced the 14 stamps from the sheet had previously been used on CIA mailings. Eventually, the media got wind of the stamp and a scandal ensued when it was discovered who had purchased the stamps and the stamps were dubbed "CIA Inverts." Facing scrutiny, the CIA was obligated to conduct their own investigation and demanded employees who had copies return their findings or face termination. As a result, four employees returned their stamps and four others declined and were dismissed. The ninth and final employee claimed their copy was lost and retained his position.

Of the pane of 100 stamps, only 93 examples reached collectors. The 2020 Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps and Covers lists the error as Scott 1610c with a value of \$17,000. The value is italicized which indicates a true price is difficult to value accurately. Reproductions can be found on Ebay, but a block of stamps was recently sold in 2015 for \$71,875. Today, the CIA Invert stamp is among one of the more famous and interesting error stamps of modern times.



The Infamous CIA Invert stamp with the Intaglio brown printing inverted.



The regular \$1 Colonial Rushlight Holder stamp, issued on July 2, 1979.s