

The Dies of the Two Cent Black Jack

The two cent Black Jack of 1861-1875 is a fascinating and extremely popular collecting specialty. Here is a summary of the different Black Jack issues:

Scott #	Year	Distinguishing Feature(s)
73	1863	without grill
84	1868	with D grill
85B	1868	with Z grill
87	1868	with E grill
93	1868	with F grill
103	1875	reissue printed from new plate

This article is not about telling one Black Jack Scott number from another. For an explanation of the grills and the 1875 reissue, see the Scott *Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps & Covers*. If you're going to collect the Black Jack to any depth of specialization, an essential reference is Maryette B. Lane's *The Harry F. Allen Collection of Black Jacks: A Study of the Stamp and Its Use* (American Philatelic Society, 1969). The Lane book is long out of print but appears frequently on philatelic literature dealers' lists and on eBay in the \$40.00-50.00 range.

Rather, this article goes beyond both the Scott *Catalogue* and the Lane book in explaining the different dies used for this issue. My principal source is an article in the Matthew Bennett, Inc., auction catalog for the Metzger Black Jack Collection (public auction #244, March 23, 2002). I've prepared all the pictures used in this article. I photoshopped an image from a die 1a india plate proof, so the markings I show are "semi-schematic": they're not necessarily in the exact spots and not necessarily in the exact sizes and shapes.

From the standpoint of dies, types and plate varieties, the 1861-1875 issue is much less interesting than the 1847, 1851 and 1857 issues. By the time the National Bank Note Company laid down the plates for the 1861-1875 issue, most of the technical problems of the new process of siderography had been solved. Even so, there were three distinguishable dies used to make the plates of the Black Jack. Two of these dies exist in three states each. Descriptions and pictures of all these appear on pages 2-4.



Figure A: The scroll to the right of the left “2” shows no dots in the colorless area.



Figure B: The scroll to the right of the left “2” has two or three dots in the colorless area.



Figure C: Jackson does not have a star on his cheek to the right of his nose.



Figure D: Jackson has a star on his cheek to the right of his nose.

DIE 1: There are no dots in the scroll to the right of the left “2” (as in Figure A). Jackson does not have a star on his cheek as in Figure C.

Die 1 stamps occur on the 1863 ungrilled issue and all the different 1868 grilled issues. Die 1 exists in three states, die 1a, die 1b and die 1c.

DIE 2: There are two or three dots in the scroll to the right of the left “2” (as in Figure B). In less clearly printed or worn plate examples, one dot is invisible or almost so. Jackson does not have a star on his cheek as in Figure C.

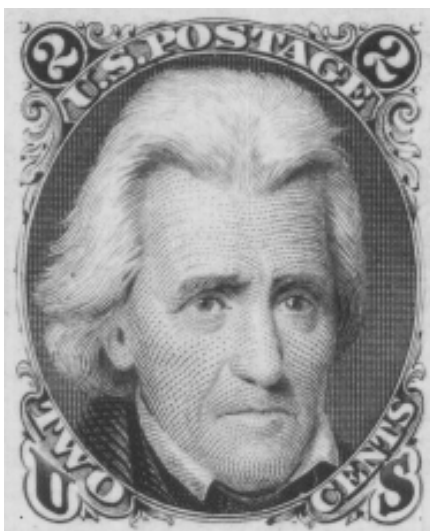
Die 2 stamps occur on the 1863 ungrilled issue and all the different 1868 grilled issues. Die 2 exists in only one state.

DIE 3: There are two or three dots in the scroll to the right of the left “2,” as in Figure B. In less clearly printed or worn plate examples, one dot is invisible or almost so. Jackson has a prominent star on his cheek, as in Figure D.

Die 3 stamps may occur on the 1863 ungrilled issue and all the different 1868 grilled issues. Die 3 exists on three states. Die 3a exists only on regularly issued stamps, die 3b exists only on the 1875 reissue and some late proofs, and die 3c appears only on late-state proofs.

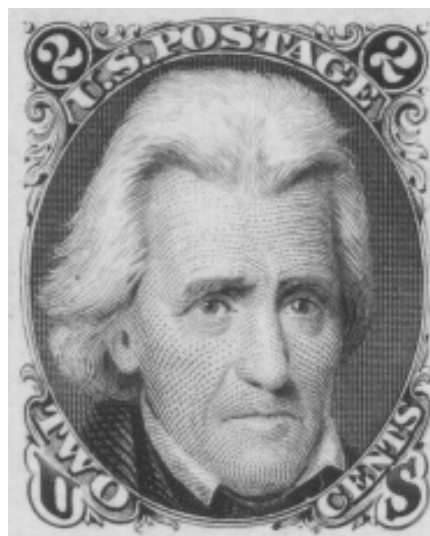
Unfortunately, the Scott *U.S. Specialized Catalogue* only mentions the different dies in the proofs section. They're not mentioned at all in the *Standard Catalogue* or the *Classic Specialized Catalogue*. And then, to totally confuse the issue, the catalog lumps dies 1 and 2 together and calls die 3 die 2! This remains the case despite the fact that the Lane book, published in 1969, describes the three different dies.

DIE 1 — no dots in upper left scroll — no dot on cheek



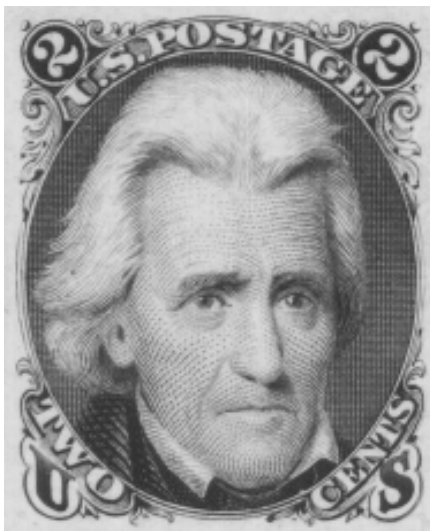
DIE 1a: Layout dots from the original die are present in all four corners.

The outer line to the left of the portrait medallion is slightly weak. There are one or two dots on the outer line.



DIE 1c: There are corner layout dots from the die in the upper left and upper right corners only.

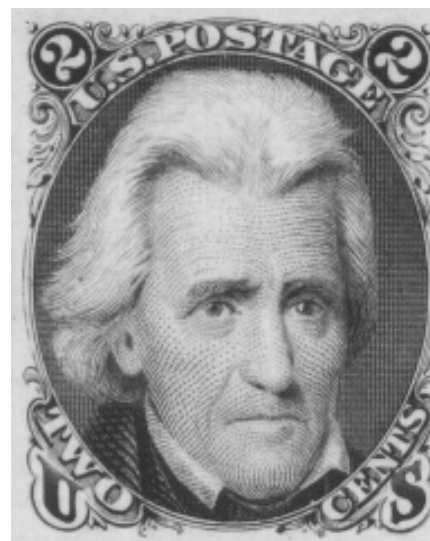
The outer line to the left of the portrait medallion is stronger than on die 1a. There are no dots on this line.



DIE 1b: There are no corner layout dots from the die in any corner.

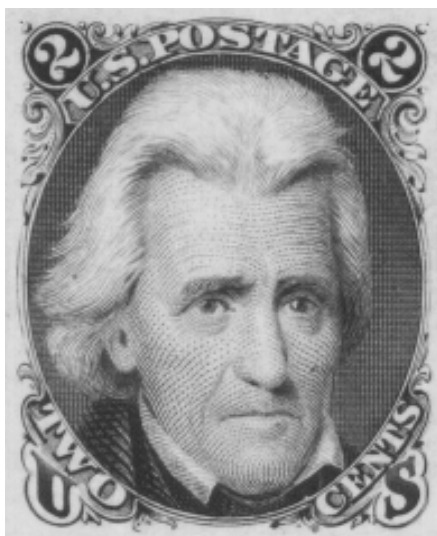
The outer line to the left of the portrait medallion is stronger than on die 1a. There are no dots on this line.

DIE 2 — Two or three dots in upper left scroll — no star on cheek

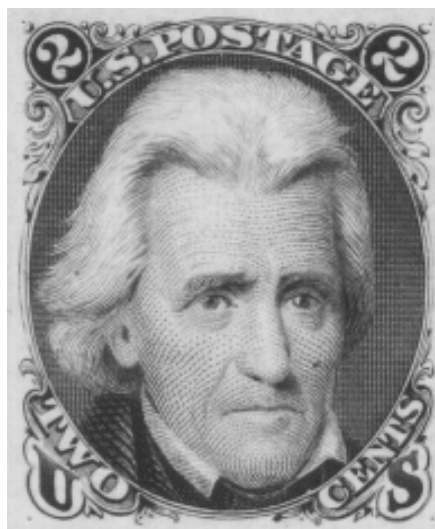


DIE 2: Layout dots from the die are present at upper left and upper right corners only. Only one state.

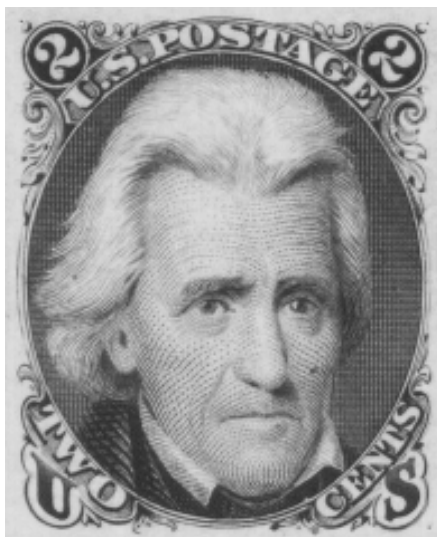
DIE 3 — Two or three dots in upper left scroll — star on cheek



DIE 3a: Layout dots from the original die are present at upper left and upper right corners only. Weak star on cheek.



DIE 3c: Layout dots from the original die are present at all four corners. Strong star on cheek. Late die proofs only.



Die 3b: Layout dots from the original die are present in the upper corners and lower right corner only. No layout dot in lower left corner. 1875 reissue and proofs only.

SURVEY: I surveyed Black Jacks offered on eBay in the “U.S. 19th century used” and “U.S. 19th century unused” categories which closed during the period December 24, 2006, through January 23, 2007. On January 23 and 24, I also surveyed offerings in eBay stores.

I didn’t look at cover offerings. In most cases, the stamps aren’t the prime interest; the postal history is. Consequently, the stamps aren’t enlarged sufficiently to tell the die. If an auction was for a multiple (pair, strip or block), I counted each stamp in the auction. Thus a block of 6 of die 1a was counted as six stamps. I checked more-than-one-stamp auctions but didn’t count any of those for which I could not make out the dies because the images were too small. This survey is only of issued stamps. Thus, proofs (except for one — see the survey), trial color proofs and specimens were not counted.

“In the hand,” I can tell the die on 95% of these stamps. The 5% I can’t tell “in the hand” are mostly due to placement of the cancel. But most of stamps in the “can’t tell” category, fully 33% of the offerings, were due to bad scans or photos.

There is one vendor whose ID begins with “k” and ends with “n.” He constantly has a quarter of a million dollars on eBay but suffers extremely poor sales. He features little, teeny scans which show you nothing beyond the fact the stamp exists and roughly how it is centered. I’ve spent tens of thousands dollars on eBay over the years, but I’ve never done business with this vendor entirely because of his poor scans. In the survey, I came across perhaps 60 of his offerings. Every one wound up in the “can’t tell” category.

One factor keeps this survey from being statistically valid. It is easier to identify some dies and harder to distinguish others. It is very easy to tell a die 1a from all others, provided you can see a bottom corner of the stamp. Die 1a is the only die used for issued stamps which shows die dots at bottom. By contrast, it is difficult to tell die 2 from die 3a if the cancel is over Jackson’s left cheek.

Scott #	can’t tell	die 1a	die 1b	die 1c	die 2	die 3a	die 3b	die 3c	totals
73	180	262	73	22	39	0	0	0	576
84	2	1	12	0	3	2	0	0	20
85B	8	1	13	0	5	2	0	0	29
87	44	10	14	9	25	6	0	0	108
93	42	3	10	1	21	20	0	0	97
103	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3
73P4									[Offered as 103 but actually an altered 73P4.] 1 1
totals	276	277	122	32	93	33	0	1	834