

# The Jenny Invert

## Most Famous Postage Stamp of All Time



*The Story Behind the Legendary Error Stamp*

# The Legend of the “Upside-Down” Jenny

The Jenny Invert is the world’s most famous postage stamp. It is perhaps the most beautiful and sought-after in existence today, recognized by both collectors and non-collectors.

What is it about the upside-down airplane stamp that fuels our interest and imagination? Maybe it’s the number of important philatelic and historic events that come together to make one unforgettable stamp story. Maybe it’s the great value, now in the millions. One thing is for sure – there is little about the Jenny Invert that isn’t linked to a great collecting story, an unsolved mystery, lots of money, myth, and more.

An invert is the most recognizable and prized form of stamp error. To date, few inverted errors have occurred on US postage stamps. Among them, the dramatic image of an upside-down airplane stands instantly identifiable. Its subject sealed the Jenny Invert’s fate as the world’s most well-known error stamp, revered by many in the collecting world as the “Holy Grail of Philately”.



*The Holy Grail of Philately*

Here’s how the legend of the Inverted Jenny begins...

# The Story Behind the Jenny Invert Discovery

It's May 14th, 1918. Office clerk William Robey is a stamp collector eager to own the new two-color stamp being issued for the first airmail flight. Robey knows how bi-color stamps with their two passes through the printing press make an error more likely. He plans on visiting the post office today, dreaming of a once-in-a-lifetime find – an invert. As Robey leaves their apartment, he tells his wife “I have a very strange feeling there's going to be a mistake.”

Shortly after noon, Robey enters a Washington, DC post office, and asks for a sheet of 100 24¢ airmail stamps. The unknowing clerk places a sheet of inverted stamps on the counter. Robey remembers afterward: “my heart stood still.” Out of over 2,000,000 24¢ Jenny airmail stamps released to post offices in Washington, New York City, and Philadelphia, William Robey purchases the only known sheet of Inverts for \$24.

After paying for the sheet without comment, Robey asks the postal clerk if he has additional sheets. The man senses something is wrong, closes his window, and contacts his supervisor. The postal clerk remarks afterward: “How was I supposed to know the thing was upside down? I never saw an airplane before.”



*William Robey*

Less than an hour after Robey returns to his office, postal authorities are at the door. They first ask to buy the sheet back; when he refuses, they threaten to confiscate it, but Robey stands firm. Officials halt sales of the 24¢ airmail stamp in Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and New York City as they search branch offices for additional inverted sheets.

In the hours following his discovery, Robey looks for a buyer. Whatever amount he accepts is a risk. Although errors in general, especially

inverts, are highly valued, the extent of the error is still unclear. If the stamps were printed in traditional sheets of 400 before being cut into panes of 100, at least 3 more panes could be in post offices, greatly decreasing the value of Robey's sheet. They were not printed in sheets of 400, but eight other invert sheets of 100 are discovered and destroyed before reaching the public. William Robey ponders what to do next. Mindful of the potential value of his stamps, and the government's threats to confiscate them, he and his wife sleep with the new treasure hidden beneath their mattress.

## **The Inverts are Sold to “Witch of Wall Street” Son – Colonel Green**

William Robey finally sells his sheet of 100 Inverted Jennies to well-known stamp collector-dealer Eugene Klein for \$15,000, a fortune for the time. Klein in turn sells the sheet to Colonel Edward H.R. Green for \$20,000.

The wealthy, big-spending collector and his miserly mother are legends in their own right. The son of millionaire Wall Street investor Hetty Green, known as the “Witch of Wall Street”, the Colonel's antics will fuel the Jenny myth over the next two decades...

Hetty had increased her family's whaling fortune many times over through clever investing at a time when few women even worked outside their home. Still, she and her two children lived like paupers. When a doctor recognized her at a free clinic and refused to treat her son, she tended to the boy herself, resulting in his leg being amputated. This set the stage for his extravagant spending after her death, and his inheritance of her \$100 million estate.

Ned Green meant to enjoy his wealth. In an attempt to do that, he spent lavishly on many things, including rare stamps and coins for his collections. The Jenny Invert sheet was among his most famous



*Courtesy of Captain Noel Hill and Barbara Fortin Bedell*

*Colonel Edward H.R. Green and his electric car – the first radio-equipped car in Massachusetts*



# How the Error Was Made

**B**y all accounts, the 24¢ fee for airmail transportation with Special Delivery was arbitrary. At eight times the regular first-class rate, it was expensive. As late as April 25, 1918, officials denied a special stamp would be issued. The public was told current stamps would be valid for airmail delivery.”

However, available stamps didn't include a 24¢ denomination. Officials made a decision to produce a patriotic red, white, and blue stamp to inaugurate the revolutionary new airmail service. It would lift war-weary spirits. It would be the first bi-colored US stamp issued since the 1901 Pan-American Exposition commemoratives. Since the stamp would be valid on all US mail, the word “airmail” wasn't included in the design.

## **The Bureau of Printing and Engraving Prepares the First U.S. Airmail Stamp**

The formal request for a new 24¢ stamp reached the Bureau of Engraving and Printing less than two weeks before the first scheduled flight. The understaffed BEP worked around the clock to design, engrave, and print the first US airmail stamps by the May 15th first flight.

Using a War Department photo, BEP veteran Clair Aubrey Huston designed a blue vignette featuring the Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny” surrounded by a red frame. Although the precise date isn't recorded, the engraving began around May 9, 1918.

The BEP's flat “Spider” press was used to print the airmail stamps. Used mostly for banknotes, the Spider press printed sheets of 100 stamps each rather than the typical 400-stamp sheets. On Friday, May 10th, the BEP began printing sheets of red frames with the plate number “8492” in the top selvage. Late Saturday afternoon, the printing plates and ink were changed. Sheets with the preprinted red frames were fed through the press again to add the blue Jenny vignette and plate number “8493.”

Because the full sheets of 100 stamps had selvage on all sides, they were



*Employees at their workstations at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing*

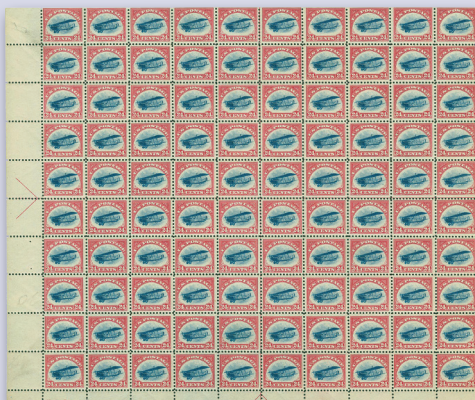
slightly larger than the typical panes of 100 stamps cut from 400-stamp sheets. To make the 100-stamp sheets fit the storage drawers used by postal clerks, the selvage on two sides of the 24¢ airmail stamp sheets was cut away during the perforation process. As a result of this unusual procedure, all non-error stamp sheets of the initial printing feature a straight edge at top and no plate numbers or siderographer's (plate-maker's) initials.

With the tight deadline met, the 24¢ airmail stamps were placed on sale slightly ahead of time late Monday afternoon – May 13, 1918. Unknown at the time, nine of the 20,000 sheets printed had been handed through the printing press upside down. The mistake created an inverted central design (vignette) and positioned the plate number on the bottom selvage. At some point, eight of these sheets were found in the BEP office and destroyed.

However, a single sheet made its way to the New York Avenue post office branch in Washington, DC. The history of philately was changed forever.

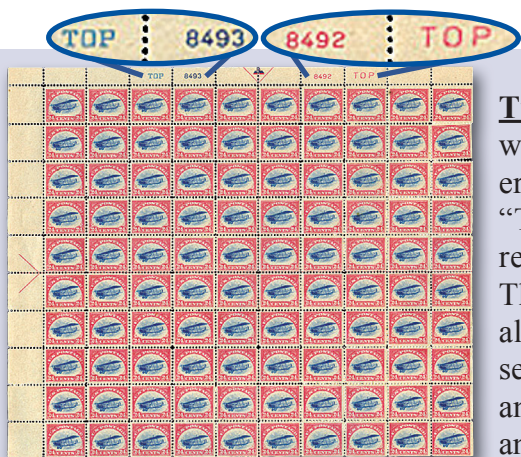
## **No Top, One Top, Two Top**

Because the 24¢ airmail stamps were still in production, the BEP reaction to the news of an invert was swift. On May 15th, the day after Robey's discovery, new procedures were implemented to prevent further printing errors. That's why three different margin formats exist.



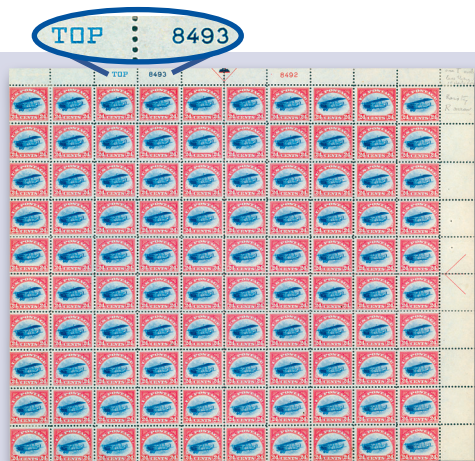
*No Top*

**No Top:** These are the 24¢ stamp sheets produced before May 15th (original printing which produced the invert). The plate number was printed in the top selvage, which was trimmed away by the BEP. Because of this procedure, a plate block was only possible on the inverted sheet.



*Two Top*

**Two Top:** After the Invert was discovered, to avoid more errors, on May 15th, the word “TOP” was added to both red and blue printing plates. The finishing machines were also reset to trim the bottom selvage, leaving plate numbers and the two “TOPS”, one red and one blue.



*One Top*

**One Top:** When production was stopped to make the above changes, a few sheets were drying which were already printed with the red frame. These sheets only needed the addition of the blue Jenny design. As a result, a few scarce sheets exist with the bottom selvage trimmed away and the word “TOP” in blue only.

# Airmail in 1918

## Early Aviation and the Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny”

Not only was philatelic history in the making, but American and world history, too... World War I was raging and with it came the dawn of a new era – the Era of Flight.

World War I produced a new brand of hero – the ace pilot and his incredible flying machine. The public’s imagination was captured by the announcement that these newly trained aviators would now brave the perils of flight to deliver mail in record time. Americans would soon thrill to tales of crash landings, switched directions, and dashing pilots flying by the seat of their pants.

Fifteen years after the Wright brothers’ 1903 flight, aircraft mechanics, instructors, and flight schools were scarce. Planes lacked reliable navigational instruments, pilots crash-landed with their planes because parachutes weren’t widely available, airports were few and unlit. Ground crews often used volunteers’ automobile headlights to guide planes to a safe landing.



*A pilot and his Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny” aircraft.*

*Photo courtesy of National Postal Museum*

Aircraft were used solely for surveillance at the beginning of World War I. Enemy pilots waved to each other, knowing they posed no threat. As the war progressed, dogfights and bombing runs became more common. The use of aviation as a military tool brought technological advances. America produced thousands of combat-ready airplanes by the time of the 1918 Allied victory. Manufactured to train Allied pilots, the Curtiss JN-4 was the first mass-produced US plane. More than 6,000 “Jenny” airplanes were produced, making it the

most widely used and recognizable model.

## First Airmail Flight Announced

The possibility of airmail delivery had been debated and dismissed for nearly a decade. Suddenly, Postmaster General Albert Burleson announced airmail service would begin between New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. With the world at war, critics argued that every available resource – including planes and pilots – was needed to win it. Experienced pilots were scarce – serving overseas, with few opportunities for training others.

Burleson brokered a deal with the War Department in March, 1918, offering a possible solution. Under the new arrangement, the Post Office Department would handle the mail and the Army's Signal Corps would provide planes and pilots. Americans would have faster mail delivery, and military pilots would receive badly needed flight training.

Unfortunately, the War Department failed to notify the Army Air Service of its new assignment until May 3, 1918. Major Reuben H. Fleet, an Army executive officer in charge of planning instruction, was put in charge of making the necessary arrangements. Fleet received his assignment on the 6th of May – just nine days before the scheduled May 15th flight.

Fleet faced a shortage of planes, pilots, airfields, and aircraft mechanics. No available planes were capable of flying the proposed route. “The best plane we have is the Curtiss JN-4D Jenny, and it will fly only an hour and twenty minutes. Its maximum range is



*Major Reuben H. Fleet (1887-1975). Fleet supervised the training of nearly 11,000 pilots by November, 1918.*

88 miles at a cruising speed of 66 miles per hour,” Fleet advised.

The Post Office Department stood firm in spite of all the concerns. The first regularly scheduled US airmail flight was to leave Washington, DC,



*The Curtiss JN-4 had few safety features. One pilot observed his plane's carburetor "would vibrate so badly that it would shake the ice off the wings."*

on May 15th. Major Fleet had under two weeks to plan this major revolution in transporting the mail.

As the Bureau of Engraving and Printing prepared the airmail stamps, Major Fleet began securing airplanes and selecting pilots. One plane was to depart New York and fly south at the same time a second plane flew north from Washington, DC. The planes were to meet in Philadelphia to exchange mail bags and refuel before returning home.

Fleet arranged for the Curtiss Aeroplane Corporation to modify six JN-4's with 150-hp engines and hoppers for the mailbags. Extra gas and oil tanks were needed to increase flight capacity. Landing fields with no obstacles and easy access had to be located. Aircraft mechanics were assigned to each location – Washington, Long Island, New York, and Philadelphia – site of refueling and mail exchange.

Fleet selected four Air Service pilots – the best available had no more than four months' experience. The Post Office Department selected Lieutenants George Boyle and James Edgerton who both graduated from flight school only days earlier. Each had just one 10-mile cross-country training flight and 60 hours of student-pilot air time.

Major Fleet and his crew worked feverishly to assemble the Jennies, many of which required extensive repairs. A non-working motor, a leaking gas tank, broken fuselage wires had to be repaired or replaced, and none of the air pressure safety valves worked. At 4:30 a.m. the day of the flight, workers discovered there was no oil at the field and scrambled to locate two barrels.

A crowd of several hundred gathered at Washington's Polo Grounds to witness the historic event. After reviewing the route to Philadelphia, Lt. George Boyle climbed inside the Jenny. His bags contained 5,500 letters to be flown on the first official airmail route in US history.

Interestingly, the plane on the airmail stamps bore the same identification number as Boyle's aircraft – No. 38262. How this occurred remains a mystery. Numbers had been assigned to the planes, but choosing the first to fly the Washington leg was done



*Major Fleet and Lt. Boyle review the map for the first airmail flight.*



*After two weeks of frenzied work, the first scheduled US airmail flight prepares for takeoff.*

randomly at the last minute. Yet days before the flight, Marcus Baldwin of the BEP engraved the number 38262 on the fuselage of the stamp's plane!

As President Woodrow Wilson looked on impatiently with other dignitaries, mechanics tried to start Boyle's plane. After four attempts, mechanics found the gas tank empty. With no gas on the field, they siphoned it out of nearby planes. Lt. Boyle took off for Philadelphia, barely clearing the trees.

Hours later, officials learned Boyle had flown in the wrong direction and crashed his plane.



*President Woodrow Wilson and Lt. George Boyle*



*Tri-city route for the first scheduled airmail service. Lt. Webb flew 90 miles, New York City to Philadelphia. His mailbags were transferred to Lt. Edgerton's plane, who flew them to Washington. The initial Washington-Philadelphia leg was to be flown by Lt. George Boyle, who flew in the wrong direction.*

Instructed to follow the train tracks north, Boyle became disoriented and used a southeastern branch of the track as his guide. Although the pilot escaped injury, Jenny No. 38262 was lying upside down in a Maryland field. The mailbags aboard Boyle's plane were quietly brought back to Washington, DC, and flown to Philadelphia and New York City the following day.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Torrey Webb left New York and arrived safely

in Philadelphia. His mail bags were transferred to the waiting plane of Lt. James Edgerton, who flew them to Washington, DC. After two weeks of intense preparation, the US airmail service was born.

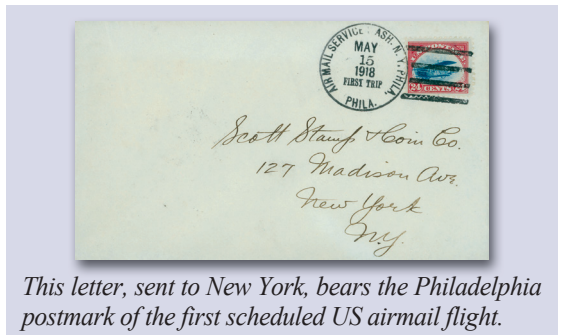
In the following months, pioneering aviators expanded airmail service, flying with few instruments over the Allegheny Mountains to Chicago and eventually the west coast. Lt. George Boyle wasn't among them. Two days after his first disastrous flight, Boyle left Washington for Philadelphia again aboard Jenny No. 38262. Another pilot escorted him north to Baltimore. On his own, Boyle became confused and landed 125 miles south of Washington. Major Fleet observed, only "the Atlantic Ocean and lack of gas kept him from going further."

In spite of frequent crashes and other challenges, the cost of airmail delivery dropped dramatically in the next few months – to 16¢ in July and 6¢ in December. Special Delivery became optional with the December rate. With each decrease, a single-color stamp was issued using the same design as the 24¢ Jenny. The *Scott Catalogue* assigned numbers to the stamps based on denomination rather than issue date, creating confusion for collectors. The first US airmail stamp (24¢) became US #C3, while the last 1918 airmail (6¢) stamp became #C1.

## The Recovery of a Real McCoy Invert

In 1955, a block of four Jenny Inverts was exhibited at an American Philatelic Society Convention in Norfolk, Virginia. The block, owned by wealthy collector Ethel McCoy, was stolen from its display case. Two of the McCoy stamps were recovered in the next few decades, one in 1977, and another in 1981.

In 2014, Mystic president Don Sundman offered a reward of \$50,000 each for the return of the two remaining stamps. In 2016, just before the Mystic reward was set to expire, one of the



*This letter, sent to New York, bears the Philadelphia postmark of the first scheduled US airmail flight.*



*Don Sundman presenting \$50,000 reward check to the man who found the Inverted Jenny, Keelin O'Neill.*

missing stamps surfaced, position #76 from the Jenny Invert sheet. Keelin O'Neill, a young man from Northern Ireland, came forward to return the stamp and claim the reward. He had been given the stamp by his grandfather shortly before his death. Don Sundman presented O'Neill with a check for \$50,000 at World Stamp Show-NY 2016.

Rights to the stolen McCoy Invert stamps were turned over to the American Philatelic Society Research Library in 1979 by Mrs. McCoy, so the recovered McCoy stamp reverted to it. The whereabouts of the final missing stamp – position #66 – remain unknown.

## The Unique Inverted Jenny Plate-Number Block

The Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block is the only block from the legendary 1918 24¢ airmail error sheet imprinted with its plate number. This makes it unique – the most sought-after and valuable among the six existing blocks of Jenny Inverts. Had the error not occurred, the plate number would have been printed in the top selvage and trimmed away after the perforation process.

The unique Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block spent decades in relative obscurity. After years of being unseen by collectors, the block sold for an unprecedented \$1.1 million in 1989.



Then in 2005, nearly 90 years after it first made headlines, America's greatest stamp rarity was once again featured in headlines around the world. The Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block was auctioned for \$2.97 million, a record amount ever paid for a US philatelic item. It was purchased by well-known collector William H. Gross,



*Don Sundman and Charles Shreve exchange stamps on November 2, 2005*

who donated millions of dollars to help build the National Postal Museum's Gross Stamp Gallery.

Less than two weeks after the auction, the legendary stamps attracted even greater attention. Television cameras rolled as the world watched the "World's Greatest Trade". They captured the one-for-one exchange of America's rarest stamp – the 1868 1¢ Z Grill, owned by Mystic president Don Sundman – for the Inverted Jenny Plate Number Block. Bill Gross needed the Z-Grill to complete his collection of 19th century US stamps. To get it, he bought the coveted block at auction, with a view to making this world record exchange, a combined six-million-dollar trade.

In 2015, Don Sundman sold the Jenny Invert Block to famed shoe designer Stuart Weitzman for over \$5 million dollars. Weitzman sold the block in 2021 to stamp collector and member of the Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents David M. Rubenstein. Rubenstein is owner of the 1297 copy of the Magna Carta, which is on long-term loan to the National Archives.

***The trade attracted media attention from around the world:***



*Three television crews joined print media reporters and an eager audience to witness the exchange.*

*Pictured above are David Sundman (left), President Littleton Coin Company and Wilson Hulme (right), Curator National Postal Museum.*

**Blockbuster Stamp Swap Worth Millions**

**– ABC News**



**Stamp Collectors Make Blockbuster NY Trade**  
**– Pakistan Times**

**Stamp Sale Lands \$3m "Holy Grail"**  
**– BBC NEWS**



**2 Collectors Set to Swap Rare Stamps**  
**The New York Times**

**Philatelists Make \$3 Million Trade**  
**–National Public Radio**

## US Postal Service Recreates World's Most Famous Stamp Error!

Philatelic history was made on September 22, 2013, when the United States Postal Service re-issued the world-renowned Inverted Jenny Error. Most notably, the new stamps were engraved with plates made from the 1918 dies that produced the original error. To avoid confusion with the earlier error stamp, the USPS gave the new stamp a \$2.00 face value.



The stamps were issued six to a sheet (#4806). Over 2.1 million sheets were released. Collectors everywhere dream of owning a rare and famous Inverted Jenny. In recreating this sought-after rarity with the original dies, the USPS gave stamp collectors a chance to get the next-best thing to the original error into their collections.

The issue of the souvenir sheet was a tribute to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum's William H. Gross Stamp Gallery in Washington DC. The upper left of the decorative selvage pictures the front of the Museum, which resides in the historic old Washington Post Office Building. The sheet's release commemorated the opening of the Gallery on the first day of issue.

The East Coast route of the first scheduled US airmail flight is shown on the right-hand side of the souvenir sheet salvage. Also pictured is a portrait of Major Reuben H. Fleet, the aviation pioneer who oversaw that first airmail delivery between New York and Washington, DC.

### **New Error with 100 "Upright" \$2 Jenny Sheets Created by USPS**

In a clever reference to the original inverted error, the US Postal Service intentionally, but secretly, produced 100 sheets showing an upright Jenny plane. It didn't reveal the plan until one lucky collector received a sheet with the Jenny positioned as on the original #C3 stamp. These new "error" sheets were distributed to top US post offices, and to

others randomly. Some went to the Stamp Fulfillment Center and ebay.com/stamps. All sheets were packaged individually inside a shrink-wrapped envelope to hide the contents. The USPS wasn't taking any chances that a customer could thumb through a stack of sheets and pull out the inverted ones.

Canadian collector Glenn Watson was the first to receive one of the right-side-up error sheets. He reported feeling like William Robey when that fortunate man discovered the sheet of Inverted Jennies in 1918. Watson hoped the new sheet would encourage interest in stamp collecting among the younger generation. Today the 2013 upright Jenny error sheet sells for approximately \$50,000!

According to its press release after the first right-side-up sheet was found, the USPS hoped in this creative way to generate interest in stamp collecting. And, that the publicity would serve to highlight the huge role played by the Post Office Department in the development of America's commercial aviation industry.

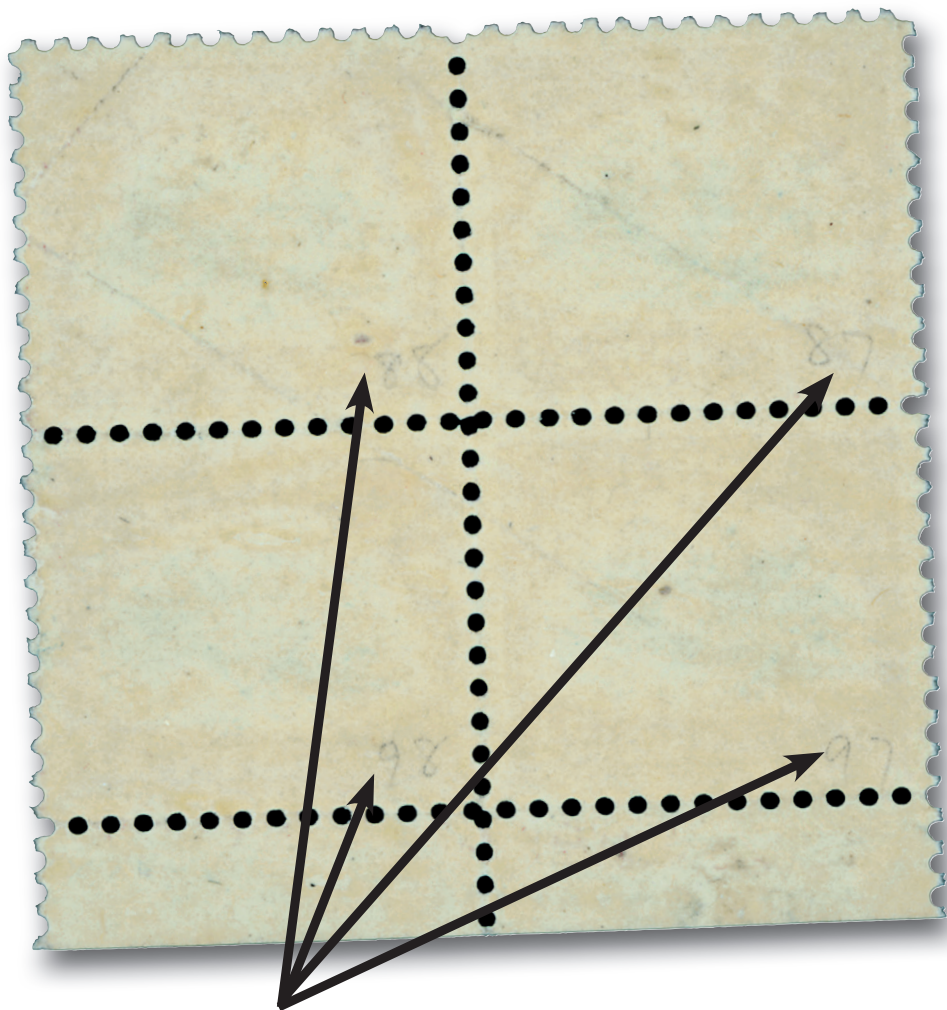
Not everyone was happy about the "un-inverted" Jenny error... Especially when it turned out the distribution scheme was inequitable and collectors in small towns had virtually no chance of purchasing one. In 2015, the office of the US Postal Service Inspector General ruled the action of intentionally creating and distributing a philatelic rarity was inappropriate, since it had greatly influenced the secondary stamp market.



*The very rare Uninverted \$2 Jenny Sheet Scott #4806d*

# The Jenny Invert

## Most Famous Postage Stamp of All Time



*Eugene Klein numbered the back of each Jenny Invert stamp in pencil. The Jenny Plate-Number Block is comprised of stamps located in the 87, 88, 97, and 98 positions.*