

Confederate Collectanea



Figure 1: CSA Scott 6, the 5-cent London printing.



Figure 2: The New York counterfeit.



Figure 3: Ward reprint, also known as the Philadelphia reprint.

Philatelic Intuition

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

On the return flight from the CSA annual convention in London, I watched an episode of *Brain Games*. If you are not familiar with it, *Brain Games* is a reality television series on the National Geographic channel that discusses and explores components of the human brain.

The first episode in 2011 explored optical illusions and how our brain can mislead us. The episode I saw on the flight home from London dealt with intuition.

If you are an experienced philatelist, there are undoubtedly times when you've looked at a stamp and said, "That just doesn't look right." An example with which most of us can identify is the common London printing of CSA Scott 6.

If you dabble on eBay at all, you have certainly seen countless New York counterfeits described as genuine and, somewhat less frequently, the Philadelphia (or Ward) reprints. To the non-Confederate specialist, they all look the same. See Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Over the years, I've had countless serious collectors and experienced dealers (specializing in other than Confederates) argue with me that examples of Figure 2 and Figure 3 are genuine. This is mostly from people who don't know me or my experience level. Yet most serious students of Confederate philately would spot these fakes and reprints in an instant and be able to assertively explain why they are not genuine London printings. I so often encounter this basic problem that it is the topic of one of the short monographs on my website under "Confederate Stamp Primer Online: Trouble Spots."

In the case of the New York counterfeit, the first thing that jumps out at me is always the cloudy greenish-blue color, which is nothing like the genuine stamp. I've always said that I can spot a New York counterfeit at five paces; this is because of the unusual aqua color which my brain instantaneously tells me is not right.

The next most obvious and defining difference between the counterfeit and the original is the shorter crossbars on the "F" and the "E" of "FIVE" in the value at the bottom. There are other differences as well. But this is not a treatise on fakes. It is about intuition.

At the wonderful philatelic tour of the British Library during Europhilex 2015, we were able to view the Tapling collection. Figure 4 shows part of our group with philatelic curator Paul Skinner.

Wealthy Victorian businessman, Thomas Keay Tapling bequeathed his collection in 1891; he was only 35 years old when he died. The spectacular collection is unrivalled in that it is the only major one formed during the nineteenth century that is still intact and contains almost all issues of postage stamps and postal stationery, as well as most of the rarities issued up to 1890. In today's currency, it is worth roughly 40 million U.S. dollars.

In the Confederate section of the Tapling collection are many fakes, some so noted and others not. When we spotted the "chicken cancel" in Figure 5, those within close enough range of the page burst out in spontaneous laughter. No authentication was needed; our

Figure 4: Philatelic Curator Paul Skinner shows CSA visitors the Confederate section of the Tapling Collection at the British Library.



intuition immediately told us that the cancel was a laughable fake. It certainly would not have passed muster for publication in Conrad Bush's book about Confederate fancy cancels.

"Back in the day," expertizers had a habit of just saying "looks good to me" or "I just don't like it." That is expert intuition. It is, however, not good enough today for formal authentication. Nonetheless, if you have that knee-jerk reaction born out of your collecting experience, it is a good idea to "listen to your gut" and get a formal opinion.

Sometimes even items with recent certificates as genuine are incorrect. In a recent sale by a major auction house, the firm had done due diligence by obtaining current certificates before the sale (neither one of them by the CSA Authentication Service). They were not well versed in Confederates.

One item had a certificate for a perforated CSA Scott 11 tied on cover with the opinion that it was genuine. The first alarm bell to me was the totally clean perforations (most genuinely perforated issues have rough blind perfs) and, more conclusively, it did not gauge as 12.5, which is the standard official perforation.

The second item was an off-cover provisional in which the description mentioned some condition problems in the lower corners but did not mention that the design was drawn in

and the whole stamp was rebacked over multiple thins at the top. Although the auction house could have legitimately stuck me with the two items per their terms of sale, they fortunately allowed me to return them.

Another example at auction was a stamp with two recently dated graded certificates. Please, Confederate collectors, lose "graded" from your philatelic vocabulary. In my opinion, it has no place in Confederate philately.

It was a "jumbo" CSA Scott 5 with a target cancel that was understandably touted as a breathtaking example. It was awesome indeed—an awesome Sperati forgery. The auctioneer, who was justifiably irked, immediately pulled it from the sale.

So back to the subject of your intuition, also referred to as gut instinct. Intuition can be described as the adaptive unconscious or a repository of memories where you are, in an instant, browsing through a catalog of prior experiences to compare with your present situation.

Scientists have discovered that intuition is a real process that takes place in multiple parts of our brains and developed in evolution as a shortcut for solving problems quickly. Often lives depended on it.

Sometimes intuition gets things wrong, so it is important to be aware of the limitations. Over



Figure 5: A bogus ‘chicken’ cancellation on a Confederate local printing from the Tapling collection.



Figure 6: A genuine Harrisonburg, Virginia, circle of wedges cancellation.

time, you amass more and more information (the cause of “senior moments?”) and your brain unconsciously organizes it into patterns. When you see something new whose details fit into those patterns, you instantaneously make that association. That is what we call intuition; it is centered in the brain, not the gut.

Scientists say there are three types of intuition: ordinary intuition, expert intuition and strategic intuition.

As a Confederate specialist for 50 years, I know instantly when something just looks wrong, such as the chicken cancel in the Tapling collection. That is a result of what scientists call expert intuition. And obviously most, if not all, others who saw it that day intuitively felt the same way. It is the sort of intuition that comes from special training and experience.

While I am a lifelong student of Confederates, I can’t make the same sort of instantaneous judgments if faced with a collection of Large Hermes Heads, for example. I have no experience with them other than to know they are from Greece.

Expert intuition can present a challenge when we run into an honest to goodness rarity that has never been seen before. Such was the case with the rare Harrisonburg circle of wedges cancel. Thirty years ago I had a *déjà vu* moment when I saw that cancel in the Samuels-Boone correspondence, subsequently written up by Vernon Stroupe in the September-October 1985 *The Confederate Philatelist*.

When I saw Stroupe’s copy, I about did back flips because I knew of another cover that

had received a “no opinion” on the status of the cancel as no one had ever seen one before. Then, all of a sudden there was a second one, also from Harrisonburg, and in an undisputable large correspondence. Since then, at least one other example on cover has been recorded. One of the Harrisonburg circle of wedges cancels is shown in Figure 6.

Strategic intuition seems to kick in when we are confronted with a tormenting problem that we can’t figure out how to solve. Sometimes we take a break and think about something else for a while and, voilà, the answer suddenly comes to us. Or how many of you have woken up in the middle of the night and have the answer to a problem you didn’t even know you had? I specifically remember a mainframe computer problem (before PCs) that resolved itself in my sleep and yet when I went to bed, I didn’t even realize that I had a problem!

When a person has to make big decisions that involve complex calculations, the sheer number of variables and information can fill the brain with irrelevant noise, and lead to a flawed choice. Intuition’s shortcuts, in contrast, can actually help a person to focus upon the most important information, and to ignore the rest. That’s why, when taking a test, the first answer that pops into your head is often the right one.

Then, let logic and concrete evidence support your conclusion.

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THE 2015 CONFEDERATE STAMP ALLIANCE ANNUAL CONVENTION

May 13-16, 2015
London, England



At the Business Design Centre, Islington,
in conjunction with Europhilex

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