COLOR ERRORS:

Occasionally, stamps are printed in a color other than intended. This can be caused by introducing the wrong color into an ink fountain. It can also be caused by using the wrong transfer die into an image on a printing plate.

In 1917 a technician at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing inadvertently entered impressions from a 5c transfer die on plates containing 2c Washington-Franklin series stamps. During the heyday of intaglio printing, stamp designs were engraved by hand on a master die of soft steel, which, when completed, was hardened. The image on the hardened die was impressed onto a roller (or transfer die), which in turn was used to impress individual images onto a printing plate. During the process, images were laid down, one by one until all rows had been completed. If during the course of a plate’s life an individual image became worn or damaged, as sometimes happened, it could be burnished out and replaced by reentry from the transfer die.

We can only speculate why the technician inadvertently picked up the transfer die for the 5c stamp instead of the 2c stamp. Perhaps it was because the image on the transfer die was small, was on a curved surface, and, being metallic, lacked the contrast of a printed image. Perhaps he confused the numeral “5” and the numeral “2.” Designs for stamps of the Washington-Franklin series are identical up to the 10c value; except for denomination, one stamp looks exactly like another, so it is easy to imagine that in haste he might have confused the die with the “5” for the die with the “2.” Or perhaps he was just inattentive or preoccupied. We will never know for sure. What we do know is that he used the 5c die to enter impressions on a plate otherwise filled with 2c stamps. Two 5c impressions appear on one pane (one quadrant of the press sheet) and one impression appears on another. Panes containing the errors were printed in rose, the normal color for 2c stamps. The rose-colored 5c stamps blended in perfectly with other stamps. But once discovered the rose 5c stamp looked startlingly different than normal 5c stamps, which were printed in blue.

Some stamps exist in a variety of shades. Shade varieties and color variations in batches of printing ink or variations in the density of ink lay down during printing. They can also result from changes in pigment over time due to exposure to light or atmospheric chemistry. Pigments prone to fading are known as fugitive. Stamps printed by the process-color method sometimes display color variations caused by variations in balance between one or more ink fountains, each of which prints a separate color. Shades are interesting and collectible in their own right, but again, they are considered varieties rather than errors. Stamps that have been intentionally exposed to chemicals or light to cause a change in color are known as changelings and have no philatelic value.