

Gum—a Dilemma

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Gum is a controversial subject. In most general stamp catalogs, Confederate general issues with no gum are valued at roughly half of stamps with original gum. Are general issue examples with no gum really worth half of their original-gum complements?

Figure 1 illustrates a large block of CSA 12-KB, a classic Keatinge & Ball (K&B) printing characterized by the heavy dark gum often referred to as “molasses-like gum.” Note how the gum has stained the face of the block. When viewed from the verso, shown in figure 2, it is evident that the gum application is not uniform. The brush strokes were laid in different directions; the gum depth is uneven, varying from heavy to light; and evidence of tiny air bubbles remains. To mitigate the heavy staining, many serious students soak their stamps—particularly the lithographed issues and the more valuable ten-cent engraved issues—to prevent further degradation of the face.

Because soaking these stamps improves their appearance and longevity, it can be argued that stamps with no gum, while listed in various catalogs as less valuable, truly are not. Many collectors, in asserting that the treated stamps are more valuable, counter with the oft-heard, “Are we collecting the gum or the stamps?” Collectors of Confederate philately face a dilemma: Should we follow the seemingly gum-crazed US stamp market trend or save Confederate stamps for future generations of students before they literally self-destruct?

The condition statement in the front of the *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History* notes that the more common provisional issues are priced for stamps in very fine condition without gum.¹ The same is the case for unused copies of the lithographed issues and the scarcer engraved issues such as the Frame Line (CSA 10) and T-E-N (CSA 9) issues. Prices for all other general issues are for stamps with original gum.² In the following sections, I explore why the gum dilemma is so important to address.

STAINING, CRAZING, ACIDS

Stamps with original gum can show problems such as brown spots and paper cracks, sometimes severe enough that the stamps literally fall apart due to the interaction of the gum with the paper. I’ve sold more than one rare lithographed block with original gum that was first sent to professional paper conservators to have the gum removed and the paper neutralized to save the block from sure disintegration.

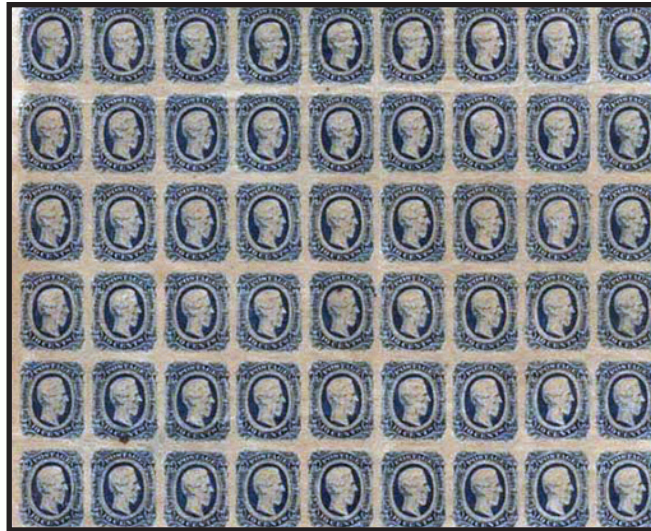


Figure 1. The front of a part-sheet of CSA 12-KB, heavily gum stained Keatinge & Ball printing.

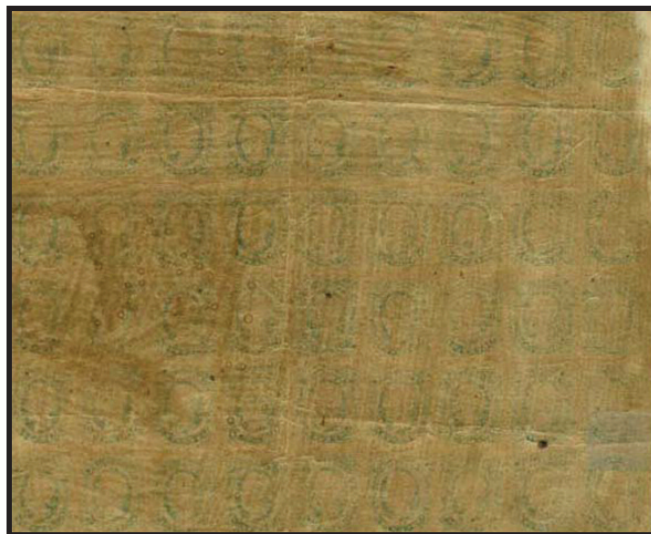


Figure 2. The back of the multiple in figure 1 showing hand-applied gum. Overall staining most evident at upper right where gum not applied.

Figure 3 shows the back of a double pane of CSA 11, an Archer & Daly (A&D) print. Uneven gum applied by brushes was not only the venue of Keatinge & Ball. Similar quandaries apply to the A&D issues, although not seen as often as with K&B. As with the K&B example, the gum staining is most easily seen in the margins or near the edge. In contrast, old hoards of type I and type II stamps that had the gum soaked years ago still appear fresh and vibrant.

The pair of typographs in figures 4 and 5 show what significant gum crazing can do, front and back. The cracked gum on this pair will eventually break the stamp

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Figure 3. Back of double pane CSA 11-AD, Archer & Daly printing.

into pieces unless the gum is soaked off. This is doubtless locally applied gum, not gum applied by De La Rue in London. The block of typographs in figure 6 show an example of the crazing/creasing that remained despite the gum being removed from stamps with traditionally thinner gum than the engraved ten-cent issues.

Thick gum tends to break due to changes in air humidity and temperature. Such breaks can affect the stamp paper and cause the stamps to disintegrate. The serious staining so common to the Keatinge & Ball issues often endures unless bleached to remove stains. Bleaching is an entirely different discussion, as is regumming.

Stamp gum prepared with acidic components can destroy stamp paper over time. Moreover, the presence of moisture, acids from the environment (air pollution), inappropriate storage materials, and the chemical composition of the paper itself repeatedly cut the glucose chains of the gum into shorter lengths. This acid hydrolysis reaction produces more acids, feeding continued degradation. Research by the Library of Congress has demonstrated that as it ages, cellulose (the primary constituent of paper, from cotton, linen, or wood pulp) itself generates acids—formic, acetic, lactic, and oxalic acids.³ Measurable quantities of these acids were observed to form under ambient conditions within weeks of a paper's manufacture. Due to strong intermolecular bonding, paper does not readily release these acids. This explains why even pH neutral papers become increasingly acidic as they age.

The Library of Congress study concludes that if a complete deacidification treatment is carried out while paper still has significant measurable strength and the treated items are then stored under proper conditions, these once-acidic items

Figure 4. Typograph pair with severe gum crazing.



Figure 5. Typograph pair in figure 4 shown from the gum side.

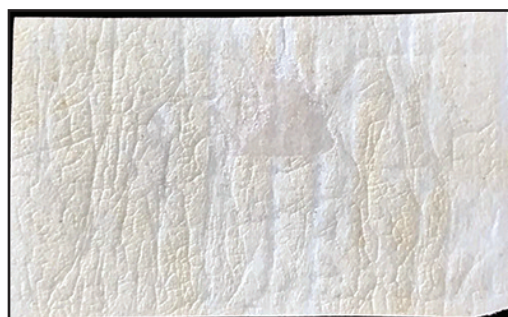


Figure 6. Back of typograph block of four from which the gum has been removed but still bearing evidence of natural gum creases/crazing.

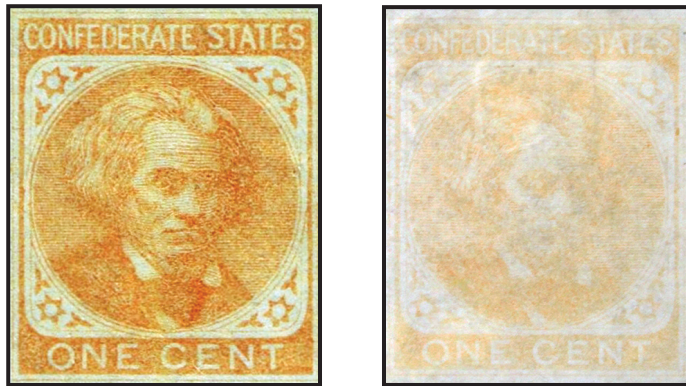


are projected to remain in stable condition for several hundred years, rather than becoming brittle and cracked in less than a century.

FUGITIVE INKS

At this point, you may have interpreted the previous discussions as my recommendation that you soak all your Confederate stamps immediately. Caveat! Soaking must be undertaken solely on a case-by-case basis.

If you soak typographed (letterpress) Confederate issues, which are said to have been printed with fugitive ink, you may end up with a larger, unintended problem. Fugitive printing inks, which were used in stamp production as well as

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Left. Figure 7. CSA 14a with original gum.
 Right. Figure 8. CSA 14 which has been soaked, resulting in the image almost disappearing due to fugitive ink.

on bank checks, easily fade on their own and often break down in water or other chemicals. (To counter attempts at forgery or the removal of cancellations, many governments have used fugitive inks to print stamps.)

In my experience, I have not noted a problem with CSA 6 or CSA 7 issues. The CSA 14, the one-cent Calhoun, is a different story. Color shades of this issue include deep orange, light orange, and yellow. The variety of hues may be due to fading. It is not impossible that all the issued stamps were initially a uniform deep orange. If you soak CSA 14, you may end up with a pale "fuzz ball." This is undeniably undesirable. The stamp in figure 7 is an original gum copy of CSA 14a, the dark orange shade. The example in figure 8 has been soaked. The paler the stamp, the longer it likely was soaked. Impressions on these issues are notoriously poor in the first place; soaking compounds the problem.

Also, DO NOT ERASE ANY MARKINGS ON THE FACE. The ink erases with the offending pencil mark. If you must soak a CSA 14 because of, for example, an offending heavy hinge, do so very quickly and be prepared to live with the consequences.

CONCLUSION

A few years ago, I bought a balance lot of Confederate general issues in stock books that had belonged to the late Jack Molesworth. As I flipped through the books, I was amazed at the eye-popping colors, a sure indicator that there was no gum.

So, I ask you, would you prefer that your albums display the gorgeous colors of the stamps you've carefully curated or that these investments retain the damag-

ing gum on the back, which is not even seen? Should your collection be penalized because you chose the former?

The CSA 14, with its fugitive ink, is an anomaly regarding gum. My stand on this issue is that no-gum examples are worth about half of their fully gummed cousins. But what about the clear majority of Confederate issues? Which are more collectible and desirable—with or without gum? My position should be clear.

NOTES

1. Patricia A. Kaufmann, Francis J. Crown, Jr., and Jerry S. Palazolo, eds., *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History* (n.p.: Confederate Stamp Alliance, 2012).
2. In most of the stamp sections in the *Confederate States Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, not only is the gum not valued, but neither is mint, never hinged. It is difficult to locate true never-hinged examples of the lithographed issues. Paying more for never hinged stamps was a practice started by individuals who knew little about stamps. They were trying to protect themselves from buying damaged or repaired stamps so they insisted on never hinged examples. The fact that most early issues no longer exist in this condition has never impeded these collectors. And, of course, when someone is willing to pay extra for something, that something is always made available by the shadier characters in our hobby.
3. "The Deterioration and Preservation of Paper: Some Essential Facts," The Library of Congress, Preservation. <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/deterioratebrochure.html>. Accessed September 27, 2017.