

A brief history of the Scott catalogs

JAMES E. KLOETZEL

Most collectors and dealers recognize that the Scott catalogs are a constant work-in-progress, and they also know that the origins of the catalogs far pre-date the birth dates of any living collector. Because of this recognition, we often find that collectors are interested in knowing the history and understanding the development of the catalogs.

Many collectors know little snippets of information about the history of John Walter Scott, the Scott catalogs and the Scott numbering system, but we would wager that few could recite the entire story accurately. Unfortunately, Scott himself never wrote his memoirs, so many interesting stories and much historical detail have been lost. From time to time, articles have appeared giving various aspects of the history that is known, but we have noted that very few such articles have surfaced in recent years. Thus, as a refresher to seasoned collectors and an intro-

duction to newer collectors, we review here briefly this interesting history.

John Walter Scott came to the United States from his native England at the age of 17 in 1863 (Figure 1). He brought with him postage stamps, having collected and traded them as a teenager while working in a London merchant's office.

Scott established himself as an outdoor dealer in New York City, on Chambers St., north of City Hall Park. After selling all of his stamps for \$10 to dealer William P. Brown (generally credited with being the first stamp dealer in the United States), Scott unsuccessfully sought other employment, but eventually accepted a \$100 consignment of stamps from Brown and set up shop next to him in front of Trinity Church.

After managing to save \$100, Scott headed to California in 1865 to make his fortune. On the way, he lost everything he owned in a fire in Idaho City, but proceeded to California on foot. He apparently worked as a teamster and then put in six months working for a German grocer in Sacramento City. By 1867, two years wiser, he returned to New York City to resume his stamp business as J. W. Scott & Co. at 34 Liberty St., which adjoined the City Hall Post Office.

That was the year, 1867, in which we may say that the Scott Stamp Catalogue began. Scott issued 15 monthly one-page price lists starting in June 1867 (Figure 2). Originals of these are rare. In September 1868, his list was expanded into a 21-page bound paper pamphlet (Figure 3), which he called his 16th-edition "Catalogue." The main difference between his earlier one-page lists and the 1868 catalog was that the former were lists of stamps he had available for sale, while the latter was a real catalog of all stamps that he believed to exist. By tradition, the Scott catalogs retain the British spelling of "catalogue" in their titles.

It is believed that Scott wrote the entire catalog himself, listing everything from what he actually saw and valuing the stamps from his own stock and experience. The catalog grew steadily, reaching about 50 pages by 1878. In that year, Scott had another nasty experience with fire. His printing office was destroyed, and with it all his early records.

By this time, the catalogs had become annual editions. Previously, many years saw the release of more than one edition. That fact, plus Scott's practice of calling his first 15 price lists "catalog editions," account for the current 2003 Scott catalogs being designated the 159th catalog edition. By 1886, the catalog had 70 pages of listings and illustrations, plus 25 pages of additional illustrations.

From the late 1860s to the early 1880s, Scott embarked on a number of other interesting philatelic enterprises that are not directly related to this catalog history. He brought out his first stamp album, "Scott's American Album," priced at \$2.50, in 1868; began publishing the *American Journal of Philately* (the first important stamp journal) in 1868; established the first actual stamp store in North America in 1869 (selling both stamps and coins); held the first stamp auction in North America (1870, in New York City); the first stamp auction in England (1872, in London, at Sotheby's auction house); and produced the first stamp auction catalog that contained photographic images (1882).

In December 1885, Scott signed a contract selling his entire coin, stamp, catalog and album business to Gustave B. Calman. The company was renamed The Scott Stamp & Coin Co., and John Scott remained for a time as a minority partner, because part of the payment for his firm was in the form of capital stock of the new corporation. By 1889, Scott had sold all his remaining stock back to the company, and at this time he resumed his previous business as the J.W. Scott Company.

Some may not realize that John Walter Scott himself never placed catalog numbers by the listings in his catalogs. Three important Scott catalogs that trace the Scott numbering system are the 1885, 1886 and 1887 editions.

The first, edition 46 of 1885, was the last catalog produced by J.W. Scott & Co. before the company was sold to Calman (Figure 4). The stamp listings are not accompanied by catalog numbers, but are simply written by country, year, denomination and color. Edition 47 for 1886 was the first catalog published by Scott Stamp & Coin Co., and the listings are the same as the previous Scott & Co. catalog, without catalog numbers.

But by the 1887 48th edition, Scott Stamp & Coin had come up with what they thought was a better way to list postage stamps and allow customers to more easily order stamps through the mail (Figure 5). A "Special Notices" section at the front of the catalog explained that "The numbers in the first column will serve to facilitate the ordering from the Catalogue; thus, if you wish to order an unused United States, 1851 issue, 1c blue, unperforated, your order may read as follows: United States 16, [price] 25 cents." And, thus, the Scott catalog numbering system was born. It is not recorded who came up with the idea of adding catalog numbers to the Scott catalog.

Gustave Calman put his younger brother, Henry, in charge of Scott Stamp & Coin, and Henry, with helpers whose names are lost to history, continued producing the annual Scott



Figure 1. At left is John Walter Scott in 1877, age 32. He had already become a very successful stamp and coin dealer and publisher. At right is Scott in 1917, age 72, two years before his death.