

Inverted Jenny, Object of Intrigue in Stamp World, Re-emerges After 61 Years

By [JAMES BARRON](#) MAY 22, 2016 The New York Times



The No. 76 Inverted Jenny, left, one of 100 famously misprinted stamps, next to a correctly printed counterpart at the Philatelic Foundation's office in New York. Jenny No. 76 was part of a block of four Jennies that disappeared at a stamp show in Norfolk, Va., in 1955. Credit Joshua Bright for The New York Times

The question is, will a certain Inverted Jenny be cleared for landing at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in Manhattan in the next few days?

This has nothing to do with air traffic controllers or glide paths. This has to do with a 24-cent postage stamp, one of the most famous ever printed, famous because it was a mistake. The experts say it was No. 76 on a sheet of 100 with upside-down biplanes — the instantly recognizable Inverted Jennies — that slipped past inspectors at a printing plant in Washington in 1918, to the chagrin of postal officials and the delight of stamp collectors ever since.

The [World Stamp Show New York](#), a once-in-a-decade jamboree for stamp people and the little pieces of paper they love, opens on Saturday. The [American Philatelic Research Library](#), which claims that it is the rightful owner of this particular Jenny, wants to display it at the show (where a real Jenny, a restored Curtiss JN-4H biplane from the early days of airmail a century ago, will also make an appearance).

But legal turbulence may stall the arrival of No. 76.

There is a reward at stake — actually, two rewards. In 2014, the library offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the recovery of No. 76, which was missing at the time, and \$10,000 for another missing Jenny. At the same time, a prominent stamp dealer, Donald Sundman of Camden, N.Y., offered rewards of \$50,000 for each of the two stamps.

First, some history. Of the 100 Inverted Jennies, this is not the one that was taped to an exhibit page, a big no-no to stamp collectors. Nor is this the Jenny that was sucked up by a vacuum cleaner when it fell out of a stamp album. That Jenny survived, but the collector who owned it soon bought another, No. 58, which is to be [auctioned on May 31](#).

Jenny No. 76 had been missing for 61 years. It disappeared at a stamp show in Norfolk, Va., in 1955.

“Yes, it was one of our shows,” said Scott English, the executive director of the [American Philatelic Society](#), which maintains the library. (He is also the administrator of the library.)

At the time, Jenny No. 76 was part of a block of four Jennies that belonged to Ethel Stewart McCoy, the daughter of [Charles M. Bergstresser](#), who with Charles Dow and Edward Jones founded [Dow Jones & Company](#). She had the money to finance her passion for stamps, specifically airmail stamps and stamps with palm trees. Her passion for stamps seems to have extended to men. After the death of her first husband, she married a well-known philatelist.



Larry Lyons, the executive director of the Philatelic Foundation, helped authenticate Jenny No. 76 after it surfaced at a New York auction house last month. Credit Joshua Bright for The New York Times

Who took off with her four Jennies remains a mystery. “That’s why you have armed guards that walk the floor of stamp shows these days,” Mr. English said. The Federal Bureau of Investigation investigated but never made any arrests.

Eventually — no one knows exactly when — the block of Jennies was separated into four single stamps. One surfaced in 1958 in the hands of a Chicago-area stamp dealer. The F.B.I. decided not to prosecute him. That

stamp made its way to the research library in the 1970s because Mrs. McCoy had given up her ownership rights and signed an agreement that said any Jennies that turned up should go to the library. A second stolen Jenny from her block appeared in 1982, two years after she died.

No. 76 turned up last month at [Spink USA](#), an auction house on West 57th Street in Manhattan. George Eveleth, the head of Spink's philatelic department, said it was brought in by a man in his mid-20s from Northern Ireland who had emailed him a few weeks earlier. "He said he was coming to New York, and he'd like to bring it to our office," Mr. Eveleth said.

The story the man told Mr. Eveleth — and, later, Mr. English — was that his grandfather had died a couple of years ago, leaving him some stamps. "He did not know the collection he inherited included a stamp that was of some value," Mr. English said. "I think he got curious, looking to dispose of it, and started looking through the pile, did some research online and realized it might be worth some money."

In "impeccable condition," he said, Inverted Jennies "can go for a lot." The estimates for No. 58 range from \$525,000 to \$1.6 million.

Mr. English said the man had maintained that he did not know how his grandfather had acquired the stamp. The only document that came with it was a curious letter from a long-gone Manhattan stamp dealer that Mr. English described as the stamp world's equivalent of a pawnshop.

The letter, from October 1965, outlined a buyback agreement. The stamp dealer, S. H. Engel & Company, paid the collector who had brought it in \$9,500. Engel gave the collector the right to repurchase it, for \$11,500, within a year. Mr. English's assumption is that the collector did not come back with the extra \$2,000 to reclaim it, and that the dealer sold it to another customer. Who that was, no one knows.



Jenny No. 76 belonged to Ethel Stewart McCoy, the daughter of one of the founders of Dow Jones & Company, before it was stolen. Mrs. McCoy signed an agreement that said any Jennies that turned up should go to the American Philatelic Research Library. Credit Joshua Bright for The New York Times

Officials from Spink took the stamp to the [Philatelic Foundation](#) in Manhattan, which determines whether stamps are authentic. The executive director, Larry Lyons, and the curator, Lewis Kaufman, began studying the stamp and comparing it with photos and electronic scans of other Jennies.

“We’re skeptical,” Mr. Lyons recalled of their reaction, “but 10 or 15 minutes later, we look at each other and say, ‘It’s genuine.’” He said they called the F.B.I. An agency spokesman did not return a call seeking comment.

Mr. Lyons and Mr. Kaufman determined that the stamp had been altered — the perforations on the left side and on the top were recut.

They also began figuring out which of the 100 stamps it was, checking the position of the plane in the oval frame, the position of the frame itself and the position of the perforations. Robert G. Rose, the chairman of the foundation, said there were even subtle variations of alignment and ink from plane to plane and frame to frame. They concluded it was No. 76.

So far, the man who brought the stamp to Spink has not been paid anything. Mr. English said last week that he expected to present an agreement to his board this week. If approved, the deal would allow the library to take ownership of the stamp during the stamp show, and it would clear the way for the man to receive a payment. (The United States attorney’s office in Manhattan would also have to have a hand in such an agreement to resolve the question of whether the stamp is stolen property, but a spokeswoman for the office declined to discuss the case.)

Mr. Sundman said he would not mind paying for No. 76. But what about the fourth McCoy stamp, the one that has not been heard from since it disappeared?

Mr. Sundman said he got a call about it last year from a man he had never met.

“He said, ‘I know who has the stamps and who took them,’” Mr. Sundman recalled. “He had this theory it was the spouse of somebody who worked for the A.P.S. in the ’50s” — the philatelic society — “and he said, ‘They’re not going to give it up.’”

Mr. Sundman said he asked how the caller knew that. “He said: ‘I’m a psychic. These things just come to me.’ That was pretty much it. Other than the psychic, I have nothing on the fourth stamp.”

A version of this article appears in print on May 23, 2016, on page A16 of the New York edition with the headline: Object of Intrigue in Stamp World Surfaces 61 Years After It Vanished.