

## A Tale of Two Thomas Edison Notes

The portraits on notes are usually political personages, heroes, artists, musicians, authors, and even sports figures. Another type represented is inventors. The great inventor Nikola Tesla rightfully appears on many Yugoslavia and later Serbia notes.

The famous inventor Thomas Alva Edison appears on an unissued Series 701 \$5 Military Payment Certificate (see figure 1) and a 1947 3 cent stamp. He also graces stamps from Hungary, Cambodia, Vanuatu, Guinea-Bissau, and one of the seven emirates of the U.A.E.



Figure 1 – Series 701 \$5 MPC

He is also the subject on two test notes from two security printers – American Bank Note Company and Ashton-Potter.

Most bank note collectors are well familiar with the American Bank Note Company, but few may know of the Ashton-Potter firm unless they also philatelists. Ashton-Potter was founded in 1925 in Canada. It completed its first stamp project for Canada Post in 1970. The firm moved to Williamsville, New York in 1990. Among its current products are stamped envelopes, postal and tax stamps for the United States Postal Service.

While attributing test notes, I was struck by the close similarities between these two portraits of Thomas Edison for these two firms. Both show a white haired front view of the inventor in a dark suit with a dark bow tie and white dress shirt. The bow tie is even off tilted the same direction. The only difference observed, the Ashton-Potter note shows Edison more close up. The Ashton-Potter note is intaglio printed on watermarked paper.

Acquiring issue dates for test notes is harder than bank notes. Nevertheless, a best guess for the ABNC test note (ABNC-271, figure 2) is 1933 or later (see the photograph image and information below).



Figure 2 - TDLR-271 20 Units

The sole Ashton-Potter test note, thus catalog number AP-101 (figure 3) is of unknown vintage. If the note was produced before its exodus from Canada, it is conceivable the note was made in the same time frame as ABNC-271.



Figure 3 - AP-101 No Units

Could the same engraver be responsible for both works? Or could both firms have ever shared work? I asked the resident IBNS ABNC expert Mark Tomasko these exact questions. He was unaware of any connection between the companies, but could not rule out Ashton-Potter taking over some engraving work from ABNC.

I then opined they were both engraved from the same commercially available portrait of Thomas Edison. Since then I have searched through many portraits of Edison on the world-wide web. It turns out many of these portraits are just as similar as the two engravings! Edison had a propensity for being photographed in a dark suit, always with a white or light dress shirt with a bow tie. Remember all photos were black and white, making any dark suit appear similar. He also preferred the stern look common for photography poses of the period. In fact the only smiling image I found of a mature Edison was painted, not a photograph.

While still a mystery, I now believe they are from the same engraving. While the details are evident in the ABNC version, the images are identical, down to the slightest of a grin gracing Edison.

Archives International sold both test notes and the photograph in the ABNC archives used by the company for their engraving. The 8 by 10 inch photograph is dated 1933 and produced by Underwood & Underwood Studios.



Figure 4 - Underwood & Underwood Studio Photograph