

# THOMAS DE LA RUE: CONFEDERATE STAMP PRINTER

Steve Feller

## Introduction to Thomas de la Rue and His Company

*This article is about the printer of Confederate stamps that was located in England. While Union printers produced some of the bank notes used within the Confederacy, only one non-Southern company printed stamps of the Confederate Government (with the slight exception that some essays were produced in the North). This non-Southern printer was Thomas de la Rue Co., Ltd., then of London. Furthermore, this company is still an active security printer.*

Thomas de la Rue was born on the British Channel Island of Guernsey, close to Normandy, France, in the region known as Le Bourg, Forest (a parish) on March 24, 1793 (Figures 1a and 1b). He died on June 7, 1866, in London. His professional life started at the age 10! At that tender age he was apprenticed to Joseph Antoine Chevalier, who was a master printer.

By 1818, de la Rue moved to London. There, he founded the printing company that bears his name and that is now the world's largest commercial security printer and papermaker. By the 1830s he was printing playing cards, after having introduced improvements, and he obtained patents in the production process. Figure 2 shows examples of his work produced in 1834. Since the ace of spades was a "duty card" (a form of revenue stamp), the jump to security printing was small.

De la Rue was prolific at producing playing cards. This business launched his success. The company continued to



Figure 1a (above) and 1b (left). Maps of the Bailiwick of Guernsey, a British Crown Dependency (legally not part of the U.K.). Note that the birth site of Thomas de la Rue was in Forest (near the modern-day airport) and this is at the Southern end of the main island (seen in Figure 1b). This main island is about four miles in its maximum land dimension and it is shaped like a triangle.

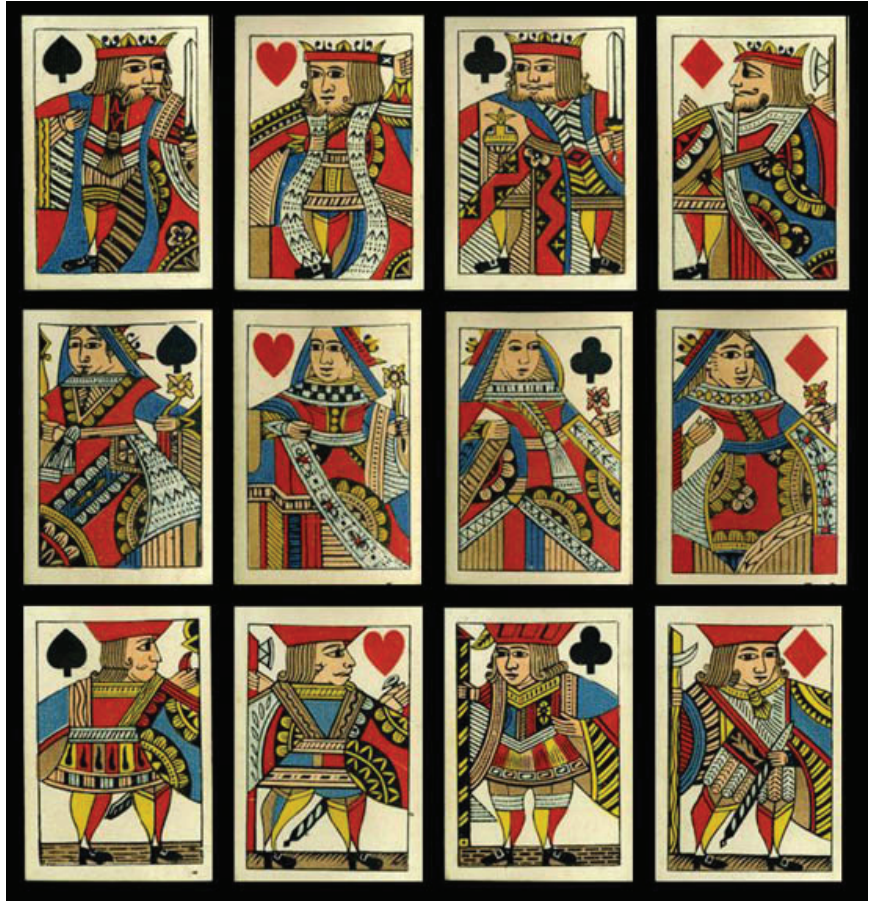


Figure 2 (above and right). A group of 12 playing cards and an ace of spaces ("Old Frizzle" duty card), produced by de la Rue in 1834 (cards). The face cards were produced by letterpress; the ace (essentially a revenue stamp), by line engraving.

Figure 3 (below right). A 2½-pence stamp from British Columbia and Vancouver Island, 1860, printed by de la Rue.

expand for the next few decades. Then, about 1855, the firm started to print stamps for many countries and territories controlled by the British. Figure 3 shows examples from British Columbia and Vancouver Island which, in 1871, joined the Dominion of Canada as its sixth province.



Figure 4. De la Rue one-pound from Mauritius, 1860. This is an example of the first paper money printed by de la Rue.





Figure 5. Thomas de la Rue and Co., 110 Bunhill Row, East Central London. This picture was taken shortly after the German Blitz bombing of Sept. 11, 1940. De la Rue took a direct hit. This was the location where the London printing of Confederate stamps took place. Photo courtesy de la Rue.

Finally, in 1860, de la Rue started to print paper money, commencing with Mauritius, as shown in Figure 4.

By the start of the American Civil War the company was one of the leading stamp printers in the world. The stage was set for the Confederate stamps. Since Thomas de la Rue died in 1866, he was still alive at the time of the printing of the CSA 6 and CSA 14 stamps, and the production of the plates,



Figure 6 (below left). Image of Thomas de la Rue on a 1996 de la Rue company test note.

Figure 7 (below). Guernsey 33-pence stamp issued in 1993. It honors the 200th birthday of Thomas de la Rue.





Figure 8: The author stands in front of the Thomas de la Rue pub in St. Peter Port, Guernsey in 2006. This is near the birthplace of de la Rue.

ink and paper used to print CSA 7-L and CSA 7-R in Richmond, Va. (The numbering of the stamps is taken from the 2012 *CSA Catalog*.)

On Sept. 11, 1940, the de la Rue plant where the Confederate stamps were produced was bombed by the Luftwaffe during the World War II Blitz (Figure 5). This factory was located at 110 Bunhill Row in East Central London. This didn't end the company, but it destroyed the location where the Confederate stamps were printed.

Shown in Figures 6 and 7 are two security items that honor Thomas de la Rue. There are several more.

In 2006, I visited Guernsey and stayed just across the way from a pub named in de la Rue's honor, as shown in Figure 8.

### **A Brief History of the de la Rue Confederate Stamps**

There are many descriptions for these issues in the philatelic literature. The stories are fascinating. I recommend three excellent descriptions: First, there is the superb *The De La Rue Stamps of the Confederacy*, by John L. Kimbrough, found at <http://www.jlkstamps.com/csa/archives/gibbons1.pdf>. The second is the extensive and also wonderful description given in August Dietz's *The Postal Service of the Confederate States of America*, published in 1929. Just the description of the printing alone makes this worthwhile. The third is the one given in the 2012 *Confederate States of America: Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*. This is a model of clarity and brevity.



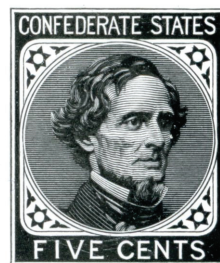


Figure 9. A letterpress (typography) press operator. This is the method that was used for printing the de la Rue Confederate stamps.

Figure 10 (below). CSA No. 6 5¢ proof on card stock.

Courtesy Patricia Kaufmann

Figure 11 (bottom). Enhanced and enlarged contrast closeup scan of the back of the Figure 10 de la Rue proof. Photo Steve Feller



The story is briefly repeated here. Maj. Benjamin F. Ficklin, agent of the Confederate States, sailed to England in late 1861 and went to the Thomas de la Rue company to obtain stamps, paper, ink and the means

to print them in Richmond. A contract was entered into and various deliveries took place. The first attempt at a delivery began at the end of January 1862 and was successful. This resulted in 2,150,000 stamps being received in Richmond, along with paper and ink. A few undocumented shipments followed. In total, according to Dietz, about 17 million CSA No. 6 5¢ stamps were printed, of which about 12 million made it through the blockade. Also, 400,000 CSA No. 14 1¢ stamps were printed and shipped to Richmond, although these were never postally used during the Confederate period.



Figure 12. CSA 1¢ proof on card stock.

Courtesy Patricia Kaufmann

The stamps were printed by traditional typography (letterpress), the relief printing method (raised letters) dates back to Gutenberg's original way of book printing during the 15th century (Figure 9).

The letterpress plates, along with additional stamps, paper, ink and a perforating machine, were shipped aboard the *Bermuda* in late





Figure 13 (left). Example of 5¢ CSA No. 6.

Figure 14 (right). UL margin block of four 5¢ Richmond printing, CSA No. 7-L, locally printed on London paper.

Courtesy Patricia Kaufmann.

Figure 15 (below). Used block of eight 5¢ Richmond printing, CSA No. 7-R, locally printed on local paper. Courtesy Patricia Kaufmann

Figure 16 (bottom right). Block of four 1¢ CSA No. 14.

Courtesy Patricia Kaufmann



February 1862. The Union captured the ship through its blockade of the South and the entire shipment was lost following this action. A new plate was made and successfully sent to Richmond. Figures 10 and 11 depict a proof of the face and back of the CSA No. 6 5¢ Jefferson Davis stamp, while Figure 12 shows a proof of the CSA No. 14 1¢ John Calhoun stamp. These are de la Rue die proofs and they are fairly scarce to rare.

Note that the back of the Type 6 proof gives the address of de la Rue as 110 Bunhill Road, along with E.C. for East Central London. As mentioned after the German bombings in 1940, stamps were no longer produced there.

Figures 13-16 show various issued stamps printed either in London or Richmond on de la Rue printing plates.

To quote Kimbrough ([www.jlkstamps.com/csa/archives/gibbons1.pdf](http://www.jlkstamps.com/csa/archives/gibbons1.pdf)):

*"In 1976, Robson Lowe, a noted British philatelist and stamp dealer, made a significant philatelic find in the De La Rue archives in London. The find consisted of a full sheet of 400 (4 panes of 100) of the 5c Blue London Print on wove paper. This sheet was a De La Rue & Co. plate proof sheet kept for the archives. This sheet was obtained by Robson Lowe and submitted to the Philatelic Foundation for certification and received certificate #57 584 dated October 18, 1976. After certification, Robson Lowe proceeded to break up the sheet into singles, blocks, and gutter blocks for distribution in the philatelic market. Each stamp from the sheet was marked on the back in pencil with its position number. Robson Lowe signed in pencil the back of each block and each single. Some of the larger blocks have since been broken down further so that each and every stamp is not signed, but each stamp does have the position number on the back. These proofs are available in the philatelic marketplace and*

are generally offered with a photocopy of the original Philatelic Foundation certificate for the full sheet. This is important because these proof singles are scarce as they are only 1 of 400 but are indistinguishable from the regular 5c Blue London Print stamps. The Robson Lowe notations on the reverse are necessary for proper identification.”

One of these stamps is shown in Figures 17a and 17b.

Also, as is noted in the *Confederate States of America: Catalog and Handbook of Stamps and Postal History*, the Type 14 1¢ Calhoun also exists in plate proof form as a sheet in two panes for a total of 200 stamps. These were found framed at de la Rue in 1976 by Robson Lowe, and they have a yellowish tone to them as well (Figures 18a and 18b).

### Thomas de la Rue Today

Thomas de la Rue remains one of the leading security printers in the world. As this is written, about 1/3 of all currency notes in circulation were designed by de la Rue and the company remains the largest commercial printer of paper money in the world, supplying notes to about 70 countries. Its business includes bank checks, driver licenses, postage stamps and tax stamps.

However, these are challenging times for de la Rue. In Spring 2020 the company’s stock price collapsed, reflecting a significant decline in its profits. This is a fast-changing business and the



Figure 17a and 17b (above). Face and back of CSA No. 6 plate proof signed on the back by Robson Lowe. Steve Feller

Figure 18a and 18b (below). Face and back of CSA No. 14 plate proof, signed on the back by Patricia Kaufmann. Steve Feller



## RECORDING NEW CSA FINDS

New Confederate finds are still being documented for future editions of the *CSA Catalog*. In addition to new, unlisted finds, I am seeking quality images to replace old black and white tracings or poor-quality images that were used in earlier catalogs. It is important that new images be quality 300 dpi .tif or .jpg files if they are to be used in future editions.

For questions or to send your digital images and information:

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If you are not a computer user, please send color photocopies to me

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immediate problem was that the company lost a significant contract to print British passports. However, de la Rue is surviving and may become stronger in the near future, as is evidenced by a quote from the annual AGM Statement just issued in August 2020:

***“Trading and outlook***

*“The Board’s expectations for 2020/21 remain unchanged from the full year results announcement issued on 17 June 2020. The £100m equity capital raising, which completed on 7 July 2020, will strengthen the Group’s balance sheet, enabling De La Rue to deliver the Turnaround Plan and create value for its employees, customers, suppliers and shareholders.*

*“In Currency, De La Rue continues to experience strong demand and has been awarded contracts representing approximately 100% of its available full-year banknote printing capacity for Financial Year 2020/21, an increase on the 80% of capacity announced at its trading update of 1 June 2020.”*

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