

Identifying the 37¢ U.S. Flag Stamps

By: Rick Stambaugh

If you're like me, you put all stamps received in the mail into a baggy to later soak and sort. But, I rarely get around to soaking. So, I accumulate a lot of baggies full of U.S. stamps on paper. When an article or stamp club program catches my interest, I go through the baggies pulling out the related stamps and finally soak, sort, and mount them.

The 37¢ U.S. flag stamps, Figures 1A and 1B, intrigued me because "Linn's Stamp News" published several articles identifying the latest issues and varieties. I cut out each article and saved it, for later use, in identifying my accumulation. I also cut out and saved the Mystic Stamp Co. back page full-color advertisements in Lynn's that showed 20 different 37¢ flag stamps with some identifying information.

Armed with the articles and ads, I was determined to sort, identify and mount my 37¢ flag stamps. I soaked nearly 300 stamps and started trying to identify each one. I quickly became frustrated and stopped. Although the articles and ads provided some of the identifying characteristics of the stamps, they didn't provide a systematic approach. So, I developed a Decision Tree that allows one to apply a series of questions to identify the stamps.

There are two advantages in using this Decision Tree. First, is that a minimum number of stamp characteristics need to be determined to identify each stamp. Although there are nine possible identifying characteristics, many stamps can be identified by only four or five characteristics. Second, the Decision Tree establishes a logical easy-to-use process for sorting a pile of flag stamps. A modern perforation gauge and a magnifying glass (or young eyes) are all that are required to use the Decision Tree.

The nine possible stamp-identifying characteristics are:

1. Is the stamp non-denominated (i.e. "First Class" without a price, Figure 1A) or denominated with "37" (Figure 1B)?
2. Is the stamp a coil stamp (i.e. with two parallel flat sides)?
3. What year date is on the bottom left side of the stamp margin (2002, 2003, 2004, or 2005)?
4. Is the year date in tall or short font? (The difference is obvious when comparing a few stamps, but hard to show with my imaging capability.)
5. Is the stamp perforated (water activated) or die-cut (self adhesive)?
6. What is the perforation or die-cut measurement using a perforation gauge?
7. Is there micro-printing in the top red stripe: USPS at top of the stripe or USA at the bottom?
8. Is there an obvious color variation (Some have clearly darker red stripes.)?
9. Does the serrated die-cut start and end with a peak? The first and last full height or depth die-cut serrations at the top of a stamp are called peaks (full height) or valleys (full depth). Figure 2 shows a peak to peak (P/P) configuration on a booklet stamp, and Figure 3 shows a peak to valley (P/V) configuration on a coil stamp.

The Decision Tree consists of three different charts. Chart 1 identifies only non-denominated ("First Class") stamps, and refers to charts 2 and 3 for denominated stamps ("37"). If the stamp is denominated with 37, use chart 2 for coil stamps, and chart 3 for non-coils (i.e. booklet and sheet stamps). When sorting a pile of stamps, the three charts establish the initial sorting step. First, sort the stamps based on the charts, i.e. one pile for non-denominational, a second pile for coils with 37, and a third for non-coils with 37.

After that first sorting, the two denominated 37 stamp piles can be further sorted by year dates. This sorting can result in making 8 piles from the two denominated 37 stamp piles.

With the initial sorting done, the stamps in each pile can now be identified by following the arrows at each decision point (question) on the appropriate chart. Example identification for some non-denominated stamps using Chart 1 would go as follows:

- Is it perforated or Die-Cut? If it is perforated it is Scott No. 3620.
- If it is Die-Cut, is it a coil stamp, yes or no? If yes, it is Scott No. 3622.
- If it is not a coil stamp, is the 2002 Tall or Short?
- If the 2002 is Tall, does the perforation measure 8? If yes, it is Scott No. 3625.

When I first applied the charts to my accumulation, I found that I had 16 different stamps. The Mystic Stamp Co. ad offered “all the U.S. Flag Rate-Change Stamps”. So, I sent for “all” the stamps to complete my collection. When I applied the charts to the 20 stamps that arrived from Mystic, I found that they didn’t send “all”, because after combining the 20 stamps Mystic sent with my own accumulation, I now had 24 different stamps. Since then another Linn’s article has identified another variety. So, I updated my decision charts to show 25 possible 37 cent Flag Stamps.

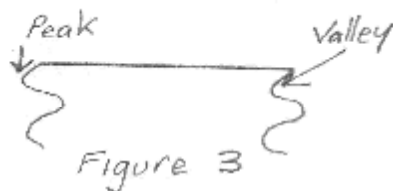
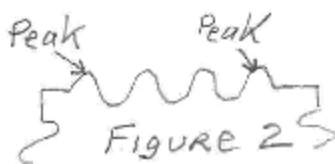


Chart 1, Decision Tree for Non-Denominated 37 cent Flag Stamps

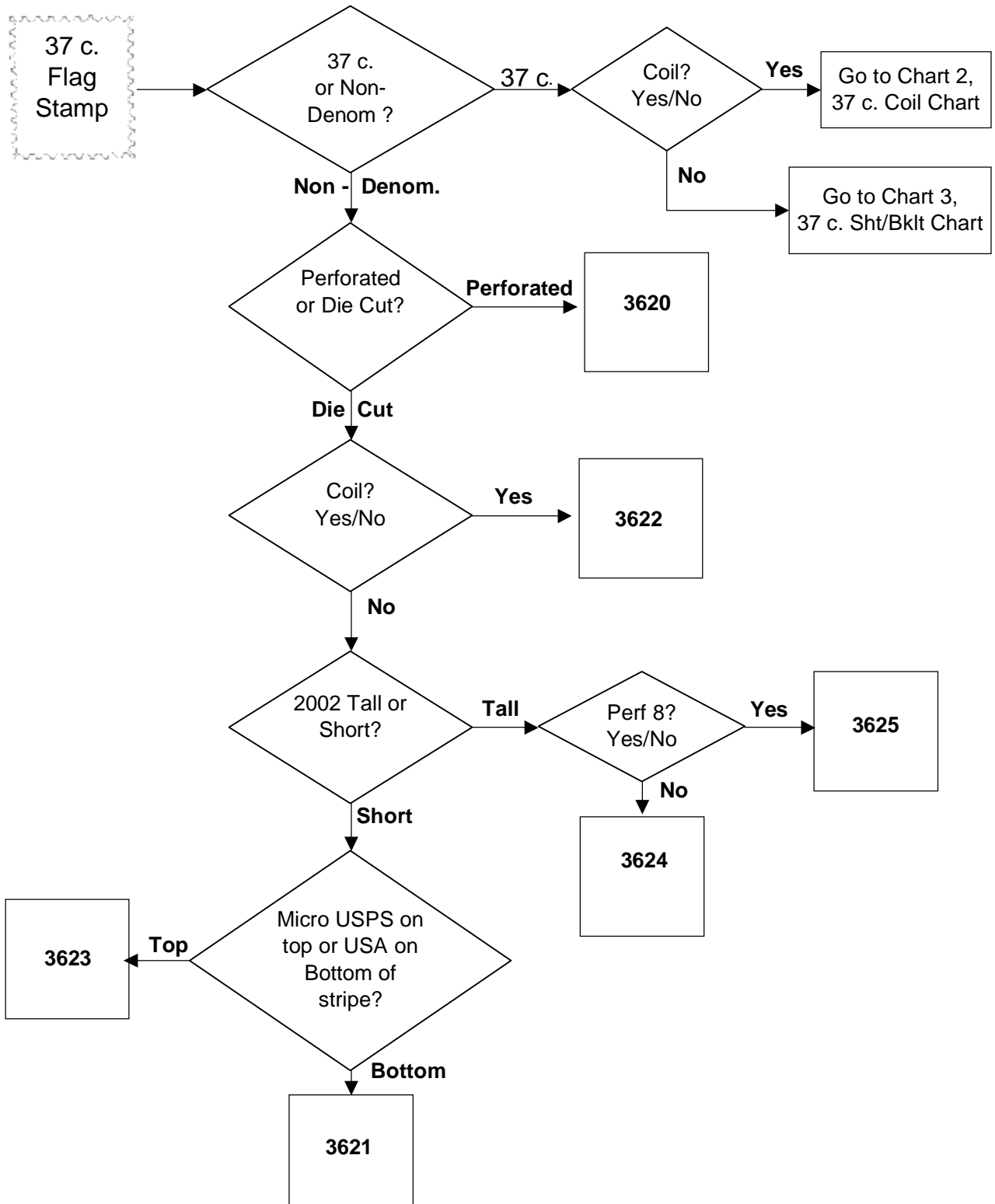


Chart 2, Decision Tree to Identify 37 cent Coil Flag Stamps

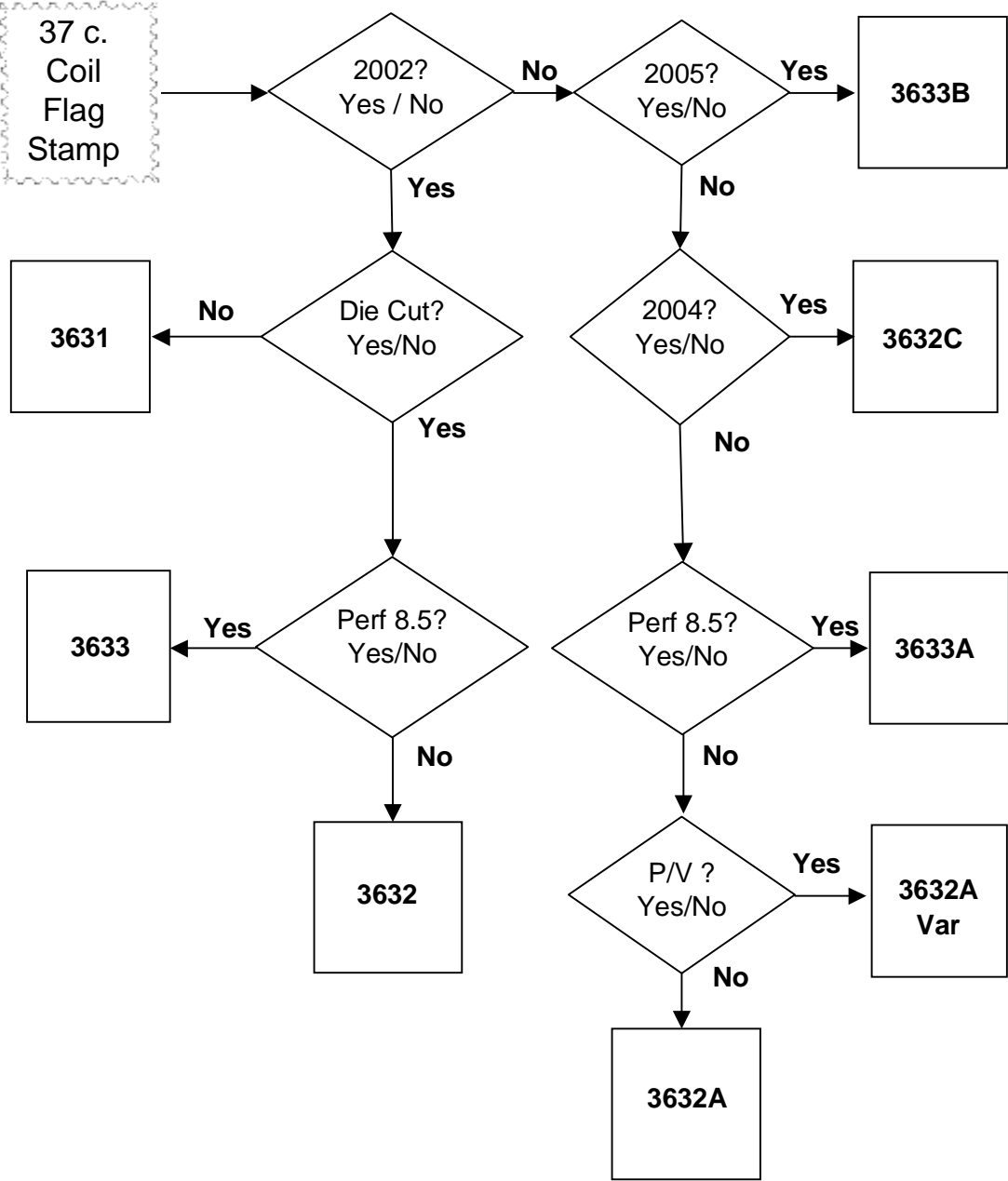


Chart 3, Decision Tree to Identify 37 cent Non-Coil Flag Stamps

