

Platen Jobbers

I recently read a news story about a man who has revived the art of making Daguerreotypes. Why would anyone in this age of auto-focus, auto-exposure cameras want to submit himself to mercury fumes in a tedious and obsolete process? The answer is stated in Saxe's Law: Yesterday's tedious commercial necessity is today's congenial pastime. The work processes of the past are the hobbies of today. As prime examples I cite weaving and cabinetmaking. In the book arts this is especially true; *viz.* papermaking, typesetting, hand composition of type, hand press printing, platen jobber printing, and bookbinding. The amateur's enthusiasm for these processes has kept them alive long after their commercial usefulness ended.

The platen jobber's introduction by Ruggles and Gordon has been described in *Newsletter* 83 (May/June 1988); in this article I will describe a few of the later presses, many of which are still to be found printing away in countless amateur basement printing shops, and now in their second century of use.

Gordon's Franklin Press, the principles of which he claimed were told to him in a dream by Ben Franklin, became the standard very quickly. It was ideal for rapid work—simple in operation and low in cost. The press came on the scene about 1863, and during the life of the patent it became the single most popular press in America. It was widely copied overseas—in England it was known as the "Anglo-American Arab," "Minerva," or "Cropper"; in France as "La Minerve".

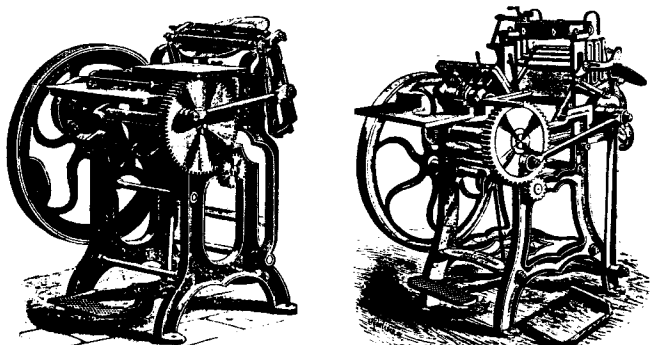
In the early 1870's, as the time approached for Gordon's patent to expire, he worked to make improvements that would hold his market position when competition would begin. In 1872 he patented an improved design with added features like a throwoff, but the old press was so well-liked that the market was overwhelmed by copies and adaptations.

Among them were the Challenge, Chandler & Price Gordon, Jones Gordon, and the Thorp Gordon. Over the years the Gordon press made by Chandler & Price of Cleveland was the most popular, and eventually by the 1950s became the only survivor. About ten years ago C&P sent out a letter claiming that the press (which was still used extensively in schools) was dangerous, and this resulted in the dumping of thousands of C&P presses and great damage to what remained of the letterpress business in the U.S.

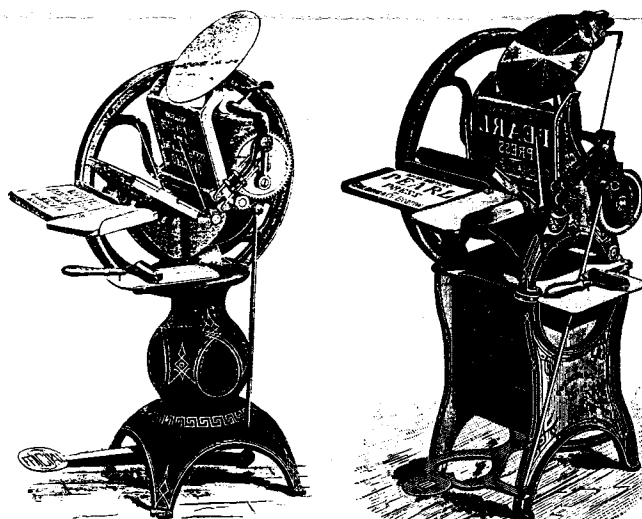
In the last century the Gordon press had some competition. The Degener & Weiler Liberty Press was a strong contender, although today it seems unwieldy. The press was designed by Gordon's machinist Frederick Degener. At one time the press was built in a factory inside the Brooklyn Bridge—that is, inside one of the vaulted commercial spaces under the roadway on the New York side.

The Liberty's rollers were held in vertical saddles by gravity, not springs, and could be instantly removed by the pressman. The bed at the rear of the press moved away from the platen during the feeding part of the cycle, moving quite a distance. Pressmen said that the Liberty was as large as "half a press when closed and two presses when open." Very few Liberty presses survive; there is one at Mystic Seaport's printing office restoration. Another was at Bowne's shop at South Street Seaport, until its superb collection of hand presses and platen jobbers was dispersed by the museum's misguided management a few years ago. I do not know where it is now.

High on any list of important platen jobbers are the Golding line of presses. These included the Official, which has a base like a hot-towel steam unit in an old-fashioned barber shop; the Golding Jobber, a heavy and magnificent



Left, Gordon Old Style; right, Liberty Press

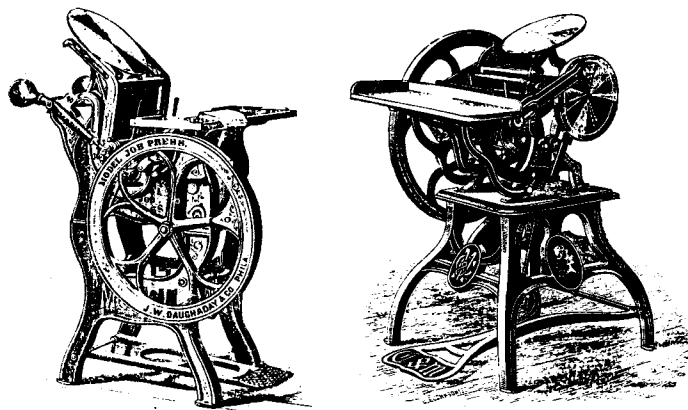


Left, Golding Official; right, Golding Old Style Pearl

press with many nice features, including a wedge adjustment for the platen; and the Pearl presses, one of today's amateur's favorites. The Pearl Old Style press was made without a throwoff, and with three wooden drawers in the base to hold ink and gauge pins and sundries. In 1895 Golding & Co. introduced the heavier Improved Pearl, with some added features, an extra roller, and a throwoff. It became a very popular press because of its speed on light work. An old printer told me that in his youth he worked for a printing shop where there were several boys running treadle Pearl presses. Since they were paid by the piece for imprinting envelopes, the presses ran all day at high speed, and the boys became adept at switching chases for the next job "almost without stopping the press."

The Colt's Armory press was in a class by itself, since an ingenious system of movements gave it an almost-parallel impression. It was a very heavy press that did superb work, and was based on Merritt Gally's Universal Press. The Colt's armory Press was made, naturally enough, at the Colt firearms factory in Hartford, Connecticut. Its inventor, John Thompson, eventually bought the rights to manufacture it in 1902, organizing the John Thompson Press Co. The Thompson-National Press Co. is still making these presses—for cutting, creasing, embossing, and similar work—at the old Golding factory in Franklin, Massachusetts.

Two of the most decorative of the old job presses grew out of smaller table-top presses made for amateurs. One was the Model, made by Daughaday in Philadelphia, which

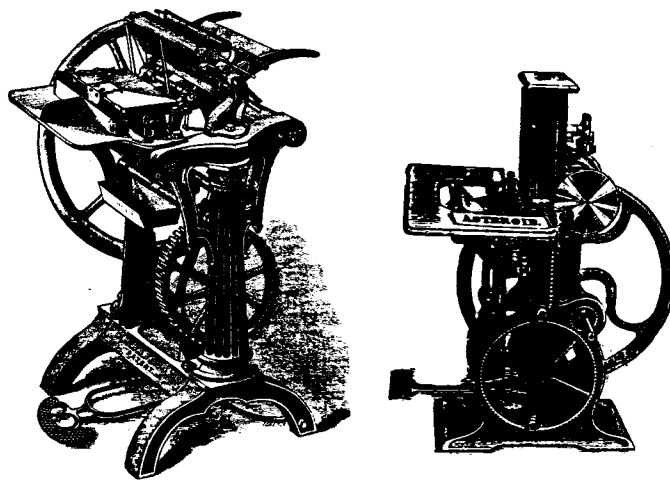


Left, Model Press; right, Columbian Rotary Press

had unusual cast-iron ball counterweights assisting the movement of the rollers. The other was Curtis & Mitchell's Columbian Press—no relation to the hand press of the same name—which was embellished with oval bas-reliefs of Columbia's head on the sides of the base.

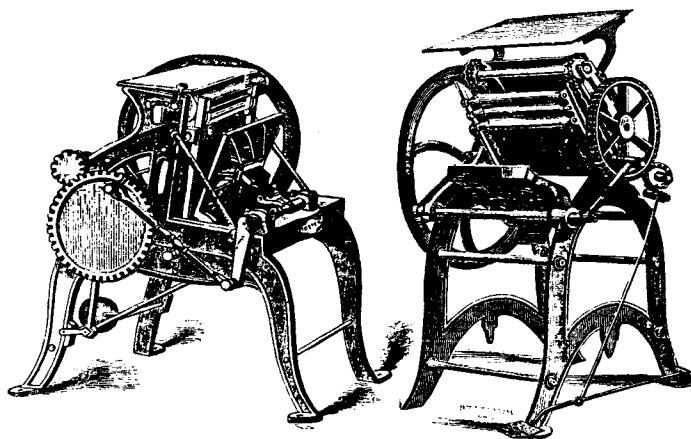
Another very decorative press is the Potter, featuring classical Corinthian columns as part of the frame. It is shown here in an advertisement from *The Printer* magazine in 1859. I have never seen one of these presses. They were made from 1858 to about 1866 by C. Potter of Westerley, Rhode Island.

There were many other platen jobbers on the market in the nineteenth century, some very unusual, that have now completely disappeared. For instance, I have never seen the Asteroid Jobber made by the Cincinnati Type Foundry, about 1875, or either of Charles Foster's jobbers, the Locomotive Jobber ("made on the principle of the



Left, Potter Press; right, Asteroid Jobber

"Alligator Press"), or his Excelsior. Foster made presses, with some success, in Cincinnati and later Philadelphia from about 1852, but his presses are virtually unknown today. The Excelsior seems to have been made later by William Braidwood of New York, about 1868, but the



Left, Foster Locomotive Jobber, right, Foster Excelsior

Locomotive Press is not mentioned in Ralph Green's *A History of the Platen Jobber*.

I would be grateful if readers would send me information or pictures of other truly unusual job presses, along with whatever information is available about them.

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Further Reading

An indispensable guide is Ralph Green's classic *A History of the Platen Jobber* (Chicago, 1953; reprinted by Harold Sterne, Cincinnati, 1981.) In a small space Green has condensed a lot of research and has listed the dates and manufacturers of most American platen presses. An excellent collection of pictures of a great many presses can be found in Harold Sterne's *Catalogue of Nineteenth Century Printing Presses* (Cincinnati, 1978; still available from Harold Sterne 5815 Cherokee Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45243). Most of my illustrations are from Sterne's book. The best single source for general information about all presses is James Moran's *Printing Presses* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1973.)

APHA NEWS

The APHA annual meeting took place on January 27 at the New York Public Library Trustees' Room. At that meeting the new slate of officers and trustees was elected. The new board members are: Virginia Smith, Baruch College, President; Jennifer Lee, Brown University, Vice President for Programs; Stan Nelson, Smithsonian Institution, Vice President for Membership; Irene Tichenor, Brooklyn Historical Society, Vice President for Publications; Martin Hutner, Secretary; John Hench, American Antiquarian Society, Treasurer; and Trustees Jerry Kelly, A. Colish Inc.; Mark Carroll, George Mason University Press; David Pankow, Rochester Institute of Technology; and Jeff Kaimowitz, Watkinson Library. APHA extends its welcome to them and its thanks to the retiring Board.

At the same meeting, the 1990 APHA Awards were presented. The Institutional Award went to The Grolier Club, one of the earliest institutions in this country devoted to the arts of the book; the Individual Awards went to Roger Chartier and Henri Jean Martin, editors of *l'Histoire de l'édition française*, a major history of printing and publishing in France. Remarks by M. Chartier were read by Katherine Pantzer of Harvard, and G. Thomas Tanselle read remarks by Robert Nikirk, librarian of The Grolier Club.

Nominations for the 1991 awards are now being accepted, with a deadline of June first. Please send nominations to APHA, Box 4922, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163-4922.

Readers who have not renewed their APHA membership should do so at once to be included in the printed membership roster, which will be sent with this Newsletter later in the year. Anyone not renewing by the deadline of May 1 will not appear in the roster.

APHA Calendar

- April 25. NY Chapter: Carl Schlesinger on Ottmar Mergethaler and the Invention of the Linotype. Grolier Club, 6 p.m.
- May 23. NY Chapter: Maxwell Whitman on Hebrew Printing & Typography in the United States. Columbia Club, 6 p.m.
- October 6. APHA Annual Conference, at Columbia University, New York. Topic: Newspaper printing technology of the 19th and 20th centuries. Speakers include Richard Schwarzlose, John Levine, Bill Rhinehart, and Prescott Low.

TYPE & PRESSES

Golden Type William Morris's Golden Type, first used by him in printing *The Golden Legend* in 1892, has been revived for digital typesetting. The new version has been released by International Typeface Corporation, and is accompanied by a bold and a black version. The original weight is very similar to ATF's Jenson, copied from Morris's design and introduced soon afterward.

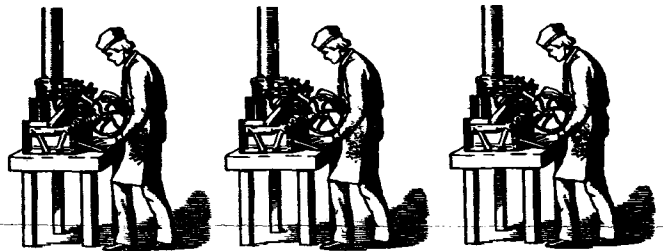
Typeface Copyright Adobe Systems Inc. has been granted the first copyright registration for a computer

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program that generates a particular style of type (ITC Garamond Light). The decision protects only the computer programs that draw the letters, and not the actual designs of the letters. A group of companies, known as the Typeface Design Coalition, has been supporting a bill in Congress that would classify typefaces as industrial designs and protect them from being copied for 10 years. It is not generally known, but from 1846 to at least the end of the century, the U.S. Patent office granted design patents to typefaces for terms of 3½, 7, and 14 years. These records provide much valuable information about the designers of many 19th century typefaces.

Letterpress Shop A complete letterpress shop, probably dating from as early as 1869 and operated continuously by the same family, is now offered for sale. The equipment includes a Damon & Peets 9 x 13 press, wood type, Sanborn paper cutter (1874) and other material. Contact Gerald D. Watkins, Timblin, PA 15778; tel. 814/256-3498.

BRIEFLY NOTED



American Typecasting Fellowship A preliminary announcement of the seventh biennial Conference of the American Typecasting Conference has been mailed. The conference will be held at Nevada City, California, the home of Harold Berliner's Typefoundry. The conference will run from July 19th through July 22, followed by a two-day technical session led by Harry Wearn of the Monotype Corporation. For full information write to Harold A. Berliner, 224 Main St., Nevada City, CA 95959.

Smithsonian Calendar The Division of Graphic Arts at the Smithsonian Institution is offering its 1990 broadside calendar, with the entire year on one sheet. Printed from type cast by hand at the Museum, it was printed in three colors on Vandercook and Washington presses, and includes an eagle from the Morgan Collection. \$3 postpaid in mailing tube from Division of Graphic Arts, Smithsonian Institution, NMAH, room 5703, Washington, DC 20560.

BOOKS

Amory, Hugh. *First Impressions: Printing in Cambridge, 1639-1989*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1989. 8½ x 11, 63 pp., paperbound, illustrated. \$14 postpaid (checks payable to Harvard University) from Special Collections, Harvard Law School Library, Cambridge, MA 02138.

The first part of the title reflects the contents of Hugh Amory's catalogue of the recent exhibition at The Houghton Library and Harvard Law School. The date "1989" seems not to have much bearing on the contents; all the printing discussed is from the 17th century.

The catalogue is divided into three sections: English titles, Indian printing, and legal issues (the Law School section of the exhibition.) The main focus of these three sections are respectively the Bay Psalm Book, the Eliot Indian Bible, and *The Laws and Liberties* of Massachusetts. Liberally sprinkled throughout the entries are brief and very lucid commentaries by Mr. Amory. The range of material is very wide. The intellectual variety and complexity of the books printed at this first press in America show that this was no primitive enterprise, though its equipment may have been limited. In addition to the Cambridge titles, entries include a wide range of related books printed in England and Europe. Mr. Amory's notes on the entries are sometimes extensive, and sometimes confined to a single sentence; but they are always learned and often witty. The material is supplemented by many large illustrations.

Mr. Amory has supplied a new census of the Bay Psalm Book, "showing how the eleven extant copies came out of hiding and when;" a brief biography of James Printer ("the first and last man who could read Massachusetts in the composing stick"); and other valuable material. For anyone interested in the beginning of printing in this country, this publication is recommended, and we look forward to the publication in *Printing History* of Mr. Amory's excellent paper on the Bay Psalm Book, given at the APHA Conference in Cambridge last October.

Reese, William S. *The Printers' First Fruits*. Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1989. 50 pages, 6 x 9¼, paperbound, 11 illustrations. \$15 + \$1.50 postage from the AAS Publications Dept., 185 Salisbury St., Worcester, MA 01609-1634.

Like the Harvard exhibition catalogue, Mr. Reese's catalogue documents an exhibition commemorating the 350th anniversary of printing in America. The American Antiquarian Society has long been a leading repository of early American imprints, and the exhibition contained only American imprints from the AAS' own holdings. For that reason the exhibition (and its catalogue) are more restricted than the wider Harvard effort; but it is very admirable in its straightforward approach.

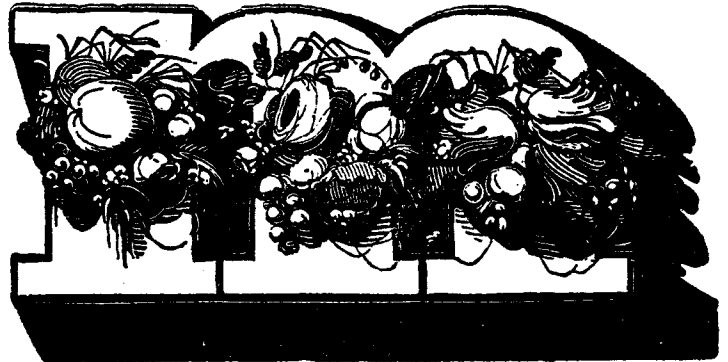
After each of the 70 entries Mr. Reese has added a clear and helpful note describing the item, explaining its significance and giving its provenance. This is a more traditional kind of catalogue, and, while it may lack the new insights of Mr. Amory's, it does supply much clear and to-the-point information. It is highly recommended.

We are happy to announce the re-publication of Richard L. Hopkins' *Origin of the American Point System for Type Measurement*. Originally published in 1976, it received much critical acclaim for its research into a major reform in American printing. It was also a fascinating look at the forces in American typesetting and printing near the end of the last century. Now Mr. Hopkins has announced a new edition, slightly enlarged, in a handsome new format and with a slipcase. The new edition, like the last, is published by the author at his own press and typefoundry. The price for prepaid orders is \$38 (Canadian and foreign orders will be invoiced for actual shipping costs.) Non-prepaid orders are \$43. To order, or to request a color brochure, write to Richard L. Hopkins, P.O. Box 263, Terra Alta, West Virginia 26764.

A collection of about 1,000 items of ephemera are being offered as a donation to an interested institution or individual. The collection includes posters, catalogs, private press announcements, business cards, ads, etc. For further information contact Monroe Causley, 2 Green Tree Lane, Dover, NJ 07801 or call him at 201/361-4531.

▲ SURVIVALS ▲

The Only Known Ornamented l.c. Wood Type



The noted typographic designer Bob Jones, proprietor of The Glad Hand Press, owns what is probably the only known font of wood type with an ornamented lower case. The font is English, and was presented to Jones in 1972 by private press printer Paul Peter Piech. Jones was so excited while bringing the font back to America that the customs inspector became suspicious of his erratic behavior, and insisted that the package be opened. "He stared at the letters dumbfounded. He was convinced he was dealing with a bonafide looney. He was right of course."

As Jones remarks in his publication *The Ultimate Victorian*, "this alphabet has to be the absolute ultimate in the exuberant excesses of the Victorian designs. It is a 14-line pica Egyptian, it is extended, slab serif, open, shaded, in-lined and floriated."

The font probably came from the Austin Letter Foundry, otherwise known as Wood & Sharwoods, and probably dates to before 1840. Ian Mortimer has written to Mr. Jones that neither he nor James Mosely, nor any of their colleagues, have ever seen similar ornamented lower case wood letters.