

# The APHA Newsletter

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Stephen O. Saxe, Editor

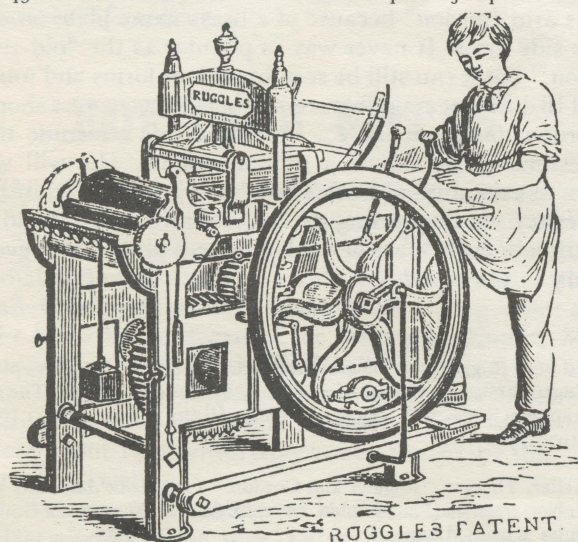
## Ruggles and Gordon: The Invention of the Platen Job Press

George Phineas Gordon claimed that Benjamin Franklin appeared in a dream and described the mechanism of a platen job press to him. In gratitude he called the invention the "Franklin," but it is worth noting that Gordon also received – and acknowledged – considerable nonectoplasmic help from a predecessor, Stephen P. Ruggles of Boston.

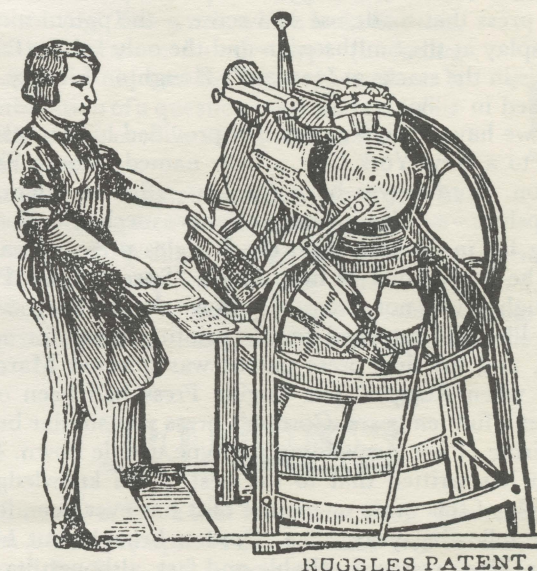
In a letter dated October 11, 1873, Gordon wrote to Ruggles:

... I have, in times gone by, most cheerfully accorded to Ruggles the introduction – the origination – of the treadle job press. I have ever said the *conception* was YOURS, and that your *efforts, skill and persistency* against great opposing obstacles introduced it. Glory enough for one man ... I shall be ready, ever, to accord my testimony ... to set you right in the eyes of the world, as the *pioneer* and the *great prototype* of job printing-presses; and the one which all other builders have taken as their great model ... Had it not been for Stephen P. Ruggles I should not have been where I am today. I should never have built a printing-press. ...

Left, Ruggles' "Upside-down Press" of 1840; right, his Rotary Job Press of 1849 – the direct antecedent of the modern platen job press.



No. 2. Job Engine Press.



No. 3. Job Rotary Press.

This gracious acknowledgment was printed in the *Typographic Advertiser* in 1879, a year after Gordon's death. We are very familiar with Gordon's presses, which are still very much with us in countless small job shops and amateur printing shops everywhere. But Ruggles' presses are hardly to be seen anywhere.

Stephen P. Ruggles was born July 4, 1808 in Windsor, Vermont. He was apprenticed to a printer there, but his mechanical bent appeared early. While still an apprentice he made an early attempt to ink the forms of a hand press by means of a roller. In 1826 he went to Boston, worked as a pressman, and in his spare time devised and built a cylinder power printing press on which the *Ladies Magazine* was printed.

In his autobiography Ruggles wrote "In 1830 or 1831 I invented and built, in New York, in Minor's machine shop, the first card or job press, I believe, ever constructed in any part of the world. This press worked with a vibrating platen and was the first press ever contrived to receive, *on its platen*, the paper, or card to be printed." This press was operated by Ruggles in the office of Daniel Fanshaw in the American Tract Society building in New York.

The press was able to print enameled cards and became a great favorite with printers and "a source of considerable profit for several years" to Ruggles. I do not know of any pictures of this press, but it should be noted, lest we think of it as a modern jobber, that it was made of wood. We have the authority of Thomas MacKellar that "he built



another wooden press, on the same plan, for the use of George P. Gordon in his business of card and job printing."<sup>2</sup>

Ruggles returned to Boston in 1833 and there continued the manufacture of the press, but in iron instead of wood. In 1840 he invented a power job printing machine, the first of which was in the office of Samuel Dickinson, a fine printer and later a leading typesetter. According to MacKellar, "this machine enabled a boy to print thirty sheets in the time required for a man and boy to print four sheets on the old hand-press. Mr. Ruggles got up various sizes and styles of job and card presses, and furnished Mr. Gordon with such as he required, and made him an agent for the sale of the machines."<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that the "power" supplied to the press originated with the foot of the pressman, applied to a treadle. He received his patent for this press November 10, 1840, and manufactured it in four sizes.

Although this press was a great advance, it left room for improvement. It was known among printers as "the upside-down press" because the bed containing the form was placed above the platen, which moved upward to make the impression. About 1500 to 2000 impressions per hour were possible, a great improvement over the 250 impressions per hour of the hand press.

For several years after this Ruggles invented machinery for printers, including stereotype plate shaving machines, lathes, and gear-designing apparatus. In 1849 he returned to presses with the Ruggles Rotary Job and Card Press, from which the modern platen jobber is descended. Some of the features of this press were the same as in his earliest card press of 1831, but now arranged in a more convenient manner.

In 1854 Ruggles sold all his patents and the good will of the business to the S. P. Ruggles Power Press Manufacturing Co. in Boston, and retired with a fortune of over \$500,000. He sold out at the right time, because George Gordon's presses were beginning to take away his market. But he continued to invent; in 1859 he received a patent for an iron hand press that made use of a screw – the patent model is on display at the Smithsonian and the only known full size press is in the stacks at Harvard's Houghton Library. Ruggles died in 1880.

As we have seen, Ruggles had provided his earliest card press to a New York City printer named George Phineas Gordon. Gordon was born April 21, 1810 in Salem, New Hampshire – another ingenious Yankee mechanic. No doubt taking his inspiration from the Ruggles press, as early as 1835 he is recorded as inventing a "Speedy Card Press," although it was not patented and we do not know what it looks like. He returned to the printing trade for several years, and his first press patent was granted March 26, 1850, when Ruggles' Job Engine Press had been on the market a full ten years. Gordon's press was similar but had the virtue of not suspending the type upside down. Ralph Green has written that to the best of his knowledge, no example of this press or picture of it has ever been found.

The following year, 1851, Gordon brought out his Alligator. The press was reliable and fast, although its snapping jaws were an ever-present danger to careless printers' fingers. It had a good sale for several years. The only one I know of is owned by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

On August 5, 1851 Gordon was granted another patent,



George Phineas Gordon's Franklin Job Press, described to him in a dream by Ben Franklin. From *The Printer*, New York, 1858.

one which was the basic design for his later, immensely successful presses. This press, called the "Turnover," was objected to by an unnamed patent owner – perhaps Ruggles – who claimed that it violated his rights.<sup>4</sup> This is the press that Gordon (a spiritualist) said was described to him in a dream by Ben Franklin. The press was called the Turnover, because of the novel movement of the platen; within a few years Gordon had simplified and improved it greatly. By 1858 it appeared essentially in its final form.

Although Gordon sold thousands of presses during his career, most were made for him by outside machine shops. At the height of the press's popularity, however, Gordon built his own factory in Rahway, New Jersey, with a capacity of 600 presses a year. (In 1901 the factory and right to use the name Gordon on its presses were bought by Chandler and Price.) The factory closed down in 1909.

When the time for his patent to expire drew near, Gordon devised some changes for an Improved Franklin. One of these was a throwoff, which had been in use on other presses for some time. This press was known in the trade as the "brass arm Gordon" because of a brass name plate on one of the side arms. It never was as popular as the "old-style Gordon," but it can still be seen in various forms and under any of 18 different manufacturers' labels in letterpress shops.

Gordon died January 27, 1878, and left a fortune that was estimated at almost a million dollars. His will was known to exist, but it took his family 12 years to find it. His real legacy was a printing press that can still be found in operation in every state of the Union and probably in every country in the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from Ruggles' autobiographical manuscript in the archives of the New England Historic Genealogical Society by Rollo G. Silver, "The Autobiography of Stephen P. Ruggles," *Printing History* 1, Vol. 1, No. 1 (New York, 1979), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>MacKellar, Thomas. "Ruggles and Gordon." *Typographic Advertiser*, Vol. XXIV, Nos. 95 & 96 (Philadelphia, 1879), p. 689. The letter from Gordon to Ruggles is printed here.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>"Gordon's Improved Card and Job Presses." *The Printer*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May, 1858), p. 9.



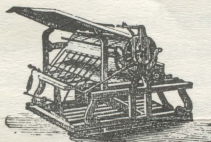
# APHA NEWS

In the last issue we mentioned that the September 24, 1988 APHA Conference in Philadelphia will be held in conjunction with an exhibition, "Legacies of Genius: A Celebration of Philadelphia Libraries." The exhibition is now open (through September 25th) and from what we have heard, it is extraordinary.

The exhibition consists of 250 rare books, manuscripts and works of art from 16 special collections libraries in the Philadelphia area. It is on view at the adjoining galleries of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia, and is free to the public.

Among the manuscript treasures are Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and the journal of the Lewis and Clark expedition. The printed first editions include a unique preliminary proof of the Declaration of Independence, Shakespeare's First Folio (1623), *Robinson Crusoe* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Members are urged not to miss this exhibition, and the best way to see it is in conjunction with the 1988 APHA Conference on "The Book Arts in Philadelphia, 1785-1840" on September 24th.



## TYPE & PRESSES

Bill Chadder (P.O. Box 589, Byers, Colorado 80103; tel. 303-822-9863) has for sale several items of old letterpress equipment. They include two 10 x 12 Chandler & Price presses, a paper cutter, 50 cases of foundry type, and miscellaneous foundry type still in wrappers. Contact Mr. Chadder for further information.

## EDITOR'S NOTES

My friend Martin K. Speckter died February 14th at the age of 72. Although his career included owning an advertising agency which handled promotion for The Wall Street Journal and other major accounts, yet the greatest satisfaction he felt had to do with reading and writing about some of the lesser-known facets of the history of printing. Much of his writing appeared in *TYPEtalks* magazine, published by the Advertising Typographers Association of America. When the publishers weren't looking, Martin would insert a piece about 19th century presses or wood type that made fascinating reading.

He was especially fascinated by the small presses sold in the last quarter of the 19th century for youngsters to learn to print with, and he became the authority on the subject. James Moran relied on his expertise in that section of his authoritative *Printing Presses*. His collection of presses included not only these but patent models, tabletop platen

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presses, and even the Columbian press used by the Stanbrook Abbey Press, which he obtained with the help of Beatrice Warde.

In 1971 the Typophiles published his *Disquisition on the Composing Stick*, a superb little book that was the first (and still the only) book on the subject. It was so fascinating that it started me off collecting these small printing tools. It was only one of many instances in which Martin started my mind moving along new paths.



Illustration of a youth (circa 1885) printing with a Kelsey press, used by Martin K. Speckter for his stationary and cards.

Martin had the distinction of being the inventor of the first addition to English punctuation in over 300 years – the interrobang. This mark, which looks like this, is available in some foundry type (including ATF's Americana) and for some typewriters. It is a combination of a question mark and exclamation point, to be used in an expression like "You call that a hat?"

?

As an eager amateur printer, in 1977 he printed this in a piece for his fellow amateurs:

"... although William Rudge was a better printer than I, and Bertha Goudy was a better compositor than I, and Bruce Rogers a better designer than I, none of them ever loved printing more than I, or owed a bigger debt to it."

## BOOKS

A twelfth copy of Poe's first and rarest book, *Tamerlane*, was found in a New Hampshire antique shop on February 29th, purchased for \$15, and is expected to sell at Sotheby's in June for between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

*Tamerlane* was written when Poe was only 14, but not published until 1827, when he was 18. It was issued in wrappers in Boston. The purchaser, a collector of historical



books and papers about Massachusetts, was aware of the importance of this book, Poe's first. "It rang a bell in my head. I was alone. I got very excited." He added, "I have never read anything about Poe in my life."

For the benefit of readers who may run across another copy, the full title is *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. By a Bostonian. (Boston: Calvin P. S. Thomas, Printer, 1827.) Merle Johnson's *American First Editions* warns "Exact facsimiles exist which require expert inspection to distinguish them from the original." Note: your editor thinks he knows the bookshop in New Hampshire where the book was found, and is somewhat annoyed that he didn't drop in last summer.

APHA members who are interested in the graphic design of Paul Rand and of designers like Lucian Bernhard, Alexey Brodovitch, A.M. Cassandre and others should take advantage of a generous offer by Prof. Virginia Smith, an APHA Trustee. Prof. Smith will send a copy of the beautifully-produced *Artograph* 6, 36-page periodical published by professors and students at Baruch College, to any APHA member who writes to request it. It is decidedly worth writing for if you have an interest in the graphic design of the 20s and 30s. Mention this *Newsletter* when you write to

Prof. Virginia Smith  
Baruch College Art Dept.  
City University of New York  
Box 281  
17 Lexington Ave.  
New York, NY 10010

## NOTES & QUERIES

For a scholarly work in progress, William, E. Lenz (Chatham College, Woodland Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15232) would appreciate information on the publication history (especially number of copies printed and sold) of James Croxall Palmer's *Thulia: A Tale of the Antarctic* (NY: Samuel Colman, 1843) which he revised and republished as *The Antarctic Mariner's Song* (NY: D. Van Nostrand, 1868.) Publishers' or editors' memos, correspondence, or family papers revealing the process of revision and the poem's reception would be most helpful.

To the Editor:

I could not resist checking your list of American printers' manuals in the APHA *Newsletter* against our holdings. You might be interested to know that the Society has A2, A3 (Isaiah Thomas's own copy), A5, A6 (1837, 1844 and other editions), A7, A8, A9 (1864, 1872 editions), and A10. I wish we had A1. Maybe a copy for us will turn up one of these days.

Georgia B. Barnhill  
Curator of Graphic Arts  
American Antiquarian Society

To the Editor:

With reference to the *Mechanick Exercises* (*Newsletter* 81) that seems to have once belonged to B. Franklin, here's a little non-scholarly footnote: it's my guess that the "single short

note written next to the word 'solace'" has to do with orthography.

About 10 years ago I was looking into several theories about how the word "chapel" came to identify printers and their workplace. At one point I was distracted by Moxon's use of "solace" as a noun meaning "penalty" and as a verb meaning "to punish," both in connection with chapel customs. It soon became apparent that these curious definitions attached to the word only with reference to printers and the printers' chapel. In fact, the OED could find only three citations for that special usage: the Moxon passage itself; an almost identical definition in an 1888 "Printer's Vocabulary;" and — here's the payoff — these sentences from a letter written by Franklin:

"This foolish letter is mere chit-chat between ourselves . . . If, therefore, you show it to anybody . . . I will positively solless you."

*Ergo*, the aforementioned guess that what Franklin wrote in the margin was probably, "Oh, so that's how the word is spelled."

Wilbur Doctor  
Kingston, RI

An ingenious guess, but incorrect. The note is reproduced below, and apparently says "Probably fro[m] French Sola[]." However, Mr. Doctor's letter shows that Franklin was familiar with the traditional term as used by Moxon. My question is, who was the recipient of the letter? My guess is that it would have to have been another printer, to understand the specialized meaning of the word.

### Customs of the Chappel.

357

Customs is in Printers Language cal-  
ges of these Solaces, and other Con-

*Probably from  
French Sola*

To the Editor:

In reading Walter Tracy's *Letters of Credit*, I noticed that a couple of Van Krimpen's types (Romulus and Cancellaresca Bastarda) include ligatures for fb, fh, and fk. I've thought they were needed (and anyone who has seen halfback, halfhearted, or Kafka set in a face with a heavily-kerned f would doubtless agree), but have not seen them before. I wonder if other faces have them?

John Lancaster  
Williamsburg, Mass.

## BRIEFLY NOTED

The National Amateur Press Association will hold its 113th annual convention at the Macon Hilton, Macon, Georgia, on July 1, 2 and 3. Noted calligrapher William F. Haywood will narrate a slide presentation on Herman Zapf. A handset newspaper will be issued daily, printed on a handfed press. For further information about the group, contact Harold Segal, 8949 Turton Drive, Philadelphia, PA 19115-4503 or telephone him at 215-677-2143.