# History of the Typewriter

## Why typewriters?

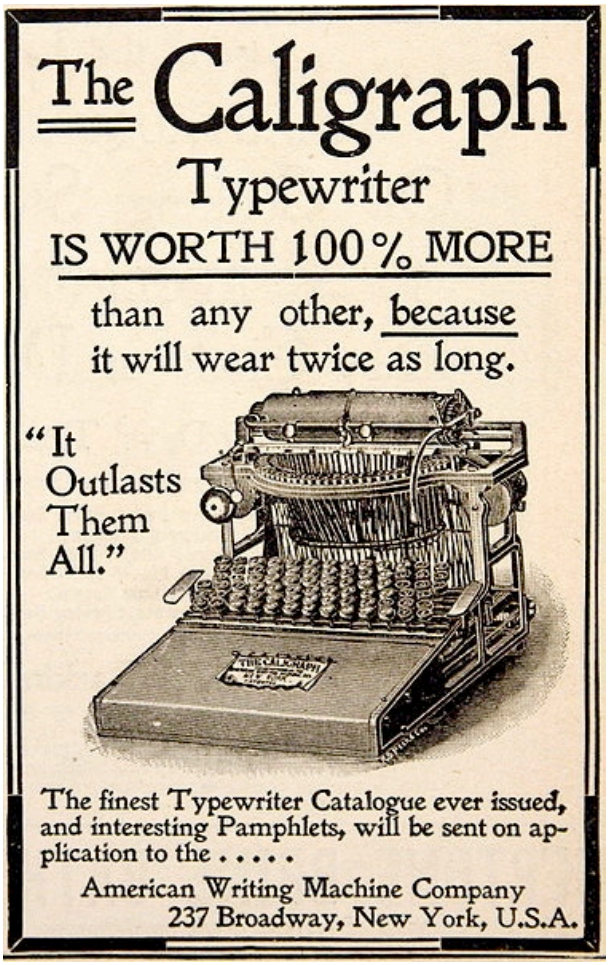
When Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press with loose type in the 15th century, he cleared the way for the gradual proliferation of the printed word.

It would seem an obvious second step to use the printing technology to create a machine that could take over the cumbersome task of hand writing. The engineers and inventors of the day were clever enough. A clock, after all, has a mechanism that would seem far more complex than that of a typewriter. So why didn't they build one until 400 years later? The answer is simple enough. There was no need for typewriters in a world where cheap labor was abundant and where machines were expensive.

It was not until the 19th Century, when industrial production was automated and boomed, that the time was ripe for the typewriter. The first practical typewriter was invented by Christopher Latham Sholes, and was marketed by the Remington Arms company in 1873. Remington was a manufacturer of guns and rifles. To offset the decline in weapon sales as a consequence of the end of the Civil War, it had decided to diversify into farm equipment and sewing machines. When Remington agreed to manufacture Sholes' invention, its engineers applied their sewing machines experience to the typewriter. Because of this, the first typewriter ended up looking like a sewing machine, mounted on a table with wrought iron legs. And, as a sewing machine, it required the operator to use hands and feet, hands for the keys and feet for the carriage return.

The action of the type bars in the early typewriters was very sluggish, and tended to jam frequently. To fix this problem, Sholes obtained a list of the most common letters used in English, and rearranged his keyboard from an alphabetic arrangement to one in which the most common pairs of letters were spread fairly far apart on the keyboard. Because typists at that time used the "hunt-and-peck" method, Sholes's arrangement increased the time it took for the typists to hit the keys for common two-letter combinations enough to ensure that each type bar had time to fall back sufficiently far to be out of the way before the next one came up. Note that Sholes hadn't imagined that typing would ever be faster than handwriting, which is usually around 20 words per minute (WPM) or less.

*The Sholes & Glidden typewriter manufactured by the Remington Arms Company in 1873.*



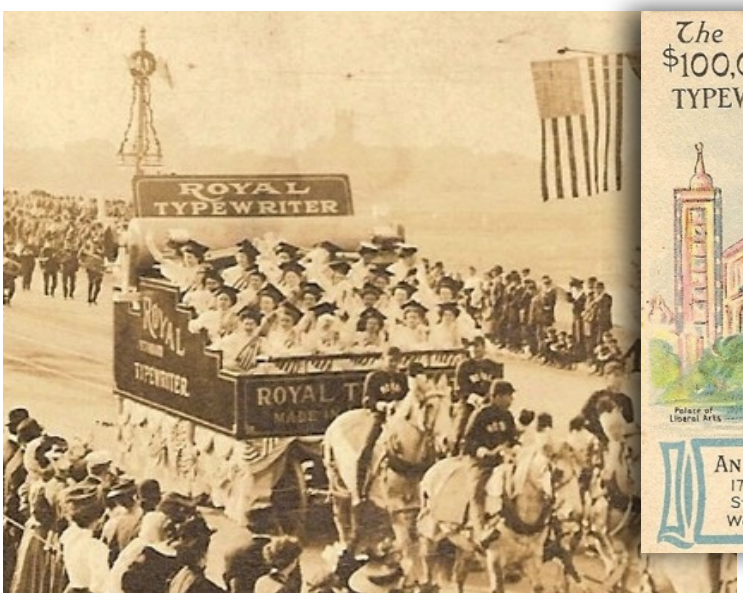

*Right, an ad for the Caligraph, an early competitor. Within just a few years, 30 typewriter manufacturers emerged on the scene, each with its own keyboard design.*

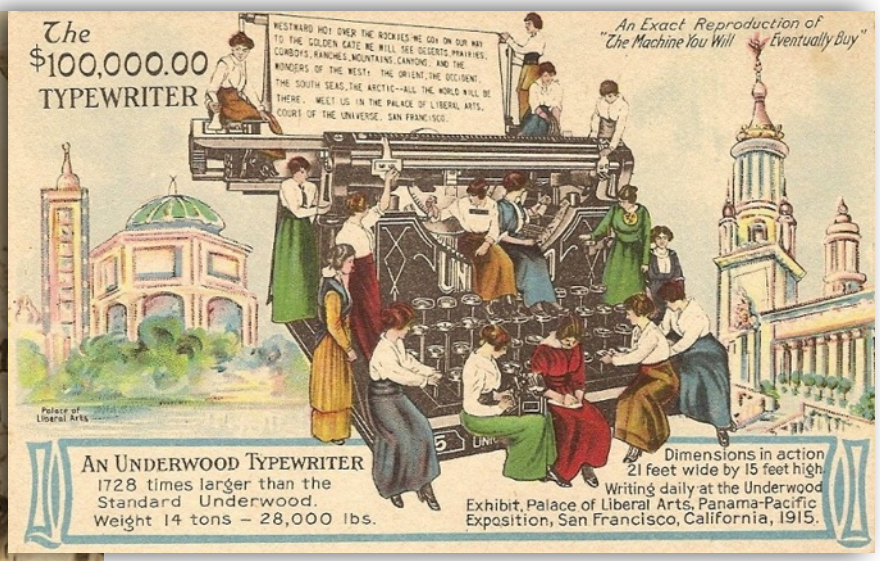
Around 1878, ten-finger typing, promoted by Mrs. L. V. Longley, the head of a Cincinnati school for stenographers, started to replace two-finger typing. Later, Frank E. McGurrin, a federal court clerk in Salt Lake City, taught himself to touch-type without looking at the keys. When McGurrin won a highly publicized typing contest between himself and Louis Taub of Cincinnati (both of whom claimed to be the "world's fastest typist"), touch-typing began to catch on.

Although typists' speeds quickly surpassed the one- and two-finger speeds achieved by early typists on the original alphabetic keyboards, the actions on the newer typewriters kept improving to keep up, and the jamming problem did not recur. Sholes himself was granted a patent on an improved keyboard arrangement in 1896. However, then as now there was widespread belief in the myth that the benefits of retraining typists were not worth the costs, and to this day the QWERTY keyboard layout has remained the industry standard.

## Society adopts the typewriter

It didn't take long for the typewriter to catch on, and advertising and other forms of promotion led the way.




*Promotional stunts included a parade float (above left) shaped like a Royal typewriter with "keys" made of young women typists. Above right, the world's largest typewriter by Underwood, weighing in at 14 tons.*


*Early advertising often contained pretty young women, not necessarily dressed for the office.*

# Women at work

As the popularity of typewriters increased, so too did opportunities for women in the workplace. Because wages earned by freelance typists were too low to be considered by most men, the positions were offered to women. Following the 1881 example set by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), typing schools were established by typewriter manufacturers, including Remington.

Typing classes soon expanded to include shorthand lessons. The skills of the typing students were offered along with the typewriters when the machines were sold. The typewriter gave women jobs in the office and an opportunity to work as freelance 'typewriters' in offices where a fulltime use for the machine wasn't feasible yet.

In that sense the invention of the typewriter played a major role in eventually giving women economic power and greater rights in the labor force, business and economy as a whole.

But there was still a long way to go, as is illustrated by a sheer endless series of telltale postcards that appeared in the early 20th Century. They all told the same story about the boss cheating his wife with his secretary. The same theme also appeared in several series of stereo view pictures, usually ending with the lovebirds being caught by the boss' wife. Note that the wife in these series always beats up the secretary, and never the husband.


*A section of a stereoscope series on the jealous wife confronting the innocent secretary.*


*Two of the numerous postcards from the early 20th century depicting secretaries as sex objects.*

# The effect on journalism

If tentatively perhaps, journalists at the turn of the century sensed that significant transformation was afoot. “Be the causes what they may,” the Journalist trade publication noted “that the methods of journalism are at present changing. Whether they have yet reached the limit of that change … is a question no man can answer.” New practices and new devices certainly were being brought to newsrooms. The “signed article,” for example, was recognized as “more and more common,” representing “another departure in modern journalism.”

The Fourth Estate noted a “rapid introduction of the typewriter into newspaper offices” and declared: “Though it is unfortunately true that many of the best reporters fail to save enough to begin a bank account, yet there is no reason why any man earning a decent salary should not possess a typewriter.” The extensive investment and capitalization required of large-city dailies—from typewriters to linotypes and high-speed presses capable of printing in color—prompted Lincoln Steffens to write: “The magnitude of the financial operations of the newspaper is turning journalism upside down.”


*A journalism class in the 1920s*

## SOURCES

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