Collecting the World's First Typewriters

By Martin Howard ©2011

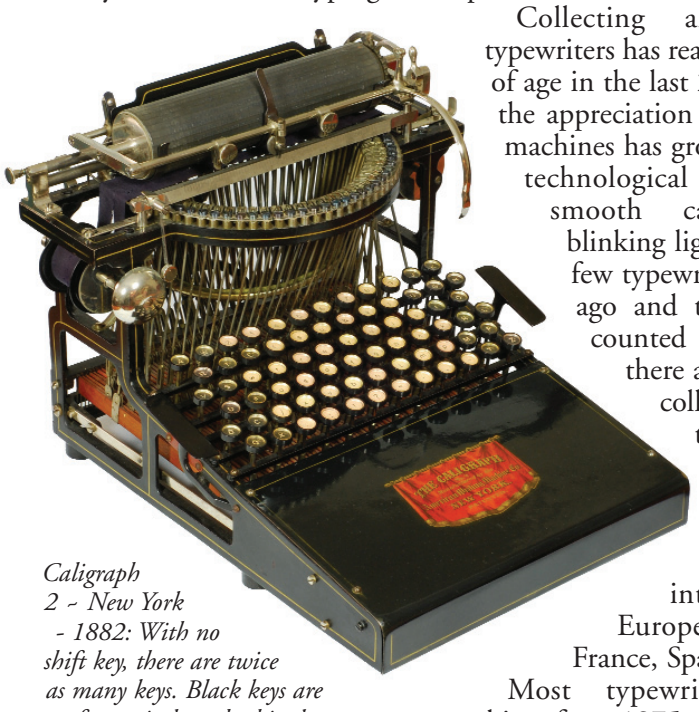
Why collect typewriters?

I started collecting typewriters in 1989, when I spotted a very dusty and intriguing item high upon a shelf in a cluttered junk shop. It turned out to be a Caligraph 2 typewriter from the 1880s. I had been looking for two years for a 19th century mechanical collectible that had a good range of design and was not too large to bring into my house. I also wanted to collect something that was off the beaten path. I quickly realized that my search was over; I was going to collect typewriters!

Part of the magic of these early typewriters is that we can still relate to them.

With a strong collective experience towards typing and a nostalgia for the typewriter, these early typewriters create an immediate connection, as one relates to the typewriter, its keyboard and how typing has impacted ones life.

Studio photo circa 1897. Courtesy of the Weil Collection.



Caligraph 2 ~ New York - 1882: With no shift key, there are twice as many keys. Black keys are for capitals and white keys are for lower case characters.

Collecting antique typewriters has really come of age in the last 20 years, as the appreciation of antique machines has grown in our technological times of smooth cases and blinking lights. There were only a few typewriter collectors 50 years ago and they could have been counted on one hand. Today there are over 500 typewriter collectors spread around the world. The largest group of collectors is found in America and Germany, but there is a strong interest throughout Europe, especially in Italy, France, Spain, and Switzerland.

Most typewriter collectors seek machines from 1875 to 1900. A period when the standard design, that would be in place for the 20th century, had yet to be discovered. During this time there was a major effort by many mechanical inventors to create a viable typewriter for a world that was ready for this revolutionary machine. The variety of typewriters produced was staggering and during these early years of discovery, ingenuity and mistakes, over 300 different typing machines were produced. Among them were machines with curved keyboards, double keyboards or no keyboards at all! Finding the optimum typewriter design was clearly not an easy task.

The following brief history focuses on this heyday of typewriter evolution. The period when the typewriter stopped being a novelty and became a necessity and emerged as one of the most important machines of the 20th century.

The First Typewriters

The keyboard provides an essential means for one to communicate and is used by more people today then ever before. It is a tool that represents our personal communication in this technological age. But what did the first typewriters look like and how did they develop?

Typewriters from the 1930s and 40s all look pretty much the same, with four rows of straight keys; a single shift and front strike visible (type-bars hit the front of the roller allowing one to see what they have just typed). Typewriters have not always looked like this though. Just imagine if you had never seen a typewriter and you were asked to design one, how might it look? In fact the standard big black machines that you may be familiar with, such as Underwoods and Remingtons, were the result of many years of mechanical evolution.

The first typewriter patent was issued to an English engineer, Henry Mill in 1714. He outlined the concept of the typewriter when he registered a patent for 'an artificial machine for impressing letters one after another, as in writing, whereby all writings may be engrossed in paper or parchment, so neat and exact as not to be distinguished from print.' However, this machine was never made.

A dozen or so typewriters were built during the first 75 years of the 19th century but none were produced in quantity. This was about to change though as the means for mass production and the need for fast accurate business communication had arrived. What was needed was a person to put forth the considerable effort to design a practical typewriter at a time when the typewriter was actually needed, even if this need was not fully realized.

Sholes & Glidden ~ Remington & Sons, Ilion, New York- 1874. This was the first practical typewriter to be manufactured. Courtesy of the Mantelli Collection.

The Sholes & Glidden Typewriter

This person was Christopher Sholes, a Milwaukee newspaper publisher, editor, and politician, who had the tenacity and conviction (even though he frequently felt dejected about the prospects for its success) in 1867 to spend the next six years designing and building various typewriter prototypes with a small team of men, including machinists, a financial backer and a marketing man in a small machine shop in Milwaukee Wisconsin.

In 1873 they had a fragile wooden prototype that was ready to present to manufacturers. After a number of failures and a deep feeling that their 'type - writer'

Franklin 2 ~ Boston - 1892: Like the Bar-Lock typewriter, the type-bars stand vertically behind the curved shield and swing down to strike the top of the platen.

Edland ~ New York - 1892: To type on this intriguing typewriter, one moves the index pointer around to a character and then pushes down. Under the index plate is a daisy wheel, with each character on a flexible brass 'finger', which is pushed to the paper to print.

Right: Hammond 1~ New York - 1881: This typewriter has a brilliant mechanical design and was one of the classic early typewriters.

The first appearance of the QWERTY keyboard - Sholes & Glidden - 1874.

would never be manufactured, a presentation was made to Remington & Sons of Ilion, New York. Remington & Sons were able to produce machines to fine tolerances and in quantity and were interested in new ventures with the Civil War over and the demand for guns down. They realized the potential of such a machine and bought the rights to manufacture the 'Sholes & Glidden' immediately. (Glidden was one of the financial backers.)

Remington & Sons took the next year to further develop the wooden prototype into a metal machine ready for mass production. In 1874, the first of 4,000 Sholes & Glidden typewriters appeared on the market. It was a beautiful machine, adorned with hand painted floral and pastoral scenes all over its black paneled frame.

A cast iron foot treadle operated the carriage return. The influence of the sewing machine on its design was clear. To see what had been typed, it was necessary to lift up the hinged carriage and look underneath as the type-bars struck on the underside of the roller. The typewriter only typed in capitals.

The Sholes & Glidden typewriter was also notable for introducing the QWERTY keyboard. The purpose of this layout was to minimize the clashing of the type-bars, by separating the type-bars for letters that are frequently typed in sequence, such as T and H. Later attempts were made by other manufacturers to introduce different keyboard layouts, with some success, however with the typing schools using QWERTY keyboard machines the die was cast. The good news is that the QWERTY keyboard is actually quite efficient; we could have done much worse.

Being first is not always easy; the Sholes & Glidden was not a quick hit and sold very slowly for the first two years and then with only moderate success.

Mignon 2 ~ Berlin, Germany - 1905: Despite its unusual appearance, the Mignon typewriter embodied a very clever design, giving a smooth and fast operation. The index plate and the type-cylinder could be changed, allowing for different languages and fonts.

The main reasons for this very slow beginning are as follows.

• The Sholes & Glidden sold for $125, a huge amount at the time. A horse drawn carriage cost between $30 and $75 and an upright piano could be had for $100.

• Surprisingly, typewriters were not initially marketed for the general business office but were seen as labor saving devices for 'Ministers, lawyers, authors, and all who desire to escape the drudgery of the pen.'

• The social custom for hand written correspondence was firmly rooted in the Victorian age and the reaction to early typed correspondence and the break with this etiquette was generally not favorable.

• There were very few professional typists to utilize the speed of the typewriter.

• New technology needs time to be seen but also to be understood as to the merits it has to offer. As is often the case, these merits are not even understood by the inventors.

Typing Class - circa 1893
There was a great need for trained typists, attracting both men and women to this new profession. Courtesy of the Weil Collection.

The situation improved with the introduction of the more reliable Remington 2 in 1878, sporting upper and lower case characters. By this time typewriters had begun to enter the business offices of an expanding nation and typing schools were catching up with the huge demand for trained typists. The need for typewriters had trumped the social norms of written correspondence. The times had indeed caught up with this revolutionary machine.

Competition arrived in 1881, with the Caligraph typewriter. During the next 20 years everything changed for the typewriter industry as the world realized that the typewriter was indispensable and that there was a huge market to satisfy. By 1886, just five years after the upturn in demand, almost every sizable office employed at least one typist. Sales had taken off. It was a remarkable time for the typewriter with great successes and many notable failures.

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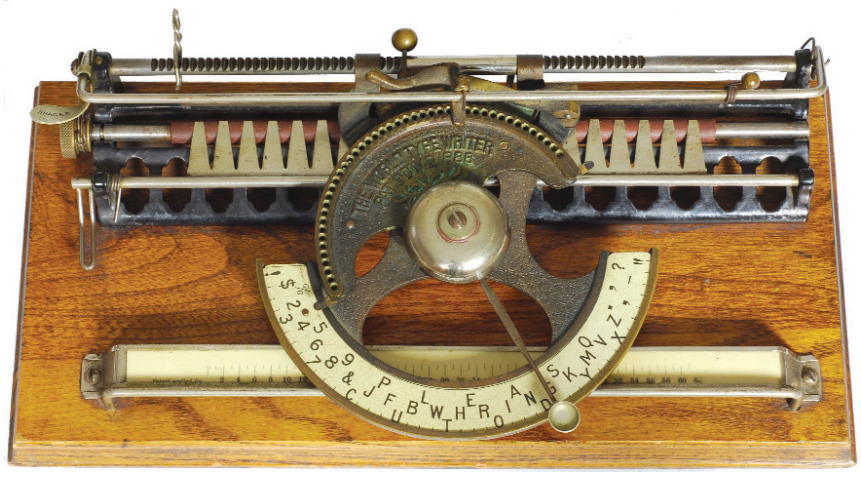

World 1 ~ Maine - 1886: This elegant index typewriter uses a swinging pointer to select the characters. At the other end of the pointer is a semi-circular wheel, where a rubber strip with characters was once attached. A metal rod pushed the rubber characters against the paper when typing.

Williams 1 ~ Connecticut - 1891: The unique William's design saw the type-bars arranged in two symmetrical fans on either side of the carriage. The type-bars hop up and over to the roller, giving visible typing. Two shift keys are used, giving three functions for each key. As a result only three rows of keys are required.

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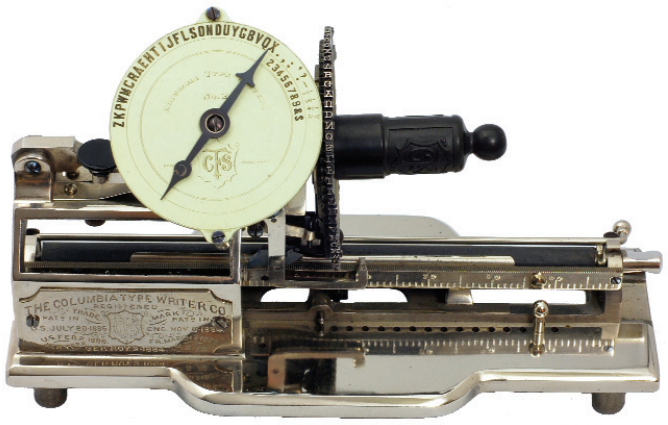
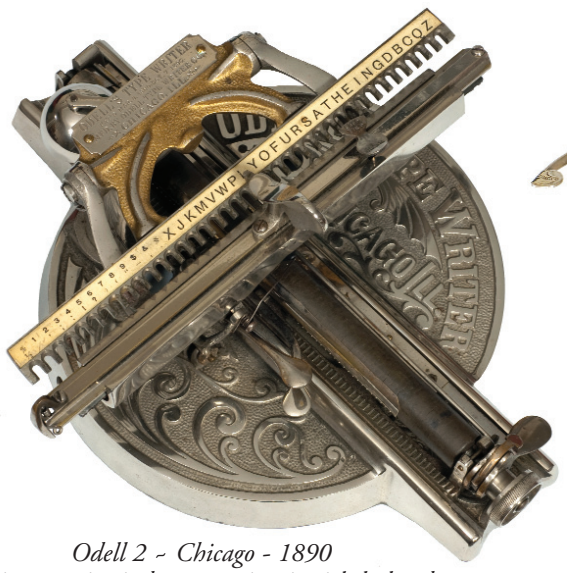


Columbia 2 ~ New York - 1885
This beautiful little machine was the first typewriter invented by Charles Spiro, a New York watchmaker, who went on to create many superb typewriters including the Bar-Lock shown below.



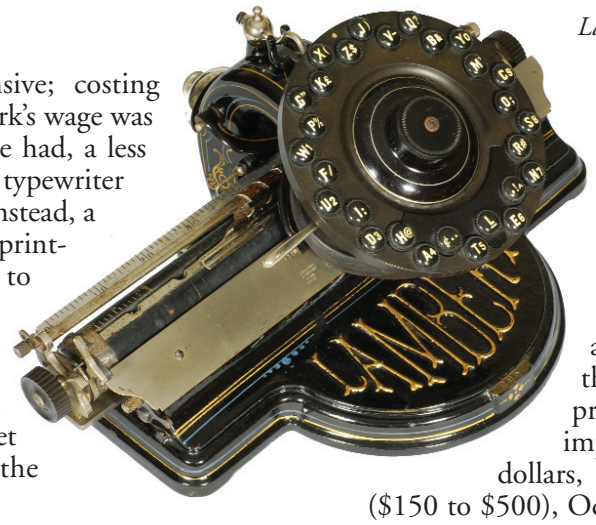
Odell 2 ~ Chicago - 1890
This attractive index typewriter is nickel plated with a striking Art Nouveau styled base.

Victor ~ Boston - 1889
The 'daisy wheel' makes its appearance on the Victor and would be a common feature on electric typewriters during the 1970s and 80s.

The index typewriter

Full keyboard typewriters were very expensive; costing between $60 and $125, a large expense when a clerk's wage was $5 a week. With few second-hand machines to be had, a less expensive machine was needed. Thus, the index typewriter was born. The index typewriter has no keyboard; instead, a dial or knob is turned to select the characters to be printed. Typing was slow, but the cost was right at $5 to $40. The index typewriter was popular for small businesses and home use. Many varieties were produced.

As secondhand machines became available and the merits of touch-typing became clear, the market for index typewriters would disappear by the beginning of the 20th century.



Lambert 1 ~ New York - 1902:
Frank Lambert, a French immigrant, spent 17 years developing this extraordinary typewriter. The phone like dial is spring-loaded and tips down when the characters are pushed.

Buying antique typewriters

Today, the values of these machines are affected by condition, rarity, and desirability, with prices ranging from a few hundred dollars, to into the thousands. However, for those interested in acquiring an early typewriter at a modest price, there are a number of intriguing and historically important typewriters that can be had for just a few hundred dollars, including the Blickensderfer ($150 to $250), Hammond ($150 to $500), Odell ($400 to $600) and the Oliver ($100 to $200). eBay is a great place to look for these and others.

If you love old technology and the beauty of old machines, you might want to consider acquiring an early typewriter and if you get one or two more, well then welcome to the wonderful world of collecting antique typewriters!

More of Martin's collection can be seen at antiquetypewriters.com

In Search of Standardization

There were many brilliant mechanical engineers, who became typewriter pioneers when they took their skills to the rapidly growing typewriter industry.

The inventors, having to avoid patent infringements and in pursuing their own notion of the better typewriter, created many different and ingenious typing machines to get the printed word onto paper. There was little if any apparent design progression for these first typewriters. Each mechanism solved a particular problem but not always in the best way. Some mechanisms, too advanced, disappeared until a later time, such as the 'daisy wheel' and the single-type element i.e. the IBM Golf Ball of 1961.

By 1896 many components, combinations and designs had been tried and the winner was emerging. A typewriter with the correct combination of successful components, a typing machine that would usher in the new century, conquer the world and put an end to this period of rich diversity in typewriter history. The Underwood had arrived.

Underwood 1 ~ New Jersey - 1896. The Underwood Typewriter was the first widely successful, 'modern typewriter.' It pulled together the three main design elements that would be found on all later machines, a four-row keyboard, single shift, and front strike type-bars giving visible typing.

Bar-Lock 4 ~ New York - 1892: The type-bars stand vertically behind the ornate copper shield, swinging down to the top of the roller to type. One can see what they typed but they would have to sit up straight!