

*Did You Know...?*

*A Customs Officer is Known as  
'Father of the Typewriter'*



**C**hristopher Latham Sholes (1819-1880) Collector of Customs during the Lincoln Administration along with his partner, Samuel Soule, patented a numbering machine in 1866.

They also patented their first typewriter with another partner, Carlos Glidden in 1868.

By 1873 Sholes developed the QWERTY keyboard, still the industry standard today, to help keep typewriter keys from jamming.

# Mr. Typewriter:

CHRISTOPHER • LATHAM • SHOLES

By Michael N. Ingrisano, Jr.

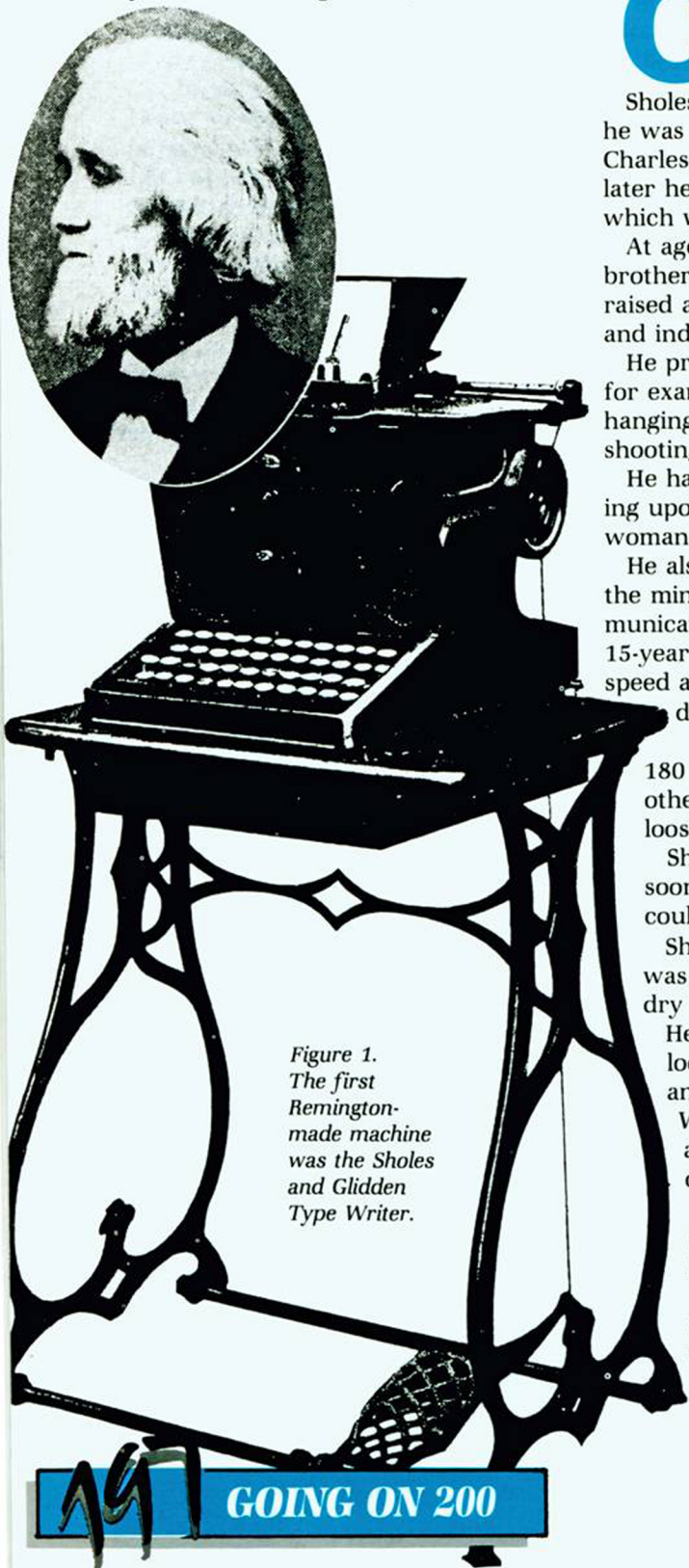


Figure 1.  
The first  
Remington-  
made machine  
was the Sholes  
and Glidden  
Type Writer.

**C**hristopher Latham Sholes, Collector at the Port of Milwaukee from 1864 to 1869, invented a practical writing machine which became the prototype of the standard typewriter as we know it today.

Sholes was born near Mooresburg, Pa., on February 14, 1819. At 18, he was a journeyman printer working for his brothers, Henry and Charles, publishers of the *Wisconsin Democrat* in Green Bay. Two years later he went to Madison to take charge of the *Wisconsin Enquirer*, which was partially owned by his brother Charles.

At age 21, Christopher started a new paper, *The Telegraph*, for his brother in Southport (later Kenosha), Wis. For the next 17 years, Sholes raised a family of 10 children, ran the newspaper, dabbled in politics and indulged in his penchant for reform.

He preached salvation on earth through works of reform, demanding, for example, the abolition of both war and capital punishment, "for hanging is the very worst possible use you can put a man to" and mass shooting is no better.

He hailed women forever, and raised the banner for equal rights, calling upon others to join in "this modern crusade against the enemies of womankind."

He also believed that to speed the improvement of the human mind, the mind and heart should be brought together in any form of communicating thought. He once clipped and published the story of a 15-year-old Philadelphia high school boy who amazed people with his speed as a reporter in the United States Senate. This youngster took

down as many as 197 words a minute.

"Calhoun, said to be the fastest talker in the Union, usually reaches 180 words the minute—he can get off 200; but 120 is the average for other people. So Phonography has fairly reached the ultima Thule of the loosest jaw and limberest tongue."

Sholes was also fascinated by the report that a telegraph line would soon reach Milwaukee (1850's), and when that happened Milwaukee could receive news from the Atlantic Coast 10 minutes after it was sent.

Sholes became intrigued with spiritualism, but he soon decided that he was being humbugged by the weird knockings, floating chairs and sundry messages from the other world.

He was into politics early in his career. As a result, he was appointed local postmaster in 1845. In 1848 he campaigned as a Free Soil Democrat and was elected to the first State Senate of the newly admitted State of Wisconsin. Then in 1851, he returned to the Wisconsin legislature as an assemblyman. By 1857, he had become a staunch advocate of the ideals of the Republican Party.

Throughout the Civil War, he was a loyal Unionist and Lincoln man. As a reward, he took up his duties as Customs collector for the Port of Milwaukee, receiving his permanent commission on May 4, 1864.

His salary as collector at the port helped him sustain his large family. His two oldest sons were employed; Charles was inspector of Customs and deputy collector and Fred was a journeyman printer. Sholes's duties were fairly light and his hours relatively short; hence, he was able to spend his leisure time inventing.

His first invention was a machine for addressing newspapers to customers who subscribed by mail. His own experience as a newspaperman convinced him of the nuisance it was to address each copy by pen and ink. His machine, operated by a treadle, could stamp the papers in

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the margin with addresses already set up in type. The machine was manufactured in Madison in the fall of 1860.

His second invention, like the first, grew out of his experience in the printer's trade. He devised a numbering or paging machine for paginating ledgers, tickets, coupons and like items. Sholes patented the device and improvements on it in 1864, 1866 and 1867.

Sholes was still improving his paging machine when someone suggested making a mechanical writing machine. If he could print figures and numbers, why not letters and words?

The idea did not intrigue him at the time. But a few months later, he read an article in *Scientific American* (July 6, 1866) which described a "Type Writing Machine" that an Alabama inventor, John Pratt, had exhibited in London.

The article concluded that the concept of type writing could be infinitely interesting, extremely feasible and advantageous over the laborious and unsatisfactory performance of the pen." And that "the weary process of learning penmanship in schools will be reduced to the acquirement of the art of writing one's own signature and playing on the literary piano [Typewriter] above described, or rather on its improved successors."

Visions of "improved successors" inspired Sholes to put his inventing genius to work. His first hurdle was to conceive a method for putting each type on a separate bar, so that the types, acting individually, would themselves strike the paper. His "little piece of mechanism" (Figure 1) allowed him to do just that.

The first model of the "typewriter" was completed by Sholes and his colleagues (a group of artisans who gathered in the shop of one Charles F. Kleinstaubler) in September 1867, and submitted for patent in 1868. (See Figure 2).

Sholes was not a businessman. To sell the device, he teamed with an old newspaper friend, James Densmore, who was more an entrepreneur than a journalist. By 1869 Sholes had been succeeded as collector in Milwaukee, having been ousted after the election of President Grant.

In the meantime, Sholes continued to improve on his device. By 1873 the device, labeled "the type-writer" by Densmore, was selling slowly, not in such numbers as to make either of the men rich. In 1870 they had shown the machine to representatives from the Atlantic and Pacific Telephone Company. But their consulting expert, Thomas A. Edison, was not impressed and the company decided not to purchase the invention.

In the meantime, one of the improvements made to the original machine was the fixing of the keyboard letters. As seen in Figure 3, the keyboard, essentially by Sholes and Densmore in a random selection, is basically the same configuration used on all modern typewriters.

Then on March 1, 1873, E. Remington & Sons, gun manufacturers, agreed to build the typewriter (Figure 4) to be marketed through a company set up by Densmore. The rest is history.

Sholes never did believe that the typewriter was a practical labor-saving device. Writing in the summer of 1878 to his partner's brother, Amos Densmore, Sholes noted:

... The trouble is just where I have always placed it—to wit: that the machine, taking everything into account, is not a labor-saving machine. The public doesn't need it—doesn't want it. It doesn't sell itself... If you recollect, I gave 5 years for the enterprize to play out in. It will in less time.

Sholes himself continued to use the typewriter. As a matter of fact, he developed a portable model for his own use.

One of the most important testimonials on the use of the typewriter came from Mark Twain, who was the first American author to submit a typewritten manuscript of a book to his publisher. The book was *Life on*

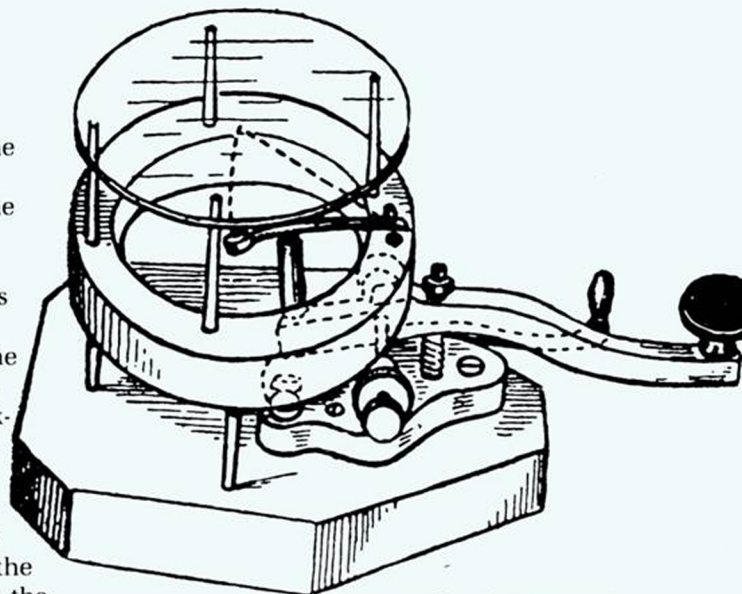


Figure 2. This "little piece of mechanism printed the letter W.

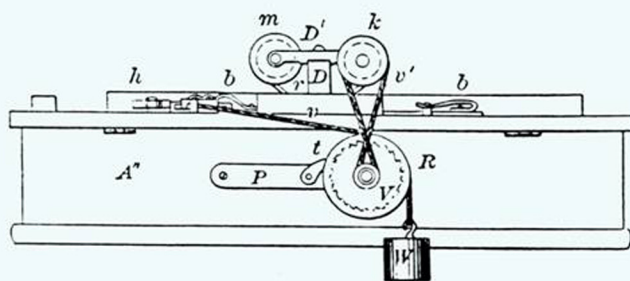
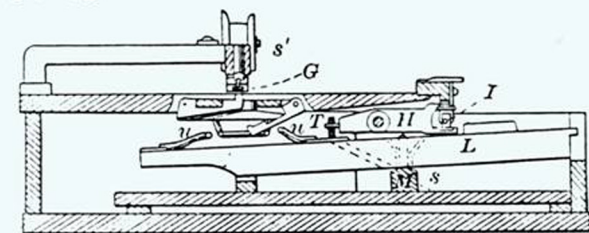
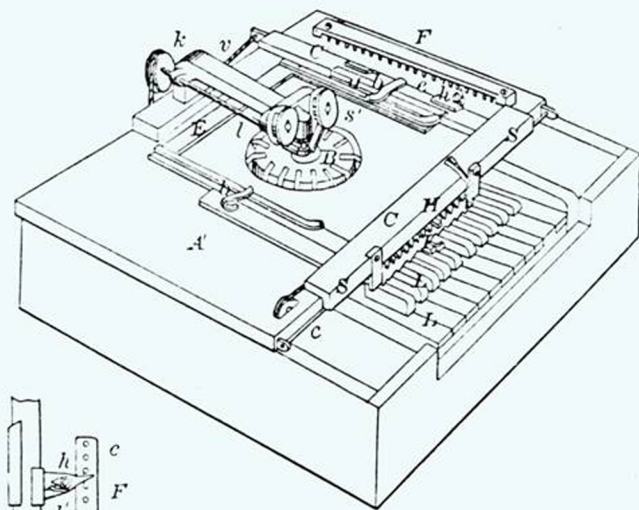
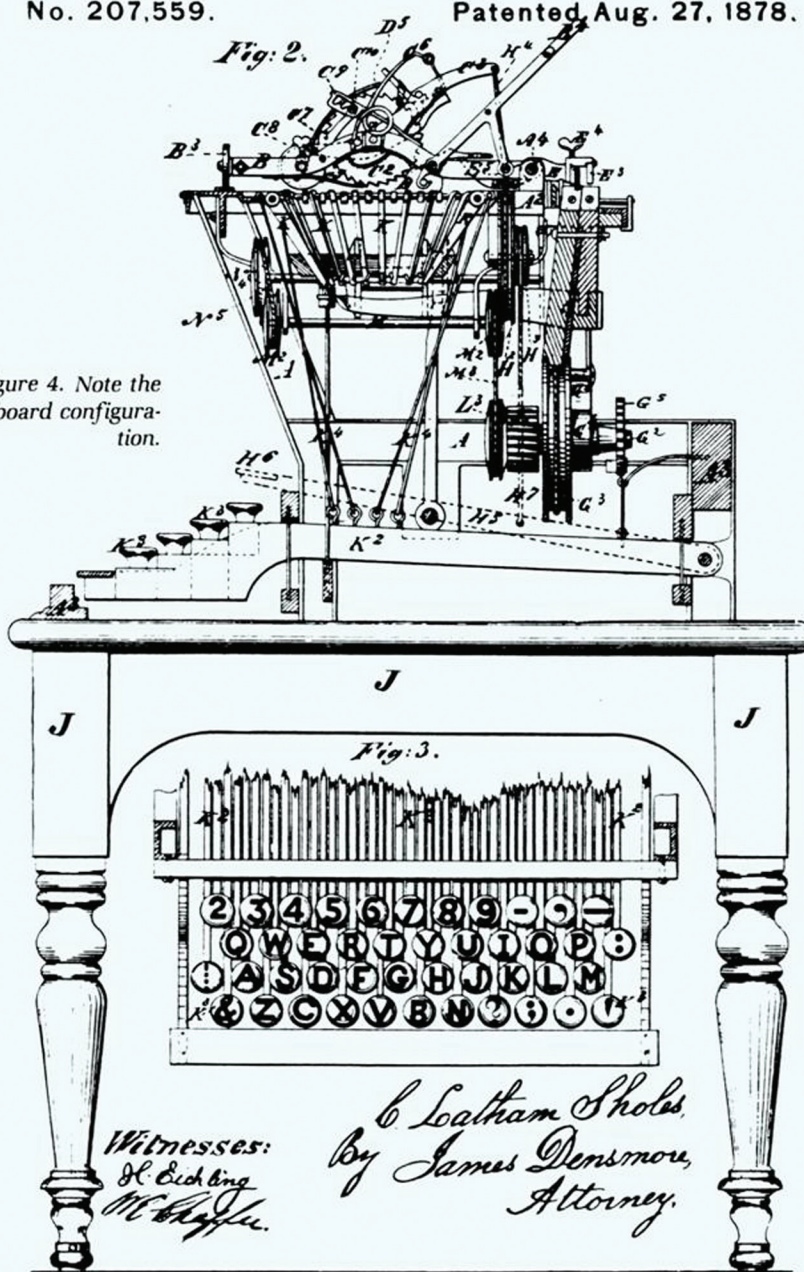


Figure 3. Sholes and his colleagues received their first patent on this typewriter on June 23, 1868.

Figure 4. Note the keyboard configuration.



the Mississippi. In a letter to his brother in 1874, Twain noted:

I am trying to get the hang of this new fangled writing machine . . . It piles an awful stack of words on one page. It dont muss things or scatter ink blots around. Of course it saves paper.

All of this was, of course, in capital letters since the early model had not been designed with lower case lettering.

By 1886, 50,000 of all makes of typewriters had been built and sold. By 1888, the Remington Standard Typewriter Company was turning out 1,500 per month, and the monotonous click of typewriter keys was heard in every business establishment in the country.

Christopher Latham Sholes died on February 17, 1890. He was 71 years old. From all his inventions, he cleared something in the neighborhood of \$40,000.

(Note: Biographical material was supplied by the Wisconsin Historical Society. Some biographical material is also found in *Who Was Who in America*. For a full history of the modern typewriter, see Richard N. Current, *The Typewriter and the Men Who Made It*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1954.)

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*The author, Michael Ingrisano, was the Director of the Information Services Division at Customs headquarters. Mike undertook the huge task of researching Customs history in preparation for the national celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1976, and for the Bicentennial of the U.S. Customs Service on July 31, 1989. CBP is in his debt for the trove of Customs history that is available to us today. Today, Mike is enjoying his retirement in Northern Virginia.*