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THE HISTORY OF PENS

by Andrew Wilson

Article Updated on 17/04/2023

★★★★★
REVIEWS

You don't always realise how important pens are in our daily lives. Often, they're sitting in convenient places in our houses for when we quickly scramble to find a pen and paper. They are also generally personalised with engraving or printed with company logos or branding, often a cheap plastic pen, but sometimes, a nice metal pen that can be refilled and kept.

The breakthrough of pens changed lives and allowed people to be able to communicate and write for future generations. Pens have evolved from using a quill to the modern fountain pen. The first pens were made of wood and were used to write on papyrus.



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Fountain Pen

1827

The fountain pen holds ink inside

The steel-point pens still required dipping in ink but they were less expensive than the quill. Historians believe that by the 1850s half of all dip pens were made in Birmingham.



The fountain pen holds ink inside which passes through the nib when it touches paper. In 1884, Lewis Edson Waterman developed a three-channel ink feed fountain pen which ensured a smooth flow of ink when writing.



Ballpoint Pen

1888

The era of ink writing ended in the 19th century when the ballpoint pen became the most durable and widely used pen. The purpose of the small rotating ball was to prevent the ink from drying out and would distribute the ink smoothly.

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WHAT IS WRITING?

At its heart, writing is a form of communication. Humans were doing this long before writing, using etchings, paintings and markings where they lived (think cave paintings and markings). Some of these markings were simple tally marks for counting.

Early forms of writing or 'recorded communication' were pictographs marked into stone or clay tablets. These images represented messages that could be 'read' by the viewer.



Jemdet Nasr Tablet - British Library - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 - Copyright - Trustees of the British Museum

The earliest form of writing is believed to be Cuneiform, dating back to the Sumerians over 5000 years ago in *Mesopotamia* (present day Iraq). Studies suggest a surplus of food from agriculture gave rise to trade and commerce, in turn creating a requirement to record numbers and tallies of grain and other food stores, and record wages of workers. The Jemdet Nasr Tablet above (dated 3000-2900 BC) shows list of barley portions which were the farm labourer's wages etched into the tablet with a stylus. Styluses were mostly made from Reed.

"Cuneiform was entirely based on the "wedge-shaped" mark that the end of a cut reed made when pushed into a clay tablet; from Latin cuneus 'wedge'." - Wikipedia

REED STYLUS - 3200 BC



THE REED PEN

The earliest known form of writing using a 'pen' began in Ancient Egypt where reed pens were created to write on papyrus. Ancient Egyptians first used reed styluses to carve hieroglyphs into tablets made from clay similar to the Sumerians. However in Egypt, there were two major advances to writing, one was the invention of ink, and the other, Papyrus, both around 4500 years ago. This prompted a slightly different reed pen.

The pens were carved from reed or bulrush as the base of the pen. Reed was abundantly available along the Nile in Egypt at the time. A length of reed was cut and one end was sharpened into a pen nib with a flat point and split in the point. When dipped into the ink, the split allowed some ink to be held in the end of the pen until it was drawn over the papyrus.

Papyrus, made from the plant of the same name, is the predecessor of paper - the word paper is derived from 'papyrus'. The development of more varied ink colours in the centuries that followed allowed great works to be written on Papyrus in a permanent record of history. Below is an image of an incredibly well preserved and beautifully drawn Papyrus scroll - Hunefer's Books of the Dead. These books were extremely important and were often written on Papyrus or other materials and placed with the body of the dead.



Hunefer 1300 BCE, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Papyrus was probably the most important surface for writing, right up until the medieval period. There was a long period of transition from papyrus to vellum and parchment which were cheaper to produce.

Fun fact: The skill of making reed pens was an important skill to have because reed pens didn't last long, so they constantly needed crafting.

THE QUILL - 600 AD



Reed pens were used extensively until the development of the Quill pen in 600AD. The quill pen was made from the primary flight feathers of geese or more rarely swans. Quills were more advantageous than Reed pens because they were more compatible with Parchment papers and animals skins and could form finer detail and smaller lettering with their more delicate tip.

Reed pens were a lot stiffer than quills and lost their point very quickly, whereas feathers for quills were more flexible to write with. The shaft of the quill is hollow meaning when the nib is dipped in ink, the ink is drawn into the nib by capillary action, this gives a longer period of writing time before requiring another dip.

Fun Fact: Feather quill pens usually had their barbs removed as they tended to get in the way of the writers view of their writing. Hollywood portrays Feather pens as a full feather - and we think they are more elegant with their barbs.

STEEL-POINT PEN - 1828





With the industrial revolution came new machines capable of mass producing products and the ability to stamp metal nibs in large volumes. A man named John Mitchell developed a way to mass produce steel nibs and in 1825 his brother William Mitchell started his own business producing steel nibs in Birmingham, England.

Steel nibs had the advantage of being more durable and long lasting than the quill that came before. They were also cheap and quick to mass produce and so quickly made the quill redundant. They could be made in different shapes and nib widths making them versatile. Being ink pens, they still needed to be dipped in ink similar to the quill, but they were less expensive and sturdier. The addition of a small hole near the top of the slit allowed more flexibility in the nib for more comfortable and smooth writing.

Fun Fact: Historians believe that by the 1850s half of all dip pens were made in Birmingham.

THE FOUNTAIN PEN - 1827



The Fountain pen was fuelled by the inconvenience of having to keep dipping a pen in ink to replenish it. The fountain pen was invented by Romanian inventor Petrache Poenaru and was described by him as a "self-fuelling endless portable quill with ink." It holds ink inside the pen and the ink passes through the nib when it touches paper. Unfortunately, the design was never perfected and had problems: it tended to clot and needed to be refilled often with an eyedropper.

Fun fact: In 1884, Lewis Edson Waterman developed a three-channel ink feed fountain pen which ensured a smooth flow of ink when writing and is widely credited with the birth of the 'Modern' fountain pen - it hasn't changed much today.

Fun Fact: It was said that In Arab Egypt in 953AD, Fatimid Caliph Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah demanded a pen 'that would not stain his hands or his clothes'. In return he was given a pen with a reservoir to hold the ink. So we don't know who first invented the fountain pen.

BALLPOINT PEN - 1888



The era of the fountain pen ended in the middle of the 20th century when the ballpoint pen became the most durable and widely used pen.

The Ballpoint pen was a turning point in pen history and is what we still use today. It was found to be a working writing pen that could be used on multiple surfaces including paper, cardboard, wood and even underwater.

The ballpoint was first linked to John J. Loud, an American inventor who received a patent in 1888 for a rotating steel ball mechanism held in a socket, but the design unfortunately didn't have a smooth flow of ink. In the 1930s, a Hungarian journalist named László Bíró found the smudging of ink on the paper annoying and instead came up with the idea to use quick-drying ink with a rotating ballpoint mechanism. The ballpoint pen was then developed into the modern ballpoint pen we use today.

with John J Loud's rotating ball mechanism to create the first usable ballpoint pen.

Read our blog [The Ultimate Ballpoint Pen Guide](#) to discover the fascinating [history of the ballpoint pen](#), when it was invented and how its popularity grew.

Fun fact: The purpose of the round metal ball is to prevent the ink from drying out and to distribute the ink smoothly on the paper.

THE FUTURE OF PENS

We have already seen the pen losing popularity to ipads, tablets and other electronic devices. However their popularity has held up remarkably well with this technological competition. Surely there will always be a place for the pen - they are so very convenient when you need to quickly note down something.



HISTORY OF PEN MANUFACTURERS

We have taken a look at some of the biggest moments in history for pen manufacturers and some great turning points for the pens we use on a daily basis.

A.T. CROSS COMPANY - 1846



Source: cross.com/cr_en_us/about-cross

AT Cross Pen Company opened in 1846 and became the first American pen manufacturer with a factory in Rhode Island. This same year, the first Cross Fountain Pen was created with the name *Peerless* to signify its design and technology. Cross pens are still popular today as they can be engraved as gifts for loved ones.

"1993 - Cross Townsend becomes known as The Pen of Presidents, used by leaders across the globe to this day. Century II also makes history as the pen chosen by both political parties for official White House signing ceremonies." - quote courtesy of AT Cross (cross.com/cr_en_us/about-cross)



S.T. DUPONT - 1872



Source: uk.st-dupont.com/collections/writing-instruments-fountain-pen

S.T. Dupont opened a factory in Paris to fill a large gap in the market for fountain pens. Dupont stood out from the market because of his intricate and unique designs on the barrels and caps. Even in the modern day, S.T. Dupont is known for their design and quality with the chiselled gold nib and palladium clip on the cap.

PARKER PEN COMPANY - "LUCKY CURVE" FOUNTAIN PEN FEED - 1894



Source: parkerpen.com/legacy.html

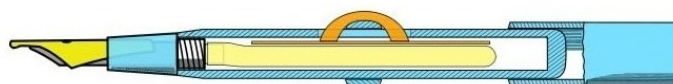
George Safford Parker invented the anti-leak system and his first innovation 1894, the *Lucky Curve* pen feed, which was a major breakthrough. It was used in various pens until 1928. These pens had a feed that curved against the side of the barrel, which prevented ink from blobbing onto the paper. Parker Pens are still a renowned business today for their sleek pen designs and relentless design innovation that keep their pen collections fresh and modern.

"It will always be possible to make a better pen." - George Parker

CONKLIN PEN COMPANY - 1897



In 1897, one year before the Conklin Pencompany was formed, Roy Conklin filed a patent for the worlds first automatic filling system for a fountain pen. Then in 1901 the famous *Crescent Filler* was born. This was an innovative automatic filling mechanism which worked by pressing a metal crescent that protrudes from the pen barrel. This compresses a sac, which, when released uses suction to draw ink back into the pen. At the time this was revolutionary and helped the fountain pen become more practical for everyday use.



SHEAFFER PEN - 1908

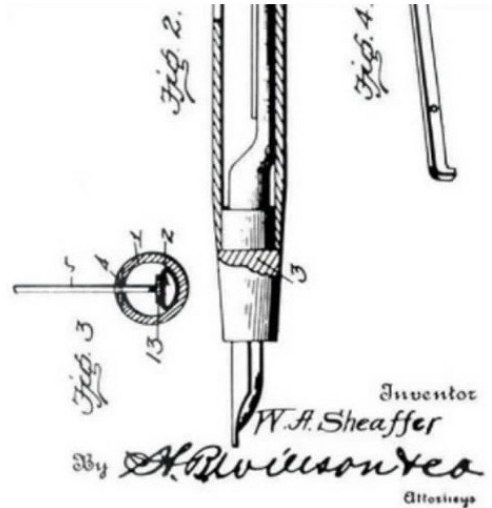


Image Source: sheaffer.com

Walter A. Sheaffer was a jeweler who wanted to make his mark on the growing fountain pen industry. Sheaffer took the idea of a lever-filling fountain pen, and built his company, Sheaffer Pens of Iowa, around this innovation.

Sheaffer describe themselves as:

"the pioneers of the lever-filling fountain pen, the inlaid nib and many more significant advancements, underscoring our perpetual drive for innovation."

In 1924, they began to manufacture their pens from celluloid, which allowed the business to offer fountain pens in a variety of colours and at a price cheaper than pens made from metal or hard rubber.

FINAL WORDS

Writing has had a huge impact in our everyday lives and has formed our humanity and culture. Even in the world of technology where we can use smartphones, tablets and laptops to make notes, the pen continues to be a key tool within society and will go down in history as one of the best creations of mankind.

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3 COMMENTS

SUSAN GRAY
Oct 17, 2024

Thank you for the cleverly written walk through the history of the pen. I love fountain pens best!

RICHARD F BINDER
Sep 22, 2023

Please consider correcting several errors in this page.

1. Sheaffer's first name was actually Walter, not William.

2. Sheaffer filed for his first lever patent on 6 March 1908, not in 1907. That design, U.S. Patent No. 896,861, issued 25 August 1908, was a failure. His second lever patent, U.S. Patent No. 1,114,052, issued 20 October 1914, worked, but it had no spring on the pressure bar. His third lever patent, U.S. Patent No. 1,118,240, issued 24 November 1914, had a sprung pressure bar and was a complete success.

3. Sheaffer did not actually invent the lever-filler. That honor goes to John Barnes, whose U.S. Patent No. 726,495 was issued 28 April 1903. Barnes sold his patent to the L. E. Waterman Company, which began producing lever-filling pens in about 1915. Sheaffer's patents illustrated the use of a pin passing through the material of the barrel for the lever's pivot, and Waterman worked around that concept by attaching its pivot pin to a metal box that was then secured into the barrel.

4. Sheaffer was not the first, in 1924, to manufacture plastic pens. The LeBoeuf Fountain Pen Company, Inc., of Springfield, Massachusetts, was manufacturing plastic pens by about 1920, based on U.S. Patent No. 1,302,935, issued 6 May 1919 to Frank LeBoeuf.

Executive Pens Direct replied:

Hi Richard, great to hear your thoughts – changes made as suggested. Thanks for providing some insight into the various patents surrounding the lever-filling mechanism for early fountain pens. It is interesting to see the very slight differences in some of these patents, and the small changes each company made to validate their designs and circumvent others' patents.

The history of pens is such a complex story and following the intricacies of each development over the years is demanding, but still very interesting.

over the years is demanding, but still very interesting.

PHADINDRA POUDEL
Aug 27, 2023

I almost missed my exam because of a duplicate pen refill.

LEAVE A COMMENT

N A M E

E M A I L

M E S S A G E

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