

# MODERN MIMOSLOP

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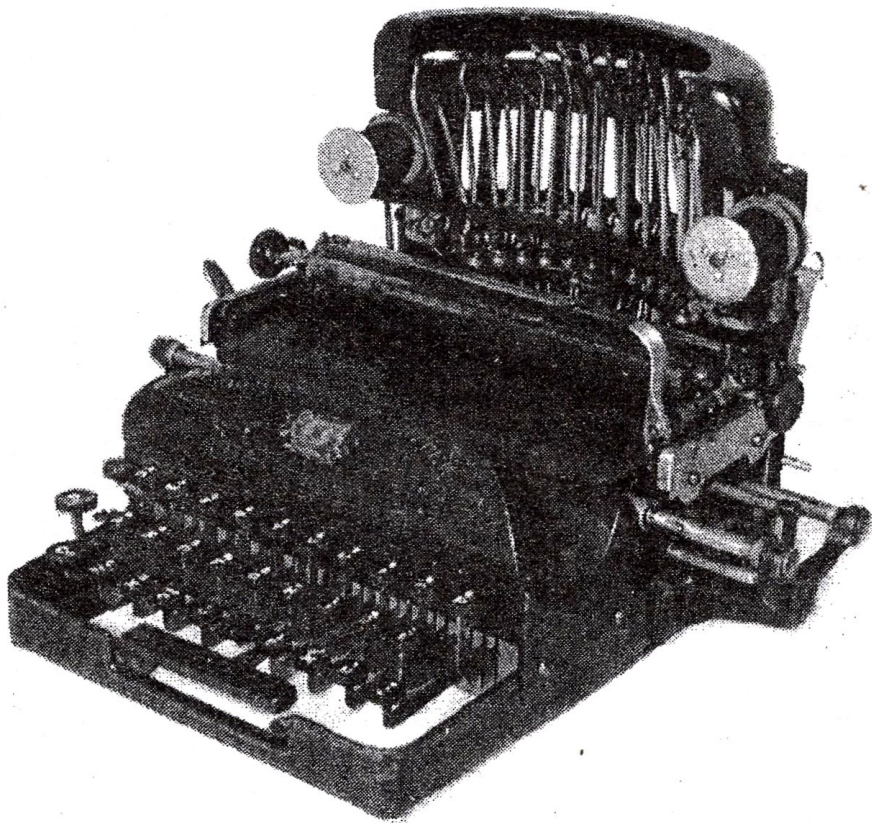
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Staten Island's Role Newly-Discovered  
In Typewriter History:

## A Major Technological 'First' 100 Years Ago



A 1996 photo of the Brooks typewriter on exhibit  
at The Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences

*"The typewriter industry began in America, and for the first half of this century was one of the largest in the country. Yet in the past ten years, it has been replaced by the computer. For all its technical, economic and social impact, it came and went practically within the lifetimes of two Staten Island generations." —Don Sutherland*



# The Brooks Typewriter...

By DON SUTHERLAND

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Exhibited until recently at the Staten Island Institute, the Brooks typewriter of 1896 joins the rare group of historic products that were manufactured on Staten Island.

Odd to our eyes, the Brooks was considered a bold advancement in typewriter design a century ago.

It was a splendid example of high-tech engineering, and a pioneer of many features that became standards for typewriters, then word-processors, and now even computers.

And although the Brooks was always well-known to historians, its Staten Island origins were discovered only recently. How this secret came to light is a tale which rivals the best private-eye stories.

The Brooks typewriter was one of many inventions of Byron A. Brooks in the earliest days of the typewriter industry. The first typewriter came out in 1873, printing capital letters only.

Brooks is credited with the subsequent invention of the shift-key, permitting both capital and small letters to be printed. When this was added, the original typewriter was renamed the Remington Standard Perfected Type Writer in 1878.

At least two other typewriters (called the Travis and the Peoples') are accredited to B.A. Brooks, at a time when the typewriter industry was growing as rapidly as the computer industry is today.

Most sources place the invention of the typewriter bearing the inventor's

name in 1887. Manufacture was delayed, however, but the Brooks typewriter finally reached the market in 1896, a product of the S.S. White dental equipment factory in Prince's Bay.

The Staten Island origin of the Brooks typewriter came to light with the discovery of a cache of business and legal documents known as "The Brooks Papers," discovered in 1970 by Thomas FitzGerald of Philadelphia.

Describing himself as an engineer, publisher, and "amateur historian," FitzGerald finally concluded the hundreds of pages were "too important to be kept private. They should be available to everyone."

In the late 1980s, the Brooks Papers were accepted by the Smithsonian Institution.

The documents are significant for reasons beyond their glimpse into the development of a Staten Island product.

"The typewriter was the most complex mechanism mass produced by American industry in the nineteenth century," writes Donald R. Hoke in his book *Ingenious Yankees*, a history of the American factory system.

"Early in the research phase of [this work], I contacted the corporate descendants of the major [typewriter] makers and met with complete failure in my attempts to find business records." Hence, the economic and production practices of the most advanced factories of the day had gone unknown. The Brooks Papers reveal much about this hidden aspect of American history.

The papers were given to Tom



## **...A Technological First**

FitzGerald as a reward for doing a good deed.

### **THE SECRET ROOM**

"I was working for Pennwalt, the company that acquired S.S. White," FitzGerald told the *Staten Island Star*, "and I met the chairman of S.S. White, Wilmoth C. Mack.

"He had this old-fashioned paternalistic approach to his company, where he was concerned with the well-being of all the employees who were being displaced by the take-over. He'd found new jobs for most, but was worried about a large number of unskilled workers. Through my own connections, I was able to get jobs for most of them.

"One day Mack called me and said 'come with me.' He took me to the old S.S. White building on 10th Street. We got on the elevator and went to the top floor. Then he took out a special key, and the elevator went one floor higher — to a floor that didn't appear on the elevator panel. A secret floor.

"We entered a huge loft, maybe 40 x 40 feet, filled with tables and bins and shelving. 'This is the company

museum,' he told me. S.S. White had done a lot of jobbing in the early days, making bicycles and electric motors and other items besides dental equipment. There must have been at least one of everything they ever produced. 'In exchange for all your help, take anything you want,' he told me."

FitzGerald had no particular interest in the various gadgets, but he found some of the early electric motors "interesting. I took 26 of them.

"Then Mack said, 'wouldn't you like the typewriter?' I said okay, the typewriter. It came with this large sheaf of papers, which I found even more fascinating than the typewriter itself. T

I read other sources on the history of typewriters and found error after error.

"The Brooks papers proved nearly all of the historical references to have major flaws."

At the time he contributed the papers to the Smithsonian, FitzGerald contacted a Staten Island collector of typewriters, to ask if local cultural institutions might be interested in copies of their own. "I contacted everyone," said the local collector, who

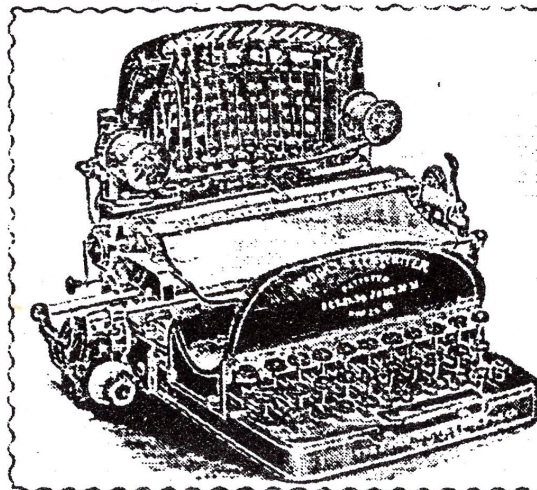
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## **Introducing Don Sutherland...**

Our neighbor Don Sutherland volunteered this article (gratis) for the Star Reporter neighborhood newspapers that Roy Lindberg and John Larsen have published since 1965 on Staten Island. We have known Don for many years as a man of extensive and diverse talents and interests. He travels frequently for his twin ventures, Sutherland Multimedia and Press Here! After publishing this material for our Staten Island audience, we asked Don if we could also publish it in our hobby journal, *Modern Mimeslop*. "Sure," said he — so here is professional writer and photographer Don in print in the amateur press for the first time! You can reach him at PO Box 345, Stapleton Station, Staten Island, NY 10304 where Daniel Graham has Box 293, but they've never met!



# 100 years ago, a typewriter built on Staten Island.



## The Brooks Typewriter WRITES IN SIGHT.

*"SUPERIOR in Every Respect to All Other Machines."*

You cannot afford to buy a machine until you have given THE BROOKS the careful examination it merits. Agents wanted in every city. Circulars and full particulars upon application . . . . .

**THE BROOKS TYPEWRITER CO.**

Sole Agents for the U. S.

291 Broadway - - - - NEW-YORK.

asked not to be identified. "They all said, 'yes, sure, sounds terrific, we'll get back to you.' Two or three years passed, and nobody got back to me."

Then, through the intervention of Borough Historian Dick Dickerson, the Staten Island Institute expressed an interest in the documents.

"We have found no other reference to a typewriter being made at the S.S. White factory," said the Institute's Vincent Sweeny.

### THAT'S A TYPEWRITER?

Though bordering on the bizarre to modern eyes, the Brooks was a progressive typewriter in its day.

It was far ahead of its larger competitors, such as the Remington. It bristled with innovations which took some competitors another ten years to adopt.

For all its forward-looking attributes, the Brooks did poorly on the market. Only two advertisements for it were published. Historians were always

puzzled that a device so sophisticated in its day did so poorly on the market.

With the Brooks Papers, some of the enigmas find their answers. For example, the exact number of Brooks typewriters manufactured is finally known — only 700.

The papers also illustrate the reason for the marketing failure: there was so much bickering between the Staten Island factory and the typewriter's inventor that production was delayed too long. The rest of the typewriter industry caught up with the Brooks, then surpassed it.

### HUNDREDS OF PAGES OF DISCOVERIES

The hundreds of pages in FitzGerald's discovery include letters from the typewriter's inventor, memos and correspondence between members of the S.S. White factory staff, and eventually documents from various attorneys as relations broke down into threats of lawsuit.

By the time the 700 machines were

finally manufactured, in 1896, the Underwood typewriter had come to the market.

The Underwood is considered to be the first "modern" typewriter, changing the course of written communications and obliterating most of its rivals. Still, the Brooks typewriter found its supporters and their hyperbole in the literature of the day.

"It represents the culmination of a life-time devoted to Typewriter invention," stated the catalog of a contemporary dealer, F.S. Webster. "Any Remington operator can operate the Brooks in five minutes." Complete with "cover and tools," the vendor offered the machine for \$100.00.

This was a substantial sum at a time when office clerks earned \$10.00 per week, but it was the standard price for top-quality typewriters.

The Brooks Papers make it clear that considerable thought went into the machine, even after production began in

the S.S. White factory.

Many improvements were suggested by factory personnel. These also became subjects of dispute, however, for there had been no prior agreements about who would pay for factory-inspired improvements.

### THE SPECIMEN EXHIBITED BY SIAS

The Brooks typewriter recently exhibited at the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences (whose photographs, reproduced here, were taken just after the exhibit closed) is one of two Brooks typewriters known on Staten Island. It was discovered and "brought home" by the local collector just after FitzGerald's first contact, from the small town of Pocomoke, Maryland.

"How it got so far from home," the collector stated, "is anybody's guess. Its previous owner was a minister, who died in Pocomoke at the age of 90. As ripe an age as that seems, it's young compared to the machine. He would have bought the Brooks as a second-



hand typewriter, since it was on and off the market nearly ten years before the preacher was born. He was black, he was poor, and for all we know, he used this machine right up to the end. It seems to be the only Brooks to include its original sheet-metal cover, which undoubtedly helped preserve it. It still types."

One of the bold strokes of the Brooks was its provision for "visible writing." This meant that the print could be seen by the typist while being typed. It was a revolutionary concept in the 1890s, as forward-looking as the graphical interface is for computers 100 years later.

Most early typewriters, including big-name brands like the Remington, placed the paper carriage across the top of the machine, with the type bars concealed beneath. They printed on the underside of the platen. In order to see the printing, the typist either had to space-off several lines, or raise the carriage on its hinges.

The Remington and its Victorian-era clones were derisively called "blind writers." Their design made it easier to make mistakes, and harder to correct them. The typist might be unaware that the ribbon or the page had run out, or that the spacing between lines was uneven. Nevertheless, the vast majority of typewriters sold in the 19th century conformed to this design. Even once the Underwood began to popularize the modern "visible" typewriter, Remington withheld a similar machine until 1908. "A good typist should not *have* to see the writing," Remington insisted.

Other inventors, and most typists, thought differently. The late 1880s and early 1890s saw dozens of attempts to make "visible writers" by relocating the

type bars to different positions around the machine.

The most successful of these prior to the Underwood was the Oliver typewriter, in 1893. It grouped two sets of type bars above the printing point, on either side. They swung downwards, traveling sideways to the paper. Unlike the Brooks, the Oliver was enormously successful. It remained in manufacture until about 1930, with well over one million sold. The Oliver is a common flea-market find today.

According to the Staten Island collector, the manufacturing quality of the Brooks easily equaled the Oliver's; both were excellent. "The machine is a tribute to the skill of the men who worked in the S.S. White factory," he stated. "The materials are tops, and the manufacturing tolerances extremely fine. As an example of high-precision factory work, the Brooks ranks with the best of its time."

But the Brooks was also easy to break. "It was L-shaped," said the collector, "meaning that no matter which way you held it, some large part of it was hanging-off this way or sticking-up that way; easy to bump into, and snap. Many surviving Brooks machines show serious structural damage. This one is intact," but spots in the finish "resemble corrosion from atmospheric moisture. In Pocomoke, the landfills are made of oyster shells. There can be a lot of salt in the air, which may explain pitting in some of the nickel-plated parts of this Brooks."

The Brooks papers portray constant arguments over who was responsible for various costs of manufacture, who should be credited for improvements made by the factory, and who, ultimately, would



take the last machines off the factory's hands.

"Brooks himself writes with an air of calm authority," said the collector, "but the people around him squabble and bicker over all the petty issues, while a few scam-artists do their best to exploit the situation. Brooks comes out looking like Gulliver, tied down in Lilliput by a hoarde that doesn't see the big picture."

If the Brooks invention had reached the market in time, according to the collector, there would have been money to make. "But after 1896, the increasing pressure was to copy the Underwood, which was running away with the market. Except for Remington, all the brands we today remember appeared in the 20th-century, in the image of the Underwood. Smith-Corona had its start in 1904, for example, Royal in 1906, and the Woodstock in 1914. All were Underwood clones."

### **SURPRISING IRONY**

An unexpected irony portrayed by the Brooks Papers is the threat of a lawsuit against Byron Brooks himself, by another typewriter manufacturer, John Newton Williams of Connecticut. "The Williams typewriter was completely different from the Brooks," said the collector, "but it was another in a group of oddball visibles that included the Brooks, the Oliver, and a couple dozen others. The Williams was more successful than the Brooks, remaining on the market for about 10 years, beginning in 1893."

Mixed-in with the S.S. White documents is correspondence from Williams' attorney, accusing Brooks, the original inventor of the shift-key, of infringing on shift-key patents of

Williams' own. "Brooks believed he was on safe ground," according to the collector, "and he probably was. The shift system used in his typewriter is not much like the Williams'. But it's still amusing to find a man accused of stealing the one thing he did that was really successful."

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## **Did a Stapleton Man Help Make the Brooks?**

Don Sutherland dug up some more history after completing this article on the Brooks typewriter. The front page Sutherland quotation in *this issue* wraps up his companion article that we hope to print in the next issue of *Modern Mimeoslop*.

**Don Sutherland's address:**

**PO Box 345, Stapleton Station,  
Staten Island, NY 10304.**

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## **hobby people**

One of the true "greats" of our hobby needs your prayers as we go to press. **SHELDON C. WESSON** has reportedly entered a nursing home in Florida after severe health setbacks. The Wesson home number is (941) 483-9200 if you wish to call Helen for more detail. Mail: 826 Golf Drive, Venice, FL 34285.

\* \* \*

Glad to get a Christmas note from **VERNON FORNEY**, long-time AAPA member in Temple, PA, who reports that he and wife Barbara enjoyed a trip to Scandinavia, except for Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen where Barbara had her wallet stolen. Our staff Great Dane, John Larsen says he never heard of such a thing happening at Tivoli Gardens before — but apparently crime knows no boundaries these days.

\* \* \*

Crane's fillers fill your holes.



*MODERN MIMESLOP* is our fun way of demonstrating the progress that has been made in mimeograph duplicating technology in the past 50 years. This journal is composed on Microsoft Publisher and "printed" on a space-age stencil duplicator called the Duplo.

## EXPLAINING MIMESLOP

### TO NEW READERS OF THIS AMATEUR JOURNAL

We are engaging in a little-known but long-established hobby called **amateur journalism**, in which the word **amateur** describes a publishing-related hobby activity carried on for pleasure rather than profit. Some of us are **professionals** in our daily work and **amateurs** when we do what pleases us — on our own time and when we feel like doing it.

The hobby had its roots in the pre-Civil War era when teenage boys had the time and ambition to play around with small printing presses, setting metal type by hand. Today **ajay** — or simply **AJ** — is the "in" term for amateur journalism.

Today, amateur publishers use whatever technology they have available, and usually print 300 to 350 copies which each volunteer mailing manager sends in a monthly "bundle" to association members. We have chosen to join both AAPA and NAPA, so we normally print about 750 copies altogether. Both groups welcome people with an interest in almost any aspect of creating and / or circulating publications.

The publishers of *Modern Mimeoslop* are Roy Lindberg and John Larsen, members of the 120-year-old National Amateur Press Association and the 60-year-old American Amateur Press Association, two of the major hobby groups in the United States. Write us:

**Roy Lindberg and John Larsen**  
**PO Box 050167, Rosebank Station**  
**Staten Island, NY 10305-0004**

or fax us at (718) 981-5713 for more information about these groups.

Users of e-mail contact..

**AAPA** through **Mike O'Connor** at **MikeOC3941@AOL.com**.

**NAPA** through **Harold Segal** at **harsegal@aol.com**

**Both groups welcome everybody who shares our interests —men, women, youngsters, baby boomers, senior citizens.**

**TO AAPA AND NAPA MEMBERS WHO DO NOT COLLECT JOURNALS: Why not pass this issue along to ANYBODY who might find pleasure in our hobby?**

**MAGNIFYING PROHIBITED:** Special instructions to Hyman Bradorofsky and others who strive for accuracy and perfection: The page printed on back of this one is erroneously identified as page 7 of the December 1996 issue. There was no page 7 in that issue and you may correct it by hand to show that it is page 7 for February 5, 1997. Gracias.