

The background of the cover is a stained glass design. It features a large turkey tail fan pattern, which is a traditional motif in American stained glass. The pattern consists of a central vertical stem that branches out into a series of overlapping, fan-shaped segments. The colors used are primarily warm tones: yellows, oranges, and reds, with some green and blue accents. The segments are outlined with dark, thick lines, creating a grid-like structure. The overall effect is a rich, textured, and colorful composition.

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The Surveyor & His Typewriter

by John S. Burt

New-York March, 13, 1839

Dear Companion,

I have but jest got my second machine into operation and this is the first specimen I send you except a few lines I printed to regulate the machine, I am in good health but am in fear these lines will not find you so and the children from the malencholey account your letter gave me of sickness and deaths in our neighbourhood, I had rested contented to what I should if it had been summer season about the health of my family, as it is jenerly healthy during the winter months; but their has ben an unusual quantity of sickness here this winter, and it has ben very cold in Urope as well as in America, a strong indication of the change of season that I have so often mentioned.— Mr Sheldon arrived here four days ago he went immediately on to Washington and took my muddle for the Patent Office, he will return here next week at which time I shall put my machine on sale and shall sell out the patent as soon as I can and return home, at any rate I seall returne home as soon as the Lake navigation is open if life and health is spared me. I have got along but slow since I have been here for the want of cash to hire such help as I wanted; I have been as prudent as I could, have taken my board with a family from Myuga who keep a boarding house they are very good christian people and are kind to me. I pay three Dollars a week for my board.— You must excuse mistakes, the above is printed among a croud of people asking me many questions about the machine. Tell the boys that I have some presents for them. If I had any news to communicate I would print more but as I have none I must close hoping these lines will find you well. I wish you to write as soon you receive this, do not make any excuses I shall like see it in any shape

William A. Burt.

All photos courtesy John S. Burt

William Austin Burt invented more than the solar compass. On July 23, 1829, his "typographer" received the first typewriter patent of any consequence from the U.S. Patent Office.

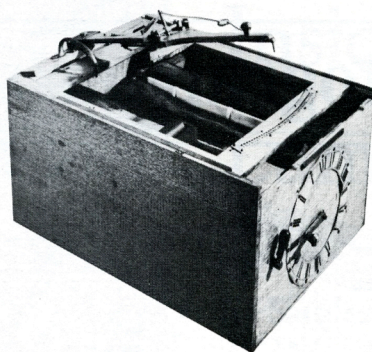
During the period before Burt got his first Michigan surveying contract, he built mills, served on the Michigan Territorial Council and developed a reputation as a learned and trustworthy citizen whose counsel was frequently sought. He soon could not keep up with all his correspondence and letter-writing.

To solve the problem he conceived the design for a writing machine to take the place of the pen. His friend John Sheldon, editor of the *Detroit Gazette* (precursor of the *Detroit Free Press*), gladly supplied the needed type.

While Burt was building his writing machine, Sheldon became embroiled in a classic controversy over freedom of the press. In a January 1829 editorial, he sharply criticized the Territorial Supreme Court for a decision demanding a retrial in a case involving a larceny conviction. He refused to refrain from commenting on the case and chose to serve a nine-day incarceration instead of paying a \$100 fine. Over 300 of Detroit's 2,200 residents attended a massive dinner for Sheldon in the jail, and a citizens committee paid the fine with individual contributions not exceeding 13 cents each. The next month Sheldon resigned from the *Gazette* for so-called "health reasons" and turned his attention to Burt's new writing machine.

It had taken only a few months to construct the primitive box-like device. Many of the parts and tools that Burt used were forged in the workshop beside his home in Mt. Vernon (now the site of Stony Creek Metropark). The mechanism, largely wood, was housed in a small wooden box (1' x 1½' x 1').

It operated by rotating a lever on which Sheldon's type was mounted. The desired letter was



The improved model of Burt's typewriter was destroyed in the Patent Office fire of 1836, but from the original documents that remained, Burt's grandson, Austin Burt, built a replica for the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. The replica is currently on display in the Smithsonian.

selected along a semi-circular scale, and when the lever was pressed down, the inked type, filled by special pads, made contact with the paper. A circular clock-like gauge on the front indicated the number of lines "typed" on a continuous roll of paper. Either upper or lower case letters could be used. The letters produced were neat and legible. Burt had succeeded in building America's first typewriter, but he had failed in his objective of keeping up with his correspondence since the process was primitive and painfully slow.

Nevertheless, when Sheldon saw Burt's finished product he was ecstatic at the commercial possibilities, and in May 1829 he typed a letter to Secretary of State Martin Van Buren. Burt's sworn testimony was printed on the back of the letter to indicate that he was the inventor of the machine "intended for use in families, offices, and stores" and which had not "been known and used in the United States or any foreign country." He could not have known about several earlier European embossing devices for the blind.

Within two months Burt received a U.S. patent granting him "full

and exclusive right and liberty of making, constructing, using, and vending to others" this new machine. For his promotional help, Burt offered Sheldon half of any proceeds.

Burt went to work on improving both the appearance and operation of the machine, and the two men set out in search of investor support and interest. Sheldon wrote his wife in October 1829 that "prospects look good" and that "a considerable number" of the writing machines were "already spoken for in this territory." The *New York Commercial Advertiser* praised it as "a simple, cheap, and pretty machine for printing letters," and suggestions for a name, such as "Burt's family letter press," were received.

By the time the second model was completed, the following May, their optimism was gone. Considerable time and expense had been spent on trips to New York, but neither capital nor adequate facilities were available to manufacture the machine. Sheldon took the improved model to the Patent Office in Washington, D.C., while Burt remained in New York hoping to sell his patent rights. The first letter typed on the machine, dated March 13, 1830, and addressed to Burt's wife, Phebe, is now on display in the Smithsonian.

Soon after Sheldon rejoined Burt in New York, the two men returned to Michigan and the typewriter patent was allowed to expire. Burt went back to building mills, and Sheldon returned to the *Gazette*. Dozens of inventors would try unsuccessfully to produce a fast and efficient writing machine during the next half century. Finally in 1874 Christopher Sholes built a prototype that the Remington Company purchased and marketed. □

John S. Burt, a great-great-great-grandson of William Burt, lives in Orange, California.
