

American Type Founders

American Type Founders (ATF) was a **business trust** created in 1892 by the merger of 23 **type foundries**, representing about 85% of all type manufactured in the United States.^[1] ATF was the dominant American manufacturer of metal type from its creation in 1892 until at least the 1940s; it continued to be influential into the 1960s.

1 Type founding before ATF

By the beginning of the final decade of the nineteenth century type founding was in a state of crisis. With the introduction of the **Linotype**, which could cast whole lines of body type in-house, demand for hand-set type was down. Throughout the late 1880s prices were maintained by an informal cartel of foundries, but as the number of foundries increased and with the invention of hot metal type, prices dropped dramatically. Additionally, type at this time was not standardized, either to body size or to base line, and printers resented the incompatibility of types from different foundries. Leaders in the industry, notably **Joseph W. Phinney** of the **Dickinson Type Foundry** in **Boston**, set up a committee to address these problems, eventually recommending consolidation.^[2]

2 Consolidation and early years

By the late 1880s, there were some 34 foundries in the United States. In 1892, 23 foundries were brought together to form the American Type Founders Company.^[3] Key to the success of this merger was the inclusion of **MacKellar, Smiths, & Jordan Co.** of **Philadelphia**, with assets of over \$6 million, the **Cincinnati Type Foundry** of **Henry Barth**, which brought with it the patents to his **Barth Typecaster**, and Benton, **Waldo Foundry** of **Milwaukee**, which included **Linn Boyd Benton** and his all-important Benton Pantograph which engraved type matrices directly instead of using punches and allowed the optical scaling of type. With the inclusion of the Barth Caster and the Benton Pantograph, ATF immediately became the largest and the most technologically advanced foundry in the world.^[2]

Conditions for the first few years were chaotic, with member foundries continuing to operate as if they were independent firms. Real consolidation didn't begin until 1894, when **Robert Wickham Nelson**, principal owner of the **Throne Typesetting Machine Company** and a new stockholder in ATF, became general manager. He immedi-

ately began to liquidate unprofitable ventures, eliminate duplications, and force the various branches to do business under the ATF name instead of retaining their former ones. Linn Boyd Benton's son, **Morris Fuller Benton**, was given the job of purging obsolete and duplicated type faces from the catalogs, and standardizing the point size and base-line of the types made. Nelson, realizing that display and advertising type (rather than the body type that was set so efficiently by the new line-casters) would be the mainstay of the foundry type business, immediately began an extensive advertising campaign and commissioned the production of new type designs. Joseph W. Phinney was put in charge of the design department and he supervised the introduction of **Cushing**, **Howland**, **Bradley**, and the William Morris inspired **Satanick** and **Jenson Oldstyle**, the last of these being hugely successful. Young Benton was then commissioned to finish **Lewis Buddy's Elbert Hubbard** inspired **Roycroft**, another successful introduction.

While Phinney often used free-lance designers, like **Will Bradley**, **T.M. Cleland**, **Walter Dorwin Teague**, **Frederic Goudy**, and **Oz Cooper**, the bulk of ATF's catalog through the 1930s was the creation of **Morris Fuller Benton**. Though he never became well known, even within the printing industry, Benton enjoyed a record of successful type introductions unparalleled by anyone, much to the profit of ATF. Benton, though he did not invent either idea, was the most successful designer of revivals of historical type designs (such as his re-cutting of **Bodoni** and **Garamond**) and he perfected the creation of "type families" (such as **Century** or most successfully **Cheltenham**) where a basic face would be offered in italic, light, bold, extended and condensed variations.

Another key player at ATF at this time was the advertising manager (and informal corporate historian) **Henry Lewis Bullen**, who created a typographic library of historical examples for designers to draw upon. This collection was turned over to **Columbia University** in 1936. The books are integrated into the main Columbia collection, but there is an archive of ATF materials as well in Columbia's special collections.

In 1901, Nelson consolidated casting operations in a purpose-built factory in **Jersey City** and the branches remained only as distribution centers. By the 1920s, ATF had offices in 27 American cities and **Vancouver**, **British Columbia**, where it sold not only type, but pressroom supplies and printing presses (their own **Kelly** line and those of other manufacturers) as well. In 1923, at a cost of \$300,000, ATF produced its largest and most superlative

type catalog. Sixty thousand of these were distributed, and to this day they are considered to be masterpieces of the art of letterpress printing. By the time Nelson died in 1926, ATF seemed to be on the path to permanent profitability.

Nelson's successor as president, Frank Belknap Berry (originally one of the founders of the Cleveland Type Foundry), was unpopular with the board and he was soon replaced by Joseph F. Gillick, whose first move was to shut down ATF's subsidiary Barnhard Brothers & Spindler in Chicago and bring their casting operations to Jersey City. Though the years immediately after Nelson's passing were disappointing, 1929 was the most profitable in ATF history.^[4]

3 Letterpress manufacturing

From 1914 to 1959 ATF manufactured letterpresses. During the 1920s and 30s they also sold presses made by *Chandler & Price*, *Laureate*, and *Thomson National Company*.^[5]

3.1 Kelly Presses

When William M. Kelly (1869–1949), an employee in the sales department, proposed a design of automatic cylinder press, Nelson immediately authorized the project. The Kelly Style B Press, a three-roller, two-revolution, flat-bed cylinder press with automatic feeder and jogger was introduced in 1914 to great success. By 1923 more than 2,500 Kelly Presses had been sold and the next year production was shifted from Jersey City to a large new factory in *Elizabeth, New Jersey*. Several models were developed and, by 1949, more than 11,000 Kelly presses had been sold.^[4]

- *Kelly Series B*, 17 x 22" press sheet, produced 1914–1937
- *Kelly Model #2*, 22 x 34" press sheet, introduced in 1921
- *Kelly Automatic Jobber*, 13 x 19.5" press sheet, introduced in 1923^[6]
- *Kelly Series A* ("Baby Kelly"), 13.5 x 22" press sheet, introduced in 1925
- *Kelly Model #1*, 22 x 28" press sheet, introduced in 1929
- *Kelly Series C*, 17 x 22" press sheet, produced 1937–1954 (1959 UK)
- *Kelly Clipper* ("the Pressman's Press"), 14 x 20" press sheet, produced 1938–1941
- *Kelly Model #3*, 25 x 38" press sheet, produced 1949–1954 (1959 UK)

Production of Kelly presses ceased at ATF in 1954, though *Vickers* continued to produce two models in England until 1959.^[7]

3.2 Golding Press Division

In 1918 *Golding & Company*, a typefoundry that also manufactured the Pearl line of letterpress, was acquired by ATF. These presses continued to be made and sold by the Golding Press Division of ATF until 1927, when the division was sold off to *Thomson National Company*.^[8]

3.3 Klymax Feeder

In addition to selling presses made by *Chandler & Price*, ATF produced the Klymax Feeder which turned C&P's hand-fed *Gordon jobber press* into an automatically feed press.^[9] As such presses were ubiquitous, sales of this feeder were robust throughout the 1920s.

3.4 Little Giant

In the post-war years, ATF produced the Little Giant Automatic Cylinder Press, a smaller (12" x 18" sheet size), more compact press of much more modern design than the Kelly presses.^[10] Production of this press ceased in 1959.^[11]

4 Depression and bankruptcy

Unfortunately for ATF, unlike printing consumables (like paper and ink), which must be purchased anew for each job, type wears slowly and its purchase can be postponed in hard times, while capital investment in new presses simply dries up, and so ATF was especially hard hit by the Depression. Also, the company had been over-extended in the boom years, too much credit had been extended to the trade, inventories were bloated, and the corps of executives (many left over from pre-consolidation days) were older and without vision. With the financial downturn after 1929 ATF began to see serious distress. In 1931 hours were cut at the factories. The following year, sales were down another 25% and salaries were cut. When major accounting errors showed that company to be even less profitable than was thought, Gillick was forced to resign.

Thomas Roy Jones, a businessman with no experience in type founding, replaced Gillick. By 1933 the situation was desperate. Sales of type were less than 30% of 1926 levels while purchases of Kelly presses had plummeted to a mere 6.8% of what they had been. In October 1933 Jones filed a voluntary petition for bankruptcy. ATF was

placed under the control of its creditors (chiefly consisting of several banks) and drastic measures were taken. Operations were consolidated, the Jersey City plant was closed and the typesetting operations moved to the Kelly plant in Elizabeth. Salesmen were put on a commission basis. Inventories were cut, faces discontinued, and production of several models of Kelly press as well as the Klymax Feeder was shut down. ATF was released from court supervision in 1936 and in 1938 a sales study was made making the following observations: the Kelly press was obsolete, body type was now the exclusive province of line-casters and display type would have to be the mainstay of type production, almost half of what ATF was selling was other manufacturers products that could easily be made in their own facilities, the acquisition of or merger with another firm in the letterpress industry would be desirable, as offset was a rising technology ATF needed to invest in that business.^[4]

5 Offset presses

In 1938, ATF purchased the Webendorfer-Wills Company and began producing their models of offset press. ATF sold these presses under the Chief name, marketing a Little Chief, Chief, and Big Chief. Large press (as opposed to duplicator) production continued until the late 1970s when the 25" Profiteer was discontinued as the basic Webendorfer design became obsolete. Once again, ATF had made the mistake they had with the Kelly press of complacently taking profits from a successful product, not investing in improvements, and eventually seeing this product become irretrievably overtaken by the competition. Beginning in the 1970s, arrangements to sell large offset presses under the Chief name were made with other manufacturers, first with **MAN Roland** and then with Solna.^[4]

6 War work and postwar direction

During the Second World War, the ATF plant in Elizabeth was converted almost entirely over to military production. Barth Casters were used to make firing pins and ATF operated two plants in Newark making ordnance.

After the war, ill-conceived efforts were made to diversify. A furniture manufacturer, Dystrom Corporation, was acquired. A competitor, **Linotype**, was purchased in 1969, but nothing came of this, the assets being sold off later to **M&H Typefounders**.^[4]

The decline of foundry type in this period might well be illustrated by the size of ATF specimen books. While the magnificent 1923 catalog was typical of its day at 1148 pages, subsequent editions were ever smaller. The 1934 catalog was only 207 pages, while the 1941 catalog was only slightly smaller at 191 pages. By 1956 the "descrip-

tive index of types" was down to only 24 pages, but this recovered a little by 1966's catalog of 30 pages. The last ATF catalog, published in 1976 and distributed right to the end, was down to only 14 pages and, by the 1980s, came with an insert listing the faces that were no longer available.

Some innovations did take place during this period however. The brilliant lettering artist **Charles H. Hughes** was engaged to produce a new version of the popular **Century Type** that would reproduce the same in offset and letterpress and the result was the lovely **Century Nova** (1965).^[12] ATF also produced the first optically scanning typeface, **OCR-A font**, in 1969 and this remains the standard on printed bank checks to this day.

7 Photocomposition

A venture was made into **photocomposition** with the ATF Hadege Typesetter. Introduced in 1958, the first model was the "A". Not many were produced because the character fit left much to be desired. The most common model was the "B". Character fit was improved by employing the **Friden Flexowriter** "Justewriter" escape mechanism to six units. The last and most advanced model based on the Friden mechanism was the "B-8", where an eighth unit was added to the escape mechanism by means of a series of electro-mechanical relays that could add the eighth unit to some wider characters, like capital "M", without changing the basic mechanical escape mechanism of the model "B". The last phototypesetter designed and produced by ATF was the Photocomp 20, so named because of its rated speed of twenty 11-pica newspaper lines per minute. It featured four stepper motors (1) to move the film across, (2) to move the type disk, (3) to advance the film to the next line, and (4) to set the size of one unit of escapement. Type disks contained four fonts, each including 17 pi characters. Its controller was the first ATF controller utilizing integrated circuits in place of relays. Circuitry was based on Motorola DTL integrated circuits. Machine styling of the Photocomp 20 was by **Richard Arbib**. Only 17 machines were sold: one in Vienna Austria, and the remainder in North America.

ATF produced type disks with all their popular type faces. These disks were concentric rings of fonts on a transparent plastic material in negative form. Usually these disks contained roman, italic and bold versions of the same face. There was even a disk with the only Canadian type design at the time, called "**Cartier**". The ATF Phototypesetter was sold world wide—in Canada, Germany, Italy, Denmark, France, Belgium, England, etc. In Denmark, several newspapers were produced on ATF Phototypesetters by a company named "Reprodan". As technology improved, ATF failed to keep pace and eventually the line was discontinued.

8 Duplicators

In the mid-1950s the small offset (duplicator) market was dominated by **Addressograph-Multilith's** Multi-1250 almost without competition. A study undertaken by **Whitin Machine Works**, a manufacturer of textile making machinery looking to expand out of an industry depressed by the introduction of synthetic fabrics, suggested that “quick printing” done with duplicators was a growing market. **Whitin** thus acquired **ATF** in 1957, began to manufacture a small (10 x 15” sheet size) duplicator at their **Whitinsville, Massachusetts** facility, and to market this under the name **ATF Chief 15**. The basic design was by **Louis Mestre**, and it incorporated many large press features as he had free use of **Webendorfer** patents. As it gave large press performance, it was an immediate success with commercial printers (who were disdainful of duplicators), and the **Chief** line remained the best of the small presses until the introduction of **Heidelberg's** T-Offset in the late 1980s. A larger **Chief 17** was introduced in the 1960s and the 1970s saw “common blanket” two color models of both the 15 and 17. Both **Chief** models were made and sold in Europe by **Gestetner Cyclograph Company**, and were also marketed in the United States by the **Itek** and **Ditto** corporations.^[13]

Though the **Chief** could produce superlative work, unlike the highly popular **A.B. Dick 350**, it required a skilled operator. Unfortunately for **ATF**, the quick printing industry had less use for such quality work and more need of a “fast and dirty” duplicator like the 350 and so its market penetration was limited.

In 1966 **White Consolidated Industries** acquired the **Whitin Machine Works** and with it control of **A.T.F.**,^[3]

ATF later purchased the competing **Davidson** line of duplicators and changed their name to **ATF-Davidson**. Breaking their pattern of low investment in upgrading technology, **ATF** actually developed improved models of the **Davidson** and this line remained competitive right to the end. The **Davidson** however, was an unusual design (with two, rather than the usual three cylinders) and its popularity remained limited.

9 Divestiture of the foundry

By the 1980s the foundry in **Elizabeth, New Jersey** was down to only six employees and duplicator manufacture was the principle business of **ATF-Davidson**. In 1986 foundry was sold off to **Kingsley Machines**, a maker of foil-stamping type, and the merged company was re-named **Kingsley/ATF**. Immediately a bid was made to enter the field of digital typography with a software subsidiary being set up in **Tucson**. With its enormous library of type, and its patents on the optical scaling of type, a digital library of **ATF** types seemed to be a good investment. As the original drawings of the faces were mostly

lost, these fonts had to be scanned from brass matrices, a daunting prospect. The work was well done, but slow, and only four faces (**Wedding Text**, **Thompson Quill Script**, **Bernhard Fashion**, and **T.M. Cleland's border designs**) were ever issued before **Kingsley/ATF** sought bankruptcy protection in 1993. An auction was held on 23 August 1993 and all the assets of the foundry were sold off, most of the priceless matrices going to scrap dealers. **ATF** designs remain the property of **Kingsley Holding Corporation** and are now licensed through **Adobe** and **Bitstream**.^[2]

Though **ATF** is now defunct, some of their original type casting machines and matrix engraving equipment are still in use at **The Dale Guild Type Foundry** in **Howell, New Jersey**. This equipment was saved through efforts coordinated by **Theo Rehak**, the last person trained to run these machines at **ATF's** **Elizabeth, New Jersey** facility.

10 ATF-Davidson and successor corporations

By the early 1980s, the **Chief** line needed updating and a crash program was undertaken to produce a press that could compete with the **A.B. Dick 9800** series. The **SuperChief** was thus introduced in 1986 with many flaws. Most of these were worked out, and the basic design was re-launched in 1988 as the **X-Press** line. Unfortunately, this was too late to save the reputation of the **Chief** line and the company shut down in July 1990. After a period of confusion, **Jim Hughes** of **Printer's Parts Store** purchased the assets of the company and operated under the name of **ATF-Graphic Products**, selling presses that were on hand and supplying spare parts. Wishing to revive the **Davidson** line of presses, the **Chief** line was sold off to **Jim Wheet** who now supplies parts for existing presses under the name **ATF Services Inc.**,^[14] while it is unclear if **Printer's Parts** remains interested in reviving the **Davidson** line of presses.

11 Typefaces

Main article: [American Type Founders \(list of types\)](#)

12 Consolidations and mergers

12.1 Original consolidation

The original group of foundries that came together in 1892:

- **MacKellar, Smiths, & Jordan Co.**, **Philadelphia**, (established 1796^[15]).

- Collins & M'Leester, Philadelphia
- James Conner's Sons, New York, (established 1827).
- P. A. Heinrich, New York
- A. W. Lindsay, New York
- Charles J. Carey & Co., Baltimore
- The John Ryan Co., Baltimore
- J. G. Mengel & Co., Baltimore
- Hooper, Wilson & Co., Baltimore
- Lyman & Son, Buffalo
- Allison & Smith, Cincinnati
- Cincinnati Type Foundry, Cincinnati, (established 1817).
- Cleveland Type Foundry of H.H. Thorpe, Cleveland, (established 1881).
- Marder, Luse, & Co., Chicago, (established 1855).
- Union Type Foundry, Chicago
- Benton, Waldo & Co., Milwaukee, (established c. 1860).
- Kansas City Type Foundry, Kansas City
- Palmer & Rey, San Francisco,^[1] (established 1875).
- Binny & Ronaldson, Philadelphia
- Dickinson Type Foundry, Boston, (established 1839).
 - Phelps, Dalton, & Co., Boston, a subsidiary of Dickenson.^[16]
- MacKellar, Smiths, & Jordan Co.'
- ATF Foundry D (Code #11) at Cincinnati
 - Cincinnati Type Foundry
- ATF Foundry E (Code #12) at Chicago
 - Marder, Luse, & Co.
 - Cleveland Type Foundry
- ATF Foundry F (Code #15) at St. Louis
 - Central Type Foundry at St. Louis
- ATF Foundry G (Code #23) at San Francisco
 - Palmer & Rey
- ATF Foundry H (Code #6) at Baltimore
 - The John Ryan Co.^[17]

12.3 Later mergers and acquisitions

12.2 Branches after consolidation

From the merger in 1892 until 1903, when all typesetting was centralized in Jersey City, these foundries were consolidated into the following branches and codes:

- ATF Foundry A (Code #1) at Boston
 - Dickinson Type Foundry
- ATF Foundry A (Code #2) at Boston
 - Boston Type Foundry
- ATF Foundry B (Code #3) at New York
 - James Conner's Sons
 - Benton, Waldo & Co.
- ATF Foundry C (Code #4) at Philadelphia
 - Advance Type Foundry (AKA Wiebking, Hardinge & Company), (Chicago), bought out by Western Type Foundry in 1914.
- Inland Type Foundry (1912, St. Louis)
- Golding & Company (1918, Boston), bought by Thomson National Company in 1927^[18]
- Keystone Type Foundry (1919, Philadelphia), (established 1883).
- H.C. Hansen Type Foundry (1922, Boston),^[20] (established 1872).
- Webendorfer-Wills Company (1938, Mount Vernon, New York), a manufacturer of offset presses.^[17]
- Dystrom Corporation, a furniture manufacturer

- Davidson Corporation, a manufacturer of offset presses
- Lanston Monotype, (1969, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), assets later sold off to M&H Typefounders.^[4]
- Several other firms.^[21]

13 References

- [1] De Vinne, Theodore Low, *The Practice of Typography*, Century Company, N.Y.C., 1922, p. 105.
- [2] Cost, Patricia. *The Bentons: How an American Father and Son Changed the Printing Industry*. Cary Graphic Arts Press, 2011. ISBN 978-1-933360-42-3.
- [3] Consuegra, David, *American Type Design & Designers*, Allworth Press, New York City, p. 263.
- [4] Pankow, David, "The Rise and Fall of ATF," *Journal of the American Printing History Association*, Vol. 22, #1/2
- [5] "Specimen Book and Catalog, *American Type Founders, Jersey City, New Jersey, 1923*, pp. 895-905.
- [6] "Specimen Book and Catalog", American Type Founders, Jersey City, New Jersey, 1923, pp. 893-94. Though Fred Williams lists this as being introduced in 1925, it was shown in the 1923 catalog.
- [7] "The Rise & Fall of the Kelly Press" by Fred Williams, *Type & Press*, Spring 1985 (retrieved from Amalgamated Printers' Association on 3 November 2011)
- [8] Golding Printing Presses, American Amateur Press Association (retrieved 7 October 2010)
- [9] "Specimen Book and Catalog", American Type Founders, Jersey City, New Jersey, 1923, pp. 898-99.
- [10] "ATF Printers Catalog / EX48", American Type Founders, Elizabeth, New Jersey, (1948?), p. 150.
- [11] "The Miehle Vertical" by Fred Williams, *Type & Press*, Summer 1982 (retrieved from Amalgamated Printers' Association on 3 November 2011)
- [12] "Century Nova, New Typeface, Shown at Premiere in Milwaukee," *Inland Printer*, November 1965, p. 176.
- [13] "Is it a Chief?", *Product Bulletin #38*, San Diego Printing Parts & Supply, Spring, 1989.
- [14] <http://www.atfservices.com/> ATF Services Inc. homepage
- [15] Establishment dates for the foundries are taken from "Discussions of a Retired Printer," by Quadrant (probably Henry Lewis Bullen), *Inland Printer*, July 1907, pp. 513-519.
- [16] MacGrew, Mac, "American Metal Typefaces of the Twentieth Century," Oak Knoll Books, New Castle Delaware, 1993, ISBN 0-938768-34-4, p. xvi, lists only five of the firms and includes Dickinson, which is absent from De Vinne's supposedly complete list.
- [17] Bidwell, John, bibliographical note in "Specimens of Type of the American Type Founders," Garland Publishing, N.Y.C. and London, 1981, p. xii.
- [18] De Vinne lists Central as being one of the original 23, but including Dickinson, that makes 24. Other sources list Central as being incorporated into A.T.F. the following year, and this would seem to be the case.
- [19] Bidwell, "Specimens of Type of the American Type Founders," p. xii.
- [20] MacGrew, Mac, "American Metal Typefaces of the Twentieth Century," Oak Knoll Books, New Castle Delaware, 1993, ISBN 0-938768-34-4, p. xvi.
- [21] According to David Consuegra (*American Type Design & Designers*, Allworth Press, New York City, p. 263.) Damon and Peets (perhaps double listed as Damon Type Foundry), a manufacturer of letterpresses, and an agent for ATF type in New York City, also became part of ATF. He also states that the Pacific States Typefoundry became part of the firm while Annenberg (Annenberg, Maurice, "TYPE FOUNDRIES OF AMERICA AND THEIR CATALOGS," Oak Knoll Press, New Castle, Delaware, 1994.) says explicitly that they did not. Consuegra also lists a "Standard Type Foundry," and an "Illinois Type Foundry," for which no further information can be found.

14 External links

- ATF Davidson homepage
- Bookplate archive: Typographic Library and Museum of the ATF
- 1896 ATF specimen book (scanned copy at the Internet Archive, more below)
- 1897 ATF specimen book (Chicago edition)
- 1897 ATF specimen book (New York edition)
- 1900 ATF specimen book
- 1912 ATF specimen book
- 1917 ATF specimen book
- 1923 ATF specimen book
- 1934 ATF specimen book

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