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The Curator
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Dear Curator :-

I enclose photographs of devices you may recognize, with some powers of interpretation, as typewriters. I call your attention to the machine called the Brooks. I thought it might interest you as a typewriter that was manufactured on Staten Island, the only one to have been, whose origin here came to light only recently.

The Brooks typewriter itself is well known to historians of the subject, as a bold, progressive stroke in the art of typewriter invention for its day. In more recent times, a Philadelphia historian, Mr. Thomas FitzGerald, came across a substantial cache of original documents revealing the typewriter as a product in 1892 of the S.S. White factory in Prince's Bay.

The Brooks Papers shed light on many details of typewriter factory organization, a subject about which remarkably little is recorded. This is the finding of Dr. Donald Hoke in his book, "Ingenius Yankees," a study of the development of the American factory system. For all the obscurity of its factory methods, the typewriter of the 19th-century was, in Hoke's words, "the most complex consumer durable."

Recognizing the significance of his find, Tom FitzGerald donated the Brooks Papers to the Smithsonian. At my request, he sent photocopies with the understanding that I would copy these and offer the copies to an institution whose mandates include Staten Island history.

Besides its native locale, the Brooks typewriter was distinguished by its "Visible Writing." This feature was then new among writing machines, and eventually stimulated the most important revolution in typewriter design since the manufacture of the first, at Ilion NY in 1873. By "Visible Writing" was meant that the typewriter conducted its printing somewhere that could be seen by the typist.

"Blind Writers," such as the original Remington-made Type Writer of 1873, and the vast majority of standards manufactured until about 1905, conducted their printing on the underside of the platen, where it was concealed from view. Various pioneering attempts at "Visible Writing" included placing the typebars behind the carriage, standing erect, to print on the top of the platen, per the Brooks.

Many other design variations produced visible or partly visible writing, as some of the illustrations herewith depict. The configuration utilized by the Brooks has been termed "Posterior Topstrike," and altogether four different typewriters (two manufactured in England) adopted this approach. The frontstrike typebasket, the "modern" form throughout most of the 20th century, was first mass-produced in the Daugherty Visible (1890), then the Underwood (1895) and by 1900 was on its way to taking over the industry.

The inventor of the Brooks typewriter, Byron A. Brooks, was distinguished earlier in the typewriter industry. He co-invented the shift-key system for printing upper and lower-case characters. This first appeared in the Perfected Type Writer No. 2 (later, Remington Standard No. 2) in 1878.

An irony in the Brooks Papers, therefore, is correspondence concerning a threatened lawsuit by John Newton Williams, for infringements by the Brooks typewriter upon shift-key patents in his own Williams typewriter.

Beyond this dispute, the Brooks' Papers appear characterized by bickering, perhaps an established Staten Island tradition even then. This more than anything seems to account for the halt of manufacture of the Brooks typewriter by the S.S. White factory after only 700 machines were produced.

There are suspicions that additional Brooks typewriters were made in other factories, but tangible evidence has not been forthcoming. The Brooks typewriter has always been better known to historians through historical publications than empirical study, as the machine is considered extremely rare by students of the subject.

Two Brooks typewriters are believed to reside on Staten Island. The more recent arrival returned about a year ago, from Pocomoke, MD. There it had reportedly been in possession of a minister, lately deceased at age 92. Putting the typewriter in perspective, its owner must have acquired it second-hand, as the machine stopped being made seven years before the preacher was born.

