A Great Dispute:

HOW MACHINE TYPESETTING CAME TO GPO, AND ONE PUBLIC PRINTER LEFT BECAUSE OF IT

GPO HISTORY TALK – APRIL 3, 2013
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1904 and 1905 were eventful years at GPO

- The new building (Bldg 1) was complete and fully occupied. Its opening brought the total floorspace to about 15 acres.
In fiscal 1904 73 million documents were produced at a cost of $2.5 million
1904-1905

- Around 4500 men and women worked at GPO
The Public Printer was Frank W. Palmer, first appointed in 1889 by President Harrison, then removed, reappointed by President McKinley in 1897.
• By the time Palmer was reappointed in 1897, newspapers and other large print shops across the country were converting to machine (hot metal) typesetting. GPO still set all its type by hand.
In 1903, Congress put pressure on Palmer to introduce typesetting machines to GPO. The printer and pressman unions, though not yet officially recognized, were very powerful, and their resistance to machines that they thought would replace workers undoubtedly influenced Palmer. But he ran an agency that works for Congress, and when Congress nudged, he placed an order for 46 Linotypes and 28 Monotypes, as a trial, in June 1904.
Machine Typesetting Arrives
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- Palmer’s annual reports are notable for their lack of narrative, but in 1904 this response to Congress appeared:
- In June 1904, contracts were made by the Public Printer with the Mergenthaler Linotype Co. for the purchase of 46 double magazine typesetting machines at a cost of $3600 each, and with the Lanston Monotype Co. for 28 typesetting machines at a cost of $3150 each. The time for delivery of the machines . . . was 3 months, and their trial by GPO, 60 days. On the delivery of the Mergenthaler Linotype machines, 7 of them were installed in the Job Division, 35 in the Congressional Record Division, and 4 in the branch [at the Library of Congress]. The purchase of a limited number of these machines was made with the view of testing the practicability of the use in the publication of the widely varying kinds of official documents. At the date of publication of this report, sufficient time has not elapsed to determine the questions of economy or practicability.
In 1905

- In July 1905, a subsequent order for 72 Monotypes was placed (about $230,000 worth)
Mergenthaler almost immediately cried “foul!” and took their complaint, replete with accusations of dirty dealing of many descriptions, directly to President Theodore Roosevelt.
The Dispute

- Roosevelt liked to appoint commissions of inquiry, and had just established the Commission on Departmental Methods, chaired by Assistant Secretary of the Treasury C.H. Keep. They were to be looking at government organization, but GPO became their first subject.
The Keep Commission

- They reported to the President in the autumn of 1905
They found that, although Palmer had failed to make the terms of the “trial” clear, and had gone forward with the new Monotype contract rather ill-advisedly, there was no evidence of wrongdoing or malfeasance. They did recommend that the contract be cancelled, and suggested that in the future the Public Printer might do well to negotiate contracts in his office at GPO, rather than in the homes of friends who were also officers in the companies concerned.
President Roosevelt refused to cancel the contract, since there had been no wrongdoing.
Both Mergenthaler and Lanston declared victory, since they were both able to find comments in the commission report unfavorable to their competitor. And in fact, another order for Linotypes was soon placed anyway.
The Public Printer fared less well. He chose to discipline, and finally dismiss, 2 managers who had been involved in the investigation, Oscar J. Ricketts and L.C. Hay.
Ricketts and Hay appealed, and got to the President who, along with the Civil Service Commission directed their reinstatement. Palmer was slow to do so, and was himself removed by Roosevelt, who named Ricketts Acting Public Printer. Shortly after, Roosevelt nominated Charles Stillings as Public Printer. In his term the friction between GPO, Congress, and the White House escalated.
The Hot Metal Era Begins

- Within a few years, GPO was operating the largest battery of Linotype and Monotype machines on earth, over 100 of each.
- The resulting explosion of work saw GPO with more compositors than ever before.