

Some Thoughts on Hobby Printing

By Brian Lewis



This article by Brian Lewis appeared in the quarterly newsletter of the Museum of Printing in Haverhill, Massachusetts.

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After visiting the Museum of Printing several times, and being at a Garage Sale or two, I decided that I wanted to start printing as a hobby. I have the advantage of having taken Print Shop in high school, but that was many years ago.

Thinking that it would be useful for others to learn from my experience, I offered to write an article for the Museum of Printing Newsletter. Although my hobby printing experience is still in its infancy, there are a number of things I have learned. They cannot all be included in one article, or it would be prohibitively long. So, where to start?

What, Why, and Where

Let's begin with the What, the Why, and the Where.

What (and Why)?

It helps if you know what you want to do with your printing hobby. In my case, I want to print novelty items for fun. I want to print things I haven't seen elsewhere. I want to print things that possibly could be sold on Etsy, although money-making is not high on my Why list.

When I found out that my daughter was pregnant, I wanted to send her a card. Hallmark did not make anything that said what I wanted to say. So I found a card with a suitable outside and a blank inside, and wrote my own message. I don't know where the words came from; I do wish I could tap into that source again. Rather than hand-writing the message, it would have been nice to print it. Other people may have the same sentiment.

Sometimes you just have to dive in. Once I had a printing press, ideas have come to me. Some friends had a baby boy that they named Roman. I printed note pads for Roman (although he's only 18 months old); these note pads have Roman's name across the top, and his birth year—in Roman numerals—below it. It will be some years before Roman can appreciate these, but his parents thought they were awesome. Try doing that without a printing press.

Soon I'm going to the birthday party of a famous author. I have two of his books and would love to have them autographed. There will be hundreds of people at his party; I'm sure many others also have books they would like to have autographed. I'm also sure that the author would prefer to spend time with his guests rather than getting writer's cramp signing books. An idea: how about printing bookplates that he could sign in advance, and could be glued into the front of the books? The organizers of the event thought this was a great idea.

The bookplate idea gave rise to a problem: a proper bookplate would be archival, acid-free paper that is gummed with water-activated glue on its back. The only place I could find this paper was England. I hope that it arrives in time. And since I was going to pay shipping, I ordered more than I need for this event. Personalized bookplates would make a great gift for anyone with a library.

So, I've touched on the Why while covering the What. Other aspects of Why are that it is fun, it is a creative opportunity, and it's something that not every person can do (or is willing to do).



Brian's Baltimore Jobber 4 treadle press



Brian's Monarch tabletop press

Where?

The next question is where? Printing presses require space, and they are heavy. Cabinets of type take up space, and they are heavy, too. Where you will have your workspace should be addressed before you begin acquiring equipment. Ideally, this should be a temperature- and moisture-controlled environment. There are few things sadder than acquiring a printing press, only to have it rust.

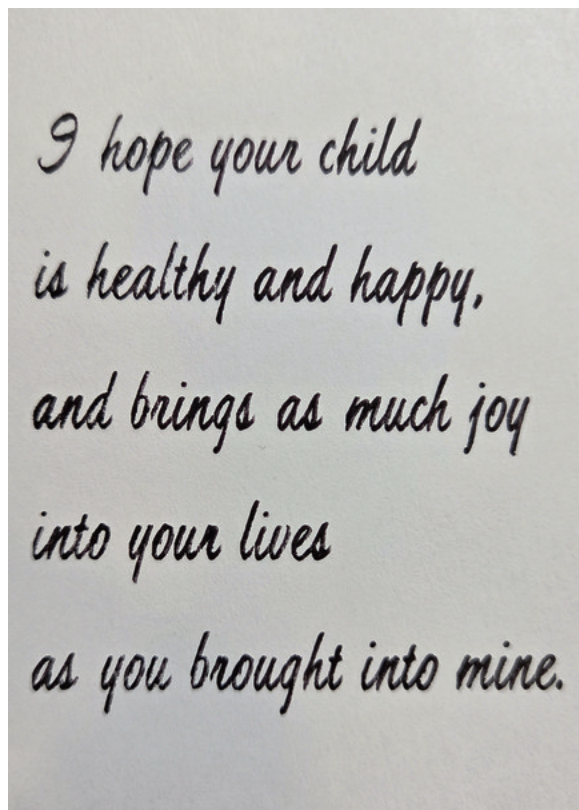
What's Next?

Education is very important. The Museum of Printing offers workshops on letterpress printing and on maintenance of your press. I highly recommend that you take

both of these classes before taking the plunge. Museum of Printing volunteers Mitchel Ahern and Chris Bradford are great resources. Make good use of their knowledge and experience.

Even if you're not ready to jump in yet, go to the Museum's Book & Garage Sale. They take place at the Museum multiple times a year. There is much that can be learned from the visitors you will meet there, as well as from the Museum's volunteers. Take the time to ask questions, solicit advice, and to clarify your What and Why.

Next time, I will write about what you'll need to get started. ✍



A proof of one of Brian's cards



The type used to print that card

Hobby Printing, Part 2

In the last issue of the Museum of Printing newsletter, I wrote about getting started in hobby printing. Now it's time to talk about what you'll need.

Acquiring Type

There is much to cover here. What you'll need and what you'll want are sometimes two different things. The distinction depends on how invested you are (or want to be). I'll describe the basics, and at the end of this article, I will list out some of those things that are nice to have.

Since I am writing about letterpress, unless you are only going to print wood-block carvings, you are going to need type. The Museum's Garage Sales are a good place to pick up type. Pro tip: don't get really small type. I recommend a minimum size of 12-point; 14-point is even better. This will reduce (but not eliminate) your need for a magnifying glass (I'll get to that later).

The typefaces you choose depend on what you plan on doing with your printing hobby. If you are planning on printing wedding invitations, a script font will serve you well. If you plan on printing business cards, you'll probably want something more businesslike than a script font. But for just getting started, you can use just about anything. The first font of type that you acquire will most likely not be the last one. At this point, the purpose is to learn, get some experience, and to have fun.

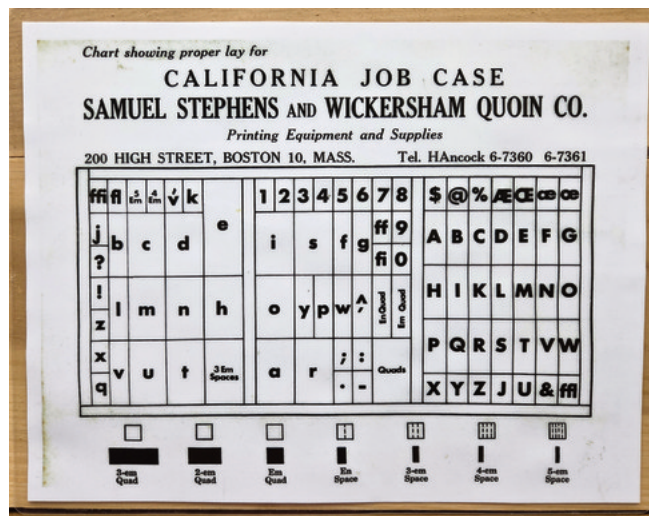
You will need a tray to hold your type. The best way to go is with the industry standard California Type Case. And you will need a "roadmap," so that you will know where the letters go. While you certainly are free to come up with your own organization, why not learn and use the most commonly used one? The Museum has copies of the California Type Case roadmaps that you can find in our letterpress lab.

At the Museum's Garage Sales, you can buy trays of type. Type in a tray. Two birds with one stone! Most of the type isn't new, but until you have some experience, and decide what you really want, that's not important. When you buy a tray of type, make sure that there are some of each letter. I bought a tray once because it had a lot of type, not noticing that there were two letters that were completely missing.

There are not many foundries making new type any longer, but when you are ready for it, check out Skyline Type Foundry (skylinetype.com).

Setting Type

For learning about setting type, Mitchel Ahern's Letterpress Intro+ workshops are invaluable. To set type, you need a composing stick, slugs, spacers, and thins. Thins are becoming difficult to find, so if you see some, buy them! There is a proper way to set type: upside down and backwards. There are literally centuries of experience that have proven that this is the best way. You'll learn to read it that way, and before long, you won't even need a mirror.



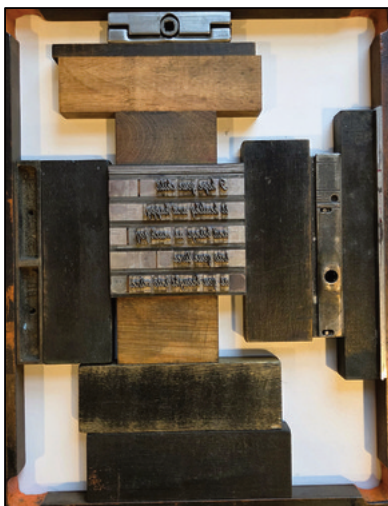
The layout for the California Job Case as shown here is an industry standard.



Using a composing stick like the one shown here you set the length of the lines that you want, then insert your type upside down and backwards.

Locking it Up

Once the type is set, you'll need to lock it up in an iron rectangle known as a chase. The chase is a removable part of your press. Locking up your type will require wood blocks (known as "furniture"), and quoins, which are like two shims inside a metal case, used to tighten everything up so that the chase can be picked up without all the type falling out of it. Operating the quoins requires a quoin key. Ideally the locking up should be done on an imposing stone, but a piece of glass makes an acceptable substitute. Just make sure it is tempered glass.



This is the chase with the type "locked up" in it. Note the "furniture," and the two metal quoins, one at the right and the other at the top. The quoins supply the pressure that holds the type in place.

Printing

You will need a press to transfer the ink from the type to the paper (or fabric, or whatever you're printing). I'll save the discussion of the press itself for a little later on in this article.

Obviously, ink and paper are required. You also will need a solvent for the ink. Mitchel recommends Gamsol, which is a great replacement for the Stoddard Solvent we used to use. It's just as effective, and it doesn't stink!

Rags are a necessity. And you'll need a fireproof disposal container for the rags, after they've been used (and have solvent on them). This is critically important! Back in the days of Stoddard Solvent, it was easy to remember this, because the used rags smelled so bad. Gamsol may not stink, but it's still flammable. Do not overlook this!

To apply the ink to the type (if you're just doing a proof), you'll need a brayer, and something on which to spread out the ink. You can use the ink disc from a press, or you can use a piece of glass. That tempered glass you might have gotten instead of an imposing stone could be used here, too.

After using the brayer to ink the type, you'll put paper on top of it, then apply pressure. A second (clean) brayer can be very useful here.

Your Printing Press

This is going to be the most expensive part of getting into hobby printing.

There are many different types of presses. I am only going to discuss platen presses here. Often, people start with a tabletop press. There are things that tabletop presses do well, and things they don't. The biggest constraint is paper size. Table-top presses are best suited for smaller applications like business and greeting cards. Another popular type of printing presses are floor-standing treadle ones. Those are foot-powered, a bit like old sewing machines. While a tabletop press or a treadle press will serve you well at an entry level, it also would serve you well to buy something that you can sell, if and when you decide to trade up. I had one press run that required 1,000 impressions, and another that required 2,000. That's a lot of standing on one leg and operating the treadle with the other. My next press will be motorized.

In order to use a press of this type, you will need tympan paper (to cover the platen); packing (to go between the platen and the tympan paper) to adjust for the thickness of the stock that you're going to print; and gauge pins to hold the stock paper in place.

Clean-up

In addition to the old rags mentioned above, you will need a brush to clean out the type before you unlock it. And, you'll need some hand soap. Mitchel recommends Super Soap. It's effective without the abrasiveness of Lava soap or one of those automotive hand cleaners.

And one last thing: a nail and knuckle brush.

After you're done printing and you've cleaned the type with a rag and solvent, brushing the type gets the ink out of corners and tight places.

Distributing the Type Back into the Type Case

Way back at the top, I mentioned a magnifying glass. If you have small type, this is a necessity. A lighted magnifying glass is even better. Even if you aren't using really small fonts, a magnifying glass can help you see imperfections or damaged letters.

Some Nice-to-Have Items

So, here are some of the other nice-to-have items.

A *plunger can* is a wonderful device for putting solvent on rags quickly, without getting your dirty hands on anything else.

Unless your printing all will be done on standard-size stock, a *paper cutter* is a God-send. Industrial paper cutters can cut a ream at a time. Buying an industrial paper cutter will cost you quite a bit, and you may not use it that much. When you do, it's indispensable. This is one of those places where having a network of printing friends pays off. One of those friends may have one.

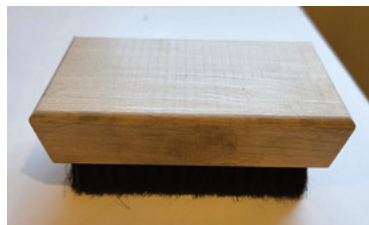
A standard *type cabinet* will hold 24 trays of type. Once you have more than a few trays of type, having them organized in a cabinet is a really good thing. Also, some cabinets have a sloped top, where you can put the tray of type while you're composing. That is surprisingly handy.

If you are prone to impulse buying, you may buy fonts that you like without considering what you will use them for. Then you might end up with three cabinets (72 trays) of type. Don't ask me how I know.



You must have a fire-proof can for holding rags that have solvent on them. The lid is opened with a foot pedal so that you don't get solvent on the outside of the can when putting dirty rags inside it.

You won't realize just how nice it is to have one of these until you start using one.



In Closing

Yes, I have a many fonts of type. Sometimes a use for something doesn't become apparent until you have it. Think about personal computers. Who can live without one today? Back in the early 1990s when they were new, a friend described a PC as "a solution in search of a problem." I think that having a large variety of fonts is like that. It can create opportunities that I haven't even thought of, at least not yet. Hobby printing is very much like that, too. It is something I enjoy, and a way to express my creativity. A year from now, I'll be printing things I haven't even imagined.

The more vibrant the community of those who do hobby printing, the better preserved this magical craft will be.

Editor's note: The Museum of Printing's Garage & Book sales are a great place to meet people, get advice, and acquire the things you need. The Museum typically runs three such sales in the spring, summer, and fall. See <https://museumofprinting.org> for the date of our next one. 🖨



Super Soap works well and is important in cleansing yourself from potentially toxic materials that are handled during set-up, printing, and cleaning.

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Hobby Printing, Part 3 / Brian Lewis

Editor's note: This is the third in Brian's series on getting started in Hobby Printing. You will find his previous articles in Volume 47 (2025) issues 3 and 4. Brian says that this will be the last article in the series until he gains more experience.



This handy tool helps you measure in picas and points rather than inches. It can also be used as a gauge for measuring the point size of type. They can be purchased at the Museum of Printing's gift shop.

Now what? You've gotten started. You have type, you have a press. You have composed something more significant than "Hello, World." That's a computer joke. Many people's first computer program just prints that out. Frankly, it's not worth inking a press just to print those two words.

This will primarily be a discussion about things that will be handy, and things you will need . . . eventually.

As you accumulate more type, a pica stick is very useful. The Museum of Printing sells one that also has notches on one side for all the common sizes of type. People with more experience can tell you the point size of any piece of type, but until you have that experience, the notches are quite useful.

Most fonts of type that you can buy do not come with quads and spacers. These are necessary for filling out a line. There are places that sell small boxes of them. You will need one for each point size of type that you have.

There are storage cabinets for furniture. These are the blocks of wood (or iron) that are used to lock up the type in the chase. Those cabinets have rows of compartments for different widths of furniture, and columns of compartments for different lengths. If you can acquire a furniture cabinet that is fully populated, you've hit the jackpot. They show up at the Museum of Printing's Garage & Book Sale from time to time. That's where I got mine.

Similarly, there are storage devices for slugs. Slugs don't vary in thickness very much; the storage device is organized by length only.

And, there is the Slug Cutter. I have one, but I haven't needed to use it yet. It's one of those things that when you need it, there aren't really many substitutes.

You will need paper. This is not something I've solved yet. I did need to order specialized paper to print the bookplates mentioned in my first article. In that case, the paper had to be archival, acid-free, and gummed on the back with water-activated glue. The supplier for that bookplate paper is in England. There are other kinds of papers that you will want. Thicker stock for posters and business cards, or carbonless copy paper for forms, perhaps.

In addition to stock paper, you will need packing paper to ensure that the pressure is uniform and to produce a sharp print. Something called Tympan paper is also necessary. It is a specially-treated, smooth, and durable paper that serves as a protective layer above the packing paper. Tympan paper is also the layer into which gauge pins are inserted for the alignment of the paper for printing.

A small paper cutter is very useful for cutting Tympan paper and packing. My preference is a rotary paper trimmer; I have one from my days working as a photographer. The guillotine-type paper cutter like we used in grade school will work, but it's not as precise.

You will want to make friends with the folks at your local machine shop, because machine parts may break, and you will need replacements that are not easily ordered, or may not be available. Do not wait until things break. Eventually, they will. Already having that relationship is preferable to trying to establish it with a deadline looming.

If you've gotten a table-top press, you can easily move that by yourself. But a floor-standing press or an industrial paper cutter are too heavy for one person to move. When I had my paper cutter delivered, it was good that I knew where I wanted it to go. It is too heavy for me to move at all. The same goes for my C&P press. Having a transportation company that knows how to transport printing presses, is a really good thing. Peter Corriveau, a Museum of Printing volunteer, specializes in this. You do not need to have a transportation company on speed-dial, but you may need them eventually.

A second fire-proof can is a good thing to have (a grateful hat tip for this idea to Mitchel Ahern, who runs the Museum's Letterpress Intro+ workshops). You can use one can for rags that have been used already, but are clean enough to be used again. The second can is for rags that are too filthy to be used any more.

As you accumulate more type, you will need a place to keep it. In the previous installment of this series, I mentioned California Type Cases. These are good because they are an industry standard, and because there are cabinets that hold twenty-four trays. If you get a cabinet, complete with all of the trays, it's like giving yourself permission to expand. These cabinets come with flat and sloped tops. A sloped top provides a handy extra workspace for setting type and other functions. It can hold a tray of type while you are typesetting. A level-top cabinet, on the other hand, gives you a place to put items like your furniture storage cabinet, the slug storage, a paper cutter, or galleys. As it turns out, level-top cabinets are much easier to find. Grab a sloped top cabinet if you can find one. In a hobby shop like mine you only really need one slope-topped cabinet. The others can be flat topped.

And speaking of fonts, you can find plenty of used type at the Museum's Garage & Book Sales. There are not very many places that are casting new type any longer. There are some that will cast new metal type for you, as long as they have the molds to make it. And there are a few other places that are creating new wood type. A search on "new type for letterpress" will bring up a number of options.

A padding press is handy if you are going to make note pads (as I did for a baby boy named Roman, who is a child of a friend of mine). To go with that, you will need padding compound (basically the glue that holds the note pad together) and a paint brush.

So, to finish this installment, I have a short story. Many years ago, my grandfather, who was a printer, printed envelopes for me with my return address on them. They were special, because he made them, and because nobody else I knew had them. I now have a grandson, and I'm going to do the same thing for him. So that makes it a family tradition.

When my grandson has a grandson of his own, someone is going to have to tell him that he needs to buy a printing press, to keep the tradition alive. I think I will tell him long before then, so that he can have a lifetime of enjoyment from it. 🖨️



You will need a storage shelf for holding furniture of different lengths and widths, organized in a way that allows you to find what you need efficiently.



A slug cutter allows you to make slugs of different lengths.



A slug storage tray allows easy access to slugs of different lengths.



You will need a box of quads and spacers for each point size of type that you have.



Brian's C&P 8-by-12 press in place in his studio.



Type cabinets for storing your type are a requirement.



Brian's padding press along with padding compound, a brush, and a knife for separating the completed pads. This is the side from which you load the printed sheets. The panel toward the back is removed. The padding compound is painted onto that edge of the paper