

Re: Oblique Penholder List (More Outlandish Speculation)

Joe,

You recently posted a message related to oblique penholders and attached a list of their makers on the OP site. You also at that time posed a request for feedback related to this topic. I am no authority but I have done some research and speculation on this subject as much as one can, considering, how little information is actually available. Since I first became interested in Ornamental Penmanship some 35 years ago, my primary focus has been on the penholder aspect of it and their history. In fact my first post to the OP site, almost a year ago now, touched on this very topic.

It's fairly obvious to me that penholders and their history are not the primary focus of the OP group and that other aspects of this hobby carry a far greater following. The fact that you have a spot on your Zanerian website indicates to me that you have shown much more of an interest in this direction than most others. The point I am trying to reach here and bring a little more focus to is the gap between the first penholders available in America (the Spencerian) and the mass market when everyone else got into the field.

To start off on this subject I have read the both the 1869 and the 1883 Spencerian & Cutting Patents over very closely and don't find that the pens and or attachments mentioned in these patents are necessarily the same penholders that we see that were offered to the public and that are seen later on in their advertising. Their first patent was for a penholder that easily converted from an oblique penholder (right or left hand use) to a straight holder and within the text of this patent the assignors (Spencer & Cutting) specifically make no claims for improving on the oblique design giving complete credit for this accomplishment to an earlier American Patent of W. Fife in 1839. But history, nevertheless, has given credit to the Spencerian style of holder for popularizing the oblique holder here in America. Unfortunately, the facts I have uncovered don't necessarily substantiate this claim. I cannot dispute the fact that the idea could have received its initial boost with the Spencer and Cutting Patent but I feel that it was someone else or others that started the ball rolling towards making this type of holder more generally acceptable to the public.

To further improve on this thought I want to elaborate a bit more on the history of the oblique holder as I see it. First, as I mentioned above, the pictures and advertising I have seen on Spencerian Holders show a holder that looks completely different from the original holders and attachments that Spencer and Cutting took their patents out for. This bothers me because it leads me to believe that their designs turned out to unacceptable in some respect and so later needed to be changed to reflect newer trends.

They admit to this shortcoming of their first patent with references mentioned in their second patent taken out in 1883. This patent covered a new design for a removable clip (the part that holds the nib) for penholders that served as both a straight and oblique nib holder that you could change from one penholder to another, as it was a separate metal piece. They seemed at the time to be very wrapped up in multifunctional holders, as it appears to be the emphasis of both of their patents.

As I think about this and continue to look at Spencer's ad, I see an ordinary holder, which has evolved from their earlier designs into the same type of holder that everyone else was making. And for me I can speculate that even with 2 patents they still didn't get it quite right i.e. capture the market interest. Secondly they had a significant head start over other makers to the tune of some 10 to 15 years and yet Spencerian holders are rare and were regarded as rare even back into the twenties. With all these years of production why are these holders so uncommon? Obviously I don't have an answer to this question except that maybe they weren't good enough to stand up to the competition of the time. So what holders were being sold back then (1880's) that are common enough today that we can draw some conclusions from?

This may not be so hard of a question to answer, as it might seem. I have 5 holders that I have purchased off eBay this last year all from different auctions that do a good job of shedding a little more light on this subject. All these holders if one were to look at them look surprisingly like Zanerian Excelsior Holders. In fact if one were to set them next to holders that you show on your Zanerian Website that belonged to Madarasz you would see no difference except for color as these holders were sold mostly in a painted black form. It goes without saying that if they look like Zanerian Excelsior holders then that is what they must be. The trouble with this observation is that some of these holders show evidence of being made quite some time before Zaner and Bloser went into business so they cannot be Zanerian Excelsior Holders.

These holders came in two different styles one has a pinned clip (the earlier one) and the other has a clip that is not pinned (the later one) but dimensionally they are the same. What I do want to mention and repeat again from my former long ago post is that G. W. Michael Patent of 1886 did improve upon the oblique design by changing the way the clip mounted into the holder. One only has to look at a well-used vintage holder to see evidence that many a penman dipped the entire front end of their penholders into the ink (I can't imagine they did this intentionally but I would imagine they could be in a hurry at times and this would happen). In penholders before the G. W. Michael Patent this technique would result in a person getting ink all over his hands because of way these early pens were designed. The clips frequently either were mounted in a metal ferrule or the clip itself would extend completely thru the penholder and out onto the other side of it. These metal attachments on the front of the pen would then soak the ink up into the clip and accessory metal pieces then onto the hands.

Also the metal clips and or ferrules of these earliest pens because of the way they were designed tended to work loose after time causing problems in maintaining adjustment. The G.W. Michael Patent Holder changed all this so that the clip mounted from the center of the holder outward onto one side the way all holders are generally made today. The Michael Patent notes the above problems with the previous designs of others and mentions these benefits in his patent. These improvements must have been considerable as these Michael's penholders are common in fact very common as I have seen many of these on eBay and not wanting to be a hog have passed on buying most of them.

What specifically does all this reveal not too much until one looks at the clips mounted in these 5 penholders I have before me. Well two have the 1886 patent date stamped on the clips, and two

don't have any markings while the last one has a date that has been defaced. After applying the old magnifying glass one can see under the defacing marks Dec 12 1880. This I think is an important point although I have found no referencing patents for this early date. These first model holders look very much like the drawing used for the Michaels 1886 patent. I can surmise then that an attempt was made at an earlier time perhaps to initiate their patent and for whatever reason it may not have been accepted at first but then 6 years later it was.

It is clear then that this penholder was being made in large quantities and considerably before Zaner and Bloser started their penmanship training and long before they started their school. Who was making this holder in not so obvious but in the end it seems to be the one being offered as the Zanerian Excelsior

Holder. All this detail may not be so important but what is and what I am trying to clarify here is that there were other people driving the use for oblique penholders during this time too. And I believe the Spencerian holders were on the sidelines never a viable seller in the market as some of their competitors, who apparently, were making a better product.

Charles

Additional Makers of Penholders not mentioned on your list.

A. P. Meub: Made both plain and inlaid holders.

Mitnik Holders: Offered by F. L. Tower.

Natural Grip: Made of bakelite.

Master Holders: Plain and inlaid holders.

E.F. Richardson Holders: Plain holders only??

Joe,

That really looks good you have me wondering how you did it so fast. Anyway I haven't completely finished my research yet as it takes sometime to learn to use the Patent Web Site. Some of this information I had found many years ago by manually going thru the LA County Library Patent Archives. I would very much like to ascertain if G. W. Michael had tried to take out an earlier patent which ultimately was rejected.

I can only do this by going to the Patent Gazettes at the downtown library and paging thru the years. Usually patent applications are taken out a year or so ahead as it takes time to process. My only reason for doing this is affirm that G. W. Michael had this idea of his early on and could then surmise that he probably was making this holder even before he applied for his patent. Sounds interesting doesn't it.

Charles Osborne