

H. L. Mencken: In the Steps of Gutenberg

“On November 26 1888 my father sent his bookkeeper, Mr. Maass, to the establishment of J. F. W. Dorman, at 217 East German street, Baltimore, and there and then, by the said Maass’s authorized agency, took title to a Baltimore No. 10 Self-Inker Printing Press and a font of No. 214 type. The press cost \$7.50 and the font of type \$1.10. These details, which I recover from the receipted bill in my father’s file, are of no conceivable interest to anyone else on earth, but to me they are of a degree of concern bordering upon the super-colossal, for that press determined the whole course of my future life.”

So wrote H. L. Mencken in the first part of his autobiography, *Happy Days*. The chapter is titled “In the Steps of Gutenberg,” and in it

Mencken describes the small press that was his father’s Christmas gift to him when he was eight, his first attempts to print with it, and how it started him on the road to journalism and, ultimately, fame. The chapter is enchanting to the lay reader, but for anyone with an interest in printing it is doubly so.

We are unusually fortunate to have many of the bits of Mencken’s early printing and other ephemera still extant, and they are reproduced on these pages for the first time. The J. F. W. Dorman Co., founded in 1865, is still located in Baltimore, where it manufactures rubber stamps, signs, and stencils. We have not the space to reprint the chapter mentioned, but it is highly recommended to anyone who finds these illustrations interesting.

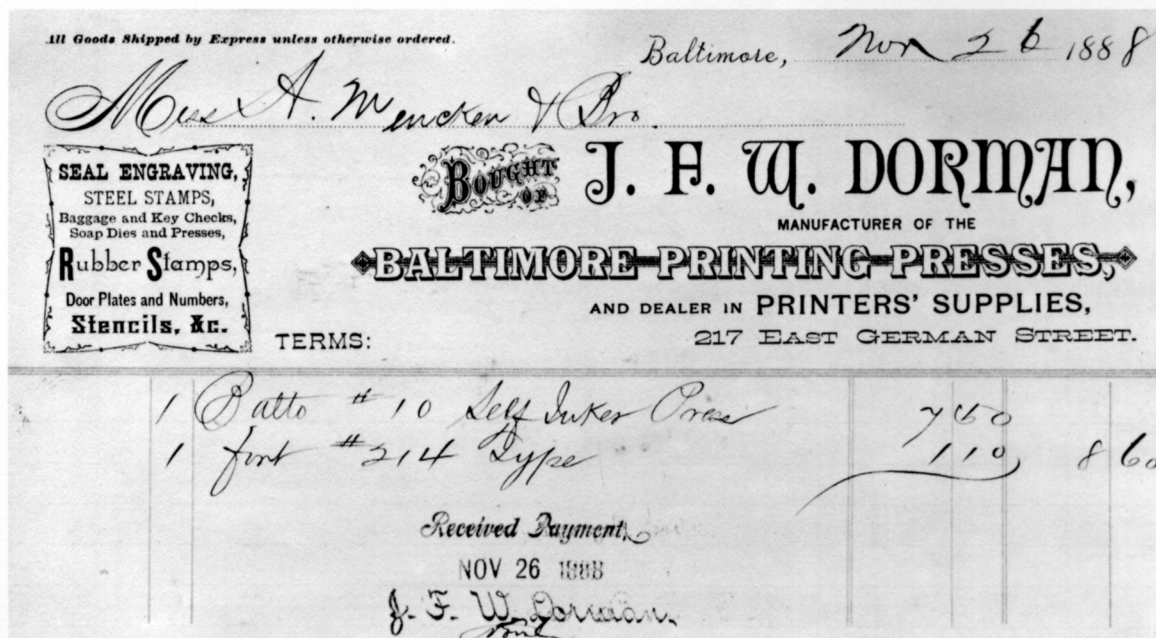


Fig. 1. The receipted bill mentioned by Mencken in the excerpt quoted. (Courtesy of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, with the permission of the Mercantile-Safe Deposit and Trust Company, Baltimore.)

BALTIMOREAN SELF-INKING PRESSES.



The Little Beauty.

— No. 9, —

Will print a form $2\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Weight of press and outfit 15 pounds. Price of Press with One Roller and Outfit of one font No. 217 type, fifty Blank Cards, Ink and Furniture,

\$5.00.

— No. 10, —

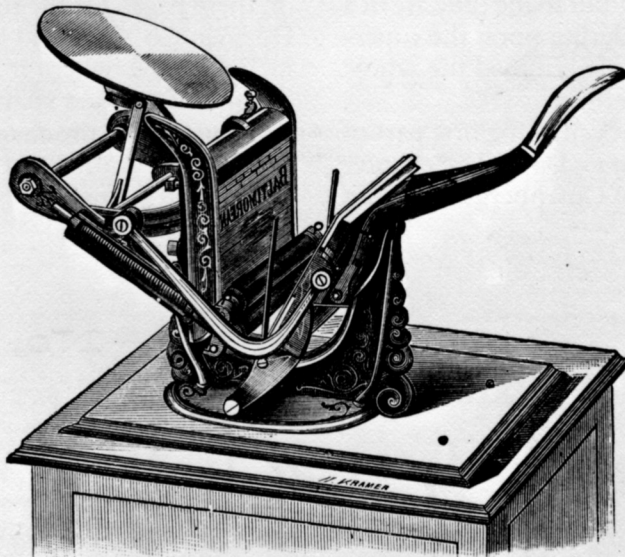
Will print a form $2\frac{1}{2} \times 4$ inches. Weight of press and outfit 18 pounds. Price of Press with One Roller and Outfit of one font No. 217 type, fifty Blank Cards, Ink and Furniture,

\$7.50.

— No. 11, —

Will print a form $2\frac{1}{2} \times 4$ inches. Weight of press and outfit 20 pounds. This press is extra finished, with two Rollers and Outfit of one font each Nos. 200 and 217 type, fifty Blank Cards, Ink and Furniture.

\$10.00.



— No. 12, —

Will print a form $4\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Weight of press and outfit 80 pounds. Price of Press with Outfit of four fonts of type, Nos. 202, 208, 217 and 219, Composing Stick, Planer, Furniture, Leads and Ink.

\$21.00.

— No. 13, —

Will print a form $5\frac{1}{2} \times 8$ inches. Weight of press boxed 125 pounds. Price of Press and Outfit with five fonts of type, Nos. 202, 208, 217, 219 and 226, Composing Stick, Planer, Furniture, Leads and Ink.

\$31.00.

One Chase, Oil Can, set of Iron Quoins and Shooting Stick go with Nos. 12 and 13 presses.

Fig. 2. A page from the catalogue of J. F. W. Dorman, 1888. Note that with the No. 10 press that Mencken's father purchased came a font of No. 217 type. The font of No. 214 type shown on the bill was an additional purchase. (Collection of Stephen O. Saxe.)

SMALL FONTS OF TYPE

With Quads and Spaces, put up in Wood Cases with Slide Lid Cover.

FIGURES GO WITH EACH FONT EXCEPT No. 218, 225 & 226.

No. 200	5 A.	\$0 60	No. 217	2 A 5 A	\$1 00
NEAT LETTER FOR NAMES AND OTHER USES. 134567890			<i>Miss Pauline B. Richardson</i> 225		
No. 201	2 A 5 a	\$0 75	No. 218	2 A 3 a	\$1 75
642 CARROLLTON AVENUE, Baltimore, Maryland, U. S. A. 642			<i>Green Apple Dumplings</i>		
No. 202	2 A 5 a	\$0 80	No. 219	4 A	\$0 85
J. F. W. DORMAN, Baltimore, Maryland. 12345678			THE SUCCESSFUL MAN.		
No. 203	2 A 5 a	\$0 80	No. 220	4 A	\$1 10
<i>Standard Letter for Circulars, Invitations, Notices.</i> 2			THE SPECTATOR.		
No. 204	5 A	\$0 60	No. 221	3 A	\$1 30
LETTER-WRITER PRINT. 12345			BRASS RULE		
No. 205	5 A	\$0 75	No. 222	4 A	\$0 80
AMERICAN HOTEL. 4967			GRANDFATHERS CLOCK		
No. 206	5 A	\$0 85	No. 223	4 A	\$1 00
MONDAY, JUNE, 188			PRINTING PRESSES		
No. 207	4 A	\$0 90	No. 224	3 A	\$1 20
PRINTING TYPES. 138			CARD LETTER		
No. 208	5 A	\$0 60	No. 225	4 A	\$0 90
ATTORNEY AND COUNSELLOR AT LAW. 93			ORNAMENTAL DESIGNS		
No. 209	5 A	\$0 85	No. 226	3 A	\$1 10
INDISPENSABLE LETTERS			PRETTY MAIDS		
No. 210	4 A	\$1 00	No. 227	4 A	\$0 90
OUR UNIQUE FACES			HANDSOME DESIGNS		
No. 211	3 A	\$1 25	No. 228	3 A	\$1 20
BRASS DASHES			J. F. W. DORMAN		
No. 212	2 A 5 a	\$1 10	No. 229	3 A	\$1 40
<i>Miss Pauline B. Richardson.</i> 1234			BALTIMORE		
No. 213	2 A 5 a	\$1 25			
<i>Miss Susan B. Anthony.</i> 2					
No. 214	2 A 5 A	\$1 10			
<i>Grand Annual Reception</i> 124					
No. 216	2 A 5 a	\$0 95			
At Home, Wednesday Evening, August 2.					

Fig. 3. Type specimen page from the J. F. W. Dorman catalogue, 1888. The font of No. 217 type (black letter) that came with the press is shown at the top right; the extra font of No. 214 type (script) that was purchased separately is second from the bottom at the left. These fonts agree perfectly with the sample of Mencken's early effort shown in Figure 4.

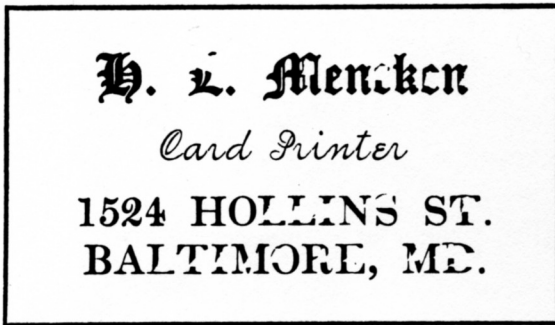
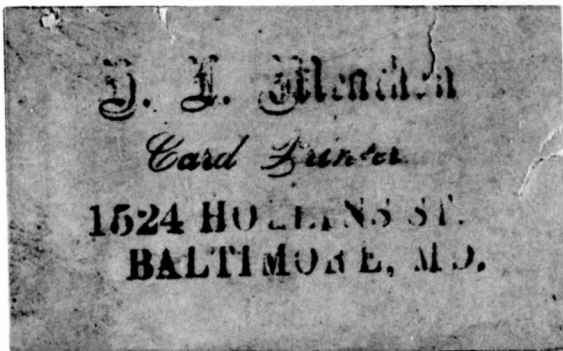


Fig. 4. (Left) One of Mencken's earliest pieces of printing, as reconstructed by W. A. Dwiggins, who designed the Knopf edition of Mencken's autobiography.



(Below) The actual card, barely legible, printed by Mencken; it will be seen that Dwiggins must have had it to refer to in designing his version. (Courtesy of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, with the permission of the Mercantile-Safe Deposit and Trust Company, Baltimore.)

The black letter type is No. 217, which came with the press; the script is No. 214, bought by Mr. Maass, whom Mencken describes as an "aesthete," and the roman—purchased by Mencken himself with money he had been given at Christmas—is apparently No. 204 (caps only) on the specimen page. Mencken notes that he styled himself "H. L." instead of "Henry L." because his father had "smashed all the Black Letter lower-case r's." For the rest of his life he was known as H. L. Mencken.

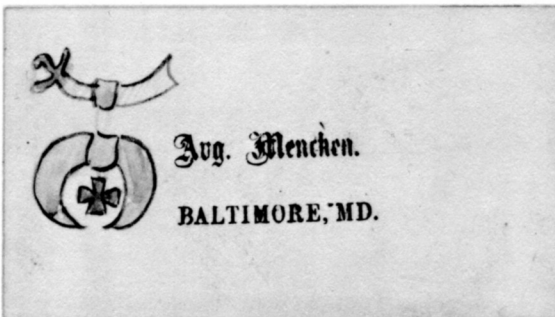


Fig. 5. Masonic card printed by Mencken for his father, who was about to attend a meeting of the Knights Templar. The symbols were put in by hand and water-colored by Mencken; his father "professed to be delighted with the cards." Mencken added, "They will go to the Bodleian after they have made the round of the American galleries." (Courtesy of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, with the permission of the Mercantile-Safe Deposit and Trust Company, Baltimore.)

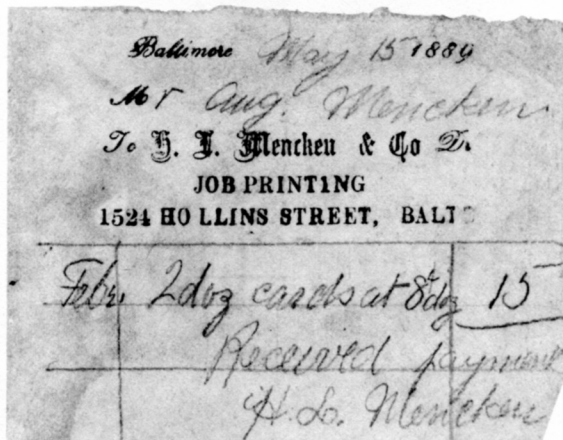


Fig. 6. A bill presented by Mencken to his father 15 May 1889, for other cards. The same three fonts of type are in use. (Courtesy of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, with the permission of the Mercantile-Safe Deposit and Trust Company, Baltimore.)