

STORIES of New Jersey

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NEW JERSEY WRITERS' PROJECT, WORK PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION

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FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF PRINTING

The huge automatic presses that rumble in printing plants all over the country are turning out many thousand words this year about a clumsy little wooden press built and painstakingly operated by Johann Gutenberg five centuries ago. The world is celebrating the 500th anniversary of the invention of that little wooden press, the foundation of the great structure of the printed word.

Four other printing anniversaries are also being celebrated: the 400th anniversary of the first printing in the New World; the 300th of the first known book produced in the American colonies; the 250th of the first paper mill in what is now the United States; and the 150th of the death of Benjamin Franklin, whose name is connected with the early days of not only American printing but also printing in New Jersey.

In a three-block-long building a printer presses a button. A low hum and a growl answer him, and tons of steel, brass and lead begin to revolve. Faster and faster the huge rollers turn; the hum changes to a whine and then a roar as the long web of paper is pulled over the spinning cylinders. The paper moves five miles an hour--then ten--fifteen--and even twenty. Rollers hiss as they cover the type and engravings with glistening red, blue, yellow and black ink. The freshly printed paper dries as it rushes over glowing burners. At the end of the block-long machine emerge finished magazines, printed, folded, cut and counted, ready to be shipped away to cities and towns and mail boxes all over the country.

The ancestor of these complicated modern machines is Johann Gutenberg's shaky wooden press that printed one sheet at a time. Gutenberg, in turn, owed his invention to thousands of unknown men in Africa, Asia and eastern Europe who developed writing and the alphabet.

To print means "to press a mark, a figure or an illustration upon another substance." The ancient king who pressed his seal on a piece of wax was a printer. Seals and dies had been known in many countries for thousands of years before Gutenberg, but the Chinese were the first to print books. Scholars have found one Chinese book printed from page-size wooden blocks in 868 A.D., and it is thought that the Chinese used individual letters of type as early as the eleventh century. Gutenberg and his contemporaries, however, were familiar only with the use of wooden blocks with figures engraved on them for imprinting designs on clothing materials and playing cards.

For centuries before Gutenberg books and learning had played little part in the lives of Europeans. The destructive wars and social disorder that followed the fall of the western Roman empire in the fifth century brought commerce