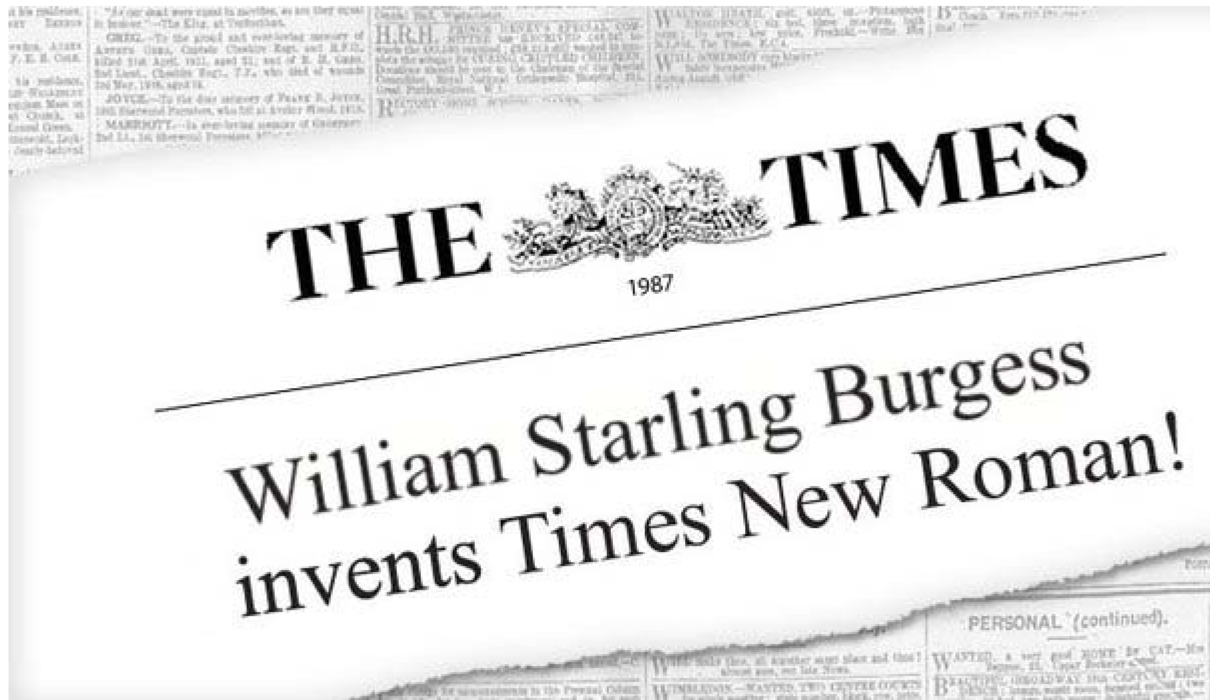
The History Page: Exactly your type

Times New Roman's a simple font with a complex story behind it

- 

By Katherine Eastland Monday, August 15, 2011

It's in State Department memos, vintage pages of Woman's Home Companion and your inbox: Times New Roman, the most widely used typeface in the world — and one of the most controversial. For more than half a century, it was attributed to a titan in the field of typography, Stanley Morison. But in the late 1980s, a Canadian printer discovered that Morison might have plagiarized the classic font.

The original story of Times New Roman's genesis goes like this: Morison wrote a blistering article in 1929 arguing that Times Old Roman, the font of The Times of London, was dated, clunky, badly printed and in need of help — his help. The paper listened and charged Morison with directing the creation of a new suite of letters. He did, and on Oct. 3, 1943, Times New Roman debuted on the bright white broadsheets of the London daily.

Here's the problem with this tidy account: Evidence found in 1987 — drawings for letters and

corresponding brass plates — suggests that the real father of the font wasn't a typographer at all, but a wooden boat designer from Boston named William Starling Burgess.

Burgess is famous in his field for having designed inventive, beautiful yachts (including three that won the America's Cup), planes for the U.S. Navy and Wilbur and Orville Wright, and some experimental cars.

But before he accomplished any of those things, Burgess — in 1904, when he was only 26 — had a brief and brilliant flirtation with typography. He wrote to the U.S. branch of the Lanston Monotype Corp. requesting that a font be made to his specifications. He planned to use it on company documents at his nascent shipyard in Marblehead, Mass. He penciled letters and mailed them in. Some work went into creating the font on the corporation's end — a few brass plates of the letters were cut — but then Burgess abandoned the project to partner with the Wright brothers. Lanston Monotype tried to sell the fledgling font to Time magazine in 1921, but it declined the offer, and Burgess' unfinished project, simply labeled "Number 54," was shelved for more than half a century.

It was the Canadian printer Gerald Giampa who stumbled upon Number 54 in 1987, soon after he had purchased the remnants of Lanston Monotype. The font's resemblance to Times New Roman was exact. Knowing he had something hot — and possibly proof of plagiarism — on his hands, Giampa asked one of the world's leading authorities on type, Mike Parker, to analyze what he'd found. Parker became convinced that Burgess was the true father of the font. He not only published an article arguing as much in Printing History, but, in his 70s, set out to painstakingly finish the work the boat designer had begun.

On this, Parker's first foray into personally crafting a typeface — whittling here, widening there to make each letter sparkle — he completed Number 54 and named it "Starling," after Burgess' middle name. The 80-year-old Parker released the font in June 2009. Notably, Times New Roman, as Morison made it, did not contain a true italic, but one that was an in-house standard at Monotype. Therefore Starling's italic — based on five sketches of slanting characters Burgess left behind — is Times New Roman's first authentic italic.

While there is no evidence that Burgess noticed his own creation in the Times — or elsewhere — it is hard to imagine that he would not have noticed it, as the font was released for use by others in 1933 and enjoyed immediate success in publications in England and America.

The font's wide success is due in part to the same reasons it suited the Times. As Morison wrote, Times New Roman is not "broad and open, generous and ample," but "by the vice of Mammon and misery of the machine … bigoted and narrow, mean and puritan" — that is, it's a work not of luxury but practicality. Morison designed Times New Roman so that more words could fit onto each broadsheet of the Times than before, thereby saving space and money; at the same time, those words did not look crammed in the columns, but comfortable. It was made to order to be both legible and economical. Note, too, that the Times was peculiar for being printed on newsprint that wasn't crinkly and thin, but thick and white, approximating the look and feel of ordinary paper. Accordingly, Times New Roman was not used much in other newspapers, but in the wider world of magazines, books and essays.

The font also has flourished beyond the world of paper. In the early 1990s, Microsoft Windows adopted it as its default font, and to this day, it's one of the few fonts Google offers for use in composing emails. But the factors that made Times New Roman great in its 1932 debut — legibility and economy — are not as pressing today; a font's on-screen size can be changed with a few keystrokes, and space is plastic.

What keeps the font great, independent of ages, is that it is sophisticated without exuding a discreet personality. Times New Roman is a many-trick pony, like that other, but altogether

different, giant of the 20th century that still dominates in the 21st, Helvetica. Morison, who believed that “the end of typography is multiplication for the sake of man” — and who never knew of Giampa’s findings, inasmuch as he died in 1967 — would have been well pleased.

Much of the evidence that could answer the question of who created Times New Roman no longer exists: A fire ripped through Burgess’ shipyard in 1918, a bomb from Hitler’s blitz exploded near the London office of Monotype in 1941, and a flood ruined the extant Lanston archives at Giampa’s house on Prince Edward Island in 2000. Perhaps to protect himself from accusations of plagarism, Morison never said he himself created the font; rather, he “oversaw” it, he “excogitated” it. Meanwhile, the Times website gingerly attributes the font to Morison, their in-house draftsman Victor Lardent, and “perhaps” Burgess. But in obscure journals, the debate over authorship rages on.

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