

Today in Columbus history, October 17, 1891, a mysterious little message appeared on page three of the *Russell Register*, the Russell County newspaper published in Seale, Alabama, by Henry Tillman Benton and William Henry Tucker.

“Apologetic / We trust our patrons will overlook the shortness of matter in this issue. We had the misfortune to ‘pi’ about six thousand type, live matter, and we could not catch up, there being but one type in our office.”

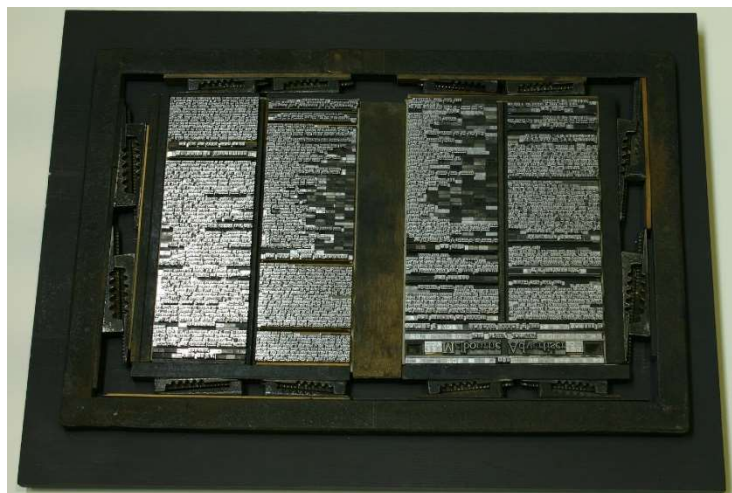
Puzzling to many 20th- and most 21st-century readers (that means this writer, too), this “apology” probably would not need much explanation to regular newspaper readers in the nineteenth century. Terms like “pi” and “pied type” appear – if not commonly – often enough in searches of Georgia Historic Newspapers that I have to assume at least a few readers knew what the words meant (and editors have a way of teaching their readers whatever they think readers need to know).

With a scant amount of knowledge of the technical terms of typesetting, I’ll attempt to translate some of the language here: To “pi” means “to jumble or spill type characters”

(<https://www.dictionaryproject.org/motd/word-of-the-day-pi-and-pie/>)

And a little more detail: “‘Pi the type’ is an old printer’s and typesetter’s term that signifies the presumed accidental dropping of a locked-up chase or ‘forme’ of metal type, thus smashing and scattering all the typeset characters into an unsalvageable mess.” <https://designobserver.com/article.php?id=40257>

So, somehow, someone in the print shop spilled the tiny lead type characters, probably already carefully arranged into several columns of sentences, maybe as he was moving the chase to the bed of the printing press. “Six thousand type” is a lot of characters, too many to be able to be replaced, apparently, in time for the October 17 issue. So, some of the content had to be left out of the newspaper that week.



1 Unknown photographer, "Type inside a chase," Museums Victoria



Was the paper really short of “matter in this issue,” compared to previous issues? On first glance, looking at the same page from the previous week’s issue, I didn’t think so. But, after lots of back and forth, I believe that there IS more spacing between the lines of personal mentions and advertisements in the October 17 issue than

on the same page for the October 10 issue. Although difficult to see, it was enough that Mr. Benton and Mr. Tucker felt the need to apologize to their regular readers.

I can't help wondering what happened that day in the *Russell Register's* print shop. Without knowing who did what in the print shop and who (if anyone) was working along with Benton and Tucker that day, it's hard to know exactly WHO pried the type and left them scrambling to reset it and get the newspaper out that week.

A quick history of the newspaper might help set a possible scene...

The *Russell Register* was never any competition for the far larger and more established papers just up the road (in 1889, in Columbus: the *Enquirer-Sun*, *Evening Ledger*, an African American newspaper, the *Messenger*, and the *Alabama Democrat*, in Girard; by 1900 *Enquirer-Sun*, *Ledger*, and the *Columbus Chronicle*), but the *Register* owners worked hard to keep the thousand-or-so subscribers that they had with a talkative, "bright" county weekly published every Saturday, full of the news of local hamlets such as Glenville, Hatchechubbee, Hurtsboro, of course, Seale, and a few others farther afield. (George P. Rowell's *American Newspaper Directory*, 1889 and 1900)

Will Tucker (full disclosure: my great grandfather) had probably begun work at the newspaper in 1885, when he was about 16 or 17 years old.* At some point, he worked his way up to compositor (typesetter) and in 1890, at age 32, he became a co-owner of the *Register* when Carey Owen Brinson brought him on to replace John V. Smith. (*Russell Register*, December 6, 1890; *Enquirer-Sun*, Dec. 7, 1890. How Tucker could afford to buy into the paper is still a mystery.) Then, in the spring of 1891, Brinson sold his portion, and Russell County Probate Judge Henry Tillman Benton came on with Will Tucker, with Benton listed first in the masthead. Tucker was probably the most experienced newspaperman on the staff and may have done much of the actual daily running of the paper, since Benton was probate judge. It could be that Benton brought money to the partnership, something always badly needed by newspapers. As with a large number of newspaper owners, the paper gave Benton a readymade pulpit for campaigning for probate judge. Had the new partners hired a new compositor to set type – someone who may have stumbled and spilled type everywhere while setting the October 17 issue? Or was it just an unfortunate accident by an old hand? We'll probably never know.



2 William Henry Tucker, date unknown

* In 1900, in an editorial comment in the *Register*, Tucker notes: "during our newspaper experience of fifteen years..." which would date his start to 1885. *Russell Register*, October 26, 1900, page 2.

Our weekly snippets of Columbus history are usually based on a few days of searching through the most popular sources for Muscogee County history. Meant to inspire readers to explore more about Columbus history, they are not exhaustive dissertations on the topic and may contain mistakes. If you have corrections or additional information, feel free to share them with the group.

as preſent in the example
letters and words ſet-ſide-down
The printer muſt learn to read

FIG. 8

3 from A.A. Stewart, "Typesetting - A Primer," (Gutenberg Project)

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SOURCES

Rhoda C. Ellison, *History and Bibliography of Alabama Newspapers in the Nineteenth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1954)

American Newspaper Directory Containing Accurate Lists of All the Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the United States, Territories, Dominion of Canada and Newfoundland, Together with a Description of the Towns and Cities in which They are Published (New York: George P. Rowell & Co., 1889, and 1900). FamilySearch.org.

A. A. Stewart, *Typesetting - A primer of information about working at the case, justifying, spacing, correcting, making-up, and other operations employed in setting type by hand* (Chicago, Il., Committee on Education United Typothetae of America, 1919) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46113/46113-h/46113-h.htm>

For "Pi" and "Pied" <https://designobserver.com/article.php?id=40257>

and <https://www.dictionaryproject.org/motd/word-of-the-day-pi-and-pie/>

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"Mr. W. H. Tucker is not a hired compositor with the Register any more, but is now a partner with me in every particular, that is, sharing the profits, losses, cussing and honor, if there be any. Will is a good one, and it is hoped that his friends will rally to him, give him the news and let him write it up; and give him their money, and let us divide." – C. O. Brinson, *Russell Register*, December 6, 1890

Unknown photographer, type inside a chase, Museums Victoria
<https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1281267>

from A.A. Stewart, "Typesetting - A Primer," (Gutenberg Project)

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