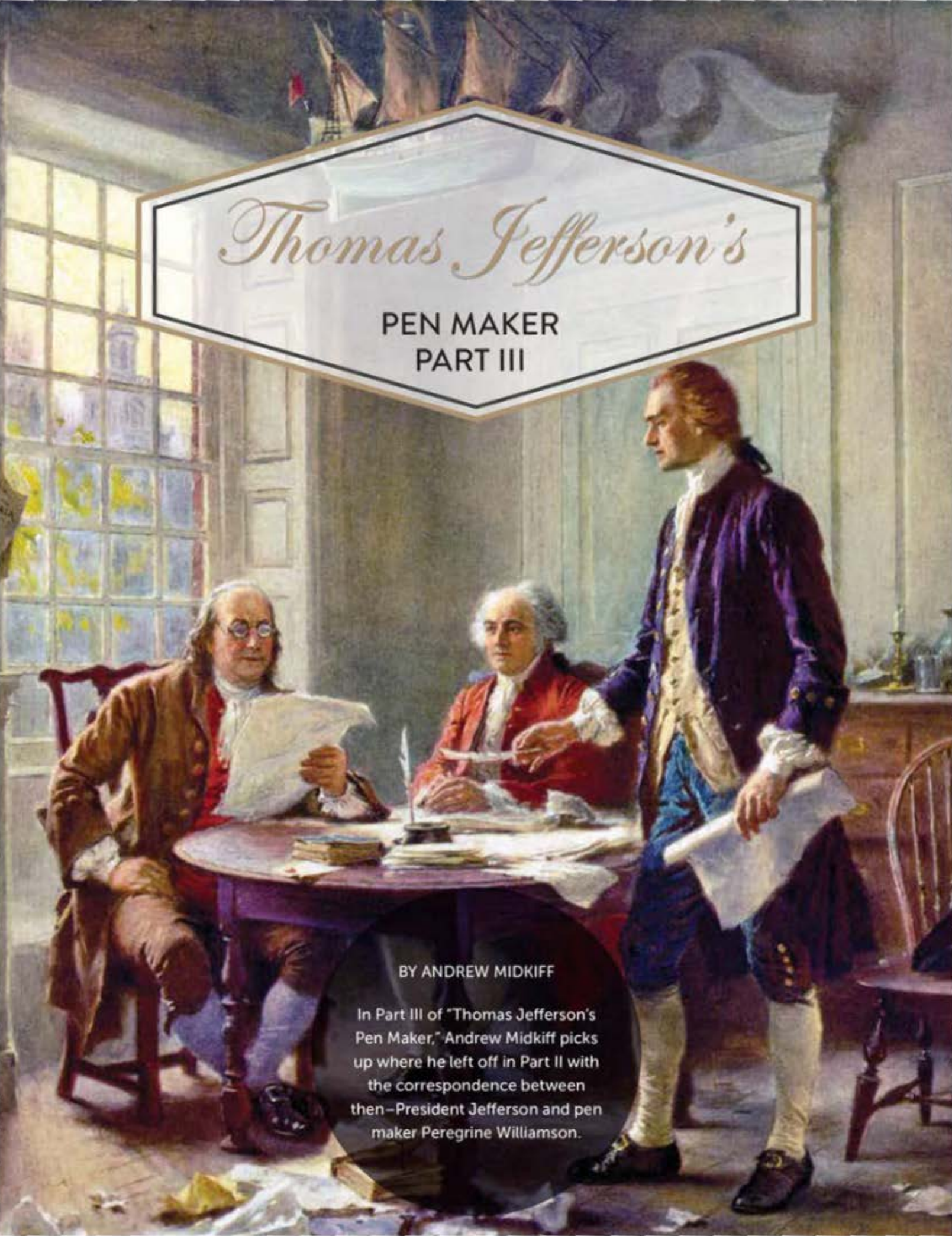


Thomas Jefferson's

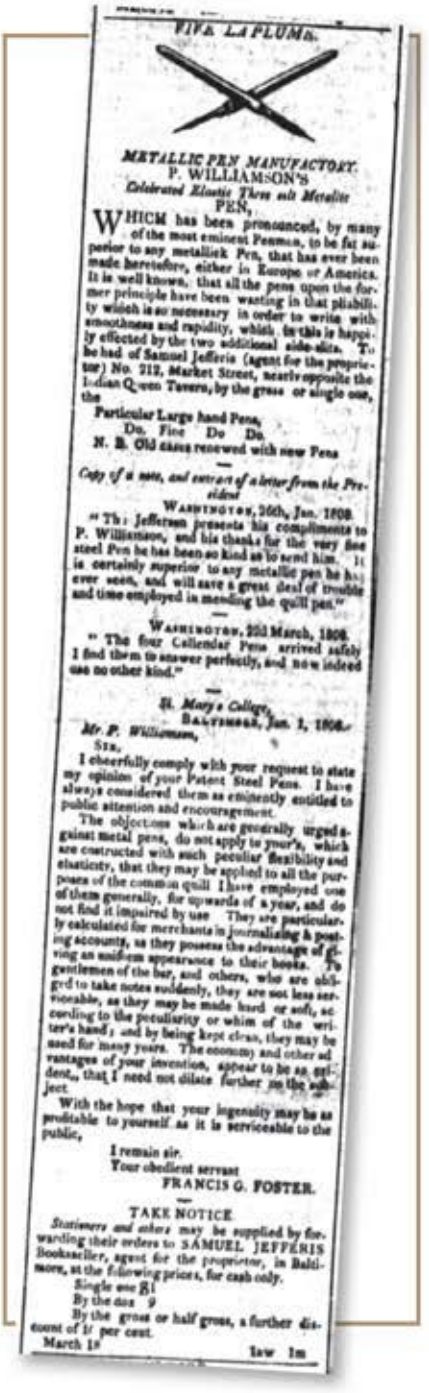
PEN MAKER PART III

BY ANDREW MIDKIFF

In Part III of "Thomas Jefferson's Pen Maker," Andrew Midkiff picks up where he left off in Part II with the correspondence between then-President Jefferson and pen maker Peregrine Williamson.

Opposite page: *Writing the Declaration of Independence, 1776*, by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris. The painting depicts Thomas Jefferson (standing), with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. This work is in the public domain.

This page: Ad for Williamson's pens, including testimonials from Thomas Jefferson and Francis Foster



VIVE LA PLUME.

METALLIC PEN MANUFACTORY.
P. WILLIAMSON'S
Celebrated Elastic Three slit Metallic
PEN,

WHICH has been pronounced, by many of the most eminent Penmen, to be far superior to any metallick Pen, that has ever been made heretofore, either in Europe or America. It is well known, that all the pens upon the former principle have been wanting in that pliability which is so necessary in order to write with smoothness and rapidity, which in this is happily effected by the two additional side slits. To be had of Samuel Jefferis (agent for the proprietor) No. 212, Market Street, nearly opposite the Indian Queen Tavern, by the gross or single one, the

Particular Large hand Pens,
Do. Fine Do Do.
N. B. Old pens renewed with new Pens

Copy of a note, and extract of a letter from the President

WASHINGTON, 26th, Jan. 1808.

"Th: Jefferson presents his compliments to P. Williamson, and his thanks for the very fine steel Pen he has been so kind as to send him. It is certainly superior to any metallic pen he has ever seen, and will save a great deal of trouble and time employed in mending the quill pen."

WASHINGTON, 25th March, 1808.

"The four Callendar Pens arrived safely I find them to answer perfectly, and now indeed use no other kind."

St. Mary's College,
BALTIMORE, Jan. 1, 1808.

Mr P. Williamson,

SIR,

I cheerfully comply with your request to state my opinion of your Patent Steel Pens. I have always considered them as eminently entitled to public attention and encouragement.

The objections which are generally urged against metal pens, do not apply to your's, which are constructed with such peculiar flexibility and elasticity, that they may be applied to all the purposes of the common quill I have employed one of them generally, for upwards of a year, and do not find it impaired by use They are particularly calculated for merchants in journalising & posting accounts, as they possess the advantage of giving an uniform appearance to their books. To gentlemen of the bar, and others, who are obliged to take notes suddenly, they are not less serviceable, as they may be made hard or soft, according to the peculiarity or whim of the writer's hand; and by being kept clean, they may be used for many years. The economy and other advantages of your invention, appear to be so evident, that I need not dilate further on the subject.

With the hope that your ingenuity may be as profitable to yourself as it is serviceable to the public,

I remain sir.
Your obedient servant
FRANCIS G. FOSTER.

TAKE NOTICE

Stationers and others may be supplied by forwarding their orders to SAMUEL JEFFERIS Bookseller, agent for the proprietor, in Baltimore, at the following prices, for cash only.

Single one $1
By the doz 9
By the gross or half gross, a further discount of 1/ per cent.

March 18 law 1m

In the last letter shown with Part II of "Thomas Jefferson's Pen Maker," Jefferson expressed his satisfaction with pens he had purchased from Peregrine Williamson. In the following letter, we see that Jefferson has now been using the pens for six months. Decades later, when pens were mass-produced, much cheaper, and were purchased by the gross, one never expected to use a steel pen for six months. They were eventually seen as disposable items. But at this point, in 1808, they were relatively expensive and were expected to last for quite a while. In the ad for Williamson's pens shown at right, the pen maker included a testimonial from Jefferson, with his permission; the other testimonial was from the penman Francis Foster. He claims to have used one of the three-slit pens for almost a year, and speculates that if kept clean and carefully used, it could last for several years[1].

Whether because Jefferson wasn't as fastidious, his use was much greater than Foster's, or Foster's claim was a bit exaggerated, six months into using the pens, the now–former president was having some problems.

From Thomas Jefferson
To Peregrine Williamson
June 21, 1808[2]

Sir Washington June 21. 08.

I must trouble you for a new supply of your steel pen points. I find them excellent while they last, and an entire relief from the trouble of mending. but, altho' I clean them carefully when laid by for the day, yet the constant use for 6. or 7. hours every day, very soon begins to injure them. the points begin to be corroded, & become ragged, & the slit rusts itself open. I have sometimes, but rarely succeeded in smoothing the point on a hone, and the opening of the slit is quite irremediable. I inclose three which will shew the manner of their going. I will thank you for half a dozen or a dozen points of the same caliber, & a note of their amount which I will have remitted. I tender you my salutations

Th: Jefferson

It's not so amazing that the president is discovering that six to seven hours a day, probably almost every day, spent sitting in the highly corrosive iron gall ink of the time, would play havoc upon a steel pen.

This is a problem that steel pen makers tried to fix for the next 130 years with many and wondrous solutions. It's not

1. Evening Post *(New York, New York), March 18, 1809, p. 3.*
2. *founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-8194*

until stainless steel nibs were introduced in the 20th century that corrosion was no longer such a problem.

Peregrine Williamson writes back with some advice and an interesting observation:

To Thomas Jefferson
From Peregrine Williamson
June 25, 1808[3]

Sir
Baltimore June 25th. 08.

Your favour of the 21 Came safe to hand requesting a new Supply of Pens but previous to its reception I had disposed of all but about a half a dozen and therfore could not send the number You mentioned but I shall not forget to select a half a dozen more out of the next number that is made and to send them on in due time—You have truly observed (notwithstanding You clean them) that the constant use for 6 or 7 hours every day very soon begins to injure them. and that the points begin to be corroded & become ragged & the slit rusts itself open. You have sent 3 to give me an idea what You mean one of which is yet good with a little sharpening which I send You with the rest—but altho we have two much reason to urge those objections to the Steel Pen in concequence of its susceptibility of corrosion & rust, Yet I believe their is no metal that would eaven be a substitute for it haveing tried them. eaven Silver or Gold which I think is proof against either of those inconveniencies not excepted—for I have discovered that it is the points of the pen (which I might say is the pen itself for all the rest would be useless without it) that begin first to become worn apart & that not so much from the corrosion as from its action on the paper that I have worn the points quite blunt so as to loose its harestroke intirely and yet the other parts to be apararntly intire. You say that you have sometimes but rarely Succeaded in Smoothing the points on a hone. I expect (if posseable) to be down to Washington Shortly and I Should be happy in takeing the pleasure to Show You the precise method to sharpen your pens as it might save You some trouble

P, Williamson

We do find steel pen repair services in London at an early date[4], but this is the first reference in the United States to repairing a steel pen. As pens became mass-produced, they became disposable, but in the beginning, at more than $1 a pen in 1808, they were too expensive to just toss when they became a bit scratchy.

But the most interesting morsel from this letter is the proof that Williamson experimented with gold and silver pens before settling on steel. He found that silver and gold wore away too easily. This was known by others as well and was the cause of the search for a harder tip that could go on the end of a gold pen. By this point, Hawkins, the same person who helped to invent the polygraph, the mechanical pencil, and many other things, was already looking for a good way to tip a gold pen with a harder metal. It wasn't until around 1834 that he successfully invented a way to reliably tip a gold pen with iridium, leading to the design used on all gold fountain pen nibs today.

The final letter I've been able to find between Jefferson and Williamson is almost ten months after the first:

To Thomas Jefferson
From Peregrine Williamson
September 28, 1808[5]

Sir Baltimore Sept 28th 1808

I avail myself of the peculiar pleasure and satisfaction of sending You the half doz steel Pens Which I hope (last promised) will be in due time.

I am Sir Your Most Obdt And Most Hub Servt

P Williamson

This indicates that Jefferson continued to purchase steel pens, most likely for his polygraph. The only follow-up we have for this letter was one from Jefferson to his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph[6], in which he asks Randolph to "swing by Baltimore and pay P. Williamson of 72 Market St. for "a dozen steel pen points."

While we may not have any more letters between the two men that survived, it is clear that Jefferson never forgot Peregrine Williamson.

In 1814, Jefferson recommends that William Caruthers stop by P. Williamson in Baltimore to see Williamson's newly patented method for making small shot[7]. (By 1816,

Williamson is listed in the Baltimore directory not as a steel pen maker, or jeweler, but as a "shot manufacturer.") So, while it's not clear if the retired president is still using Williamson's steel pens in 1814, it does seem as if he's keeping track of Williamson's other inventions.

An interesting postscript to this story of the two men is found in a letter dated 1822 from Jefferson to a friend in New York, DeWitt Clinton[8].It seems from the context of the letter that Clinton had just sent Jefferson some pens made of some other material than steel. Gold, perhaps? Silver? Jefferson writes back:

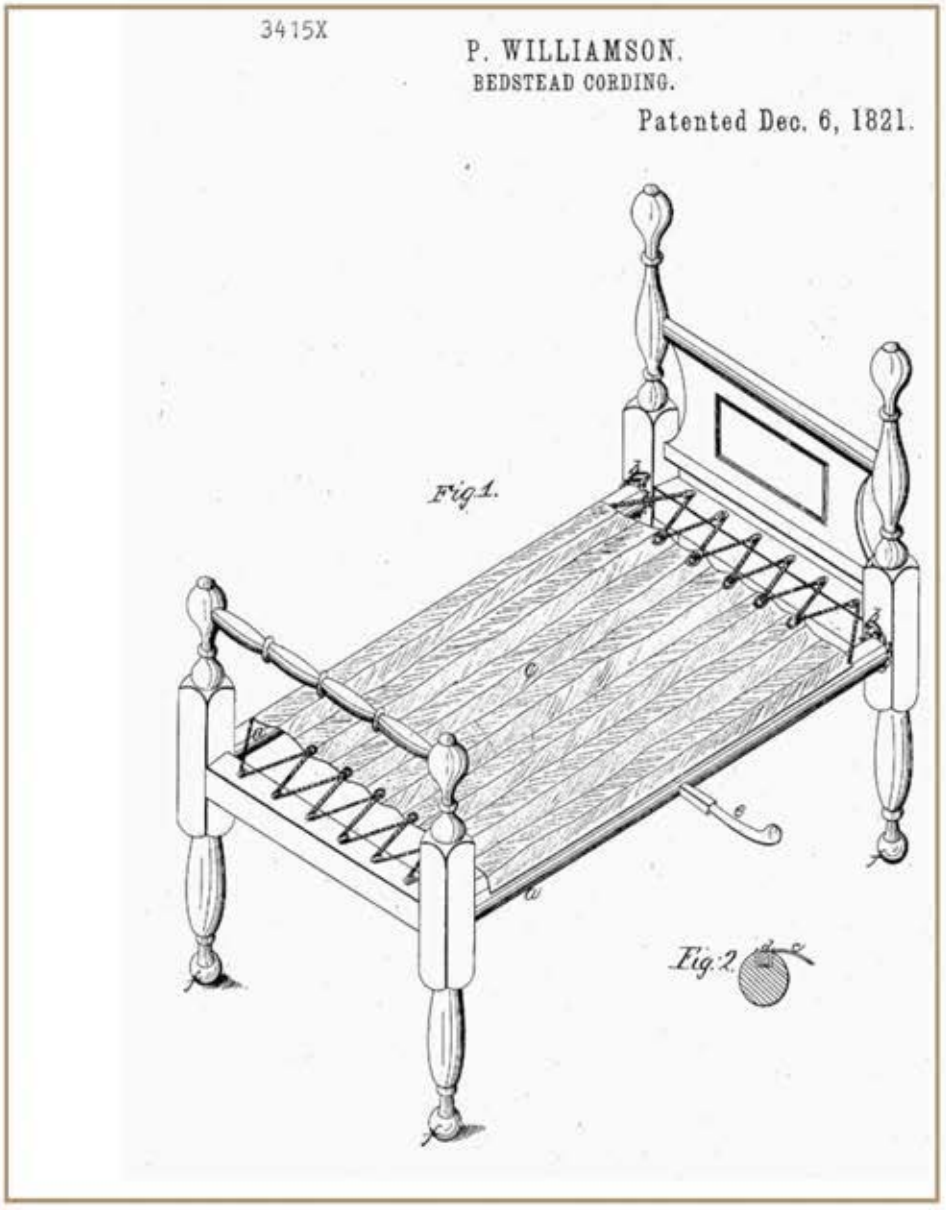
> I thank you, Dear Sir, for the elegant pens you have been so kind as to send me; they perform their office admirably. I had formerly got such from Baltimore, but they were of steel, and their points rusted off immediately.

Peregrine Williamson continued to make pens for a while. The one later account that mentions these years says he was so successful that he and a journeyman assistant made a clear profit of $600 a month, which was quite a tidy sum for a two-man operation around 1815. According to the same account, he "continued to manufacture his pens until the demand, limited as it was, becoming for the moment supplied, the manufacture of pens was abandoned."[9] This was sometime after the latest ad I've been able to find, which was from 1813, and most likely sometime by the early 1820s. By this point, he seems to have moved to New York City, where he continued to pursue his other inventions[10].

Peregrine Williamson was granted 10 patents that I've been able to find. They range widely and include his 1808 patent for the three-slit pen; a machine for shots and bullets[11], the first U.S. patent granted for improvements to a coffee

Left: Thomas Jefferson's polygraph at Monticello. Polygraphs could produce several copies of a document simultaneously. ©Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello; loaned by the University of Virginia.

Below: The only patent image still existing for any of Williamson's patents. The bed's webbing was tightened by rotating the side rails like a ratcheted windlass.



3. founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-8223

4. Bore, Henry. The Story of the Invention of Steel Pens, *Ivison, Blakeman & Company, New York, 1890, pp. 23–24.*

5. founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-8762

6. founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-8852

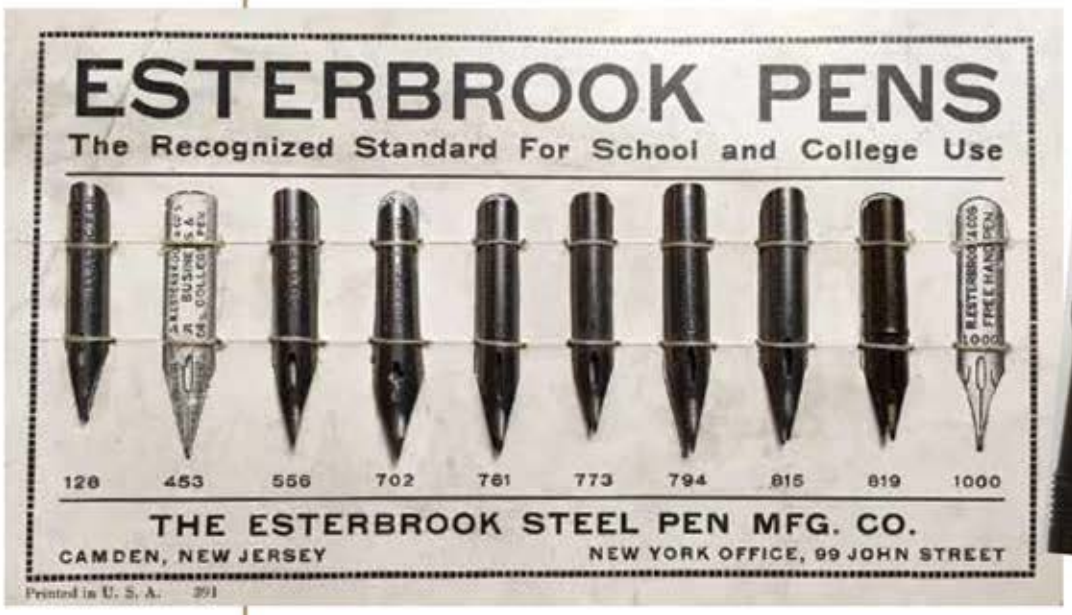
7. founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-08-02-0080

8. founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-2722

9. newspapers.com/clip/14838096/1835_peregrine_williamson_journ_of/

10. In 1829 we find a notice in the Evening Post *(New York, New York) that lists Peregrine Williamson among others who have letters left at the NYC post office. (July 3, 1829, p. 1) newspapers.com/clip/19965744/1829_peregrine_williamson_left/*

11. Pat. 1,926X, May 12, 1813



This card of Esterbrook pens from the author's collection illustrates how nibs were sold in Williamson's day.

Williamson's last patent—for a nib with a slider mechanism to regulate flexibility—was later echoed in the adjustable nib on Wahl's Doric. Photo courtesy of David Nishimura.

roaster[12], an improved bedstead[13], a new type of stove to be used on a railroad car[14], which was granted before the first regular railroad was even run in the United States; and, in 1835, a patent for a new kind of pen[15] for which the very tip was especially hardened, and which also included a slide that allowed one to regulate the stiffness of the pen as you slide it up or down the nib.

Not all of Williamson's inventions ended up being patented. In 1822, the Baltimore City Council and mayor passed a resolution to allow Peregrine Williamson to sweep some chimneys in the city of Baltimore using his new invention[16].

> Permission granted to Peregrine Williamson to sweep a certain number of chimneys in the City by his newly invented machine.
>
> Whereas, Peregrine Williamson has invented a new mode by which to sweep chimneys, so as, in his opinion, to render unnecessary to use of climbing boys; and is desirous, in order to give his invention a fair experiment, that a trial of it should be made in a certain number of houses; and is being desirous to promote any invention by which the use of human beings in this business may be dispensed with,
>
> …
>
> Approved Feb. 20th, 1822

No results from this experiment are known, but a chimney sweeping mechanism is not included among his many patents.

Considering his many other inventions, both successful and unsuccessful, his first patent, of the three-slit pen, turned out to be his greatest. Unfortunately, he received neither the credit nor the bulk of the profit that arose from this invention.

In 1831, as various gentlemen in Birmingham were just starting to figure out how to crank out these steel pens on an industrial scale, Joseph Gillott filed a patent for a pen with increased flexibility by adding two additional side slits to the nib. Gillott's patent gained him fame. His prowess at manufacturing, along with better quality materials, and better timing (the creation of the penny post and expanded educational opportunities for a broader portion of the public), gained him a massive fortune. In an 1835 article on Williamson, the author addresses this with barely hidden scorn. After describing the nature of Williamson's original pen design, he continues:[17]

> A sample of the pens was sent out to England, and imitations soon came back, placarded with an Englishman's name as the inventors, "by His Majesty's Royal Patent." The Englishman could not invent so much as a card even, but made almost a facsimile of Mr. Williamson's. The same cards have been perpetuated to this day, and the business has been pursued by the English manufacturers, until more than a hundred tons of steel are now used annually in the manufacture of more than two hundred millions of pens, and the price is reduced to a few cents. The English manufacturers, in the meantime, have realized immense fortunes by the invention, but have added nothing to the principles of Mr. Williamson, nor, after all their changes of form, have they contrived anything better than his, or so good.

Peregrine Williamson sold his pens for $1.00 each or $9.00 for a card of a dozen. Pens were continued to be sold by the card for decades more, long after most were sold in boxes of a dozen to a gross.

That's not to say we can fully embrace the author's statement that the British contributed nothing. They are the ones who figured out how to mass-produce pens with machinery; began to use higher quality, and thinner, steel; and introduced grinding and extra piercing to increase flexibility. They were the real pioneers of the steel pen industry, but that's a story for another time.

Interestingly enough, Williamson's last patent, the nib with the sliding clasp to regulate flexibility, seemed to have also made it to England under another man's name. In 1856, Alexander Prince was granted a very similar patent, no. 777: "Improvements in steel pens for the regulating the elasticity thereof." As late as 1932, this idea of a sliding regulator of elasticity on a nib shows up in Wahl's Doric adjustable fountain pen nib.

Peregrine Williamson died of apoplexy in New York City in 1841 at the age of 71[18].

For such an important early figure in the history of steel pens, very little is actually known about him. He appears in no census data, very few directories, no genealogies. Very little is known about his personal life. We know he was married to Sarah Nowland in 1809, we know he served in the Baltimore Militia during the war of 1812, but we don't know where he was born or raised, or even how he made his pens. What we can say for certain is that he was a true pioneer and innovator, and that he was Thomas Jefferson's Pen Maker.

12. *Pat. 3,185X, Mar. 20, 1820*
13. *Pat. 3,415X, Dec. 06, 1821, and another Pat. 3,598X, Oct. 17, 1822*
14. *Pat. 5,368X, Feb. 16, 1829*
15. *Pat. 8,735X, Mar. 30, 1835*
16. *Baltimore, MD.* Ordinances of the Corporation of the City of Baltimore from 1813 to 1822, Inclusive. *Re-printed by John Cox, city printer, 1876, p. 433. books.google.com*
17. Evening Post *(New York, New York), May 22, 1835, p. 3*
18. New-York Tribune *(New York, New York), Sept. 17, 1841, p. 3*