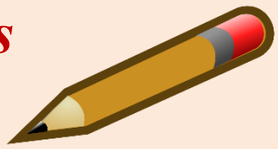
Sharpen Your Pencils

By Inga Milbauer



Pencils have been in use for centuries, and graphite sticks encased in wood date back to the 1560s. In the American colonies, pencils were initially imported from overseas. William Monroe, a cabinet-maker from Concord, Massachusetts is credited with making America's first wood pencils in 1812.[1]

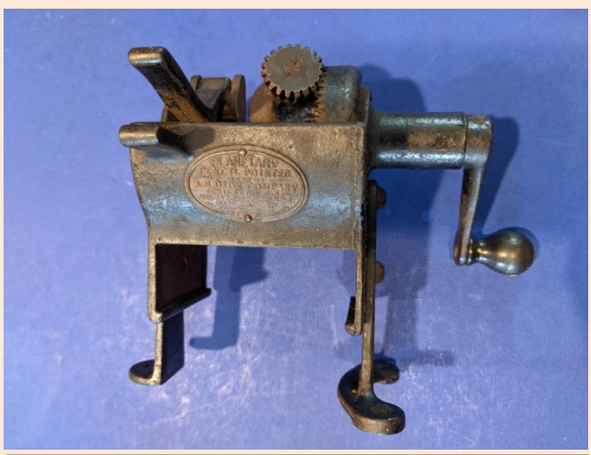
While being used, a pencil gets dull and the core of it will shorten so pencils will have to be sharpened. This was done by whittling the pencil with a small knife or sand paper. The Frenchman Mr. C.A. Boucher (Paris) invented a pencil sharpener in 1822, but did not patent his pencil sharpener. The first patent was granted to French mathematician Bernard Lassimonne (Limoges) in 1828. His sharpener had small metal files in a block of wood which would grind the edges of the pencil's tip. During the next twenty years, various pencil sharpening tools were developed. In 1847, a simple hand-held pencil sharpener was designed and patented by Thierry des Estivaux. The hand-held pencil sharpeners we still use today, the "prism sharpeners", are similar to his design of a tube fitted with a narrowing cone and a blade.

In the United States of America, the first pencil sharpener was patented in 1855 by Walter Kittredge Foster of Bangor, Maine. His company produced these small hand-held sharpeners in large numbers and also sold them in Europe. Often the point of the pencil breaks off while trying to hold the prism sharpeners steady while the pencil is turned (or vice versa). This problem was solved by the development of the planetary pencil sharpener.

The A.B. Dick Planetary Pencil Pointer was developed by G. F. Ballou and patented on March 17, 1896. The sharpener has two milling disks rotating around their respective axes (like a planet) as they revolve around the tip of the pencil.[2] The sharpener and pencil are stationary while the crank of the sharpener is turned. "It claimed to be the only system by which a perfect point could be made on pencils of all kinds, grades and sizes."[3] An advertisement states:

> ***"NOW A Woman CAN Sharpen A Pencil.***
> *The day of whittling has gone by. In every bank, office, school, store, draughting room, and home there is or should be a* ***Planetary Pencil Pointer****. The only successful device for sharpening lead pencils, slate pencils, colored pencils, wax crayons, etc. – no sand paper, files or knives, simply two revolving wheels that clip off the shavings and taper the point, but preserves the softest lead. Simple, compact, cleanly. Saves the cost in the saving of lead."*[4]

The A.B. Dick Company sold these sharpeners until the mid 1910s. The company was incorporated in Chicago, IL as a lumber company by Albert Blake Dick (1856-1934) in 1884. It grew into an office supplies company, and became the world's largest manufacturer of mimeograph equipment.



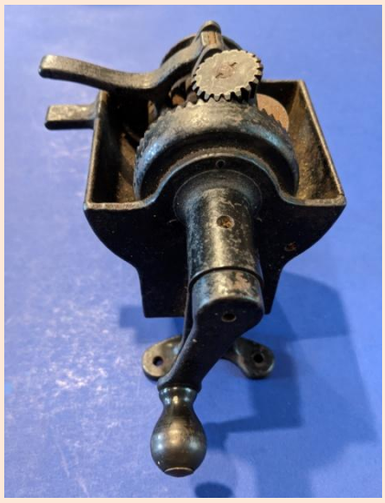
A.B. Dick Planetary Pencil Pointer
Front View

BHSM Collection

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum has an A.B. Dick Planetary Pencil Pointer in its collection. It is made of cast iron, and measures about 5 inches in height, 6.5 inches width and 4.25 inches in length. Unfortunately, it is missing the metal box which would catch the shavings from the pencil, and the donor has not been identified. By squeezing the two handles on the left, the pencil can be inserted.

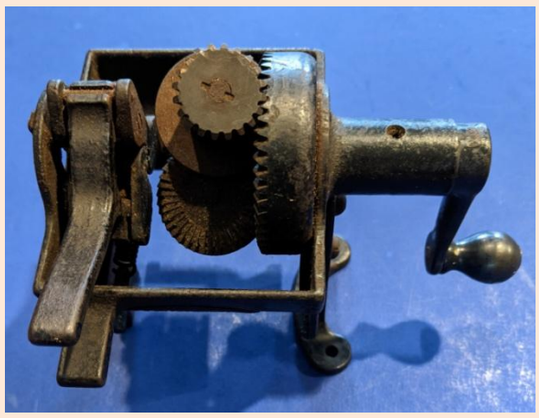
A.B. Dick Planetary Pencil Pointer
Side *View*

BHSM Collection



A.B. Dick Planetary Pencil Pointer
Side *View*

BHSM Collection



A.B. Dick Planetary Pencil Pointer
Front View

BHSM Collection

A.B. Dick Planetary Pencil Pointer
Name Plate

BHSM Collection

The design of the planetary mechanism that was used in the Planetary Pencil Pointer was improved in 1904 by the Olcott Climax Pencil Sharpener. It replaced the milling disks with a cylindrical cutting head with spiral cutting edges. The next big innovation in pencil sharpeners was the development of electrical sharpeners. Developed in 1910, they became widely available in the 1940s. Pencil sharpeners have not changed much since that time except for the materials. However, other tools for writing (such as ballpoint pens, mechanical pencils and digital technologies) have gained widespread popularity since the second half of the twentieth century. When was the last time you used a pencil sharpener?

Acknowledgements:
[1] https://pencils.com/pages/the-history-of-the-pencil
[2] https://www.officemuseum.com/pencil_sharpeners.htm
[3] http://www.pasttools.org/articles/pencil_sharpeners.htm
[4] https://vintage-ads.livejournal.com/3065456.html
https://www.madeinchicagomuseum.com/single-post/ab-dick-company/
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https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/antique-planetary-pencil-pointer-405131616
Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, Massachusetts
Photography by Inga Milbauer

Published 23 September 2022
Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc.