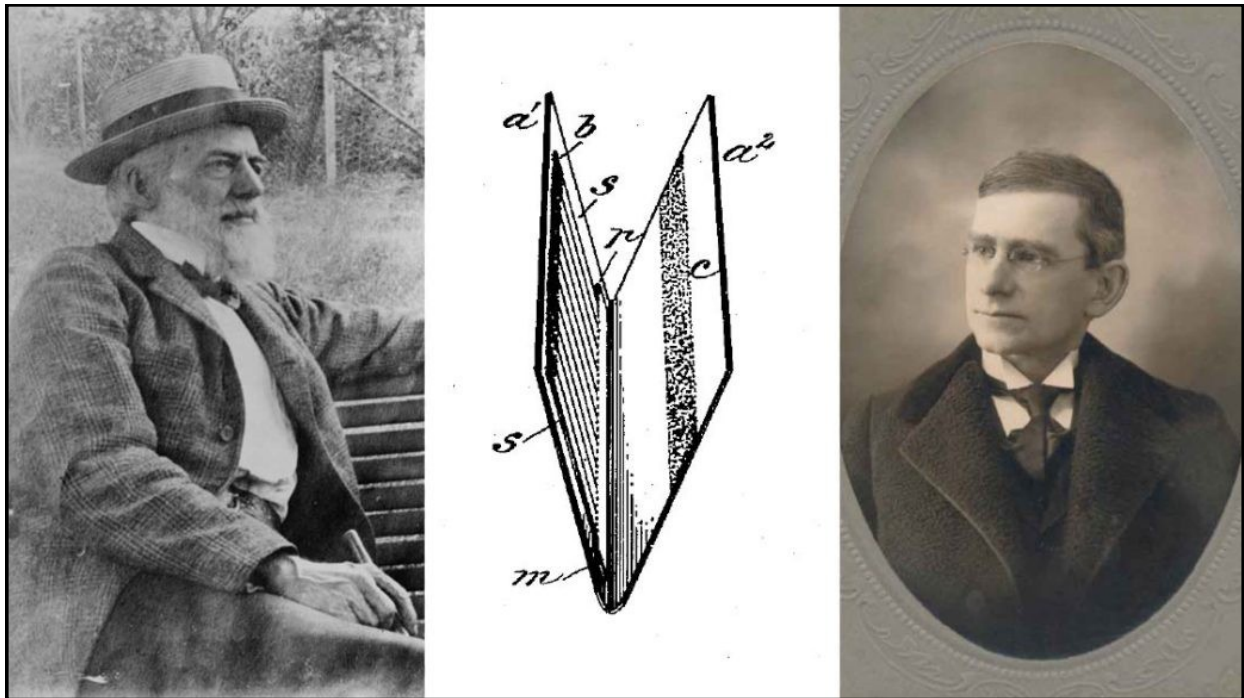


Pusey vs. Bowman

by Mike Prero

[November 20, 2109 article from Bowman's hometown newspaper –*LebTown*]



“The invention of the matchbook in the late 19th century has long been credited to a Philadelphia attorney, but a Lebanon entrepreneur and newspaper proprietor Charles Bowman has begun to get the recognition he deserves for creating the most common design.

One half of the story begins with Joshua Pusey, a Philadelphia lawyer who was born in 1842 and developed a number of inventions throughout his life. These inventions ranged from the widely used (Pusey is credited by the *New York Times* with creating the modern toboggan) to the amusingly niche (it seems unlikely that his “coin-operated dispenser for opera glasses” found similar popularity). But Pusey’s greatest legacy, aside from

the toboggan, is the invention of the matchbook.

The standard origin story, which typically names Pusey alone as the inventor, goes as such: Pusey, a fashionable man about town, disliked carrying around a bulky box of matches with him. He had the simple idea to use a folded bit of cardboard to secure the matches (the better to fit inside the pockets of his suits, as the story goes), and thus the first incarnation of the matchbook was born.

Pusey's design was simple but clever, with one dubious feature. Two rows of matches were fastened inside a small square of folded cardboard that could be opened like a book. However, the striking surface on Pusey's design was *also* put inside the fold, right alongside the matches, and a hasty swipe of a match could light the whole book on fire. Despite this flaw, the contraption was admirable and sleek, and Pusey dubbed it a "flexible."

Pusey secured a patent on his design in September of 1892. But it was a Lebanon man whose patent, received only a few weeks later, is recognizable as the first modern matchbook: Charles Bowman.

Bowman, born in Lebanon in 1847, was "a mechanical as well as a journalistic genius" (*Lebanon Daily News*, Aug. 21, 1902). Growing up in a family of farmers and merchants and attending local schools, Bowman became involved in local businesses, including the Electric Light and Power Company, and his inventions and entrepreneurship made him a prominent Lebanon businessman.

It is unknown where exactly Bowman's inspiration for creating a matchbook came from, but it nevertheless led him to a design that stood the test of time. Crucially, the Bowman matchbook keeps its striker on the outside surface, not nestled on the interior next to the matches. It also led to the eventual creation of the words "close cover before striking," a bit of instructional phrasing that became iconic in its own right (compare "mind the gap" or "objects in mirror are closer than they appear").

Pusey got wind of the rival inventor, who lived only two hours away. It all came to a head in June of 1893, when Pusey challenged Bowman's patent. Bowman was by now in business with his company, the American Safety Head Match Company, which had begun operation at the start of the year. Pusey, despite being a patent lawyer himself, failed to overturn Bowman's design, and it was upheld in a decision in March of 1894. It was a short-lived victory for Bowman, for the American Safety Head Match Company burnt out only three years later.

Both inventors eventually sold their patents to the Diamond Match Company, a formidable presence in the match manufacturing world. Pusey let his go in 1896, before securing a job with Diamond itself in their legal department. Bowman's design also sold in 1896 and quickly became the standard. When the Mendelson Opera Company used matchbook covers to promote a comedian's show in the last years of the 1890s, the market for matchbooks exploded, and enthu-

PUBLIC NOTICE.—NOTICE IS HEREBY
given that an application will be made to
the Governor of Pennsylvania on Thursday,
February 2d, A. D. 1893, by Charles M. Bow-
man, Josiah Funck, William Louser, Jacob L.
Rise and William S. Huber, under the Act of
Assembly entitled "An Act to provide for the
incorporation and regulation of certain corpo-
rations," approved April 29, 1874, and the sup-
plements thereto, for the charter of an intend-
ed corporation to be called "The American
Safety Head Match Company," the character
and object of which is the manufacture of the
Patent Safety Head Match and other matches,
and for these purposes to have, possess and
enjoy all the rights, benefits and privileges of
said Act of Assembly and supplements thereto.
CHAS. M. ZERBE, Solicitor.
Lebanon, Pa., January 12, 1893—t

siasts of phillumeny, the hobby of matchbook collecting, have been admiring them ever since.

For a long time, Bowman's story and involvement with the early history of the matchbook had been largely untold. The Rathkamp Matchcover Society, which claims to be the oldest phillumenic organization in the world, merely notes that "there is some debate" on Pusey as the sole inventor of the matchbook.

That's at least better than a brief 2012 article by the *New York Times* which lacks even an allusion to Bowman's involvement.

But history has begun to warm to Bowman again. There have been a number of articles in recent years that explain the Pusey-Bowman debate and note that Bowman's design is the one that had a major effect on the matchbook's popularity. The advertising potential offered by a well-designed matchbook was not lost on 20th century companies, who utilized the invention and its "20 little salesmen" to promote all kinds of products and services.

Even after selling his patent to the Diamond Match Company, Bowman continued to tinker with new inventions and improvements to existing ones. These included a fireproof book, a method of rail track construction, a kind of explosive fire extinguisher, a hose drier, and even a match designed to be vermin-proof (evidently rodents gnawing on matches were a fire hazard back in the day).

Not only was Bowman a keen inventor in his own right, he was also the proprietor of the first morning newspaper in the county, the *Lebanon Daily Times*, which officially began publication in February of 1876.

According to *The Newspapers of Lebanon County*, by Robert A. Heilman and Gladys Bucher Sowers, *The Times* grew out of Bowman's earlier *Lebanon Valley Standard*. It was also tied to a number of associated regional weeklies, also run by Bowman: the *Annvil Record*, the *Fredericksburg Times*, the *Jonestown Journal*, the *Mt. Zion Bulletin*, the *Myerstown Gazette*, the *Newmanstown and Sheridan Star*, the *Palmyra Register*, the *Richland Advocate*, and the *Schaefferstown Herald*.

Aside from the myriad publications Bowman oversaw (including ones even beyond these), he also served as a Lebanon city treasurer for one term.

As Bowman aged and his health declined, so did his newspapers. The Times shut down sometime in the 1920s, though Bowman remained a well-respected citizen. In September 1930, after several months of pneumonia and illness, he died at the age of 82 and the community mourned the loss. Bowman is buried in Mount Lebanon Cemetery. Onetime rival Pusey had died several decades earlier in 1906.

Though Bowman may have received little attention for his contributions to the world of matches and matchboxes, history is now recognizing him as another impressive inventor alongside Pusey—it just took time to catch on.”
[Thanks to Andy Denes, CA, for sending this in]

SHINES AS A DOUBLE GENIUS

EDITOR BOWMAN INVENTS A
MOUSE PROOF MATCH

And Disposes of it to the Diamond
Match Company, and the Golden
Flow Will Soon Begin.

Charles M. Bowman, the genial and versatile editor and proprietor of the *Daily Times*, who is a mechanical as well as a journalistic genius, received notice Wednesday from his attorneys at Washington that he has been granted a patent for a mouse proof match, which he applied for in February 3, 1900.

That his invention is valuable is evidenced by the fact that he has assigned it to the Diamond match company, which controls the match market of the world. Mr. Bowman is to be congratulated on his excellent success, and the hope is expressed that he may soon revel in the golden flow.