Printing’s Inventor
Remains a Mystery

We know little about the man who probably put together the modern printing system and a method for creating a true masterpiece — the 42 Line Bible. Johann Gutenberg worked in strict secrecy and didn’t sign his books — and historians have uncovered no notes by or contemporary narratives about the man or his work. We have only a few fifteenth-century government and legal records about him.

Historians began compiling and analyzing those documents almost 300 years after the fact. Two mid-twentieth century works on Gutenberg — Douglas McMurtrie’s The Gutenberg Documents and Victor Scholderer’s Johann Gutenberg, The Inventor of Printing — still rely on those documents reported and analyzed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians.

Historians say Gutenberg was born about 1395 into a patrician family in Mainz, Germany, but was constantly pressed for money throughout his life. In his early thirties he moved to Strasbourg during sharp disputes among Mainz’s wealthy classes. He apparently experimented with printing and definitely had some legal and social problems in Strasbourg. He entered into a partnership in 1438, with all parties sworn to secrecy. Testimony from an ensuing legal battle indicates they worked with the tools of printing, but there are no direct statements that they were developing a movable type system.

The historians note that Gutenberg’s social problems also brought him to court. One of Strasbourg’s gentry ladies sued him for breach of promise of marriage. He apparently won the case and remained unattached for life, but his vehement defense testimony resulted in his having to pay damages of defamation. The city’s tax records showed he had a well stocked wine cellar. He paid tax on 420 gallons of wine in 1439.

The documents show that he had returned to Mainz by 1450 when he entered into a partnership with lawyer Johann Fust, which again landed Gutenberg in court. The lawsuit document shows Fust invested considerable money with Gutenberg for “the work of the books” — the printing of the 42-line Bibles. Fust foreclosed on Gutenberg in 1455 just as the Bibles neared completion, taking his materials, his press, and even his technician, Peter Schoeffer.

The historians propose two possibilities why Fust shut Gutenberg down at this crucial moment. Fust’s own creditors may have pressed him to repay money, or he may just have been a sharp businessman. Fust knew that the completion of the Bibles ended his partnership with Gutenberg. Fust would get his initial investment back and his share of the profits on the Bible run, but Gutenberg would then have the printing “secret” to himself with enough capital to subsidize future work. Perhaps Fust saw that foreclosing on Gutenberg gave Fust “the secret” and the printing monopoly. Whatever the reason, Fust and Schoeffer became wealthy and famous through printing while Gutenberg lived out his days printing on borrowed equipment and a small pension by the grace of the local archbishop.

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The idealized painting at top shows Johann Gutenberg inspecting proofs from his press. Although he usually gets credit for “inventing” printing, we know relatively little about him or his work. The bottom engraving, the earliest portrait of Gutenberg, shows him holding a die of twenty-four letters. The portrait, which may have been an imaginary likeness, first appeared in a book in 1584. Blind and impoverished, Gutenberg had died in 1468, after forfiting ownership of his printing system to a creditor, who grew wealthy printing books and for many years claimed credit as the inventor of printing.