

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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In Appreciation of the Personal Computer

Last month marked the 20th anniversary of an auspicious cultural development, the introduction of the PC, the personal computer. The anniversary has nothing to do with the State House or my official business, but it has introduced radical changes in the way our business and personal lives are conducted. And since the legislature is meeting informally and the budget negotiations are still unresolved, the personal computer is the topic of this end-of-summer Byline.

The news of that landmark event led me to recall my first home computer, the second and succeeding ones, on the assumption that my personal history is similar to other home users. The monumental computer-generated changes in our lives over the past 20 years parallel those changes.

Before the existence of home computers, I worked for the Department of Defense as a programmer, so I was excited at the prospect of owning my own machine. The new 64K Apple 2 would be a great addition to my home, even though it took an entire morning to produce the one page letter that I could have typed in 30 minutes. Purchased in 1982, it introduced a magical leap from typewriter technology. Recalling the screen with its green glow and its blinking cursor, it seems primitive now. But at the time it meant the end of longhand drafting and erasable typing paper.

The computer, bought as I was embarking on the task of editing Reflections of Longmeadow, helped produce the timely completion of that volume. Yet today such a machine with a monotone screen and daisy wheel printer could most easily be found in a museum setting. My personal machine left my possession when it was stolen from a parked car on the streets of Boston.

After that first computer, my home office has made the transition through the two other models to its present-day iMac. It works well for my needs, though the six-gigabyte hard drive, 128-megabyte machine (I am told) is already woefully undersized for future needs.

The first computer replaced the typewriter; the second introduced the mouse; the third showed me the Internet; and the fourth added real-time interactivity of a cable Internet connection. What's next? The computer does not have voice communication or a webcam. And my Internet communications are still hampered by the need for wiring.

Today, I still use the computer for "typing." It is difficult to find an actual typewriter for those occasions it is necessary to fill in spaces on a printed form. Over time I have added the functions of paying bills, ordering merchandise, reading the news and communicating with friends and constituents. Could you have imagined such activities 20 years ago? I wonder what unexpected uses await us in the years ahead.

NOTE: The state's fiscal year just ended its second month and departments are functioning with interim appropriations based on last year's appropriation. Government suffers as uncertainty keeps new programs from being implemented, while House and Senate negotiators fail to agree on a single document. I will continue to provide updates on the status of the budget.