

**A Bibliography of the
Personal Computer**

A Bibliography of the Personal Computer

The Books and Periodical Articles

Roy A. Allan

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This eBook is dedicated to my daughters Jackie, Lisa and Susan; my sons Scott and Thomas; and my dear wife Ann Louise.

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Preface

This bibliography has been abstracted from my book entitled “A History of the Personal Computer: The People and the Technology” (ISBN 0-9689108-0-7). It has been updated to add additional books and new books released between 2001 and 2005. It has also been rearranged to facilitate its use as a separate publication.

The content of this eBook is a copy of my paperback book with the same title (ISBN 0-9689108-4-X) – First Edition 1.0.

Part One of the eBook is a bibliography of books and Part Two is a bibliography of periodical articles.

We do believe that this bibliography is the most extensive available in reference to the history of the personal computer and the industry. The author would appreciate advisement of any errors or omissions.

Part Three is a reprint of an article written by the author entitled “What Was The First Personal Computer?” It was first printed in *The Analytical Engine*, May 1996 issue, Volume 3.3, pp. 42-46, a Journal of the Computer History Association of California. The reprint has been adjusted to correct an editorial error noted in the Fall 1996 issue, page 33 of the journal. This journal was discontinued after the Fall 1996 issue.

Roy A. Allan,

London, Ontario, Canada

March, 2006.

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Part Three ...

What Was The First Personal Computer?

By: Roy A. Allan.

Defining Terms

Recent literature is inconsistent in defining “the first personal computer” as the term is presently understood. This has resulted, to an extent, from limited awareness of some early products with a claim to the title. Which computer was truly the first to be personal in the modern sense?

This article does not discuss the early personal use of mainframe computers; it also excludes experimental computers, such as the MIT Memory Test Computer, and minicomputers, because they were not oriented to the consumer market. In an article entitled “Is There Such a Thing as a Personal Computer?” [7], Lawrence I. Press presented several criteria – such as architecture, software, physical characteristics and marketing – which would serve to distinguish a personal computer.

Thus, for the purposes of this article, the term “personal computer” requires clarification. Up to the mid-1970’s, when the majority of computers were mainframes shared by many users, a “personal” computer was defined as being designed for use by one person. As the technology progressed, our understanding of the term has changed; we now consider some early hardware too large and too expensive to qualify as being “personal,” and require that “a PC” should also be small, easy to use, and of relatively low cost. Today’s personal computer has evolved into a desktop appliance, available through the consumer market, that provides ready and affordable computing power to an individual. In this context, which of the early computers then called “personal” should we consider for the distinction of being “the First”?

1957: The IBM Auto-Point

John L. Lentz at IBM developed a small Personal Automatic Calculator (PAC) in the late 1940's, and described an engineering model of PAC in December 1954. This project evolved into the IBM 610 computer, described by the reference work "IBM's Early Computers" [1] as being "IBM's first Personal Computer." The Model 610, also called the Auto-Point, was announced in September 1957, with a purchase price of \$55,000. The computer system consisted of a floor-standing cabinet – incorporating the electronics, magnetic drum, plug-board, and separate paper-tape readers and punches – with a keyboard for input and an electric typewriter for output. It was not a stored-program computer; a programmer entered instructions from the keyboard, or input them through the paper-tape readers.

Scientists and engineers used the Auto-Point computer to solve small scientific and engineering problems. IBM built about 180 units, but was not then an aggressive competitor in the development of small computer systems. Other organizations such as Bendix Aviation, Librascope, Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), were thus able to participate in an emerging market and developed, respectively, the G-15, LGP-30, PDP Series and LINC small computer systems.

1963: MIT LINC

Gordon Bell, a principal in the design of early DEC PDP-Series minicomputers, has stated that the MIT LINC was the first personal computer. MIT developed LINC – an acronym for "Laboratory INstrument Computer" – to facilitate the use of computer technology in biomedical research laboratories [3]. Principal designers were Wesley Clark and Charles Molnar. MIT demonstrated a prototype in early 1962 and completed sixteen units by mid-1963, which were assembled by scientific users to improve their understanding of the system. LINC had four console modules, an electronics cabinet and keyboard. The processor logic circuits used transistorized circuit modules from DEC. An oscilloscope module could display a 512-by-512-point image. Memory was magnetic core with a basic capacity of 1,024 twelve-bit words; two magnetic-tape drives provided additional storage. Each system cost

about \$32,000. Initial software was a text editor, an assembler and some utilities. A small number of scientific laboratories used the LINC computer in dedicated applications.

The IBM 610 and the MIT LINC were “personal” computers developed with reference to established larger architectures, at a cost which confined their use to major scientific organizations. In the late 1960’s a company called Computer Terminal Corporation (CTC) took the opposite tack by starting development of a “smart” computer terminal which would incorporate a microprocessor.

1971: Datapoint 2200

An Invention & Technology article [11] quotes Jack Frassanito as saying “I invented the personal computer...” CTC hired Frassanito in 1969 to develop a computer terminal that would have its own processor and other circuitry which would allow it to mimic other major computer manufacturers’ terminals. The self-contained unit included a 12-line display, keyboard, two cassette tapes, a Texas Instruments bit-serial processor supported by TTL logic, 8K bytes of internal memory. CTC introduced the resulting Datapoint 2200 in June 1970, and shipped the first units in early 1971.

Although CTC designed the unit purely as a terminal with unprecedented capabilities, a number of commercial users wrote programs and used it as an early, small, desktop computer. The Datapoint 2200, however, was still not made available at a price attractive to an individual user. The first personal computer with a price affordable to an individual user in a potentially larger market was the Kenbak-1.

1971: Kenbak-1

An Early Model Personal Computer Contest, sponsored by the Computer Museum of Boston, ComputerLand and CW Communications in 1986, selected the Kenbak-1 as being the first personal computer. The criterion for selection of the winner was “interest, significance and date of each model” [5]. Designed by John V. Blankenbaker and introduced in late 1971, the computer used 130 small and medium-scale integrated circuits and had a memory of 256

8-bit bytes; it processed 1000 instructions per second. Input and output were very limited, with no keyboard or screen. Blankenbaker sold only 40 units at a price of \$750 [4].

The Kenbak-1, with its primitive user interface, stands in sharp contrast to history's next "first personal computer" – the stunningly innovative, feature-rich and costly Alto, developed by the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) in California.

1973: Xerox Alto

According to Alexander and Smith's "Fumbling the Future: How Xerox Invented, Then Ignored, the First Personal Computer" [9], Xerox developed the Alto computer as a research project in the early 1970's; construction of the prototype was begun in November 1972 and completed in April 1973. Lead engineers included Chuck Thacker, Larry Tesler, Butler Lampson, Peter Deutsch, Bob Metcalfe and several others. Intended sale price of a system was about \$30,000, and the production cost of early examples was nearly that high. An Alto computer system consisted of a main tower case intended to fit under a desk, cabled to a grayscale bit-mapped display screen, 8 inches horizontal by 10 inches vertical, that could display 60 lines of 90 characters – a full portrait page. Input was by keyboard supplemented by the "mouse" originally designed by Douglas Engelbart at SRI. The processor was a 16-bit custom made unit and basic memory was 64K 16-bit words, expandable to 256K. One or two 2.5 megabyte pack-type hard-disk drives were installed in the main cabinet. PARC also developed a new interactive programming language called Smalltalk which was used to create a windowed graphic environment and the desktop metaphor that was an unprecedented synthesis of hardware and software. Furthermore, PARC surrounded its individual Altos with a resource pool that included an Ethernet network, shared laser printers, and electronic mail. These were new human interface concepts that eventually formed the basis for developments by Apple Computer, Microsoft and others.

But the Alto, like computers previously described, and like contemporary systems including the National Radio Institute NRI 832 kit, Hewlett-Packard HP 9830A programmable calculator, EPD

System One computer kit and IBM 5100 portable computer, still relied on discrete components. Use of discrete logic kept production labor-intensive and limited the designer's ability to achieve a low system price. Technological developments at Intel Corporation were about to surmount this last obstacle to the affordable small computer.

1971: Intel

Intel introduced large-scale integrated memory chips and microprocessors in the early 1970's, providing the basis for low-cost personal microcomputers. The company released the 4-bit, 4004-based SIM-4 simulator board – the first commercial product incorporating a microprocessor – in May 1972, followed by the 8008-based SIM-8. The Intellec 4 and Intellec 8 development systems, or “blue boxes,” followed in August 1973 [6].

The SIM-4 was not a computer, but a design aid to facilitate the development of microprocessor applications. Implementation of the microprocessor in commercial computing really started with the European Micral.

1973: Micral

The French Micral microcomputer developed by REE (Recherches et Études Électroniques) was the earliest personal computer to use a microprocessor [2 & 5]. Truong Trong Thi managed the company and released the computer, which sold for \$1,950, in January 1973. The unit included an Intel 8008 microprocessor and 256 bytes of RAM, expandable to one kilobyte.

France had produced the first microcomputer. Another year would go by before the first North American microcomputer was advertised in the March 1974 issue of *QST*, an amateur radio magazine.

1974-5: Early US Microcomputers

The first personal computer in the USA to use a microprocessor was the Scelbi-8H, designed by Nat Wadsworth and Robert Findley of Scelbi Computer Consulting, Inc. in Milford, CT. Described in advertisements as “The totally new and very first – Mini-computer,” the 8H used the Intel 8008 microprocessor and up to 4K bytes of memory. In kit form it sold for “as low as \$440.” The price was right, but Wadsworth had health problems, and a change in the company’s first priority – to publishing – resulted in poor sales of the computer.

The first “magazine project” microcomputer, called the Mark-8, was designed by Jonathan A. Titus and appeared in the July 1974 issue of *Radio-Electronics* [10]. It used the Intel 8008 microprocessor and had 256 bytes of memory. Enthusiasts could buy plans from the magazine for a nominal amount, or a substantially complete kit of parts for \$350; sales were insignificant. Today, just over twenty years later, a Mark-8 is one of the most valuable and sought-after of all historical micros.

It was a misfortune of both the Scelbi-8H and the Mark-8 to stumble and fall in the darkness just before dawn. Only a few months later, a New Mexico-based company called MITS – Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems – could not cope with the orders it received when it introduced the Altair microcomputer.

1975: Altair 8800

The January issue of *Popular Electronics* [8] featured the Altair 8800 developed by Ed Roberts of MITS – although the unit on the magazine’s cover was only a painted, empty case. It used the Intel 8080 microprocessor, and basic memory was only 256 bytes. A 100-pin bus with 16 slots facilitated expansion of the system with additional memory and peripherals. Kit price by mail order was \$397. The Altair 880 was a startling success, and a flood of orders created severe delivery problems at MITS; in theory, the same computer was available assembled and tested for \$621, but customers who ordered a finished unit waited for months while the factory caught up.

In retrospect, the Altair’s position in the vanguard of the microprocessor revolution is puzzling. The layout of the hundred-pin Altair bus (more commonly known today as the “S-100 bus”) was deeply compromised and made the design of third-party peripherals unnecessarily difficult. MITS’ own add-on products were sometimes poorly engineered, like the 4K dynamic memory boards, or sometimes were announced but never produced. And if the hardware was attractively priced, the software was not; a paper tape of Bill Gates and Paul Allen’s “Micro-soft” Altair BASIC interpreter sold for \$150.

Regardless, the combination of the Altair hardware and the Microsoft BASIC interpreter was the first runaway success of the “personal computer” industry. More sophisticated products with better promotion, like the Apple II computer introduced in June 1977 and IBM’s PC released in August 1981, gave substantial computing power to the consumer in the mass market. Which of these early computers we can honor as “the First” will depend on our narrow and literal, or broad and inclusive, interpretation of the term “personal computer” – which has obviously meant many things to many people over the past forty years!

Conclusion

The IBM 610 Auto-Point Computer was the earliest personal computer, but it did not use the stored-program concept. The MIT LINC used the stored-program concept, but was a limited scientific project with no impact in the general market. The Kenbak-1, the first low-cost personal computer, had a very limited interface and enjoyed few sales. Xerox' Alto introduced many of the concepts widely used in computers today, but was a "personal computer" only in a rarefied environment and at prohibitive cost. The French REE Micral was the first personal microcomputer to use a microprocessor. The Scelbi-8H and the Mark-8 were the first US microcomputers, but did not have a significant success in the market. The Altair 8800 – with a more powerful microprocessor, an innovative BASIC interpreter and an affordable price – was "the first" personal computer to be a commercial success and start a "personal" technological revolution.

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