

Origin of the Sheaffer Balance – Discovered at Last?

Though Sheaffer's radical streamlined fountain pen triggered a design revolution, it may well have purloined the key element from a nearby, small competitor

By Daniel Kirchheimer

“We are the originators of the properly balanced fountain pen”

From whom did that proud declaration issue? And was it really true? When the W. A. Sheaffer Pen Company released its Balanced fountain pen in December of 1928 after applying for a design patent on the distinctive torpedo-shaped instrument, the sleek form seemed to be without precedent – a quantum leap from the staid, square-ended pens that had been the prevailing fashion for decades. Indeed, the novelty of the shape passed the test of a patent challenge just a few years after its introduction, due, in part, to the other party's inability to produce any earlier pens that shared the symmetrically-tapered look Sheaffer claimed as its own.

But did the new design spring, fully-formed, from the head of Craig Sheaffer, to whom credit is given in the patent application? I think not. Instead, I now believe the company developed the design by logically furthering a concept already in its product line, and in addition, I will attempt to show that the earlier Sheaffer product itself was not even an original Sheaffer design, but rather was a result of a frank copying of a competitor's product, and furthermore that even the descriptor “Balanced” is not an original Sheaffer creation. Along the way, I will stamp out one of the most longstanding and entrenched myths about a particular style of Sheaffer pen.

The Essence of the Balanced Pen

The key attribute of the Sheaffer Balanced pen from a functional perspective is the extended, tapered tail of the body. This shape allows the user to write comfortably with the pen without placing the cap on the back end of the barrel (“posting”) in order to provide needed length and, yes, balance.

The tapering of the cap provides largely an aesthetic component, and it is true that Sheaffer did not protect the Balance with a “utility” patent, which would have required proving the *functional* value of the entire shape; the company settled for a design patent only, but marketing materials – and the name – make it abundantly clear that Sheaffer wanted the, well, balanced aspect of the design to be viewed as a major functional advantage over “square end” pens.

Though the ability to write comfortably without posting the cap was a benefit applicable to both models with a pocket clip and to those with a ring, it was especially useful for ringtops, because with those models, the cap generally would remain attached to a chain or ribbon secured to the writer's clothing when the pen was uncapped for use, and thus it would not even be available for posting. The tapered, extended tail to the body of the pen provided a comfortable feel in the user's hand when writing, even

without the cap posted, unlike earlier square-ended designs that were awkward to use without posting the cap.



*With or without the cap, Balance^o
brings an exhilarating urge to write*

Whichever way you prefer to write, this versatile Lifetime^o pen slips smoothly into your hand. Capped or uncapped, streamline Balance^o conquers writing fatigue. Self-poised, this pen is eager to write. The top-heaviness of old-style designs is eliminated in this Balance^o Lifetime^o pen, so that it swings of its own accord to an easier writing angle.

Figure 1: Detail of 1931 Sheaffer ad highlighting the function of the tapered barrel shape (courtesy Roger Wooten)

When the Balanced pen line was introduced – and it was a *very* limited line at first, consisting of just four models, according to the first known catalog entry – those first versions had quite long barrel tapers; Sheaffer subsequently shortened them a bit. One of those first models was a standard-girth, full-length ringtop model, available in black, Deluxe Black and Pearl, and Jade.



Figure 2: Early Ringtop Sheaffer Balanced Lifetime Pen in Jade

In addition, one as-yet undocumented but well-known variant of these first models has a tapered barrel end that is a bit longer still, and that is made from a separate piece of material, rather than being a turned-down portion of the barrel proper. This part was generally fabricated from what appears to be a hard composition material that was likely molded rather than turned to shape. It was attached to the end of the barrel with a threaded stud that mated with a threaded hole in the end of the body of the barrel. (There are also variants of this piece that appear to be made of celluloid and that are solvent-welded in place, and there are also pens with two-piece barrels where the end piece is somewhat shorter and is made of a matching celluloid material.) In a sense, with that extra-long tail, they are the most balanced of the Balances.



Figure 3: Ringtop Balanced Lifetime with screw-in black barrel endpiece

We now know the story of the launch of the Balanced fountain pen: The stunning new concept was unveiled at the end of 1928 with no fanfare, but it took the market by storm, wildly exceeding Sheaffer's expectations, and the rest is history. But had Sheaffer even earlier produced a model of fountain pen that incorporated this same balanced, tapered-barrel principle prior to the creation of the capital-B Balance? Had Sheaffer appropriated this idea from themselves, so it can still be said that Sheaffer was the originator of the design, only earlier than previously thought? The answer is yes... and, maybe, no.

The Missing Link: Model J74TR

Indeed, Sheaffer *had* produced a tapered-barrel pen that prefigured the Balanced instruments: the humble item designated only as model J74TR, which appears first (and only) in Sheaffer's 1928 catalog, mere months before the Balance proper was introduced.

Just like the later true Balanced pen described and depicted above, this earlier pen was constructed with a separate, screw-on black barrel tail; the cap, however, was flat on top in the style of the rest of Sheaffer's line, and it bore a black band at its top reminiscent of the 5-30 and 7-30 pens (though the cap

was a bit shorter) with an embedded White Dot in that black band indicative of the pen's Lifetime guarantee (Sheaffer also produced a similar model with a one-color cap under its Univer sub-brand, as well as an extremely rare Sheaffer-branded version with a pocket clip). Sheaffer described the model as having a "short black quill" in the catalog listing, with no other comment as to purpose. The key characteristic, however, is that the shape and configuration of this model's barrel is *identical* to the soon-to-follow true Balance pens with quills.



Figure 4: Circa mid-1928 Sheaffer J74TR, with "short black quill"

If the role of this distinctive model as the ur-Balance, if you will, is not evident from its shape, there is another key piece of evidence: the model symbol. Here's how it breaks down:

Model Symbol Element	Meaning
J	Jade
74	Model 74 nib; a medium-sized Lifetime point
T	Tapered (speculative)
R	Ringtop

Obviously, the key element to the model symbol is that "**T**" suffix, which appears in no other Sheaffer model of that or any earlier time. (Note that Sheaffer's numbering system also had a "**T**" *prefix* code that indicated a slightly **Thinner** version of the pen model it was applied to, so, for example, a **T8C** was a thinner **8C** [oversize Lifetime flat-top]. But this "**T**" prefix is completely unrelated to the "**T**" suffix, just as a "**C**" prefix indicates striated Golden Brown, whereas a "**C**" suffix indicates a pocket **Clip**.)

What was the model symbol for the Jade true Balanced pen discussed earlier? It was *the very same J74TR*, for both quilled and regular-style Balances. In fact, the "**T**" suffix thenceforth meant "Balance" throughout Sheaffer's model symbol system; for years, every Balanced pen carried that code to disambiguate them from their square-ended kin. I consider this linkage to be strong evidence that the Balanced model of that designation is a direct, one-generation descendant of the earlier, flat-capped model with the same symbol. It also implies that the flat-capped pen was considered by Sheaffer to be *the same model* as the tapered-cap version, further indicating that one evolved into the other. As an aside, I observe that we often refer to the Balanced-cap, flat-barreled Sheaffers that appeared around 1930 (likely as an attempt to move out old square end parts) as Half Balances, but from an evolutionary perspective, I claim the flat-capped, tapered barreled J74TR under discussion here was the original Half-Balance, on its way to becoming a full Balance under the same model number.



Figure 5: First-generation (flat-capped) J74TR (top) and second-generation (Balanced) J74TR (bottom)

Why has this connection not been considered before? The reason, I think, is that there has long been a longstanding and pervasive belief among collectors that the Sheaffers of any era with these black quills are “telephone dialers” – specialty models intended for dialing a rotary phone with their replaceable endpieces. From that viewpoint, the similarity between the flat-capped model with a quill and the later Balanced pens with quills is simply due to the fact that both were using the same component for providing the phone-dialing function, so it is completely unremarkable; one is just a flat top pen with a phone dialer, and one is a Balanced pen with a phone dialer – nothing more. This piece of conventional wisdom dates to at least as far back as 1990, when it appeared in Fischler and Schneider’s *Fountain Pens and Pencils* along with a photo of several such quilled Sheaffers, both flat-topped and Balanced.

However, this long-held belief is pure myth, in my opinion. There is not a scintilla of evidence that the quill was intended for dialing a phone. Other writing instruments (typically pencils) designed for that purpose used a completely different shape for the dialing piece – usually a spherical component. The placement of the supposed dialing piece, especially on a ringtop pen, doesn’t seem sensible, either; who would want to dial a phone while waving around an un-capped fountain pen? And why would a part intended for dialing a phone need to be so long? I’ve examined hundreds of Sheaffers with these quills and I have never seen one with the wear that would be imparted by using it to dial a phone; if that were their intended purpose, nearly every example should bear similar wear marks from that activity, as phone dials were made of thin metal at the time. Furthermore, the only Sheaffer-drafted description known of a pen with a quill – that 1928 catalog listing for the flat-top J74TR – says *nothing at all* about its being intended for dialing a telephone, and a “quill” is a clear reference to the extended form of a capless pen, but it has no association with a phone dial. And, as we will see in a moment, there is more evidence still that the purpose of that quill was not for dialing a phone, but instead to impart balance to the pen when writing without posting the cap.

So, to return to our exploration, it seems that before the Balance proper was born, Sheaffer had a model that incorporated the key functional element that provided the balanced writing experience. But was that pre-Balance J74TR, with its distinctive tapered tail that provided the crucial balance to an un-posted pen, itself a Sheaffer innovation, allowing Sheaffer to retain credit for the Balanced pen idea?

It was not.

In fact, starting well over a decade earlier, a nearby competitor had been selling a nearly identical pen.

Houston is Surprisingly Close to Fort Madison

The Houston Pen Company was named for its founder, William A. Houston, not for its location. Though it began life in Tracy, Minnesota, its tracks run eerily parallel to Sheaffer's in some ways; Houston received his first pen patent in 1908, as did Walter Sheaffer, and in 1912 Houston moved his operation to Sheaffer's backyard (by Midwest standards) – Sioux City, Iowa, just as Sheaffer was incorporating and beginning production across the state in Fort Madison. For many years, Houston, under various names, produced a line of very distinctively-shaped pens, first as dropper-fillers and syringe-fillers, and subsequently bearing the neat snap-filler patented by Martin Borbeck in 1918 (U.S. patent 1,268,206), the latter under the Snapfil name. The distinguishing characteristics of the design were the presence of a flat, ringtop cap with supplied chain and clip (or "safety device"), and a *long, tapered barrel*.



Figure 6: Snapfil Fountain Pen

This basic form must have enjoyed at least a modicum of success, given its fairly long run, and I suspect this fact had not escaped Sheaffer's notice. Indeed, though Sheaffer's aforementioned flat-capped J74TR model might have seemed quite out of place in Sheaffer's lineup, *it was a nearly exact copy* of a model of a fountain pen being sold by Houston's company under the "Snapfil" name.



Figure 7: Snapfil (top) and Sheaffer J74TR (bottom)

Given the otherwise anomalous shape of the Sheaffer with respect to the maker's other pens, and the fact that it is almost identical to a popular Snapfil model, added to the relative proximity of the Snapfil's maker, it seems extremely unlikely that Sheaffer was unaware of the Snapfil's design and that the resemblance was purely coincidental. Rather, I posit, Sheaffer simply copied what was apparently a successful pen design to gain a bit of market share. As the shape of the Snapfil was not protected by patent, it could be copied without restriction, and copy it Sheaffer did, in my opinion. In fact, it is not outside the realm of possibility that Sheaffer's subsequent tapering of the cap to create the Balance was a way to impart enough uniqueness to permit Sheaffer to protect the design from imitation by patenting it – but Sheaffer could never apply for a utility (functional) patent on the feeling of balance that the distinctive tapered barrel imparted.

The idea of shaping a fountain pen's body like a traditional dip pen holder was itself not new at all. In fact, when Sheaffer sued the Worth Featherweight Pen Company for violating Sheaffer's Balance design patent, Worth submitted evidence showing examples of pens with long, tapered barrels dating all the way back to Prince's Protean Fountain Pen from the early 1850s (though the embattled company could produce no precedent for a pen with fully-tapered cap as well, no doubt contributing to its loss in that action).

The Lynchpin

There is one last piece of evidence I would like to present in an effort to crystallize the narrative I am proposing. I have long wondered about the origin of the name that Sheaffer bestowed on its new streamlined pen. However, I had assumed we would never know the answer to this question, as it likely was proposed during some sort of spitballing session in Sheaffer's marketing department, and the event would not be recorded and would thus be lost forever in the sands of time.

However, I now have reason to believe that Sheaffer used not only Houston's pen for, shall we say, inspiration when creating the progenitor of the "Balanced" pen; I think that when it finished the job and tapered the cap, Sheaffer also took from its cross-state competitor the name itself. As evidence, I offer the following: The cover of Houston's 1915 catalog shows two pens; one of their distinctively-tapered models on the left, and a representation of a generic square end pen on the right. The caption beneath reads,

For Writing Use A Balanced Pen THE HOUSTON	For Ball Playing Use A Club ALL OTHER MAKES
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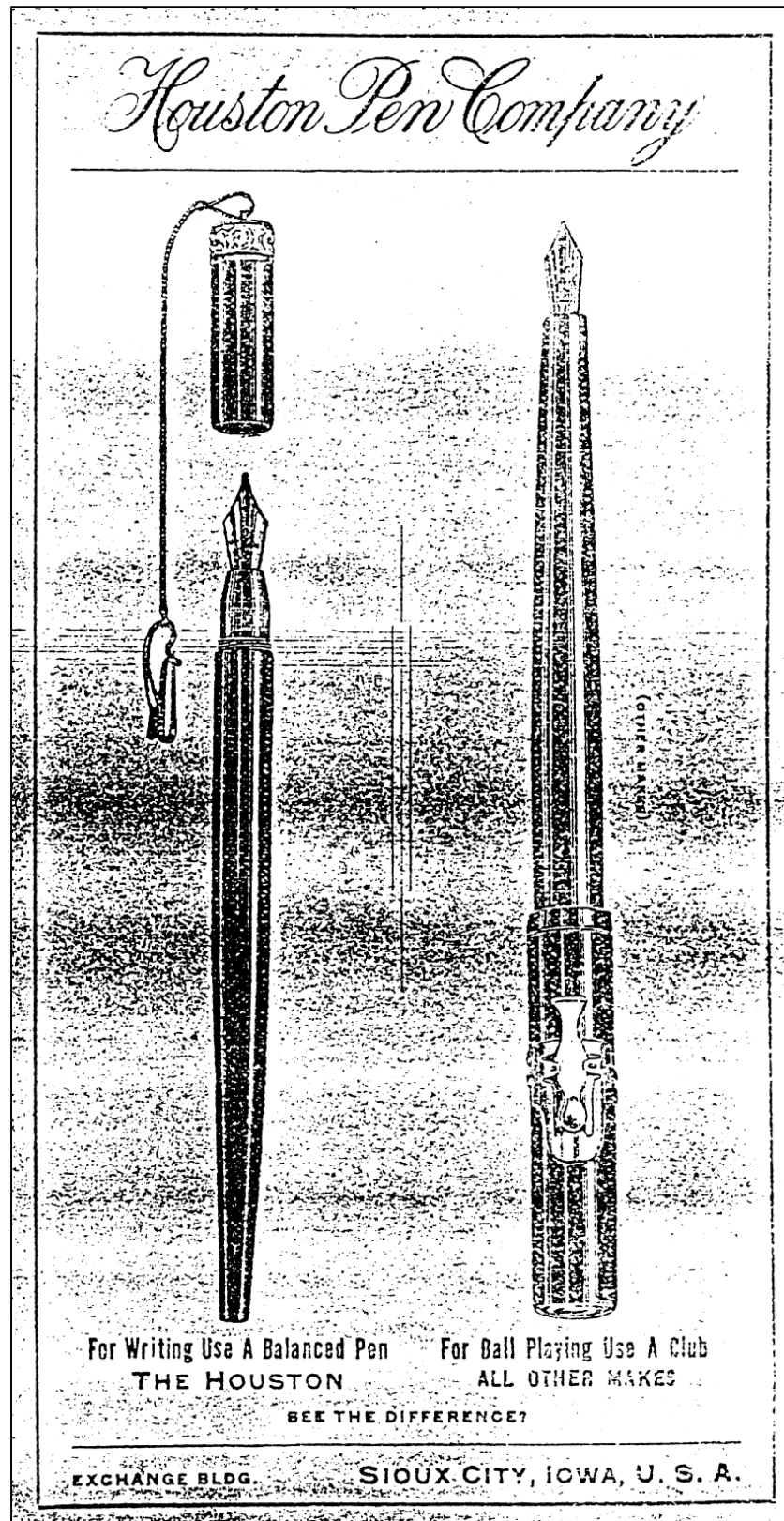


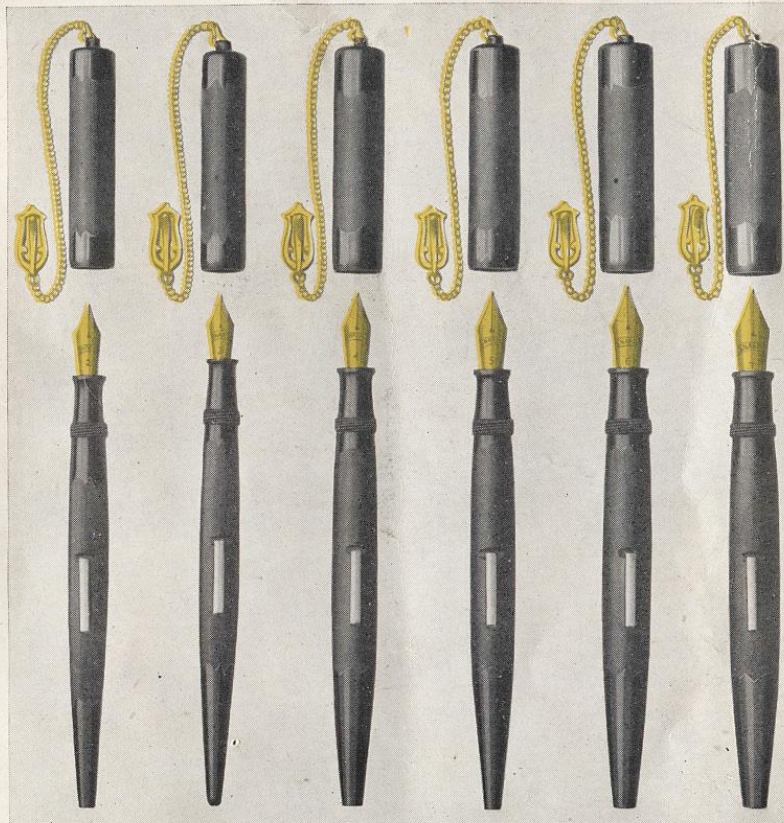
Figure 8: Cover of 1915 Houston catalog showing use of "Balanced"

In fact, the company's catalogs consistently use the terms "balance" or "balanced" when trumpeting the virtues of their fountain pen's unusual shape. For example, here is a page from an undated Snapfil catalog that is likely from the late teens or early 1920s; note the highlighting of the "balanced" nature of the pen's design:

SNAPFIL

BABY GRAND

PROPERLY BALANCED PEN WITH CHAIN
ATTACHMENT



Baby Grand No. 2	Baby Grand No. 3	Baby Grand No. 4	Baby Grand No. 5	Baby Grand No. 6	Baby Grand No. 7
Price \$3.00	Price \$3.50	Price \$4.50	Price \$5.50	Price \$6.50	Price \$7.50

Length of pen $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches.

OUR BABY GRAND is the biggest fountain pen hit of the age—a pen for the person that prefers a short holder, our number 2 and 3 being specially adapted for the school girl or boy, the proper balance improving their writing.

Figure 9: Page from undated Snapfil catalog showing use of the term "Balanced" (courtesy George Rimakis)

I believe I have presented herein compelling evidence that Houston's "Balanced Pen" served as the template for Sheaffer's flat-capped J74TR, and therefore that the shape of that Sheaffer pen's barrel had nothing to do with telephones, and everything to do with balance, just as Houston touted. And when Sheaffer tapered the cap too, and deemed it the Balanced pen, Sheaffer was simply making explicit what had already been the case with its earlier item – and with the Houston pens that Sheaffer copied.

And that bold claim to being the first to make such an implement – **"We are the originators of the properly balanced fountain pen"**? It was made not by Sheaffer in the late 1920s, but by Houston, in their 1915 catalog. Whether that declaration was true or not, one thing is now clear: Sheaffer's famous Balanced pen was most certainly not the first balanced pen.

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