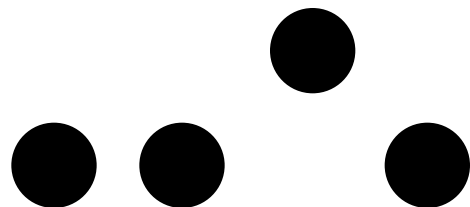


Ka-

CHONK!

**A Textile → Computing
History Zine
via Punched Cards**



Cassandra Hradil

.readme

It's hard to overstate the presence of the physical punch card in all spaces involving data in the 20th century United States: from census-keeping, to record-keeping in business, government, and schools, to writing code and programming computers. They were matter-of-fact and ubiquitous – for their operators, and for the human beings they were designed to count. A massive step forward in the automation of information, their creation and storage was a monumental task – until it wasn't.

Punch cards are an industrial technology, made to interface with machines, and with the hands of their human operators, often women. They mark a moment between the concrete and abstract, where code begins.

The materiality of punch cards is not beyond our reach. We can maintain a sense of what these cards looked like and felt. We therefore get to experience what data meant, from a tactile and practical standpoint, throughout much of computing history.

The left facing pages of this zine reproduce different punch cards (not always to scale). Arranged chronologically, with photographs, notes from historical sources, and QR codes to videos of these machines at work (where available), this incomplete assemblage helps us see technologies both historical and alive.

Threading this history together surfaces relationships between machines and people, with a visual focus on the interfacing of hands and machines. Gender, labor, and power come to the fore. We begin to see stories of whose hands punched out the data of early computation – who worked, who counted, and who was counted. By stitching together these stories, we put the history of computing back into our own hands.

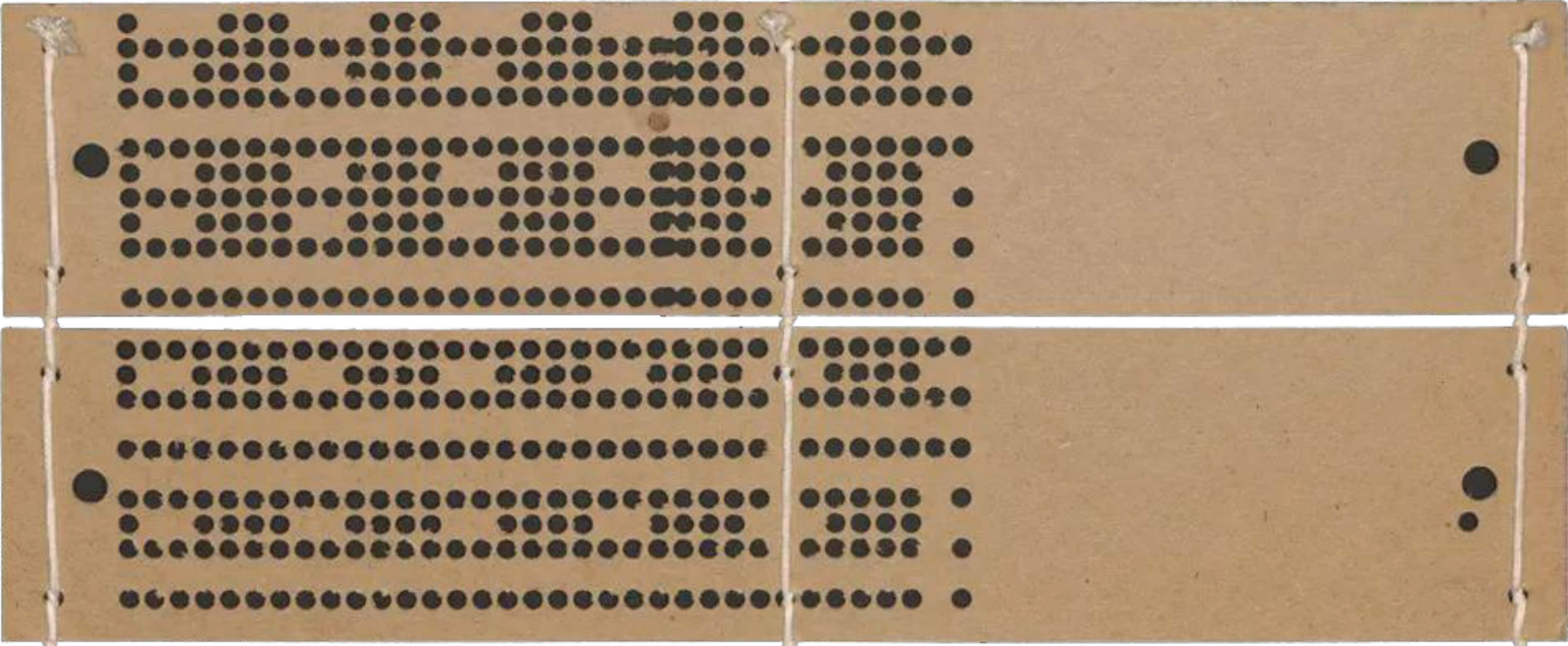
textiles

census

programming

industry

government



The image shows two punch cards, likely from an early computer system. Each card is a rectangular piece of light brown material with a grid of small circular holes. The top card has a pattern of holes that forms the letters 'C', 'I', 'P', 'I', 'G' in a stylized, blocky font. The bottom card has a similar pattern of holes, also forming the letters 'C', 'I', 'P', 'I', 'G'. The cards are held together by a vertical strip of white thread or string running down the center. There are also horizontal strips of white thread or string at the top and bottom of the cards. The cards are mounted on a light brown background.

image source: CUNY, "Early Computer Programming." <https://infotech.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2018/11/16/new-5/>

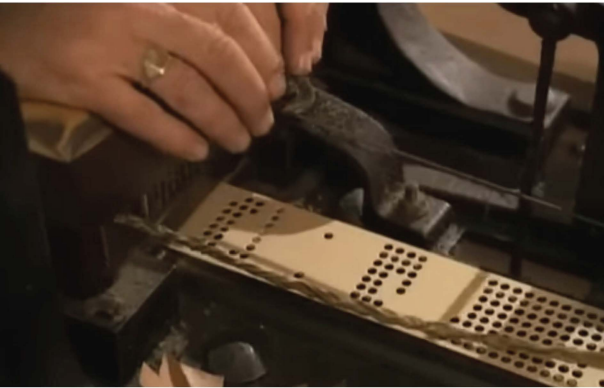
3

The Jacquard Mechanism

cards are chained together so pattern can be read in a continuous loop

Joseph Marie Jacquard invents an automation for storing + weaving textile patterns on industrial looms.

Patterns can be produced with speed, scale, + detail. The below portrait of Jacquard was woven in silk using a Jacquard loom and measures fewer than 20 inches on each side.



see how it works! →

"How Was It Made? Jacquard Weaving."
The Victoria + Albert Museum
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6NgMNVK52A>

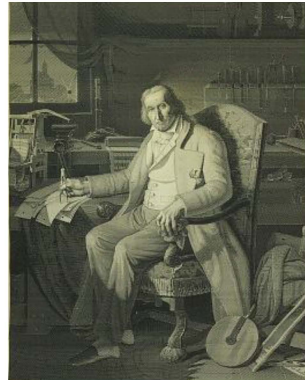


image source: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002737214/>

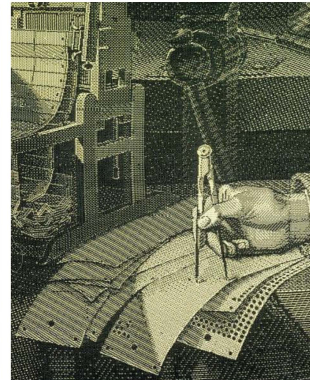
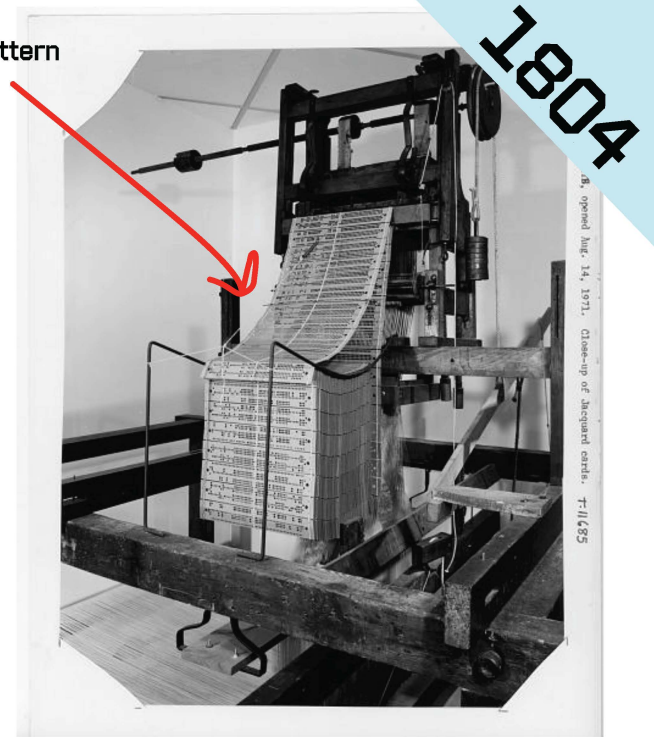
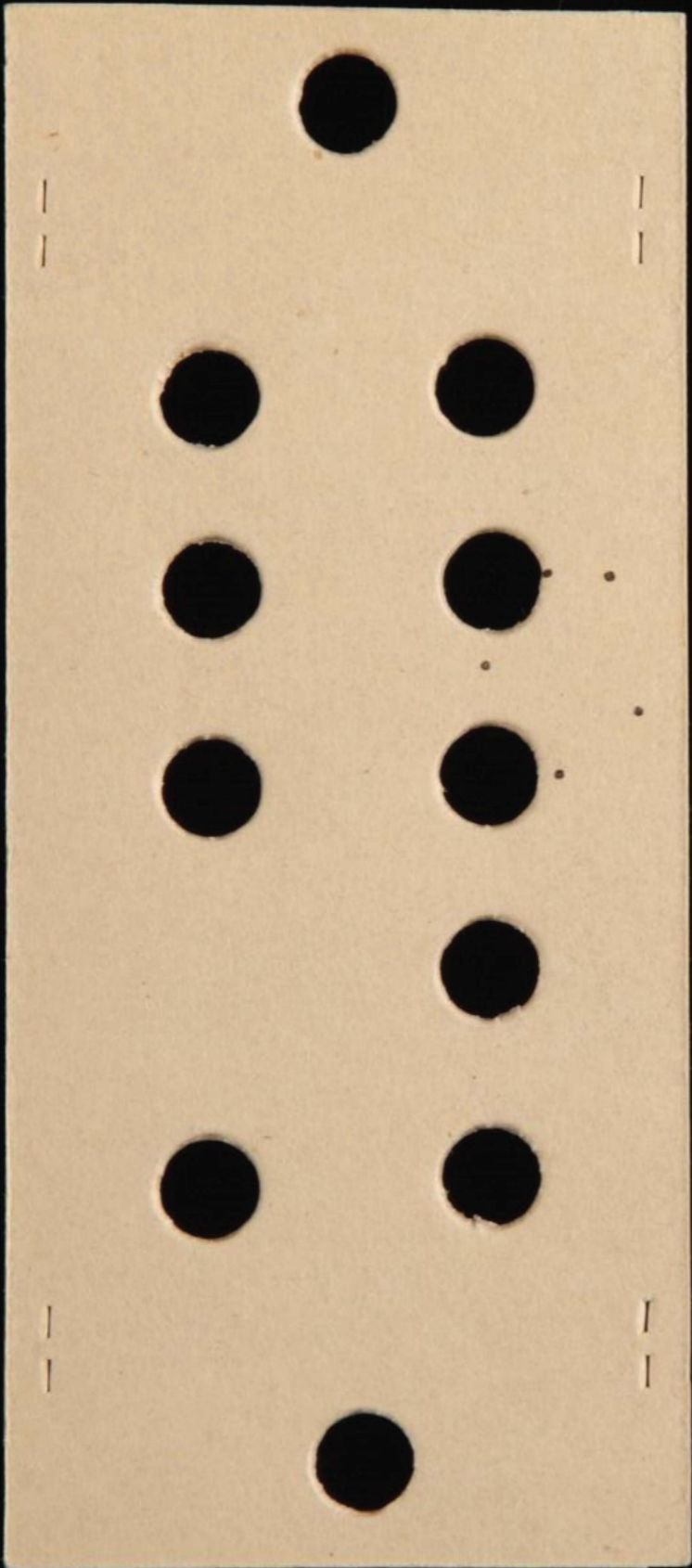


image source: Smithsonian National Museum of American History.
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_645517





Babbage's Calculating + Analytical Engines



1830s

Charles Babbage designed two machines that were meant to use punched cards for mathematical operations: the Calculating and Analytical Engines. While Babbage never finished building either machine, a working version of his Difference Engine now exists, and was displayed at the Computer History Museum. Ada Lovelace's annotations on Babbage's plans are now considered one of the first computer programs.



← see how it works!

"Babbage's Difference Engine No. 2." Wired.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0anlyVGeW0I>

image source (left): Smithsonian National Museum of American History.
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_904252

image source (center and right): <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co62248/punched-cards-for-babbages-analytical-engine>



"Instructions and data were entered into the engine using punched cards, with small 'operation cards' specifying the operations to be performed, and larger 'variable cards' defining where the value should be stored."



Science Museum Group. <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co62248/punched-cards-for-babbages-analytical-engine>



Binghamton R. R. Co.

TRANSFER.

Good only for this current trip,
from point of transfer, on next car
over the line punched after time canceled.



— 40 +

TRADE-MARK,

Subject to Rules of Company.

PICTURE PUNCHED INDICATES TYPE OF PASSENGER.

Issued by
Conductor No.

47

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15
16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31

MANUFACTURED BY
GLOBE
TICKET COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA, PA.

X	X	ROSS	VILLE	LESTER	SHIRE	ASY	LUM
O	HOME	GLEN	WOOD	P. DICK	INSON	DEP	OTS
C	C	WEST	MAIN	NO. CHE	NANGO	S. FO	REST
		BROAD	AVE	LEROY	STREET		

IF BLACK PORTION PUNCHED TIME IS P. M.

1	1	2	3	4	5
2	1	2	3	4	5
3	1	2	3	4	5
4	1	2	3	4	5
5	1	2	3	4	5
6	1	2	3	4	5
7	1	2	3	4	5
8	1	2	3	4	5
9	1	2	3	4	5
10	1	2	3	4	5
11	1	2	3	4	5
12	1	2	3	4	5

Punch Card “Photographs”

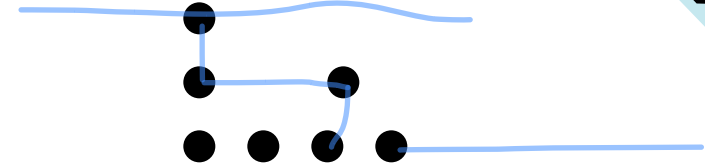
Punched Card “Photographs” served as one source of inspiration for Herman Hollerith’s development of punch card data processing

1880s

“Along the margin of the ticket is printed, in a straight column, the following words in small black type:

Male – Female;
Slim – Medium – Stout;
Young – Middle-aged – Elderly;
Eye: Light – Dark; Hair: Light – Dark; Beard –
Moustache – Chin – Side – None.

The passenger is photographed on the ticket bearing his signature by punching out all the words that are not descriptive of him. If for a male, the word “female” is cut out by the punch; if he is slim, the words “medium” and “stout” are punched.”



These cards took the use of the punch for rail tickets – tracking stations and time tables – and added a component of tracking people’s traits, which would be important to the development of the census.

The Railway News, Vol. XLVIII, No. 1234 (Aug. 27, 1887); Page 360

image source: Jim Strickland, "Hollerith and the 'Punched Photograph'" Computer History Museum.
https://ed-thelen.org/comp-hist/images/VIE_04_003.pdf

9

Baltimore Mortality Statistics

1880 - Herman Hollerith, a special agent working at the census, is asked to mechanize the enormous task of storing and processing census data

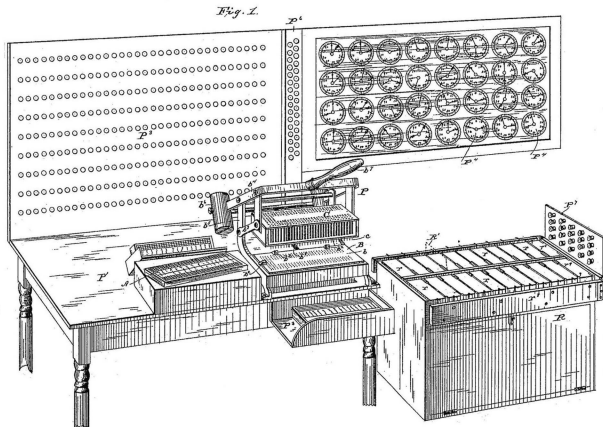
1884 - Hollerith files his first patent for punched card data processing

1886 - Hollerith "tests" his equipment on a survey of mortality statistics by the Department of Health in Baltimore.

"Before Hollerith's invention, the Census Bureau had reached the absurd point where it had not yet finished processing all of the previous census's figures when the new one began."

Dan Bouk, Democracy's Data

Hollerith's full tabulating apparatus as pictured in his 1889 patent



“

Information was read from each card by placing it on a hard rubber mat that contained an array of tiny cups of mercury, so spaced that there was a cup directly under each of the possible hole locations. [...] Where holes had been punched in the card, pins passed through them and made electrical contact with the mercury. Each cup of mercury was electrically connected to a dial with two hands that rotated in a manner analogous to the hands on a clock and were able to record numbers from 0 to 9999. After many cards had been processed, the operator manually wrote down the number incrementally recorded by each dial.

”

Emerson W. Pugh and Lars Heide, "Punched Card Equipment." 2009.

https://web.archive.org/web/20121013053741/https://www.ieeeeghn.org/wiki/index.php/STARS:Punched_Card_Equipment

1886

1	2	3	4	W	M	0	1	5	0	Un	0	6	12	0	6	12	Me	NH	VT	CHI	NCH	LA	SD	
5	6	7	8	B	F	10	15	18	1	S	1	7	13	1	7	13+	MAS	RI	CT	IND	WIS	MO	NBR	
1	2	3	4	Ch	20	21	25	30	2	MO	2	8	14	2	8	N	NY	NJ	PA	ILL	MIN	ND	KAN	
5	6	7	8	Jp	35	40	45	50	3	MI	3	9	15	3	9	F	MD	VA	MVA	KY	TEN	ALA	CLF	
1	2	3	4	In	55	60	65	70	4	Wd	4	10	16	4	10	DEL	NC	SC	MIS	LA	TEX	ORE	WSH	
5	6	7	8		75	80	85	90	95+	Un	D	5	11	17+	5	11	DC	GA	FLA	OKL	IT	ARK	IDA	NEV
1	2	3	4	En	OK	0	a	4	17	11	5	Un	15	2	0	US	Un	En	US	Un	En	UTA	ARI	
5	6	7	8	Of	NR	1	b	5	01	12	6	NG	20+	3	1	Gr	Ir	Sc	Gr	Ir	Sc	NM	COL	
1	2	3	4	2	NW	4	c	6	0	13	7	1	No	4	Au	Sw	CE	Wa	Sw	CE	Wa	WYO	MNT	
5	6	7	8	4	0	7	d	7	1	14	8	2	Pa	5	Sz	Nw	CF	Hu	Nw	CF	Hu	ALX	AB	
1	2	3	4	6	12	10	e	8	2	15	9	3	Al	6	Po	Dk	Fr	It	Dk	Fr	It	Au	SEA	
5	6	7	8	8+	Un	g	f	9	3	16	10	4	Un	10	O1	Ru	Bo	O1	Ru	Bo	Sz	Po	NS	

IBM190916

The U.S. Census



image source (left): Smithsonian National Museum of American History.
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_905318

image source (above): https://www.census.gov/library/photos/1950_08010.html

image source (right): https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_694411

In 1888, the Census Bureau held a competition for a faster method for processing the census, which Hollerith won.

By 1900, the Bureau of Census was using Hollerith's punch card system to process its data, and would continue to use and refine it over the next 50 years.

“The Census Bureau loved its tabulating machinery, its “robots.” The handbook for new employees waxed poetic about the census’s computing capacities. **‘The tabulation of the enormous mass of data assembled by the Bureau is made possible by the use of punched cards and electric tabulating equipment.’** The people punching those cards or running the equipment, the people who made the tabulation possible – the people reading the handbook – did not warrant a mention.”

Dan Bouk, *Democracy's Data*



Above, a “pantograph punch” developed by Hollerith to make tabulating census data less physically taxing to the tabulator’s hands.

1900

IBM 7920404s-0 IBM 148331

NUMBER OF PIECES FINISHED			
0	0	0	0
1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6
7	7	7	7
8	8	8	8
9	9	9	9
10	11	12	

WHAT THE PUNCHED HOLE WILL DO

THE **IBM** CARD DEMONSTRATES THE FIRST STEP
IN **IBM** ACCOUNTING

- ① It will add itself to something else.
- ② It will subtract itself from something else.
- ③ It will multiply itself by something else.
- ④ It will divide itself into something else.
- ⑤ It will list itself.
- ⑥ It will reproduce itself.
- ⑦ It will classify itself.
- ⑧ It will select itself.
- ⑨ It will print itself on the **IBM** card.
- ⑩ It will produce an automatic balance forward
- ⑪ It will file itself
- ⑫ It will post itself
- ⑬ It will reproduce and print itself on the end of a card.
- ⑭ It will be punched from a pencil mark on the card
- ⑮ It will cause a total to be printed.
- ⑯ It will cause a form to feed to a predetermined position or to be ejected automatically, or to space from one position to another.

3	1412	S1120	4
DEPT. NO.	EMPLOYEE NO.	PART NO.	OPER. NO.
5	2400	1200	
NUMBER OF PIECES FINISHED	PIECE RATE	AMOUNT	
00000000	00000000	00000000	
11111111	11111111	11111111	
DATE	DEPT. NO.	EMPLOYEE NO.	PART NO.
22222222	22222222	22222222	22222222
33333333	33333333	33333333	33333333
44444444	44444444	44444444	44444444
55555555	55555555	55555555	55555555
66666666	66666666	66666666	66666666
77777777	77777777	77777777	77777777
88888888	88888888	88888888	88888888
99999999	99999999	99999999	99999999
56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65	66 67 68 69 70 71 72	73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80	

REPRESENTATIVE COMPANY

IBM Punch Cards

Hollerith → Tabulating Machine Company → IBM

1896 – Hollerith founds his company, renamed in 1905 to the Tabulating Machine Company

1911 – Tabulating Machine Company is amalgamated to form the Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company (CTR)

1924 – CTR is renamed International Business Machines (IBM)



IBM workers program on desk-sized punch cards

image source (above): <https://www.ibm.com/history/punched-card>

image source (left): Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_764853

“

“The card itself was unassuming, a thin piece of stiff cardboard measuring 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches by 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches comprising 80 columns, 12 rows and a series of tiny rectangular holes. But for almost half a century, IBM cards held most of the world’s stored data.”

”

“The IBM Punched Card.” <https://www.ibm.com/history/punched-card>

Listen to Bubbles Whiting talk
about Hollerith punch cards! →

“Bubbles Whiting – Using Punch Cards – Hollerith and IBM”

The Centre for Computing History

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7JA0cc9kBU&t=334s>



1930s
IBM punch cards = data

15

Census of Prisoners

Between 1926 and 1946, the US Census Bureau collected statistics on people held in state and federal prisons.

This unpunched card from 1934 appears to be from the Pennsylvania state prison system. The Smithsonian record suggests that the headings are as follows: “**institution, state, sheet number, line number, offense, minimum sentence, maximum sentence, previous commitments, sex, marital condition, age, and race and country of birth.**”

image source (left): Smithsonian National Museum of American History.
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_690156

As an instrument of data, and in particular an instrument of tracking people, punched card technology has been used to collect and analyze data towards carceral and eugenicist ends.

In 1933, the Dehomag company released this advertisement for the German 1933 census. Übersicht = survey. Dehomag was a subsidiary of IBM. At this time, IBM cards were still called “Hollerith punch cards.”

Dehomag cards and machines were later used to track prisoners in Nazi concentration camps.

image source (right): “Advertisement by the Dehomag Company for Hollerith Punch Cards, which were used in the 1933 Census (June 1933).” German History in Documents and Images. <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/advertisement-by-the-dehomag-company-for-hollerith-punch-cards-which-were-used-in-the-1933-census-june-1933>

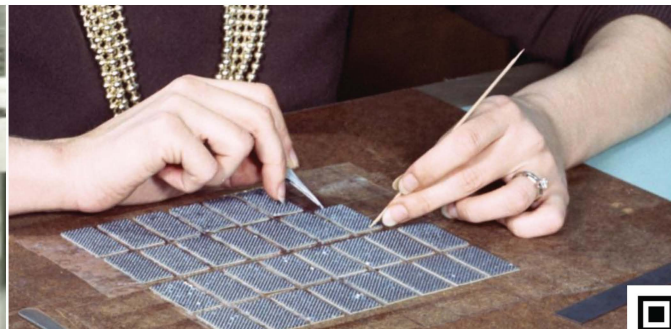
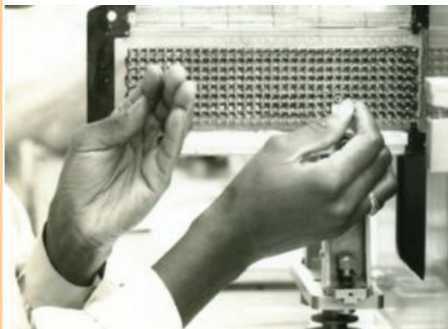


“The rope mother is the one that led the development and that was the one in charge of making sure everything came together.”

“In Their Own Words: Dan Lickly on Rope Mothers.”

<https://wehackthemoon.com/people/dan-lickly-computer-engineering>

In the 1960s, workers at MIT and Raytheon created durable computer memory for the Apollo Guidance Computer. This memory was woven by hand using wire and tiny magnetic beads (cores).



Listen to Elaine Denniston talk about working at MIT! →

“Elaine Denniston, Data Key Puncher and ‘Rope Mother’”

<https://soundcloud.com/hack-the-moon/elaine-denniston>

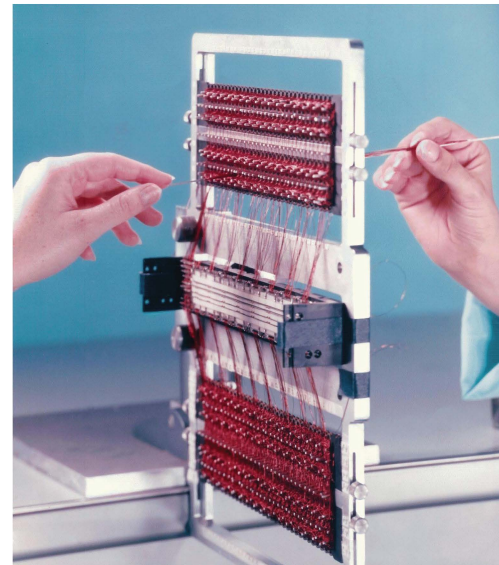
<https://wehackthemoon.com/bios/elaine-denniston>



Image source (left): <https://www.righto.com/2019/07/software-woven-into-wire-core-rope-and.html>

Image source (center + right): <https://wehackthemoon.com/tech/core-rope-memory-when-computer-science-meets-girl-power>

Interlude :



Textile
factories



Computing
manufacture

Weaving Memory

working women's labor flowed
from textile factories to the
work of data and computation

to punch card processing
to woven core memory
to chip manufacture

“

“The competencies required to create core memory planes included a variety of craft skills often sequestered to the realm of women's work: weaving, needlework, and embroidery.

Corporate attempts to automate this process proved more costly than employing human hands to perform these intricate actions. In need of cheap “unskilled” labor, retired or laid-off female workers from the mills of a dying Massachusetts textile industry were hired to weave the memory.”

”

Liza Stark, “Hilda Wove All Those Wires.”

See how core memory is made →

“Fabrication of Apollo Erasable Ferrite Core Memory”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5P4ZnyJqyro>

“Core Rope Memory”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2JfsiWKsKQ>

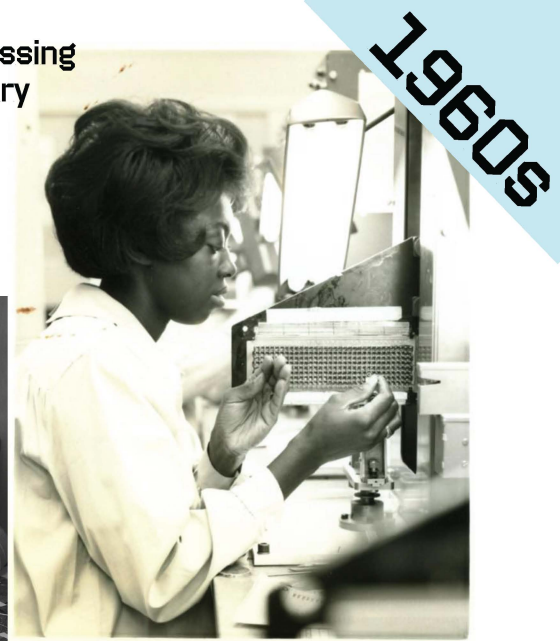
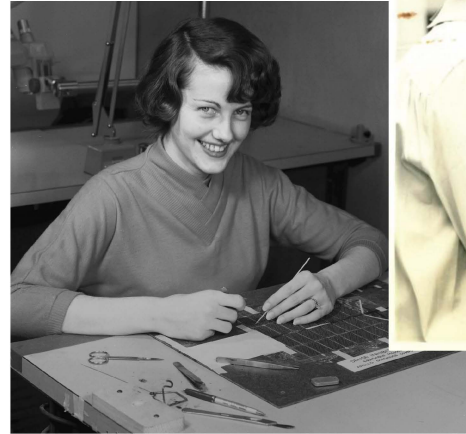


Image source (above right): <https://www.righto.com/2019/07/software-woven-into-wire-core-rope-and.html>

Image source (above left): <https://wehackthemoon.com/tech/core-rope-memory-when-computer-science-meets-girl-power>

19

IBM Punch Cards

By the 1960s, punched cards had become more than data storage: they were the medium of computer programming. They were also increasingly common outside of technical spaces.

“ They announced scores on standardized tests, served as a library cards, were part of the proof of mathematical theorems, and kept medical records. Some are printed with the names of users, from university computer centers and computer clubs to the Library of Congress to Bell Laboratories.

“Punch Cards for Data Processing.”
Smithsonian National Museum of American History

IBM was the company of punched cards - so much that they lost antitrust suits over the technology.

In countercultural spaces like Berkeley's Free Speech Movement, punch cards became a symbol of dehumanization and conformity - people reduced to numbers, to data.

illustration from the W.E.B. DuBois Club newsletter, Berkeley

The 80 column (80 byte) format standardized by IBM continued to be the maximum line length for computer programs long after punch cards were no longer used for programming. The physical card dimensions had remained the same since Hollerith's original design.



A programmer with a stack of cards containing the program for the SAGE military computer network. 62,500 cards = 5MB of data!

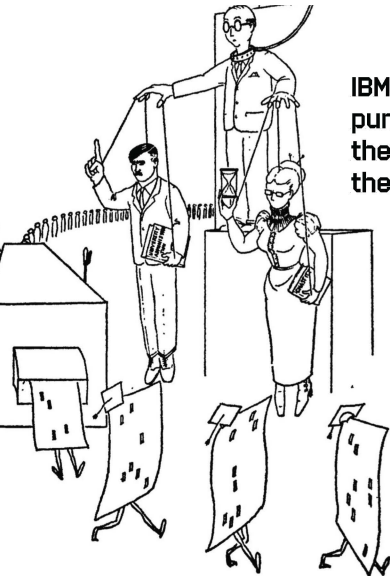


image source (above): Steven Lubar, "Do Not Fold, Spindle or Mutilate": A Cultural History of the Punch Card."

image source (left): Jim Scott.

<https://www.jkmscott.net/data/PunchedCards/PunchedCards.html?hidden=true#venerable5081>

image source(above): 1955, MITRE corporate archive

<https://www.computerhistory.org/revolution/memory-storage/8/326/924>

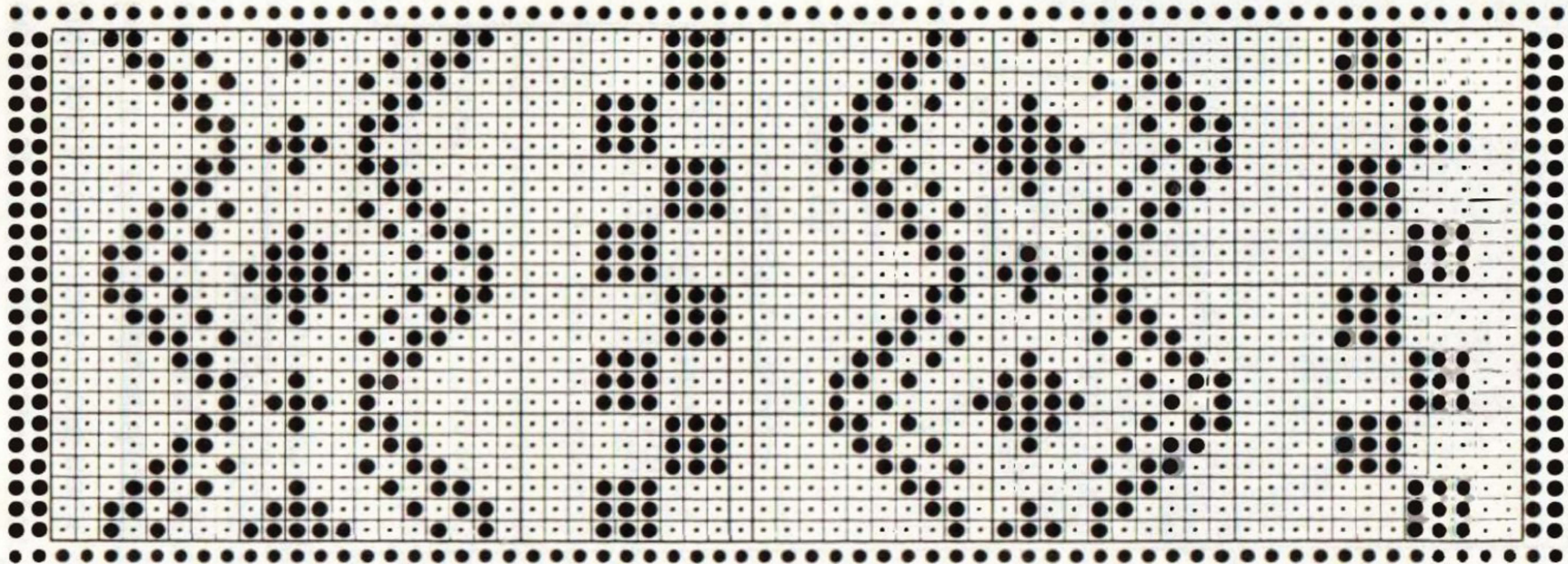
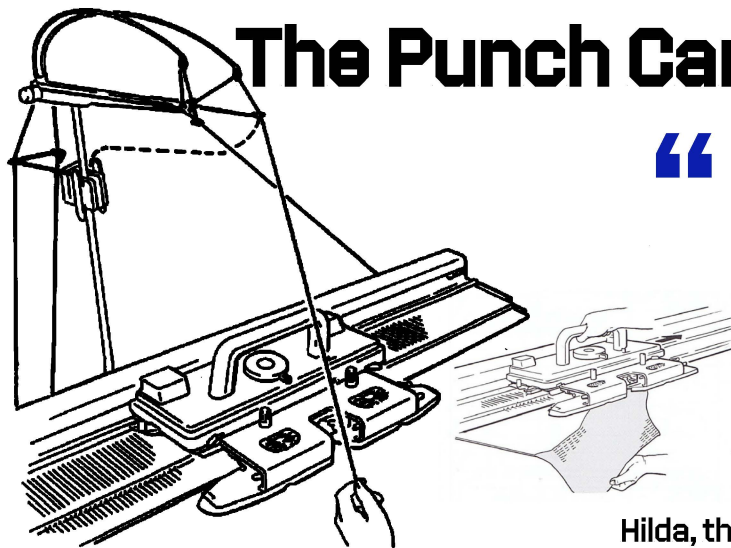


image source: "Modern Machine Knitting Magazine", 1994. Archive.org. <https://archive.org/details/modern-machine-knitting-magazine-1994.02-300dpi-clear-scan-ocr/page/60/mode/2up?q=silver+reed+punch+card>

The Punch Card Knitting Machine



Tons of amazing punch card knitters are on Youtube!
Just one example →

“Knitting Fair Isle with a Punch Card.”
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Lq5grzG7IMU>



images source: Silver Reed SK280 Instruction Manual. <https://mkmanuals.com/silver-reed-sk-280-knitting-machine-instruction-manual.html>

“

“Punch cards are the source, in something so fundamentally binary that fluency is not hard to come by. (Fluency in binary for almost all other tasks is nearly impossible.) I can repeat a row as many times as I wish. I can change whether my machine ignores the 1s, knits the 1s, purls the 1s, etc. I can perform subsequent operations on the punch card’s outputs with manual manipulation. And I own it. I own my knitting machine, can take it apart and repair it without violating some terms of service, and can hack and modify it and my punch cards to my heart’s content.”

Nichole Nomura, “Vanishing Culture: Punch Card Knitting.”
<https://blog.archive.org/2025/02/12/vanishing-culture-punch-card-knitting/>

Hilda, the Silver Reed SK280 machine in our lab at MITH (Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities), was designed in 1988. Punch knitting machines date back to 1972. Silver Reed, who became known for their knitting machines (alongside Brother), began as a typewriter manufacturer in 1952.



Alice Bi, member of MITH, casts on stitches during a workshop.



1972-
Present

”

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Printing instructions

Using the printable PDF, print double sided.

Printing in landscape mode ensures that the pages will flip left to right.

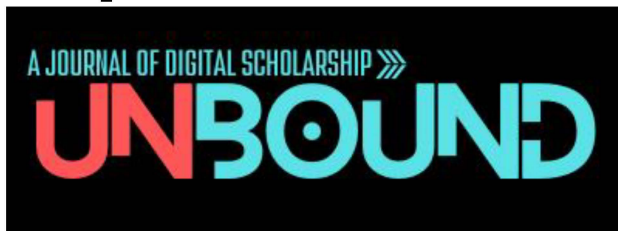
Once printed, cut each sheet of paper along its horizontal center line.

Place the pages in order according to their page numbers.

Bind on the left hand side using staples, stitches, or a hole punch and rings, as you prefer!

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