

Reading 19th Century Handwriting

Paleography and other considerations



Goals

01.

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What is paleography

03.

Activity

Some hands-on practice

02.

Nature of the documents

Mise en page and the nature of legal documents

04.

Resources

Some helpful resources from UMD and elsewhere





Paleography

The art and science of reading historical
handwriting

01.

Paleography

Paleography is the formal name for the characteristics of handwritten text based on time period

Each time period has a number of characteristics relating to handwriting. Why?

Professional standards (secretarial shorthand, etc.)

Educational expectations

Physical materials (ink used, writing implements, etc.)

Use

Historians can use this information, coupled with the information contained within the actual writing to draw many conclusions about the text.

What are some examples you can think of where handwriting would be especially common? How would that be valuable for determining the context, content , audience, use and other determinations about the document?

Paleography

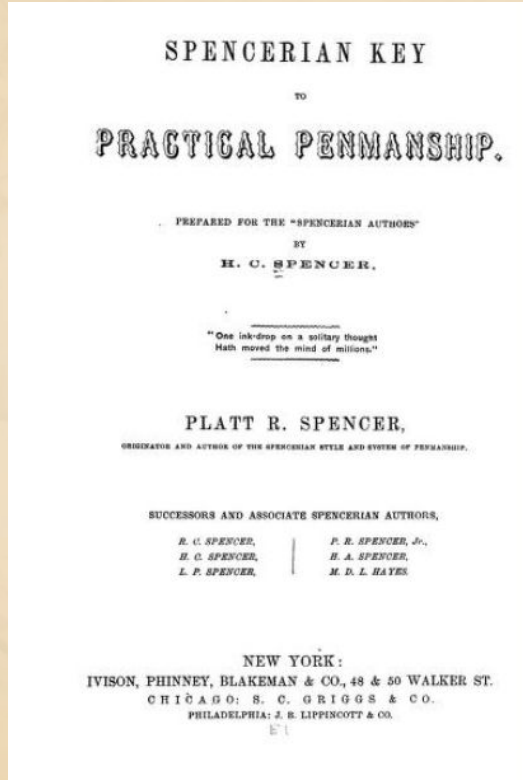
Some research areas, like medieval studies and renaissance studies (and others) have many rules and a pretty strict dating and assessment regime for paleography.

For the 19th C. the main challenge is being able to read the often flowing and flowery script, but the language itself is not too difficult to decipher as it is pretty close to our own ways of writing and the spelling is mostly the same.

Some challenges still arise, though, especially with abbreviations – esp. Latin abbreviations that are common in legal documents

Legal language itself can be very tricky as it is today

Characteristics of 19th. C. Handwriting



Platt Spencer was a huge influence on the development of 19th. C. penmanship and handwriting

Taught at business and law schools

Uniform handwriting for legibility and clarity

Focus on form

Pre-typewriter script

Was superseded by later movements away from the flowery script

Holdover from 18th C. -this fluidity holds at both ends of the 19th. C - keep in mind in terms of script style

CHAPTER X.

BUSINESS WRITING.

Soon the untought hand that feebly guides the pen
Shall sweep the curse in busier haunts of men ;
Where each day's doings on life's active stage,
Arrayed in light, shall crown the well-writ page.—T. N. S.

Of all the manifold uses of the pen, that in which it is made subservient to the wants of every day life should unquestionably hold the highest rank. While beautiful and elegant penmanship gives evidence of taste and skill, *business writing* may be said to sway the world! Easy and graceful in its proportions, it is as attractive as it is useful. Plain to the eye, conveying thought with electric speed to the reader's mind, its perusal gives genuine satisfaction to all to whom it is addressed.

Men in the world of commerce, who transact business daily with those who are known to them only through the medium of letters, involuntarily form opinions based upon the character of the writing of their correspondents. If it is firm, free and legible, it inspires a well-grounded confidence in the general ability of the writer, and gives an assurance that he will do well whatever his hand finds to do.

It would seem that an accomplishment so desirable, placed within the reach of all, would be almost universally acquired; but it must be acknowledged, that while all admit its practical utility, and long to share in the benefits it confers, it is really attained by comparatively few. The great majority of those who buy and sell, who indite briefs, and send manuscripts to the press, whose writing forms the most essential feature in their pursuits, and whose letters are sent over land and sea, often fail to attain even legibility in their penmanship.

Analysis.—Principles:—Second, Sixth.

Probable Faults.—Too great slant of first curve and loop; too low crossing of loop; straight line on left side of oval; terminating curve too far from second curve, or made too nearly straight, and extended below the ruled line.

Suggestions.—Practice upon the right curve and Contracted Capital O, separately, until correct forms are secured; then practice upon them in combination.

The Capital Letter H commences one space above the ruled line, with a left curve, which extends upward to four-fifths the height of the letter, then joins a right curve, extending downward to one-half the height of the letter. This line unites with an ascending left curve, which crosses the right curve very near its top, forming a loop. At this point it unites with a descending right curve, which is continued to the ruled line, where it connects with a compound curve, which is drawn upward and to the right, crossing the descending curve, and extending to the height of the letter. Here it unites with a Contracted Capital O, which crosses the compound curve in descending, and completes the letter. The lower left and the right loop are of equal length and width, and the two sections of the letter are upon the same slant.

The spaces on each side of the first loop are each equal to the width of the loop, and also equal to the space between the two main portions of the letter.

A horizontal line drawn through the letter at one-half its height, touches the lower portion of the first loop, and the upper portion of the oval.

This letter is also composed entirely of curves.

Analysis.—Principles:—Third, Second, Third, Second, Third, Second, Sixth.

Probable Faults.—Beginning with too slight curve, carried too far to the right, producing an angular joining; carrying second left curve above the first; giving too much slant to the compound curve which unites the two sections, and causing a disproportion between the parts of the letter.

Suggestion.—Write the letter within four equal spaces, as in annexed diagram.

The Capital Letter X is a combination of the Capital Loop and the Contracted Capital O, meeting at one-half their height. Their original slant and proportions are preserved.

Analysis.—Principles:—Seventh, Sixth.

Probable Faults.—Making the ovals, turns, and curves angular, produced by a cramped position, or a quick, nervous motion of the hand; beginning second section too far from first, and failing to unite them.

Suggestions.—Practice thoroughly upon the inverted and direct ovals, as in diagram, endeavoring to secure ease of position, and free and uniform motion of the hand, arm, and fingers. This will enable the writer to form ovals properly in all capital letters.

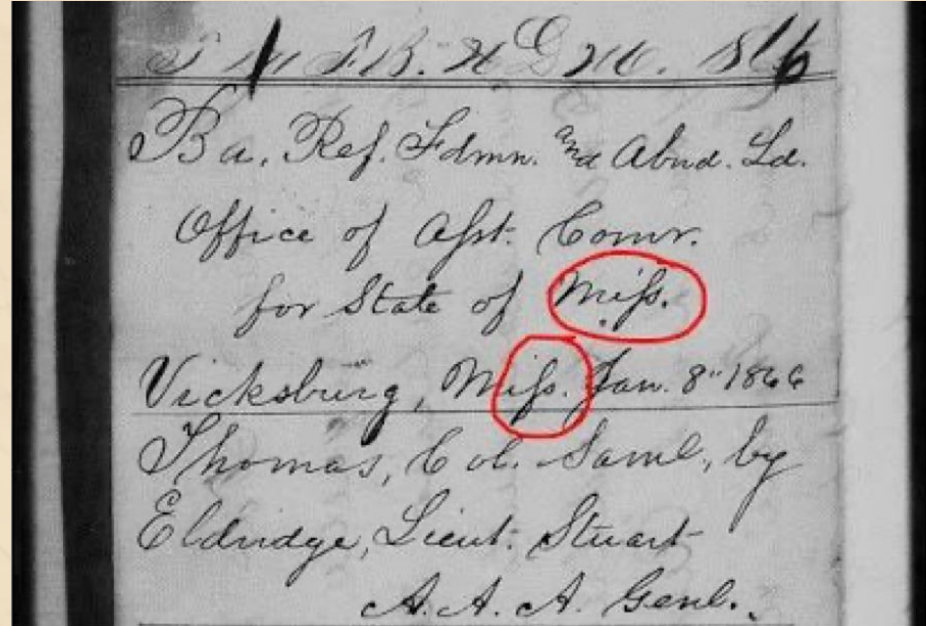
The Capital Letter Z is five spaces in length, three spaces being above the ruled line and two below it. It begins with a Capital Loop, which extends to the ruled line, where it is joined to a left curve, rising one-half space and crossing the last curve of the Capital Loop, forming a small loop. The left curve is then united to a modification of the extended inverted loop, as in the small letter *z*.

Some common abbr., conventions, and spelling/misspellings

Double S: oftentimes you'll see a word that looks like it is spelled abyfs or abyff when the word is actually abyss. The strange double S is a hold over from earlier handwriting and printing conventions (long s). When you see this, transcribe as SS

&c= et cetera

Name abbreviations: Often the 2nd use of a name will be abbreviated. William may be substituted for Wm. In letters where the people are known, this might happen from the beginning. Can be a sign of coding, but also more likely of sore hands



- attacted = attacked
- Do or do = ditto (please type out what the ditto mark or "do" stands for)
- evry = every
- evning = evening
- fiew = few
- greaddeal or great eal or gread eal = great deal
- inst. = a date in this month. An example of this would be "the 8th inst.," meaning "the 8th of this month."
- obdt. = obedient
- perhapse = perhaps
- thare = there
- ult. = a date in the previous month. An example of this would be "the 14th ult.," meaning "the 14th of last month."
- verry = very
- viz = short for the Latin videlicet, which itself is a contraction of the Latin phrase videre licet, meaning "it is permitted to see". It is used as a synonym for "namely", "that is to say", "to wit", "which is", or "as follows."
- vols = volunteers
- ware = were

Advice/strategies

CONTEXT matters: skim through the entire document and make out what you can. Try to find names, dates, locations, and keywords. This will help in deciphering the individual words which can be tricky.

Once you find the people, see what you can learn about them – that too can help you in deciphering the document. The same is true with the location information

Look for common and easy to read words as anchors in the sentence, that can help you work backwards to figure out the context as well

Is there standard legal language being used? (more below) Why? What can this tell you? What resources and other documents can you reference to figure out the meaning and impact?

Keep a record/notes of the document's idiosyncratic spellings, abbreviations, etc.

Use additional sheets of paper to [focus] on a line by covering the preceding and subsequent lines – this can help your eyes/brain focus on the specific characters in more detail without distraction. If you're doing this on a computer, zoom in as much as possible before it gets blurry



02

Nature of the Documents

Looking at historical legal documents

“The Past is a Foreign Country, they do things differently there.”

L.P Hartley, *The Go-Between*



Legal documents

Written in “legal English” which is a language all its own

Many standard phrases and document types – “boilerplate” language (standardized and reused)

Logical and dispassionate (therefore not necessarily readable for tone/emotion unlike letters)

Lots of Latin!

Lots of abbreviations and old fashioned language (e.g. messr = mister)

Mise en page

Understanding the layout of a document and the textual and non-textual elements can greatly add to your understanding of the document's usage and its life during and after its creation

A very important example is what is called "marginalia" – these are the annotations found in the margins of a document.

Other annotations, underlining, doodles, scribbles, etc. can be vitally important to the understanding of the life of the document and its users

Additionally, the economy of the page can also tell you something about its origins – how the space is either crunched or open (crammed text or lots of space)

Not everything is evidence/valuable, though – sometimes an ink spot is just an ink spot

The inked "seal" is common in the 19th C. as legal rules relaxed regarding wax seals

Whereas my slave William Williams has enlisted in the
service of the United States: now in consideration thereof, I
William B. Duvall of Prince Georges County, State of Mary-
land, do here by in consideration of said enlistment, manumit

Whereas my slave William Williams has enlisted in the
service of the United States: now in consideration thereof, I
William B. Duvall of Prince Georges County, State of Mary-
land, do here by in consideration of said enlistment, manumit

Whereas my slave William Williams has enlisted in the service of the United States: now in consideration thereof. SYMBOL - William B. Duvall of Prince Georges County, State of Maryland, do here by in consideration of said enslavement manumit...

Whereas my slave William Williams has enlisted in the
service of the United States: now in consideration thereof, **S.**
William B. Duvall of Prince Georges County, State of Mary-
land, do here by in consideration of said enlistment, manumit

Whereas my slave William Williams has enlisted in the service of the United States: now in consideration thereof. SYMBOL - William B. Duvall of Prince Georges County, State of Maryland, do here by in consideration of said enslavement manumit...

Whereas my slave William Williams has enlisted in the service of the United States: now in consideration thereof, P William B. Duvall of Prince Georges County, State of Maryland, do here by in consideration of said enlistment, manumit

The marks attached to the letter P are as follows:—

p, per, par, por ; e.g., psōa, persona ; cpet, comparet ; pta, porta.

p̄, prae, pre ; e.g., p̄sēs, praesens ; sup̄mus, supremus.

p, pro ; e.g., pceres, proceres ; ĩpp̄e, improprie.

p̄ indicates the omission of almost any other letters than those mentioned above ; e.g., p̄ea, postea ; p̄a, poena ; p̄cta, puncta ; p̄pa, papa.

The person of

In the presence of or present or at hand

The context matters greatly when determining which of the symbols and abbreviations to use

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THE
RECORD INTERPRETER :

A COLLECTION OF
ABBREVIATIONS, LATIN WORDS AND NAMES
USED IN
**ENGLISH HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS
AND RECORDS.**

COMPILED BY
CHARLES TRICE MARTIN, B.A., F.S.A.,
ASSISTANT-KEEPER OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS.

LONDON:
REEVES AND TURNER,
100, CHANCERY LANE AND CAREY STREET,
New Publishers and Booksellers.

1892

LAW DICTIONARY,

ADAPTED TO THE

CONSTITUTION AND LAWS

OF THE

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

AND OF THE

Federal States of the American Union;

WITH

REFERENCES TO THE CIVIL AND OTHER SYSTEMS OF
FOREIGN LAW.BY JOHN BOUVIER.

*Ignoratis terminis ignoratur et ars.—Co. Litt. 2 a.
Je sais que chaque science et chaque art a ses termes propres, inconnu au commun des hommes.—FLURV.*

SIXTH EDITION, REVISED, IMPROVED, AND GREATLY ENLARGED.



03

Resources

Paleography/handwriting resources

- **Spencer, 1886, Spencerian key to practical penmanship,**
<https://archive.org/details/cu31924029485467/page/n1/mode/2up>
- **National Archives guide to transcription,**
<https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/transcribe/tips>
- **Smithsonian guide to transcription,**
https://transcription.si.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/transcribing_historical_handwriting_in_the_smithsonian_transcription_center_1.pdf

Legal English and legal document resources

- **Martin, The record interpreter: a collection of abbreviations, Latin words and names used in English historical manuscripts and records,**
<https://archive.org/details/recordinterprete00martiala/page/n3/mode/2up>
- Bouvier, A Law Dictionary Adapted to the Constitution and Law of the USA,
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.35112104912615>
- The Slavery, Law, and Power Project, <https://slaverylawpower.org>
- Yale Law School Avalon Project, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/default.asp>

an article on law writing that can help and point towards additional sources

- Parker, Kunal M. "Context in History and Law: A Study of the Late Nineteenth-Century American Jurisprudence of Custom." *Law and History Review* 24, no. 3 (2006): 473–518. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27641401>.



04

Hands-on work

Let's look at a sample to try
our skills

**Please feel free to email
me with any questions!**

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