

Tips & Tricks to Reading Old Handwriting

by Marjorie Weiler-Powell

Comprehending old handwriting is an essential skill to be developed by all genealogical researchers. As a novice genealogist, I can remember being surprised to discover that not all information was in nice neat print like what my mother had typed and shared with me. Census records were handwritten. My ancestor's Petition to Partition required many months of my time to decipher the writing and to make sense of the proceedings. County marriage records sometimes involved the handwriting of six different people: the clerk, the groom, the bride, the preacher or Justice of the Peace, and perhaps the parents' permission statements.

All of these people had different styles of penmanship, but the cursive letters were basically formed the way I was taught in grade school. With some studying, pondering, and maybe divine inspiration, I could decipher the words and understand the meaning. That is, until I delved into church records and naturalization records. This time I was dealing with writing from the 1830's, which was a hundred years earlier than what I had been previously reading. I just could not make it out. Every conference that I attended the following year, I kept hoping that there would be a class on reading old handwriting. No such thing.

I finally grew tired of waiting for someone to help me and decided to help myself. I asked friends for advice. I created my own reference document outlining strategies to handle different perplexing situations as I came across them in the records. Two reference works were of great assistance: *Reading Early American Handwriting* by Kip Sperry and a reprint of the 1881 *Witter's German-English Primer* (available through the Indiana German Heritage Society). Lastly, I researched the history of paleography in order to prepare a speech on deciphering handwriting for my local genealogy group.

Paleography is the study of old handwriting. The word is derived from the Greek *paleo*, meaning

ancient, and *graphy*, meaning writing. By studying the style of handwriting within a document, a person can date when it was written. But the most predominant reason to study old letter scripts is because you want to discover what the document says.

TIP 1: The best way to gain proficiency, as with any task, is by practice. I would suggest beginning with recent records and going backward in time. This way you start with what you know. Changes in style will be introduced gradually and you will be better able to absorb the differences and still recognize the letters. Or, you could pick a personal document to transcribe from your own genealogy research. You could also volunteer at your local library to index or abstract a collection. As your experience increases, so will the speed and ease of deciphering the writing.

Another benefit of working with a collection of a single record type is that this homework increases your knowledge of words that are appropriate to different types of records. Marriage records use bride, groom, minister, witnesses and date. Baptism records may contain the child's name, parents' names, sponsors, birthdate and baptismal date. Every type of record has its own group of frequently used words. And once these vocabulary sets are identified, a list can be drawn up and the words translated into any foreign language by using reference books or by using various translation websites.

Handy reference materials are necessary for genealogy research. The Witter book was a godsend when I found my ancestor's naturalization records. In the "Oath of Intention", my ancestor declared his intent with six other individuals for that one record. I was so excited to see the signatures, but then, thoroughly perplexed as to which one belonged to my great-great-grandfather. I so very badly wanted to recognize it and to have that connection, to see my ancestor's personality through his penmanship. I used the Witter book to make the letters myself and then compared my version to what was on the court

(continued on page 19)

Tips & Tricks to Reading Old Handwriting
(continued from page 18)

document, easily finding my ancestor's signature.

TIP 2: You should not only try to read old script but practice writing it. This act will reinforce the learning in your brain. In the Sutterlin script, there are several letters that may seem the same at first glance. The letters e, i, c, n, m, and u are formed with sharp strokes and very hard to tell apart unless you apply some reasoning when looking at the word.

TIP 3: When a word contains a series of up and down strokes, count the vertical lines — minims — in the word. Suppose the first letter is 'h' and then there are four minims. So consider the possibilities: 'hee', 'hnn' or 'him' or 'hen'. The first and second are not words. 'Hen' would only work if looking at an inventory as in a will. 'Him' works if a personal pronoun is needed to make sense in the document.

There are other clues to decipher which letters are used. The 'i' should be dotted. The above dot may trail several letters beyond the lower 'i'. Our ancestors wrote just the way we do today with trailing 'i' dots. The same with crossing the 't'. It may trail after. The letter 'c' and 'u' have a rounded mark above them. So look for this ubogen when reading. And the letter 'e' is two vertical marks made really close together, which sometimes looks more like a modern printed 'n'.

TIP 4: Read within context. Use the sentence structure to help your brain supply the next naturally occurring word. When a document is being transcribed, make several passes at reading it. Write down the most obvious, easy to read words first and leave blanks where it is difficult. On subsequent passes through the document, read for common sense to fill in the blanks. Be receptive to alternate word spellings. Become familiar with standard phrasing within types of records because the part that is different is the data that is particular to the individual.

Take notes to keep for reference on a scribe's style. Be aware of frequently used name abbreviations and make note of a scribe's personal abbreviation idiosyncrasies. A scribe may use a suspension, which looks like a long line at the end of a word to represent omitted letters. Look before and after,

above and below the word. Sometimes flourishes from other words or lines interfere with interpretations. Be aware that words may be abbreviated, run together, split or capitalized for no apparent reason. Symbols for hyphenation could be a dash, colon or equal sign and hyphenation did not always occur at a syllable. Punctuation is haphazard before the 20th century.

TIP 5: Use technology. The use of colored transparencies may bring out a contrast in hard copies (or for microfilm reading, use different color background papers). Use the zoom controls or a magnifying glass to slowly adjust the size back and forth to help your mind identify the letters. A negative print may bring out difficult words. If a copier is not available, place a plain sheet of paper in the microfilm reader and trace the word so that it can be studied later.

TIP 6: Use the same tips for deciphering letters as with deciphering numeric digits: compare numbers written by the same person throughout the document and always remember the context of what you are reading. For example, if you can't distinguish whether a number is a twelve or a fifteen but you know it is a month, then there really is no problem — it has to be a twelve.

TIP 7: There are also historical considerations to aid in deciphering months that are written as numbers. I hated history in high school. It took genealogy to show me a respect for history. A historian doesn't have to be a genealogist, but a genealogist must have an awareness of history. Consider the following case. Church records are mostly chronological and while I was looking through September and October church records, the scribe changed. The next entry now had '8ber' as part of the date. On first impulse, I assumed that this was an entry for August, the eighth month. Why was this entry stuck here? I stared and stared, thinking that I was interpreting it wrong.

Finally, I decided that it must be because a German number eight sounds like 'oct' and the scribe used this convention because it was a German parish. But something kept nagging me and it resurrected dormant information from my long-ago high school history classes. Way back in Roman times, the year

(continued on page 20)

Tips & Tricks to Reading Old Handwriting
(continued from page 19)

had ten months. Then Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar were each honored with a month of their own: July and August. These months are placed between June and September because that was the end of the list of months named after gods.

But this still didn't explain why someone nearly 1900 years later was using 7, 8, 9 and 10 for the modern 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th months. It just doesn't seem right unless you know some Latin. Romans used Latin. Catholic church scholars used Latin. The numbers in Latin are septem for seven, octo for eight, novem for nine and decem for ten. I realized that my new scribe record was still chronological and it still was the month of October.

As I continued my research, I came across 'Xbr'. The Roman numeral X means ten in our Arabic numeral system, which would mean October. But, remember this is a Latin scribe and the Latin word for ten is decem. So, the month was actually December.

On a side note, December is also Christ's birth month. X is used for Christ. This X for Christ use also appears in people's names, such as 'Xpher' for Christopher.

TIP 8: As with words, one must consider the style for writing numbers. What was commonly written 150 years ago is different from modern day conventions. Be ready for numbers that extend below the line – frequently the number nine and the number four. The head of the number nine may actually rest on the word line and be mistaken for a zero if its tail is ignored. The number one may have a top hook on it and be mistaken for the number seven. The number seven may have a horizontal slash in the middle, which helps to make it look different from the number one. The best procedure for deciphering numbers is again to compare to other known numbers throughout the document.

In summary: practice writing the old script, read in context, and make comparisons to other letters written by same person within the record. I did finally find several presentations on handwriting at a recent conference for the Federation of Genealogical Societies – three years after my original foray into deciphering handwriting. I attended all of them, and the speakers confirmed my personal deductions and gave me a few more insights. One of the lecturers claimed that it takes 500 repetitions for the brain to remember new information. So start counting, and good luck!



Indiana Genealogical Society
2008 Annual Conference
Evansville, Indiana

Join us in Evansville on 5 April 2008 for the Indiana Genealogical Society's Annual Conference. Our featured speaker will be J. Mark Lowe, CG.

The conference will be held at The Centre in downtown Evansville. The complete program and registration form will be published in the December issue of the *IGS Newsletter*. The registration form will also be posted on the IGS website and the IGS blog.

We hope to see you in Evansville next April!