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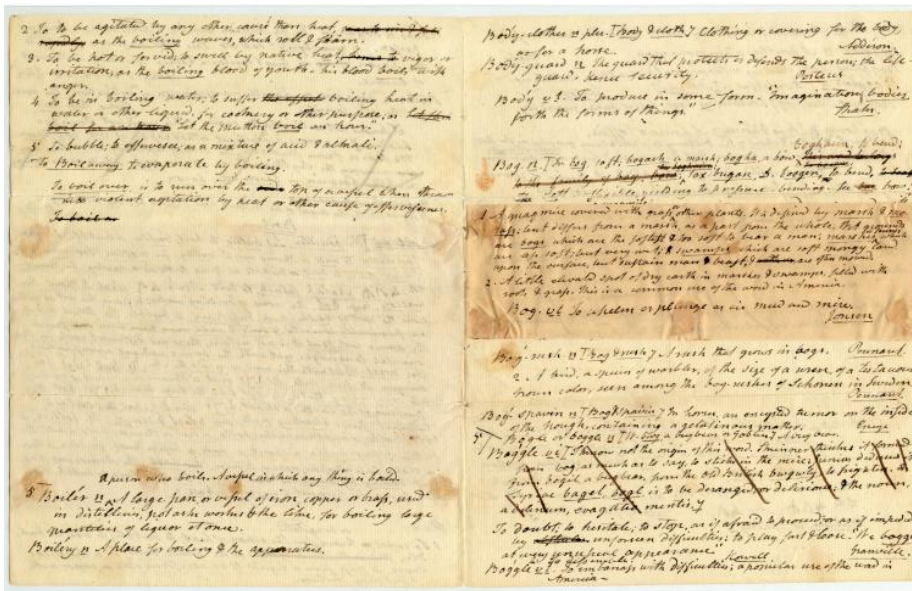
# Deciphering Old Handwriting

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One of the hot topics of debate among parents and educators these days is whether it is necessary for today's computer-age students to learn cursive handwriting. Given the time investment required, is it important enough to continue to be taught in our public schools? If professional genealogists and historians were to weigh in on the subject, we would vote with a resounding Yes!

Historical documents that are fundamental to our nation's history and laws, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, were written in cursive. And what about handwritten letters from grandpa sent home from the war, or great-grandma's gingersnap cookie recipe, to say nothing of actual genealogical

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your discovery of your own family history.

**1. Read the entire document quickly to get the context.** Even if you feel like you don't understand anything on the page, your eyes will start to get familiar with the handwriting, and you will begin to recognize some words.

**2. Write out the alphabet using the scribe's handwriting.** Make a cheat sheet of sorts, creating each letter the way the scribe does. One way to do this is to trace the strokes of each letter with your finger to get the feel of the way the scribe writes. The lines where the scribe begins a letter are often thicker than where he stops, helping you follow the direction the scribe took to make the letter. If you're really dedicated to getting the full experience, you can even purchase a historic style dip pen, nib, and inkwell for only a few dollars online or through a local art shop.

**3. Leave blanks for words or letters that you don't know.** As you start to transcribe the document, write down each word, but don't spend a lot of time on a word or letter that is giving you trouble. Use placeholders for the letters you can't figure out ("st\_e") and move on. Continue to the end of the document and come back to those spots later when you have seen more of the forms and context of the document.

**4. Look for common words or phrases.** There are many options. Look for the word "the." Months of the year are also usually easy to read and contain many letters of the alphabet to compare to. Learn about common phrases used in the type of document you are looking at, such as wills and land deeds. Becoming familiar with these boilerplate terms and clauses can give you several words or phrases with which to compare other words and letters. For example:

Wills:

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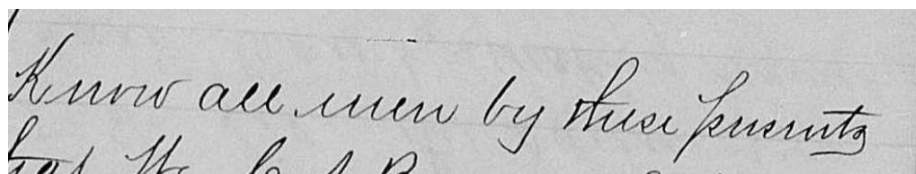
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- “This indenture made this ...[date]” often begins a land deed.
- The words “grantor,” “grantee,” and “appurtenances”
- “Know all men by these presents...”



- “In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this [date]”
- “Signed sealed and delivered”

**5. Remember that spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were not standardized until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.** Something that is helpful to keep in mind when dealing with early American documents is that spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were not as important to early Americans as they are to us today. It wasn't until 1806, when Noah Webster published *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* – the first American lexicon to define spelling – that spelling began to become more uniform, and even then, it took years to catch on. This was largely because basic education was not totally compulsory everywhere in the United States until all the way in the 1920s. As a result, the following are important considerations:

- Words were often spelled phonetically, the way they sounded. Local accents could also affect the way a word was spelled; for example, the surname *Harrington* could become *Arrington*. This is even more common when an ancestor in a record was an immigrant from a non-English-

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extended to the next line.

- The first word in a sentence may or may not start with a capital letter; sometimes words in the middle of the sentence are capitalized. Names were not always capitalized.
- Clerks often used abbreviations, substitutions, and contractions, even with proper names. For example:
  - Wm for William, Danl for Daniel, Geo for George
  - Superscripts were used in the abbreviations such as Jun<sup>r</sup> or Esq<sup>r</sup> and Dan<sup>l</sup>
  - substituting “y” for “i”
    - dyed = died
    - eyther = either
    - Catherine = Catheryn
  - adding e to ends of words
    - sole = soul
    - doe = do
    - sume = sum

Being able to read old handwriting and transcribe the contents of [wills](#), [deeds](#), [vital records](#), and other period writings are skills that are important to a genealogist but also to historians and anyone desiring to make connections with the past. With practice and patience, the process will become easier, and you too will be able to unlock the mysteries captured inside these precious pieces of the past.

*The experts at Legacy Tree Genealogists can help you read, transcribe, and even translate the documents necessary for learning more about your ancestors. [Contact us](#) today for a free consultation.*

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#### Kim - Legacy Tree Genealogists Project Manager

Kim's love of family history began as a child while listening to her great-grandmother tell stories of her uncle who, as a boy, ran down the streets of Springfield, Illinois dragging sticks along white picket fences with Abraham Lincoln's son, Tad. She received a family history research degree from Brigham Young University-Idaho, and really enjoyed all the different projects she got to research as a Legacy Tree intern. After graduation Kim joined our team as a project manager, and gets as excited as her clients do as the discoveries unfold.

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Allan Crane says

[December 7, 2016 at 12:54 am](#)

Appreciated the insights and helpful tips on deciphering old handwriting, and would like to add that in many cases these tips need to be applied to barely legible census records, as well, and, particularly, the resulting transcription errors from these records. Had it not been for blind luck I probably would have never found the 1900 U. S. Census record for my g-grandfather, John Crane. The “C” in Crane was transcribed as a “G” and the “N” as a “V”, resulting in the digital census record for him being listed under the surname Grave.

[Reply](#)

Olivia says

[December 7, 2016 at 5:05 am](#)

What a lovely and helpful article! Thank you.

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younger folks who cannot read handwritten documents. Many are so accustomed to reading text on electronic devices that they cannot read any form of handwritten text. In some ways handwriting is becoming a lost form of art, just as formal language is becoming lost in favor of short strokes on a handheld device.

Bob

[Reply](#)

Brenda Jones says

[December 14, 2016 at 10:31 pm](#)

Also a document that has a double s in a word can look like two p's. We discovered this while transcribing an 1860 Census.

[Reply](#)

Dave Robison says

[December 16, 2016 at 9:06 am](#)

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[Patty](#) says

[April 17, 2018 at 5:49 am](#)

This quite interesting., thank u for this information.

[Reply](#)

Annette Baker says

[April 17, 2018 at 11:33 pm](#)

I'm curious as to why you picked Harrington/Arrington and Schneider/Snider/Snyder. I have both of those surnames and alternate spellings in my pedigree. They're fairly close in degrees from one another too. My paternal grandmother had them both.

Also why are there comments posted from 2016?



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those particular names because of a client case she was working on that featured those names. During the course of research she discovered the various spellings of these particular names in the documents that were found.

As far as comments from 2016, that is when the blog post was originally written, but we recently shared it again in our newsletter.

[Reply](#)

Amber - Legacy Tree Genealogists  
says

[April 24, 2018 at 8:57 pm](#)

Hi Annette. The researcher chose those particular names because of a client case she was working on that featured those names. During the course of research she discovered the various spellings of these

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Pamela B. Heckert says

[June 27, 2018 at 5:51 pm](#)

I have just realized that a number I was looking at in a census was an 8 sideways and not a 10. The person is now 2 years younger than I thought. 1861 Canadian census.

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