

State Archives of North Carolina

Style Guide:

A Reference for Reading Historic Documents



Deciphering Handwritten Records

One hurdle to using and transcribing historic documents is how handwriting has changed over time – and that we don't write in cursive nearly as much as we used to.

Here are some tips for reading handwritten documents!

Tips: Decoding Handwritten Documents

1. It's important to take time to study the handwritten text. Use context clues to determine the content of the message and better understand the intent of the writer.
2. Use reference tools and resources: it may be necessary to consult geographical dictionaries to identify unfamiliar town names and/or understand town origins. In examining North Carolina records, a great online resource for this is [NCPedia](#), which includes access to an excellent geographical dictionary, [the Gazetteer](#).
3. Getting a second opinion doesn't hurt, especially from your friendly neighborhood reference archivist!

Abbreviations, shorthand, lettering

Oftentimes words were abbreviated by removing certain letters or all but the first and last letters of a word or name (see Fig. 1 on the next page). Latin, being the chief language of record in the Middle Ages, introduced a system of abbreviations to simplify the copying of many repetitious portions of words.

Ab ^o : = ABRAHAM	Hen ^o : = HENRY	J. d ^o // = DITTO MARKS
A. bra ^d : = ABRAHAM	Hby = HENRY	Gr- Fi = FEMALE
Anth ^s = ANTHONY	Ja ^d . = JAMES	P = PER
Ben ^y : = BENJAMIN	Jos ^o : = JOSEPH	Person = PERSON
Cha ^s = CHARLES	Jere: = JEREMIAH	Pish = PARISH
Ch ^s = CHARLES	Jno = JOHN	Inf ^t = INFANT
X ^f ther = CHRISTOPHER	Jr ^o = JEROME	Sam Smith ^e = SAM SMITH
Cath ^{ne} = CATHERINE	Matt ^w = MATTHEW	atto ^o = ATTORNEY
Kath ^e : = KATHERINE	N ^o : = NICHOLAS	af ^s = AFORESAID
Ed ^t : = EDMUND	Nich ^s = NICHOLAS	Ch = CHURCH
Edw ^d = EDWARD	Nich ^o : = NICHOLAS	W ^r Rec ^t = PER RECEIPT
Euz ^{ne} = EBENE	Pamel ^a = PAMELIA	CS = CONTINUED
Ezry = EZRA	Reb ^a : = REBECCA	ff = ^{"SUPRA SCRIPTUM"} (as written above)
Eliz th = ELIZABETH	Rob ^t = ROBERT	W ^r = ^{"VIDE LICET"} (namely - 2-117)
Eliz ^z : = ELIZABETH	Sam ^b : = SAMUEL	Tes ^t = "TASTE" (witness)
Em ^l : = EMILY	Tim: = TIMOTHY	L.S. (real) ^{"LOCUS SIBILLI" (piece of wax seal)}
Fr ^d : = FRANCIS	Tho ^s = THOMAS	
Fran. = FRANCIS	Tris ^t = TRISTRAM	

Fig. 1: Common name abbreviations in the 17th and 18th centuries. ([source](#))

Superior-letter abbreviations were also used, for example:

- s^d for "said"
- p^sence for "presence"
- Rich^d for "Richard"
- w^{ch} for "which"

Some writers simply shortened words and left no other indication of the missing letters, such as written phrases like:

- "I am sir yr most obt and hble servt," which reads as "I am sir your most obedient and humble servant"
- "abt two hund wt of spare Cordage," which reads as "about two hundred weight of spare Cordage"

In terms of lettering, special letter forms and symbols were often used to condense text, like the tailed s, the thorn, the ampersand, monetary symbols, and symbols used in place of names. The tailed s is often mistaken for an f, and two s's together look like a p (see Fig. 2).

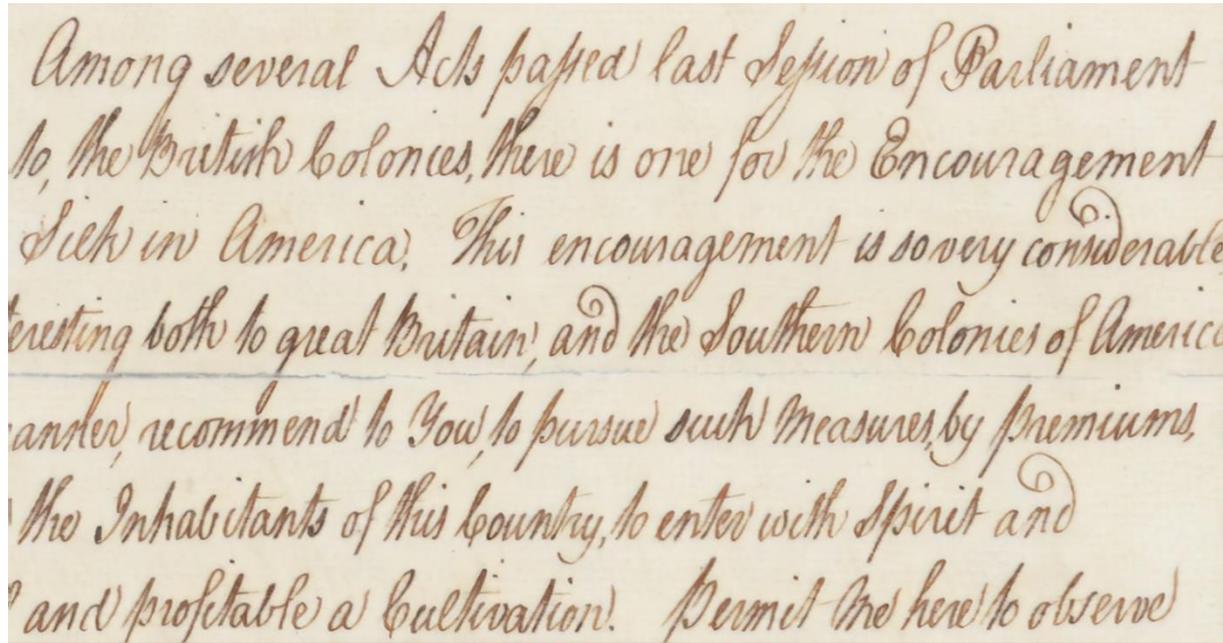


Fig. 2: Examples of the tailed s (as seen in “passed” and “session”) and arbitrary capitalization of words. [\(source\)](#)

The thorn, often mistaken for the letter y, represents the “th” sound (see Fig. 3); thus, the word:

- y^e is “the”
- y^t is “that”
- y^m is “them”

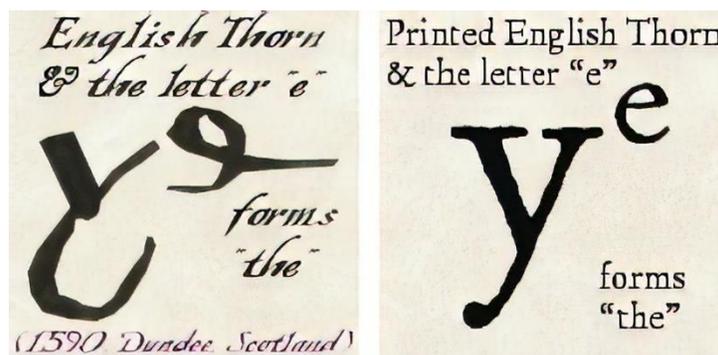


Fig. 3: The handwritten versus printed thorn. [\(source\)](#)

This misconception of the thorn has led to such visible modern errors as “Ye Olde Gift Shoppe.”

There are also several letters that need careful attention, as they are visually very similar to one another—particularly L and S, J and T, K and R, and several others (see Fig. 4).

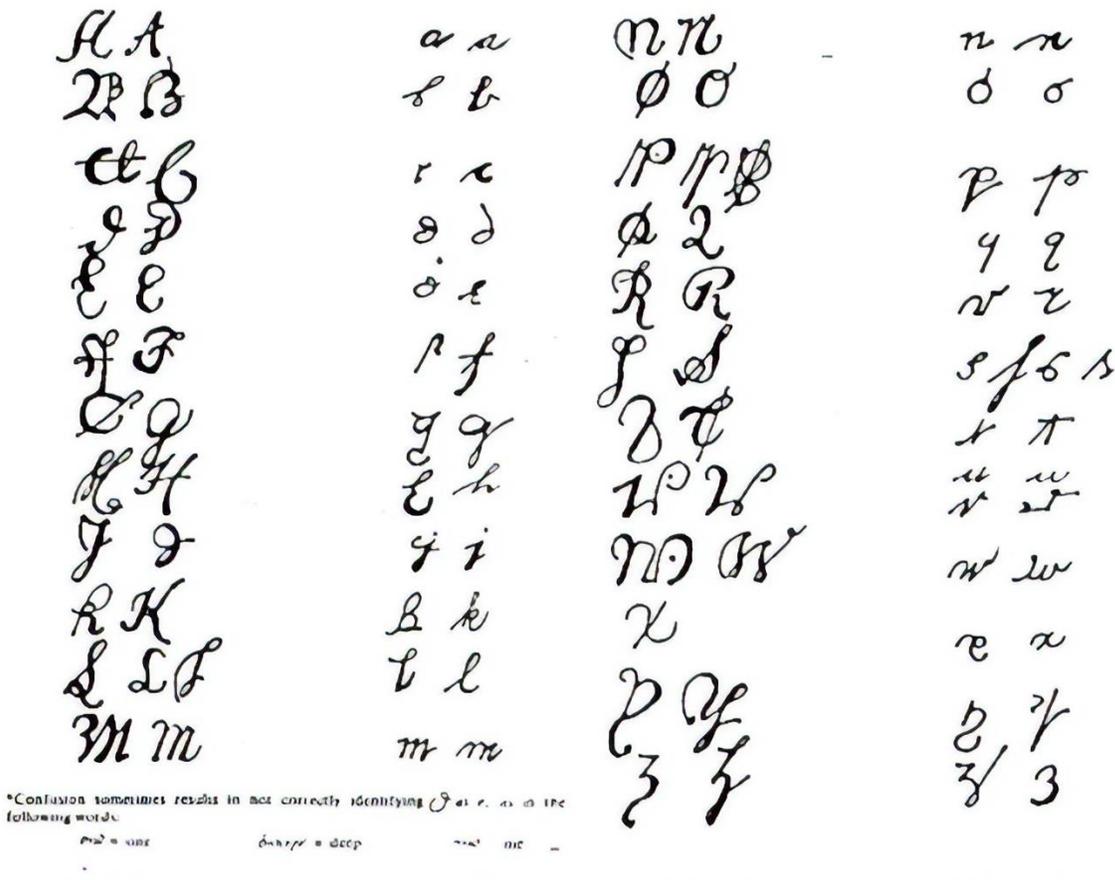
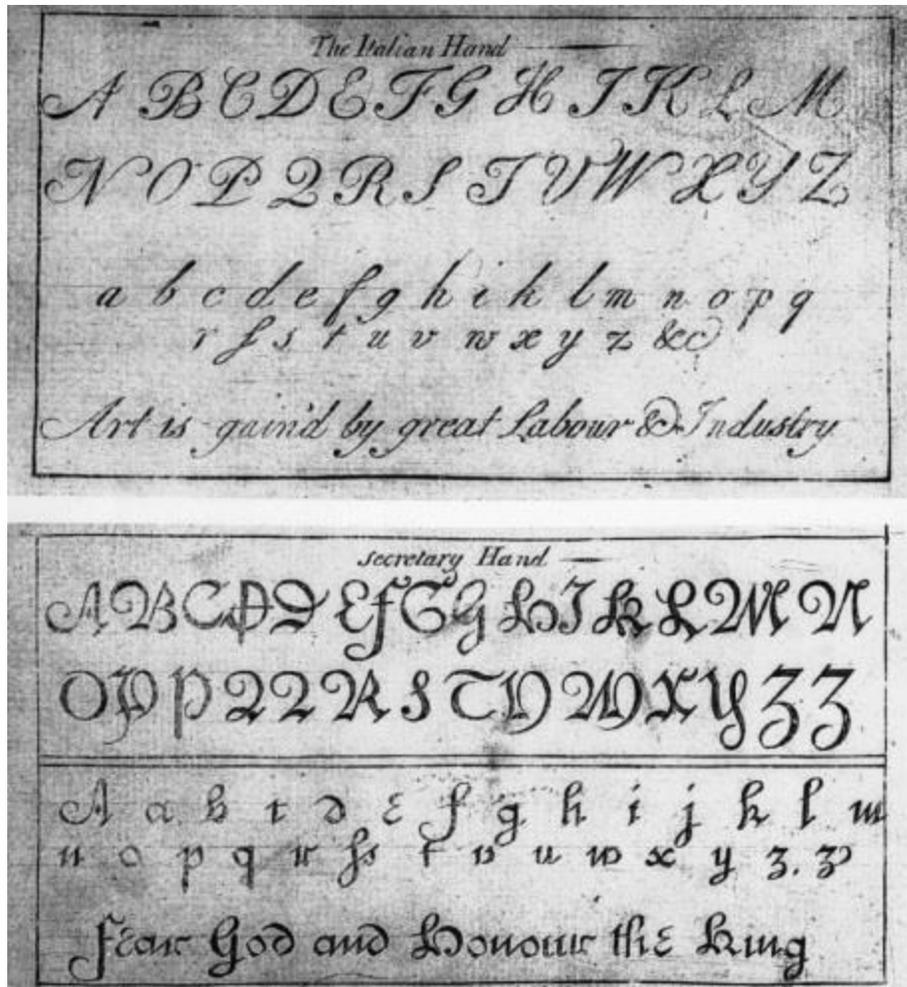


Fig. 4: Colonial handwriting samples.

Capital letters were also written in many different styles, and it is apparent when examining text from this era that words were often capitalized without any apparent reason and proper names were usually left in lower case (see Fig. 2). ([source](#))

Writing Styles

Several different styles of writing have developed over the centuries. Legal and court scribes used a style of handwriting (referred to as “court hand”) to help distinguish their works from the “Gothic” style of script, which was used in the Middle Ages for religious documents. “Court hand” was the predecessor to “secretary hand” in the 16th and 17th centuries and then, as literacy increased, a new, thin, flowing style referred to as “italic hand” became more common and is the style of writing that is in use today.



An example of the italic style versus the secretary style of writing. ([source](#))

Phonetic Spelling

It wasn't until the nineteenth century that a standard of spelling was introduced. Until then, people would often write what they heard (using what is otherwise known as phonetic spelling) and not necessarily what was said, so pronunciation was particularly important. Inconsistencies in spelling, according to Leary (1996), were attributed to one of four tendencies:

- Adding letters
 - "wee" for "we"
 - "doe" for "do"
- Dropping letters
 - "puding" for "pudding"
 - "begining" for "beginning"
- Substituting letters
 - "heyrns" or "hairs" for "heirs"
- Substituting sounds

- “wine” for “vine”
- “prosuant” for “persuant”

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