The Evolution of Handwriting in the English-Speaking Colonies of America

LAETITIA YEANDLE

THE HANDWRITING OF THE EARLY ENGLISH COLONISTS was the handwriting they had learned in England; and the development of handwriting in America, until she became an independent nation, followed closely the development of handwriting in England. Even when manuals on the subject began to be published in the Colonies in the middle of the eighteenth century, they were either reprints of English publications or largely dependent on English models. When their foreign origin became more of a liability than an asset, their source was often purposely forgotten.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the handwriting used in England on an everyday basis for correspondence and business was the secretary hand. It owed much to the court hands which had evolved in the Middle Ages and which, in a fossilized state, continued to be used in certain courts of law until the early part of George II's reign. A new hand, however, was slowly displacing the secretary hand even in its heyday in the sixteenth century, a hand known as the italic or Italian hand because it had originated in Italy. This was developed by leaders of the humanist movement in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to provide a hand that was both pleasing to the eye and easy to read. In England it was at first used chiefly for signing one's name, for emphasis, and by women; but as the seventeenth century progressed, its letter forms are found increasingly in the handwriting of all kinds of people, until in the eighteenth century only a few letters from the secretary and court hands continued to persist—in particular the *c,* the *e,* the *r,* the *v,* the *w,* and the long *s.*

What was basically the italic hand, which we use to-day, came to assume different forms. The upright form which is more akin to printing became known as the roman hand because of its classical antecedents; the sloping, cursive form as the italic proper; and a round, matter-of-fact form as the round hand. In his *Universal Penman,* first published in 1741, George Bickham illustrates five varieties among

the ten or so "alphabets in all the usual hands." Later, a straightforward and practical hand, often used in business for invoices, the engrossing of documents, and such like, was referred to as copper-plate because it gave the appearance of having been incised on a plate of copper like an engraving.

Writing was not a widespread accomplishment and writing masters long looked upon its teaching as a vested interest. Nevertheless, with the growth of commerce and industry, more and more people needed to be able to write and the advantages of simplifying the teaching of handwriting so that it could be easily and quickly mastered became apparent. A few iconoclasts and outsiders in the eighteenth, and nineteenth, centuries realized the need, especially in America with its expanding frontier, for instruction that would provide the basics in a short length of time and would place less emphasis on the calligraphic aspect or the importance of learning from a recognized writing master. One of these innovators, John Jenkins (ca. 1755–1822), reduced the formation of letters to six basic strokes. He and other itinerant masters held classes for a few weeks at a time in various educational institutions. Jenkins's *Art of Writing, Reduced to a Plain and Easy System,* Book I, printed in 1791, was the first copy-book to be published by an American in America.

One reason for interesting oneself in the development of handwriting is to be able to read handwritten documents more easily. Another is to learn how one may identify and date manuscripts with no apparent author or date and how one may establish their genuineness. An awareness of the styles of composition prevailing at different periods, of the implements people wrote with, and of the kind of paper and ink they used, can help to reinforce or supplement any information gained from examination of the handwriting and study of the contents.

Paper was made by placing a thin mixture of beaten rags (usually of linen) and water in a sieve-like wire mold, the vertical wires being laid at right angles, and at wider intervals, over the wires underneath. The watermark was caused by the impression made by a wire design attached to the criss-cross of wires. This paper is known as laid paper to distinguish it from wove paper which began to appear after the middle of the eighteenth century. For the latter, the wires of the mold were woven and so the impression of the wires in the paper is not visible when the paper is held up to the light, only the design of the watermark if one was attached. Watermarks can be helpful in placing and dating paper, if only approximately. A few catalogs have been prepared which attempt to sort out the various watermarks in use in Europe from the mid-twelfth century and to give some indication of the date and place where a particular paper was made and used.[1] The first work on American watermarks was published last year.[2] Though the first American paper mill was established in 1690, much of the writing paper used in America until the end of the eighteenth century was manufactured in western Europe.

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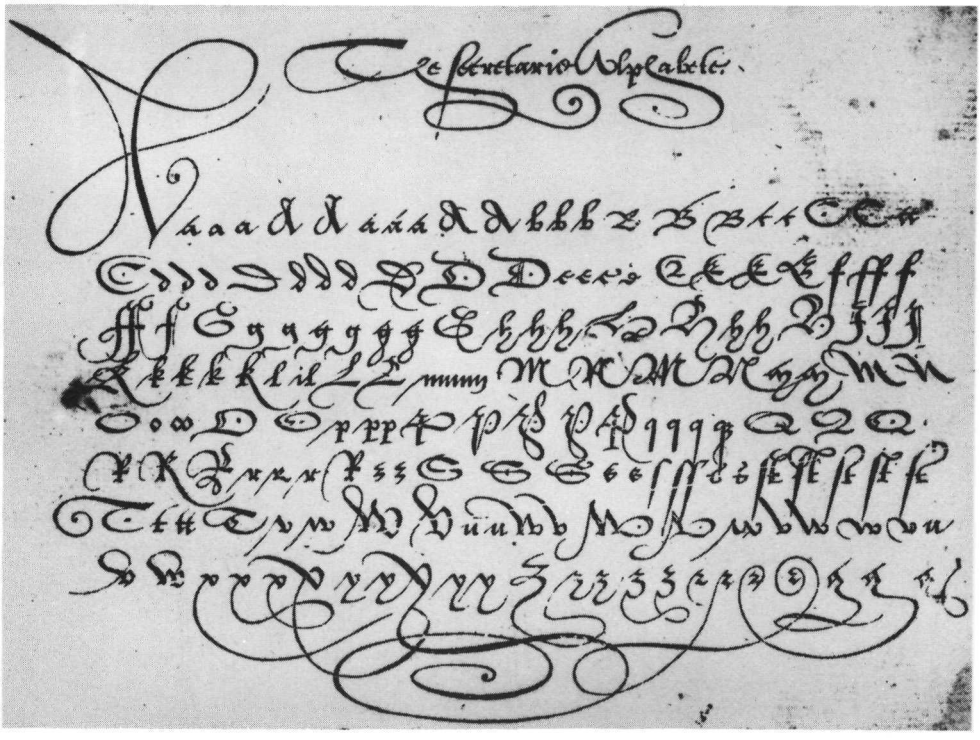
[1] Among the most useful are: E. Heawood, *Watermarks Mainly of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Hilversum, Holland: The Paper Publications Society, 1950); and W. A. Churchill, *Watermarks in Paper . . . in the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger & Co., 1935). Another important work concentrates on earlier watermarks and so is less useful for the Colonial period: C. M. Briquet, *Les Filigranes* (1907), A. Stevenson, ed. (Amsterdam: The Paper Publications Society, 1968).

[2] T. L. Gravell and G. Miller, *A Catalogue of American Watermarks, 1690–1835* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979).

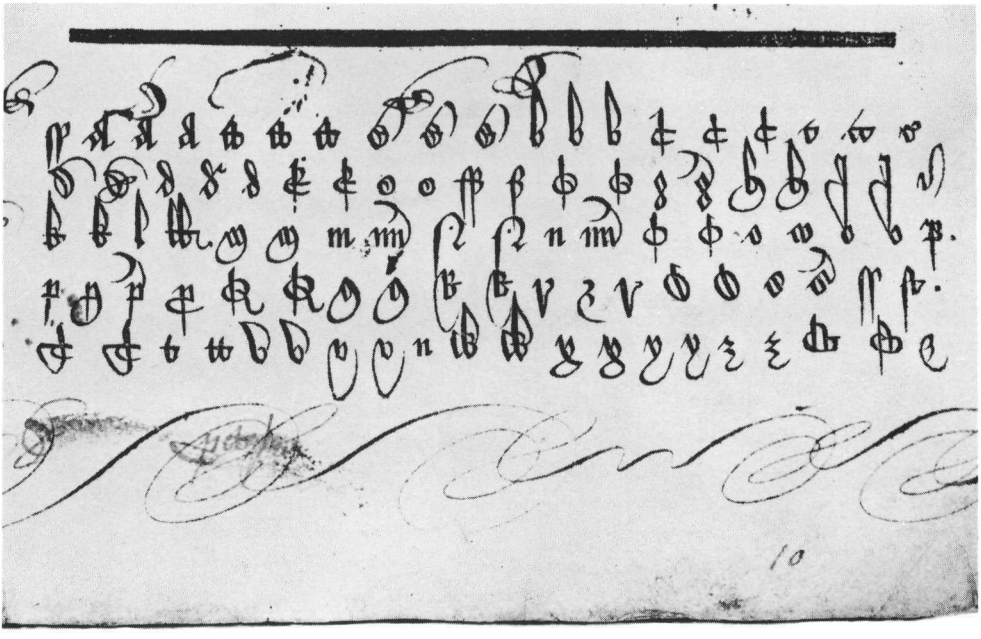
Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ink was usually made at home and was one of two kinds. The standard ink was made from galls or oak apples, which provided the gallic or tannic acid, copperas or vitriol, which provided the iron salts, gum arabic, which affected the viscosity, and a liquid, which might be wine, vinegar, and/or water. Other inks were made with carbon, often lampblack, suspended in a mixture of water and gum arabic. They were blacker at the beginning than the inks made with galls, but did not last as well; the ink did not become an integral part of the surface of the paper and the carbon particles tended to flake off.

The examples of handwriting shown in the following pages are, with a few exceptions, all dated and were written in America by people who were born before the close of the eighteenth century. Most come from the collections of the Folger Shakespeare Library. A few are taken from books on penmanship to give an idea of the styles of handwriting that were being taught at the time of publication and often for many years afterwards.

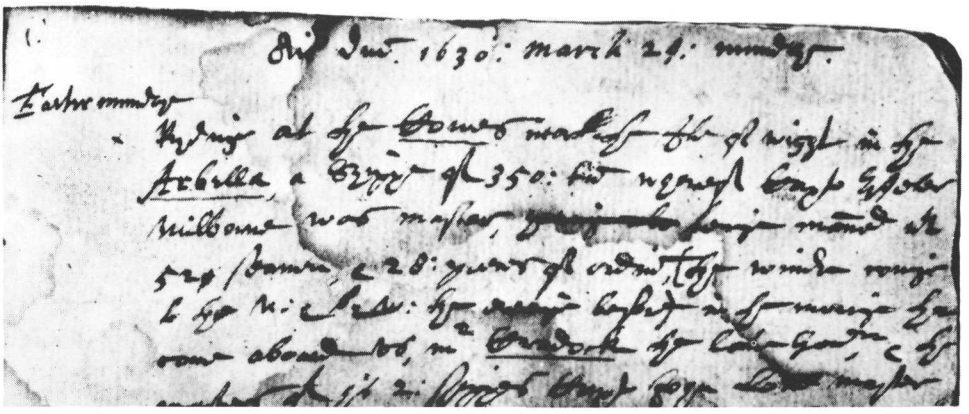


These two alphabets illustrate the hands in which so many of the manuscripts of the early Colonial period are written. Both examples come from John de Beauchesne and John Baildon's *A booke containing divers sortes of hands,* the earliest book on handwriting from an English press, published about 1571. The forms of some letters differ more from those we use today than others, especially the small *c, e, h, k,* the *r*'s and *s*'s, the *v, w, x,* and *y,* as well as many of the capital letters. Of these the small *c, e, r,* and long *s* were to persist the longest. Several small letters, like the *k, v, w,* and *y* are hardly distinguishable from their capitals except by their size. A few letters which one is not likely to confuse in today's alphabets, like *K* and *R, p* and *x, g* and *y,* can easily be mistaken for one another.

The second alphabet includes marks of abbreviation. These are significant. Since Latin was the chief language of record in the Middle Ages, an elaborate system of abbreviations had evolved to simplify the copying of many repetitious portions of words and their highly inflected endings. Where applicable these were used in the copying of English and pose one of the chief obstacles to the easy reading of early modern texts. During the English Commonwealth period an attempt was made to get rid of the use of abbreviations as well as the centuries-old practice of recording most of the legal records in Latin and of copying them in the so-called set hands which few could readily read; but at the Restoration of the monarchy the old customs were brought back and it was not until 1733 that an Act of 1731 took effect stipulating to all intents and purposes that English was to be the only official language and that records were to be written in "such a common legible hand and character as the Acts of Parliament are usually engrossed in . . . and not in any hand commonly called court hand, and in words at length and not abbreviated."[3]



[3] Cited in L. C. Hector, *The Handwriting of English Documents* (London: Edward Arnold, Ltd., 1966), p. 23.



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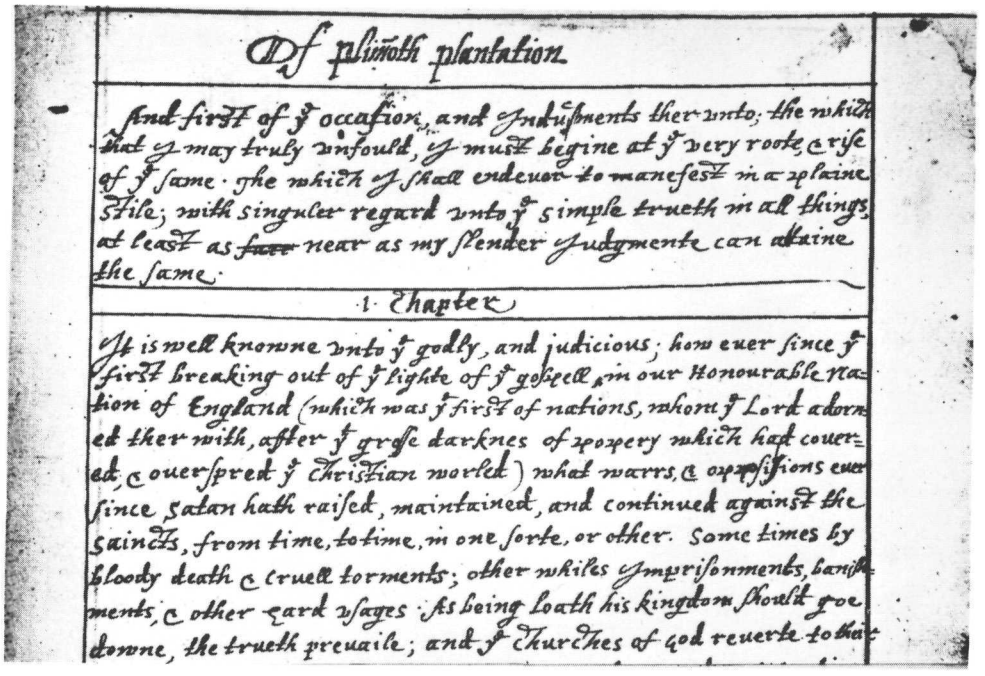
The two manuscripts illustrated on this page show what the secretary and italic hands could become in the hands of two contemporaries, Governor John Winthrop (1588–1649) and Governor William Bradford (1590–1657). The first is the opening passage from Winthrop's diary, written in secretary, the second the first page of Bradford's history written in a hand that is basically italic. Part of the difference in legibility is to be explained by the circumstances under which each was written. One is a diary, hastily written, the other a neat copy. Bradford mixes certain secretary letters with his italic, the *g*, the *p*, the *v*, the *w*, and an occasional *h*. The use of ligatures connecting *c* and *h*, *s* and *t*, the use of *v* where we would use *u*, the lack of a standardized spelling, were common to all men.



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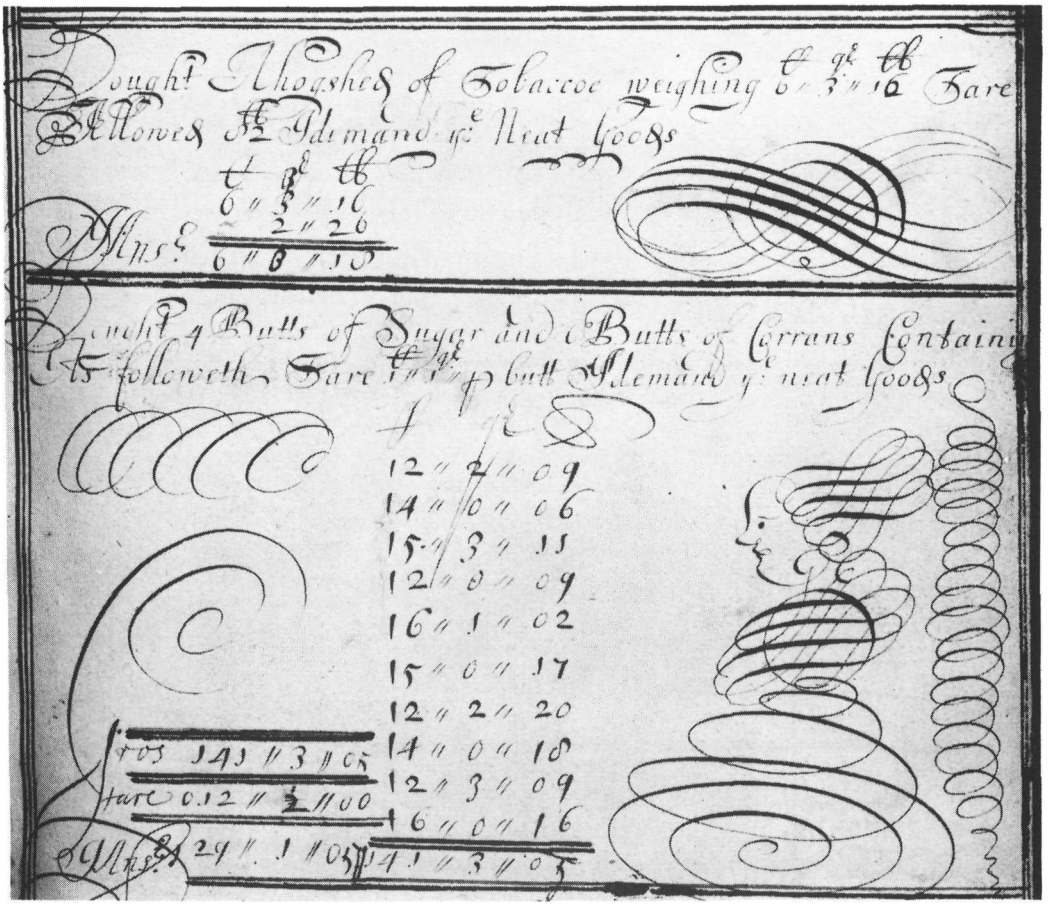
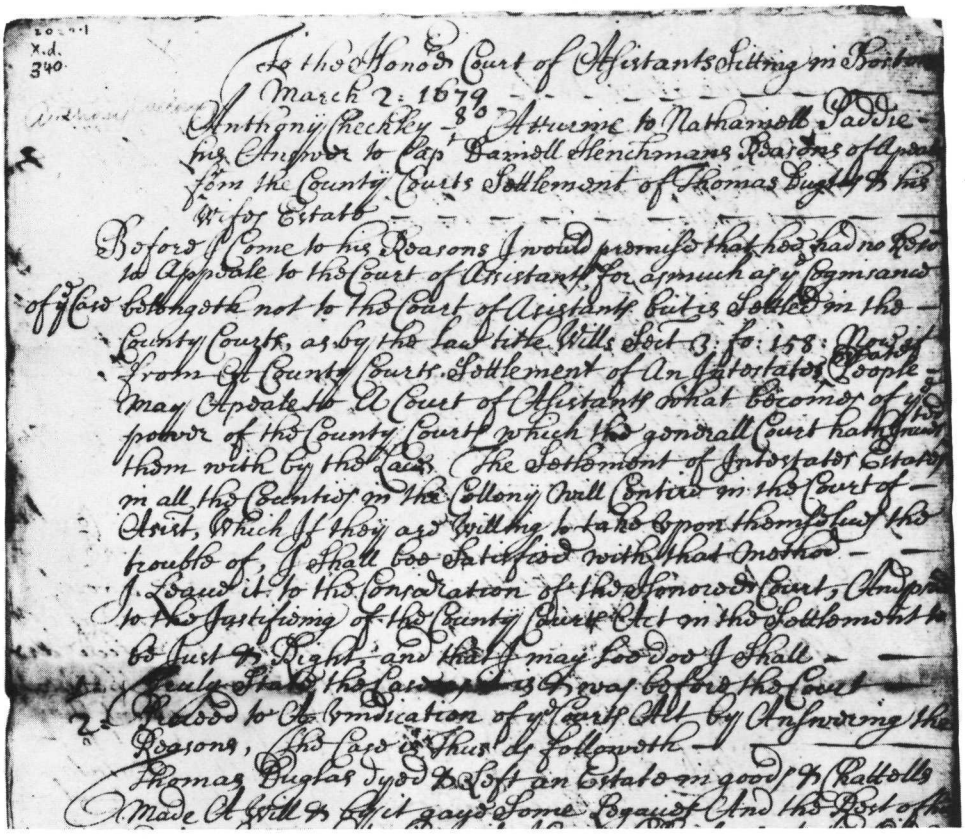
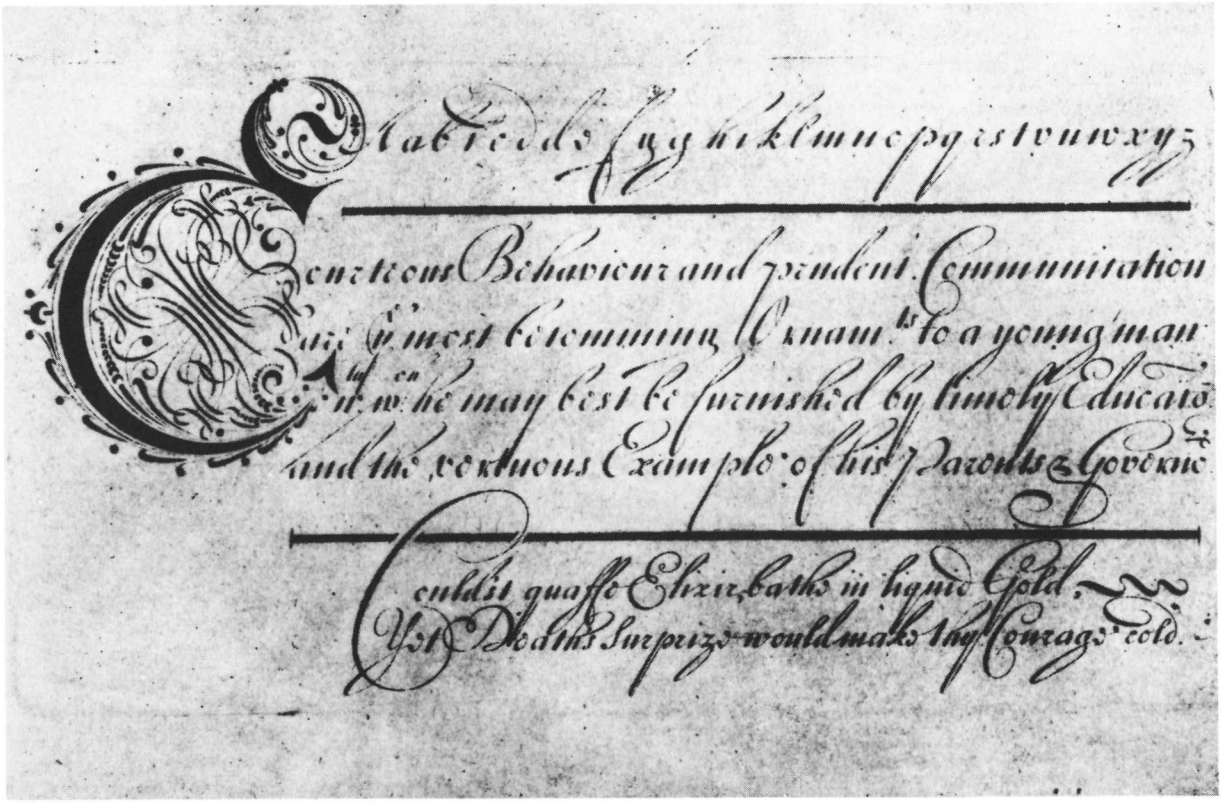


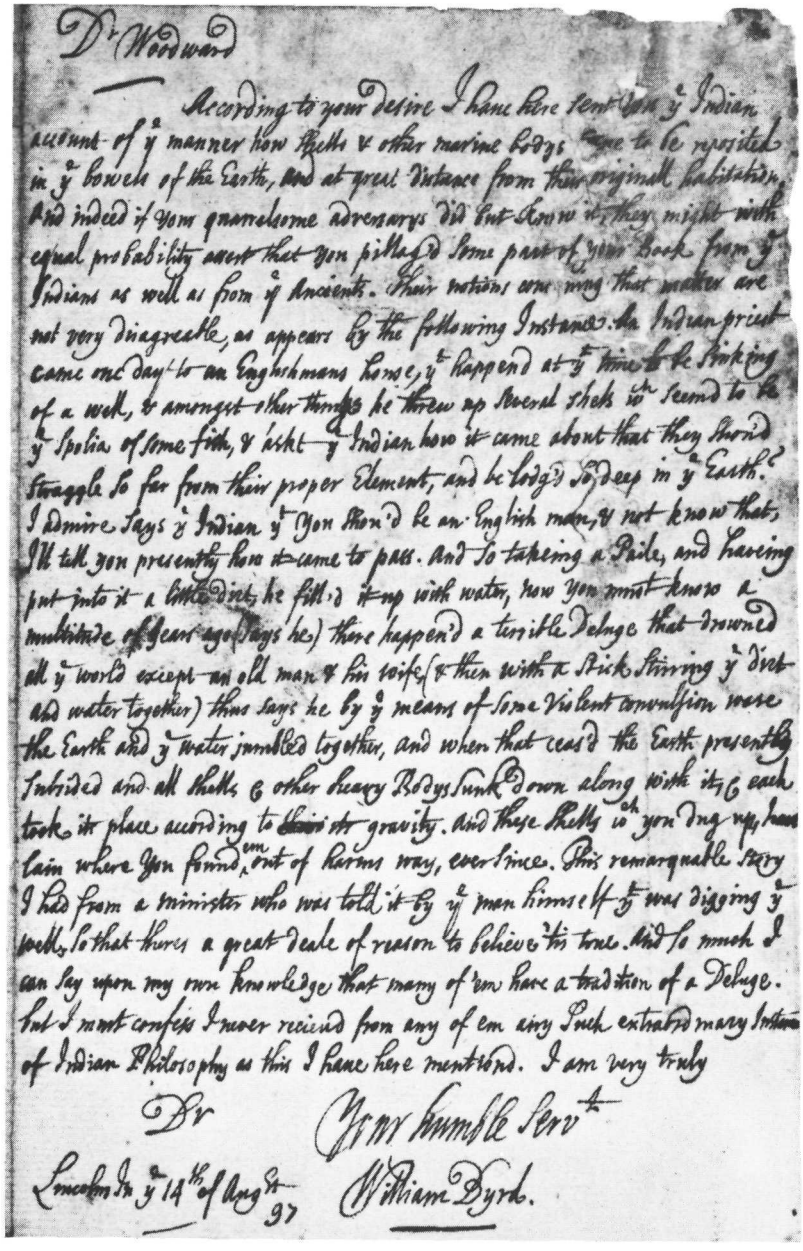
An illustration from a typical copybook written in 1685 by Sarah Cole, scholar to Elizabeth Beane, mistress in the art of writing. As a knowledge of arithmetic became a more and more desirable accomplishment with the expansion of trade, the demand for instruction in the art grew and the elements of arithmetic and other useful information were frequently included in writing manuals. The exuberant flourishes helped to show one's mastery of the pen. The hand is a form of italic. The slightly curvacious numerals, *1* and *8*, in the third long column of figures, are formed characteristically. One seldom finds this form of *8*, written backwards to us, in the later nineteenth century. The *C* of hundredweight is still the old-fashioned *C*, and so is the superior *r* of quarter. The habit of capitalizing the first letter of many words became less common as grammatical conventions were standardized.



This document is Anthony Checkley's argument in the case of Henchman v. Paddie, which was appealed to the Court of Assistants in Boston, 2 March 1680. The exemplar on the opposite page is from a widely used writing manual, *Multum in parvo,* published by Edward Cocker in 1661. The person who wrote the court document learned to write from a similar handbook. Both illustrate a hand combining italic and secretary forms. The secretary *e,* the *v,* and the *w* are especially noticeable. The dotting of the *y* in *Anthony* (line 3) is more common at an earlier date. The writing is full of loops, long descenders and ascenders, and capital letters with flourishes. The method of writing the year date reminds one that England and her colonies, unlike most of western, Catholic, Europe after 1582, had not yet adopted the Gregorian Calendar; so the new year began on March 25th, the feast of the Annunciation, instead of January 1st. England did not adopt the New Style until 1752 when she had to skip eleven days in order to catch up. In correspondence with Europe this discrepancy in the number of the day is sometimes expressed as a fraction.



Reproduced from The English Writing-Masters and Their Copy-Books, 1570–1800, *by A. Heal, 1931, facing p. 140, Plate no. XXXVI; with the kind permission of the Cambridge University Press.*



D^r Woodward

According to your desire I have here sent you y^e Indian account of y^e manner how Shells & other marine bodys came to be reposited in y^e bowels of the Earth, and at great distance from their originall habitation. And indeed if your enamelesome adversarys did but know it, they might with equal probability assert that you pillaged some part of your Book from y^e Indians as well as from y^e Ancients. Their notions are very many times not very disagreable, as appears by the following Instance. An Indian priest came one day to an Englishmans house, y^t happend at y^t time to be sinking of a well, & amongst other things he threw up several shells w^ch seemd to be y^e Spolia of some fish, & askt y^e Indian how it came about that they should struggle so far from their proper Element, and be lodg'd so deep in y^e Earth? I admire says y^e Indian y^t you shou'd be an English man, & not know that, I'll tell you presently how it came to pass. And so taking a Pail, and having put into it a little dirt, he fill'd it up with water, now you must know a multitude of years ago (says he) there happen'd a terrible Deluge that drowned all y^e world except an old man & his wife (& then with a Stick stirring y^e dirt and water together) thus says he by y^e means of some Violent convulsion were the Earth and y^e water jumbled together, and when that ceas'd the Earth presently subsided and all Shells & other heavy Bodys sunk down along with it, & each took its place according to their gravity. And these Shells w^ch you dug up, have lain where you found 'em, out of harms way, ever since. This remarquable Story I had from a minister who was told it by y^e man himself y^t was digging y^e well, so that there's a great deale of reason to believe 'tis true. And so much I can say upon my own knowledge that many of 'em have a tradition of a Deluge. But I must confess I never received from any of em any Such extraord^y Instance of Indian Philosophy as this I have here mentioned. I am very truly

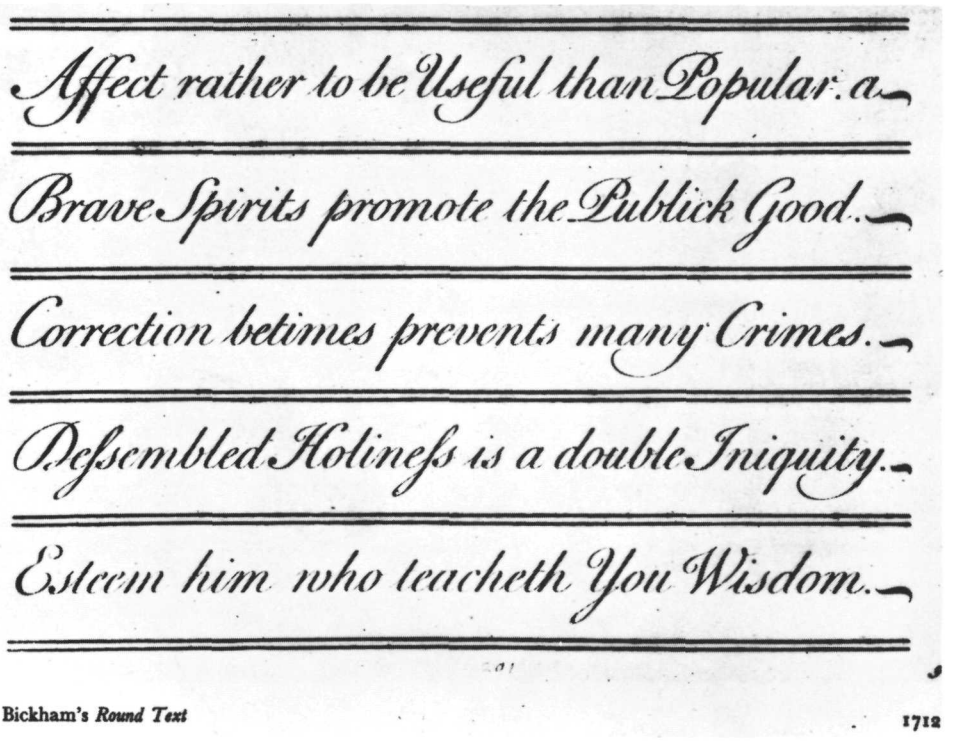
D^r Your humble Serv^t

Lincolns In y^e 14^th of Aug^t 97 William Byrd.

The two letters were written over fifty years apart, one in 1697 by the second William Byrd (1674–1744) of Westover in Virginia, the other in 1753 by a Jacob Bacon, a minister at an "infant plantation" at Upper Ashuelot (now Keene) in New Hampshire. The Byrd letter has some of the features which are common in the eighteenth century—the *'d* for the past tense, the *'em* for *them* (sometimes without the apostrophe, in Byrd's handwriting), the spelling of *asked* as *askt,* the free use of the ampersand and *ye* for *and* and *the*. A little is known about Byrd's early education. When he was seven he was sent to an English school in Felsted, Essex, run by a well-known master, Christopher Glascock. Byrd went on to study at the Middle Temple, and, at the time this letter was written, had

recently been elected a member of the Royal Society. Dr. John Woodward was a noted geologist and had published in 1695 *An Essay toward a Natural History of the Earth.* Jacob Bacon's letter shows us other common abbreviations that are still found in the eighteenth century, *altho'* for *although, thro'* for *through, y^r^* for *your*, and less commonly by then, *w^t^* for *what.*

The reference to Upper Ashuelot pinpoints one of the differences between English and American manuscripts of the same period. English place names changed but seldom, except in the spelling. Some American names changed frequently and the use of a particular name can help to give an approximate date to an undated document.



Bickham's *Round Text* **1712**

Reproduced from The English Writing-Masters and Their Copy-Books, 1570–1800, *by A. Heal, 1931, Plate no. LXVI; with the kind permission of the Cambridge University Press.*

The two plates are taken from books by a writing master whose works were widely published in the first half of the eighteenth century, George Bickham. The first plate is from his *Round Text* of 1712, the second plate from *The Universal Penman* of 1741.

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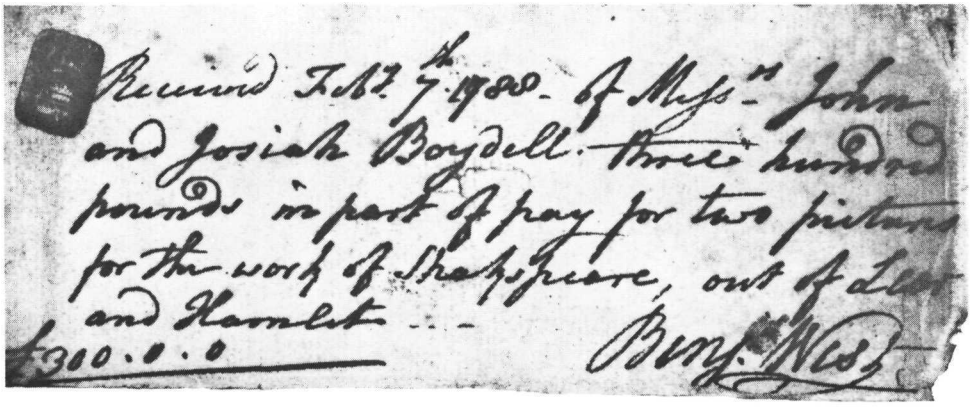
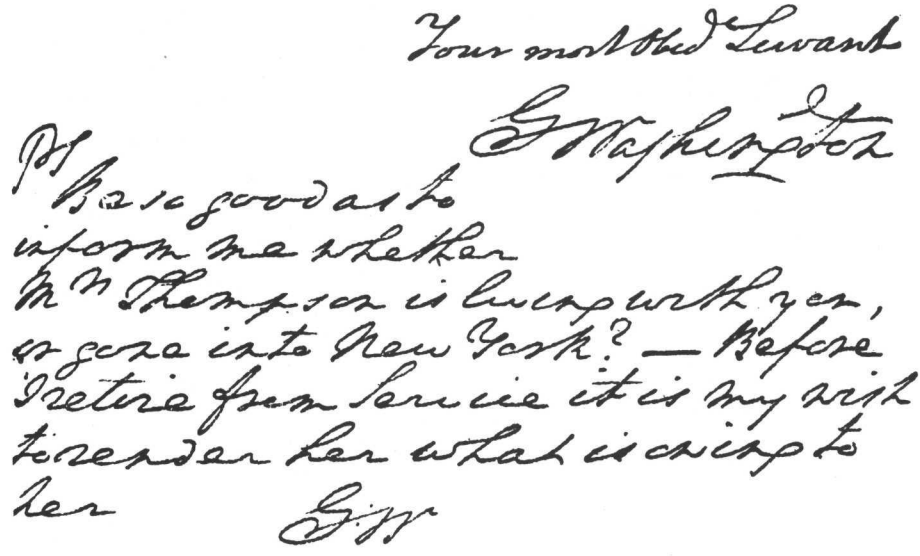
Bickham's *Universal Penman* 1741

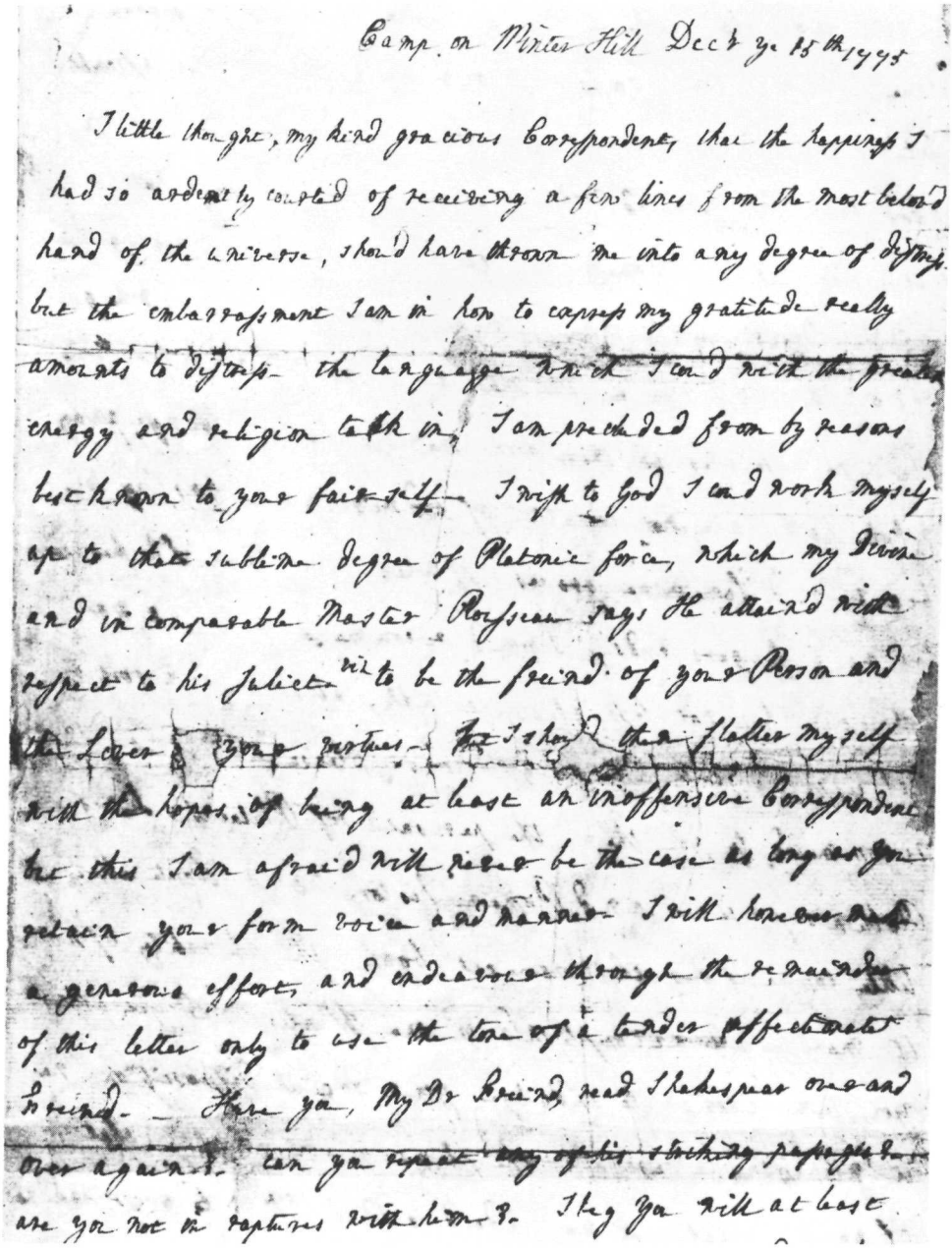

Received Feb.y 7th 1780 of Messrs. John and Josiah Boydell three hundred pounds in part of pay for two pictures for the work of Shakspeare, out of Lear and Hamlet
£300.0.0
Benj.n West

Benjamin West (1738–1820), the writer of this receipt, was born near Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, but spent most of his adult life in England. It would be difficult to distinguish between an American and an English hand on the basis of early training. One knows that this receipt was not drawn up in America because of the stamp (a blind one in the center of the document) in the amount of four pence. The use of pounds, shillings, and pence, and other currencies, continued in America until the nineteenth century.


Your most Obed.t Servant
G Washington
P.S.
Be so good as to
inform me whether
Mr Thompson is living with you,
or gone into New York? — Before
I retire from service it is my wish
to render her what is owing to
her
G.W.

Reproduced from the Bible of the Revolution, *1930, with the kind permission of W. R. Howell.*

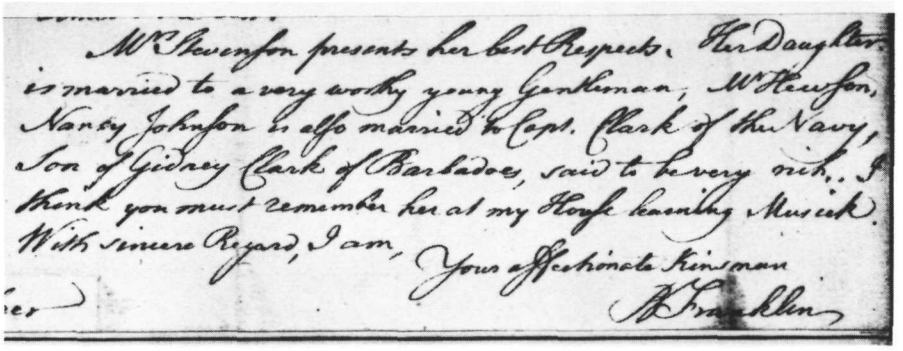
The hand of George Washington (1732–99) is so regular and flows so easily that it looks as though it never lost touch with the copybook hands of his childhood. As Thomas Jefferson remarked in a letter written in 1814, Washington "wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy, correct style. This he had acquired by conversation with the world, for his education was merely reading, writing, and common arithmetic, to which he added surveying at a later day."



Camp on Winter Hill Decr ye 15th 1775

I little thought, my kind gracious Correspondent, that the happiness I had so ardently coveted of receiving a few lines from the most beloved hand of the Universe, should have thrown me into any degree of distress, but the embarrassment I am in how to express my gratitude really amounts to distress— the language which I could write the freest energy and religion talk in, I am precluded from by reasons best known to your fair self— I wish to God I could work myself up to that sublime degree of Platonic fervor, which my Divine and incomparable Master Plotinus says he attained with respect to his Juliet viz to be the friend of your Person and the Lover of your mind— but I shou'd then flatter myself with the hopes of being at least an inoffensive Correspondent, but this I am afraid will never be the case as long as you retain your form voice and manner— I will however make a generous effort, and endeavour through the medium of this letter only to use the tone of a tender affectionate friend— Hark ye, My Dr Friend, read Shakespear over and over again— can ye repeat any of his touching passages to— are you not in raptures with him?— Hey ye will at least

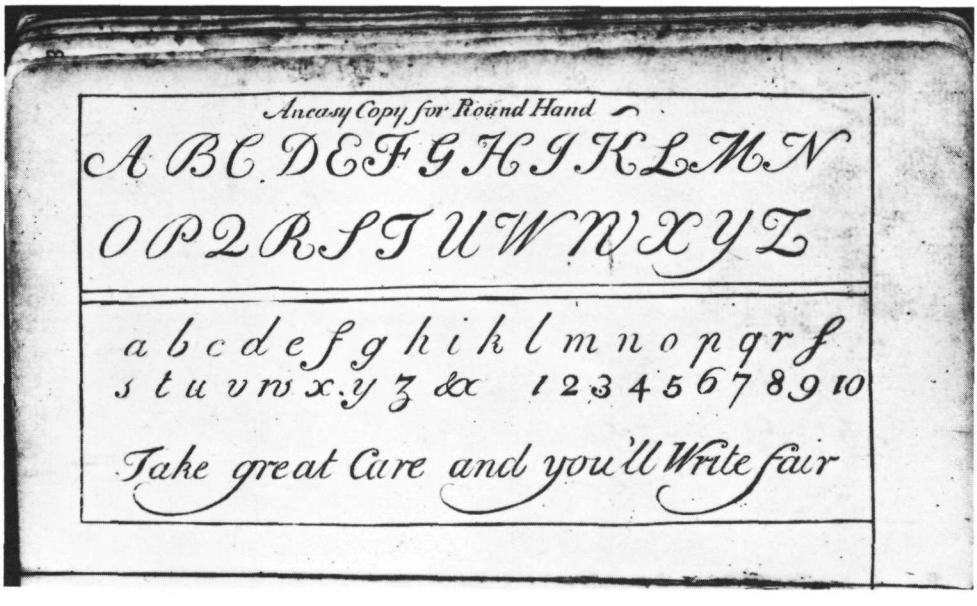
Major General Charles Lee (1731–82), the writer of this letter, was born in Cheshire, England, and went to schools in Bury St. Edmunds and in Switzerland. His hand, unlike Washington's except for the long *s*, still has vestiges of the older hands, as for example the *v*, and the *w*.



Mr Stevenson presents her best Respects. Her Daughter is married to a very worthy young Gentleman, Mr Stevenson. Nancy Johnson is also married to Capt. Clark of the Navy, Son of Gidney Clark of Barbadoes, said to be very rich. I think you must remember her at my House learning Musick. With sincere Regard, I am, Yours affectionate Kinsman

B Franklin

This is the hand of an accomplished penman who helped to print, in 1748, the first copybook to be published in America, *The American Instructor: or, Young Man's Best Companion . . . The whole better adapted to these American Colonies, than any other Book of the like kind.* (See illustration below.) It was the ninth edition, revised and corrected, of a work by George Fisher, originally published in England as *The Instructor.* Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) was taught to read and write by his father and spent part of a year at the Boston Grammar school, but in his *Autobiography* he pays particular tribute to his schooling at George Brownell's school for writing and arithmetic. "Under him," Franklin says he "acquired fair writing pretty soon." Franklin left school when he was ten, but he always was interested in handwriting *per se* and studied Cocker's *Arithmetic,* chiefly, he relates, to make up for having failed to grasp the subject in school. This letter, dated 21 August 1770, is concocted of at least two letters, both genuine, as one can tell by holding the letter up to the light. The two watermarks clash with one another.



An easy Copy for Round Hand

A B C D E F G H I K L M N

O P Q R S T U W N X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i k l m n o p q r s

s t u v w x y z & 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Take great Care and you'll Write fair

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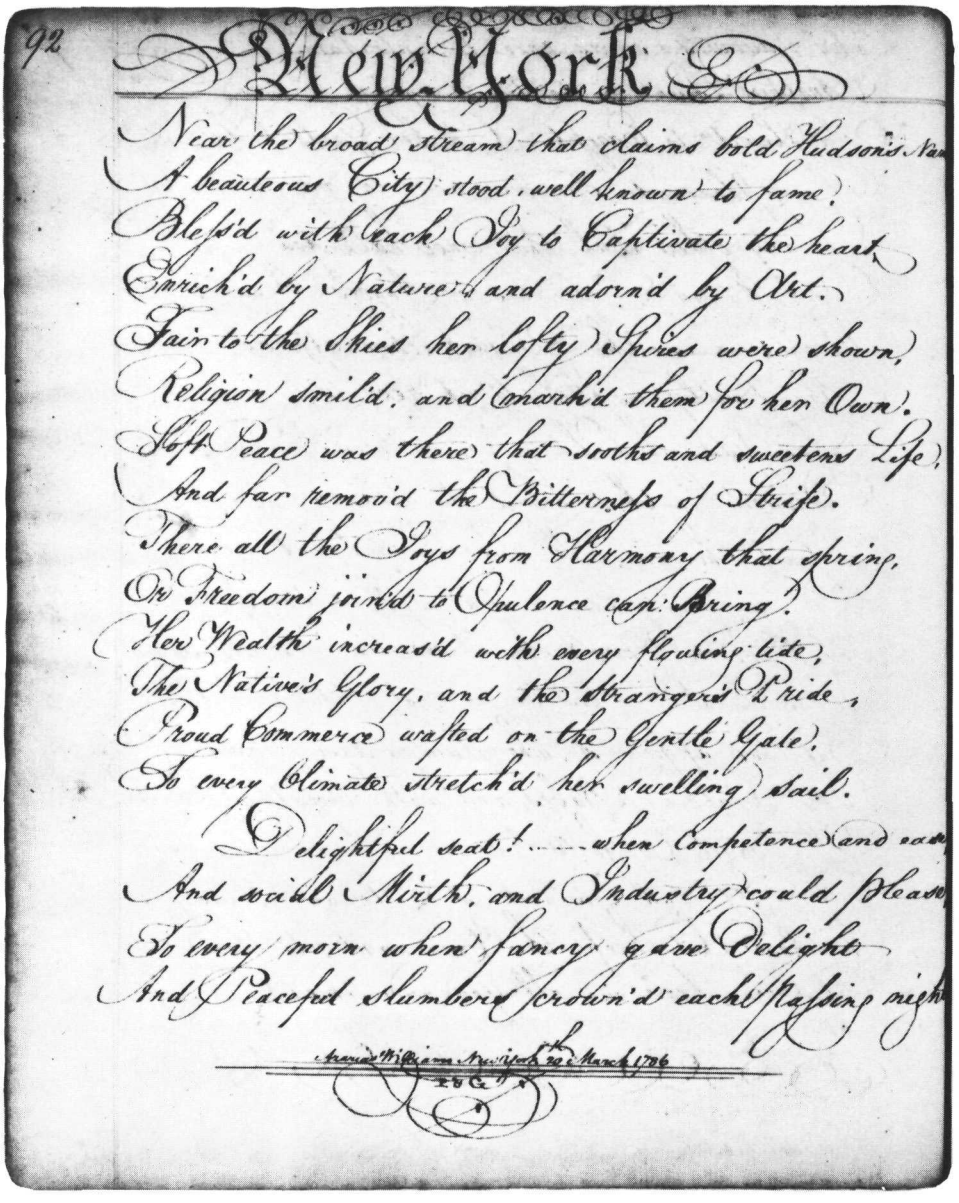
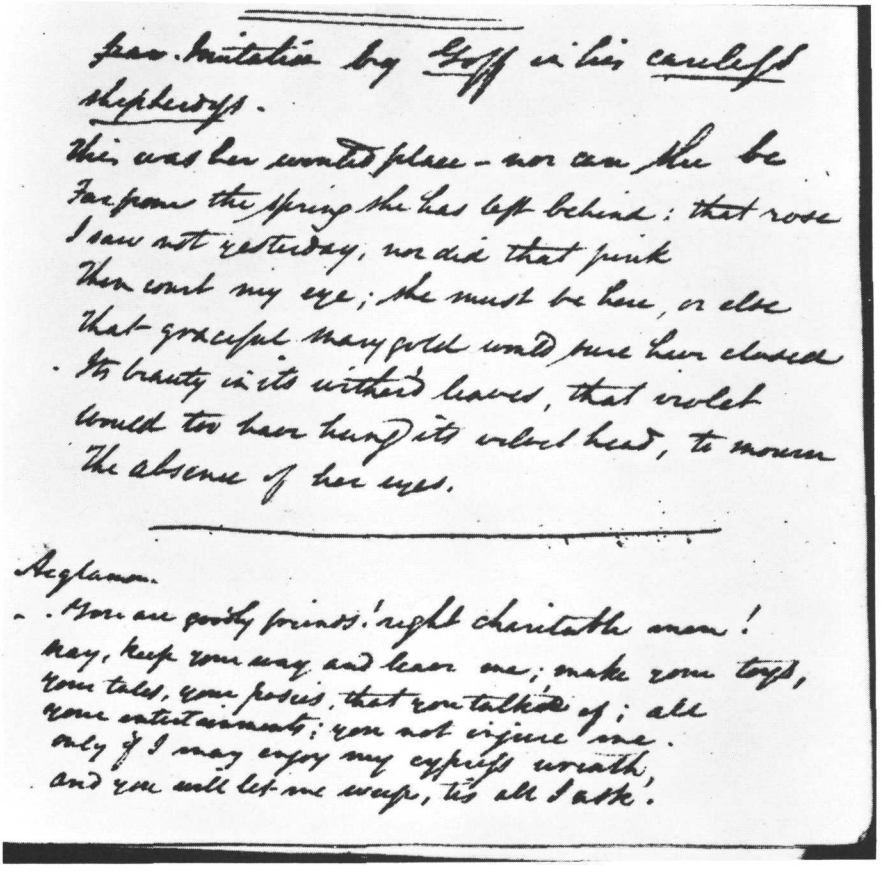

92

New York

Near the broad Stream that claims bold Hudsons Na
A beauteous City stood, well known to fame;
Blessd with each Joy to Captivate the heart
Enrichd by Nature and adornd by Art.
Fair to the Skies her lofty Spires were shown,
Religion smild, and Cmarkd them for her Own.
Soft Peace was there that soothes and sweetens Life,
And far removd the Bitterness of Strife.
There all the Joys from Harmony that spring,
Or Freedom joind to Opulence can Bring.
Her Wealth increasd with every flowing tide,
The Natives Glory, and the Strangers Pride,
Proud Commerce wasted on the Gentle Gale,
To every Climate stretchd her swelling Sail.
Delightful seat! ... when Competence and ease
And social Mirth, and Industry could please
To every morn when fancy gave Delight
And Peaceful Slumbers crownd each passing night

Azarias Williams ... 5th March 1786

Azarias Williams was a merchant from Yorkshire living in New York between 1785 and 1790. His handwriting suggests a background of hours on a high stool entering merchandise in ledgers. He uses the *'s* for the genitive, which is now everyday usage.



free imitation by Goff of his careless shepherds.

This was her wonted place - nor can she be
Far from the spring she has left behind: that rose
I saw not yesterday, nor did that pink
Then court my eye; she must be here, or else
That graceful many petal'd cup have closed
Its beauty in its withered leaves, that violet
Would too have hung its velvet head, to mourn
The absence of her eyes.

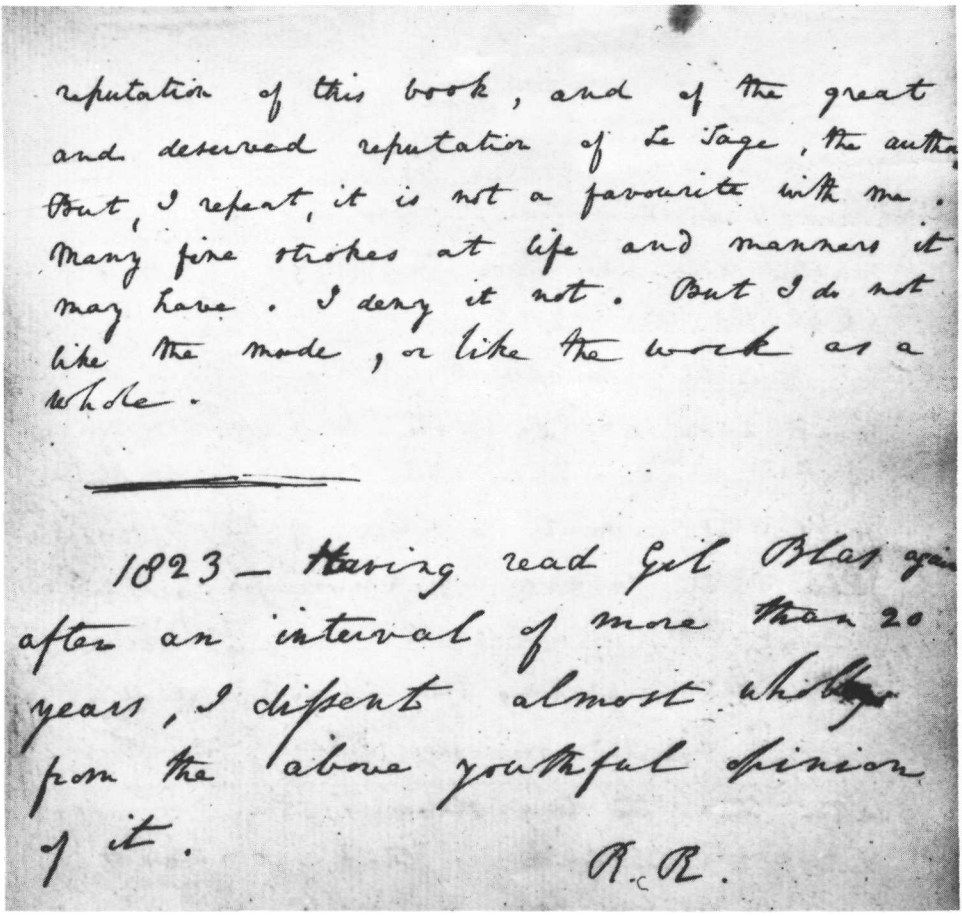
Anglamon.

- You are goodly friends! right charitable men!
Nay, keep your way and leave me; make your toys,
Your tales, your poesies, that you talked of; all
Your satisfactions; you not injure me.
Only if I may enjoy my cypress wreath,
And you will let me weep, 'tis all I ask'.

Both Washington Irving (1783–1859) and Richard Rush (1780–1859) were born after the Declaration of Independence. The first excerpt is taken from an undated commonplace book belonging to Irving. If one did not know who had written it and if, most helpfully, the countermark of the watermark was not a date, 1809, one might be inclined to think it was entered earlier than about 1810. Yet the stem of the *d*'s flies backwards less frequently than is so often true in the eighteenth century, and the long *s* is only used when it is the first of a double *s*.

The excerpt from Richard Rush's commonplace book, opposite, provides a convenient date for the compilation of the major portion of the book. Otherwise, purely on the basis of its appearance, one might be inclined to date it a little later. The paper is American and has the countermark, *Brandywine*.

Irving attended a variety of schools in New York City before entering a law office for a while and then deciding to become a writer. Rush went straight from school and college into the law.



reputation of this book, and of the great and deserved reputation of Le Sage, the author. But, I repeat, it is not a favourite with me. Many fine strokes at life and manners it may have. I deny it not. But I do not like the mode, or like the work as a whole.

1823 — Having read Gil Blas again after an interval of more than 20 years, I dissent almost wholly from the above youthful opinion of it.

R. C.

The manuscripts illustrated in these pages give some idea of the changes in handwriting that occurred in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the English-speaking colonies, and also of some of the factors involved in trying to date and place undated and unidentified documents. During these centuries the secretary hand gave way to the italic; spelling, capitalization, and punctuation became more standardized; *i*'s and *j*'s, like *u*'s and *v*'s, came each to be regarded as a separate letter and not as two forms of the same letter; abbreviations were used less and less; the subscriptions of letters became less flowery, though they were still, on the whole, an integral part of the last sentence. The use of a particular place name, the kind of currency mentioned, the way in which a date is written, the watermark of the paper, may provide further clues. The use of blue paper, letters with separate envelopes and, of course, postage stamps, are evidence that the documents were written at a later date. The nineteenth century was to bring many changes in the methods of writing, and not least in the implements with which writing was accomplished.

LAETITIA YEANDLE is the curator of manuscripts at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. Her article is a revised version of the paper she presented at the SAA convention, in Chicago, on 26 September 1979.