

OLD HANDWRITING AND SYMBOLS

Reading old handwriting can be a real problem when it is in a foreign language, but it can be just as much a problem in English, especially if you are not aware of changes in handwriting and styles over the years. Many words, for instance, were abbreviated by deleting a letter or all but the first and last letters of a word; even names were shortened this way. In Colonial America this deletion was common in letters and documents and was usually indicated by a horizontal line written above or through the word. Some of your handwriting problems may require you to find some old penmanship manuals in the library (interesting browsing, actually, whether you need them or not). Here are examples of a few of the more common abbreviations and symbols:

<i>Ab:</i> = ABRAHAM	<i>Hen:</i> = HENRY	<i>J. d: //</i> = DITTO MARKS
<i>Abra:</i> = ABRAHAM	<i>Hoy</i> = HENRY	<i>fi - Fi</i> = FEMALE
<i>Anth^s</i> = ANTHONY	<i>Ja.</i> = JAMES	<i>P</i> = PER
<i>Beny:</i> = BENJAMIN	<i>Jos:</i> = JOSEPH	<i>Person</i> = PERSON
<i>Cha^o</i> = CHARLES	<i>Jere:</i> = JEREMIAH	<i>Pish</i> = PARISH
<i>Ch^s</i> = CHARLES	<i>Jno</i> = JOHN	<i>Inf^t</i> = INFANT
<i>Xpher</i> = CHRISTOPHER	<i>Jr^e</i> = JEROME	<i>Sam Smith^e</i> = SAM SMITH
<i>Cath^{ne}</i> = CATHERINE	<i>Matt^w</i> = MATTHEW	<i>Atto</i> = ATTORNEY
<i>Kath:</i> = KATHERINE	<i>N^s</i> = NICHOLAS	<i>af^s</i> = AFORESAID
<i>Ed:</i> = EDMUND	<i>Nich^s</i> = NICHOLAS	<i>Ch</i> = CHURCH
<i>Edward</i> = EDWARD	<i>Nich^o</i> = NICHOLAS	<i>W^r Rec^t</i> = PER RECEIPT
<i>Euz^{ne}</i> = EUGENE	<i>Pamel^a</i> = PAMELIA	<i>CS</i> = CONTINUED
<i>Ezry</i> = EZRA	<i>Reb^a</i> = REBECCA	<i>ss</i> = "SUPRA SCRIPTUM" (as written above)
<i>Elyth</i> = ELIZABETH	<i>Rob^t</i> = ROBERT	<i>W^r</i> = "VICI LICET" (namely-to-wit)
<i>Eliz:</i> = ELIZABETH	<i>Sam^b</i> = SAMUEL	<i>Tes^t</i> = "TESTE" (witness)
<i>Em^l:</i> = EMILY	<i>Tim:</i> = TIMOTHY	<i>L.S. Seal</i>
<i>Fra:</i> = FRANCIS	<i>Tho^s</i> = THOMAS	"LOCUS SIGILLI" (place of the seal)
<i>Fran.</i> = FRANCIS	<i>Tris^m</i> = TRISTRAM	





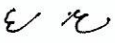





Reading Old Handwriting

Reading the handwriting in many old documents is a challenge. These strategies will be helpful in deciphering what it says.

Strategies

1. Look for other words on the page for an example of the letter, i.e., names occupations, months, states
2. What is the most likely word? First impression
3. Alphabetical order
4. Trace over the letter or word to copy
5. Boiler plate phrases in deeds and wills
 - a. Deeds--hath granted, bargained, sold, aliened, enfeoffed, and confirmed and by these present doth grant, bargain, sell, alien, enfeoff and confirm unto the said ...
 - b. Wills—In the name of God, Amen, I (name) of (Town) and (County, state of, last will and testament
6. Abbreviations used for names
7. Read from the end of the word.
8. Isolate the letter with your fingers or paper.
9. Magnify or reduce the image may make it easier to read.
10. Place a piece of yellow paper or acetate on the image to enhance the contrast.
11. Move the image to a different position—top of screen, tilt the image, look at it sideways.
12. Ask a friend—trace or copy the image and show it to a fellow researcher.

Letter formations that are confusing

1. Double s 
2. Drop r 
3. L and S 
4. I and J 
5. U and V
5. E as 
6. T as 
7. S on the end that looks like z 
8. said 
9. e as e 
10. Loop on the end of capitals 
11. Tail of word above or top of one letter looking like tail of one above

Other symbols

1. --- a line over an **m** or **n** indicates a double letter
2. : a colon at the end of the word indicates an abbreviated word
3. = a double bar indicates a split word
4. ~ a tilde over a **c** reads as **ti** or **ci**

Resources

“Handwriting and Script” www.cyndislist.com

“Deciphering Old Handwriting” Treasure Maps: www.amberskyline.com/treasuremaps

Greenwood, Val D. *Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*. 3rd edition. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2000.

Sperry, Kip. *Reading Early American Handwriting*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co. 1998.