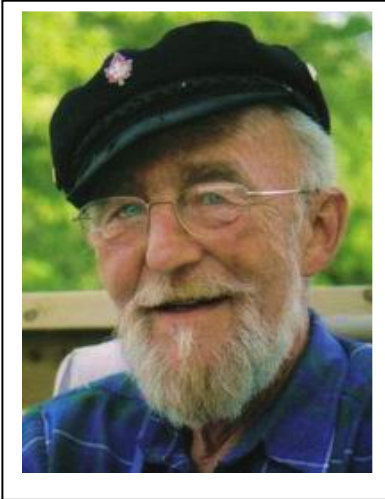


### Old Handwriting



Almost all the old documents we use in our research are handwritten and those from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are not usually too difficult to read. However older documents can present problems in writing styles.

Until I tried to do it, I wouldn't have believed how difficult it could be to decipher old handwriting. Eventually I went through the whole document looking for words that I could make out well enough to identify. I copied each letter as it appeared and its modern equivalent. Then I went through it again filling in the letters that I could now identify. Now I could identify a few more words and had a few more letters. The process was repeated until decipherment was complete. It was like doing a cryptogram.

Old handwriting is known in academic circles as palaeography and there are a number of excellent books and articles available on the subject. University libraries would be a good source for these.

There are also several excellent websites that can help to prepare us to deal with these confusing documents.

Sabrina Murray, a Florida genealogist, taught a course on 'Deciphering Old Handwriting' and a lot of the material from that course is presented at: <http://amberskyline.com/treasuremaps/oldhand.html> . This site is a good place to start. It is fairly basic and has lots of hot links to actual examples of old writing and the abbreviations often used.. The only limitation is that the examples are all taken from documents produced in the United States and the style of writing can vary a little from that in England or elsewhere.

The Finnish Genealogical Society has a site that focuses on old European handwriting styles. They have samples of both upper and lowercase alphabets from different periods, which is very helpful. You can download or print out these alphabets as working guides or study aids. Their site is at: <http://www.genealogia.fi/faq/faq031e.htm> .

Cambridge University has a strong interest in palaeography and they have produced a free online course on the subject. Entitled 'English Handwriting 1500-1700', it has 28 lessons. Each lesson focuses on a specific manuscript and provides the resources for deciphering it, information on dating writing styles, and all that you would expect from a great course.

There is even a short self-test at the end of each lesson where you try to decipher a passage and, of course, the correct answer is supplied so that you can check yourself out. The documents that are used are rated on a difficulty scale of 1 to 5. The first few lessons use level one documents and by lesson 26 you are up to level 5 ones. The URL for this course is:

<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/eres/ehoc/index.html> .

### Old Newspapers Online

Researchers with ancestors in the United States will soon have another great resource available to them. The National Endowment for the Humanities is working with the Library of Congress to digitize up to 30 million pages of newspapers that were published between 1836 and 1922.

The reason for picking those specific dates is that the typefaces of newspapers prior to 1836 are too difficult for optical scanners to recognize and papers after 1922 are protected by copyright.

The U. S. government announced that this resource will begin to come online in 2006. It sounds almost too good to be true but let's keep our fingers crossed.

A similar project is underway in the U.K. by the British Library. You can read about this one at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3795631.stm> . I haven't seen a recent estimate for the completion of that project but it was originally about the same as the American one.