

# *Reading Early American Handwriting*

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## Chapter 7

# Sample Alphabets and Handwriting Styles

“It’s a poor mind that can only think of one way  
to spell a word.”

—Andrew Jackson

Both capital and lowercase letters are discussed in this chapter. Sometimes capital letters are more difficult to recognize than lowercase letters because of the flourishes and style of writing, while at other times lowercase letters are more difficult to interpret.

A summary of handwriting styles and letters of the alphabet to be aware of is given below:

- Aa Small *a* may have its top flaked off, or may not have been rounded, making the letter look like a *u*. Small *a* may look like an *o*. Capital *A* may look like a capital *T* or *H*.
- Bb Small *b* may look like an *f*, especially if it descends below the line, or it may look like an *l* or a *b*.
- Cc Capital *C* often has a horizontal or slanted line drawn through it. A capital *C* may stand for *and*. Small *c* sometimes looks like a small *r*, or resembles an older style *t*. A small *c* may not be rounded at the top making the letter look like an undotted *i*.
- Dd Small *d* was often looped to the left with a flourish. Small *d* may look like *el*. A looped small *d* may appear as an *O*.
- Ee Small *e* may resemble a modern *o* with a loop or circle at the top. Sometimes a small *e* was written large and looks like an *l*. A small *e* may resemble a *d*. A final *e* may have a flourish or tail.
- Ff Two small *ff*(s) were used to form a modern capital *F*. A small *f* or backward lower case *f* may look like an *s*. A capital *F* may be confused with a capital *H*.
- Gg Small *g* may appear as a small *y* with a flat line on the top.
- Hh Capital *H* and small letter *h* are often the most difficult to recognize because of the flourish or loop which often descends below the line. About one-half to three-quarters of the lowercase *h* may descend below the line (especially in colonial handwriting). An *h* may have both an ascender and a descender. To some people

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- this may look like a large *E*.
- Ii Letters *I* and *J*, *i* and *j*, were often used interchangeably and often appear identical. A small *i* may appear as a minim (an up and down stroke). A small *i* may or may not have been dotted over the letter. A capital *I* or *J* may look like a capital *F*.
- Jj Letters *J* and *I* and *j* and *i*, were often used interchangeably.
- Kk Capital *K* or small *k* may look like an *R*. A small *k* may look like a *t*.
- Ll Capital *L* often looks like a capital *S*. Read for the context of the document.
- Mm Letters *m* and *n* were often written as minims, or up-and-down strokes in a series. It is helpful to count each stroke when deciphering these two letters.
- Nn It is important not to confuse the letters *n* and *m*. Also, sometimes *n* and *u* look alike. A small *n* may look like an *r*, for example, *on* and *or*. Read for common sense.
- Oo Small *o* was often rounded to avoid confusion with the small letter *e*. A small *o* may look like an *a*.
- Pp Small *p* may look like a *q* or a small *x*. The descender on a small *p* may have a wide space between the two lines, especially in colonial handwriting. A small *p* may have an ascender.
- Qq Small *q* may look like a *p* or a *y*.
- Rr Small *r* was often written upside down, especially during the colonial period. It may be written upside down and regular in the same word or on the same page. It may appear to be a small modern *w*. A small raised *r* may look like an *E*. A small *r* may look like a small *n*.
- Ss What is often known as the old style *s*, long *s*, double *s*, or long-tailed *s* often looks like a backward lower case *f*, double *f*, double *p*, *fs*, *p*, or a backwards *s*. It frequently resembles the letter *p* or an *h*. This style *s* is seen even in records into the middle nineteenth century, including the 1850 U.S. census. It can be a troublesome letter for those beginning their research. The first *s*, or what is known as the leading *s*, was usually followed by a more regular looking or modern *s*. See, for example, *Mass.* for Massachusetts. But you can sort of see it in *Mifsifsippi* and *Mifsouri*. An *s* at the end of a word was sometimes round, as opposed to the long *s*. An ending *s* in a word may look like an *o*, or an *o* with an upward swirl, and may be a superscript letter; it may not be closed or rounded, and may look like a looped *o*. A small *s* in the middle of a word will appear different than at the end of a word. A capital *S* may



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look like a capital *L* or a capital *G*.

Some examples of the old style *s* are:

*Appearance in Document*

*Interpretation*

Jefsie/Jefse/Jepe

Jessie/Jesse/Jesse

Maps

Mass [Massachusetts]

Mifsifsippi

Mississippi

Mifsouri

Missouri

Rofs

Ross

- Tt Small *t* and the small *c* often look like the same letter and may be difficult to distinguish. Read for context. A small half-crossed *t* at the end of a word is often called a "Palmer T" and is still used by some people today. A small *t* may not be crossed. A capital *T* may appear to be a capital *F*.
- Uu The letters *U* and *V* and *u* and *v*, were often used interchangeably. Thus David may appear as Daudid and Upon may appear as Vpon. A small *u* may appear as a minim. Sometimes a small *u* looks like an *n* or an *s*.
- Vv The letters *V* and *U* and *v* and *u*, were often used interchangeably. A small rounded *v* may look like an *o*.
- Ww Capital *W* may appear as a capital *M*. A small *w* may appear as a double *v*. A capital *W* may appear as two *U* s.
- Xx An *x* may appear as a *c* or two half circles connected. An *X* was frequently used as a mark in a document when an individual could not write his or her name.
- Yy Small *y* may look like a *g* with a descender. A capital *Y* may be closed at the top.
- Zz This letter appears infrequently and when it does appear is usually clearly written.

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In summary, some of the most difficult letters to be aware of in old handwriting, especially during the seventeenth century, are the following lowercase letters:

c

e

h

r

s

t

The capitals of the above letters may also present problems in deciphering old handwriting. Also remember that the lowercase *d* was often looped back to the left, and *I* and *J* and *U* and *V* were used interchangeably.

If you can master these dozen or so more difficult or unusual looking letters, you should be ready to begin reading seventeenth and eighteenth-century American handwriting.

### **Sample Alphabets**

Four sample alphabets follow. It is difficult to present alphabets that represent all handwriting styles and letter forms used in America since the early seventeenth century. However, these four alphabets represent many of the letters described previously and those seen in the documents reproduced in this manual.

All scribes did not write exactly alike, and even their own handwriting styles changed. It is more important to understand the concepts in reading old handwriting and to practice reading documents than to memorize alphabets. There were almost as many different styles of writing as there were writers.

### *Sample Alphabets and Handwriting Styles*

1. The first alphabet, adapted from the Society of Genealogists, London, England, has been reproduced as a handout by Stevenson's Genealogical Center, Provo, Utah. See Archibald F. Bennett, *A Guide for Genealogical Research* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1951), p. 269. See also the Internet site *Examples of Letters of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Found in Parish Registers*: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~genepool/oldalpha.htm>

2. The second alphabet, "Letter Forms Found in American Handwriting, 1640–1790," is from the booklet by Harriet Stryker-Rodda, *Understanding Colonial Handwriting*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1986), pp. 20-21, courtesy Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, Maryland.

3. The third alphabet is reproduced from Kent P. Bailey and Ransom B. True, *A Guide to Seventeenth-Century Virginia Court Handwriting* (Richmond, Va.: Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, 1980), pp. 18-19, courtesy Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, Richmond, Virginia.

4. The fourth alphabet is reproduced from Andrew Wright, *Court Hand Restored, or the Student's Assistant in Reading Old Deeds, Charters, Records, etc.*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: John Camden Hotten, 1867), plate 18.

Concluding this chapter is a list of personal names, words, and abbreviations reprinted from *Kansas Review*, Kansas Council of Genealogical Societies, Topeka, Kansas, vol. 11, no. 3 (1986); and *CSGA Newsletter*, California State Genealogical Alliance, vol. 12, no. 2 (Feb. 1994), p. 34.



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A A A A A A H aa  
 B B B B BB  
 C C C C C C r r r  
 D D D D D D O O O  
 E E E E E E E O O  
 F F F F F F f f f

N N N N N N n  
 O O O O O O o  
 P P P P P P P P P P P P  
 Q Q Q Q Q Q q  
 R R R R R R r r r  
 S S S S S S s s s  
 s s s s s s s s s s s s

G G G G G G g g  
 H H H H H H h h h  
 h h h h h h h h h  
 I and J J J J J j  
 K K K K K K k k k  
 L L L L L L l l l l l l  
 M M M M M m

T T T T T T t t t  
 U U U U U U u u u  
 V V V V V V v v v  
 W W W W W W w w w  
 X x x x x x x x x  
 Y Y Y Y Y y y  
 Z Z Z Z Z z z

British and Early American Alphabet

Sample Alphabets and Handwriting Styles

A A	a a
B B	b b
C C	c c
D D	d d
E E	e e
F F	f f
G G	g g
H H	h h
I I	i i
K K	k k
L L	l l
M M	m m

Letter Forms Found in American Handwriting, 1640-1790



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n	n	n	n
o	o	o	o
p	p	p	p
q	q	q	q
r	r	r	r
s	s	s	s
t	t	t	t
u	u	u	u
v	v	v	v
w	w	w	w
x	x	x	x
y	y	y	y
z	z	z	z

Letter Forms Found in American Handwriting, 1640-1790

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A	A A A A	a a a
B	B B B	b b
C	C C C C	c c
D	D D D	d d d
E	E E E E E	e e e e
F	F F F	f f f
G	G G G G G	g g g
H	H H H	h h h
I	I I	i i
J	J J J	j
K	K K	k k k
L	L L L	l l
M	M M M	m m

Seventeenth-Century Alphabet

N	n N n N	n n n
O	o o o	o o
P	p P p p p	p p p p
Q	q q q	q
R	R R	r r r r
S	s s s s	s s s s
T	T T T T T	t t t
U	u u	u u
V	v v v	v u u
W	w w w	w w w
X	x x	x x x
Y	y y	y y y y
Z	z	z z

Seventeenth-Century Alphabet





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Ab: = ABRAHAM

Abra: = ABRAHAM

Anth<sup>s</sup> = ANTHONY

Benj: = BENJAMIN

Ch<sup>o</sup> = CHARLES

Ch<sup>s</sup> = CHARLES

X<sup>p</sup>ter = CHRISTOPHER

Cath<sup>ne</sup> = CATHERINE

Kath: = KATHERINE

Ed: = EDMUND

Edw<sup>d</sup> = EDWARD

Eug<sup>ne</sup> = EUGENE

Ezry = EZRA

Ely<sup>th</sup> = ELIZABETH

Eliz: = ELIZABETH

Em<sup>l</sup>: = EMILY

Fra: = FRANCIS

Fran. = FRANCIS

Hen: = HENRY

Hby = HENRY

Ja: = JAMES

Jo: = JOSEPH

Jere: = JEREMIAH

Jno = JOHN

Jr<sup>e</sup> = JEROME

Matt<sup>w</sup> = MATTHEW

N: = NICHOLAS

Nich<sup>s</sup> = NICHOLAS

Nich<sup>o</sup> = NICHOLAS

Pamel<sup>a</sup> = PAMELIA

Reb<sup>a</sup>: = REBECCA

Robt = ROBERT

Samb<sup>s</sup> = SAMUEL

Tim: = TIMOTHY

Tho<sup>s</sup> = THOMAS

Tris<sup>m</sup> = TRISTRAM

J. d: // = DITTO MARKS

si - Fi = FEMALE

P = PER

Person = PERSON

Pish = PARISH

Inf<sup>t</sup> = INFANT

Sam Smith<sup>e</sup> = SAM SMITH

Atto<sup>s</sup> = ATTORNEY

af<sup>s</sup> = AFORESAID

Ch<sup>h</sup> = CHURCH

W<sup>r</sup> Rec<sup>t</sup> = PER RECEIPT

C<sup>d</sup> = CONTINUED

ff = "SUPRA SCRIPTUM"  
(as written above)

Viz<sup>r</sup> = "VIDE LICET"  
(namely - to-wit)

Test = "TESTE" (witness)

L.S. (seal)  
"LOCUS SIGILLI" (place of the seal)

Kansas Review, Kansas Council of Genealogical Societies, Topeka, Kansas, vol. 11, no. 3 (1986); and CSGA Newsletter, California State Genealogical Alliance, vol. 12, no. 2 (Feb. 1994), p. 34.