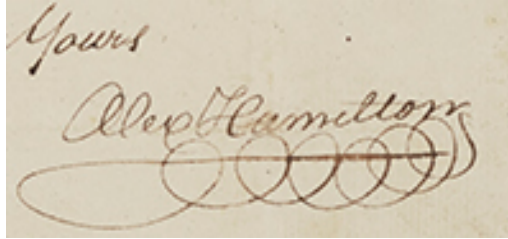




Transcribing Documents: There Is More Than Meets The Eye!”

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Genealogical proof requires the conduct of “reasonably exhaustive research,” preferably using *original* documents.¹ The emphasis on original sources means that the interpretation of handwritten records is an essential skill for genealogists. The first step in analyzing a handwritten document is the creation of a transcription, that is, an exact copy. The skill of transcribing can be honed by working with a variety of pre-20th century American documents that are commonly encountered by genealogical researchers.

I. Contextual Background

A. Two principal “scripts” (or “hands”) were used in pre-20th century American records—

- 1 “Secretary Hand” was used in record keeping up until the mid-nineteenth century.
- 2 “English Round Hand” (similar to modern cursive writing) was in use consistently by the mid-nineteenth century.²

B. Many pre-twentieth century American records are characterized by a lack of standardized spelling and the use of phonetics.³

II. Why Transcribe?

- A. Create a legible copy of a record that may include archaic letters, unfamiliar words or phrases, or illegible parts.
- B. Perform a detailed analysis in order to glean all information from legal or other contextual clues.

* Alexander Hamilton (St. Croix) to his friend Edward Stevens, letter, 11 November 1769; *Alexander Hamilton Papers: General Correspondence, 1734-1804*; Alexander Hamilton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss24612.001_0024_0083/?sp=13).

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition, (Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com, 2019), 1. These standards can be used by anyone.

² Kip Sperry, *Reading Early American Handwriting* (1998; reprint, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2008), 3–4.

³ Val. D. Greenwood, “Familiar Record Practices: Problems and Terminology,” *The Researcher’s Guide to American Genealogy*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2017), 42.

- III. *Genealogy Standards*⁴ provides the following specific guidance relating to transcriptions:
 - A. Accuracy of Transcription: Standards 23, 29, 32
 - B. Completeness of Transcription: Standards 29, 32
 - C. Adequacy of Citation: Standards 1-6, 32
- IV. Techniques for analyzing hand written documents that are commonly encountered in genealogy——
 - A. Formatting is not always relevant
 - B. Exactness in capitalizations, spelling, *etc.*, is necessary.
 - C. There are two options for rendering obsolete letterforms.
 - D. Complete and accurate citations are important.
 - E. When are annotations needful and how should they be reflected?
 - 1 Uncertainty about a word
 - 2 Clarifications
- V. Beware of Third-party Transcriptions
 - A. Errors occur even where transcriptions were made close in time to the original.
 - B. Special problems with commercial transcriptions of U.S. census records——
 - 1 Census takers failed to follow instructions;
 - 2 Transcribers failed to consult instructions and rarely performed detailed analyses (such as identifying how the enumerator formed particular letters).
- VI. Transcribing is More Art than Science——
 - A. The primary resource for deciphering a scribe's writing is the document itself.
 - B. Use brackets and "*sic*" sparingly:
 - 1 Use brackets to either highlight words that you are unsure of or to include commentary.
 - 2 Use the Latin "*sic*" to indicate that a word is transcribed exactly as it is in the original, complete with any error (but try to refrain from using it for every misspelling).
 - C. Do not reformat the overall structure of the document.
 - D. Do not correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, *etc.*
- VII. Get Some Practice by Volunteering to Participate in Transcription Projects
 - A. Boston Public Library (Boston Public Library, *Anti-Slavery Manuscripts*, <https://www.antislaverymanuscripts.org>).
 - B. Library of Virginia (*Making History Transcribe*, Library Of Virginia; http://www.virginiamemory.com/?_ga=2.228320085.990735739.1550567557-1877430469.1546729812).
 - C. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

⁴ *Genealogy Standards*, 1-8, 17-18, 20.

(<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/smithsonian-transcription-center>).

Additional Resources

- Black, Henry Campbell, *Black's Law Dictionary: Definitions of the Terms and Phrases of American and English Jurisprudence, Ancient and Modern*. Revised fourth edition. St. Paul Minnesota: West Publishing Co., 1968. This is the leading authority on legal terms and abbreviations. This particular edition is the last one that included archaic legal terms. See Judy G. Russell, "Which Black's?" (<https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2015/03/24/which-blacks/>)
- Board for Certification of Genealogists®. *Rubrics for Evaluating New Applications for BCG Certification*. Washington, D.C.: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2016. <http://bcgcertification.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/BCG-New-Application-Rubrics-2018.pdf>
- Bell, Mary McCampbell. "Transcripts and Abstracts." *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, And Librarians*. Elizabeth Shown Mills. Editor. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2001. Chap. 16, pp. 293-326.
- "Transcribing Source Materials," *OnBoard 2* (January 1996): 8 (<http://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-transcribing-source-materials/>)
- Powell, Elissa Scalise. "The Dubious Identity of Mary Dubois: The Danger of Relying on Derivative Records." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 104 (September 2016): 233-235.
- Powell, Kimberly. "Abstracting & Transcribing Genealogical Documents: Transcription Rules & Techniques." *Thoughtco*. (<https://www.thoughtco.com/abstracting-and-transcribing-genealogical-documents-1421668>)
- Sperry, Kip. "Guidelines for Reading Old Documents." *Genealogy.com*. http://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/68_sperry.html