

READING OLD FAMILY LETTERS

CONVENTIONS IN WRITING FROM THE LATE 1800's (and before)

Round Hand was especially common in personal papers and letters from the 18th century. It's similar to how we write today, although early examples may use different shapes for capital letters, almost interchangeable i's and j's, and a long s that looks similar to a current f when there are two s's together. They capitalized many more words than we do now.

A sample of Round Hand cursive writing. The text reads: "The great Improvement you have is a plain Proof of an uncommon Genius;". The letters are highly decorative and interconnected, with a prominent long 's' at the beginning of the second line.

A few conventions from this era:

Mifs = Miss	A big loopy "s" was often used when there were 2 s's in a row.
Mifsion = mission	Same as above.
Jan'y = January	Abbreviation for the month.
&c = etc.	Older convention in writing etcetera.

For odd forgotten letters and their modern adaptations see:

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/31904/12-letters-didnt-make-alphabet>

READING TIPS

LOOK CLOSELY: Use a magnifying glass if needed, examine everything you see on your document, every letter, every mark or image.

TAKE YOUR TIME: Read slowly and carefully. *Today, many of us are used to 'skim reading'*, so you'll need to resist the temptation to skip ahead, and take time for each individual letter when the reading is tough.

COMPARE INDIVIDUAL LETTERS OR GROUPS OF LETTERS: If you can't read a letter, compare that shape/letter/word to others on the same page or in the same document. Often by finding 2 or 3 of the same letter/word, you can figure it out.

MAKE A CHART: It's useful to make an alphabet chart as you go. This is very easy – just write out the alphabet on a separate piece of paper, then copy examples from the document for each letter – preferably lower and upper case. Compare letters from words you can read or understand to those you can't.

WRITE IT DOWN: Read through 1st, then go back to the beginning and attempt to transcribe the document, making sure you copy what's actually there – don't correct

spellings or add missing characters, as you may make mistakes that will confuse you later.

SPOT THE PATTERNS: On a second read through it's easier to spot unusual spellings. For example, i's and j's are often interchanged, and if a writer does this once, they may well do so again later on. Also be careful of downward strokes, which can cause confusion with i's, u's, n's and m's.

SPELLING INCONSISTENCIES: There are a lot of reasons for variant spellings:

- Names simply didn't have standardized spellings generations ago.
- Few people could write, those who could often had undeveloped skills and spelled phonetically.
- Immigration encouraged simplifying spellings, shortening names, or changing them to fit in with their new life.
- Misunderstandings with pronunciations

SHORTENED FORMS: Abbreviations can be particularly tricky. It helps to keep a LIST as you come across them, perhaps with your best guess of what they mean. You can then look them up in a dictionary or online

GET HELP: If you come up with a portion of a document that you just can't read, try reaching out to another transcriber, facebook forums, internet sites, etc.

SOURCES:

<http://www.ancestry.co.uk/cs/learning/old-handwriting>

<https://familysearch.org/ask/salesforce/viewArticle?urlName=Basic-Indexing-Guidelines-1381813432182&lang=en>

<http://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/00000015.html>