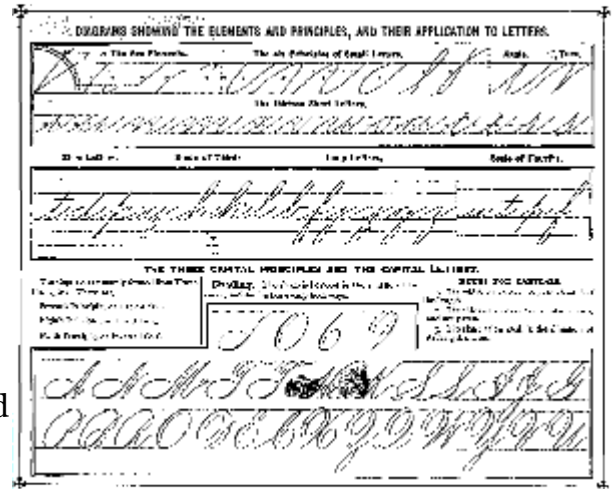


GENTREK: Handwriting in Genealogy

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Whether he signed with a flourish, scribbled out a scrawl, or literally made his mark, seeing your ancestor's "signature" provides a different perspective especially when pictures and images are not available. This time let's look at some places where you might find traces of your ancestor's handwriting among the records.



Wills

If your relative left a last will and testament, the original document may have been filed for record along with other loose papers. These materials are usually placed together in a packet or case file. The actual will should contain your ancestor's signature (or at least his mark). In some areas, the will record is actually a transcription of the will which unfortunately also contains a transcription of your ancestor's signature. If the handwriting of the will looks an awful lot like your ancestor's "signature," then you are probably reading a transcription of the will.

Estate Records

In 1861, Melinda Newman relinquished her right to administer the estate of her deceased husband. She signed the document. Another paper from the estate file contains the signatures of several of her children who were acting as either administrators of the estate or bondsmen. Receipts and other documents in the file could contain signatures of heirs or others with an involvement in the estate.

Court Records

Was your ancestor involved in a court case? If so did he sign any of the documents in the case file? Early court records usually consist of transcriptions of various records, but later materials should contain the actual papers filed while the case was active. If the legal action dragged on over several years, you may find numerous copies of your ancestor's signature.

Petitions

Did your ancestor sign any petitions? State, regional, or local archives may have copies of various petitions, such as ones to build a new road, establish a new county, remove a county official, etc. The difficulty is that many of these records are unindexed and locating them requires diligence. My own ancestor signed a Maryland petition during the Revolutionary War protesting the selling of real estate by the colonial government. The property being sold was owned by a British subject and rented by my ancestor.

Marriage Records

Your ancestor's marriage record may contain his signature, if the record is relatively recent (early records frequently just list names and dates). If your ancestor served as a bondsman on his relative's marriage bond his signature as bondsman should be included. If your ancestor gave consent for a child to marry, the consent may be simply noted as "parental consent" without even a name specified. If you are lucky, the parent's signature has been scrawled on the record. Consider marriages your ancestor could have witnessed as well. My own ancestor's 1907 marriage contains a sibling of the groom and a sibling of the bride as witnesses. Both signed the marriage license.

Note Holder

Did your ancestor loan money to someone else? If the loan was secured by real estate, a mortgage should have been recorded in the jurisdiction where the property was located. A release of mortgage may have been recorded when the debt was paid, filed in a separate series of documents or perhaps recorded right on the mortgage copy itself. The transcriptions recorded separately likely do not contain your ancestor's signature, but the notation made on the copy might. In this case, the clerk writes a note in the margin of the recorded mortgage indicating that it has been paid. The holder of the note signs under the clerk's note, right in the record book indicating that the property is now free and clear. Auntie Maude signed such a release on a mortgage to her son-in-law in Illinois in the 1890s. It was a great place for me to get my third great-grandmother's signature.

Pension Records

If your ancestor filed for a pension, there's a good chance his signature is on one of the application papers. In some cases, there may be many copies of his signature throughout the file. If his widow later filed for a widow's pension, her signature may also appear in the same set of documents.

World War I Draft Cards

Was your ancestor of an age to register for this draft? If so, his signature should appear at the bottom of his card. All of these cards are available to the public via microfilm and are now indexed and available to Ancestry.com subscribers.

World War II Draft Cards

Was your ancestor required to register for the World War II draft? Cards are available to any interested person for men born between 28 April 1877 and 16 February 1897. Draft cards after that date are available subject to restrictions from the Selective Service Administration.

SS-5 Applications

If your ancestor completed their own SS-5 form (Application for a Social Security and Tax Account Number), their signature should be at the bottom of the form. These forms are available from the Social Security Administration for any deceased individual with a social security number. More information about obtaining copies of the SS-5 forms can be obtained [here](#).

Birth Records

If your ancestor's birth was recorded in a timely fashion, she likely did not sign the record, regardless of how precocious she was. However, you may find that your relative's parents signed the relative's birth certificate. It happened. This signature will not be obtained if you receive a transcription of the record instead of an actual copy. My birth certificate has my mother's signature. The copy I obtained when I first started genealogy is a copy of the actual record, including Mom's signature. The copy I obtained as proof of citizenship is simply a transcription of the document (minus Mom's signature). My oldest daughter's birth certificate has the signatures of both her parents, not just the mother. Record keeping practices do change over time (I did not have to sign my youngest daughter's birth certificate, but was required to sign the oldest one's because I was named as the father). If your ancestor obtained a delayed certificate, his own signature likely is included. Signatures of other relatives may also appear in delayed birth recordings.

Death Certificates

If your ancestor signed his own death certificate, I'd love to see a copy! The more likely scenario is that a family member was an informant on a relative's death record and signed the document. Knowing the name of the informant on a relative's death record is usually enlightening as it puts the information provided in perspective. It is even better when the signature is that of one of your ancestors.

Home Sources

Letters, diaries, and other materials in your home (or your relatives' homes) may contain the signature of your ancestor and even more of her handwriting. Greeting cards are another good source of more recent ancestral signatures.

Extended Family Approach

It has been hinted at in some of the record sources mentioned, but records on your ancestor's siblings or cousins may contain her actual signature. This is particularly true for those records where siblings might have had to provide testimony or signed an affidavit. Some military pension files are full of signatures of other family members (in addition to neighbors, justices of the peace and other individuals).

Other Places

We have scratched the surface of places where your ancestor may have literally "left his mark." Considering searching for your ancestor's handwriting. You may learn more about her than just how she crossed her "t."

Interpreting Difficult Handwriting

Before you begin indexing a genealogy project, try to become familiar with the handwriting style used by the clerk. This will help you to more correctly interpret names, dates, and places. To interpret handwriting that is difficult to read:

- Compare how similar letters and numbers were written. If one or two letters are difficult to read, look for the same letters in familiar words that can be read.
- Compare the principal's name to the names of the father, mother, spouse, or other names on the record.
- If an index exists for the record, check to see if it will help clarify the entry. Or compare the name to supplementary documentation with the record, such as a certificate of correction.
- Look-up lists may be helpful in clarifying names and places. It is important to use the lists to help read the entry, but the list should not replace what is actually on the record.
- If you still cannot read the handwriting, make a decision, and type as many letters as possible for each name.

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