

Reading Historical Documents

The Litchfield Historical Society's archives hold thousands of documents - diaries, letters, account books, maps, reports, and so much more. Many of these papers are handwritten in cursive. To read and understand documents from the past, you need to be comfortable reading cursive.

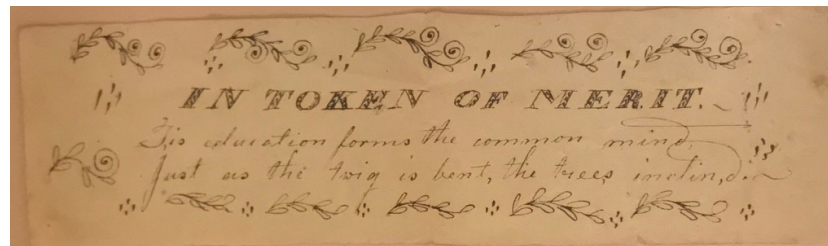
Historians spend time reading and re-typing handwritten documents in a process called **transcribing**. Transcribing documents makes the information easier for others to read and study.

When historians transcribe a document, they copy down exactly what they see – from misspelled words to uncompleted sentences. Sometimes the writer's penmanship was not very good and it can be a real challenge to read!

Read the historic documents on the following pages and print words you see on a blank lined page or on your computer.

Here are a few tips to try if you are having trouble reading a word:

- Read the sentence as a whole and see what words would make sense.
- Write down what letters you can read, sound out any words that could fit
- Look in the documents for similar words
- Ask for help. Sometimes a second pair of eyes can see something you can't
- Skip it! Put a bracket [] and come back to it later



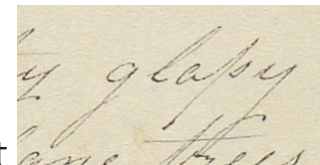
A piece of penmanship from a student at the Litchfield Female Academy
Helga J. Ingraham Memorial Library Collection

Reading Historical Handwriting

One challenge in reading historical documents is how much handwriting has changed over time. Some letters will look different in old documents.

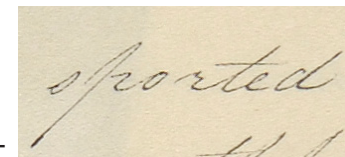
Double S

The letter that looks like an lowercase f is an s. This was a very common way to write double s's in the early 19th century. Since the two letters look similar, ask yourself which letter makes more sense. In the example on the right, the word glafsy doesn't make sense, but glassy does.

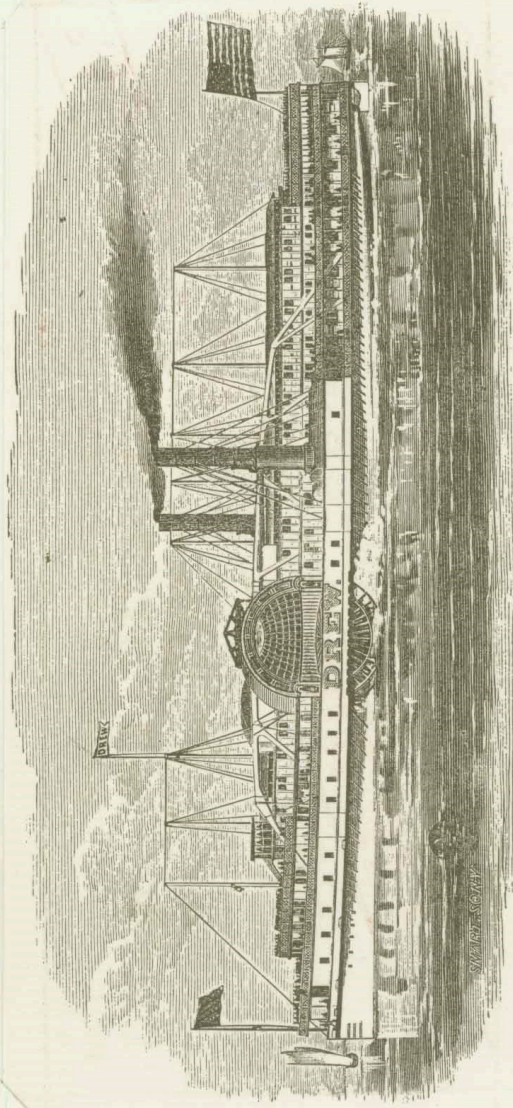


The Letter P

In the past, the letter p was written with a much taller vertical line than we use today. The round part of the letter may also be open at the bottom, making it look kind of like an h. Again, we can use context clues. In the example to the right, the word shorted doesn't fit, but sported does.



Everyone's handwriting is a little different. It is important to remember that old documents were written by real people and sometimes they made mistakes - maybe they forgot to dot and i or maybe their letter o looks more like a letter a. Part of reading historical documents is solving the puzzle!



Journal.

June 17th 1879

We arrived in Albany about five o'clock this morning after passing a very restless night on the North River boat "Drew." How could it be otherwise? For three hundred soldiers of the "Grand Army of the Republic" were upon the same boat. Their songs, shouts, and noisy amusements and every now and then their united cheering were certainly not the companions to induce rest or sleep. Before retiring we had a light tea in a small room adjoining the dining saloon. We saw the sunset from the deck, also



James N. Livingston and Charlotte Landon were
lawfully joined together in Marriage on the day of
D 1820 Attest
E. L. L. L.



The Vice President of the
United States and Mrs. Adams present
their compliments to M^r and M^{rs}
Wolcott and request the favor of their
company at dinner on Thursday
next at 4 o'clock.

Jan^y 28

The favor of an answer
is desired.



214



'Bantam! dear lake! how calm thy waters lie!
How brightly green, thy sunny banks arise,
As the hours of childhood sported there.
And bright as life appeared to youthful men:

No storm disturbs thy glassy surface clear;
Reflecting still the plane thy broad bright leaf,
Or gah with dark green crown, or gayer green
The corn sends forth in sunny hours; Sometimes

A tall bare pine, its foliage sent
Upon thy wave, like disappointments here,
'Amid the brighter green of joy & hope -
And yet clear, placid lake! thou art the same
As when within thy cooling wave I swam,
In childhoods hour -

— — — — — Thou art the same
'Tis man alone is changed — — — — —

W. W. Grace.

W. W. Grace -



Journal of Mary Perkins Quincy

June 17th 1879

We arrive in Albany about five O'clock this morning after passing a very restless night on the North River boat "Drew" How could it be otherwise? For three hundred soldiers of the 'Grand Army of the Republic' were upon the same boat. Their songs, shouts, and noisy amusements and every now and then their united cheering were certainly not companions to induce rest or sleep. Before retiring we had a light tea in a small room adjoining the dining saloon. We saw the sunset from the desk, also

Mary Perkins Quincy was born in 1866. She was the daughter of John Williams Quincy and Lucretia Deming Perkins Quincy and a granddaughter of Charles Perkins and Clarissa Deming Perkins. The Litchfield Historical Society has a large collection of her papers detailing her many travels.



Portrait of Mary Perkins Quincy painted by James Wells Champney in 1892.
Litchfield Historical Society Collection

Marriage Performed by Lyman Beecher

James R. Livingston and Catherine Landon were
lawfully joined together in Marriage on the day of

Ad 1820

[Atted ?]

Enter



1861 Photograph of Lyman Beecher, seated in the middle, with his daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe and son Henry Ward Beecher.
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Lyman Beecher was the minister at Litchfield's First Congregational Church from 1810 to 1826. One of his duties was performing marriages, like the one above. Lyman was also the father of one of America's most influential families, including his daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe.



Invitation to Oliver Wolcott

The Vice President of the
United States and Mrs Adams present
their compliments to Mr and Mrs
Wolcott and request the favor of their
company at dinner on Thursday
next at 4 o'clock

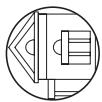
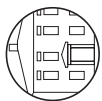
January 28

The favor of an answer
is desired



Portrait of Oliver Wolcott Jr. painted by artist Gilbert
Stuart in 1813.
Litchfield Historical Society Collection

This note is from the Wolcott Family Collection. Oliver Wolcott Jr. was born in Litchfield in 1760. In 1795 he was appointed the second Secretary of the Treasury under President Washington. He held the position into the administration of President John Adams, retiring in 1800. His home in Litchfield is now the Oliver Wolcott Library.



Friendship Album of Mary Wallace Peck

Bantam! dear lake! how calm thy waters lie!
How brightly green, they sunny banks arise;
Calm as the hours of childhood sported there
And bright as life appear'd to youthful kin:
No storm disturbs they glassy surface clear;
Reflecting still the plane trees broad bright leaf,
Or oak with dark green crown, or gayer green
The corn sends forth in sunny hours; Sometimes
A tall bare pine, its foliage sent
Upon thy wave, like disappointments hue,
Amid the brighter green of joy & before –
And yet clear, placid lake! thou art the same
As when within thy cooling wave I swam,
In childhoods hour - - - -

----- Thou art the same

'Tis man alone is chang'd

[Attamak?] –

Mr Brace



Portrait of John Pierce Brace painted around 1830
Litchfield Historical Society Collection

This poem is from the friendship album of Mary Wallace Peck Mansfield. Mary attended the Litchfield Female Academy from 1811- 1816, and later became a teacher there. Her friendship album, which she started in 1825 includes art work, memorials, and many inscriptions from friends and families, such as this poem signed by “Mr. Brace.”

Want to read more historic documents?

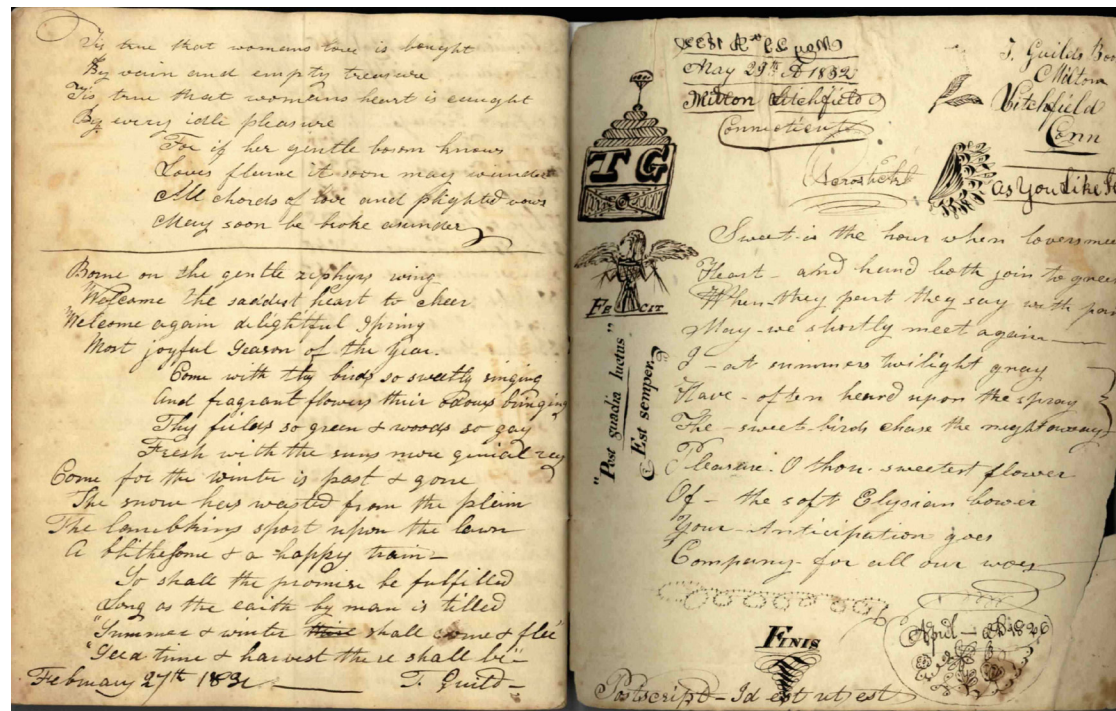
Visit the Litchfield Historical Society Archives online and learn what we have in our collection! Go to www.litchfieldhistoricalsociety.org

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<https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist>

<https://crowd.loc.gov/help-center/welcome-guide/>



From the school books of Truman Guild

Helga J. Ingraham Memorial Library Collection