

Transcribing Historical Handwriting in the Smithsonian Transcription Center

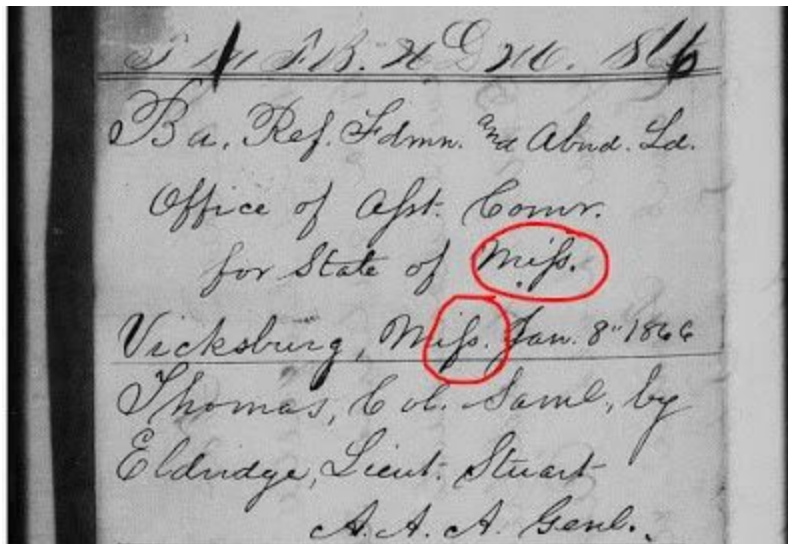
Common Problems

Because spelling, punctuation, and grammar guidelines were not standardized until the 1870s, **misspelled words and other grammatical errors**, as we understand them today, appear often in documents written in before the 1900s. Often, words would be written out phonetically, and proper nouns, surnames, and place names were often spelled incorrectly, sometimes a single word would even be spelled differently in multiple ways within the same document.

Different styles of handwriting can also create challenges when trying to read historic documents. Prior to the 20th century, many different forms of cursive writing existed, varying in style between decades and centuries. Referring to some of the common conventions, names, and abbreviations below may help as you transcribe historical documents, as will reviewing the text in full for contextual clues.

Common Abbreviations, Conventions, and Spellings/Misspellings

- Double “s” = [handwriting in the 19th century and earlier often includes the double-s “ss”](#) in a way that appears to look like “fs” or “ff.” When you see the “fs” or “ff,” please type out the double s “ss” as it would appear if you were reading the word out loud.



- + or & or &c. = et cetera, etc. [[Please transcribe this as & or “and”]]



- attacted = attacked
- Do or do = ditto (please type out what the ditto mark or “do” stands for)
- evry = every
- evning = evening
- fiew = few
- greaddeal or great eal or gread eal = great deal
- inst. = a date in this month. An example of this would be “the 8th inst.,” meaning “the 8th of this month.”
- obdt. = obedient
- perhapse = perhaps
- thare = there
- ult. = a date in the previous month. An example of this would be “the 14th ult.,” meaning “the 14th of last month.”
- verry = very
- viz = short for the Latin videlicet, which itself is a contraction of the Latin phrase videre licet, meaning “it is permitted to see”. It is used as a synonym for “namely”, “that is to say”, “to wit”, “which is”, or “as follows.”
- vols = volunteers
- ware = were

Common Civil War Abbreviations

Adjt. = Adjutant

ASAC =

Brig. = Brigadier

Capt. = Captain

Cav. = Cavalry

Col. = Colonel

Col. Inf. = Colored Infantry

Hd Qrs. = Head Quarters

Inf. = Infantry

Lieut. or Lt. = Lieutenant

Maj. = Major

Messrs = Masters / Misters / Mister / Master [[depending on context]]

Prov. Gen. = Provost General



Prov. Mar. = Provost Marshal

QM = quartermaster

Regt = regiment

USCT = United States Colored Troops

USCI = United States Colored Infantry

USV = United States Volunteers

VRC = Veteran Reserve Corps

Common Name Abbreviations

Abig. = Abigail

Abr. = Abraham

Alexr. = Alexander

Benj. = Benjamin

Cath. = Catherine

Chart. = Charlotte

Chas.= Charles

Danl. = Daniel

Eben. = Ebenezer

Edw. = Edward

Eliz. = Elizabeth

Elnr. = Eleanor

Ezek. = Ezekiel

Fredk. = Frederick

Geo. = George

Han. = Hannah

Jno. = John



Margt. = Margaret

Mart. = Martha

Saml. = Samuel

Susna. = Susannah

Thom. = Thomas

Thos. = Thomas

Wm. = William

Strategies

Context clues: Read through the document before starting to transcribe. Even if you can't make out certain words, you may be able to better understand the meaning of sentences, etc. by reading through the page. Think as well about what makes the most sense in the context of the entire document. Searching for historical background related to the topic or person represented in the page, or looking through other documents in the same project, may be helpful as well.

Style sheets: Keeping track of the rules that trip you up, challenging words you've come across, and specific tips you find helpful when transcribing certain historical documents, can often make your work easier. Check out [this example](#) of how to build your very own style sheet from one of our Transcription Center volunteers, Beth Graham.

Alphabet or term list: Write out each letter or commonly used word on a separate piece of paper, then copy examples from the document for each letter – both lower and upper case. It's usually easiest to identify letters in more obvious words like names and places, then refer to your chart to help with more difficult words.

Further Information and Resources

- Ancestry.com - [“Tips for Reading Old Handwriting”](#)
- U.S. National Archives and Records Administration - [“Transcription Tips”](#)
- Legacy Tree Genealogists - [“Five Tips for Deciphering Old Handwriting”](#)
- [Freedmen's Bureau Abbreviations, Staff Rosters, and Style Sheets](#)
- [Freedmen's Bureau Records FAQs](#)

