RISK MANAGEMENT: How Will Archivists Function Once Reading Cursive Disappears?

Society of American Archivists 2022 Research Forum, 3 August 2022 by Paul C. Thistle
Archival Preservation Risks

• Light (UV, IR . . .)
• Fire
• Flooding (including fire fighting ;-)
• Theft
• War
• Improper storage, handling, climate control
• Mold
• Carrier chemistry destroying fugitive media substrate . . .
• Elementary ( & subsequent) education culture change???
• Handwritten records NOW at ever-increasing risk of becoming illegible for no other reason than disappearance of teaching, learning, & MAINTAINING cursive handwriting!
Teaching cursive across North America is disappearing from elementary school education (Roessingh 2019; Berger 2017; Shapiro 2013).

USA Common Core State Standards, adopted by 42 states and the District of Columbia, call for handwriting instruction in kindergarten and first grade only, and teaching in keyboard skills after that. The standards don’t mention cursive (Berger 2017).

Canada: only 7 of 13 jurisdictions still have cursive in their curricula BUT, not all teachers take the time to teach it! (Roessingh 2019).

Scholarship re cursive writing is overwhelmingly focussed on the benefits to child mental & physical development (Medwell 2008), NOT on the clear & present danger for archives & historians.

Do we risk cursive illiteracy destruction of the evidentiary value of handwritten records?

Are archivists thinking about this risk?
Professional Org Contacts

• SAA e-newsletter, *In the Loop*, June 30, 2021: no responses
• AAO Advisor: “Certainly the AAO has *no such reports.*”
• ACA ED: “*no* [related] *questions or issues* have been *raised.*”
• UBC iSchool: *no Archival Science faculty research*; one potentially interested grad student informed, but *no response*
• CHA Pres.: *no suggestions* except propose conference session
• Paul’s [LinkedIn article](#): “How Will Archives & History Function Once Reading Cursive Disappears?” Aug. 11, 2020: 1 response
• USC Archivist: “most students struggled mightily with just reading the [WWI] handwriting.”
• HBCA: “*we do not have any immediate plans* relating to the potential disappearance of cursive writing. I am *not aware of any reports or studies* on this subject.”
Professional Org Contacts

• PAMA: “We help people in all kinds of ways, from deciding what records to access, to **deciphering old handwriting**, interpreting unfamiliar record types . . .” (McCracken 2015)

• UMASC: “I **do [not] know of any studies or papers on that. We have talked about it but it has not gone beyond that.**”
  - “At present we do have a volunteer who transcribes cursive and we can always look for some solutions.”
Cursive Legibility Risk MGMT?

A Declaration by the Representatives of the UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA, in General Congress assembled.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new Government.
Remarks in July 1774.

Thursday the 21st.
Fine. Wind East. Paddle 36 miles to the Wide River. Notice the water between them was fine and deep. goes 5 miles to Georgetown. Place but the water between them was fine and deep. Afternoon 5 miles. Sailed past a small Island at the mouth of which the Indians were rowing. in the evening 10 miles past a small portage. Then the best way for us to go but it is an uncomfortable with feet and shoals. in the evening heavy rain.

Friday the 22nd.
Fine. Wind W. Paddle 33. Miles to the S W through the Wide River. and made lake. Then came to 2 Portage of strong Shoals at 9 o clock. The day left us by a strong breeze which is about one mile and a half long.

Saturday the 23rd.
Fine. Wind S. Paddle about 35. Miles. We S W through. parlors. where there were a party of Indians among them was a woman and a number of boys who accompanied us from the Port. From where we left in the morning. we had the current in our favor, and in the course of the river. We came to the Port. which is a mile and a quarter long.

Sunday the 24th.
Slight. We were on the Lake. The wind was calm. The water was smooth, and all things said to right. We left the Indians behind and proceeded, making north, by bay,, etc., and approaching them with the design of impressing them. We came to a small Shoal and then passed the Pointe. We were. The Indians said. that there was much resistance, and that they were tired of us. The Indians generally got much better of us and they told us to give away great quantities of oil. For nothing. and asked for tobacco, of which we gave them. We passed a large Island and then came to the Pointe. where we landed and tried to carry anything to the Fort. The Indians said. to the Pointe to leave it to the Indians. And the Indians rejected it with the greatest of the terror. It seemed they would not let us in.
Paul's Thesis Secondary Notes
Darwin’s Crosswriting?
More than English Languages!

Standing Bear’s account of the Battle of the Little Bighorn

Louise, wife of Standing Bear, in “old German” cursive account

Moravian Church Archives annual German Script Course for historians ([https://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/events/](https://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/events/)). “They have experience in both teaching cursive and why it’s important/how to incorporate it” (Abney 2022).
What about non-Latin Scripts?

**Chinese Script**

漢語

中文

*Hànyǔ written in traditional (top) and simplified characters (middle); Zhōngwén (bottom)*

**Arabic Script**

بعد زـِبـِع قَرَنْ مـَن الـْيَـِـِبَـْـَـْـَـٰـْـَ~۹٩ (١٩٦٩)

وهي كنديّة مبلّغت

الراکبـة جورجيـت بشـير

 Mitsui, داخل صالـة يرانزيت

مطـَار القاهرة بعد اول زيارة لها

إلى مـصر متنـئة بِإصابتها بهبوط

حـادة في الدورـة الدموية قبل

دقائق من صعودها إلى الطائرة

المصريـة المتجهة إلى الولايات

المتحدة الاميركية.
Solutions?

to prevent the evidentiary value of handwritten records from being completely erased by cursive illiteracy?
‘Transcribe-A-Thon,’ BUT Cost?

Dr. Caleb Edward Iddings Diaries
Caleb Edward Iddings, (1829-1904) was a physician in Sandy Spring, Maryland. In 1849, prior to medical school, he joined the wave of young hopefuls traveling to California, seeking fortune during in the Gold Rush. Upon his return from the West, he obtained his medical training at Maryland...

Start Transcribing

Project by Sandy Spring Museum

Enterprise Farmers’ Club Minutes
The Enterprise Farmers’ Club is an agricultural association in Sandy Spring, Maryland that has met continuously since its formation in 1865. The group meets to discuss and exchange thoughts and information related to agricultural practices and the business of farming. The meeting agendas have...

Start Transcribing

Project by Sandy Spring Museum

Home Interest Society Minutes
Home Interest, which refers to itself as a “Society,” was founded in Sandy Spring, Maryland, on August 27th, 1870 and has met monthly (more or less) to the present day. Early in its existence, meetings were not held in June and July to free up members to attend to agricultural and horticultural...

Start Transcribing
USC Response Solution 2022

• “Oops. They can’t read it!”
  • “created an assignment for an Intro to Public History course at UofSC where they were looking at letters from World War I and writing a few metadata fields . . .
  • “What I learned is that most of the students struggled mightily with just reading the handwriting.
  • “I am in conversation with the UofSC Press to create a source anthology for U.S. History using only handwritten documents with tips and tricks for reading them” (Abney 2022).

Ann Abney, CA, Special Projects Archivist
South Carolina Political Collections
University of South Carolina Libraries
https://sc.edu/libraries/scpc
York Factory Journal, 1714-15
‘AI’? for York Factory Journal, 1715

Eating they are not all workers. One of the Indians came some 15:30 before he told me he did not love to see they loved to see the White ones. So there is. Many of the Indians has great friendship for the Black hare. So I conclude to this.

On board was in a miserable condition. Had a year of nothing but trouble with us by the loss of the cattle and the bad lodging we have had for our losses. Good as then after as very hard and sickly working winter. Great deluge of water and ice at the river breaking up.

Monday 9th. Slept on a height of bar &main leaf. Threw into the Mosquito all of our goods. Proceeded all right. We did ride at day went in the boat from the tree we did ride at night. To look at the port to see if it was standing.
Don’t Ignore Problem, STUDY it!
Good writing is:
plain,
uniform,
done with lots of
practice.
Teach & Maintain Cursive!
Lobby to ‘preserve’ access to cursive records:

Professional archives organisations, Archives science schools, Custodial institutions, U History faculties, Historical societies, Government education departments, U Education faculties, K-12 School divisions, Teachers, Parents, Students … !
SAA Annual Meeting Activism
HBCA Journals’ fate?
HBCA Journals = ‘mere artifacts’?
Disappearance of cursive outcome for HBCA Journals?
We need to ‘conserve’ cursive documents from ‘fugitive legibility’!
RISK MGMT: ‘What, Me Worry’?

Alfred E. Neuman, ‘mascot’ of Mad Magazine, 1952-2018

“What, me worry?” = “a forgotten meme”

- **IF** archivists do take responsibility for accessibility of our cursive records holdings,
- **YES—** **INDEED—** **WE DO NEED TO WORRY ABOUT CURSIVE ILLITERACY OF BOTH STAFF & USERS!”