

Chirography

By Maria Weyraugh

Inspired by the use of the word “chirography” in a letter to Lieutenant-General James Longstreet from General Robert E. Lee, while General Longstreet was recovering from a wound from friendly fire, which damaged his nerves and control of his entire right arm and the ability to write, General Lee encouraged his “Old War Horse,” to practice his “chirography” as he wrote to him. Never to worry about the style—just practice as to improve upon it. In this, I wished to use my inspiration of a very overworked commanding general to take the time to write, encourage and support his ailing “lieutenant,” can inspire any teacher to any student, to whom wishes to improve upon their writing.

Accustom to the word “calligraphy” which is the generalized term of “beautiful writing,” at times can intimidate the curious, the doubts within of any potential student on the art of writing. On my own personal journey of better penmanship, I can assure you that once the secrets are known, the student then has the keys to change their writing but, how they approach writing, how they see writing and how that writing can inspire others.

Hopefully, with these series of articles, I will be able to ease concerns and encourage those who might be interested to pick up the penmanship of those individuals to whom lived during the American Civil War, with the ability to improve on their impressions regardless of being military, civilian, adult or child.

If there are any questions or areas that might be troublesome, feel free to E-mail me at: ACWCalligrapher@aol.com.

Part I

The common mistake of students of the Civil War, is to attach the writing style from 1861 through 1866 to those specific years. The participants during the Civil War to whom were adults, filling the positions of military officers, soldiers, relatives would have already had their writing skills from eighteen years or more before the American Civil War broke out. Furthermore, individuals were never taught how to print so, their penmanship began with the many exercises which form the basic strokes to create various letters, as well as the “shadows” created by thicker portions of ink and the thinner strokes by a mere “caress” of the nib.

According to the biographies of the oldest Union Generals, the oldest was General John Ellis Wool, who was born on February 29, 1784. At seventy-seven years of age, he was the oldest General actively commanding for either side of the Civil War. General Wool would have been brought up with the quill and inks, long before metal nibs were introduced into the writing scene, using these quills and Iron Gall Inks on reports during the War of 1812, Indian Wars, Mexican War and active under General Winfield Scott as a Brigadier-General since 1841. Now, just to be informative, General Winfield “Fuss n Feathers” Scott was born June 13, 1786. Two years younger than General Wool. Both of these generals would live to see the end of the American Civil War.

Other generals to whom were born in the 1700's are: General Joseph G. Totten, born in 1788; General James W. Ripley, born in 1794; General Edwin V. Sumner, born 1797; General Charles Thruston, born 1798; General John Abercrombie, born in 1798; General Ethan Hitchcock, born in 1798; General John Dix, born in 1798; General Richard Delafield, born in 1798 and General Daniel Tyler, born in 1799.

On the Confederate side, for those who are interested, General David Twiggs, born in 1790; General William "Extra Billy" Smith, born in 1797 and General Samuel Cooper, was born in 1798.

Those to whom served and were fairly young, let us say at the age of twenty, would have begun to learn their writing at the beginning around age six, which would make it approximately 1847. At this period young men would have gone to "business school" if they were lucky and could afford it, learning how to write professional quality calligraphy, learn the "Lloyd's" style of stenography or—shorthand, to draw as well as illustrate. George Bickham's methods of writing and style would have been used, in addition to learning from all the "Master Penman" of their day. Women, if privileged would have been taught how to read, write and learn their education from private schools or tutored in their homes.

Because the quill is a feather from a goose, an eagle, a swan, a hawk or a turkey; the preparation of this quill took skill, time and labor and writing with a quill isn't far off from writing with your fingernail. Only, it would be split as to flex, cured as not to splinter or split more unless cut with a quill pen knife—or what we know as a "pen knife" now days. The master penman or professional calligrapher, such as the gentleman to whom wrote out the United States Constitution, Bill of Rights and other high end documents would have to have twenty quills perfectly cut, as to maintain the clarity of each stroke. Wear on the tip of a quill is much faster than that of a metal nib. An apprentice would most likely be carefully cutting quills as the master penman or calligrapher wrote. In addition, these quills are hollow and ink is fed by gravity. It is required to have a 30 degree angle as not to cause ink to rush out and create a huge spot on the paper. Therefore, it was often the case, any person writing would have a fixed desk at such an angle or have a writing slope or lap writing desk which was constructed with that 30 degree angle or, in a pinch, three inches off the flat of the surface. The writer would have also been equipped with a "ponce sander" which is a bottle of fine ground powder absorbent, which would act as a blotter paper that would be introduced many years later, as to dry areas of wet ink. Since the quill point could never achieve a round point, the quill no matter how well cut would always have a flat portion that touched the paper. Therefore, to achieve the shadowing in the letters, the writer had to turn the quill at a precise angle and maintain it all the way through.

Since each feather has its own distinct growing pattern, no two quills were identical. So, when the uniformity of metal nibs or "steel pens" as they were called in the paperwork of the Army Quarter-Master's form, this was a blessing to all writers to have consistency. In addition, the ability to add a "reservoir" into a metal nib, a writer could write longer between dipping it into the ink to reload it, and was free of the required 30 degree angle.

Due to the documentation of writing instruments on Civil War era forms, it is evident that quills were still issued and listed in the 1861 Revised Manual for the Armies of the United States and quartermaster forms. Briefly touch upon this connecting arch of writing instruments is worthy to understand.

Glossing over from the quill in its “feather” state, to the quill nib which was snipped off from the feather portion, shaped like a modern metal/steel nib held in a specialty holder, which had teeth to bite into the quill to hold it in place, we then enter the metal or steel nib era, to which most all of us will find a more cooperative instrument to use as well as being authentic.

As in this phase of writing, we now approach the “Victorian” age. Her Royal Highness, Queen Victoria began her reign during President James Buchanan's Administration and would witness several more Presidential Administrations in her lifetime. When looking at “Victorian” era pens, there should be much caution as the Victorian age goes beyond the American Civil War phase of most re-enactors impressions. This narrows the window in regard to authenticity.

Dip pens will be the absolute must. Fountain pens would come much later in the 1800's. A glass tube to hold the ink and a crude filler underneath metal nibs once designed for dip pens. In addition, a wide range of dip pens were available. Some dip pens were very skinny diameter wise, not much bigger than a toothpick's diameter. The holder could be sculpted from Ivory, bone or Agate stone. Rarely, would there be one made of Onyx as it was too fragile. That said, these extremely delicate pen holders required the writer to have a light hand. Otherwise, the pen holder could snap. Dropping them on a hard surface can also make them shatter. There were retractable nib, pen holders in existence in the 1840's, through post Civil War. Some had retractable dip pen nib holders and retractable lead pencil holders—the forerunner of the mechanical pencil.

These dual pointed writing instruments are called “combination” pens. These pens were made by jewelers and if there is one that is reasonable, in working shape, they can work for another one-hundred-fifty years. The cylinder is usually made of silver, white gold or yellow gold. Nickel would be introduced in the 1870-90's, and often mistaken to be stainless steel. Combination pens that have the sliding button where the finger rests are often collapsed by heavy handed writing, warping the channel which makes it difficult to slide the nib in and out of the interior of the pen holder case. Wood nib holders were frequently used. For military re-enactors, Sullivan Press has a fine example of a pen holder. Gillott nibs were used as well. They can be obtained today.

Ink is another important element in the writing experience. During the early years from Colonial to 1860, Iron Gall Ink was used exclusively, to which the writer could get in powder form, solid form or already mixed and in liquid form in a bottle. For today's writer, the common mistake is for the writer to use water from the tap, even with a filter, is not pure. This chemical reaction collides with the properties of Iron Gall inks and won't come out as good ink, in addition to using apple vinegar rather than white vinegar. This too influences the powdered Iron Gall Ink sold. For those in the military, to have liquid ink was inconvenient as inkwells were often lacking in a positive seal, to which would leak from the cap into the traveling lap desk, writing slope or wherever it happened to be, while traveling on horseback, by wagon or coach, so it was often the

case the ink was in powder form and excess ink dumped or placed back in the bottle, corked and sealing wax used to make the final seal. Iron Gall ink is acidic and eats everything in time. Today, being aware of this, writers are encouraged to wash their nibs, dry fully and keep them separate from other nibs, paper and or anything else—especially children! During the Civil War though, Iron Gall Ink which was time consuming to make, was quietly being replaced by ink made of chemicals which was far cheaper, quality just as high in the standards and didn't have the acidic nature of Iron Gall Ink. This change over took place during the Civil War, in which several grades of inks were used on documents. These were Black, Copy Ink and Red. Copy ink being more inferior quality or “left overs.” Red was usually used for accounting and corrections. Black ink though was always used and the quantities required according to quarter-master reports were in the gallons.

In using ink for modern applications, it is recommended that a more modern ink be used, such as Sumi ink with the brand name of “Moon Palace.” Being made from chimney soot, it is authentic as it was used in the production of ink during the Civil War, especially when supplies were lean. It is not acidic and wouldn't be such danger around children, nibs and garments will not suffer the damage as well. Noodler's Black Ink, Higgins Calligraphy Ink –also good choices. Fountain pen ink can be used with dip pens. This ink is much thinner than calligraphy ink. It will also dry faster. So, it is possible to use fountain pen ink. I highly recommend to not use the same bottle of ink with the fountain pen, as to keep contamination down. I personally prefer Noodler's Ink, as it is American made ink, that is a bit thicker than fountain pen ink and works extremely well with quills, dip pens and fountain pens.

The writer's next most valuable tool is an inkwell. There are at times authentic wood inkwells, that are of a cylinder design on the market. Some still have the distinctive smell of Iron Gall ink within them. Each of these wooden inkwells are one of a kind, threaded specifically to the lid. The construction is rather clever I might add. A bottle was inserted in a hollowed out piece of wood, then a spring was connected to the bottom plug made of wood as to keep pressure upwards as to press against the seal in the lid, then the plug was polished off along with the rest of the outward wood. When you see a crack in the lid—it might be due to a drop but, it also could be due to forcing a different lid onto the main part of the bottle. Reproductions are on the market following the same exact pattern and it will be near impossible to tell the authentic from the reproductions. If the inkwell doesn't have a seal, it will most likely be an inkwell meant for anything other than travel.

Paper is the next area of value, knowledge wise. For reenactment purposes, I recommend the Ivory Pastel paper offered by Staples. I have put it along side authentic documents and its very close to the real documents. Each piece of paper has a top and bottom side. In paper that is packaged, the top is usually under the brand's heraldry and face forward on the display. The back is where the casement paper is seamed and folded then glued. The top of the paper is usually the smoothest. When using cotton rag paper, which is textured, if the watermark is readable and not reversed, it is top. Reversed watermark is bottom. Watermark's top is in the direction the paper should be in. Because cotton rag is made on screens, pressed in one direction, so too the writing with a dip pen should go in such a direction.

Forms for military use by re-enactors, may be acquired through Sullivan Press CD-Roms. Or, these forms can be made from examples provided within the 1861 Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States. Company Clerk by Katz, can be found in a paperback form.

Part II will look into the etiquette, formats for correspondences, orders and reports.