

**SOURCE: Student Organization for Unique and Rare Collections Everywhere**  
Society of American Archivists Student Chapter  
Agenda for November 12, 2024, 6 pm Meeting

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**Attendees:**

Hilde Creager  
Marija Dalbello  
Jillie Fisch  
Kelan Amme  
Gabrielle Ignotis  
Edward Robinson  
Alisa Kraut  
Michael Tashbook  
Katie Leffler  
Gail Lordi  
Christian Ryder  
Amy Reich  
Tom Acs

**Introductions**

- Our speaker today is Alisa Kraut. Alisa is Artifact Registrar of the Atwater Kent Collection at Drexel University. The Atwater Kent collection is a collection of over 130,000 objects held at the Philadelphia History Museum prior to its closing in 2018. Following the museum's closure, Drexel became steward of the collection and launched an online collection in 2023. Alisa wrote about the silhouette portraits that are part of the Friends Historical Association collection in her blogpost, "Peale's Museum Silhouettes, the Original Souvenir Selfie." She graduated from Rutgers' Master of Information program in 2023 and was president of SOURCE.
- Collection was maintained by Atwater Kent, who ran a radio company and maintained a private collection and donated it to the city on the condition that they manage a city museum in perpetuity

**Crash Course in Historic Handwriting (for archival transcription) - Alisa Kraut**

**Introduction:**

- This crash course is largely focused on American English from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as transcription and handwriting can be dependent on language

**Paleography:**

- Paleography is the study of writing systems – this is different from understanding handwriting for archival transcription

**Transcription Tips:**

- Read other similar transcriptions to familiarize yourself with things like grammar and form before you start
- Work with the image if it is in a digital format – download it, adjust the contrast, color, etc.; this can work with pictures of physical documents as well
- Read things out loud, spelling can be inconsistent
- Use context clues
- Rotate the document to read in the same direction as the writing
- Make notes on things like the way people may write certain letters
- Google place names to confirm spelling
- Be aware of letters that are likely to look the same

**Practice:**

- BYU Script Tutorial: <https://script.byu.edu/english-handwriting/exercise/easy>
- Be aware of dates and abbreviations, punctuation can be difficult
- You'll likely encounter a lot of lower-quality images in volunteer/crowd-source

**Additional Resources:**

- “Reading old documents,” The National Archives, UK.  
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/reading-old-documents/>
- “Palaeography: An Overview,” PORT (Postgraduate Online Research Training), School of Advanced Study, University of London.  
<https://port.sas.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=44&section=1>
- Transcribing Medieval Manuscripts and Archival Material. Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL). Walker-Meikle, 2015,  
[https://www.cerl.org/resources/links\\_to\\_other\\_resources/tools\\_decribing\\_mss\\_and\\_archival\\_materials](https://www.cerl.org/resources/links_to_other_resources/tools_decribing_mss_and_archival_materials)
- (\$100) “Reading Old Handwriting,” 10-module course from the Continuing Genealogical Studies series, National Genealogical Society:  
<https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cgs/reading-old-handwriting/>
- [Transcribing Historical Handwriting in the Smithsonian Transcription Center](#)
- [Understanding Handwriting, Abbreviations, Dates and More](#) (Family Search) by Dan Poffenberger

- [Tips for Reading Old Records: Handwriting, Spelling, and Boundaries](#) from Genealogy.com

### **Transcription Options:**

- Citizen Archivist, National Archives
  - Smithsonian Digital Volunteers Transcription Center
  - Zooniverse
  - AHA Crowd Transcription Projects
- Don't forget radical empathy: you're transcribing things to increase access for others, and be empathetic to yourself – take breaks

### **Additional Questions**

**The NARA makes it clear that when transcribing these documents it's important to write exactly what we see in the artifact, varied spellings and misspelled words alike. They discuss how handwriting has changed over time and the case highlighted regarding the 1780s letter to the 'houfe' of representatives. The letter that looks like a lowercase f is an s, and is seen in handwritten and printed documents into the early part of the nineteenth century. In this scenario would we transcribe [houfe] or [house]?**

- Keep the spelling the same, potentially put the modern spelling in brackets
- Include a note on the document if certain spellings/quirks are repeated in a document
- Some style guides will say that you should change punctuation when relevant to help readability – know what the institution expects when making these decisions
- In the case of offensive language, this can also be dependent on institution

### **How does radical empathy guide your work?**

- Falling in love with the material you're working on
- Not in the position of working with challenging documents, so empathy may be different in the case of materials like this

### **What has been the most memorable experience or discovery that you have made in your work as a professional and citizen archivist while transcribing these materials?**

- Not transcription, but the first time looking at a difficult document, working on an exhibition on Leonard Bernstein – printed out his FBI file
- Even things that have been made public can be difficult to read, not only because of things being blacked out
- St. Catherine Drexel papers, Native American boarding schools, trying to find her views on race and reading between the lines

### **OCR and handwriting recognition being applied to transcription**

- OCR isn't perfect for older writing, but there are ways to edit it
- NARA has a project building on OCR, used to identify advertisements in newspapers
- Still a long way to go