Transcribing

Documents in the National Archives

Catalog

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

The National Archives is the nation's record keeper. We preserve and provide access to the records of the U.S. government, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, as well as the records of ordinary citizens.

Many of the documents at the National Archives are handwritten records such as letters, memos, and reports. Transcribing these primary sources helps us increase accessibility to historical records so that all of us can more easily read, search for, and use the information they contain.

By transcribing documents, you can help us unlock history and discover hidden aspects of records and the stories they contain.

BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSCRIPTION

Type what you see.
All documents are unique and may contain various aspects such as stamps, tables, or charts. Type what you see and follow the order and layout as best you can. Type words exactly as they are written in the document. This includes capitalization, abbreviations, names, dates, and even misspelled words.

Formatting
The goal of transcription in the National Archives Catalog is to enhance searchability. Every word you transcribe helps improve search results for that document. When transcribing, don't worry about matching the format of the original document (this includes line or paragraph breaks and hyphenated words). You may include [crossed out] next to crossed out text to indicate its format, as it may provide information useful to the document. Include punctuation exactly as noted in the document, even if it is incorrect.

"I can't quite read this."
18th and 19th century handwriting can be difficult to read! Compare similar letters in the document to help confirm that you are reading the text correctly. Letters will often appear similar or standard throughout a handwritten document by the same scribe. If you can't make out a word, use [illegible]. If you'd like to make a notation about something you see in the record, do so in brackets. For example: [stamp in blue ink]. Do your best and use your best judgement.

Save frequently.
As you transcribe in the Catalog, be sure you save your work frequently. Click the [Save] button to save your progress and all your hard work. Only one person can work on a page at one time.

Other tips
Any comments from the transcriber should be noted in the [Comments] section of the Catalog description, not the document's transcription field. Additionally, if you see a misspelled word or name, consider adding the correct spelling in the [Tag] field to improve searchability. Likewise, if there is a word or phrase that you think is important and is somehow separated (for instance by hyphenation, or part of bracketed text), include the entire word or phrase in the [Tag] field so that it becomes searchable.

Everything helps!
The National Archives Catalog contains millions of digitized pages. Even if you can't complete the entire transcription of a document, every word you transcribe helps improve search results.

Ready to transcribe?
Here are some examples of the types of records you might find in the National Archives Catalog, along with tips for reading and transcribing the content.

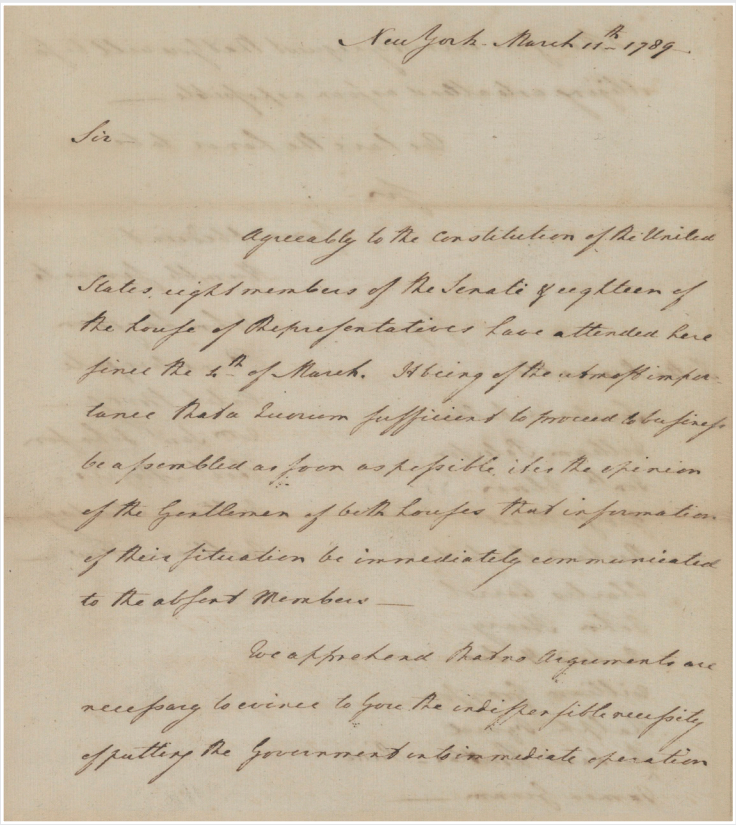
One hurdle to using historic records is how handwriting has changed over time — and that we don't write in cursive as much as we used to. Here are some tips for reading handwritten documents.

TIPS
for reading Historic Documents

This Letter to Absent Senators from the Senate, dated 1789, has some great examples of letters that look weird to modern eyes, even if you're used to reading cursive. In particular, the lowercase "p" and the lowercase "long s" may give readers some trouble. Let's look at the whole first page.

"Agreeably to the Constitution of the United States, eight members of the Senate & eighteen of the houfe--" Wait, what?

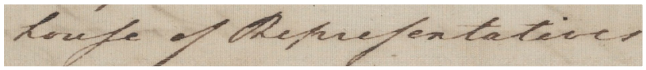
This letter that looks like a lowercase "f" is an "s." You'll see these in handwritten and printed documents into the early part of the nineteenth century. Since the two letters look very similar, try to use context clues. Ask if the word or phrase makes more sense with an "f" or an "s."


New York March 11th 1789

Sir

Agreeably to the Constitution of the United States, eight members of the Senate & eighteen of the houfe of Representatives have attended here since the 4th of March. It being of the utmost importance that a Quorum sufficient to proceed to business be assembled as soon as possible, it is the opinion of the Gentlemen of both houses that information of their situation be immediately communicated to the absent Members —

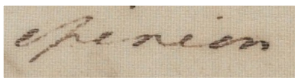
We apprehend that no Arguments are necessary to evince to you the indispensible necessity of putting the Government into immediate operation


houfe of Representatives

Since our options here are "houfe of Reprefentatives" or "house of Representatives," it's pretty clear which is correct.

Another letter that can cause trouble is that lowercase "p." The style here is to have a much taller ascender, or vertical line, than we use on our letter "p"s nowadays. The round part (called the bowl) of the "p" may also be open at the bottom, making it look kind of like an "h."

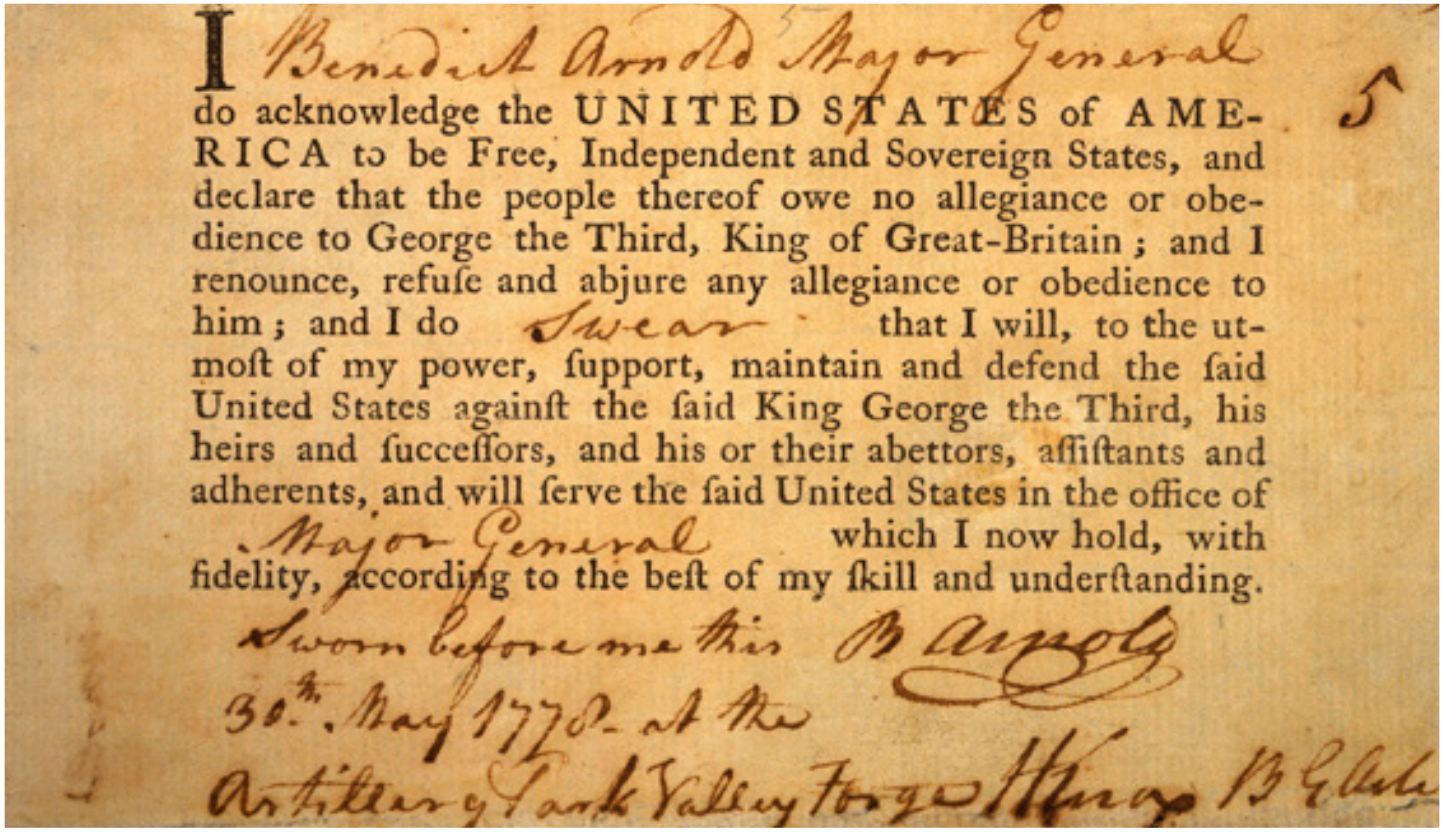
We can use context clues again with the "p." Looking at the word "Representatives" above, we can see that the "p" does have the tall ascender and the open bowl. We can apply this to the rest of the document, such as in the following word:


opinion

That second letter is a tall-ascender open-bowl "p." The word is "opinion". Here's another example:

Using our knowledge of the "long s" and the "p," we can see that this is a common English phrase: "as soon as possible."

as soon as possible



I Benedict Arnold Major General do acknowledge the UNITED STATES of AMERICA to be Free, Independent and Sovereign States, and declare that the people thereof owe no allegiance or obedience to George the Third, King of Great-Britain ; and I renounce, refuſe and abjure any allegiance or obedience to him ; and I do Swear that I will, to the utmoſt of my power, ſupport, maintain and defend the ſaid United States againſt the ſaid King George the Third, his heirs and ſucceſſors, and his or their abettors, aſſiſtants and adherents, and will ſerve the ſaid United States in the office of Major General which I now hold, with fidelity, according to the beſt of my ſkill and underſtanding.

Sworn before me this B Arnold
30th. May 1778 at the
Artillery Park Valley Forge H Knox B G Artly

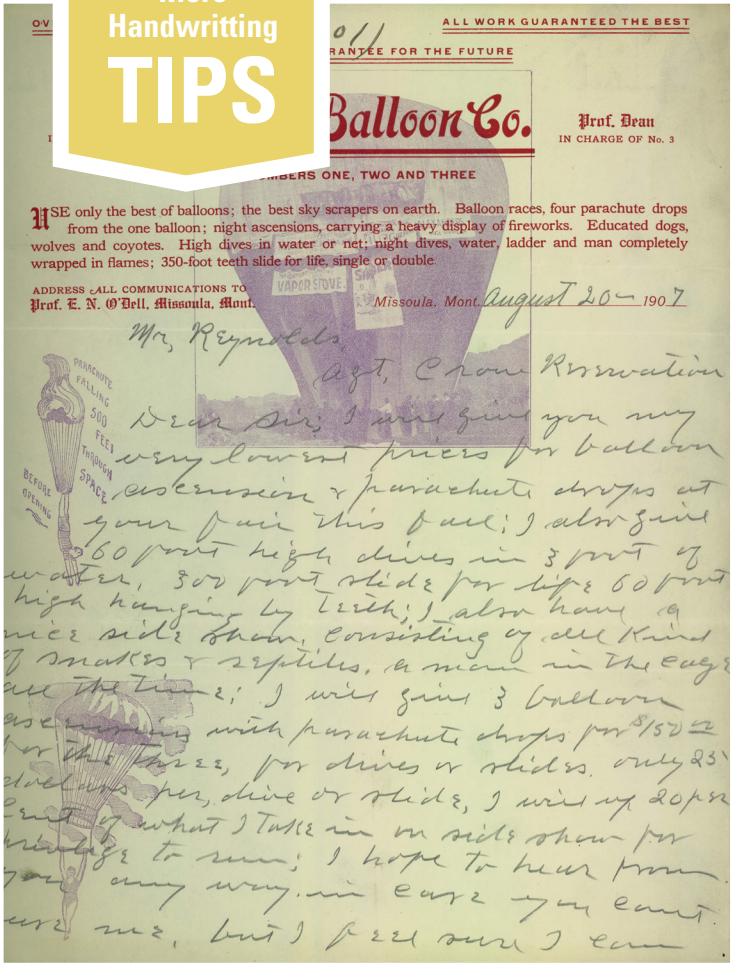
You may also come across the "long s" in typeset documents. For example, take a look at Benedict Arnold's Oath of Allegiance:

You'll see the typewritten "long s" numerous times within this interesting document. Using context clues as we read through the document, we can see that the letter that looks like a lowercase "f" is often an "s". When you see this a document dated prior to the mid-19th century, be sure to transcribe it by using the "s" on your keyboard:

> I Benedict Arnold Major General do acknowledge the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA to be Free, Independent and Sovereign States, and declare that the people thereof owe no allegiance or obedience to George the Third, King of Great-Britain ; and I renounce, refuse and abjure any allegiance or obedience to him ; and I do [handwritten] Swear [end handwritten] that I will, to the utmost of my power, support, maintain and defend the said United States against the said King George the Third, his heirs and successors, and his or their abettors, assistants and adherents, and will serve the said United States in the office of Major General which I now hold, with fidelity, according to the best of my skill and understanding.
>
> ***—Sworn before me this B Arnold***
> ***30 th Day of May 1778 – at the***
> ***Artillery Park Valley Forge H Knox B G Artillery***

TIPS for reading Historic Documents

More Handwritting TIPS

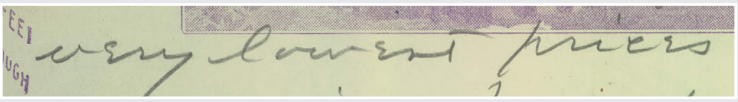

ALL WORK GUARANTEED THE BEST
RANTEE FOR THE FUTURE
Balloon Co.
Prof. Dean
IN CHARGE OF No. 3
MBERS ONE, TWO AND THREE
USE only the best of balloons; the best sky scrapers on earth. Balloon races, four parachute drops from the one balloon; night ascensions, carrying a heavy display of fireworks. Educated dogs, wolves and coyotes. High dives in water or net; night dives, water, ladder and man completely wrapped in flames; 350-foot teeth slide for life, single or double.
ADDRESS ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO
Prof. E. N. O'Dell, Missoula, Mont.
Missoula, Mont. August 20 1907
Mr. Reynolds,
Agt, Crow Reservation
Dear Sir; I will give you my very lowest prices for balloon ascension & parachute drops at your fair this fall; I also give 60 foot high dives in 3 foot of water, 300 foot slide for life 60 foot high hanging by teeth; I also have a nice side show, consisting of all kind of snakes & reptiles, a man in the cage all the time; I will give 3 balloon ascensions with parachute drops for $150.00 for the three, for dives or slides, only 25 dollars per dive or slide, I will up 20 per cent of what I take in on side show for privilege to run; I hope to hear from you any way in care you can't sure me, but I feel sure I can

Not every letter writer of the past had the clear handwriting of a clerk. This letter from L.N. Odell of the Odell Balloon Company shows some variations that you may run into.

Take a look at "Dear Sir". This is a really useful part of the letter to use to get your bearings, because "Dear Sir" is used in a lot of letters and doesn't often have any spelling surprises.

We can see that the lowercase "e" in this word looks like a mirror-image "3", sometimes called a "Greek e". Knowing that the writer of this letter makes his "e"s like this can help us to puzzle out some words that might not be very clear. We can also see that the "a" in "dear" is open at the top. Maybe the writer leaves a lot of his round letters open.

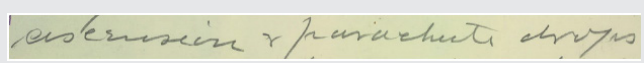
Here's a phrase in the letter that might not be terribly clear:



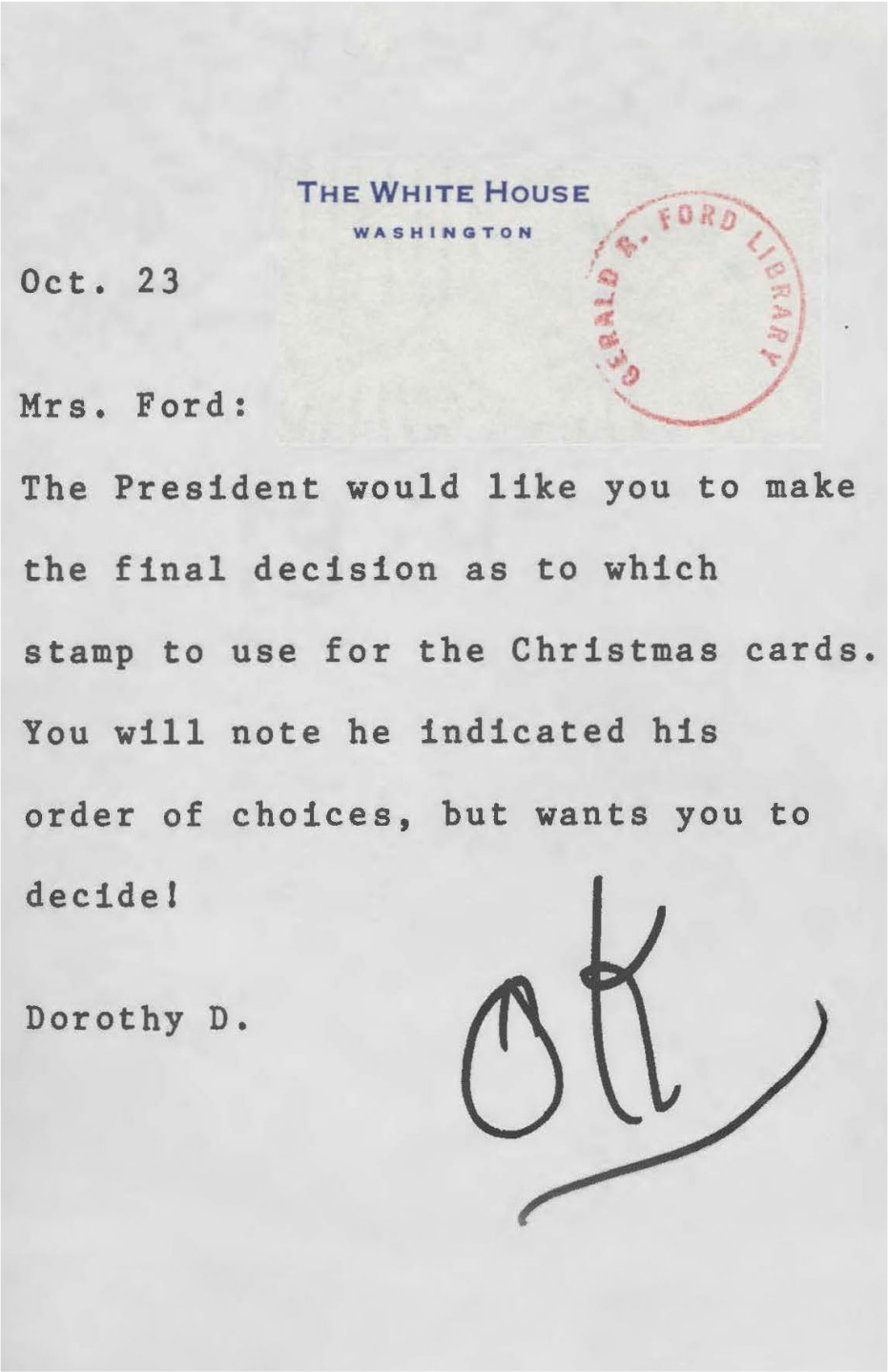
Once we plug in "e" where those "Greek e"s are, it might be easier to see that the first word is "very". The second word starts with a clear "l", but the second letter could be a "u" or an "o" with an open top. "lowe*t" is more likely than "luwe*t". What word fits there? That second-to-last letter is just an "s" that's not connected at the bottom, making the second word in this phrase "lowest."

How about the last word? If the second-to-last letter is an "e", the third-to-last letter that looks like an "e" probably isn't. What if it's a "c" with a loop at the top? That first letter is a puzzler, though. In the "Letters to Absent Senators from the Senate" example, the "p" in that post is the same as the first letter in this word. The last word in this phrase is "prices".

Ready for another phrase?



With our knowledge of the open top "a"s and "o"s, the "Greek e"s, the loopy "c"s, and those pesky "p"s, we can see that this phrase is "ascensions and parachute drops". Which is borne out by checking the red print in the letterhead: this company advertises "four parachute drops" and "night ascensions," so it would make sense that those words are in this letter.



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

GERALD R. FORD LIBRARY

Oct. 23

Mrs. Ford:

The President would like you to make the final decision as to which stamp to use for the Christmas cards. You will note he indicated his order of choices, but wants you to decide!

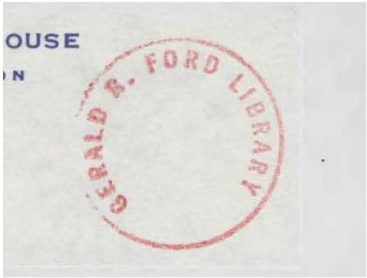
Dorothy D.

OK

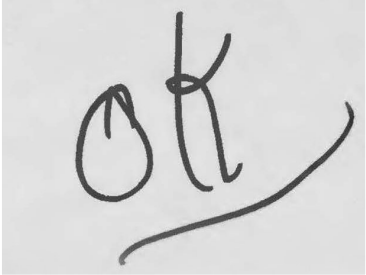
TRANSCRIBING DOCUMENTS

with Stamps and other Unique Features

This Memorandum Regarding Stamps for President Ford's Christmas Cards contains many unique features that may make transcribing challenging. In addition to the typewritten text, you'll notice a stamp in the upper right hand corner:



You'll also notice a handwritten note at the end of the document:



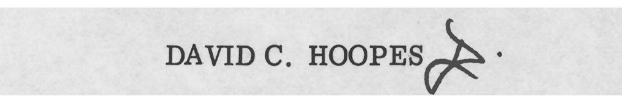
TIPS

Stamps and other Unique Features

Stamps &
Other Unique
Features

TIPS

The second page of this document contains typewritten material, hand-writing, and even postage stamps! Here are some ways you might consider transcribing the various identifying features of this document. In the “FROM” line of the document, you’ll notice that David C. Hoopes initialed next to his name:


DAVID C. HOOPES

To indicate this, it’s best to designate these initials in brackets as you transcribe: **FROM: DAVID C. HOOPES [initialed by hand to the right “D.”]**

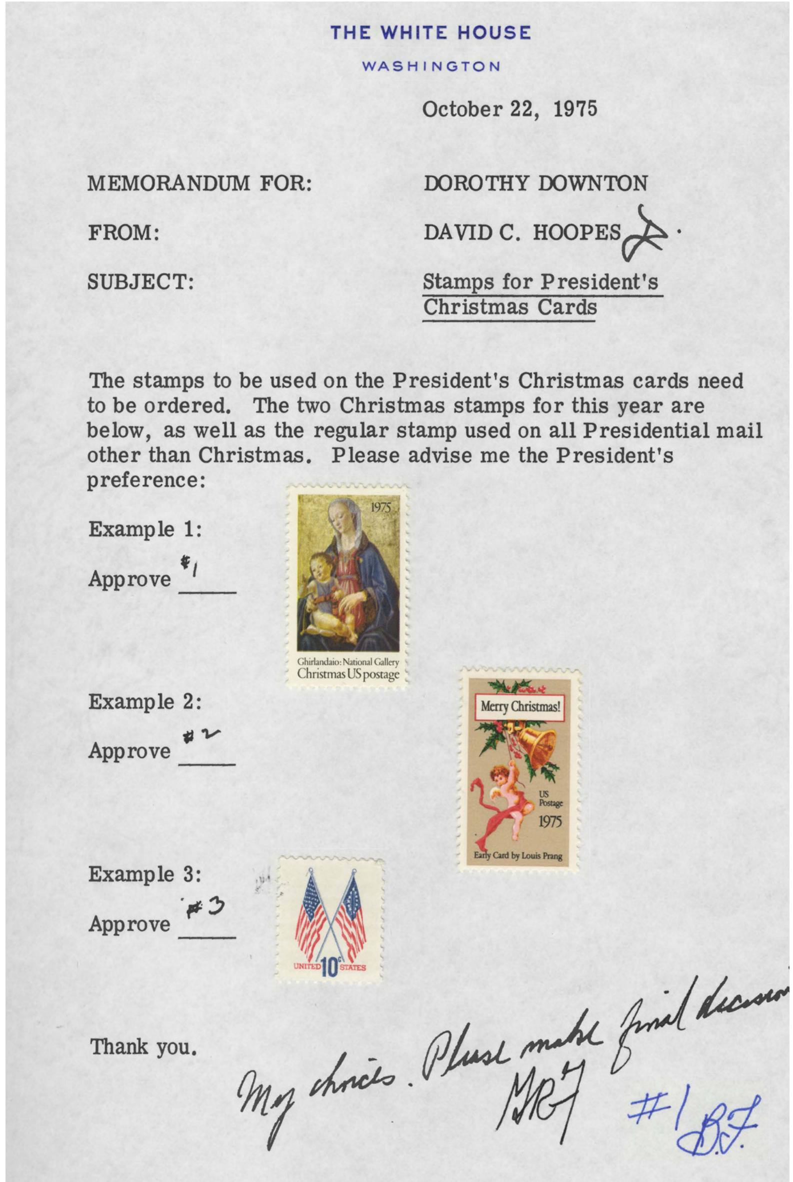
You will also notice an actual postage stamp has been affixed to this document:

Example 1:

Approve #1

In the transcription, you can identify the postage stamp by describing its features in brackets. For example:
preference:
Example 1: [stamp shows Madonna and child; beneath it reads “Ghirlandaio National Gallery Christmas US postage”]

Approve [added by hand “#1”]


THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

October 22, 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: DOROTHY DOWNTON

FROM: DAVID C. HOOPES

SUBJECT: Stamps for President's Christmas Cards

The stamps to be used on the President's Christmas cards need to be ordered. The two Christmas stamps for this year are below, as well as the regular stamp used on all Presidential mail other than Christmas. Please advise me the President's preference:

Example 1:

Approve #1

Example 2:

Approve #2

Example 3:

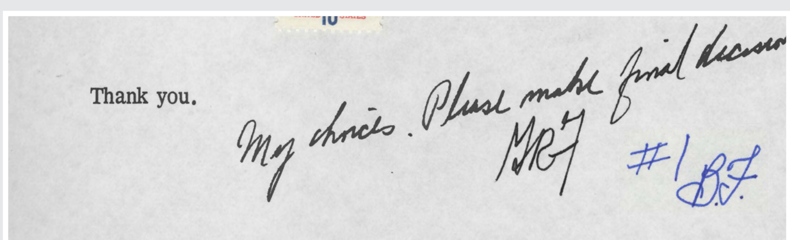
Approve #3

Thank you.

My choices. Please make final decision. GRF

#1 B.F.

At the end of this document, notice the handwritten note:


Thank you.

My choices. Please make final decision. GRF

#1 B.F.

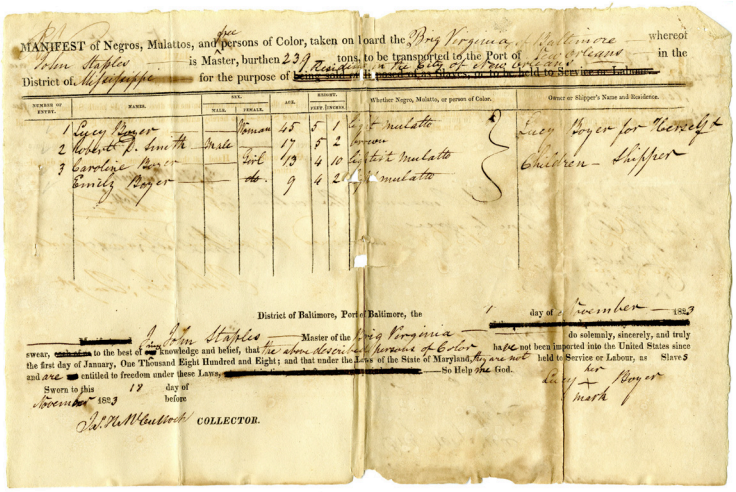
Transcribe this by indicating the handwritten portion and the different colored ink in brackets:
Thank you. [added by hand at the bottom in black ink. “My choices. Please make final decision. GRF”] [added slightly below in blue colored ink “#1 B.F.”]

TRANSCRIBING TABLES AND CHARTS

Some records in the National Archives contain tables and charts that may be challenging to read and transcribe. This Slave Manifest for Brig Virginia of Baltimore contains a lot of details including names, dates and locations which are important to researchers.

Even though we see columns of hand-written information in this document, it's not necessary to try to preserve those columns when transcribing. Transcribe the information in the table by writing out the row of text in one line. The goal of this transcription is to help understand the content in the document as well as help with search results. Notice the column headings are written out and the names of each passenger is transcribed on a separate line. Also notice that the transcription indicates crossed out text and a carrot mark to indicate additional handwritten text:

MANIFEST of Negros, Mulattos, and ^free persons of Color, taken on board the Brig Virginia of Baltimore - whereof John Staples - is Master, burthen 23.9 — tons, to be transported to the Port of New Orleans - in the District of Mississippi — for the purpose of ^Residing in the city of New Orleans [crossed out: being sold or disposed of as Slaves or to be held to Service or Labour]


MANIFEST of Negros, Mulattos, and ^free persons of Color, taken on board the Brig Virginia of Baltimore whereof John Staples is Master, burthen 23.9 tons, to be transported to the Port of New Orleans in the District of Mississippi for the purpose of [redacted]

Number of Entry.	Names.	Sex. Male.	Sex. Female.	Age.	Height. Feet.	Height. Inches.	Whether Negro, Mulatto, or person of Color.	Owner or Shipper's Name and Residence.
1	Lucy Boyer		Woman	45	5	1	light mulatto	Lucy Boyer for Herself &
2	Robert D. Smith	Male		17	5	2	brown	Children – Shipper
3	Caroline Boyer		Girl	13	4	10	lightish mulatto	
	Emily Boyer		do.	9	4	2	light mulatto	

District of Baltimore, Port of Baltimore, the 1 day of November 1823

[redacted] I John Staples Master of the Brig Virginia [redacted] do solemnly, sincerely, and truly swear, [redacted] to the best of [redacted] knowledge and belief, that the above described persons of Color have not been imported into the United States since the first day of January, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eight; and that under the Laws of the State of Maryland, they are not held to Service or Labour, as Slaves and are [redacted] entitled to freedom under these Laws, [redacted] So Help me God.

Sworn to this 18 day of November 1823 before J. McCulloch COLLECTOR.

her mark [hand drawn X] Lucy Boyer

District of Baltimore, Port of Baltimore, the 1 day of November 1823

[illegible] I John Staples - Master of the Brig Virginia — do solemnly, sincerely, and truly swear each of us to the best of our ^my knowledge and belief, that the above described persons of Color have not been imported into the United States since the first day of January, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eight; and that under the Laws of the State of Maryland, they are not held to Service or Labour, as Slaves and are entitled to freedom under these laws [crossed out text]— So Help me God.

Sworn to this 18 day of November 1823 before [illegible] McCulloch COLLECTOR

her mark [hand drawn X] Lucy Boyer

TIPS Tables and Charts

TRANSCRIBING MAPS

When transcribing maps, it might not be feasible to transcribe every street, river or landmark identified on the map. You can choose to identify those items in the [Tags] contribution area in order to make them searchable. Most maps, however, contains keys or legends with important information.

For example, this Map of the Battlefield of Gettysburg contains descriptive information about the map and the battle in the lower right corner: Zooming in on the text, we can now transcribe the map's description:

When transcribing, it is not necessary to preserve line breaks or hyphenated words in the text. Typing out sentences without line breaks will improve search results by allowing users to search for whole words or phrases in the document.

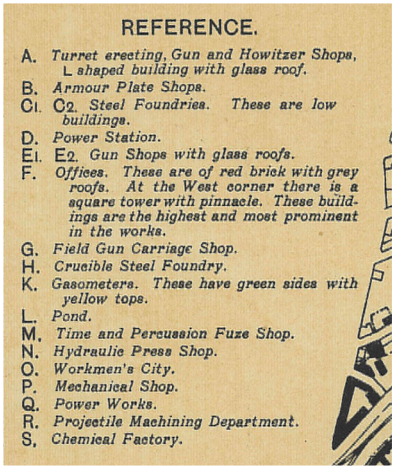
ELLIOTT'S MAP OF THE BATTLEFIELD OF GETTYSBURG PENNSYLVANIA
Made from an accurate Survey of the Ground by Transit and Chain
The Secretary of War reports of this battle "The opposing forces in the sanguinary contest were nearly equal in numbers, and both fought with the most desperate courage. The commanders were also brave skilful and experienced, and they handled their troops on the field with distinguished ability." It is believed there were about one hundred thousand men on each side engaged in the three days battle. The loss of killed on the Union Side was 2834 of wounded, 13,709. Missing 6643. The number of killed and wounded on the side of the enemy is unknown, but supposed to be greatest, as they attacked the Union army behind breastworks and in massed columns against discharges of grape and cannisters from numerous batteries. There was captured from the enemy 41 standards, 28,178 small arms, and 13,621 prisoners.

TIPS Transcribing Maps

MORE MAPS
and Reference Keys

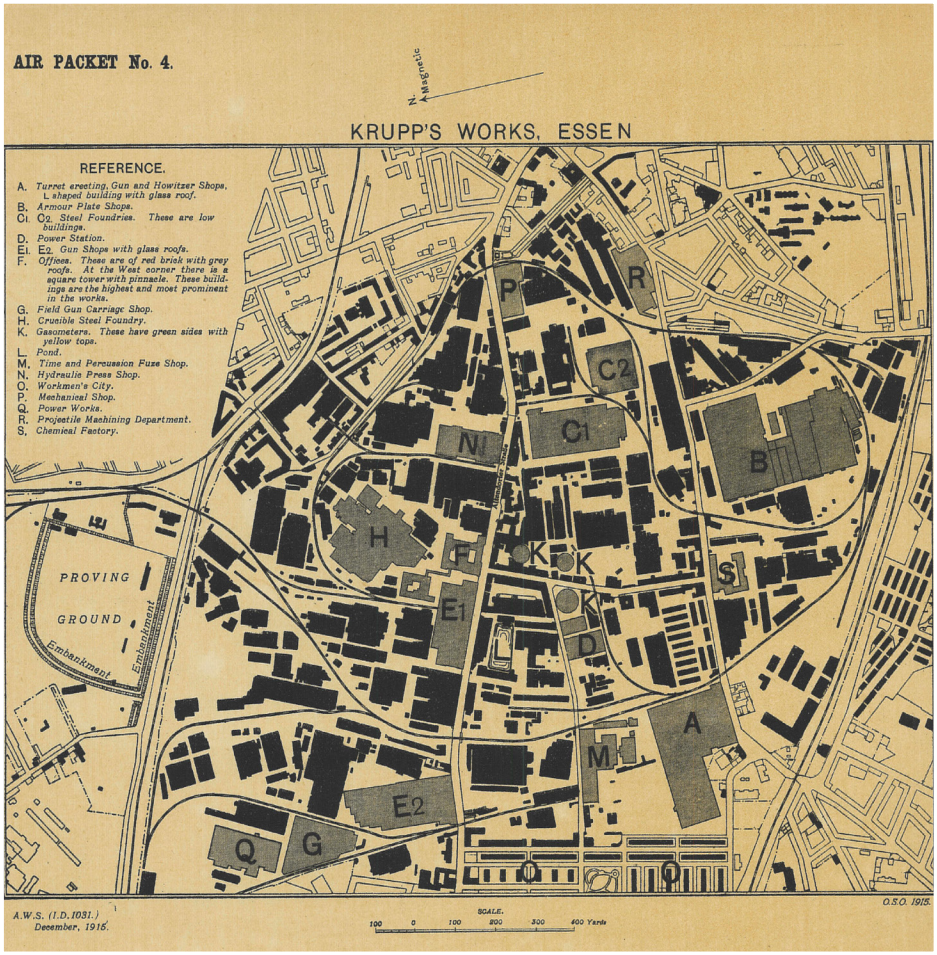
This World War I Air Map contains a reference key with important identifying information:

The Reference key identifies portions of the map using letters:



REFERENCE.

A. Turret erecting, Gun and Howitzer Shops, L shaped building with glass roof.
B. Armour Plate Shops.
C1. C2. Steel Foundries. These are low buildings.
D. Power Station.
E1. E2. Gun Shops with glass roofs.
F. Offices. These are of red brick with grey roofs. At the West corner there is a square tower with pinnacle. These buildings are the highest and most prominent in the works.
G. Field Gun Carriage Shop.
H. Crucible Steel Foundry.
K. Gasometers. These have green sides with yellow tops.
L. Pond.
M. Time and Percussion Fuze Shop.
N. Hydraulic Press Shop.
O. Workmen's City.
P. Mechanical Shop.
Q. Power Works.
R. Projectile Machining Department.
S. Chemical Factory.



A transcription of this portion of the map could look something like this:

REFERENCE.

A. Turret erecting, Gun and Howitzer Shops, L shaped building with glass roof.
B. Armor Plate Shops.
C1. C2. Steel Foundries. These are low buildings.
D. Power Station.
E1. E2. Gun Shops with glass roofs.
F. Offices. These are of red brick with grey roofs. At the West corner there is a square tower with pinnacle. These buildings are the highest and most prominent in the works.
G. Field Gun Carriage Shop.
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N. Hydraulic Press Shop.
O. Workmen's City.
P. Mechanical Shop.
Q. Power Works.
R. Projectile Machining Department.
S. Chemical Factory

TIPS

Maps and Key References

CLUES for understanding 18th and 19th Century Documents

Be aware of contemporary spelling and abbreviations. The following list may help you decipher the words around the unusual word. Please transcribe the word as spelled or abbreviated in the document, however — **do not correct it.** If you wish, you can include correct spellings or significant un-abbreviated words in brackets following the word or abbreviation or in the [Tag] field.

Common 18th and 19th-century abbreviations and their full spellings include:

inst. = a date in this month (e.g. the 15th inst.)
ult. = a date in the previous month (5th ult.)
& = et cetera

Common "misspellings" and writing conventions:

attacted = attacked
do = ditto
evry = every
evning = evening
fiew = few
greaddeal or great eal or gread eal = great deal
perhapse = perhaps
thare = there
verry = very
ware = were

Common Civil War abbreviations:

Adjt. = Adjutant
Brig. = Brigade
Capt. = Captain
Cav. = Cavalry
Col. = Colonel
Col. Inf. = Colored Infantry
HdQrs. = Head Quarters
Inf. = Infantry
Lieut. or Lt. = Lieutenant
Maj. = Major
Prov.Gen. = Provost General
QM = Quarter Master
Regt. = Regiment
R.R. = railroad
Vols. = Volunteers

Common name abbreviations

Abig. = Abigail
Abr. = Abraham
Alexr. = Alexander
Benj. = Benjamin
Cath. = Catherine
Charlt. = 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