

IT'S AN AUDIO WORLD

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From the piped-in music in stores to the constant sound of television, radio, and music in almost every home, we think we live in an audio world. We forget that our ancestors lived in a truly audio world. Our forgetfulness is understandable. We obtain our glimpses into their lives through written documents, but chances are that our ancestors rarely communicated among themselves through the written word. In fact, many of them couldn't read or write. Those who could usually had little time or reason for reading and writing. Thus, we have a skewed view of their lives.

I was reminded of this recently when the October 2003 issue of the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* began publishing genealogical entries from a colonial diary abstracted by my friend and colleague, D. Brenton Simons, who has given permission to use the quotes below. Jonathan Willis of Boston could write and felt that it was important to make almost daily entries in his diary from 1744–1747, putting him fairly high on the literacy scale, yet his diary might at first lead us to believe just the opposite.

PRONUNCIATION AND ACCENTS

Words have not always been pronounced as they are now. It is important to remember that up until the Revolutionary War, we were part of England. In fact, we were English. So guess what? Americans had English accents.

My friend Lloyd Bockstruck tells me that he listens to the British comedies on PBS as an aid to his understanding of colonial American accents. It is perhaps one of the most creative justifications for watching TV that I've ever heard, but one that has merit. Personally, I find that the care required to listen to Hetty Wainthrop's accent as she solves her mysteries in Lancashire is a good reminder to me of what my Lancashire ancestors went through as they settled in Philadelphia and then Illinois. I can certainly attest to the focus required by me on a Yorkshire vacation to decode the questions asked by the waitress at mealtimes.

OBSOLETE SYMBOLS AND MARKS

Written English used to be filled with several letters or symbols that we no longer use in written text. These included the *thorn* (which looks like a *y* but is pronounced *th*), the *per* (which looks like a *p*, usually with an extra-tall upstroke, and could be used to replace *par*, *per*, *pir*, *por*, or *pur* anywhere in a word), the long *s* (which looks almost like an *f*), the *ff* (for *F* at the beginning of a proper noun), and *&c* (*et c[etera]*).

PUNCTUATION, CAPITALIZATION, AND COMPOUNDS

Let's look at a few entries from Jonathan Willis diary.

"this Evening I Attented ye funeral of ye much Lamented Mr Parker—ye Re'd Mr Prince allso buried his dafter to night"

One difficulty in reading colonial documents is the lack of readily apparent sentences. You cannot rely on seeing a period followed by a capitalized word, which in modern writing telegraphs the ending of one sentence and the beginning of another. Sentences were often separated by dashes or colons. Jonathan Willis often strung together one after another with an "&."

Our modern eye is further confused by the tendency to capitalize words that we wouldn't. In the entry above, Willis randomly capitalized a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Even more annoying is the tendency to lowercase proper names.

Colonial documents such as wills and deeds have a bit more structure than Willis's nightly notes, but there doesn't seem to have been any overwhelming compulsion to punctuate consistently, and commas and apostrophes were apparently considered an unnecessary extravagance.

SPELLING

Language is constantly evolving. New words come into use. Existing words drop out of use or change meaning. Pronunciation varies over time and place. Spelling of words and names was not standardized until very recently. Word division was casual. Phonetics ruled.

There was no one right way to spell a word. Spelling varied even by the same individual, so we see Willis, when discussing his mother-in-law's stroke, mentioning that she was "speechlesse," "speach Lesse," and "speachlesse."

When Willis noted "My wives Birth day," he was not a bigamist; he was simply writing in an audio world. "Dafter" (daughter) was sometimes pronounced to rhyme with "after," as it was in *Pilgrim's Progress*, although we don't know which way Willis pronounced it. We see the same switch commonly in "draftsman" and "draughtsman."

Likewise, we may have to deliberately forget our first instinct for pronunciation to interpret his statement that they have "bene very Bussie to day" preparing for a funeral on "munday."

When reading old documents, we must be flexible, especially in the pronunciation of vowels, and pay attention to context. Remember that our modern English language has many letters that are pronounced more than one way. We know how to pronounce the pronoun "you," and the "yew" tree, so we should have little difficulty when Willis says that his mother-in-law "continews much the same after many means yousd."

Note the difference between the pronunciation in the following of the similarly spelled "frinds" and "dind."

"Artery Election Sundry dear medford frinds down Brother John Willis dind with me to day my wife all day with her dying mother whom ye lord Revive."

We have to make many adjustments to "translate" it: "Artillery Election. Sundry dear Medford [a town near Boston] friends down. Brother John Willis dined with me

today. My wife [was] all day with her dying mother whom the Lord revive.”

PROPER NAME AND NICKNAMES

Too often we blame the scribe when an ancestral name is “misspelled,” and blame it on the lack of familiarity, but that is unfair. Jonathan Willis repeatedly refers to the Rev’d Mr. Boyls [Byles] and mentions his sister-in-law Lidiah Nowell [Lydia Newhall]. We must use great care in interpreting the names of individuals, although places such as “phelidellphiah” may be easier to identify correctly.

Just as words have fallen from our vocabulary, so too have nicknames. Willis frequently expresses concern over

the illness of “mool.” Only once does he spell the name “moll.” Her proper name was Mary.

CONCLUSION

When reading early American documents, it is wise to divest yourself of any preconception of what is right or proper. Sometimes interpreting the handwriting is only the first battle if your transcript doesn’t make modern sense. Be flexible, remember that our ancestors lived in an audio world, and you’ll be more likely to understand what is written.