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Letters as Physical Objects: A Hands-On Exploration

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Letters as Physical Objects: A Hands-on Exploration

The sky was sunny, the room was packed, and the smoke detectors were (luckily) not too sensitive during our club meeting on February 5th to explore the physical aspects of some late 18th century and 19th century letters in the Kislak Center’s Collection. In meetings from previous years, we had only discussed some of these traits (see our Anatomy of a Letter series of blog posts), but this time around we took a hands-on approach, creating our own letters. As a template we used some business letters from the John Rowe Parker Correspondence, which feature several different kinds of folds, sender and recipient markings, and traces of wax sealing. It is important to remember that while folding and writing styles show patterns, they do change over time—there is no one “18th century” or “19th century” technique. Rather, we chose a specific and prolific businessman, John Rowe Parker, who folded all of his many letters in the same way.

To begin, we wrote on one whole sheet.

Dear Penn MS Collective,
Next, we folded the top and bottom of the same sheet down over itself to make a smaller rectangle.
We then folded this in thirds from the the sides.
Then we addressed the letters.

All of John Rowe Parker’s letters, and many letters through the 18th and 19th
centuries, were sealed with wax, so we tried our hand at this too.
The Hand of John Baranik trying not to get burned!
Next we exchanged letters and opened each other’s letters, breaking the wax seal. Up to this point we had created letters which match the writing style and sending folds of the John Rowe Parker Correspondence.
Impression from wax seal and rip caused by opening in letter from Allyn Bacon to John Rowe Parker, October 31, 1817.

There was one final step: the letters in the Correspondence featured filing folds, which meant that the recipient folded them again after receiving them in order to store them more efficiently, adding the name of the writer at the top.
Filing fold on letter from George Willig to John Rowe Parker, Dec 11, 1820

We copied this technique as well.
Professor Stallybrass was eager to remind us that although we had been able to imitate one style of writing, folding, sealing, opening, folding, and storing, there exist many other styles in archives at Penn and around the world. Some writers folded margins before they wrote, some writers pre-folded their letters before they wrote, and some folded their letters so as to write the smallest amount possible. Being able to imitate on style made us curious to explore others—perhaps we will cover this next time!
- October 2015
- September 2015
- August 2015
- March 2015
- November 2014
- April 2014
- February 2014
- January 2014
- November 2013
- October 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013
- June 2013

**CATEGORIES**

- Academic Year 2013-2014
- Letters
- Student Work
- Summer 2013
- Uncategorized