

17 Wednesday Jul
2013

Anatomy of a Letter

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POSTED BY NICOLE WILLIAMS IN LETTERS

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While John and I continue to transcribe away in RBML, we want to give you a guide to some of the characteristics of the materials we are using. Unsurprisingly, there is much variation between letters, as their writers chose the paper, the format of their letter to serve varying purposes. Many of these characteristics involve written conventions, which is something that John will focus on in the second part of this post. I am going to be looking at the more concrete aspects of a letter—what can be determined simply from the paper.

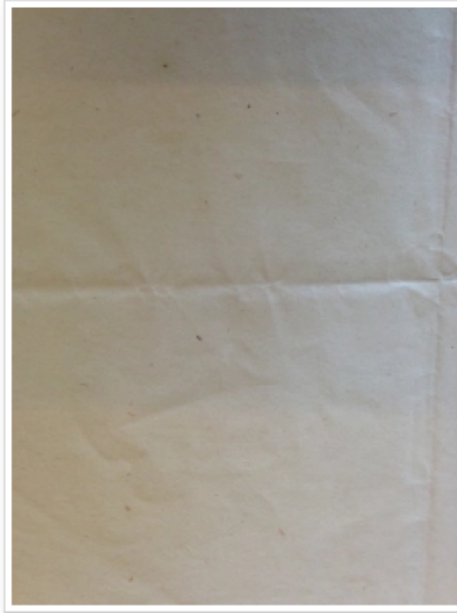
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There are several different things we look for when we inspect a letter.

1. What paper was used?

There are two different types of paper that writers in early Philadelphia used: laid and wove. Wove paper is created by using pulped linen in a wire mesh frame in a way that the liquid material weaves itself together. Laid paper is made by sifting a diluted linen pulp into a mold that then creates a series of parallel ribs throughout the paper, which are referred to as chain lines. When you hold a piece of laid paper up to a light those lines are clearly seen. Wove paper, however is made using a frame of wire mesh woven together, thus eliminating the presence of chain lines and making the frame lines almost indiscernible. Wove paper grew popular in the late eighteenth century as letter writers began to use it in their correspondences, and this method of creating paper eventually eclipsed laid paper

in the early nineteenth century. Today, however, upscale stationary will have fabricated chain lines that are put in to create the illusion of the much more arduous paper making process.



- This is an example of wove paper



- The chain lines are visible in this example of laid paper

2. Watermark

This leads right into number 2: the watermark. Wove paper does not possess watermarks, but laid paper does. Watermarks are incorporated by the paper making company, who wish to include their mark on the paper. Many times this will simply be a name or initial in the paper that is normally invisible but can easily be seen if held up to the light. If it is not visible when held up to the light, it is not a watermark.

be found when held up to a light. Identifying watermarks helps us discern what type of paper a writer was using, where the writer was acquiring his paper, and the respective popularity of different paper markers' brands.

3. Seal

Only some of the letters possess wax seals. This is usually because the reader will rip open the letter too quickly, causing a rip in the parchment, or the seal may fall off. Letters with wax seals are generally made with stamped with an emblem belonging to the owner, so a series of letters from the same person most likely will have the same seal.



— Example of a ripped seal

4. Pre-folded

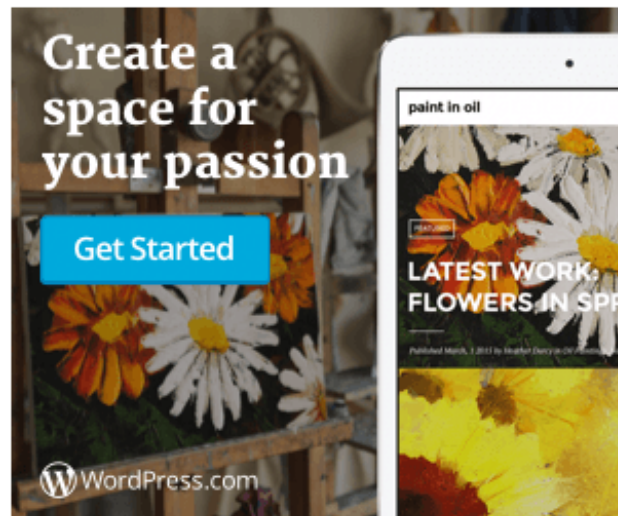
Many writers in early Philadelphia would pre-fold their letters. This means that they would fold the sheet of paper before writing, creating multiple pages on which they could write. If a sheet is folded in half, this will turn that page into into four pages, thus giving the writer more room to fill. When John and I consider the letters, we measure the size of the paper, as well as how much of the paper the writer used. Usually, there will be blank sections, or in some cases blank pages.

5. Margins

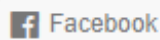
Occasionally, we will also see pre-folding in order to form margins, establishing

spatial boundaries on the page. Rather than write to the edge of the page, the writer will use folds in the paper to measure the section on the page in which they will write. This creates a neater letter and also can provide additional space in a pinch, as writers will use the margins as extra writing space if they run out on the page.

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Gary Grossman *said:*

October 3, 2013 at 12:36 am

Interesting article, sorry for the snark but I was puzzled by your comment "If a sheet is folded in half, this will turn that page into into four pages, thus giving the writer more room to fill." Perhaps this is inappropriately worded, but the laws of physics demand that paper does not expand via folding. But perhaps I have missed something.

REPLY



ibaranik *said:*

October 3, 2013 at 10:50 am

Gary,

Thank you for your interest in the blog! Nicole is away in London, but I'll do my best to speak on her behalf; I think she was describing how folding a sheet of paper produces four "pages" — two on each side of the sheet (see <https://penmanuscriptcollective.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/4-pages-sheet.jpg> for a picture, though this writer, George Willig, Sr., wastes two pages). If a writer was writing on an unfolded sheet of paper, one side would have contained text, but the other would be reserved for the address of the recipient. Folding the sheet in half created four pages, three of which could be used for text—the fourth was used for the address. Three half-sheet pages > one full-sheet page, so folding a sheet of paper enabled a writer to use 25% more space. Thanks again for reading!

– John

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