

## “Fortunate Art”: Short-Writing and Two of Its Practitioners in Colonial New England

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## **"Fortunate Art": Short-Writing and Two of Its Practitioners in Colonial New England**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This article is based on a paper given at the 2019 Conference on Sermon Studies, which took place September 5-7 in Dublin, Ireland.

## “FORTUNATE ART”: SHORT-WRITING AND TWO OF ITS PRACTITIONERS IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

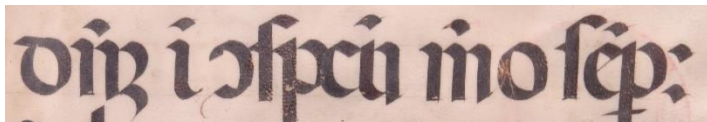
David M. Powers

“Fortunate Art, by which the Hand so speeds,  
That words are now of slower birth than deeds . . .”

So run the first two lines from a dedicatory poem “upon the art of Short-writing,” addressed to Thomas Shelton to commemorate his important 1626 volume, *Short-Writing, the Most Exact Method*.<sup>1</sup> The poem celebrates the excited and optimistic reception of a new technology for capturing spoken words onto paper. Before the advent of electronic recordings, shorthand or short-writing was clearly the best method to take down what a speaker said for posterity.

There were much earlier precedents, but they do not seem to have served as direct sources for modern shorthand. Latin abbreviations on monuments and in correspondence can be considered early examples. Probably the best known of these was the monumental inscription “SPQR,” “Senatus populusque Romanus,” meaning *the Senate and the Roman people*; but there were many others. Abbreviations used in letters included “S. P. D.,” or “salutem plurimam dicat,” *sends many greetings*. Another abbreviated greeting was “S.V.B.E.E.V.,” which stood for words which translate, *If you are well, that’s good. I’m well*. Tironian notes, which were allegedly invented by Cicero’s secretary/slave Tiro in the mid-first century B.C.E., were not posted on public inscriptions, but confined to written texts. The Tironian system proved very popular and expanded greatly in the subsequent centuries; by the 12th century C. E. it had evolved from the original 4,000 to over 13,000 symbols. In that system each character stood for a separate word. Thus “h” stood for “a,” *from*; “s” for “se,” *self*; a check mark meant “ex,” *out of*; “Z” meant “ne,” *lest*; a “7” meant “et,” *and*.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, medieval versions of compressed writing consisted basically of multiple contractions, which certainly saved space on paper or vellum, though they may not have contributed to rapid note taking. Here is an example from a manuscript of a portion of Psalm 16:

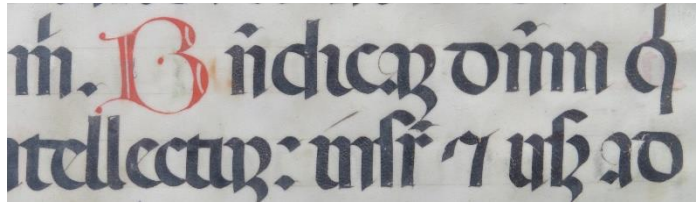


Long mark lines over a word or syllable, called a macron, indicated that some letters had been omitted, often an “m.” Conventional abbreviations emerged: “dm̄,” with a macron over the “m,” meant “dominum,” *lord* (the first word in this example). A line straight through the descender of a “p” stood for “per,” *through* (thus “semper,” *always*—the last word in this example). A

<sup>1</sup> The book was later reconfigured and republished as *Zeilographia or A New Art of Short-Writing Never Before Published More Easie, Exact, Short, and Speedie Then Any Here To Fore. Invented & Composed by Thomas Shelton Author and Teacher of Ye Said Art Allowed by Authoritie. London Printed by M.S. and Sold at the Authors House In Bores-Head Court by the Cripple-Gate.*

<sup>2</sup> “Tironian Notes,” Wikipedia, accessed August 14, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tironian\\_notes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tironian_notes); William P. Upham, *A Brief History of the Art of Stenography* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1877), 8-24.

backwards “c” stood for “con-,” here seen in “conspectu,” *sight*. The example in its entirety reads, *The Lord in my sight*.



In this second example, a vertical mark over an “m” meant “mihi,” *to me* (the first word). The vertical line over “q” meant “qui,” *who*. Flourishes at the ends of some words indicate that additional letters are to be understood. In the next to last word, for instance, the flourish means “-que,” making the word mean “usque,” *until*. That word is preceded by a persistent Tironian character which endured over the centuries and survived in English handwriting into the 1600s, namely, the 7-shaped symbol for “et,” *and*.<sup>3</sup>

But with Timothy Bright’s *Characterie*, published in 1588, came a new approach. The newly-invented systems which appeared relatively quickly were, as Kelly Raffey McCay points out, “not mere abbreviations of longhand, but . . . highly developed writing systems that operate according to their own rules and require their own literacy.”<sup>4</sup> A stenography industry emerged in short order.

In his World War II-era study of coded communication, *Secret and Urgent*,<sup>5</sup> Fletcher Pratt offered a useful distinction between codes and ciphers. Early shorthand systems offer examples of both.

Both Bright’s *Characterie* and Peter Bales’ *The Art of Brachygraphy* (1597) relied on codes. As such, they required users to memorize extensive sets of symbols. An extract from Bright’s handbook illustrates the complexity of a code-based system. Ten and a half pages of double columns were devoted to symbols; a little over one column gave thirty-eight symbols for words beginning with P, from “paciēt” to “purpose.” Fluency in this system required mastering many symbols which differed only in subtle ways.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen R. Reimer, “Manuscript Studies: Medieval and Early Modern. IV.vi. Paleography: Scribal Abbreviations,” accessed March 23, 2020, <https://sites.ualberta.ca/~sreimer/ms-course/course/abbrevtn.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly Raffey McCay, “‘All the World Writes Short Hand’: The Phenomenon of Shorthand in Seventeenth-Century England,” currently in revision for *Book History*, volume 24, calls Bright’s invention “the catalyst for a growing number of shorthand systems published throughout the seventeenth century and well into the twentieth—all of which remained firmly rooted in the written medium.”

<sup>5</sup> Fletcher Pratt, *Secret and Urgent* (Garden City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1942), 13.

The Table		Characterie.	
Perfwade.	Purge.	Rodd.	Soddayn.
Phyficke.	Purpose.	Roote.	Socuer.
Place.		Rough.	Some.
Plague.		Rubbe.	Sore.
Playe.		Rule.	Sounde.
Plaine.	R	Rulh.	Space.
Plead.	R Ace.		Spare.
Pledge.	Raigne.	S	Spark.
Poynt.	Rebuke.	Salute.	Speake.
Possible.	Reche.	Saue.	Spice.
Power.	Recouer.	Scarce.	Spitt.
Pray.	Reade.	Schoole.	Springe.
Praise.	Redy.	Sclaunder.	Staye.
Preach.	Region.	See.	Start.
Preiudice.	Reioyce.	Seede.	Steppe.
Prepare.	Religion.	Seeme.	Steward.
Present.	Remember.	Sence.	Stone.
Pretende.	Repe.	Shine.	Strayne.
Preuayle.	Repent.	Shippe.	Stronge.
Preuent.	Reson.	Shoote.	Study.
Pricke.	Resoluc.	Side.	Stuffe.
Prince.	Rest.	Sinke.	Stumble.
Promis.	Restore.	Singe.	Substance.
Prophecy.	Rewarde.	Sitt.	Such.
Proportion.	Reuenge.	Skill.	Sweete.
Prosper.	Reuile.	Slippe.	Swell.
Proue.	Richc.	Smatter.	Surfet.
Pulpet.	Right.	Smoke.	Sunne.
Punish.	Ripe.		
	Robbe.		
	Rodd.		

On the other hand, John Willis' *The Art of Stenographie* (1602) and Thomas Shelton's *Short-Writing* (1626), and the spate of systems which followed them, all functioned as ciphers. Even though their inventors and promoters sought to capitalize on the differences among these systems, each claiming their own as "easie," "exact," "faire," "short," "swift," "lineall"—and basically better than the competitors—they all seem to have involved several basic dynamics. Cipher systems worked phonetically. They promoted streamlined spelling, which meant skipping some letters. Double letters were compressed into one. Homonyms abounded. Sound dictated spelling. Each word began with a "great letter" to represent its initial sound. In Willis' system, for example, either "k" or "s" stood in for "c," depending on whether that orthographic "c" had a hard or soft sound. Vowels were usually omitted, but were indicated by the various positions of the next consonant, with that location revealing the intervening vowel (see below). In this way shorthand could create any imaginable word without requiring a pre-established set of symbols. But the generally brief handbooks describing each short-writing system usually emphasized the crucial need to learn a system's alphabet cold.

Here is Shelton's earlier alphabet. In it "i" and "j" are the same, as are "u" and "v."

A	Λ	F	7	K	~	P	σ	U	∨	Z	z
B	I	G	4	L	∪	Q	9	V	✓	CH	>
C	Γ	H	<	M	\	R	r	W	↓	SH	h
D	/	I	┐	N	—	S	p	X	x	TH	o
E	e	J	┐	O	C	T	/	Y	y		

Vowels were only written as initial “great letters” of words beginning with vowels. All others were indicated by specified fixed positions surrounding the initial “great letter.” These spatial arrangements varied from system to system. The following schema illustrates how this worked in the John Willis system. A sign for “t” placed at the lower left of an initial “b,” would spell “bat.” Other single syllable words beginning with “b” and ending in “t” would be written as follows.

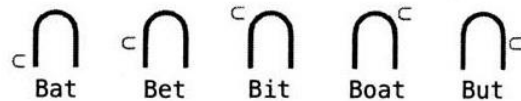


FIGURE 5

*Shorthand vowel example. Different spatial arrangements of shorthand symbols correspond to different intervening vowels.*

The subtleties of this system meant that the sentence “Her smile was appealing” could be “virtually indistinguishable” from “Her smell was appalling.”<sup>6</sup> Douglas Shepard, the transcriber of Henry Walcott’s “Shorthand Notebook” in Hartford, Connecticut, remarked that in Wolcott’s coding based on John Willis, the place name of “Quinnipiac” (the original Indian name for New Haven) “is monstrous to behold.”<sup>7</sup>

The founder of Rhode Island, Roger Williams (1603-1683), who was trained as a protégé of England’s Chief Justice Coke, used this system. Notes he took have been deciphered by Lin Fisher and colleagues at Brown University in Rhode Island and published in *Decoding Roger Williams*. The diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) and the scientist Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) of England, and the minister Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705) and President Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) of America, all used Shelton’s system.<sup>8</sup>

### The Fortunate Art Applied

In the 1597 introduction to his code-based system, Peter Bales remarked that short-writing is “very convenient and profitable for all yong Students, either in Divinitie, Phisick, or the Law”—the three traditional professions—but also useful “for Ambassadors, Messengers, & Travailers into farre countries.”<sup>9</sup>

Of all these possible applications, however, this new technology seems to have had its most important impact on preaching. With the advent of short-writing, stenographic notes—anonously sourced, unreviewed by the preacher, and frequently riddled with errors—could be rushed into print. And this did happen, much to the chagrin of some ministers, including John Cotton, the premier preacher of Boston, Massachusetts. In 1642 a short-writing adept named John

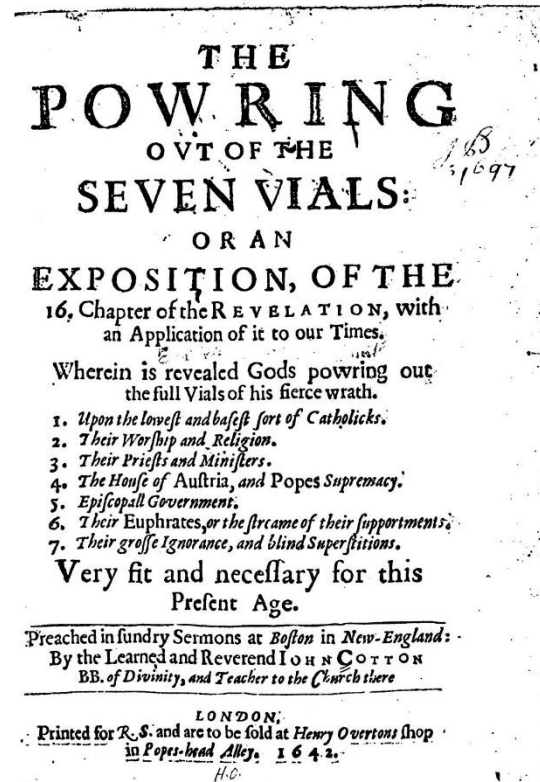
<sup>6</sup> Linford D. Fisher, et al., *Decoding Roger Williams: The Lost Essay of Rhode Island’s Founding Father* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas H. Shepard, “The Wolcott Shorthand Notebook Transcribed” (Ph.D. diss., State University of Iowa, 1957), 5.

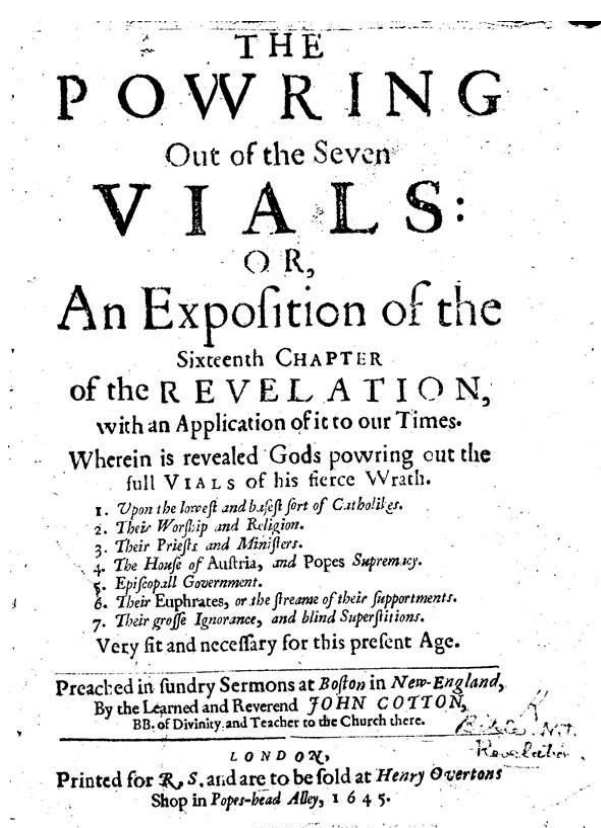
<sup>8</sup> “Thomas Shelton (stenographer),” Wikipedia, accessed June 29, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Shelton\\_\(stenographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Shelton_(stenographer))

<sup>9</sup> Peter Bales, *The Art of Brachygraphy* (1597), page C, recto.

Humfrey sent a version of Cotton's sermons to be printed in London. When Cotton saw the finished product, he was astonished and appalled—and he felt cheated.<sup>10</sup> He also felt obliged to publish his own corrected edition three years later. Interestingly, it was printed with an almost identical title page, and was issued by the very same publisher!



John Humfrey's pirated edition



John Cotton's edition

It is possible to access sermons from the 17th and 18th centuries in several ways. When Perry Miller explored the New England preaching tradition of that era in *The New England Mind*, he identified the "Jeremiad" form of prophetic critique as normative.<sup>11</sup> This narrowed his subject considerably. Miller focused on the dangers of being outside the church covenant, rather than ways of living inside it. He confined his study to printed sermons, produced in bulk for special community occasions, such as elections or fast days, when the preacher was addressing a civic situation. It was a pioneering and careful study but very limited in scope and not sufficient for drawing widespread conclusions.

Years later Harry S. Stout came to another conclusion in his study of *The New England Soul*.<sup>12</sup> Stout turned to sermon manuscripts, where he discovered a very different tone in the

<sup>10</sup> John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649*, ed. Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 208; David D. Hall, *Ways of Writing: The Practice and Politics of Text-Making in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953; reprint Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 27–39.

<sup>12</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

“sequence of salvation” topics of week-by-week preaching to congregations. Ordinary weekly sermons proved to be much more gracious than those for public occasions.

However, there is a third, though somewhat rarer, source for analyzing what colonial era sermons have to tell us. Beyond printed sermons and handwritten notes ministers used in preaching—what they planned to say from the pulpit—are the notes parishioners took, sometimes in shorthand. From these notes we are privy to what people heard as they sat on the benches or in the pews. As Stout himself noted, the average weekly churchgoer in New England listened to thousands of sermons over a lifetime, which represents more than nineteen thousand hours of concentrated listening;<sup>13</sup> thus, another way to find out the tone of sermons in the 17th and 18th centuries is by discovering what the parishioners thought the preachers were saying (or trying to say).

The importance of reception theory, particularly the audience theory pioneered by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, must be noted here.<sup>14</sup> Using this theoretical approach, the congregation becomes an important conduit for accessing the sermon and preaching. Furthermore, the understanding of what ministers preached, and why, can be enhanced to the same degree that Stout’s use of manuscript sermons expanded what Miller deduced from examining published sermons. The perceptions and voices of the congregations, the hearers, are now paramount. To put it crudely, the bias of the creator, the preacher, is replaced by the bias of the consumer, the parishioner.

The significance of this new repository for sermons cannot be overstated. As several commentators have noted, there were, and are, far more sermons preached than are available as published works or in manuscript form.<sup>15</sup> Examining notes on and from sermons provides scholars access to more of what William Gibson called “sermon events.”<sup>16</sup> Shorthand notes make it possible to speak a little more confidently about the tone of preaching in the 17th and 18th centuries.

A twenty-first century reader of this material faces several challenges. Those difficulties explain why so much material remains unread. One task is identifying the system in use. Was it by John Willis, or Edmond Willis? Was it the earlier Thomas Shelton, or the later Thomas Shelton, or even Samuel Shelton? In 1877 William Upham delineated an astonishing forty-eight different short-writing alphabets.<sup>17</sup> Here are the first twenty-four:

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<sup>13</sup> Stout, 4.

<sup>14</sup> See Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 53-121, and Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” University of Birmingham Archives, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-artslaw/history/cccs/stencilled-occasional-papers/1to8and11to24and38to48/SOP07.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> William Gibson, “The British Sermon 1689-1901: Quantities, Performance, and Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon, 1689-1901*, ed. Keith A. Francis and William Gibson (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 6-9.

<sup>16</sup> Gibson, 7.

<sup>17</sup> William P. Upham, *A Brief History of the Art of Stenography* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1877), 46-47.



	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
a	Λ	/	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
b	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
c	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
d	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
e	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
f	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
g	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
h	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
i	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
j	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
k	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
l	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
m	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
n	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
o	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
p	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
q	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
r	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
s	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
t	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
u	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
v	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
w	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
x	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
y	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ
z	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ

Variations may seem quite slight, with the same symbols frequently used for different letters. For instance, many systems used lambdas for one of the letters. In nine of them a lambda represented “a.” But others used lambda for “g” or “j” (the same sound), “o,” or “w.” In seventeen a straight up-and-down line stood for “t.” But in ten that meant “b,” and, in others, “d” or “j.” Anyone who used a system simply had to know what the character meant in that system’s alphabet.

A second challenge added further complexity: what modifications did the individual writer make? What quirks, alterations, idiosyncrasies did he or she invent? In a sense every single writer used a system which was uniquely his or her own. Everybody adapted.

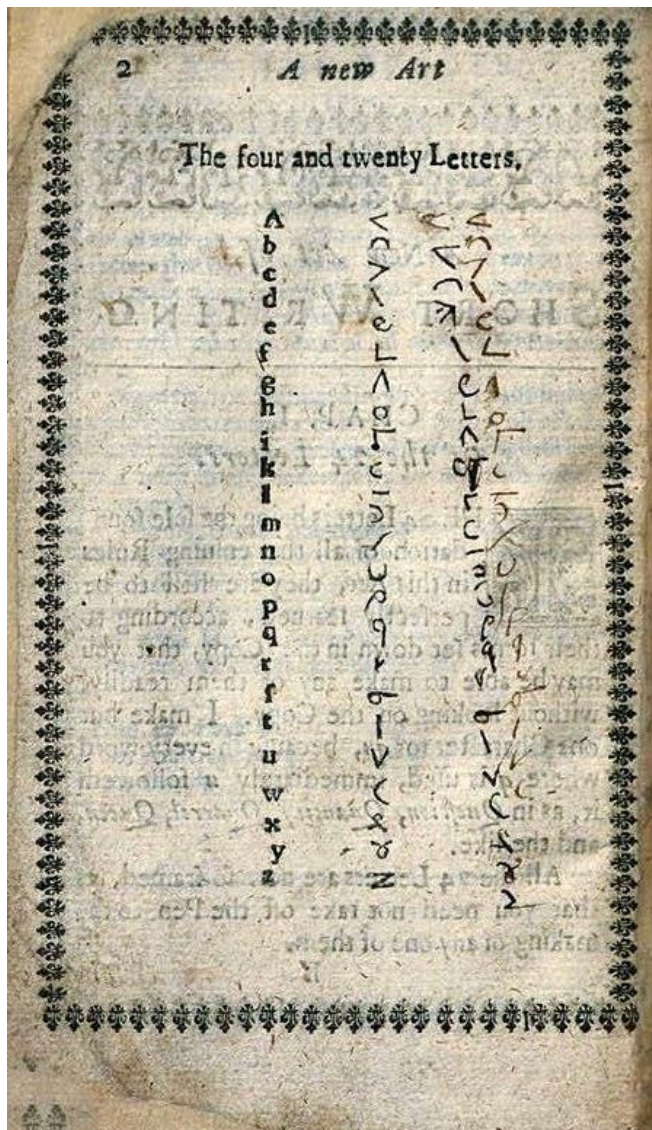
But in the spirit of encouraging transcriptions—not discouraging them!—this study considers successful experiences deciphering and decoding the notes of two persons who used short-writing to one degree or another in New England. First are the notes for preaching developed by a clergyman in the 18th century; second, the notes taken by a teenager as he listened to preaching in the 17th century.

### Rev. Adonijah Bidwell’s Ciphred Notes

The Rev. Adonijah Bidwell (1716-1784) left numerous manuscripts in a combination of longhand, abbreviations, and short-writing. Some of them were simply notes on reading, but others were intended for preaching. Bidwell adapted Thomas Shelton’s second, later system, from 1659, called *Zeilographia* – number 16 of the versions which Upham catalogued.

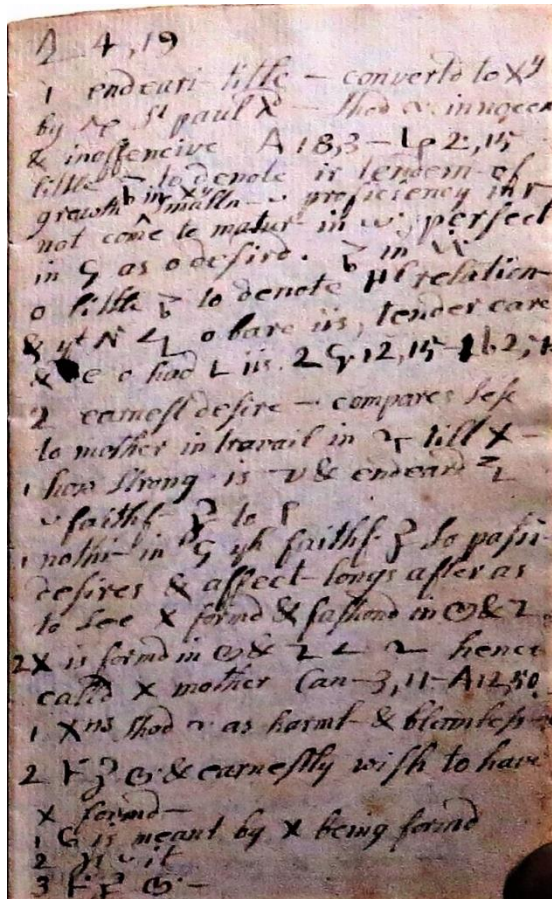
Bidwell was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and educated at Yale College. He served in ministry at Monterey in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts (in what was originally called “Housatonic Township No. 1”), from 1748 to 1784. This placed him just a few miles from a fellow Congregational minister, the particularly prominent theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758); after Edwards left Northampton he served from 1751 to 1757 in the Indian mission town of Stockbridge. The impetus for the study of Bidwell’s cipher came from the historian John Demos,

who has asked why there is no Edwards correspondence involving Edwards' neighbor Bidwell, nor any mention at all of Bidwell in any of Edwards' papers.



Bidwell tended to record the opening symbols only, rather than completed shorthand words. Thus the same symbol could stand for several possible words beginning with the same sound; the specific meaning must be deduced from the context. An example is the "Pr" symbol, meaning in Bidwell's usage any word beginning with "pr"—"Proverbs," "prince," "principle," "providence," "proof," and so forth.





This is the first page of an undated Bidwell sermon on Galatians 4:19, “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you. . .” The manuscript is held at the Bidwell House Museum in Monterey, Massachusetts. Others of Bidwell’s sermons are posted on the “Hidden Histories” site of the Congregational Library in Boston, Massachusetts. The manuscript notes for this sermon go on for another nineteen pages or so. Beginning on the third page, Bidwell’s message very closely tracks chapter one of a 1677 volume by Henry Scougal (1650-1678), *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*.<sup>18</sup> That discovery, as well as finding that other Bidwell sermon notes were copied out of books by William Burkitt (1650-1703), Matthew Poole (1624-1679), Isaac Watts (1674-1748), and Matthew Henry (1662-1714),<sup>19</sup> made it much easier to transcribe Bidwell’s notes! (However judiciously we must use it, it is amazing what Google can reveal.)

It seems we are now in a position to answer John Demos’ question. Jonathan Edwards had little to do with his neighbor Adonijah Bidwell because Bidwell was not very original. Indeed,

<sup>18</sup> Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man, or, The Nature and Excellency of the Christian Religion: With the Methods of Attaining the Happiness It Proposes* (London: Printed for Charles Smith and William Jacob, 1677).

<sup>19</sup> William Burkitt, *Expository Notes, with Practical Observations, on the New-Testament: of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. 4th edition. (London: printed for Thomas Parkhurst, at the Bible and Three Crowns in Cheapside; Jonathan Robinson, at the Golden Lion, and John Wyat, at the Rose, in St. Paul’s Church-Yard, 1709); Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*. 4th ed. (London: Printed for T. Parkhurst, 1700); Isaac Watts, *The Doctrine of the Passions Explain’d and Improv’d*, (Dublin: Printed by R. Reilly, on Cork-hill. For G. Ewing, Bookseller at the Angel and Bible in Dame-street, MDCCXXXVII. [1737]), 81-85; Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Prophetical Books of the Old Testament* (London: Printed for J. Lawrence, R. Robinson, N. Cliff, and D. Jackson, 1712).

Bidwell borrowed heavily from scholars of a previous generation. Some of his favored sources were over a century old. The fact that he did not identify his sources by name, either in his notes for reading or for preaching, raises a serious question.

But it may be that Bidwell's notes, carefully reexamined, may yet redeem him, and on the very basis of his borrowed messages. Exploring how some of his manuscripts developed over time and how they could have related to political events leading up to and throughout the American Revolutionary War may offer a good reason to appreciate his preaching.

Bidwell supported the revolution. Did his rhetoric mirror those commitments? His extensive notes for a sermon on 1 Peter are instructive at this point. The text is 1 Peter 5:8: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. . ." The manuscript bears two dates: 1754, two decades prior to the war; and 1774, the year the first Continental Congress met to deal with what were called the "Intolerable Acts" of Parliament, during what Mary Beth Norton has called "the Long Year of Revolution," when war seemed dangerously imminent.<sup>20</sup> I like to refer to that manuscript as the "Angels and Devils" sermon. Observations Bidwell interspersed in his later handwriting can be readily distinguished from his original notes. They are penned more heavily, and at a somewhat upward slant. The difference can be seen in this leaf, where Bidwell added a section in the lower part of the page, written in his later, heavier hand. This addendum is drawn from Matthew Poole's *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (1700) and concerns doing battle with the devil. "Resist," he said, "i.e., comply not with his motions and temptations." The last line on the page reads, "You can't be conquered so long as you do not consent."

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *1774: The Long Year of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 2020).



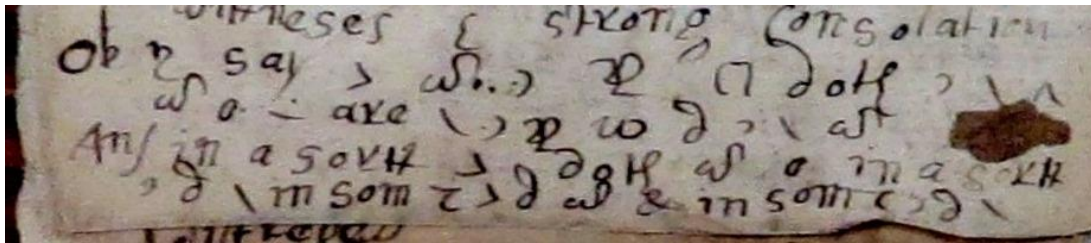
At another section in the same set of notes he wrote in his more mature hand (echoing a book by William Burkitt), “The Christian’s duty discovered, i.e., not to yield but resist and oppose. We must either resist or be taken captive; [we] never get rid of him [that is, the devil] but by resisting. If we parley and treat we must expect to be triumphed over and trampled.” It is conceivable that these fighting words from his manuscript for the 1774 presentation of this sermon could be meant to refer to the looming American Revolution. So the most appropriate question regarding Bidwell’s use of other sources may not be whether he plagiarized, but why he borrowed the particular sources he did.

### John Pyncheon’s Coded Notes

The second example is from John Pyncheon (1625?-1703), who left two known booklets of short-writing notes on the sermons of his minister, the Rev. George Moxon (1602-1687). John came to Springfield, Massachusetts, as a ten- to twelve-year-old child when his father William Pyncheon founded the settlement in 1636. After his father returned to England in 1652, John remained in New England, and went on to exercise considerable impact there. He was instrumental in the English colonization of western Massachusetts as a dealer in real estate and as a public servant.

As a teenager John took notes on the sermons he heard. This was a homework assignment of sorts, designed to teach him to listen carefully, to speak persuasively, and to understand and affirm the Puritan theological framework. He created complete sentences by interspersing symbols of his own invention among longhand words as he wrote while the minister preached. John practiced what Meredith Neuman, in her important book *Jeremiah’s Scribes*, calls “aural

auditing.”<sup>21</sup> He wrote what he heard. His misspellings reveal words he must not have understood – as well as the Yorkshire accent of the minister. Here is part of a page from one of his manuscripts.



This example demonstrates the obvious economy of short-writing. Coding thirty-three of these forty-nine words as symbols takes up far less space. I was able to discover the meaning of over 120 of the symbols John used – though a very few which he used sparingly still elude me.

Decoding requires finding some starting point. My first breakthrough came with the section pictured above. I began with the fixed points of Bible citations--a suggestion I learned from Harry Stout. Find the verses, and you have at least a word or two of text. From there, it becomes a matter of noticing things: repeated patterns, sequences, connections that have not been identified before.

Here is a selection of some symbols John adapted or invented for his use. A few are found with other meanings in other systems; but a great many are unique to him.

#### JOHN PYNCHON - SHORT WRITING SYMBOLS (1640)

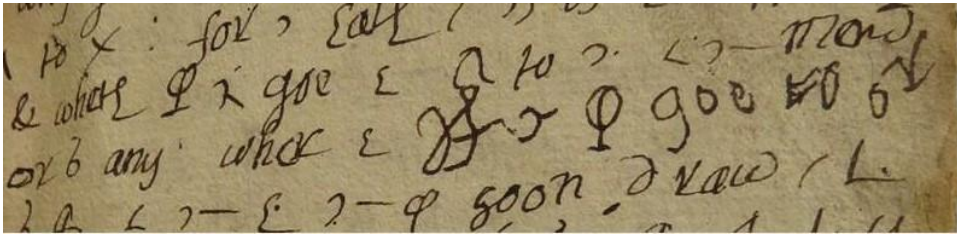
α	according	D	doctrine	[word]	-ness	÷	that
A	affliction/s	∂	down	n	never	/	the, thee
g	against	7 <sup>c</sup>	duty	\	not	o	them
o	all	C	earth	e	nothing	ω	there, their
A a	also	ε	else	N	now	/.	these
^	among	T	enough	@	origin	g	they
π	another	e	ever	co	out	g	thing
u	because	e	every	A	part	4	think
o	before?	f	faith	P	people	6	this
B	believe	ff	father	for	person, -s	o	those
Q	between	L	for, -ful	o	point?	Z	thou

Some amusing peculiarities occur here and there in John's notes. There are instances of pen tests and attempts at fancy writing. There is one place where it appears John must have been trying to write with his non-dominant hand. Notice the squiggly symbols toward the right in the

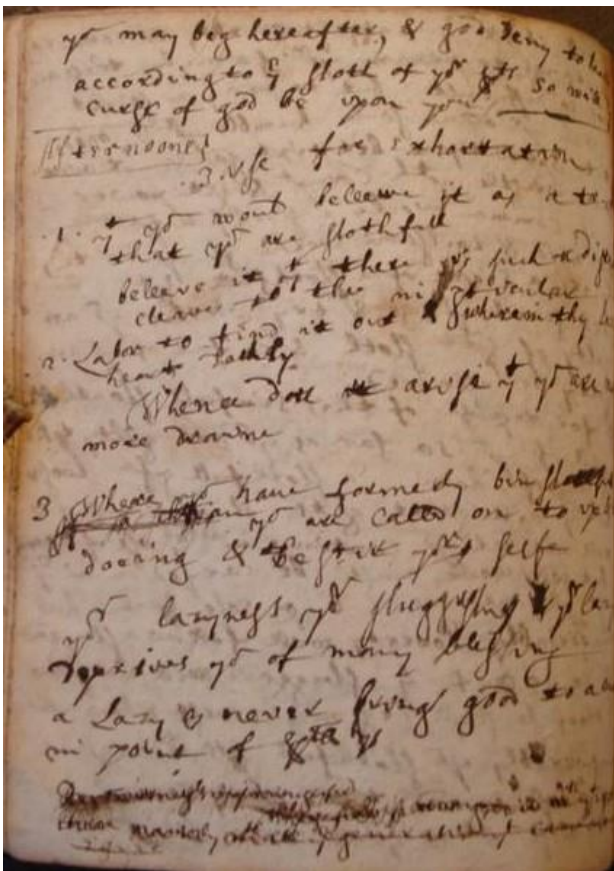
<sup>21</sup> Meredith M. Neuman, *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).



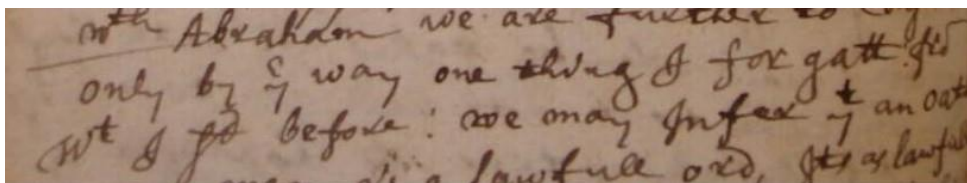
middle line! (“Can we mend ourselves anywhere else? If we should go to ourselves, what can we have?”)



Two times in another set of notes, from 1649 (when John was 23 or 24 years old), his handwriting became such a scrawl in his afternoon jottings (below the first three lines in the illustration) that it makes one wonder whether he may have had one too many ales at lunch? These later notes, all in longhand, are held by the Pennsylvania Historical Museum in Philadelphia.



And here is a favorite. On July 8, 1649, Pynchon carefully wrote – and Moxon must have said – “Only, by ye way, one thing I forgot from what I said before. . .” This extraordinary scrupulousness seems to verify John’s reliability as a notetaker.



I believe as well that in addition to the testimony historic sermons offer regarding the theological essentials of their eras, there is much to be gleaned when we read backwards, so to speak, by asking of the speaker or notetaker the editor's question: "Why are you telling me this now?" Consider the notes on Moxon's sermons. We achieve a better understanding of what life was like in Springfield in his day from what he had to say about the issues he addressed. When we read backwards in this way, we will discover that George Moxon, as reported by John Pynchon, dealt quite articulately with a variety of concerns among his people: Hunger and poverty. Truth telling in the community. Youth and their relationships with parents. Sound doctrine. And especially struggles of the spirit, including the challenge of living with uncertainty in a very uncertain time and place.

John's notes are so complete they can be reconfigured as sermons. I was able to transcribe his notes, punctuate them, and turn them into a book.<sup>22</sup> Based on that transcription, Moxon's message from March 2, 1640 has been recorded by Steven Hirst, an actor from Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire, Moxon's native area in England.<sup>23</sup>

Moxon's message ends this way:

. . . be tender of making other lives uncomfortable. Be tender over their natural lives. Your neighbors, put to [them] your helping hand to do what you can to make the natural lives of others comfortable—also their spiritual life; do not vex their spiritual lives. Tell them that they have no grace and that they be not the child of God, but comfort their lives and pray to God to comfort them. Thus much for this time.

## Conclusion

From the long-known but only recently decoded manuscripts in this study, more vivid, more granular, more striking impressions of two long-gone eras emerge, and more detailed interpretations of those times become possible. (Thus, for example, despite the efforts of the preacher, what the congregation heard and paid attention to may not have been what was intended.) The data which remain hidden in a trove of historic shorthand documents still await discovery and transcription—an endeavor which will surely deepen and expand appreciation of our past.

<sup>22</sup> David M. Powers, *Good and Comfortable Words: The Coded Sermon Notes of John Pynchon and the Frontier Preaching Ministry of George Moxon* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Excerpts may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL2xoGgDGweOO5JzY5Lyclw/videos>.