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“Fortunate Art”: Short-Writing by Ministers and Sermon Notetakers in Colonial New England

David M. Powers

independent scholar, dmpowers42@juno.com

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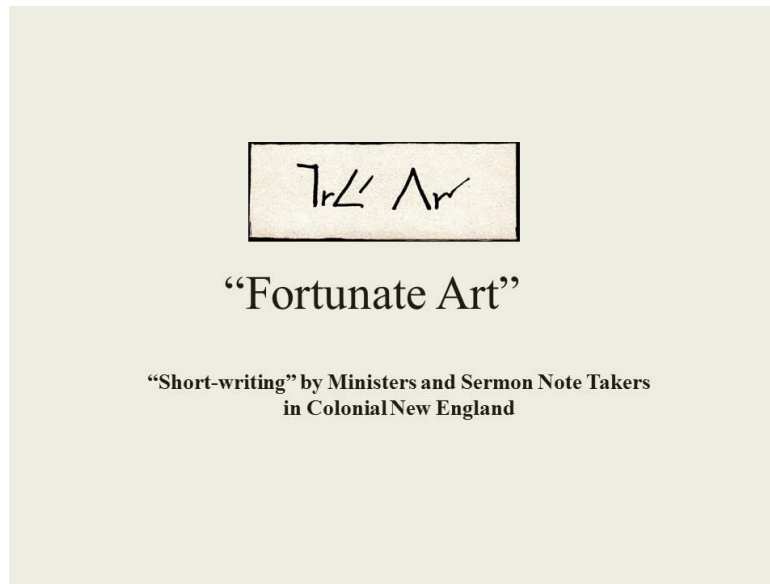
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“FORTUNATE ART”: SHORT-WRITING BY MINISTERS AND SERMON NOTETAKERS IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

David M. Powers

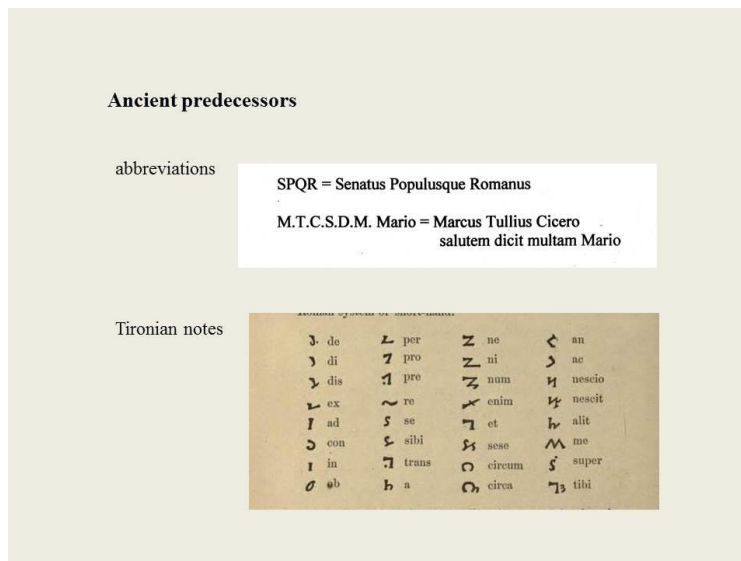


“Fortunate Art, by which the Hand so speeds,
That words are now of slower birth than deeds...”

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 on *Short-Writing, the Most Exact Method*. The poem celebrates the excited and optimistic reception of a new technology for capturing spoken words onto paper. Before the advent of electronic recordings, short-writing or short hand 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. Tironian notes, which were allegedly invented by Cicero’s secretary / slave Tiro, evolved eventually by the 12th century from the original 4,000 to over 14,000 symbols.¹ Here’s a small sample.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tironian_notes (accessed August 14, 2019). William P. Upham, *A Brief History of the Art of Stenography* (Salem, MA::Essex Institute, 1877), 8-24.



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. These examples are from Psalm 16 (15 in the Vulgate)



But with Timothy Bright’s *Characterie*, published in 1588, came a new approach.² A stenography industry emerged in short order. The newly-invented systems which appeared relatively quickly were, as Kelly Rafey points out, “not mere abbreviations of longhand, but . . . highly developed writing systems that operate according to their own rules and require their own literacy.”³

² Kelly Rafey, in her unpublished paper submitted for review, “All The World Writes Short Hand: The Phenomenon of Shorthand in Seventeenth-Century England,” 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.”

³ Rafey, “All The World Writes Short Hand.”

A Renaissance reinvention

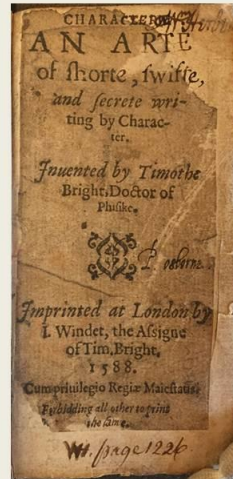
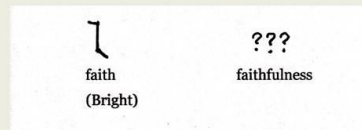


Photo: Kelly Rafey - Bodleian Library, Oxford

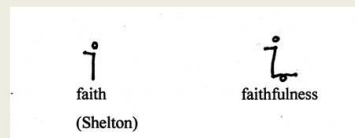
In his World War II era study of coded communication, *Secret and Urgent*,⁴ Fletcher Pratt offered a useful distinction between codes and ciphers. Early short-hand systems offer examples of both. The illustrations before us graphically depict the limitations of codes and the advantages of cipher. Here are the characters for “faith” in both a code and a cipher system. From the rules of Shelton’s cipher I can imagine a symbol for “faithfulness” – but what is the separate symbol for that in Bright’s code? I couldn’t find it in his book.

How short-writing worked

In the beginning: **codes** – separate symbols for every word



Improved methods: **ciphers** – separate marks for letters & sounds



Since both Bright’s *Characterie* and Peter Bales *The Art of Brachygraphy* (1597) relied on codes, they required users to memorize extensive sets of symbols. This extract from Bright’s handbook illustrates the complexity of a code-based system.

⁴ Fletcher Pratt, *Secret and Urgent* (Garden City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1942), 13.

Code confusion

Plead.	Raigne.	S	Sparkes.
Pledge.	Rebuke.	Salute.	Speake.
Poynt.	Rechc.	Sauce.	Spice.
Possible.	Recouer.	Scarce.	Spitt.
Power.	Reade.	Schoole.	Springe.
Pray.	Redy.	Sclaunder.	Staye.
Praife.	Region.	See.	Start.
Preach.	Reioyce.	Seede.	Steppe.
Prauidice.	Religion.	Seeme.	Steward.
Prepare.	Remember.	Sence.	Stone.
Present.	Repe.	Shine.	Strayne.
Pretende.	Repent.	Shippe.	Stronge.
Preuayle.	Reson.	Shoote.	Sturdy.
Preuent.	Resoluc.	Side.	Stuffe.
Pricke.	Rest.	Sinke.	Stumble.
Prince.	Restore.	Sitt.	Substance.
Promis.	Rewarde.	Skill.	Such.
Prophecy.	Reuenge.	Slippe.	Sweete.
Proportion.	Reuile.	Smatter.	Swell.
Proper.	Richc.	Smoke.	Surfet.
Proue.	Right.		Sunne.
Pulpet.	Ripe.		
Punish.	Robbe.		

Bright, *Characterie* - 1588

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, functioned as ciphers. Even though their inventors and promoters capitalized 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 work phonetically. They all 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 "c" had a hard or soft sound. Vowels were usually omitted, but were indicated by the various positions around key consonants where the next consonant would be placed. (More about that shortly.) 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 strongly emphasized the crucial need to learn a system's alphabet cold.

“Great letters” – John Willis – 1602

A	^	H	°	O	⸮	V	∨
B	∩	I	∞	P	/	W)
C		J	>	Q	⸮	X	∞
D	⌈	K	⌈	R	—	Y	⸮
E	<	L	∩	S		Z	z
F	⌋	M	u	T	c		
G	⌋	N	\	U	⸮		

Here is Shelton’s earlier alphabet. You’ll notice “i” and “j” are the same, as are “u” and “v.”

Another alphabet – Thomas Shelton – 1626

A	^	H	<	O	⸮	V	∨
B		I	⌋	P	⸮	W	↓
C	⌈	J	⌋	Q	q	X	x
D	/	K	^	R	r	Y	y
E	⸮	L	∩	S	p	Z	z
F	⌈	M	\	T	/	CH	>
G	q	N	—	U	∨	<u>SH</u>	⸮
						TH	°

I mentioned the techniques for indicating vowels through the placement of consonants. Consonants following the initial sound were to be located at fixed positions adjoining the initial “great letter” to signify the intervening vowel. The schemata before us show how that worked. (I do wonder how the Jeremiah Rich system avoided a place for “e.”)

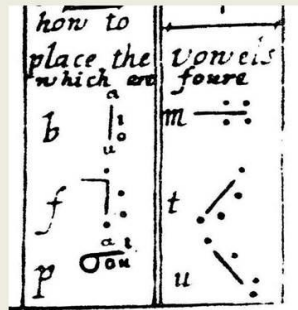
“How to place the vowels”

Vertical Signs	Horizontal Signs
i o	i o u
e u	e a
a —	

John Willis - 1602

Vertical Signs	Horizontal Signs
a	a e
e	u o i
i	
o	
u	

Thomas Shelton - 1659



Jeremiah Rich - 1690

For example, in the John Willis system, a sign for “t” placed at the lower left of an initial “b,” would spell “bat.” This chart shows how other single syllable words beginning with “b” and ending in “T” would be written. The subtleties of this system meant that the sentence, “Her smile was appealing,” could be “virtually indistinguishable” from “Her smell was appalling.”⁵ 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” (which was the original Indian name for New Haven) “is monstrous to behold.”⁶

Roger Williams, who was trained as a protégé of Chief Justice Coke, used this system for notes which have recently been deciphered by Lin Fisher and colleagues at Brown University in Rhode Island, and published in *Decoding Roger Williams* (2014), from which this illustration comes. Samuel Pepys and Sir Isaac Newton of England, and Michael Wigglesworth and Thomas Jefferson of America, all used Shelton’s system.

⁵ Linford D. Fisher, et al., *Decoding Roger Williams: The Lost Essay of Rhode Island’s Founding Father* (Waco: Baylor, 2014), 8.

⁶ Douglas H. Shepard, “The Wolcott Shorthand Notebook Transcribed.” Ph.D. diss., State University of Iowa, 1957, 5



FIGURE 5
Shorthand vowel example. Different spatial arrangements of shorthand symbols correspond to different intervening vowels.

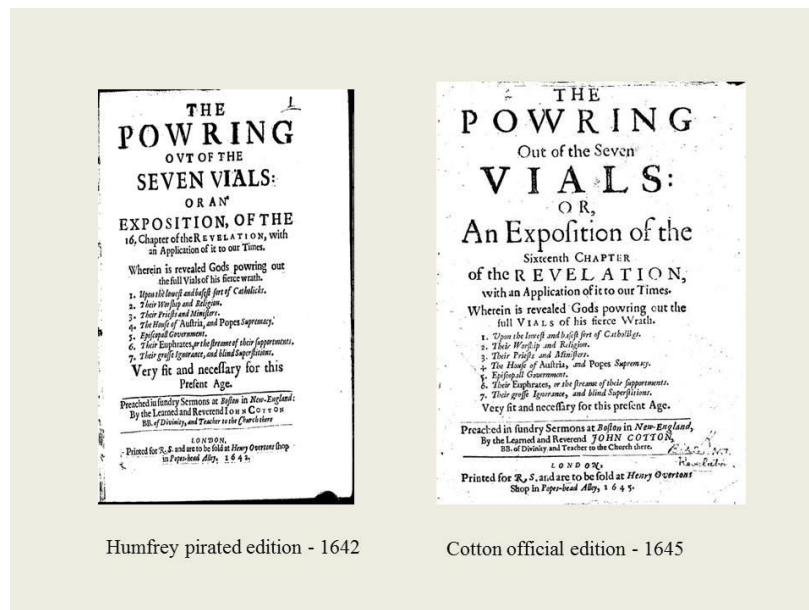
from Lin Fisher, et al.,
Decoding Roger Williams (2014)

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.”⁷

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, anonymously sourced, unreviewed by the preacher, frequently riddled with errors, could be rushed into print. And that 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 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.⁸ He also felt obliged to publish his own corrected edition three years later. Interestingly, it was issued with an almost identical title page – and was issued by the same publisher!

⁷ Peter Bales, *The Art of Brachygraphy* (1597), Cr.

⁸ Winthrop, *The Journal John Winthrop, 1630–1649*. Edited by Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 208. David D. Hall, *Ways of Writing*, 81.



Humfrey pirated edition - 1642

Cotton official edition - 1645

We can 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.⁹ But Miller confined his study to printed sermons, produced in bulk for special community occasions, such as elections, when the preacher was addressing a civic situation. Subsequently, Harry Stout came to another conclusion in his study of *The New England Soul*.¹⁰ Stout turned to sermon manuscripts, where he discovered a very different tone in the “sequence of salvation” topics of week by week preaching to congregations. But there is a third 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 short-writing – what they heard sitting on the benches or in the pews.

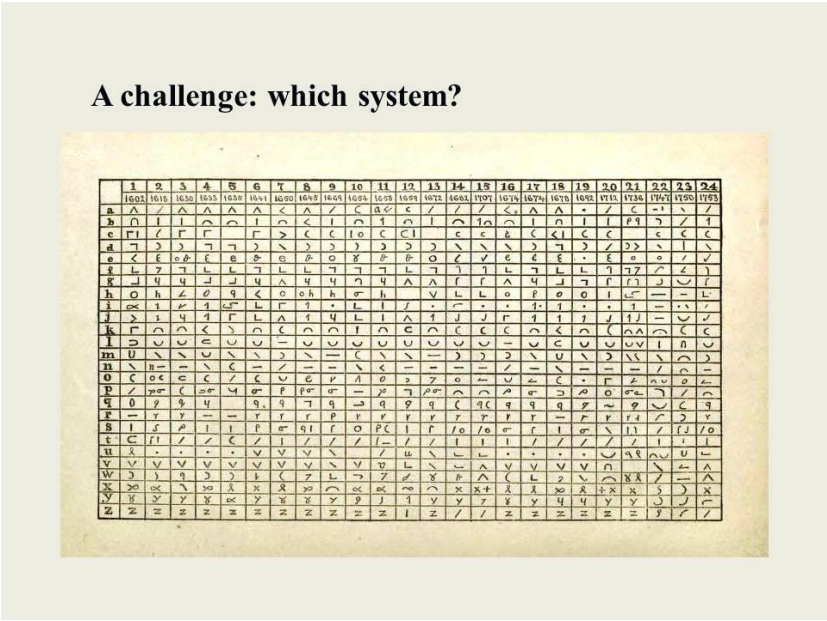
A twenty-first century reader of this material faces several challenges. Those challenges are probably why so much remains unread. One challenge is identifying the system in use. Was it John Willis – or Edmond Willis? Was it the earlier Thomas Shelton – or the later Thomas Shelton – or even Samuel Shelton? In 1877 William Upham delineated an incredible 48 different short-writing alphabets.¹¹ Here are 24.

⁹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953; reprint Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 27-39.

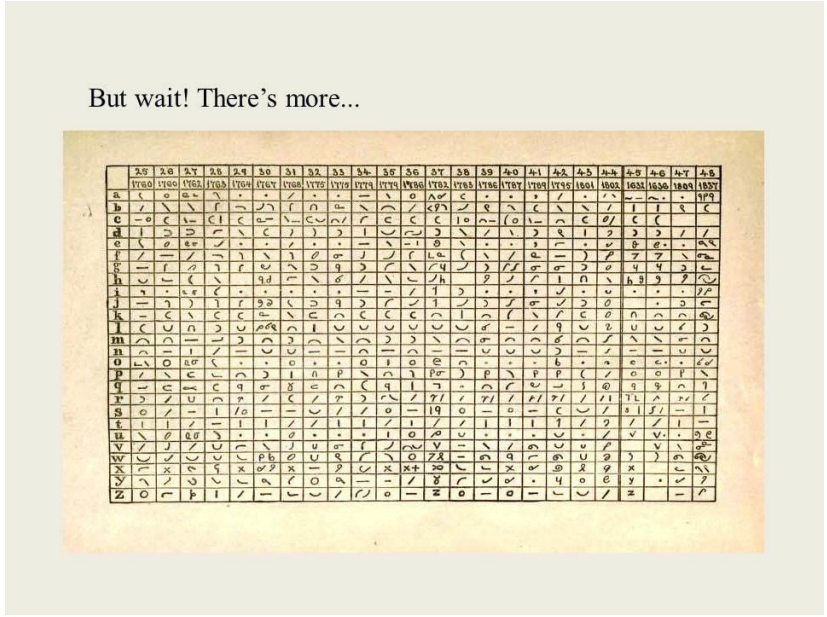
¹⁰ Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Upham, *Stenography*, 46-47.

A challenge: which system?



And... here's another 24!



But wait! There's more...

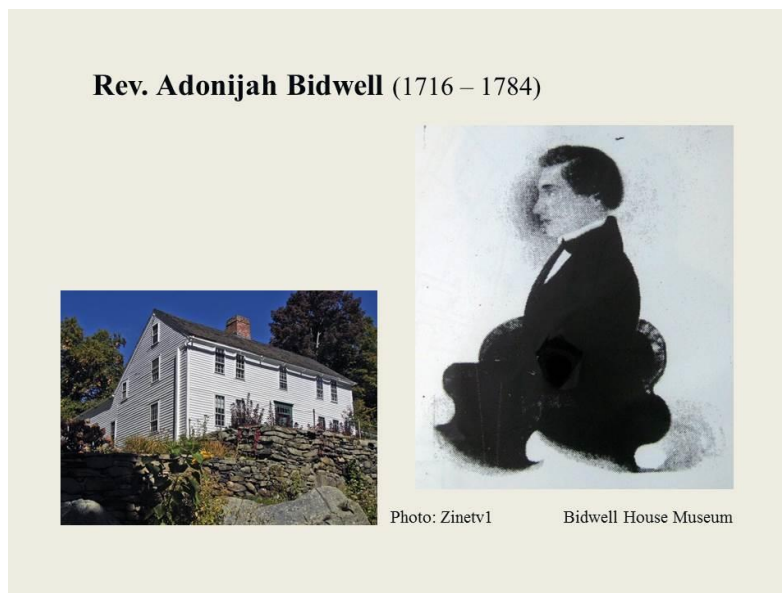
Variations may seem quite slight, with the same symbols frequently used for different letters. For instance, many systems used lambdas for one of the letters. In nine of them a lambda represented "a." But others used lambda for "g" or "j" (the same sound), "o," or "w." In seventeen a straight up-and-down line stood for "t." But in ten that meant "b," and in others "d," or "j." You simply had to know what the character meant in the system you were using.

Another challenge is, 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 I want to encourage transcriptions, not discourage them! So let me report on my successful experiences deciphering and decoding the notes of two persons who used short-writing to one degree or another in New England, one a clergyman in the 18th century, the other a teenager in the 17th century.

REV. ADONIJAH BIDWELL (1716 – 1784)

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 was born at Hartford, Connecticut, educated at Yale College, and served in ministry at Monterey in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts. That placed him just a few miles from the particularly prominent theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), after Edwards left Northampton for the Indian mission town of Stockbridge, where he served from 1751 to 1757. The historian John Demos has asked why there is no Edwards correspondence involving his neighbor Bidwell, nor any mention of Bidwell in any of Edwards' papers?



Bidwell adapted Thomas Shelton's second, later system, from 1659, called *Zeiglographia* – number 16 of the 48 versions I showed you.



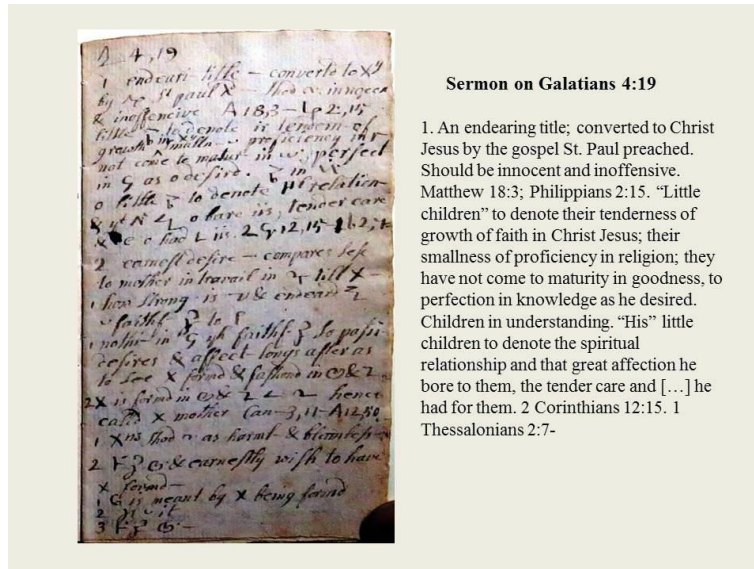
Bidwell tended to record the opening symbols only, rather than completed shorthand words. So the same symbol could stand for several possible words beginning with the same sound (though the meaning usually becomes clear from the context). An example is the “Pr” symbol, meaning in Bidwell’s usage any word beginning with “pr” – “Proverbs,” “prince,” “principle,” “providence,” “proof,” and so forth.

Bidwell characters

3	in	∩	of, our, own
⌊	iniquity, ignorance	P	Peter, Paul, power
⌋	issues	⊂	please, place
5	Jeremiah, judges, judgment, justly, justify	⊄	Proverbs, prince, principle, providence, proof
⊂	Jesus	∩	reason
⌋	justice, justify, justly	⌋	Revelation, righteous, religion
9	Kings, know, knowledge	⌋	sacrifice
		∩	said

Here 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...” This manuscript is held at the Bidwell House Museum. Other of his 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 19 pages or so. Beginning on the third page, Bidwell’s message very closely tracks

chapter one of Henry Scougal’s 1677 volume, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*.¹² I found that other Bidwell sermon notes are copied out of books by William Burkitt, Matthew Poole, Isaac Watts, and Matthew Henry, and I have to admit that that discovery made it much, much easier to transcribe his notes! (It is amazing what Google can reveal.) I believe we can now answer John Demos’ question. Jonathan Edwards had as little to do with his neighbor Adonijah Bidwell as he possibly could because Bidwell was not very original. Indeed, he borrowed heavily from scholars of a previous generation. The fact that he did not identify his sources by name, neither for his notes for reading nor for preaching, raises a serious question, in my opinion. (I suppose plagiarism is another application of technology – but not one I’d like to celebrate!)




Here’s a page from another Bidwell sermon. The text is I Peter 5:8: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:” One possible inquiry regarding Bidwell could proceed by exploring how some of his manuscripts developed over time and how they may relate to political events leading up to and throughout the American Revolutionary War. Bidwell supported the revolution. Did his rhetoric mirror those commitments? I find his extensive notes for a sermon on 1 Peter 5:8 instructive at this point. The manuscript bears two dates, 1754 (pre-war) and 1774 (the year the first Continental Congress met to deal with what were called the “Intolerable Acts” of Parliament). I’ve come to call that manuscript the “Angels and Devils” sermon. Observations Bidwell interspersed in his older hand can be readily distinguished from his original notes. So, in this example, Bidwell has added a section, in the lower part of the page, about doing battle with the devil. “Resist,” he said, “i.e., comply not with his motions and temptations.... You can’t be conquered so long as you do not consent.” (The last line on the page). 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

¹² Henry Scougal (1650-1678), *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)

taken captive; [we] never get rid of him but by resisting. If we parley and treat we must expect to be triumphed over and trampled.” Fighting words! As part of his manuscript for the 1774 presentation of this sermon, can these words be correlated with the looming American Revolution, I wonder?

Sermon on I Peter 5:8




“You can’t be conquered so long as you do not consent.”

The image shows a handwritten manuscript page with a list of notes and a quote. The notes are numbered 1 through 7 and describe various properties of the devil. The quote is at the bottom of the page.

JOHN PYNCHON (1625? – 1703)

My second example is John Pynchon (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 as a ten- to twelve-year-old child when his father William Pynchon founded the settlement in 1636.

John Pynchon (1625? – 1703)

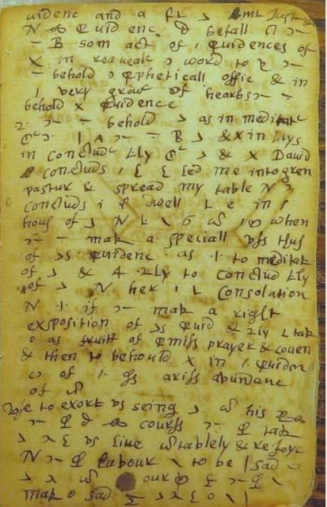


Pynchon Point,
Agawam (Westfield) and
Connecticut Rivers

The image shows a photograph of a riverbank with trees and a log. The text is centered above the image.

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. Here is a page from one of his manuscripts. He

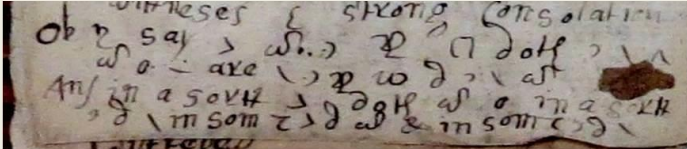
created complete sentences by interspersing symbols of his own invention among longhand words as he wrote while the minister preached. John practiced what Meredith Neumann, in her important book *Jeremiah's Scribes*, calls “aural auditing.”¹³ He wrote what he heard. His misspellings reveal words he must not have understood – as well as the Yorkshire accent of the minister.



February 23, 1640

Now here is for consolation: Now first, if we make a right exposition of God's providences, and secondly, [if we] will take them as fruit of promises, prayer and covenant and then to behold Christ in these providences—out of these things arises abundance of comfort. Use to exhort us: seeing God comforts his people, what we should do, what courses we should take. God would have us live comfortably and rejoice. Now we should labor not to be so sad, because God would comfort our hearts. We should not make others sad when God would have them not so.

You can see here the obvious economy of short-writing. Coding 33 of these 49 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.

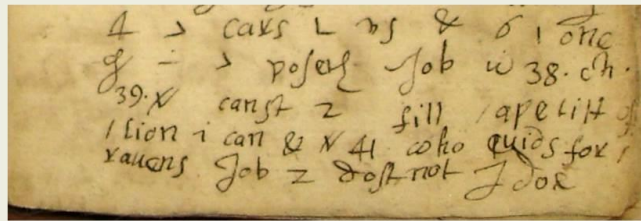


“Objection: you say God comforts his people. But doth he not also comfort those that are not his people? Why doth he not comfort [all]?”
 Answer: In a sort God doth comfort them; in a sort he doth not. In some regards God doth comfort and in some regards he doth not.”

¹³ Meredith M. Neuman, *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Decoding requires finding some starting point. My first breakthrough came with this section. 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’s a matter of noticing things – repeated patterns, sequences, connections that haven’t been identified before.

A first breakthrough:



...then God cares for us. And this is one thing that God poseth Job with, 38 ch., 39 v., “Canst thou fill the appetite of the lion? I can,” and v. 41, “Who provides for the ravens? Job, thou dost not. I do.”

Here’s 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 alone.

Some symbols

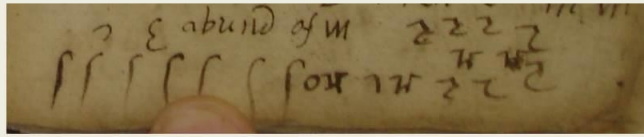
JOHN PYNCHON - SHORT WRITING SYMBOLS (1640)

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

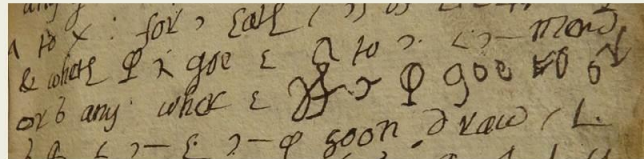
I discovered some fun peculiarities here and there in John’s notes. There are instances of pen tests and attempts at fancy writing. There’s one place where I think John must have been trying to write with his non-dominant hand. See the squiggly symbols towards the right in the middle line! [“Can we mend ourselves anywhere else? *If we should go to ourselves*, what can we have?”]

Some peculiarities:

pen tests and fancy lettering



writing with non-dominant hand - December 27, 1640



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 that I have to wonder if 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.

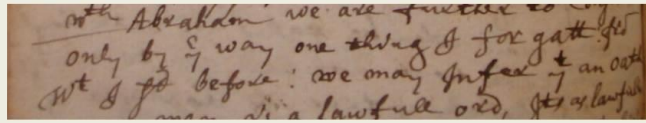
**one too many ales
for lunch?**

afternoon --->
June 3, 1649



And here's my favorite. On July 8, 1649, Pynchon carefully wrote – and Moxon must have said – “Only, by the way, one thing I forgot from what I said before. . .” (He wrote it all down!) I believe this extraordinary scrupulousness verifies John's reliability as a notetaker.

“– Only, by the way, one thing I forgot from what I said before: we may infer . . .”



I believe as well that in addition to the testimony historic sermons offer regarding the theological essentials of their eras, there's a lot more 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. And when we “read backwards” in this way, we'll find 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.

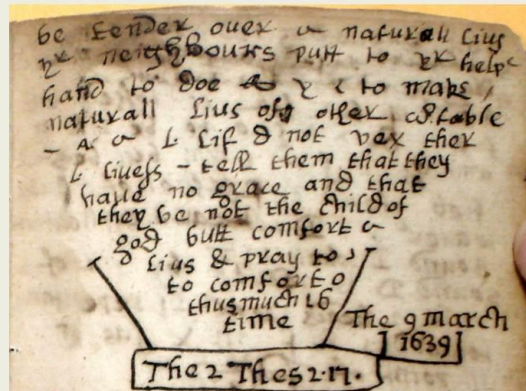
John's notes are so complete they can be reconfigured as sermons. I was able to transcribe his notes, punctuate them, and turn them into a book, the title of which is *Good and Comfortable Words: The Coded Sermon Notes of John Pynchon and the Frontier Preaching Ministry of George Moxon* (2017). Moxon's message from March 2, 1640 has even been recorded by Steven Hirst, an actor from Hebdon Bridge in Yorkshire.



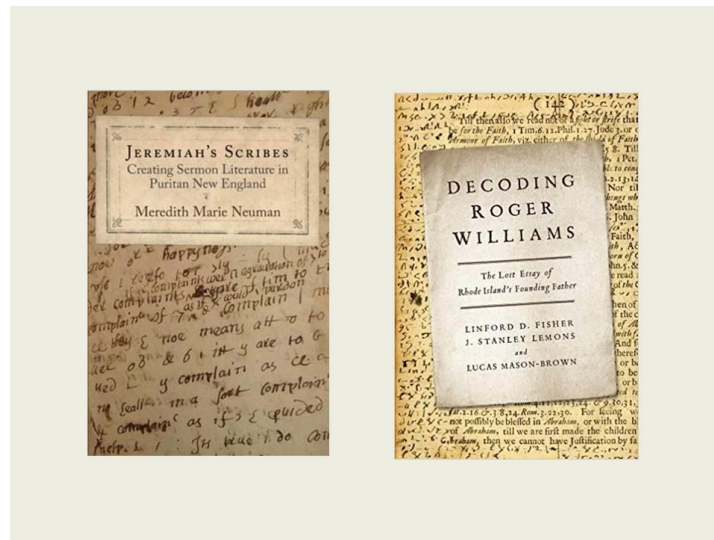
Steven Hirst as "George Moxon"

That 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.”



Here are the covers of two of the recent resources I mentioned. (You’ll notice a certain family resemblance among books on these subjects!)



And the cover of my transcription of John Pynchon's notes:

