


Writing with a quill pen

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A reenactor demonstrates how American colonists wrote, using dip pens and ink.

Video:  Writing with a quill pen

Duration: 3:35

Transcript:

Video Transcript

(00:02)

I'm going to demonstrate writing with a quill pen, and the quill pens that they were most commonly using were made from goose feathers. And these have been used since the 7th century, so they've been used for well over a thousand years. And since most people were right-handed, the most preferred feather from the bird would have been the flight feathers of the left side, since they would give us this nice curve for right-handers. And how you would do this is you would have to cut the hollow-point tip about an inch up, give it a nice point, and then give it a slit down the middle so the ink will be able to run down. And it would take a lot of practice, and most people would not know how to read or write in North Carolina in Colonial times, only about two out of every ten people, because education was very expensive, and they could not really afford to send children off to school to learn their reading and writing. So this is where your most learned professionals, your lawyers, your politicians, and of course military officers.

(00:48)

And you would keep your ink in wells. The ink that I'm using today is an imported ink from India. For local inks you could use berries, you could also use black walnuts. You put the tip of the feather in the ink, give a tap on the side, then you have to use a very light, smooth and even strokes as you write across.

(01:25)

And you can only get about three to six words out each dip. So you can imagine how long it would take to write a long letter to your correspondents. You have to go back every two or three words sometimes just to get finished. Then of course when you're finished, these very important gentlemen would be sending important information — a lot of sensitive materials — so they would need to make sure no one would get into their letters that they were writing. And so one way they had to seal them, is they would use these wafers. And it's like a wax candle: It has a wick at the end, and you would burn it, and you'd let the wax drip. And it would drip on the paper, and then a lot of gentlemen had their own stamp and seal. The one I'm using today has the symbol of the eagle, of course we use for American freedom. If you're still loyal to King George, you would probably have the crown, and some very important gentlemen have their initials or namesakes, and they would keep them on a ring, so when they were done, they would just stamp it. Let the wax cool, it would harden, and you'd have a sealed letter.

(02:18)

Also, of course, working with this ink, there's going to be a lot of mistakes made, and paper and all this stuff would be very expensive, and to dry the ink a lot of times for blotches they would keep a lot of sand with them. And what you would do is you would just sprinkle sand all over the document when you were done, it would soak up a lot of the extra ink, then you just shake, of course, the sand off, again, you're done.

(02:37)

And what's good about most of this writing stuff here is that people have to travel a lot so all this stuff can go all right back in my lap desk and it's very light, doesn't take up a lot of space, so I can travel with in anywhere I need, and if I don't have a table like I do today then it just sits in my lap, and then I can sit there and use it as my desk.

(02:52)

And a couple other instruments that were used later on were a couple of these different style pens. This right here is glass stylus, it's made from all glass, it's very smooth in writing with, and it's also very, very expensive and very rare. Also what was very popular were the metal-tipped pens, and this one here is a brass. And what's good about this is they have interchangeable tips. Everyone has different writing styles, so according to your writing style you could have a different tip; a longer one, a shorter one, a wider one, or skinnier one. And what's also great about these two is they use a lot less ink. You can get about two or three sentences out of just one dip as opposed to, again, just three or four words with the quill pen. Again, all this can fit right here in this box, and can be taken with you.

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