

Transcribing Colonial Text

These instructions will help you transcribe the 2-page handwritten documents related to “Murphy Rape” in the Week 3B readings. **Yes, it looks impossible — but it isn’t!** If you follow these instructions, you will be surprised at how much you can transcribe.

***Learning Goal:** To gain experience with handwritten historical manuscripts. To compare men’s and women’s presentations of sexual assault in early America.*

Tips for Decoding Handwritten Colonial Documents

These are the kind of documents that historians regularly deal with when writing colonial history. They are hard to read, the penmanship is bad, the words are unfamiliar, the spelling is random. Some strategies:

- Go word-by-word, write each word down. Leave blank spaces for unknown words and letters, or ?? for guessed words.
- If you can't figure out a word, try to figure out individual letters and leave blanks for the letters you don't know. Once you write down a group of letters, you may be able to figure out the rest of the word.
- If you can't figure out a word at all, leave a _____ in the sentence. When you read the sentence over, you may be able to figure out the unknown word from the context.
- Find similar letters other places in the document to compare to letters or words you can't decipher.
- After you write out your transcript, read it over and see if you can fill in any missing words.

Some Colonial Writing and Spelling Information:

- Colonial Americans abbreviated words with superscript: “said” = s^d and Thomas=Th^{os}.
- Colonial Americans also used older versions of common words: “yt”= that; “ye” = the; “sheweth” = showed, etc.
- Colonial Americans sometimes wrote “and” with an ampersand: &
- Colonial Americans often used what looks like an “f” where we would use an “s”: “Nakednefs”.

Remember, this is testimony from an attempted rape case. You are reading both a woman's accusation (Information of Mary Seller) and the statement of the accused man being questioned (*extra tip*: Q: and A: = Question and Answer). To get you started, here is the first line of the “Information of Mary Seller” Document:

To Tho[ma]s Foster Esq[ui]r[e] one of his majesties Justices' of the Peace for ye County of Plymouth...[good luck with the rest of it!](#)