

Readers Writing: The Curriculum of the Writing Schools of Eighteenth Century Boston

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Housed at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, is a collection of 188 single-page manuscripts penned between 1748 and 1782 by 117 boys at Boston's three eighteenth century writing schools. Because of reduplication, there are only 106 different texts on the 188 manuscripts. This collection formed the basis for a reconstruction of the form and content of the writing school curriculum. The source for two-thirds of the pieces longer than a single sentence was George Bickham's Universal Penman (1743). At a time when writing was equated with penmanship, school progress was measured in terms of mastering successive scripts, beginning with the round hand. The 106 different texts copied by the boys, when analyzed for their content, were found to portray the secularism, rationalism, optimism, and materialism of the eighteenth century.

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Writing instruction in colonial America barely figures in modern discussions of colonial education. Because formal schooling is only one aspect of education as broadly conceived by Lawrence Cremin in his *American Education: The Colonial Experience*, writing instruction receives merely a brief mention there (1970, pp. 185, 503-4). A publication on colonial writing by the late Ray Nash, who was by far our greatest authority on early penmanship, was only printed in a limited edition, and many good libraries do not own a copy (Nash, 1959). Moreover, only a handful of articles on colonial penmanship has appeared in journal articles over the past twenty years (e.g. Stryker-Rodda, 1980; Weiser, 1981; Yeandle, 1980).

Nonetheless, writing instruction offered at a writing school (which was often the living quarters of the writing master) was a landmark on the colonial educational landscape. Its importance in the eighteenth century may be gauged from the fact that there were three writing schools in Boston (itself a hub of educational activity), from 1720 on, when Boston's third writing school was opened. In contrast, Boston founded only two Latin grammar schools.

By focusing on manuscripts penned by boys in Boston's three writing schools, the present paper takes a close look at writing instruction in the eighteenth century, at least as it was offered in Boston. The paper seeks to reconstruct the curriculum of the Boston writing school, asking what was taught there and in what sequence. The essay begins with an overview of the sources used for the study, continues by setting the writing schools of Boston in their historical context, and closes by examining the extant products of the schools in some detail, both for their form and content.

Sources **A**n investigation into the curriculum of the Boston writing schools is possible because of the preservation of a remarkable collection of manuscripts penned at those schools, housed at Houghton Library, Harvard University.

The Houghton Library Penmanship Collection offers an unusual chance to see exactly what was occurring in the school setting. Textbooks are often used as bases for inferences on curricular matters,

but the inferences have to be based on various assumptions that we can never quite prove: that the textbook was read in its entirety, for example. Here, with the boys' own work, we have a window onto the actual products of school instruction. This collection formed the major basis for my inferences on the curriculum, and is discussed in detail below.

Writing at a Boston writing school is also mentioned in a schoolgirl's diary: Anna Green Winslow attended the South Writing School in 1771 at the age of eleven, as a private pupil (Earle, 1970). Additional sources were a reminiscence by Daniel Colesworthy, whose father was taught by John Tileston at the North Writing School (Colesworthy, 1887), Robert Seybolt's collection of primary source material on Boston schoolmasters (Seybolt, 1928), and the Boston colonial town records (Boston, 1881, 1885, 1886).



The Historical Context **W**riting instruction in the colonial period was virtually synonymous with penmanship instruction (Monaghan and Saul, 1987, p. 88). Clear penmanship, which was one of the aims of this instruction, was a career skill. At a period when reading and writing were still being taught separately (Monaghan, 1988), someone who worked the land may have been able to read, but did not need to know how to write. In contrast, a boy who planned on pursuing a ministerial career needed to be fully literate. But writing was also an essential commercial skill, useful in any activity that required record-keeping and accounting.

The gender bias implicit in the word “penmanship” is no accident: men were responsible for teaching writing. Women, on the other hand, were considered qualified to teach reading, which was patently believed by colonial Americans to be the easier of the two literacy skills to impart (Monaghan, 1988). Those who were responsible for teaching the young at Boston's writing schools were all male (Seybolt, 1928).

Boston early became famous for its town-funded educational system — for which only boys were eligible. It solicited the services of its first schoolmaster in 1635, only seven months after the town records begin. (According to Nash, the master concerned was a professional scrivener [1959, p.9].) Boston's first free Latin grammar school was opened the following year, and a second free grammar school (called the North Grammar School) was added in 1712 (Seybolt, 1928, p. 135). At them, boys were taught Latin, Greek, and even some Hebrew (Middlekauf, 1963).

The responsibilities of the grammar schoolmaster, however, did not,

ideally, include writing instruction. This was a specialty for which a different kind of training was required — an apprenticeship to a writing master. So the town, in 1666, employed a Daniel Hinchman to assist the grammar schoolmaster and to “teach Childere to wright” (Boston, 1881, p. 30).

Throughout the colonial period there were also private writing masters in Boston. Between 1636 and 1776 we know of twenty men who taught writing there privately (Seybolt, 1928). There were undoubtedly other writing instructors among the many additional private teachers whose specialty we do not know.

Samuel Granger was just one of many entrepreneurs in Boston who was given permission by the selectmen (the town’s executive committee) in 1720 to teach “writeing, Logick & Merchants Acco[un]ts” (Boston, 1885, p. 65). As Granger’s job description suggests, writing instruction was tied closely to arithmetic instruction (Cremin, 1970, p. 503). Until the 1680s, however, a Boston boy could only obtain these valuable commercial skills at the town’s expense if he were attending Boston’s one grammar school (which, as we have seen, made provisions for the teaching of writing). Then, in 1682, the townspeople of Boston decided that there should be an alternative to the college-oriented education of the grammar school, and asked the town to open and finance a writing school. Accordingly, the town voted that “one or more Free Schooles” should be devoted solely to the “teachinge of Children to write & Cypher [do arithmetic] within this towne” (Boston, 1881, p. 158).

Two years later, in 1684, the first writing master was hired by the town (Boston, 1881, p. 171). This first “free” writing school was later known as the Writing School in Queen Street, to distinguish it from the North Writing School, which opened in 1700. The second grammar school that opened in 1712 redressed the balance between academics and commerce, but the town put its final stamp of approval upon commercial education when the third and last writing school, known as the South Writing School, was created in 1720 (Nash, 1959, p. 8).

There were, then, by 1720, a total of five free schools offering two alternate forms of education in Boston. Both grammar and writing schools admitted boys only, at the age of seven. School attendance was required for six days a week, Sunday being the lone day off. The grammar school boys probably attended their own schools from seven to eleven, and again from one to four or five. From eleven to twelve, and from five to six, they would visit the writing school (Nash, 1959, p. 10). Those boys who attended the writing schools but

not the grammar schools were presumably there from early in the morning. Girls could only be taught by the town-funded writing masters as private pupils at times when the boys were not in school.

Students were supposed to know how to read before they entered the writing school. The writing schools did not, however, ignore reading instruction altogether: some more advanced reading instruction, or perhaps just practice, was offered there as well. In 1719, the year before the third and last writing school was opened, the town meeting issued a set of instructions to the writing masters, perhaps as an attempt to clarify the curriculum. Scholars were obliged to read, morning and evening, “A Portion of Gods Word,” and the masters were to be sure that “proper Seasons be Stated & Sett a part for the Encourageing of good Spelling.” In addition, the town required morning and evening prayers, and catechizing (teaching the boys the catechism) on Saturdays (Boston, 1885, p. 53).



Nonetheless, the writing master was not expected to stoop to offering elementary reading instruction. An incident involving John Proctor makes this clear. Proctor was master of the North Writing School from 1731 to 1743. In 1741, he was summoned before the selectmen to answer what seems to have been a parental complaint: he was accused of having refused to admit boys from “Families of low circumstances” to his school. Proctor replied that he had “refus’d none of the Inhabitants Children but such as could not read in the Psalter” (Boston, 1886, p. 288). This response seemed to be satisfactory, as it was reproduced in the selectmen’s report without apparently provoking adverse comment. (Obviously, the Psalter — the Book of Psalms — was serving as a kind of minimum competency test of reading ability, at a time when the reading curriculum entailed a primer, the Psalter, and then the Bible.)

The boys would remain in either the grammar or writing school until the age of fourteen or fifteen, when the grammar school boys would normally go on to Harvard College, while the graduates of the writing schools would look for a job in such fields as bookkeeping. At a time when all records were handwritten, there was plenty of opportunity for clerks in Boston, which remained a key port for the eastern seaboard throughout the entire colonial period. The writing school was also a preparation for a position higher than that of a clerk: an aspiring merchant might travel this route.

During the thirty-four year period from 1748 to 1782 covered by the Houghton Library penmanship collection, only nine writing masters taught at the three schools. The Writing School in Queen Street had two masters in charge simultaneously. Samuel Holyoke (who was

there from 1733 to 1767) was assisted in 1753 first by Samuel Holbrook, who resigned a year later, then by John Proctor Jr., son of the Proctor who had turned boys away from the North Writing School. Zechariah Hicks presided at the North Writing School from 1743 to 1761, whereupon he was succeeded by John Tileston. At the South Writing School, Abiah Holbrook Jr. was master from 1743 until his death in 1769. After a few unsatisfactory months under the tutelage of someone else, the school was entrusted to Abiah's brother Samuel, who taught there until 1775, when the disruption of daily life caused by the war caused him to leave Boston temporarily (Seybolt, 1928).

Abiah Holbrook Jr., born in 1718, is the most famous of all the Boston writing masters. A fifth generation American and the son of a keg-maker, he made his way rapidly through the town system. He was first apprenticed to, then usher (assistant) to John Proctor Sr. at the North Writing School, before succeeding to the mastership of the South School in 1743. His great treasure, bequeathed to Harvard College, is his "Writing Master's Amusement," a manuscript book exhibiting a dazzling array of old scripts (Nash, 1953). Each page features a huge letter of the alphabet, together with scriptural texts penned in black, blue, red and green, and enclosed in decorative borders.¹

John Tileston, at the North Writing School, taught there for an astonishing fifty-eight years, from 1761 to 1819. He was famous for his punishments. He had fallen into a fire as a child, and his right hand was crippled and disfigured as a result. However, it could still hold a quill pen. It had also lost all sensation. Tileston would use it, therefore, as Colesworthy remembered it, as an instrument of discipline "which would have done no discredit to the beak of a bald eagle" (Colesworthy, 1887, p. 45).

The writing instrument used in the schools was the quill pen (Daniels, 1980, p. 312). Tileston's diary reveals many occasions when the masters borrowed quill pens from each other, in quantities of one or two thousand at a time (Colesworthy, 1887, p. 72). With over two hundred boys at each school (we know, at least, that in 1755 there were two hundred and sixteen boys at the North, and two hundred and thirty-seven at the South Writing School [Nash, 1959, p. 16]), quill consumption was high. Pencils were, as discussed below, also used.

The Houghton Library Penmanship Collection **T**he collection of manuscripts from the three writing schools of eighteenth cen-

tury Boston is housed at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.² It consists of one hundred eighty-eight manuscripts, penned by one hundred and seventeen boys (if we can assume that the four unsigned manuscripts were each the product of a different boy). One outsized manuscript, signed Abiah Holbrook, is probably the work of the master of the South Writing School. The dates of the pieces range from 1748 to 1782. It is obviously a collection of the students' best work, which would have been exhibited to the town "Visitors" — representatives of the town of Boston who visited each school in June, at the end of the school year, to take a look at what the boys had been doing.



Even a cursory look at the collection reveals that fine penmanship (or what today we would call calligraphy) was the major focus of the exhibition. The boys' "pieces," penned on large single sheets of paper usually measuring at least eight by twelve inches, display a wide variety of what the eighteenth century called "hands" (scripts). These range from the eighteenth century business script known as the round hand, through round text (simply an outsize version of the round hand), to several gothic hands (those "old English" forms that are still familiar to us today from their appearance on newspaper mastheads or diplomas).

The range of talent displayed in the pieces is considerable. Some, clearly from the hands of relative beginners, present a one-line sentence repeated six times (as in figure 1). At the other end of the scale are pieces exhibiting seven or more different scripts (as in figure 6). Because the exhibition was also an opportunity for the writing master to display his skill, the master would contribute decorative elements (Nash, 1959, p. 16). One problem, therefore, is that of distinguishing the student's work from the master's — or perhaps the usher's — on any particular piece.

The actual content of the texts derived from various sources; a complete discussion of these lies beyond the scope of this paper. Many pieces were inspired by models in books on penmanship. None of these was a colonial product: all copybooks were imported from England.³ Writing masters would have no doubt owned several of these imported books on penmanship: Abiah Holbrook Jr., for one, had over twenty such books in his own personal collection (Nash, 1959, pp. 18-19). The Boston boys might have made their copies from pages in one of these books, but it is much more likely that their source was their master's own representation of a piece. In this connection, the unusually large size of Holbrook's own manuscript, his 1769 "A Wise man avoids," suggests that it was intended to be

a model.

A 1743 publication by George Bickham, *The Universal Penman*, was a major source of models for all three writing schools. Of the one hundred and six different *texts* (as opposed to the 188 individual pieces) in the collection, forty-six (43%) can be found in Bickham's book. Because so many of the texts appear more than once, the proportion of actual pieces is higher: one hundred and four out of one hundred and eighty-eight pieces (55%). If we subtract the twenty-five single-sentence pieces, the proportion of the collection that owes its content to Bickham's book rises to sixty-four per cent.⁴

The Universal Penman was a compilation of the work of the best penmen in England, who sent their model pieces to Bickham to engrave along with his own. It actually took Bickham eight years to complete the book, and he sent it to purchasers in parts over the years (Bickham, 1954, introd.). His book therefore reflects the 1730s as well as the 1740s: several pieces are dated in the 1730s. The impact of *The Universal Penman* on the Houghton Collection may be gauged from the figures: the texts of figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 can all be found in Bickham (*ibid.*, pp. 33, 19, 37, 78, 116).

Since copying was the prime learning technique, it is surprising that there are not more identical manuscripts. (As just noted, the collection consists of 106 different texts penned on 188 pieces.) Some seventy-four texts appear only once, seventeen appear twice, and the remaining fifteen texts are reduplicated from three to fourteen times (Appendix I). The most popular single text in the collection is the very complex showcase production, "A Wise man avoids..." (figure 6). (It does not appear in Bickham.) Yet despite the large number of pieces for which the wording is identical, no two penned by different boys are exactly alike. Youth's creativity, and the boys' inspired decorative swirls (or those of their master), render each manuscript unique.

Table 1.
Number and Percentage of Manuscripts by Decade

	Number	Percentage (rounded)
1740s	3	2
1750s	38	20
1760s	69	37
1770s	31	16
1780s	1	1
undated	46	24
Total	188	100

The authors of all but four of the one hundred and eighty-eight manuscripts have revealed themselves, usually by writing their names (both first and last names) followed by the Latin “scripsit” (“wrote this”). In addition, many boys also identified which school they belonged to, their age, and the date. The identification is by no means consistent, however, and the entire collection resembles, at first sight, a puzzle with far too many of the pieces missing.



Each of the three Boston writing schools is represented: there are ten manuscripts that indicate that they were penned at the Queen Street Writing School, twenty from the North Writing School, and fifty-nine from the South Writing School. The remaining ninety-nine do not include the name of their school. Some of the unidentified manuscripts may well have come from the North Writing School, as at least one name — that of Joseph Skillin — appears both as the author of a manuscript with no location and of one that names the North Writing School. But there is not enough evidence to do more than hazard a guess that many of the manuscripts giving no location may have been the products of the North Writing School.

There is much more evidence on the date at which these pieces were composed. All but forty-six manuscripts identify the year that they were written; three give us the month as well — May or June. (This supports the suggestion that these are exhibition pieces, displayed for the official June visitation.) The spread in years, however, is uneven.

In addition, forty boys reveal how old they were at the time that they completed a particular piece. The ages actually identified on the pieces range from John Molineux, who disclosed that he was nine (figure 2), to John Fenno, who declared himself to be fourteen. Fortunately, however, some boys (John Molineux, for example) reveal both their age *and* a date on at least one piece. From this, it is possible to infer dates and ages for their other compositions. The ascertainable age range then turns out to be from nine years to sixteen: John Fenno was the oldest at sixteen, when, in 1768, he penned his second version of “A Wise man avoids.”

For someone like myself, who was trying to figure out the order of the curriculum, the most helpful pieces were those that came from the hand of the same boy over a period of time. Out of the entire collection, fifteen boys contributed two pieces each, and another fifteen contributed three or more pieces. Of those who penned four or more, Benjamin Hurd did not identify the school he was attending when he completed four pieces in 1751 and 1752. John Allen wrote four undated pieces at the North Writing School. The other prolific writers

were all at the South Writing School. William Harris wrote five pieces in 1757 and 1759, and John Gray five in 1763, while Abiah Holbrook — a pupil with the same name as his master — penned five manuscripts between 1766 and 1770. John Molineux and Samuel Fenno were the authors of seven manuscripts each, all of them dated in the 1760s. Samuel's older brother John Fenno is represented in the collection by a handsome thirteen pieces, ranging from when he was twelve, in 1764, to sixteen years old, in 1768.

John Fenno's many works should in theory have offered the most insights. Ironically, they did not: he was just too good, too young. He was one of Abiah Holbrook Jr.'s star pupils, who in 1767, when he was fifteen years old, penned the title page for Holbrook's "Writing Master's Amusement." John's talent is confirmed by the fact that he went on to become an usher to Abiah's brother Samuel Holbrook in the South Writing School, probably when Samuel became master there upon Abiah's death in 1769 (Seybolt, 1928, pp. 148, 154-55).

Of all the boys, William Palfrey, author of only three pieces, and John Molineux proved to be the most helpful to my detective work. On June 17, 1748, William Palfrey completed his "Quiet minds commonly enjoy much Content," carefully copied six times from the model at the top of the page (figure 1). In 1751, he produced a none-too-well-written poem that began "Truth is the Band [sic] of Union." In 1754, he wrote the elaborate "A Wise man avoids" in a dazzling array of scripts (figure 6). The six years between William's first and last manuscript is the longest time span for any student represented in the collection. Thanks to William, we can tell that it could take a student that length of time to move from the most elementary of the pieces preserved in the collection to the most complex. William does not, however, reveal his age on any of his manuscripts, so we must look elsewhere for clues on that, and for the intermediate steps in the curriculum.

One approach to figuring out the sequence of penmanship instruction was to look at the difficulty of the pieces. It seemed logical to suppose that instruction would proceed from easy to difficult, from simpler scripts to more complex ones. It also seemed a fair guess that students would be taught one script at a time, and become fairly adept at that before they began another. The work of John Molineux, in particular, supports this hypothesis.

The Curriculum: General Comments **T**he boys used both pencil and ink to complete their copies. Pencil marks are clearly visible on the one unfinished piece in the collection as well as on

several others. Just as calligraphers usually do today, the students sketched the text in pencil before executing it in ink.

The rectangular manuscripts are positioned either horizontally or vertically. There seems to have been a progression: the beginner started with a horizontal text, which allowed his immature handwriting to extend the full length of the paper, as he copied a single sentence. At a certain point in the writer's education, the paper was turned upright so that he now had to fit his text into a narrower space. A poem was typically copied at this stage, perhaps partly because a poem fits easily onto a vertical page, as its lines are of similar length. Finally, the paper would be restored to its horizontal position. This time, however, the writer would be required to fit the text (now a set of pithy sentences) into small, carefully defined, geometric shapes: ovals or flattened octagons. The movement was toward ever greater control over spacing the material.

A couple of distinctions emerge that relate to the date at which a piece was penned. The early manuscripts are inclined to be decorated by birds (as in figure 1, dated 1748), the later by lines and decorative squiggles (as in figure 3, 1765). While the rule is not hard and fast (John Fenno, for instance, added birds to one of his versions of "A Wise man avoids," in 1767), there are twenty pieces displaying birds dated 1757 or earlier, as opposed to only three in the 1760s, two in the 1770s, and none on the sole 1780s piece. Moreover, the earlier manuscripts seem to favor horizontally-turned paper even for writing poems. William Palfrey's 1751 poem on "Truth," complete with birds, was one of these. My assumption, therefore, in the absence of a date, is that a poem on horizontally-turned paper, adorned with birds, was penned in the 1750s. There are, incidentally, no examples of birds gracing vertical paper, no doubt for the practical reason that birds take up room: there is not enough space for them as a border for a vertical page.

Another difference that emerges as time passes is in the use of color. More boys used red ink, in addition to black, than did not: it appears on one hundred and four manuscripts. There is a definite tendency for red ink to be used on the later pieces. Not one of the thirty-six manuscripts dated 1757 or earlier has red ink. It first appears on three out of five 1759 manuscripts. In the 1760s, however, only eleven of the dated pieces are *not* embellished with red, only two in the 1770s, and none in the 1780s. In addition, a third color, blue, occurs on eleven pieces penned by seven boys — one of whom was taught at the Queen Street School, while the others were all at the South Writing School. Two other manuscripts, again written by



South School boys, have gray or green. The earliest of the third color pieces is 1763. Here the influence of the master may be apparent: Abiah Holbrook Jr. was master during the time most of the pieces were penned, and his affection for color was pronounced. He used blue as well as red on his own outsized piece.

The sole Queen Street representative, William Read Miller, was allowed to use blue at the tender age of eleven. None of the South Writing School boys, however, was younger than thirteen when he first added blue. Moreover, John Gray penned “How to get riches” twice in 1763, but had a birthday between the two pieces, as he identifies himself as thirteen on one and fourteen on the other. It is the fourteen-year-old version that has the added blue ink. Similarly, John Fenno wrote the poem “Painting” in 1764 without blue, and again in 1765 with blue. It seems that being allowed to use a third color was a privilege, and perhaps an added motivation for repeating a piece.

Discovering the order of the curriculum is not made any easier by the fact that, as just noted, boys often executed the same piece twice. John Molineux, for instance, penned his piece “Virtue” twice in the same year. One gets the definite impression from John Fenno’s work that Holbrook ran out of texts to assign to him. Eight of Fenno’s manuscripts are two copies each of four different texts, including the “Writing Master’s Invitation” (1764 and 1766) and “A Wise man avoids” (1767 and 1768).

That these schoolboys’ manuscripts are so easy for us to read today is a tribute not only to the talent of their authors, but to the triumph of the eighteenth-century round hand. The “secretary” script of the seventeenth century had been routed by this new hand, which was the script of English commerce. Valued for its clarity, it was, on both sides of the Atlantic, the form taught as a “good clerkly hand” (Whalley, 1982, p. 243). As Britain’s commerce became supreme, the English round hand was adopted by other European countries, along with England’s trade practices (Nesbitt, 1957, p. 114).

The boys’ writing displays features that are characteristic of the period: capitalized nouns, certain abbreviations (such as “acco:ts), the use of “ye” for “the,” and of course the f-like *s* in the middle of words or as the first of a repeated *s*.

The Curriculum: Form **S**tudents at the three writing schools progressed in their studies, it appears, by systematically mastering one script after another as they copied and recopied models set for them by their masters. Interestingly, while so many of the texts they

reproduced can be found verbatim in Bickham's 1743 *Universal Penman*, and while the layout is almost always the same, the scripts they used are not necessarily identical to those in Bickham. The Boston boys' versions of "The Writing Master's Invitation," for example, look at first glance as if they are perfect copies of the piece penned by the writing master Joseph Champion and engraved by Bickham (figure 4.). On each manuscript, however, the Bostonians have used round hand in place of the Italian hand in Champion's model. This lends support to the assumption that boys were copying a model adapted by their masters from *The Universal Penman* or some other penmanship book rather than from the book itself.

The stages below are inferred from the evidence. When students' ages are documented for a particular piece or group of pieces, a median age is provided, along with a note on the number of manuscripts from which this information has been derived. Ages given in square brackets are estimates. The age at which students began to learn a new script would in any case vary with their individual skill. The nomenclature used for the scripts has been borrowed (from Bickham 1954, pp.210-11.)

While the manuscripts reproduced in figures 1 to 6 were in reality penned by three different boys, they may be viewed as representing the developmental stages in the acquisition of penmanship of a single boy, over the course of some six years.



First Script: Round Hand **O**ut of forty-nine manuscripts written in round hand alone, only two mention their authors' ages. None of the twenty-five one-sentence pieces discloses an age.

I: One Sentence. [Ages 7-8].

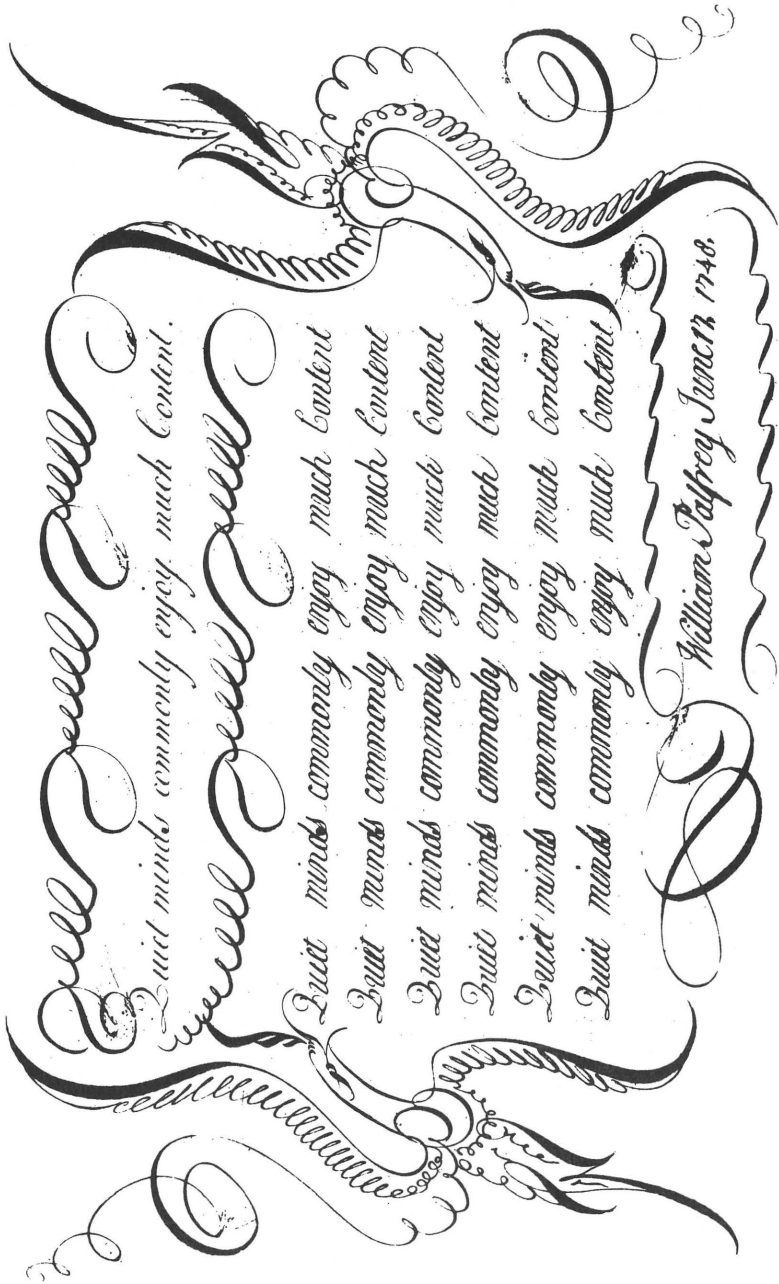
Figure 1. "Quiet minds commonly enjoy much Content."

This is plainly one of those beginner's pieces on which the student copied six times (or, more rarely, four times) a sentence set for him by the master. Here, in William Palfrey's contribution of 1748, there is a marked contrast between William's immature handwriting and the skilled penmanship of his master at the top of the page. If William penned his 1754 "A Wise man avoids," at the age of thirteen or fourteen (see below), he would have been seven or eight years old when he penned "Quiet minds."

There are some two dozen pieces in the collection similar to William's early effort, and none is later than 1757. All of them have decorative elements extraneous to the words: many of these, as in William's case, represent birds. These "strikings" and "flourishes," as they were called, display a virtuosity far in excess of any then available to young William, and were undoubtedly penned by the master himself. They seem to indicate a graceful way for the master to add elegance and luster to a fairly elementary contribution.

Figure 1.

Quiet minds commonly enjoy much Content. William Palfrey, June 17, 1748.



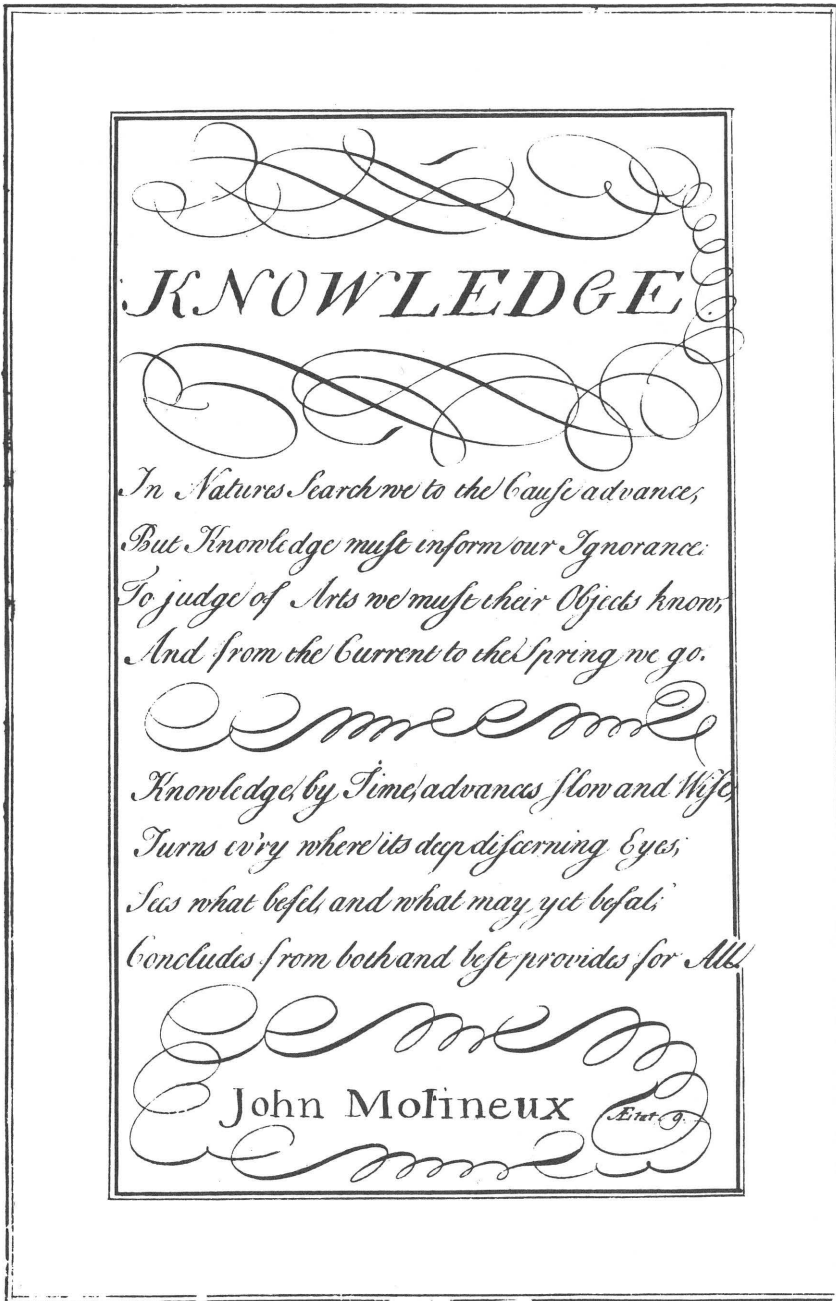
II: Paragraph or Poem. [Ages 9-10].

Figure 2. “Knowledge.” The next progression was for the learner to write an entire text, usually a poem, in round hand. John Molineux, aged nine in 1763, is our example: he was one of the two authors of the round-hand only group of pieces to reveal his age. The other author was eleven. The title of his “Knowledge” and his signature are in red. His uneasy signature, in a script known as “roman print,” is an example of a foray into a second script that did not entail genuinely mastering it. So, too, is his title in “italic print.”

We also gain, from John’s work, a glimpse of the order of composition. It is clear that the words were penned before the enclosing lines were inked in. We can see, in John’s text, the logic behind this sequence: on the bottom right-hand side, his words have overflowed his margin. If he had inked in the line first, he would have been in trouble. As it is, he simply left a gap, and continued his ruling below the words.

Figure 2.

Knowledge. John Molineux, [1763], age 9 [South Writing School].



Second Script: Gothic I (German Text). [Ages 11-12]. Documented median age for 21 two-script pieces: 12. Age range: 10-15.

Figure 3. "Virtue." The next stage was to add another script. About fifty pieces in the collection are written in two scripts, and they range in date from 1753 to 1782. Of these, twenty-one reveal the age of their authors: a span from ten to fifteen years old, with a median age of twelve. In virtually every case, the new script is the gothic script named "German text." John Molineux is again our example. His production at the age of eleven, in 1765, on the topic of "Virtue," clearly displays the new gothic script (penned in red ink) that he has added to his repertoire. Note that his signature is now in a capitalized italic (italic print).

Third Script: Roman Print or Italic Print [Age 13]. Documented median age for this piece from 5 pieces out of 5: 13. Age range: 12-14.

Figure 4. “The Writing Master’s Invitation.” The next step was to add yet another script. At the age of thirteen, John penned a classic piece, “The Writing Master’s Invitation and Instruction.” His new script, again penned in red, is the roman print that he had essayed at the age of nine as a signature. His round hand is now smaller and more mature. Here his signature is in italic, as in the previous piece.

Despite the showy quality of “The Writing Master’s Invitation,” it was less demanding, technically, than it appears at first sight. The only gothic letters are in the wording of the title and the “Labor Omnia Vincit” (“Work conquers all”); otherwise the piece is in round hand or a fairly straightforward roman. As noted earlier, there are five examples of this in the collection. Of these, four are from John Molineux’s school, the South Writing School, and the fifth from the North. In three of the four South School examples, the decorative element at the top of the page is the beautifully executed quill pen seen on John’s manuscript. If this is not the work of Abiah Holbrook Jr., but of John himself — and indeed, there are some telltale smudges on the strikings at the bottom of the page — it nonetheless shows the influence of a particular school and schoolmaster.

Another three-script piece (although it could also be performed in two) was the popular “Reputation and the Credit of the Merchant.” The bulk of its text was confined to two squashed octagonals, set one above the other, into which the students placed the words. Its popularity may have stemmed in part from these geometric shapes. It must have been useful practice for the showcase pieces like “A Wise man avoids,” where the wording had to be fitted into numerous geometric shapes.

Fourth Script: Italic Print or Roman Print [Age 13].

Figure 4.

The Writing Master's Invitation and Instruction. John Molineux, [age 13], 1767, South Writing School.

THE
Writing Master's
INVITATION AND INSTRUCTION.

*Come Youths thus charming & Sight behold!
With Sward & Scepter a Pair of Gold!
If you would win this glorious Prize,
To us your Master shall unfold:
All you from Scarcers & Misters grown
Make both the Sward & Gold your own.*

*Come listen Youths and I'll display
To this rare Art a certain Way.
He that in Writing would improve,
Must first with Writing fall in Love
For true Love for true Pens will call,
And that's the Charm that conquers all.*

*Three Things bear mighty Sway wth Men
The Sward the Sceptre and the PEN*

*Who can the least of these command
In the first Rank of Fame shall stand*

Sabor Omnia Vincit.

JOHN MOLINEUX Scripsit 13^o School 1767.

Fifth Script: Gothic II

(Old English Print). [Ages 13-14].

Documented median age for this piece from 4 pieces out of 7: 13 1/2. Age range: 12 1/2-15.

Figure 5. "Fame." The piece reproduced here, an undated work penned by Joseph Russell at the age of twelve and a half, was probably executed in the late 1750s or early 1760s: the decoration looks a little fussy, and there is no red ink. (By giving his age with such precision, Joseph may have been pointing out to his audience that he was unusually young to have produced such a piece.) His contribution is chosen for its very clear presentation of the two kinds of gothic, which to the uninformed eye could pass as the same script. The easiest way to distinguish them is to look at the lower case *a*. The first gothic learned, in the center of the page, is the German text used by John Molineux in his "Virtue": it has a "manuscript" *a*. The second gothic script, old English print at the top of the page, has a lowercase *a* that looks like a modern printed *a*. The capital *F*'s in "A scanty Fortune clips the Wings of Fame" (the top line), are also noticeably more elaborate than the *F* in "Fame due to vast Deserts ..." (the middle line). (The fact that the letters in old English print are formed almost entirely by successive straight penstrokes presumably makes it a more difficult script to master than the curved strokes of German text.)

The piece titled "Fame" was ideally suited for exhibiting four scripts, although it presupposed mastery of five. All of the seven examples of "Fame" in the collection are identical in their texts. All have four scripts, but these are not identical. The format of the piece is the same: the five sentences follow an *a, b, c, b, d* format, with the second and fourth maxims always penned in round hand. The others are like a Chinese menu: you have to choose one of the two gothic scripts from menu A for the first sentence; then you may take any two from menu B: a roman, an italic, or the other gothic. Joseph's sentences run, from the top of the page: gothic II (old English print), round hand, gothic I (German text), round hand, italic.

Figure 5.

Fame. Joseph Russell, age 12 1/2.

F A M E.

A scanty Fortune clips the Wings of Fame,
And checks the Progress of a rising Name.

*Fame is at best but an inconstant Good,
Vain are the boasted Tiths of our Blood,
We severest Love what we most highly Prize,
And with our Youth our short-lived Beauty dies.*

**Fame due to vast Deserts kept in Store
Unpaid till the Deserver is no more.**

*Agenious Untow feels within my Breast,
Eager of Action, Enemy to Rest,
This urges me to fight, and fires my Mind,
To leave a memorable Name behind.*

**The Thing call'd Life, with ease I can disclaim,
And think it over-Sold to purchase Fame.**

JOSEPH RUSSELL *Scriptit. Æ. 12 1/2 Years.*

Fifth Script and Over. [Ages 13-16]. Documented median age for this piece from 8 pieces out of 14: 13 1/2. Age range: 12-16.

Figure 6. “A Wise man avoids...” Shown here is the classic showpiece for five scripts or more, the octagonal “A Wise man avoids.” (It is one of the pieces that have no predecessor in *The Universal Penman*.) William Palfrey was probably thirteen or fourteen years old when he penned this masterly version in 1754. By any standards, it is a dazzling effort.

The basic structure of “A Wise man avoids as much to Contradict as being Contradicted” (the sentiment in its central octagon) is similar in all its fourteen manifestations in the collection. The “showy” scripts are likely to face each other, in pairs, across the central octagon. The most usual format is to have, therefore, four different scripts, twice each, in the surrounding octagons, while the center octagon exhibits the fifth script, the easier gothic. William’s scripts, circling his German text in the central octagon, from “noon,” clockwise, are: round hand, gothic II (old English print), Italian, square text, round hand, roman print, Italian, gothic I (German text).

As the octagonal design leaves a sizable space on each side of the page, it provides additional opportunities to show off. Some students drew giant alphabetical letters; a few were like John Fenno, who drew birds on each side of his 1767 piece, thereby producing a design so full of swirling movement that he actually spoiled it. William Palfrey was content with sober circles and ovals, enclosing yet more scripts.

“A Wise man avoids” affords us a further opportunity of evaluating the constancy of the curriculum over the thirty-four years covered by collection. The example penned by William in 1754 is the earliest of the fourteen. The thirteen others are dated between 1763 and 1772. Each of the writing schools is represented — the Queen Street School once, the North twice, and the South nine times. (Two of the manuscripts do not reveal their school affiliation.) Of the eight manuscripts that include the age of their author, the median age is thirteen and a half, with the range from twelve years old to sixteen. The former piece is one executed by Samuel Fenno, who was as precociously gifted as his brother John. The latter is John Fenno’s second attempt, dated 1768 — in a contribution toned down from his exuberant and overdone performance of the year before.

Bookkeeping **T**his last figure reveals something of what the boys might use their calligraphy for, once they left school.

Figure 7. “Bills of Parcels” The two scripts are round hand, for the text and figures, while the decorative title is in the simpler of the gothic scripts. As we have seen, boys were using these two scripts as early as the age of ten and as late as fifteen. Mastering round hand and the introductory gothic may have been the minimum standard which a boy had to reach in order to be considered trained for the world of work.

Summary **T**he median ages for each script, then, as documented in detail above, run as follows: round hand (paragraph/poem): age ten (data from only two boys); gothic I (German text): age twelve; roman print: age thirteen; gothic II (old English print): age thirteen and a half; five scripts and over placed in geometrical shapes: age thirteen and a half. This evidence supports the hypothesis that the curriculum consisted of a series of scripts that students mastered in succession. Every student would have begun a new script, of course, by repeatedly penning the individual letters of that alphabet — a stage too elementary ever to appear in the exhibition pieces.

While the wide age range even for a single piece shows that boys progressed according to their skill, not their age, it is nonetheless possible to reconstruct the tempo of the writing school curriculum. The first script a student would learn, at the age of seven, was round hand; the most elementary level (after individual letters) was a sentence copied six times (figure 1). By the age of nine or ten, the student would be skilled enough to write poems or paragraphs in round hand, perhaps using (but not really mastering) italic or roman print for his title or signature (figure 2). At the age of eleven or twelve, he would tackle his second script, the first and simpler of two gothic scripts, German text (figure 3). Growth in skill seems to have accelerated now, for some boys. The next year the student would add a third (and then fourth) script, roman print (figure 4) and italic print. If he had the ability, at the age of thirteen or fourteen he would master a fifth script, the more difficult gothic known as old English print (figure 5). Not too long thereafter, by now an accomplished penman, he would add other scripts, up to perhaps eight. By this time, his control over spacing his text was so secure that he was able to write in small geometric spaces (figure 6).

The pieces signed by John Fenno support this curricular sequence.

Figure 7.

Bills of Parcels. William Harris, 1759.

Bills of Parcels.

The Hon^{ble} the Lady Ashly,
Bought of Simon Pindar,

1758 March 29.

36 China Plates	at ^{£ s d} . 3. 8 each	£ 6. 12. .
18 Dishes Ditto	at . 10. 6 D ^{rs}	9. 9. .
1 Tea Table Set compleat		3. 10. 4
Indian Sprig'd Muslin 1 p ^{er} 7 ¹ / ₂ Yards	at . 9. 4 ¹ / ₂	6. 6. .
Fine Chints 6 p ^{er} 10 ⁰	at 3. 3. 6 p ^{er} 10 ⁰	19. 1. .
30 Indian Fans,	at . 2. 6 each	13. 15. .
		<u>£ 49. 1. 4</u>

M^r David Chambers

Bought of James Holt,

1759. April 19.

15 Pair of Women's Worsted Hosi mist	at 5. 7 ¹ / ₂ p ^{er} pair	£ 4. 3. 9
23 Ditto of Men's Silk,	at 11. . D ^{rs}	16. 2. .
32 Ditto of Mens Yarn,	at 3. 2 D ^{rs}	5. 1. 4
18 Ditto of Norwich Hosi,	at 4. 10 D ^{rs}	1. 7. .
10 Ditto of Threads,	at 3. 6 D ^{rs}	7. . .
26 Ditto of Womens Silk Gloves,	at 4. 8 D ^{rs}	£ 6. 1. 4
		<u>£ 12. 15. 5</u>

William Harris, scripsit. 1759.

John first penned “Painting” (like “Virtue,” a two-script piece) at the age of twelve; “The Writing Master’s Invitation,” also at twelve; “How to get Riches” in five scripts at fourteen; “Fame” (using the second gothic script, old English print) at fifteen, and “A Wise man avoids” at fifteen.

We can also assume that by the time a given learner penned an exhibition piece (other than the single sentence of figure 1), he would have progressed in his mastery of a script well beyond the level of mere copying. Models such as those in *The Universal Penman*, therefore, were as useful for their exhibition of a text as for a script.

Job-Related Training **W**hether, in fact, a training in the more fanciful scripts was the most practical pedagogical approach in a vocational school is open to question: speed was being sacrificed to presentation. Yet speed would be highly valued on a job. Later writers on penmanship would castigate the proponents of the “old system” for ignoring this reality. There were three qualities desirable in writing, claimed B.F. Foster in 1835: legibility, expedition, and beauty. However, “the pupil, who is taught by the old system, attains *legibility* to perfection, while the writing is executed slowly — *beauty* of character, to a surprising degree — and of *EXPEDITION*, not even the name.” Foster attributed this to the technique of the old system, which required the student to write with his fingers alone, resting his arm on the paper to do so, then lifting and repositioning it for the next portion of his writing. Later, when the former student “enters the counting-house, he is told that it will never answer to write so slow. He then, usually, sacrifices all to expedition, and, nine times out of ten, his writing degenerates into a mere scrawl.” This happened, according to Foster, not only to those who were not particularly skilled penmen, but also to those whose writing was “when they finished their education, the admiration of all” (Foster, 1835, pp.39-42).

The content of the Houghton Library penmanship collection as a whole stands in marked contrast, in its exclusion of job-related pieces, to the content of George Bickham’s *Universal Penman*, which had provided models for so many pieces in the collection. Bickham had devoted almost half his pages to practical examples of bookkeeping and correspondence. The fact that there are only two pieces in the entire Boston collection that portray accounts (figure 7 and one other) surely reflects a strong statement by the Boston writing masters in favor of beauty and legibility over mere utility.

The Curriculum: Content **A**ll cultures monitor the content

of materials designed to instruct children. Texts for the teaching of literacy have been especially subject to scrutiny. Contemporary scholars have analyzed the messages conveyed to children by texts used for reading instruction in colonial America (e.g. Smith, 1968), but texts used in writing instruction have not received comparable attention. Now, however, the extensive Houghton Library penmanship collection allows us to look at the content of the models that children were required to copy.

The assumption made throughout this essay has been that the pieces that appear in the Houghton Library collection were copies of a model — rather than original compositions written by the boys themselves. (The one incontrovertible exception, Thomas Cartwright's 1764 contribution, is discussed below.) In the case of those many instances where we find multiple exemplars of the same text, there can be no doubt that they were copies. This is particularly striking when a particular piece was penned in different schools at different decades.

There are, it is true, a large number of pieces which appear only once and which have no counterpart in *The Universal Penman*. It is at least conceivable that some of these were the creations of the boys themselves. Nonetheless, given that the accepted pedagogy for imparting penmanship was to have the student copy a model, it seems unlikely. It is assumed in this essay, then, that the boys who signed their names to these pieces were acknowledging their responsibility for the penmanship (except for certain embellishments, as noted earlier), but were not laying claims to the authorship of the content.

The collection, therefore, has to be approached with some care. First, the date at which a piece was penned is rarely the date at which the original of the text was composed. In teaching reading, textbooks were used over a remarkably long span of time: the *New England Primer*, first published at the end of the seventeenth century, was re-issued over the entire span of the eighteenth century. The same situation prevailed in penmanship instruction: the same models were assigned to students repeatedly over the decades. One piece in the collection, "Reputation and the Credit of the Merchant," appears seven times at intervals from 1757 to 1782. It had previously appeared in George Bickham's *Universal Penman* in 1743 (Bickham, 1954, p. 137). As noted earlier, texts in Bickham's book account for sixty-four per cent of all the pieces in the Houghton Library collection, if we exclude the one-sentence pieces. In fact, a Bickham predecessor can generally be assumed for the pieces discussed below, unless noted otherwise. Many texts, in short, were no doubt assigned to



students because the master had a copy of Bickham's book.

Moreover, the writing master's selection of a particular model for a student was dictated by several considerations other than those of content. Individual pieces, as we have seen, were chosen because they traditionally exhibited a given number of scripts, and so were only useful for pupils at a certain stage of their handwriting education. Moreover, a one-sentence piece may have provided practice on a particular letter. "Commendation commonly animates the ingenious," for example, looks as if it is good practice for the letters *c*, *m* and *n*. Just as it would be unwise to infer an American love for animals from the typist's sentence "the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog," so, too, inferences based on the content of the penmanship collection must be made with some caution.⁵

Nonetheless, the material selected — whatever its antiquity, and whatever the pedagogical considerations — was considered suitable fare for the young at the moment in time when it was assigned to a student by a writing master. It is, therefore, important to examine the thrust of the messages being aimed at the young writers through the texts they were copying. From this, we can obtain some important clues on the world view of the second half of the eighteenth century.

The one hundred and six texts penned on the one hundred and eighty-eight manuscripts of the Houghton Library collection were grouped into broad categories according to their content — as judged from their titles, or, in the absence of a title, the general tenor of the piece. Ten categories emerged.

1. *Religion*. Those pieces that either had the word "religion" in their title, or devoted the major portion of the piece to some kind of religious statement, fell into this category.
2. *Moral or Ethical*. This rather general category included any material that seemed either to hold up a value to the writer/reader (like "Virtue") or to prescribe a course of conduct that was relevant to character formation. The pieces reproduced in figures 1, 3, 5, and 6 all fall into this category.
3. *Business /Commerce /Money*. This category included all those pieces where the emphasis was on trade or making money. ("Sound not a trumpet in your own commendation" was therefore categorized as "*Moral*", but "Money commands many Enjoyments" was classified as "*Business*").
4. *Political*. This was a category for any pieces that focused on

rulers or governors and the ruled or governed.

5. *Aesthetic*. A fifth homogeneous group encompassed pieces that related to a work of art, whether to its creation or to the finished product. Pieces on sculpture and music came under this rubric.
6. *Penmanship/Writing*. A fair number of pieces specifically referred to the art of teaching or learning handwriting (e.g. figure 4).
7. *Education*. Besides those pieces that included the word “education” in their title, works that addressed parents were categorized as educational.
8. *Intellectual*. This category included pieces that focused on the products of education (rather than on the process, as in the preceding category), such as knowledge itself (figure 2).
9. *Bookkeeping*. The two pieces in this category were samples of the kind of work that boys would be doing once they had left school (figure 7).
10. *Other*. Two pieces seemed to fall into none of the other categories.



The numbers and percentages of pieces that fall within each content category are as follows:

Table 2.
Number and Percentage of Manuscripts in Each Content Category

	Number	Percentage (rounded)	Examples
Moral/Ethical	80	43	figures 1, 3, 5, 6
Business/Commerce	28	15	
Aesthetic	17	9	
Penmanship/Writing	17	9	figure 4
Political	14	7	
Intellectual	12	6	figure 2
Religion	9	5	
Education	7	4	
Bookkeeping	2	1	figure 7
Other	2	1	
Totals	188	100	

While each category is discussed in greater detail below, the fact that strikes one immediately is the small proportion of religious content.

This is not to suggest that there is no underlying assumption of religion: the word “God” turns up now and again within a piece. Nonetheless, the general secularity of the content should give pause to those who would judge the mindset of the later eighteenth century largely from the contents of the *New England Primer*.

An analysis of the content of the single-sentence one-script pieces, of which there are twenty-five, is a useful point of departure. In the first place, it was easy to decide upon the category to which one lone sentence should be allocated. Second, as these pieces are among the earliest in the collection, they provided evidence on content that was considered appropriate in the 1750s. As is the case with the collection overall, the moral category contains the largest number of pieces (17 pieces or 68%), while the religious category contains a somewhat larger proportion (three pieces or 12%) than does the collection as a whole. Business (money) receives as much attention as religion (three pieces), and there is one piece each classified under education and penmanship.

The high proportion of moral content is partly a function of form: the sentences (copied four to six times) either offer a crisp maxim in the declarative mode, or else make a pronouncement in the imperative form. The net result, if one reads them one after another, is a set of instructions issued to the young for their comportment. The general tenor may be summarized as follows: Be extremely careful in choosing your friends. Conduct yourself modestly, and do not get an inflated opinion of yourself if honors should come your way. You may work for rewards such as praise or money (other, that is, than for the joy of work itself). Money is useful. Education will improve you. Honor God.

A sampling of the sentences that give rise to this summary runs like this: “You may learn to know men by their company.” “Better to be alone than in bad company.” “Flattering friends are worse than enemies.” “Nothing more recommends a Youth than Modesty.” “Sound not a trumpet in your own commendation.” “The hope of reward sweetens Labour.” “Commendation commonly animates the ingenious.” “Money commands many enjoyments.” “Education is that which makes the man.” “Admire, adore and praise, the God that guides thy ways.”

The next point worthy of note is the societal aspect of the texts. Virtually all of them address someone who is involved with other people, in work or at leisure, in a social activity. These are not maxims aimed at the spiritual strivings of the lonely soul. If they are not quite tips on how to make friends and influence people (that would be

going too far), they are certainly guidelines for functioning smoothly and successfully in the real world. The single sentence piece illustrated here, William Palfrey's "Quiet minds commonly enjoy much Content" (figure 1) is therefore not particularly typical of the rest. The most ethical of the instructions — in the sense that it mentions the subjects of good and evil — is "Lamentation and mourning are the companions of vice." In sum, these sentences tell the writer how to get ahead without also getting in trouble.

Many of the same themes appear in the collection as a whole. They are, it will be argued, the embodiment of an eighteenth century rationalism that would find its full voice in the precepts of the Enlightenment.

Religion Religion, in the nine manuscripts in this category, appears not so much as a belief in an omnipotent God as an exhortation to love thy neighbor, and as a useful instrument for social control. The most "religious" texts are the three one-sentence pieces written in the 1750s, discussed above. There are also two elaborate showcase pieces which feature a central octagon proclaiming "All praise honor glory and adoration." Most of the other examples, however, treat religion much as other texts treat virtue. Samuel Hill, in an undated piece titled "Religion," declares that "The commands of Heaven ... are nothing else but Exhortations to Love and directions for social Happiness." Stephen Greenleaf hails religion blandly as "gentle Piety." William Irvett, in 1751, urges that homage be paid to "pure Religion ... That she may keep thy Soul from harm secure, and turn thy Footsteps from the Harlots door." The ninth and last manuscript appears to be one of the few in the collection that identifies religious belief in Boston, supposedly the seat of Puritanism, as specifically Christian: it is a 1764 piece by John Fenno, titled "The Nativity of Christ."

Moral/Ethical It is significant that the eighty pieces devoted to ethical topics, such as John Molineux's "Virtue" (figure 3), are mostly devoid of any religious references. The emphasis in the very large number of texts that were classified as moral is on man's social relationships.

The company one keeps continues to be important. Friendship, for instance, is a key concept. Five pieces in the collection relate to friendship; three of them ("A friend should always like a friend indite") are identical. William Allen, in 1748, wrote,

Tell me ye knowing and discerning Few



*Where I may find a Friend who's firm and true
Who dares stand by me when in deep distress,
And then his love and Friendship most express.*

The worldliness embedded in the texts is remarkable. Ambition is encouraged, but in an ambivalent way. Eight identical texts are devoted to "Fame" (figure 5). The first stanza suggests that having an inadequate supply of money hinders one from becoming well known ("A scanty Fortune clips the Wings of Fame"). The second decries fame as an "inconstant Good." The last stanza, however, claims that one's life is a small price to pay for it. This popular text seems to be an agglomeration of maxims on fame, and was no doubt often chosen because of its capacity to exhibit four kinds of script. Nonetheless, it reveals a fascination with a worldly desire for a reputation.

Even in the midst of worldly success, however, pride and ostentation are still to be eschewed. One elaborate piece presents a central octagon surrounded by eight ovals; in the central place of honor is inscribed, "Beware of vain glory, for an Accomplish'd man conceals vulgar advantages, as a Modest Woman hides her Beauty under a negligent Dress." Another, simpler, piece, titled "Pride," characterizes pride as the worst of "all the Causes which conspire to blind."

The quality promoted most often, however, is not self-depreciation but prudence. The moderating tendencies of religion are noted in one of the octagons in the collection's most popular piece, "A Wise man avoids" (figure 6). "Prudence is a Christian as well as a Moral Virtue," we are informed. Without it, "Devotion degenerates into Superstition Liberality into Profuseness & Zeal is a pious Frenzy." Excess is, in short, frowned upon. "The Golden Mean" is the title of two pieces (written in 1751 and 1769). A middle road of caution is best: "A Wise man avoids as much to Contradict as being Contradicted and the more his judgment inclines him to censure, ye [the] more Cautious he is" (figure 6).

Other pieces focus on what people say. Truthfulness is a virtue. William Palfrey, in his 1751 piece not reproduced here, called truth "the Band of Union, and the Basis of Human Happiness. Without this Virtue there's no Relyance upon Language ... if Perfidious thou at once be found / Thy words tho' true, like to Untruth will sound." Similarly, John Vinal in 1753 exhorts us, in a piece called "Swearing," "Don't bind yourself to what you cannot do."

Business/Commerce/Money **S**everal of the twenty-eight pieces in this category straddle the dividing line between morality

and business. Five pieces are titled “Human Prudence”; two of these, significantly, are subtitled “or, How to get Riches.” The first precept runs, “In things of moment on thy self depend.” The advice is on the lines of Thomas Stanley’s 1769 piece, penned at the Queen Street School, which, under the title “How to get Riches,” informs us that “The Art of growing Rich consists very much in Thrift.” At the same school, William Read Miller wrote in 1774 that “it is imprudent to put Man’s whole Fortune at the Hazard of any one Prospect.”

Some of the maxims fall under our modern-day notion of business ethics. Over and above the notion that you will regret it if you don’t work hard (“Idleness brings men to want,” wrote Benjamin Hurd in 1751) is a set of rules on how to behave in a business context. “Reputation and the Credit of the Merchant,” a Bickham piece that has seven exemplars in the collection, is one instance.



*Good name in Man or Woman,
Is the immediate Jewel of our Souls.
Who steals my Purse steals Trash...
But he that filches from me my Good Name,
...makes me Poor indeed.*

The title makes it clear that it is not one’s reputation in general, but a business relationship, that is the focus of interest here.

The second part of the text is even more explicit on the theme of the extreme importance of sustaining confidence in oneself in the business world. It reiterates the importance of truthfulness, or at least, of monitoring what one says:

How careful ought a Man to be in his Language of a Merchant. It may possibly be in the Power of a very shallow Creature to lay the Ruins of the best Family in the most opulent City; and the more so the more highly the Merchant deserves of his Country: that is to say, the further he places his Wealth out of his hands, to draw home that of another Climate.

In other words, the bigger the importer/exporter you are, the more careful you have to be of your reputation. (This, incidentally, was no idle advice in an era when so much business, both domestic and international, was conducted on credit.)

Other pieces related to business have no moral content at all. Instead, they praise commerce. “Merchants of great Benefit to the Publick” is the title of Andrew Cunningham’s manuscript, penned at the South Writing School in 1774. Merchants, according to Andrew’s

pen, promote international understanding and prosperity. “They knit Mankind together in a mutual Intercourse of good Offices, distribute the Gifts of Nature, find Work for the Poor, add Wealth to the Rich & Magnificence to the Great.” British merchants are specifically mentioned for their foreign trade: “They vend our Goods and bring us Riches too.”

A text titled “How to get Riches, Humbly Inscrib’d to the British Nation,” takes this theme a step further and attributes a civilizing influence to commerce. It is a popular piece that appears no fewer than ten times, perhaps partly because it allowed a none-too-experienced writer to venture into two new scripts for only a few words (gothic for “How to get Riches” and “British Nation”; italic for “Humbly inscrib’d”). The piece exhudes what, in another context, we would term imperialism.

*Thro’ various climes & to each distant Pole
In happy Tides let active Commerce rowl [sic]...
Let Britain’s Ships export an Annual Fleece
Richer than Argos brought to ancient Greece
Returning Lad’n with the Shining Stores
Which lye profuse on either India’s Shores.*

*...In Worlds unknown to plant Britannia’s pow’r
Nations yet wild by precepts to reclaim
And teach ’em Arms, & Arts in Britain’s name.*

Political **T**he fourteen political pieces focus heavily on the topic of liberty. Apart from one fleeting reference to “princely order,” only two pieces mention royalty, and both were penned in the 1750s. One, dated 1757, mentions the duty of the subject (“Kings are to command and subjects to obey”). The other, written by Peter Roberts in 1755, talks about the British throne and the kings “youthful George, and lawrel’d William.” In contrast, ten of the other political pieces include the word “liberty” in their titles and/or opening lines, and emphasize that the duty of government is to protect the governed. Liberty is hailed as a “goddess,” and a much penned sentiment is that “The Love of Liberty with Life is giv’n.” Liberty is directly linked to Britain in a piece which appears in 1757 and again in 1767, titled “On the British Nation”: after apostrophizing Liberty as a goddess, it continues, “From British Laws our choicest Blessings come.” These sentiments, all to be found in Bickham’s *Universal Penman* of 1743, convey the message that ordinary citizens on both sides of the Atlantic were believed to have, by the 1740s, what would later be termed “unalienable Rights.”

One piece is certainly appropriate for its own decade. In 1774, James Thwing of the Queen Street School, aged eleven, in a piece subtitled “Considerations on the destructive Spirit of Arbitrary Power” proclaims that the good of the governed is the sole end of government, and that when the interests of a people are not pursued, then “we know what Opinion the people will have of their Governors.” (There is no model for this in Bickham’s book.) Whatever their source, these sentiments are certainly apt for the revolutionary era.



Aesthetic **T**he seventeen pieces categorized as “Aesthetic” involve eight on painting, five on sculpture (all of them titled “The Grecian Carver”), and four on music. (All the texts can be found in *The Universal Penman*.) Music is credited (by Thomas Cartwright, in 1766) with a soothing effect: it alone “can bind / The wandering sense & calm the troubled mind.” The general approach of these pieces, however, is that man has become more skillful at the arts over time. A piece titled “Painting,” executed seven times in the collection from 1764 on, gives us an idea of the content. (John Molineux was one of those who penned it, at the age of thirteen.) It was a useful two-script piece which in a sense portrays the triumph of form over content: even to an adult with a knowledge of European art, it is barely intelligible. It can have made no sense at all to a thirteen-year-old. John Leach penned the following, undated, version:

Painting

*In Ancient Times, when Painting first began,
A Pen, or Chalk, thus imitated Man.
Long time the Sister Arts in Iron Sleep,
A heavy Sabbath did supinely keep:
At length in Raphal’s [sic] age at once they rise,
Stretch all their Limbs, & open all their Eyes.
Thence rose the Roman & the Lombard line,
One Colour’d best, and one did best Design.
Raphael’s, like Homer’s, was the nobler Part,
But Titan’s [sic] Painting look’d like Virgil’s Art.
By slow Degrees the Painting Art advanc’d,
As Man grew polish’d Picture was inhanc’d.*

Penmanship/Writing **S**eventeen pieces are on penmanship or writing. (They might have been categorized as educational, but for the fact that they emphasize the art of writing.) Their general tenor is aptly summarized by the sole single-sentence representative in

this category: Benjamin Holmes' 1751 "Command your hand by care and pains."

Five of the pieces are "The Writing Master's Invitation and Instruction" (figure 4). This paean in praise of the art of writing was a public relations piece aimed at glorifying the writing master's profession. "Who can the least of these [the sword, sceptre or pen] command, / In the first Rank of Fame shall stand" was a self-serving pronouncement in a profession that certainly took itself seriously. The poem does strike one true note on the importance of motivation: "He that in Writing would improve, / Must first with Writing fall in Love. / For true Love for true Pains will call..."

Other pieces praise the invention of writing for its ability to transcend both space and time. As Richard Checkley put it, in his 1773 North Writing School piece titled "On the Art of Writing," thanks to the invention of writing, "With the hard Laws of distance we dispense." One piece, however, (by James Greaton, undated), looks at penmanship from the point of view of the learner, and rather disarmingly renounces perfection. Credit is to be given to the writer for effort:

*Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.
In ev'ry work regard the wipers [sic] End
Since none can compass more than they intend.
And if the means be just, the conduct true,
Applause in spite of trivial faults is due.*

(Perhaps predictably, this is not a text found in *The Universal Penman*. None of the writing masters assembled there would have admitted to any flaws in their productions at all.)

Intellectual Twelve pieces were classified under the heading "intellectual." To be well-informed is good for the character. Peter Roberts informs us in his 1755 manuscript that "Learning makes a good Man better" and that it is the "temperance of Youth." Another unsigned piece calls it an "ornament to Youth." Knowledge is "a golden key," claimed Benjamin Hurd in 1751. Other texts, with titles like "Criticism," "Wit," and "Study," seem to put a value on intellectual sophistication. A popular piece which appears three times in the collection promotes the notion that, in learning at least, moderation is not a desideratum. Shallow information is hazardous. "A little learning is a dangerous thing. / Drink deep or taste not the Pierian Spring," wrote Joseph Deoster in 1757.

Two pieces named “Knowledge,” both to be dated 1763, promote the message that mankind is making steady progress in scientific understanding. “In Nature’s Search we to the Cause advance,” and “Knowledge, by Time, advances slow and Wise,” wrote John Molineux at the age of nine (figure 2). Knowledge can guide us in making decisions by looking to the past and the future: it “Sees what befel, and what may yet befel, / Concludes from both and best provides for All.” It enables us, in short, to control our own destinies.



E**ducation** The seven educational pieces are of particular interest. Their overall impact is that parents must begin, in education, as they mean to go on. Education means instilling good habits, while bad habits, once formed, are hard to eradicate. They echo a 1751 piece by William Millar (included in the “Moral” category), which pointed out that “Ill Custom by Degrees to Habits rise.” In a 1751 manuscript called “Education,” we are told that “All Youth, set right at first, with Ease go on.” Children are pliable, according to William Hish in 1766: they are like “tender oziers” (willow branches) or “softened wax”; and

*'Tis Education forms the tender mind.
Just as the Twig is bent, the Trees inclin'd.*

Some other pieces address the costs of a private education. While these Boston boys were receiving their education at the town’s expense, this was not the case generally in writing schools, and this was reflected in one poem. As Elias Thomas wrote (undated):

*Next unto God, dear Parents I address
Myself to you, in humble Thankfulness
For all your Care and Charge on me bestow'd
The means of Learning unto me allow'd:
Go on I pray, and let me still presue [sic]
The Golden Arts the Vulgar never knew.*

(This was a poem that Anna Green Winslow, whose family did indeed have to pay for her instruction, copied at the South Writing School in 1771. She confided to her diary at one point that she had promised to be “very good all day.” One of her efforts in that direction was to transcribe this poem from her school copybook into her diary [Earle, 1970, p. 47]).

Finally, there is a poem which combines a deprecation of the writer’s efforts with a pitch for continued parental financial support. Houghton Perkins penned this undated commentary on his own efforts. (Because his piece is adorned with birds instead of ruled lines,

it was probably executed in the 1750s.)

*These Honour'd Parents are but small Effects
Of your true Love and manifold Respects:
These few unpolish'd Lines cannot express,
The Thousandth part of my due Thankfulness
For your last Favours: Yet if these you grace
With Acceptation, I in Writing's Race
Shall run more swift by that Encouragement,
And in due time, some nobler Piece present.*

Out of all the one hundred and six texts in the Houghton Library collection, there is only one that was unarguably a contemporary composition, composed for a particular occasion. It is the most engaging piece in the entire collection. Its content (complete with a wonderful double-entendre in its closing words) suggests, to me at least, that it is the creation of the boy who signed it. Thomas Cartwright penned this in the North Writing School at the age of thirteen, dating it June 1764 — the end of the school year, when the town visitors came for their annual visitation.

*To the much Honoured VISITORS of
the FREE-SCHOOLS.
With Joy our Eyes do meet the Dawn,
That ushers in th'auspicious Day,
When You, the Encouragers of the Pen,
The annual Visit stoop to pay.
Accept our humble Offerings, Sirs!
Accept it once more we entreat,
Your pupils, This, fresh Life shall give
And Joy diffuse through every Seat.*

It is pleasing to think that crusty old John Tileston allowed this much creativity among his students.

One last piece that falls under this rubric is noteworthy because it mentions mothers. The overwhelmingly male content of these pieces is hardly to be wondered at, given that these were boys' commercial schools, to which girls could only come privately, at their own expense. Mentions of women in any guise are few and far between. (When they do occur, they are not necessarily flattering, as one reference to "the harlot's door" indicates.) Benjamin Wheeler's 1772 South School poem, titled "To a Female Parent," is therefore of particular interest. (It is not found in Bickham's book.) Its general point is that although mothers are naturally entranced by the beauty and brilliance of their male offspring, they must harden their hearts and exercise restraint for the boys' own good.

*Conversing with your sprightly boys
Your eyes have spoke a mother's joys;
With what delight I've heard you quote
Their sayings in imperfect note!
I grant in body and in mind,
Nature appears profusely kind,
Trust not to that. Act you yo[u]r part:
Imprint just morals on their heart.
Impartially their talents scan:
Just education forms the man.*



Bookkeeping Only two pieces in the collection, as we noted earlier, give us any idea of the kind of work that the boys would meet in the real world of work after the writing school. Both of them are derived from models in Bickham's *Universal Penman* (figure 7).

Other Two pieces seemed not to fit any of the categories above. One is in the form of a letter by "Theodorick, King of the Goths." It might have been categorized as "intellectual," as it praises his translator for making works in Greek accessible to the Romans. The other, titled "Fear," is one of the few that refers to human emotions. Some of the pieces (classified as "Moral" because of their general content) do mention emotion: one 1751 piece, for instance, is named "Envy and Detraction." And perhaps an argument could be made for including "Pride" in a category for emotions. But, by and large, human passions do not figure much in the overall picture. When they do, they are emotions with a public reference. Envy, for example, denotes a feeling aroused by the sight of another person's possessions, while detraction suggests a public belittlement of someone else. Interpersonal emotions, such as jealousy or even love, seem not to appear at all. In this connection, it is significant that the topic of marriage does not occur either, even though there were several texts in Bickham on both love and marriage. The worldliness of these Boston pieces is once again evident.

Conclusion As noted earlier, almost two-thirds of all the manuscripts (aside from the single-sentence pieces) derive from models at least as old as the 1730s or 1740s, when they were penned by English writing masters for George Bickham's *Universal Penman*. These texts were copied over and over again in the writing schools of Boston during the second half of the eighteenth century. It is no wonder, then, that the messages conveyed by the manuscripts in the Houghton Library penmanship collection are so consistent over such

a long period of time.

Notwithstanding their high proportion of moral content, the texts exhude the secularism, rationalism, optimism, and materialism of the eighteenth century. At the individual level, man is worldly, not spiritual. As far as religion is concerned, not one piece speaks of Christian themes such as Christ's redemption of sinners. Rather, religion is to be esteemed for its civilizing influence. Man is also a social creature, who is affected by the company he keeps, and who must exercise moderation in his dealings with others and in his business affairs. Already present in these texts is the later notion, which would become standard in the early nineteenth century, that education shapes character by molding it rather than by rooting out its evil propensities. Moreover the learner can make strides by diligence. Practice makes perfect.

At the national level (because these texts derived from British models), Britain is still the writer's nation, not America. Vigorous commerce, conducted in British ships, is of value to all. On the other hand, government has certain obligations to the individual, and the theme of liberty is a recurrent one.

At a universal level, a belief in man's ability to control his own destiny is visible in these texts. Slowly but surely, mankind is advancing in knowledge and skill. It is not too fanciful to suggest that, just as the boys were expected to improve their skill in penmanship by self-disciplined practice, they were expected to make progress in the real world as well. Their future was bright.

Postscript **T**he Houghton Library penmanship collection has provided a wealth of material on the form and content of the curriculum of the three writing schools of eighteenth century Boston. The limitations of the collection, however, as a guide to the whole curriculum need to be stated clearly. There is a very large difference between the number of boys who produced the pieces in the collection and the actual number of boys enrolled in the schools over the thirty-four years. In the year 1755, for instance, as noted earlier, we know the enrollment figures for two of the three writing schools: over four hundred and fifty boys. In contrast, there are only two manuscripts in the collection that bear that date.

The collection, then, tells part of the story — for the boys undoubtedly produced one hundred and eighty-eight pieces over the course of thirty-four years — but not the whole story. The fact that the manuscripts were specially selected for exhibition to the school visitors skews the collection in favor of the best pieces. We are left to guess at

all the work the boys undertook in school that the writing masters thought unworthy of exhibition. It must be remembered that the writing schools were commercial training schools which were substituting education for the much more familiar colonial route of apprenticeship. The writing masters surely focused more on the real world than the collection leads us to believe.

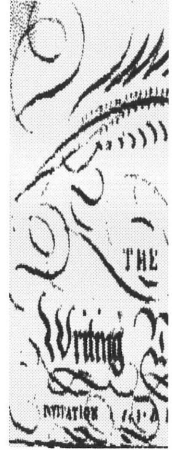
There is missing information on all the three Rs. We already know that the curriculum was supposed to include some advanced reading. As discussed earlier, the selectmen had stipulated that some time was to be spent, in the writing schools, on reading the Bible and on spelling.

Even in penmanship, there are gaps at the initial stages. The collection does not give us any glimpses of the protracted practice on letter formation that we know preceded any penning of connected prose. Nor does it show us any of the work done by boys who never managed to write very well, let alone beautifully.

As far as composition is concerned, the collection surely reflects reality: the boys did not compose the texts, except on the rarest of occasions. Nonetheless, further research might reveal that boys were occasionally asked to compose poems. The possibility has to be left open for now.

Even more important, the collection shows none of the commercial arithmetic that the boys were presumably doing. The two pieces categorized as “bookkeeping” were actually penmanship pieces, not practice in addition, as they came straight from the pages of the *Universal Penman*. The boys could not have spent all their school hours on penmanship; the strain on the hand would have been too great — especially if we believe those who criticized the “old system.” They must have devoted far more attention to commercial arithmetic — double entry bookkeeping, for instance — than the collection ever suggests. The instruction presented in George Fisher’s *Instructor* (1786) is presumably a reasonable guide to some of this missing curriculum. Further archival research will no doubt provide more information: an arithmetic copybook, for instance, penned by a boy known to have been enrolled in one of the writing schools, would be illuminating.

Obtaining a complete picture of the curriculum from the Houghton Library penmanship collection is therefore not possible. Nonetheless, it brings us closer to understanding both the form and content of the curriculum of the writing schools of eighteenth century Boston than any sources examined by scholars up to this date.



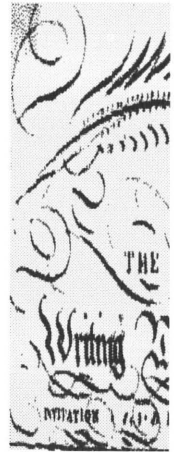
Notes

- 1 MS, Abiah Holbrook, "The Writing Master's Amusement," Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- 2 MSS, "Miscellaneous Specimens of American Calligraphy," Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- 3 George Fisher's *The American Instructor*, published in the American colonies from 1748 on with slight changes of title, is sometimes called the first American copybook. However, it has only a few pages of scripts, and was in fact a self-instructional manual that offered a range of subjects (Fisher, 1786).
- 4 There were 13 Bickham texts out of the 15 in the collection (See Appendix I) that appear three or more times (totaling 62 pieces); nine Bickham texts of the 17 that appear twice each (18 pieces); and 24 of the 74 pieces that appear once only (24 pieces). These total 46 out of 106 different texts, or 104 out of 188 pieces. Subtracting the 25 single-sentence pieces from the total leaves Bickham appearing in 104 of 163 pieces, or 64%.
- 5 I am indebted to Leila F. Monaghan for this observation.

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Appendix 1.
Frequency of Occurrence of Manuscripts with Identical Texts,
Presence in Bickham (1743), and Content Category

Key to Content Category	
Aesthetic	A
Business / Commerce / Money	B
Intellectual	I
Moral / Ethical	M
Penmanship / Writing	Pen
Political	Pol

<u>Title</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>In Bickham?</u>	<u>Content</u>
A Wise man avoids . . . (figure 6)	14	no	M
How to get Riches, humbly inscrib'd . . .	10	yes	B
Fame: Ascanty Fortune . . . (figure 5)	7	yes	M
Painting: in ancient times when Painting . . .	7	yes	A
Reputation and the credit of the Merchant	7	yes	B
The Grecian Carver	5	yes	A
The Writing Master's Invitation (figure 4)	5	yes	Pen
Beware of vain glory . . .	4	no	M
Friendship: a friend should always like a friend . . .	3	yes	M
Human Prudence, or, How to get Riches	3	yes	B
Learning: How pleasant and how sweet . . .	3	yes	I
Liberty: O despicable state . . .	3	yes	Pol
Liberty: O Liberty! Thou Goddess . . .	3	yes	Pol
Virtue: Virtue's the Friend of Life . . . (figure 3)	3	yes	Pol
subtotal	15 texts (3 to 14 each, above)	80	
	17 texts (2 each)	34	
	74 texts (1 each)	74	
Total	106 texts	108	pieces