Immigration

Sources and Strategies

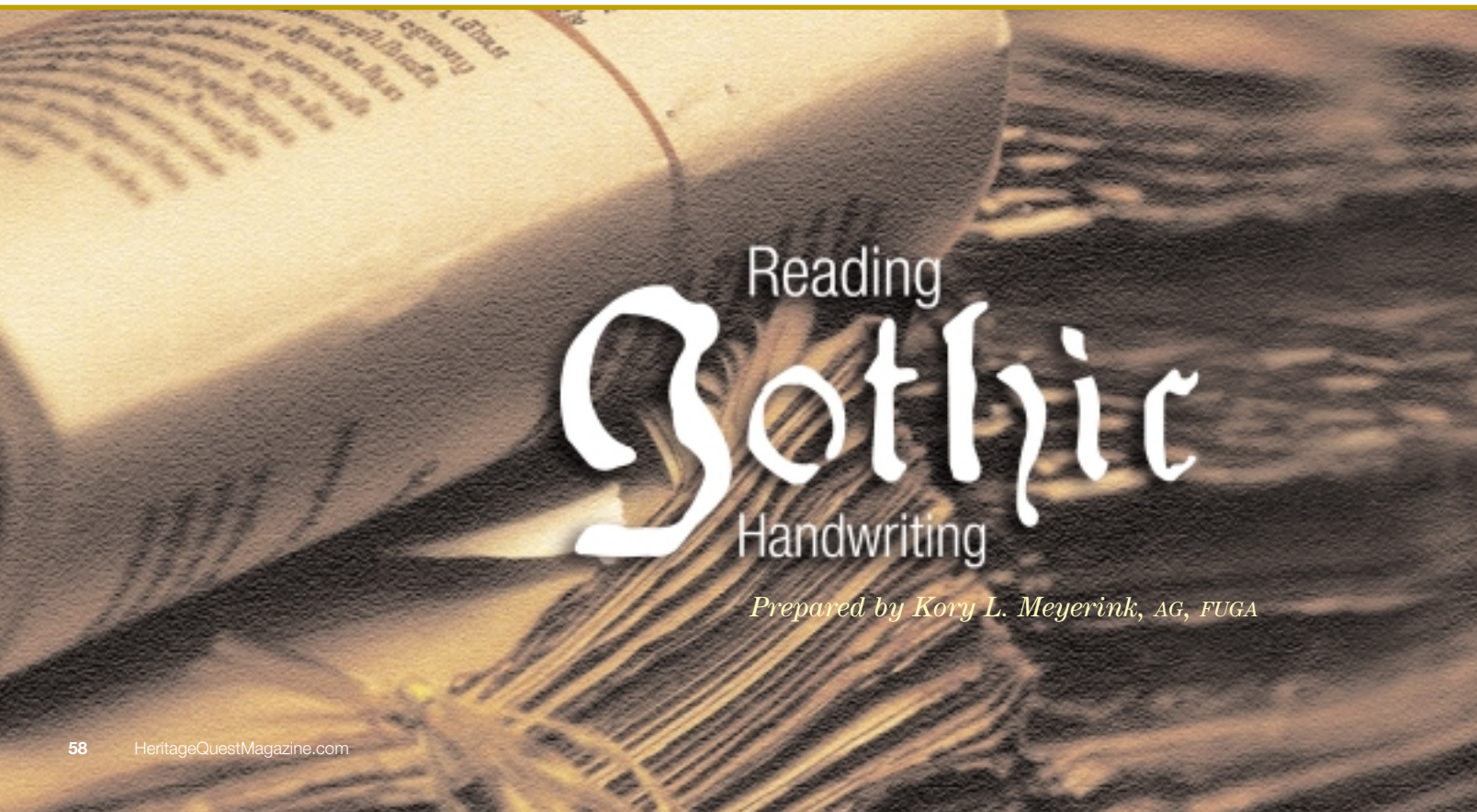
Sooner or later (hopefully sooner, probably later), you'll find it. That long-awaited name of the town in the old country where your immigrant lived, or was born. Well, now what? Like the proverbial dog who finally catches the car he's been chasing, what are you going to do with it, once you have it?

For a genealogist, the answer may seem obvious. The first thing you want to do is access the records of the hometown, verify that the ancestor did indeed live there, and then extend the ancestry as far back as the records allow (or as far back as the family was in that town).

Aaahhh, but there is a catch! Or, two. For the majority of immigrants to North America, those immigrants came from a country where they did not speak English. But, perhaps even worse than that, many came from countries where the handwriting and lettering styles were different than modern researchers are used to reading or writing.

Learning the foreign language of your ancestors is not that difficult. College and community education classes abound. Dictionaries and genealogical word lists are easy to obtain. But that handwriting! There are far fewer opportunities to learn to read the old styles—particularly that used in northern European countries, a style usually called the *Gothic script*, or handwriting. Dealing with old Gothic handwriting is difficult for many researchers. There are few rules, and even fewer textbooks from which to learn.

Most Germanic countries used a handwriting style that had evolved in northern Europe over several centuries, even while the different languages were evolving. Hence, the Gothic script is predominant not only in Germany, but in The Netherlands and the major Scandinavian countries (notably Denmark, Sweden, and Norway). With upwards of ten million immi-



grants having come from these countries alone, learning the fundamentals of the Gothic script is crucial to the research success of their descendants.

Brief History of Gothic Handwriting

Handwriting evolved over time in Germanic countries, just as it did in other countries. By the 1300s, it had become the so-called Gothic script, sometimes called *Fraktur*. However, that term, *Fraktur* is now usually used in reference to a printing typeface, generally used in Germany prior to World War II.

The first instructional materials promoting a common handwriting style appeared in 1538 and helped develop a quasi-standard that continued to grow and evolve throughout German-speaking areas. The presence of the early primer, and others that followed, means that there are similarities in the handwriting throughout all Germanic areas. However, by its very nature, handwriting varies from person to person, or in this case from one clerk or minister to another. Some were careful scribes, who made precise letters and numbers as they had been taught in school. Others took less time as they made their records, or wrote in a smaller hand, or tried to fit too many entries on each page in the various books they kept.

Therefore, each writer will have his own little quirks and differences from other writers. Minor variations will also exist in different countries. Researchers must take time to get used to such variations. As education became more universal in the 1800s, handwriting became more standardized, and the records become easier to read. However, it was not until the twentieth century when countries officially began discouraging the use of the old style Gothic handwriting, favoring instead letters formed in the Latin style. In Germany, this did not happen until 1941. Since a more modern Latin style has been taught in the schools for the past 60 to 80 years, there are very few persons in Europe, even among some of the record custodians, who can easily read the old records.

Thus, the diligent researcher has to be almost *self-taught* to read the old Gothic style of handwriting. While it helps to have a good familiarity with the specific language of the records, including both the vocabulary and the grammar, it is not necessary. The old Gothic handwriting uses all the same letters found in more modern Latin (or English) writing, along with a couple of extra forms for several letters, depending on the specific language. The *only* difference is that many of the letters are formed differently and, of course, the words are not in English.

Therefore, it is best to begin learning the old Gothic handwriting by learning the letters.

Lowercase Letters

As with English handwritten records, the lowercase letters are used most frequently. Therefore, it is useful to begin introducing the Gothic script with the lowercase letters.

The first point to make is that, in addition to the 26 letters familiar to English readers, there are usually additional lowercase letters, depending on which language. For example, most readers of *German* have already learned about three vowels that sometimes carry the umlaut (two dots). These are considered separate letters: *ä*, *ö*, *ü*. In addition, there is a second form for the letter *s* and, in German, an entirely different letter that represents a double-*s*, (*ss*) called an "esset."

A double-s, is called an esset.

In *Danish*, there are also three additional letters: *æ*, *ø*, *å*. The *Dutch* use an underline (_) character, which is often used in place of *y*, and may be written as a *ÿ* (with the umlaut over the letter). *Swedish* uses three of these same letters: *å*, *ä*, *ö*. *Norwegian* uses the same three added letters as does Danish, although prior to 1915, the *å* was often written as a double-*a*, or *aa*. While practice writing these letters is generally regarded as the best way to learn the Gothic script, it is also important to learn how to recognize them, and that is easier to discuss in this column.

Experience has shown that a useful way to recognize letters is to discuss them in groups, based on certain common features. When reading a Gothic style document, you find a letter that is difficult to recognize, simply determine which group it belongs to. Then systematically eliminate other members of the group, based in part on what the letter clearly is not, as well as what letters would be appropriate at that place in a word of that specific language. Understanding the following five groups will help.

Letters Very Similar to Latin (English)

The first group to consider consists of six letters that appear very similar to English (Latin style) handwriting. This includes the letters: *b*, *i*, *j*, *l*, *m*, and *n*. Despite individual variances in handwriting, these letters should be clearly recognizable to most researchers.

The other groups all focus on how the letters appear on the page. All letters are said to sit on the baseline, which is the straight line (usually just imagined, but actually printed on certain notebook paper) followed in any block of text. From that baseline, each letter either remains only on that line, or may stick up (ascend) past the midpoint, or hang down (descend) below the base line where the letters sit.

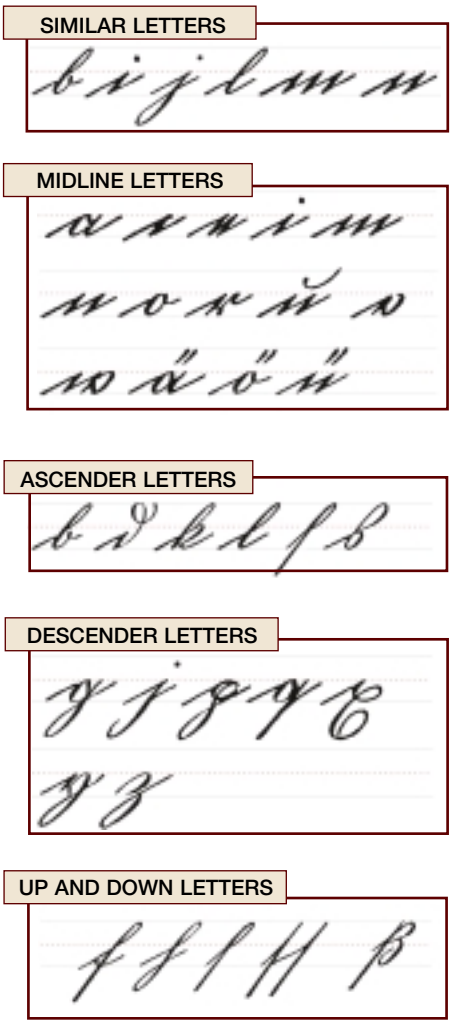
Fortunately, most Gothic letters are similar enough to English letters that usually the same letters in both languages (both in handwriting and printing) fall into the same classes. The exceptions, discussed below, include *h*, *s*, and *x*. The six letters similar to English also appear in the other groups, as appropriate, and their recognition will aid the researcher in dismissing them en route to correctly identifying each letter.

Midline Letters

The largest group includes those letters that are simply written fully between the base line, and the midpoint (called the midline) between that base line and the baseline of the next line above. As in English, these midline letters are as follows: *a*, *c*, *e*, *i*, *m*, *n*, *o*, *r*, *u*, *v*, *w*, and the three German vowels that use the umlaut: *ä*, *ö*, *ü*. Note that all the vowels (except the occasional *y*) and three very common letters (*m*, *n*, *r*) are part of this class of letters. The other letters in this class appear less frequently.

Ascender Letters

Another class of letters includes those that have one stroke ascending past the mid-point of the regular line of letters. This includes the letters: *b*, *d*, *k*, *l*, *t*, and *s* (but only at the end of a word). In handwritten English, these also are ascender letters, except for the letter *s*.



Descender Letters

The opposite is a class of letters having a pen stroke that descends below the base line. Sometimes this descending stroke is called a "tail." These letters include the following: *g*, *j*, *p*, *q*, *x*, *y*, *z*. In English handwriting, all of these letters are also descenders, except for *x*, which has a tail in Gothic script.

Up and Down Strokes

The final (and smallest) class of lowercase letters includes the four that have pen strokes both ascending past the midline and descending below the baseline. In English, only the letter *f* does this. In Gothic you will be watching for: *f*, *h*, *s* (at the beginning or middle of words), and, specifically in German Gothic, the *ss* (double-*s*), which looks like the Greek capital letter, *Beta* (ß).

Uppercase Letters

Uppercase letters are generally easier to read in the Gothic script than are lowercase letters. Part of this is due to the fact that the letters are larger, making them more distinct. Also, many of them bear some resemblance to English (Latin style) capital letters. It should also be remembered that, specifically in German language records, all nouns (common and proper) begin with uppercase letters. It is also helpful to classify groups, as was done with the lowercase letters. The following classes should help readers decide which letters are which.

Similar to Latin Script

It's usually best to start with the easiest letters to recognize. Certain capital letters look very similar in English (Latin) as in the Gothic script: *E*, *F*, *I*, *J*, *L*, *O*, *R*, *T*, and *X*.

Similar to the Lowercase Letter

Having learned the lowercase letters, it should now be fairly easy to enlarge some of those letters to the size of capital letters. The following letters are almost identical as uppercase letters as they are in the lowercase: *A*, *B*, *G*, *Q*, *V*, *W*, *Z*, *Ä*, *Ö*, and *Ü*.

Comparable to Latin Script

Several other letters of the uppercase in old Gothic script bear some resemblance to the Latin characters we use in English. Although they are not identical, a close observation will reveal many commonalities, although the Gothic letters may have an extra loop or crossbar. These letters include: *M*, *N*, *P*, *U*, and *Y*.

Very Different Appearance

Well, with 24 out of 29 letters being fairly easy to recognize, that only leaves five letters to struggle with. However, *W* gets "double" attention, since it is indeed similar to its lowercase version, yet very different from its Latin script version. Even some of these include some elements found in their Latin script versions. However, as you practice, spend more time on these six letters, three of which are very common in Gothic documents: *C*, *D*, *H*, *K*, *S*, and *W*.

Abbreviations

Regardless of the language, abbreviations are common with most handwritten records. Space may be limited, paper scarce or expensive, or clerks and scribes hurried. In any case, not recognizing abbreviations often leads to misreading the records. Of course, any writer may use personal abbreviations, which are difficult, if not impossible, to interpret without some sort of legend or key. However, over time, certain abbreviations developed within the old Gothic script, which are relatively easily understood.

Many abbreviations were formed, as they are in English, by simply leaving off the ending, usually the final syllable or two. This is typically indicated by a period (.) or colon (:). Sometimes other punctuation marks were used, such as the comma (,) or the semi-colon (;).

Where two letters appear together, notably two *m*'s or two *n*'s, the second such letter is often omitted, and the abbreviation shown by drawing a straight line (a bar) over the remaining letter.

Two common, brief endings on some Gothic words, the *-er* and *-en* endings, were often omitted and replaced by a kind of tail. For *-er* the tail is an upward stroke, ending in a loop, while for *-en* the tail typically is downward, with an upward hook.

Some of the most popular given names were so common that they were simply abbreviated by the first initial. While *M*. for Maria, and *J*. for Johann, or Jan in Scandinavian countries, are the most common; others appear in other records, such as *K*. for Katherine or W. for Wilhelm. For some names, it may vary from parish to parish. To learn if the abbreviation *G*. stands for Georg or Gerhart, you will have to examine the records very carefully. In such cases, the abbreviation was not used in all instances, so you can probably find multiple records dealing with the same person, some using the abbreviation and some not. This will allow you to create your own locality-specific list of abbreviations.

Confusing Letters

Although formal instruction books show that each letter is distinct and different, some still look quite similar. Add to this the natural variations found with different scribes, and sometimes one letter is easily mistaken for another. There is even a fictitious word which helps illustrate this fact in the Gothic script. Consider the letter combination: *minnum*. All of the strokes used to create these letters are identical (go ahead, practice writing this word in the old Gothic script). The only difference is that the letter *m* has three up strokes, the letter *i* has a dot, the two *n*'s have a total of four up-strokes, and the *u* carries a bow above the letter.

The bow is crucial to separate the

From: Sophie Duriot, *Beginners' Book in German*. (Ginn & Co., 1889)

letters *u* and *n*. However, sometimes, when the German umlaut is placed over the *u*, it can create some confusion. The two dots may be written poorly, and may appear as a bow (a curved line, turned up at the ends, like a smile). However, usually in such a case, the bow appears upside down (the curve turns down at the ends, like a frown). Where that appears, consider it to be a poor umlaut.

Other lowercase letters that are often confused include *f* and *s*, as well as *e* and *u*, and even *e* and *r*. Uppercase letters to watch for include *I* and *J*, which are often interchanged in writing. Also, the letter combination *St* often looks quite a bit like the single letter *N*.

Numbers and Dates

Understanding the words is, of course, quite important in reading Gothic documents. However, genealogical records almost invariably include numbers and dates, which may be expressed differently in Gothic script than in Latin.

Most regular digits (numerals) are quite similar to their Latin version; however, the numbers *1* and *7* are sometimes confused by inexperienced researchers. The number *1* will often have a slight up stroke to begin the number, while *7* usually includes a cross bar in the middle of the stem.

When reading dates, it is important to remember that the days of the week and months of the year are proper nouns, so they will be capitalized. There is a known number of them (seven days, twelve months)—so, learn the names of the days and months in the language of the record and you should have no trouble. Many are quite similar (for example, in Norwegian, four are identical) to the English names, and should be readily recognized, except when the last four months are abbreviated to their old Roman numbers, *7ber*, *8ber*, *9ber*, *10ber* (being September through December). Six of the seven days of the week almost always end in *-tag* in German, while the Scandinavian days all end in *-dag*.

Reference Tools to Use

There are so many potential pitfalls when reading Gothic handwritten records that the diligent researcher, including those with years of experience, still make regular use of certain reference tools. While you may not be able to carry all of the following tools along with you in your research, you should be familiar with each of them so that you can use them as needed.

Foreign Language Dictionary

Sometimes the only way to correctly identify certain letters in some documents is to understand what word is being written. Though the document is written in a foreign language, it is one whose spelling has been reasonably consistent for many centuries (personal names and places not withstanding). Here is where a good foreign language/English dictionary, such as found in most bookstores will be an important tool. Where possible, have a dictionary specifically designed for genealogists, or one that includes older, archaic terms. Even a genealogical word list is a significant help. They are easily available to print for your own use at www.familysearch.org, under the "research helps" tab look for "German Research Helps."

Foreign Grammar Guide

An understanding of the foreign language, including proper syntax, conjugation of verbs, proper tense of sentences and other grammatical conventions (gender, voice, number, etc.) can greatly aid the reading of old documents. While grammatical rules were not as fixed in earlier years, modern grammar is not significantly different. A typical school grammar guide will likely be sufficient to help you work out many problems. College bookstores may be the most convenient source for such tools.

Gazetteers

Some of the most difficult words to decipher are place names. These are generally unique words that don't appear in dictionaries, and are not part of the standard verbiage of the records. Therefore, they are not as easily read. Knowing the names of nearby villages (as taken from a period map, for example) can help; but often people moved from quite some distance. Knowing the appropriate gazetteers, and how to use them, for the state or province, and having access to them, will allow you to interpret words otherwise unknown. It is important to remember that place names are proper nouns, and should always be capitalized in Gothic records.

Library Catalog or Archive Inventory

Whatever records you are reading, someone has already described them in a library catalog or archive inventory. This description will help you understand the nature of the records, the dates it covers, and the kind of information to expect. Usually North Americans are using microfilm copies of these European records, so the library catalog is the best place to find this information. When using the records in an archive, ask for a copy of the description of the records, in order to fully understand the records you are reading.

Useful Tactics for Reading the Records

The following concepts will often make it easier to read the old Gothic documents.

Identify the Arrangement of the Records

Here is where the record description provided by the library or archive can be valuable, as well as any previous experience you have had with similar records. You should also browse through the records before trying to read them. Determine the general format, as well as any specific order within records. For example, do the records always begin with the date, or with a person's name?

Determine if there are any standardized phrases and words. One entry may be difficult to read, but another entry just a few pages away may be much easier. While the specific person in the record may not be your ancestor, learning the terminology of the entry will help you find and read that same terminology in the entry of interest to you.

Many records are arranged in columns with standard headings. Knowing the content of each column will help you readily read entries of interest. Other records, such as civil registration, may be on pre-printed forms. Here you can interpret the printed language much easier, and can then focus on the handwritten portion in the form's blanks.

Determine if there are any indexes for that record. They may be at the back of the book (end of the microfilm) or even in another book (or roll of film). Finding a person of interest in the index will usually provide not only the page number and date, but also the most common spelling of the name. This may help you decide how to read certain letters.

Watch for signatures of ministers or witnesses, as well as other standard elements. Is the age always given in the particular burial records you are searching? Are the witnesses' names always given? Is the father's occupation typically recorded?

Most records are arranged chronologically. This is a great help in reading dates. Sometimes months are hard to read, or even days of the month. Don't just try to read one entry of interest. Note the dates in surrounding entries, to make sure you are reading the dates correctly in your entry.

Understand Language and Customs

Make use of the reference tools mentioned below. You may want to create a record-specific vocabulary list with typical words appearing in that type of record. Then, when you see that word again, you will more readily recognize it.

Be sure you understand the spelling conventions and grammar, including any typical abbreviations. Understand the phonetics of the foreign language as well. Some sounds can be expressed in more than one way (this is much more common in English, but does happen in Germanic languages). For example, the letters *d* and *t* are often interchanged. Take note of such situations before you decide you must be wrong about the spelling of a particular word in the record.

Pay attention to the unique characters in the particular language. This includes certain letter combinations (such as *sch*), which seldom appear in English. Be certain to distinguish between the ending *s* versus the initial and internal *s*, or *ss*.

Watch for any naming customs that appear in the families. Certain given names will be repeated in successive generations. This can help you stay on the right track as you pursue a family through the years. Although most of these cultures don't have a standard naming pattern, as do some other cultures, you may still detect some patterns, particularly among the Dutch. Add such names as are common to the family to your record-specific vocabulary list.

Apply Correct Mechanics

This is a "catch-all" group of tactics that address some of the physical constraints we can control in our research. For example, don't force the answer to come when dealing with a particularly difficult entry. Move on to other entries, such as the birth records of other children in the family. Often you need to become more familiar with the words, names, and handwriting style in that particular record. Later you can come back to that entry and it will be easier to read.

Sometimes the image you are working with is poor. There are several ways in which you can improve the image. If you are using a microfilm reader, you may want to try a different reader with a brighter light bulb, or with a better (or greater) focus. Some people have found that a light pastel paper, instead of the white projection background will bring out difficult to see letters. With modern technology, you may be able to scan the image into your computer, and then improve the image with computer software.

Read through other pages to get an understanding of the content of the record, and the format of the entries. Scan other pages for the words or letters you cannot recognize. The words may be clearer on another page, or the letter may be more obvious when found in a different word.

Keep track of unusual regional names, both place names and given names. You may find them in more recent records, which are more legible, and then better understand them in the older records.

Take time to practice writing the letters. You may find it useful to trace over some of the letters, words, and even entire entries in the record. As you trace those letters, you will better understand what the original writer was recording, and then be able to read that letter or word.

The most important aspect of this part of reading the records is to understand that you may need to take time to fully understand the record in order to make sense out of it. Remember, someone with knowledge of specific facts recorded that information and knew what he was writing. It is not just chicken scratch, although at times it may look like it. There is meaning in those "scribbles" and with work you can figure it out.

Useful References

The following books, or similar ones, may be available at the library or Family History Center, or wherever you usually research Gothic records. If so, they may provide help in understanding the records you are reading.

Bukke, Inger et. al. *The Comprehensive Feast Day Calendar*. Bountiful, Ut.: Thomsen's Genealogical Center, 1983.

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