

Throughout 2024, NCRA's 125th anniversary year, the JCR will be featuring articles from past publications. We hope that you enjoy this look into our shared history.

FROM THE Archives

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Shorthand an Ancient Art



HOW many stenographers realize that shorthand is one of the first of the arts. It is a fact that the Greeks and Romans used a certain tachygraphy, and while it is not definitively known at what date a contracted system of writing was first employed, it is believed that certain notes and inscriptions in the papyri dated in the second century, B.C., were made in shorthand.

The development of shorthand in the early ages was due especially to Marcus Tullius Tyro. He was born in Latium in 300 B.C. He was a slave and was raised with Cicero, who was some years his junior. Freed, he became Cicero's secretary, and in this capacity he aided him greatly.

In the famous trial of Cataline (63 B.C.) the stenographic rapidity of Tyro was at its height. In the first century before Christ a discourse of Cota Uticensis, according to Plutarch, was taken down in shorthand.

Certain words of Diogenes Laertus have been taken to indicate that Xenophon took shorthand notes of the lectures of Socrates. A letter of Flavius Philostratus, of date A.D., 195, mentions a Greek shorthand writer, but no very ancient specimens of Greek shorthand are now in existence.

Origen of Alexandria (185 to 254, A.D.) noted his sermons down in shorthand, and Socrates the ecclesiastical historian of the fourth century, said that

parts of the sermons of St. John Chrysostom were preserved by the same process. The shorthand they used was a form of writing in which each word was represented by a special sign. The letters of the alphabet, connected so as to admit a great rapidity of execution, formed the elements of these characters.

Manilius, who was a contemporary of Cicero, Virgil and Horace, mentions it in verse. He says:

“In shorthand skilled, where little marks comprise
Whole words, a sentence in a single letter lies,
And while the willing hand its aid affords,
Prevents the tongue to fix the failing words.”

The largest amount of ancient shorthand material is found in the Vatican MS. and contains forty-seven pages covered with tachygraphic writing of the eleventh century. In it are fragments of the works of St. Maximus the confessor of St. Cyprian of Antioch. The origin of the Greek tachygraphy is supposed to be the results of secret writing which has developed from forms of oppression, and which the early Christians adopted for their own use.

In 1588 Dr. Timothy Bride published a work called “Characterie,” and two years later Peter Bales’ “Art of Brachygraphie” appeared. In these systems almost every word in the English language is provided with an arbitrary sign. What would the students of the present time do were they compelled to learn an arbitrary sign for every word in the English vocabulary?

The first system which met the demands in any practical manner was compiled by John Willis in 1602. It was substantially based on the alphabet, was clumsy, unweildy, and entailed great practice and study. Between that time and the publication of Sir Isaac Pitman’s phonography in 1837 more than two hundred systems intevened, nearly all based on the common alphabet. But seven were, like the Pitman, strictly phonetic, they being those of Tiffin (1750), Lyle (1762), Holdsworth and Aldridge (1766), Roe (1802), Phineas Bailey (1819), Towndrow (1831), and De Stain (1839). The Wllis system was adapted to the German, Dutch and Latin. T. Sheldon’s system, republished a great many times down to 1687 and which was an imitation somewhat of the Willis, was the one used by Samuel Pepys in writing his diary. The book of Psalms in metre was engraved according to Sheldon’s system by Thomas Cross.

In the early days it would seem that there were as many incompetents as at the present time, for we find in a prologue of the play of Queen Elizabeth, written by Thomas Heywood, a contemporary of Shakespeare, the words:

“To throng the seats, the boxes and the stage,
So much that some by stenography drew
A plot, put it in print—scarce one word true.”

From the time of the publication of Sir Isaac Pitman’s work until the present day, there have been thousands upon thousands of systems of shorthand given to the public.