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# John Jenkins and *The Art of Writing*: Handwriting and Identity in the Early American Republic

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### Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Christen, Richard S., "John Jenkins and *The Art of Writing*: Handwriting and Identity in the Early American Republic" (2012).  
*Education Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 8.  
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John Jenkins and *The Art of Writing*:  
Handwriting and Identity in the  
Early American Republic

RICHARD S. CHRISTEN

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ALTHOUGH English handwriting texts circulated in British North America throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the first “purely American designed, made and produced” penmanship book did not debut until 1791.<sup>1</sup> Written by John Jenkins, a thirty-six-year-old New England schoolmaster, *The Art of Writing, Reduced to a Plain and Easy System* was little more than a pamphlet—thirty-two pages of text accompanied by a frontispiece and four plates of engraved writing samples. The slim volume is remarkable, however, for it unveiled an alternative to English-influenced handwriting practices, and bolstered by endorsements from a cluster of New England notables—including John Adams, Timothy Dwight, and John Hancock—it was immediately popular. By 1813, when a second edition appeared, the Jenkins system had become America’s handwriting standard.<sup>2</sup> The key to this success was an

I would like to thank the Spencer Foundation, whose generous funding made research for this article possible. My thanks also go to Paul Bartels for his invaluable support at many stages of the writing process.

<sup>1</sup>John Jenkins, *The Art of Writing, Reduced to a Plain and Easy System* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1791); Stanley Morison, *American Copybooks: An Outline of Their History from Colonial to Modern Times* (Philadelphia: Wm. F. Fell, 1951), p. 20. Citations to quotations from the 1791 edition of *The Art of Writing* will be embedded in the text and will be designated 1st ed.

<sup>2</sup>John Jenkins, *The Art of Writing, Reduced to a Plain and Easy System* (Cambridge, Mass.: Flagg and Gould, 1813). A “third edition,” identical to the 1813 book, was printed in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, in 1816. Citations to quotations from the 1813 edition of *The Art of Writing* will be embedded in the text and will be designated 2nd ed.

*The New England Quarterly*, vol. LXXXV, no. 3 (September 2012). © 2012 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved.

innovative pedagogy that promised to make penmanship “plain and easy.” In contrast to the traditional method of teaching and learning writing—pupils endlessly copying exemplars under the stern watch of a master—Jenkins instructed students to analyze the structure of letters carefully before executing them. This hand-and-mind combination, he boasted, would dramatically abbreviate the time needed to learn writing and bring handwriting mastery within the reach of all Americans.

Such claims seem trivial today, when handwriting has become increasingly irrelevant, its economic, social, and educational functions nearly exhausted.<sup>3</sup> But in the late eighteenth century, penmanship was a prized skill. Essential to commerce, government, education, and personal correspondence as well as a recognized marker of character, class, gender, and occupation, it was a valuable social and economic tool. And because it mattered in these practical ways, the pen was an important means of fashioning, expressing, and controlling identity. Early Americans used penmanship to convey ideas, pursue their ambitions, and most important, present themselves to friends and colleagues.<sup>4</sup> Certain scripts carried more prestige than others—elegant penmanship signified refinement; a plain hand represented lower social rank, for example—and mastery of a specific hand was a highly visible way of positioning oneself within society. Handwriting instruction, which regulated access to these styles, became a practical manifestation of collective values. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, penmanship teaching methods typically restricted elegant handwriting to

<sup>3</sup>Interest in penmanship instruction has revived recently, spurred in part by neuroscientists’ claims of a connection between brain development and handwriting. See Kitty Burns Florey, *Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall of Handwriting* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville Publishing, 2009); Stephen T. Peverly, “The Importance of Handwriting Speed in Adult Writing,” *Developmental Neuropsychology* 29.1 (2006): 197–216; and Gwendolyn Bounds, “How Handwriting Trains the Brain: Forming Letters Is Key to Learning, Memory, Ideas,” *Wall Street Journal*, 5 October 2010, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704631504575531932754922518.html>; accessed 21 July 2011. For a critique of this revival, see Anne Trubeck, “Stop Teaching Handwriting,” *Good: The Magazine*, 11 February 2008, at <http://www.good.is/post/stop-teaching-handwriting/>; accessed 18 July 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. x.

political and cultural elites and, in the process, reinforced aristocratic hierarchies.

Writing in the shadow of the American Revolution, Jenkins recognized that subtle changes in everyday cultural practices like handwriting could have significant effects on the character of the new nation.<sup>5</sup> In the 1791 printing of *The Art of Writing*, he predicted that if his pedagogical method and common script were widely adopted, they would foster unity in the new but disjointed republic. Twenty-two years later, in *The Art of Writing*'s revised second edition, Jenkins touted his system's social potential when he promised that a hand-mind method would democratize fine penmanship, bringing beauty and a traditional signifier of gentility and respectability within reach of many more Americans, especially the nascent middle class. Reimagining handwriting as a mental as well as a physical process, he also chipped away at the ancient separation between those who worked with their hands and those who did not. For Jenkins, well-fashioned writing and other skilled handwork were dignified intellectual activities, and the capable craftsman—whether represented by the ingenious mechanic or dutiful clerk—was an archetype for the early nineteenth century.

The two editions of *The Art of Writing* provide valuable insight into the ways in which Americans understood and attempted to shape identity in the early American republic. In 1791, concerned that the new republic might unravel, Jenkins viewed handwriting as an agent of national unity. Two decades later, emphasizing individual social and economic opportunity, he portrayed the pen as a means for Americans to define their place within a promising but uncertain context. Born in 1755 and thus twenty-one years old when independence was declared—not fully a member of either the Revolutionary

<sup>5</sup>For historians advocating this perspective, see David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Rhys Issac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); and T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of the Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

cohort nor of what Joyce Appleby describes as the “inheriting generation”—Jenkins did not advocate an abrupt break from the past.<sup>6</sup> His vision of the new United States fused both old and new: glancing back to the values of the eighteenth-century aristocracy, he employed them purposefully to inch toward a more individualistic, mercantile, and middle-class society. Ultimately, Jenkins believed that synthesis—gentility with opportunity, aesthetics with utility, and most important, hand with mind—should define individual and national identity in the early American republic.

### *Handwriting and Gentility*

Prior to Jenkins, British and American penmanship was enmeshed in a hand-mind hierarchy that had dominated Western thought and action since at least classical Greece.<sup>7</sup> For Aristotle, moral fitness, civic reliability, and social rank depended largely on the type of work one did—manual or intellectual. Reflective contemplation, essential for effective deliberation and virtuous conduct, required leisure, which the pressures of manual work precluded. Citizens “must not lead the life of mechanics and tradesmen for such a life is ignoble and inimical to virtue . . . and the performance of civic duties,” Aristotle insisted. Manual tasks “tend to deform the body [and] absorb and degrade the mind”; if citizens “habitually practice them there will cease to be distinction between master and slave.”<sup>8</sup> In keeping with his leisure-labor, hand-mind hierarchy, Aristotle recommended different educations for citizens and noncitizens:

<sup>6</sup>Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), p. vii.

<sup>7</sup>Anthony R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1994), and *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (Orlando, Fla.: Harvest, 2003); Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); and Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Modern Library, 1943), pp. 132–33, 321–22. See also Kenneth Charlton, “The Liberal-Vocational Debate in Early Modern England,” in *Preparation for Life: The Paradox of Education in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Joan N. Burstyn (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1968), p. 2.

applied learning at the worksite for the city-state's noncitizen laborers, artisans, and merchants; for citizens, a liberal education focusing on such intellectual studies as prepare free men for constructive leisure and civic duties.<sup>9</sup>

In the seventeenth century, Europeans associated intellectual and civic fitness with gentility. Those who mastered manners, grace, good taste, and classical learning—characteristics that, in essence, separated them from the effects of the body—“ought to be preferred in Fees, Honours, Offices, and other dignities of command and government, before the common people,” Englishman Henry Peacham directed in his popular courtesy book *The Compleat Gentleman* (1634). Conversely, “whosoever labour for their livelihood and gaine have no share at all in Nobility and Gentry . . . because their bodies are spent with labour and travaile.”<sup>10</sup> Educational practices in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain and its colonies reinforced Peacham's dichotomy. Grammar schools or private tutors taught the gentry a classical curriculum and aristocratic behaviors, while those engaged in commerce, technical occupations, or other hand labor learned in apprenticeships, on the job, or in what we would today refer to as business schools. Instructional methods also conformed to the hand-mind distinction: physical application for manual skills; memorization, analysis, and other mental techniques for intellectual subjects.<sup>11</sup>

Although formidable, the Western hand-mind divide was never absolute. In early modern Britain, for example, a vocal minority linked hand labor with Christian virtue, and

<sup>9</sup>Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, expanded ed. (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995), pp. 17–18.

<sup>10</sup>Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman* (1634), repr. as *Peacham's Compleat Gentleman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), pp. 12–13. According to Lawrence Stone, the primary social divide in early modern England was between “those who did, and those who did not have to work with their hands” (“Social Mobility in England, 1500–1700,” in *Seventeenth-Century England: Society in an Age of Revolution*, ed. Paul S. Seaver [New York: New Viewpoints, 1976], p. 7).

<sup>11</sup>Kenneth Charlton, “The Teaching Profession in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England,” *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 11 (1967): 29–43, and *Education in Renaissance England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 16–20.

even Peacham grudgingly acknowledged that merchants might become “esteemed and held capable of honour in their Common-wealth.”<sup>12</sup> Mental-manual boundaries were even more permeable in British America. Colonial elites were more likely than their English counterparts to be working men, actively engaged in running estates or in commerce. Moreover, because the colonies had no titled nobility or entrenched hereditary gentry, wealth from commerce, especially the long-distance trade, carried social and political clout, particularly in New England and the middle colonies, which accorded successful merchants like John Hancock and Robert Morris governing roles alongside large landowners, clergy, educated professionals, and government officials.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, gentility and other hand-mind assumptions still played a crucial role in legitimizing America’s “natural aristocracy.”<sup>14</sup> In the absence of other markers of distinction, eighteenth-century colonial authority and status depended heavily on how one appeared to others. Americans expected their leaders, regardless of wealth, to display a repertoire of genteel attributes—classical education, proper dress, correct speech, graceful movement, polite manners, civic engagement, personal disinterest—that would herald their moral worth and separate them from the less polite masses.<sup>15</sup> Hancock and

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Pelican Books, 1975), pp. 300–302. Nonetheless, Peacham insisted that merchants became worthy of honor only after, following an Aristotelian prescription, “they had ten yeeres before given over Trading and Merchandize” (*Peacham’s Compleat Gentleman*, p. 11).

<sup>13</sup>Mark C. Nitcholas, “The Evolution of Gentility in Eighteenth-Century England and Colonial America” (M.A. thesis, University of North Texas, 2000), p. 155; Stephen Mennell, *The American Civilizing Process* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 81–83; and Stow Persons, *The Decline of American Gentility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. v–vi.

<sup>14</sup>Mennell, *American Civilizing Process*, p. 94. For more on the nature of the “natural aristocracy,” see Andrew S. Trees, *The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 2–3, and Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 11–12.

<sup>15</sup>According to Alan Taylor, a late eighteenth-century American became a gentleman “only if other people, common as well as genteel, publicly conceded that he had crossed—by breeding, education, and acquisition—the subtle line separating

Morris were wealthy merchants, but in the end, it was their learning, dress, manners, and public generosity that granted them access to the inner circles of American politics.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Benjamin Franklin realized that, no matter how prosperous, he would not be able to perform the role of a gentleman convincingly while working as a printer. He retired as soon as he had amassed a “sufficient tho’ moderate fortune” and began, at the age of forty-two, to cultivate the manners, learning, and public-spirited avocations that signified gentility.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, William Cooper, a wealthy upstate New York landowner who, like Franklin, had risen from obscurity, found his rough, clumsy, and bombastic demeanor an obstacle to political influence.<sup>18</sup> Elite colonial women also relied on appearance to distinguish themselves and to display their family’s social status; they acquired luxury goods for their homes, pursued educations directed toward taste and discernment, and organized and participated in exclusive social activities.<sup>19</sup>

A hand skill used in a wide range of vocations and activities, mental as well as manual, penmanship was, in some ways,

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the genteel few from the common many” (*William Cooper’s Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* [New York: Random House, 1995], p. 14).

<sup>16</sup>William M. Fowler Jr., *The Baron of Beacon Hill: A Biography of John Hancock* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980); Harlow Giles Unger, *John Hancock: Merchant King and American Patriot* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000); and Marko Junkkarinen, “Living an American Lifestyle in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia—Robert Morris, Prosperous Merchant and Family Man,” *EurAmerica* 35 (2005): 459–99. For more on Hancock’s use of gentility, see Gregory H. Nobles, “‘Yet the Old Republicans Still Persevere’: Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and the Crisis of Popular Leadership in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1775–1790,” in *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), pp. 258–85.

<sup>17</sup>Simon P. Newman, “Benjamin Franklin and the Leather-Apron Men: The Politics of Class in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *Journal of American Studies* 43 (2009): 161–75, and Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993), pp. 118–19.

<sup>18</sup>Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town*, pp. 145–46.

<sup>19</sup>Sarah Fotherly, *Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies: Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 2008), pp. 13–18.



an unlikely marker of social rank.<sup>20</sup> During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, steady growth in literacy, political centralization, and commerce induced widespread demand across class and occupation for an aptitude that had been rare during the Middle Ages.<sup>21</sup> Social historian David Cressy estimates, based on document signature rates, that written literacy was nearly universal among the clergy, professionals, and male gentry in seventeenth-century England and that approximately half of tradesmen, skilled artisans, and yeoman could write their names. Overall, less than one-fifth of women could write, Cressy points out, but rates among well-born females and London residents were much higher.<sup>22</sup> Upper-class men and in many cases women found the pen useful for studies, household transactions, and personal correspondence. It was even more vital for government, business, and the professions. Bills of sale, ledgers, contracts, and other legal, diplomatic, and financial records—the lifeblood of politics, law, and especially business—all required fast, legible penmanship. The extension of English sea power and long-distance commerce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave handwriting another boost as trading companies, stock exchanges, insurance companies, and other commercial entities emerged, all depending on a cadre of workers who could write well.<sup>23</sup>

Specialized writing masters taught many types of students, from aspirant clerks to budding gentlemen and ladies.<sup>24</sup> The

<sup>20</sup>For other examples of hand and mind blending in early modern England, see Charlton, “The Liberal-Vocational Debate,” pp. 1–18; Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities, Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 184–200; and Sheldon Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education: An Essay in History and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 25.

<sup>21</sup>Henry C. Schulz, “The Teaching of Handwriting in Tudor and Stuart Times,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 6 (1943): 381–425; and Charlton, *Education in Renaissance England*, pp. 267–69.

<sup>22</sup>Since reading was generally taught before writing until the early twentieth century, David Cressy assumes that reading literacy was higher than written signature rates (“Levels of Literacy in England, 1530–1730,” *Historical Journal* 20 [1977]: 1–23).

<sup>23</sup>Donald M. Anderson, *Calligraphy: The Art of Written Forms* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), pp. 148–49.

<sup>24</sup>Early seventeenth-century penman Martin Billingsley complained of so many London competitors that “a man can go into no corner of this city, but he shall see and

masters conducted private lessons for well-born boys and girls, operated schools to train future merchants and supplement the classical learning of grammar school students, who were typically the sons of Britain's elites, and composed instructional manuals, where they frequently proclaimed that effective handwriting was vital to both the aristocrat and the tradesman.<sup>25</sup> As early as 1618, Martin Billingsley criticized those who saw penmanship as "onely a hand-labour"; the pen, he pronounced, was "so excellent and of such necessary use, that none ought to be without knowledge herein."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Edward Cocker, England's best-known seventeenth-century writing master, declared handwriting foundational to both the gentleman's liberal studies and the less genteel vocations. "Handwriting" he wrote, "is an Art neither Mechanical nor Liberal, yet the Parent and Original of both . . . highly necessary and behooveful to the Learned and the unlearned."<sup>27</sup>

Although writing was widely distributed across classes, occupations, and to a lesser extent gender, Billingsley, Cocker, and other English writing masters taught a range of distinctive scripts to meet the differing needs of their clients. Over time, these hands became important indicators of livelihood and social rank.<sup>28</sup> Profit-minded shopkeepers and harried clerks typically learned running secretary, a faster version of the cumbersome medieval gothic; the court and aristocracy, for whom handwriting was primarily an aesthetic tool for correspondence and other writing, favored the more chic, stylish, and prestigious italic, a form developed by Italian humanists from a much admired Carolingian script. Handwriting styles also marked

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hear of a world of squirting teachers" (*The Pen's Excellencie or The Secretaries Delight* [1618], p. B4v). Grammar schoolmaster Charles Hoole urged his colleagues to release their students to spend one or two hours per day at a writing master's school or hire one as an in-house teacher, either full time or for part of the year (*A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching School* [London, 1660; repr. Syracuse, N.Y.: C. W. Bardeen, 1912], p. 301).

<sup>25</sup>Cressy, "Levels of Literacy."

<sup>26</sup>Billingsley, *The Pen's Excellencie*, pp. C2–C2v.

<sup>27</sup>Edward Cocker, *Arts Glory, or the Pen-man's Treasury* (London, 1674), pp. B1–2.

<sup>28</sup>Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, p. 23.

gender among the gentry, with gentlemen typically writing a large, brazen version of italic and ladies a more delicate script.<sup>29</sup>

In the colonies, penmanship signaled occupation and social rank in more subtle ways. Written literacy rates were higher in British America than in England, with nearly all white males and 50 to 90 percent of women, depending on social class and location, capable of signing their name by the end of the eighteenth century. British American scripts, moreover, were never as distinct as in the mother country, and over time, they bled into one another. Nearly every late eighteenth-century colonial writer—shopkeeper as well as aristocrat, man as well as woman—used some form of roundhand, a relatively simple script that merged elements of both running secretary and italic.<sup>30</sup> Commercial groups, however, tended toward a spare and tidy roundhand, concerned more with speed and efficiency than with beauty; less dependent on practicality, female writers across classes and aristocratic males retained as many elements of the elegant italic as possible.<sup>31</sup> Among colonial women, handwriting possessed a delicacy akin to needlework. Well-bred men, on the other hand, wrote boldly and frequently adorned their letters with flourishes and other decorative elements.<sup>32</sup>

Eager to display their gentility, many late colonial and early national elites were fastidious about handwriting. Benjamin Franklin stressed the importance of penmanship in his autobiography, and later his skilled roundhand was featured on

<sup>29</sup>For more on early modern England's handwriting scripts, see Hilary Jenkinson, "The Teaching and Practice of Handwriting in England," *History* 2 (1926): 130–38, 21–18; Stanley Morison, "The Development of Handwriting: An Outline," intro. to Ambrose Heal, *The English Writing-Masters and Their Copy-Books, 1570–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), pp. xxi–xl; and Schulz, "The Teaching of Handwriting," pp. 381–425.

<sup>30</sup>Carl F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 19–23. E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), p. 376. For a discussion of the groups practicing handwriting in colonial America, see Thornton, *Handwriting in America*, pp. 6–12.

<sup>31</sup>Morison, *American Copybooks*, pp. 9–19.

<sup>32</sup>Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 15; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun* (New York: Knopf, 2001), pp. 148–49.

engraved plates in the American version of Englishman George Fisher's writing manual.<sup>33</sup> Hoping to improve his penmanship as well as his manners, the young George Washington transcribed adages from William Mather's *The Young Man's Companion*. Later, Washington guarded his reputation by rewriting some of his early papers to improve their penmanship. He also had a habit, according to Benjamin Rush, of preparing a new copy of a personal letter if "there were a few erasures on it."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Henrietta Tilghman, from a distinguished family on Maryland's Eastern Shore, urged her friend Polly Pearce to burn their poorly crafted correspondence.<sup>35</sup> John Hancock learned fine handwriting and his impressive autograph from Boston's most accomplished and highly regarded penman, Ibiah Holbrook. His famous signature on the Declaration of Independence may have allowed King George to read the tract without his spectacles, as schoolchildren are often taught, but the graceful roundhand and flourished capitals were also intentional reminders that he was a gentleman.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, William Cooper's sloppy handwriting was a clear signal, according to Alan Taylor, that "he was in over his depth."<sup>37</sup>

Colonial writing masters who could teach both elegant and practical styles were in high demand in the eighteenth-century colonies. Hancock's mentor instructed 216 pupils at Boston's South Writing School in 1746, while another 227 studied at the rival North Writing School.<sup>38</sup> As writing masters had for generations, Holbrook provided a set of exemplars—either written or engraved in copybooks—that students then imitated until they

<sup>33</sup>Ray Nash, *Some Early American Writing Books and Masters* (Hanover, N.H.: H and N, 1943), p. 78.

<sup>34</sup>Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, p. 36; Ray Nash, *American Writing Masters and Copybooks: History and Bibliography through Colonial Times* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1959), p. 23.

<sup>35</sup>H. M. Tilghman to Polly Pearce (1783 or 1784), cited in Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, p. 166.

<sup>36</sup>Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Person, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 9; Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, p. 127.

<sup>37</sup>Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, p. 144.

<sup>38</sup>Fowler, *Baron of Beacon Hill*, p. 289 n. 19.

could produce an acceptable “school piece” for display. The main text of these pieces was usually a simple roundhand, but Holbrook and other skilled writing masters often pushed their students, even those headed for commercial careers, toward a more aristocratic and socially valued style, which students frequently used for their names, the sample’s title, and other select text. Many also decorated their school pieces with flourishes, colored ink, or even paint, and in some cases, with mythical birds, dragons, and monsters.<sup>39</sup>

Most students, however, did not learn from a master like Holbrook. Over the last half of the eighteenth century, trained writing masters could not keep pace with proliferating rural schools, and so general schoolmasters were often obliged to teach penmanship. Unlike Holbrook and other skilled masters, who inscribed beautiful samples based on images drawn from copybooks in their professional libraries, many general schoolmasters were often themselves poor writers who produced ungainly models, which inevitably perpetuated an awkward hand among their students.<sup>40</sup> Over time, the increased production of British or British-influenced copybooks fortified less-skilled teachers with engraved exemplars, freeing them from tedium and embarrassment and their students from the misery of copying an inadequate script. Still, the situation was far from ideal. Country schoolmasters encouraged students to write in the genteel manner, even though they could not properly model it themselves. As a result, most children struggled to write any script well, much less the difficult aristocratic style.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Nash, *American Writing Masters*, p. 16, and Bushman, *Refinement of America*, p. 94. For a detailed description of the writing curriculum in a New England school, see E. Jennifer Monaghan, “Readers Writing: The Curriculum of the Writing Schools of Eighteenth-Century Boston,” *Visible Language* 21 (1987): 167–213.

<sup>40</sup>Holbrook’s library included at least twenty-two British writing manuals (Nash, *American Writing Masters*, pp. 18–19).

<sup>41</sup>For a discussion of the expansion of schooling into rural areas during the late eighteenth century, see Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 475–576, 544–51, and Carl E. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), pp. 13–29.

*The Jenkins System of Handwriting Instruction*

John Jenkins began teaching in 1781. A clumsy writer himself, he initially relied on the traditional methods and writing samples contained in English copybooks. But after years of lamenting the results, he crafted an alternative pedagogy, which he eventually introduced in 1791. Underlying Jenkins's new method was his contention that all letters were constructed from a few basic components. Writing masters had grouped letters according to structural likenesses since the sixteenth century, and some went as far as to identify fundamental letters that served as models for the rest. But they always viewed each form as an integral, unbroken unit.<sup>42</sup> Jenkins, on the other hand, conceptualized letters as mixtures of interchangeable parts. "In every art and science," he wrote, "there are certain first and fixed principles, which are as a foundation upon which the whole is built. The right understanding of these is absolutely necessary, that we may become masters of the art which we undertake to learn." Writing was no different, Jenkins argued. Six basic pen strokes were writing's building blocks, which could be combined to form twenty-five of the twenty-six lower case letters and many of the capitals. These "first and fixed principles" were the keys to effective penmanship, Jenkins maintained, and their neglect the reason "why, so many months [of penmanship practice], and I may say years, are, with many, but little better than thrown away" (1st ed., pp. 9–10).

For centuries, the copying of models had been the primary focus of handwriting pedagogy, a process that relied heavily on manual skill. Not surprisingly, only a few—those with natural dexterity, resources to hire a skilled writing master, or leisure time to practice extensively—could accurately imitate the writing exemplars. Many more floundered, often working long and hard but seldom advancing beyond a mediocre scrawl.<sup>43</sup> Study would help struggling students, Jenkins believed. When writers

<sup>42</sup>Nash, *American Writing Masters*, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup>Ray Nash, *American Penmanship, 1800–1850: A History of Writing and a Bibliography of Copybooks from Jenkins to Spencer* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1969), p. 3.

have “clear and distinct ideas of each of the principal strokes well impressed on their minds at first,” he wrote, well-formed letters are “instantly ready to drop from the pen when called for.” Successful writing required more than a mental conception of writing’s building blocks, he acknowledged. Students would need to practice the individual strokes manually to develop dexterity, or, as he put it, “to acquire the right motion of the fingers, or pressure of the pen, in order to draw these strokes upon the paper.” But, he insisted, a mental image must always precede the physical act of writing. “The pen,” Jenkins instructed, “must follow the mind” (1st ed., pp. 9–11).

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writing masters had observed the association between writing and the intellect, yet none saw handwriting as Jenkins did—as a mental activity in its own right.<sup>44</sup> For them, the writing process was exclusively physical—an activity by which one trained one’s fingers, hand, and arm to mimic a copybook’s beautiful forms.<sup>45</sup> In the eighteenth century, English writing master John Clark moved closer to the position Jenkins would advocate. “To write a correct hand,” Clark wrote, one must “get an *exact Notion*, or *Idea* of a good *Letter*, which may be done by frequent and nice Observation of a Correct Copy . . . [and] to be able to express, with the *Pen*, that *Idea* upon the Paper.” There was, however, a subtle but significant difference between the two men’s views.<sup>46</sup> Clark stressed memorization of “the idea of a good letter,” whereas Jenkins delineated a more complex mental process that included both analysis—comprehending component parts—and synthesis—combining those parts to create a whole.

Jenkins’s hand-mind conception of penmanship owed more to the European Enlightenment than to English writing masters. Like many in the Revolutionary generation, Jenkins embraced the Enlightenment belief in a self-evident natural order that could and should be applied to all human organizations

<sup>44</sup>Nash, *American Writing Masters*, p. 30.

<sup>45</sup>See my “Boundaries between Liberal and Technical Learning: Images of Seventeenth-Century English Writing Masters,” *History of Education Quarterly* 39.1 (Spring 1999): 38–43.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted in Nash, *American Writing Masters*, p. 29; see also Morison, *The Development of Hand-Writing*, p. xxxv.

and systems, and he discovered this regularity in the six fundamental strokes that structured the letters of the alphabet.<sup>47</sup> A pedagogy that tapped into this inherent rationality was key to effectively teaching handwriting, Jenkins thought. Asking a student to put pen to paper without a basic understanding of a letter's form would be like setting "a lad to translate Vergil before he had studied his Latin Grammar, or to solve a difficult problem in mathematics, without the knowledge of the power of figures" (2nd ed., p. x).

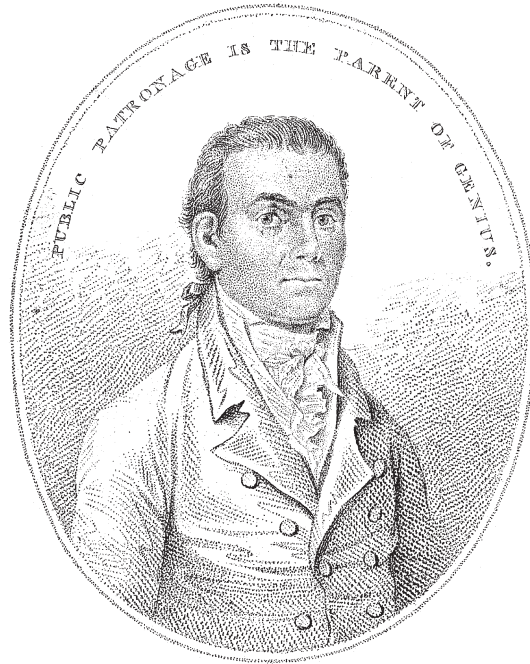
Heinrich Pestalozzi, a Swiss educator who espoused Enlightenment ideals, placed a similar emphasis on pedagogical rationality and order. Although best known for his refinement and application of Rousseauian natural education, Pestalozzi also explored the implications of John Locke's ideas on sensory experience. He accepted Locke's notion that sense impression was the foundation of all knowledge and perceived teaching as the "progressive clearing up" of the confusion resulting from initial sensations. When children first view an object, he wrote, they have only a "dim consciousness" of its underlying form or structural design. The role of schools is to teach skills such as "measurement"—the identification of the precise geometric figures and angles comprising an object—to enhance this understanding. All learning, Pestalozzi concluded, required the sorting of basic principles from initial sensory impressions prior to their application.<sup>48</sup> Although there is no evidence that Jenkins was familiar with Pestalozzi, the two educators clearly held allegiance to the same philosophical tradition.<sup>49</sup> Both saw the

<sup>47</sup>See Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 142–84; Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 41–56; and Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), pp. 239–65.

<sup>48</sup>Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children: An Attempt to Help Mothers to Teach their Own Children and an Account of the Method* (1801), trans. Lucy E. Holland and Frances C. Turner (Syracuse, N.Y.: C. W. Bardeen, 1898), pp. 142, 192.

<sup>49</sup>Pestalozzi's ideas were circulating in Europe as early as the 1770s and attracted American supporters, but his colleague Joseph Neef did not bring them to the United States until the early nineteenth century. See William S. Monroe, *History of the Pestalozzian Movement in the United States* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), pp. 39–75.





## JENKINS.

*Three things bears mighty sway with Men,  
 The Sword, the Sceptre and the Pen,  
 And he who can the least of these Command  
 In the first rank of Fame he's sure to stand.*

FIG. 1.—Frontispiece to the 1813 edition of Jenkins's *The Art of Writing*. Image courtesy of the Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh library.

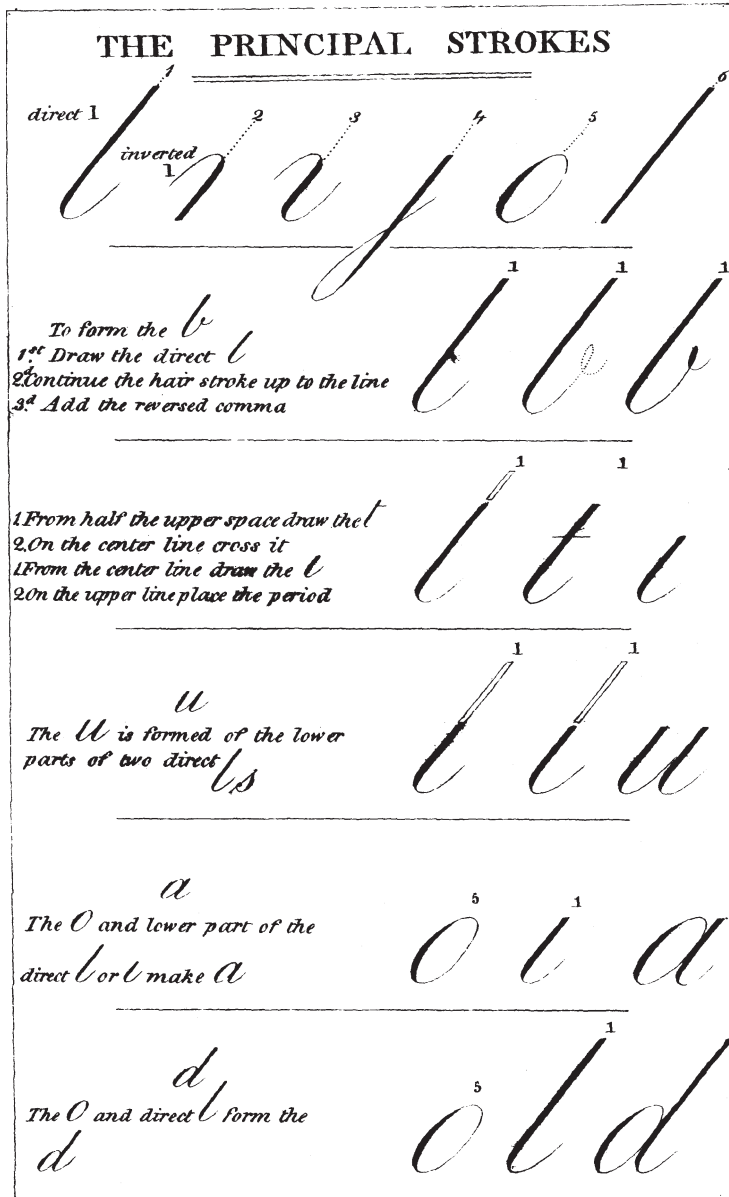


FIG. 2.—Jenkins's six "principal strokes." Image courtesy of the Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh library.

handwriting process as a mental activity—scrutinizing the rational structure underlying each form—followed by physical execution. Pestalozzi encouraged beginning writers to study letters “independently of the use of the pen” before attempting to draw them; Jenkins turned this aspiration into a detailed instructional strategy.<sup>50</sup>

Jenkins’s progressive plan began with rigorous question-and-answer exercises intended to help students quickly grasp the letters’ component parts. After studying “the names and numbers” of the principal strokes, Jenkins’s pupils responded to questions such as,

Ques. Which is the first stroke?

Ans. The direct *l*.

Ques. Are there any other letters contained in the direct *l*?

Ans. The *t*, little *i*, and the *u* are but the lower part of the *l*; the *b* is also formed of the direct *l*, but carrying the hair stroke up to the line, and adding a small swell.

Ques. Is the *l* part of any other letters?

Ans. Yes, the *l* being drawn on the right side of the *o*, makes the *d*; the lower part of the *l* . . . drawn on the right side of the *o*, makes the *a*.

Through dialogues such as this, Jenkins maintained, writers learned “the dependance of the letters upon these strokes, as well as of one letter upon another,” insights that would free them “from all embarrassment, respecting what strokes to draw, or how to draw them” (1st ed., pp. 17, 18, 20). Two decades later, he was more direct. A student, Jenkins warned, must not write until he or she has “committed each dialogue to memory; and is able to answer any question put to him without the book; and has obtained a clear idea of the component parts of the letters” (2nd ed., p. 25). Thus prepared, a student could then pick up a pen and begin a series of sequenced physical drills: learning how to hold the pen without “tremor and awkwardness,” tracing the principal strokes and letters with a “dry” pen, executing the strokes individually and with accuracy, and,

<sup>50</sup>Pestalozzi, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, p. 198.

finally, combining these strokes into actual letters and words, first in a large script or “school hand,” then in a size suitable for adult use.<sup>51</sup>

### *Handwriting and National Identity*

Primarily a how-to, technical manual, the first edition of *The Art of Writing* nonetheless alluded to broader goals. A frontispiece dedication to “the young masters and mistresses throughout the United States” evoked the aim of training more, if not all, American children to write competently. If teachers and students used their minds to support their hands, better penmanship would be achieved—and with less pain—Jenkins promised. Careful study of the letters’ inner structures would reduce the number of forms to be mastered from over two dozen to six, and with only a few fundamental strokes to execute, students would become skilled writers “in half the time usually consumed in the common way.” Individual variations would also be mitigated, he assured, since all aspiring writers would begin with “a proper standard of imitation” (1st ed., pp. 9–10). In short, the Jenkins system would establish a uniform criterion for the benefit of all.

Inspired by fellow New Englander Noah Webster, Jenkins believed that handwriting’s democratization and homogenization would foster a common American identity. Webster is best known for his nineteenth-century dictionary, but he first gained notoriety with *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, a popular spelling book that debuted in 1783, eight years before Jenkins’s handwriting text.<sup>52</sup> Among average folk and elites alike, eighteenth-century spelling and speaking exhibited little consistency or structure. It was not unusual for a writer to spell the same word differently on a page, and regional

<sup>51</sup>For students whose “fingers [were] stiffened and rendered insensible of the weight of the pen,” Jenkins recommended inserting “a round piece of lead, an inch and an half in length” into the pen. “[T]his weight will at once be perceivable by the learner, and enable him more readily to acquire the command of the pen” (2nd ed., pp. 25–27, 59).

<sup>52</sup>See E. Jennifer Monaghan, *A Common Heritage: Noah Webster’s Blue-Back Speller* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1983).

pronunciation differences were the norm rather than the exception. According to Webster, the absence of standards made language learning difficult, especially for the burgeoning school population and the one out of four Americans who were non-native speakers. To address the problem, he proposed rules that would “render the acquisition of language easy both to American youth & to foreigners.”<sup>53</sup>

An ardent nationalist, Webster believed that true independence and unity required widespread use of a language that was both shared and distinct from that of America’s erstwhile mother country. “As an independent nation,” he wrote, “our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be our standard.” And yet, regional dialects must also be expunged. They “at first excite ridicule,” Webster remarked, with mocking laughter “followed by disrespect.” “Our political harmony is therefore concerned in a uniformity of language.” Spelling and pronunciation rules would impose order, Webster insisted, and over time produce “a language in North America as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish, and Swedish are from German” and “demolish those odious distinctions in provincial dialects, which are the objects of ridicule in the United States.”<sup>54</sup>

In the first edition of *The Art of Writing*, Jenkins extolled Webster’s *Grammatical Institute*. The two authors shared a publisher, the Boston firm of Thomas and Andrews, which acquired the rights to Webster’s spelling book a year before it brought out *The Art of Writing*, and their promotional campaigns, utilizing endorsements from respected schools and

<sup>53</sup>Noah Webster, “Memorial to Legislature of N York, Jan 18, 1783,” cited in David Micklethwait, *Noah Webster and the American Dictionary* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), p. 58. Richard M. Rollins suggests that Webster’s motive was as much social control as nationalism in “Words as Social Control: Noah Webster and the Creation of the American Dictionary,” *American Quarterly* 28.4 (Autumn 1976): 415–43.

<sup>54</sup>Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (Boston: I. Thomas and Co., 1789), pp. 22–23; *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, pt. 1 (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1783), p. 6.

individuals, were similar.<sup>55</sup> But Jenkins no doubt recognized the noted orthographer as a valuable ally with the general public and appreciated the affinities between Webster's approach and his own. Both distilled an important mode of communication into its essential elements and patterns. Both maintained that understanding and applying these patterns would facilitate the acquisition and use of the tools of language. And both believed that standardized language forms would enhance what Jill Lepore refers to as the "act of imagination" that we call nation.<sup>56</sup> "All are at once ready to acknowledge there should be a proper standard for pronunciation," Jenkins commented. "Is it not as necessary there should be a proper standard to convey our ideas by writing as by pronunciation?" Of course, Jenkins answered. For just as Americans had come to appreciate that "when we are all taught to pronounce alike, we may, without any difficulty, understand one another . . . we shall soon perceive the agreeable effect of that harmony and similarity which will be the natural consequence" of shared handwriting (1st ed., p. 10).

Although attuned to nationalist goals, the first edition of *The Art of Writing* only vaguely referenced penmanship's political, economic, and social potential. Those incapable of writing a legible hand were "in a great measure, disqualified for the service of the public; or even to transact private business with propriety," Jenkins observed (1st ed., p. 9). But, he stopped far short of Thomas Jefferson's and Benjamin Rush's demands for a common school curriculum that would advance republican ideals and national growth, and he said even less about handwriting's social potential.<sup>57</sup> In the aftermath of the Revolution, many Americans challenged aristocratic structures that

<sup>55</sup>Nash, *American Writing Masters*, p. 33.

<sup>56</sup>Jill Lepore, *A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States* (New York: Vintage, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>57</sup>Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," in *Crusade against Ignorance: Thomas Jefferson on Education*, ed. Gordon C. Less (New York: Teachers College, Columbia, 1961), pp. 83–92; and Benjamin Rush, "A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania," in *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 1–24.

had been supported, in part, by differentiated writing styles; others, like Webster, used communication models to perpetuate traditional social norms and relationships. Yet in 1791, in the midst of this turbulence, Jenkins did not consider penmanship within the context of social change.<sup>58</sup> With the second edition, issued nearly a quarter century later, however, he was ready to vaunt the social advantages of his innovative handwriting system.

### *Elegant Handwriting and Social Identity*

Published in 1813, *The Art of Writing*'s second edition included the original text, slightly revised, with several noticeable additions: more pages of endorsements and dialogues, "An Address to Parents and Guardians," an expanded preface that included an autobiographical narrative, and new sections on proportion, slope, and joining letters.<sup>59</sup> Many of the additions were unabashed attempts to reassert the value of his system and to reclaim it from those authors who, Jenkins complained, had pirated the hand-mind approach over the previous two decades and "palmed their filched and mutilated works on the public, under the idea of improvements" (2nd ed., pp. vii–viii). But at a more fundamental level, Jenkins used the second

<sup>58</sup>In the early twentieth century, John Franklin Jameson (*The American Revolution as a Social Movement* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926]) proposed that the American Revolution was a social movement as well as a political revolution. Since then, many others have advanced his thesis, including Gordon S. Wood in his Pulitzer Prize-winning work *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992). For critiques of Wood's argument, see Joyce Appleby, "The Radical Recreation of the American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51.4 (October 1994): 679–83, and Michael Zuckerman, "Rhetoric, Reality, and the Revolution: The Genteel Radicalism of Gordon Wood," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51.4 (October 1994): 693–702.

<sup>59</sup>In the first edition of *The Art of Writing*, Jenkins promised six additional books, but bad health and expensive engraving fees delayed publication. When a second book finally appeared in 1813, it was not a new volume in the proposed series but a second edition of *The Art of Writing*. Books 2 and 3, which were workbooks with a few engravings and rudimentary instructions, were eventually published, the first on an unknown date, the latter in 1817. There is no evidence that the remaining three proposed volumes made it to print. See Nash, *American Writing Masters*, pp. 52–59, and *American Penmanship*, p. 262. See also William E. Eaton, "American School Penmanship: From Craft to Process," *American Journal of Education* 93.2 (February 1985): 255.

edition to preach the social efficacy of his system, evident in his newfound desire to merge practicality with elegance, a long-standing marker of gentility and aristocratic status.

Concerned with method more than product, the initial printing of *The Art of Writing* modeled the principal strokes and letters but showed little interest in aesthetics or style. The aim was first and foremost utilitarian: the service of the republic; transacting business effectively and efficiently (1st ed., p. 9). Two decades later, in the second edition, Jenkins promoted penmanship that was both "useful and ornamental." He urged readers not to "content themselves with barely conveying their ideas in a rough and homely dress" but to strive for a handwriting that was, as his array of adjectives entreated, beautiful, elegant, handsome, fair, and fine. All Americans, Jenkins insisted, should display a hand that "at once, charms and feasts the eye, and, with good sentiments, gratifies the mind" (2nd ed., pp. x, xvii).

Jenkins advocated a simple elegance. Both volumes of *The Art of Writing* displayed a plain roundhand, well crafted but absent the delicate strokes and decorative flourishes that had been popular among the gentry. Since the hand "is intended rather for use than ornament, every thing which has the appearance of the latter is designedly omitted," Jenkins wrote. "All needless scrawls and flourishes naturally obscure the simple idea of the letter, and the learner is thereby not only perplexed, but much retarded in his progress" (1st ed., p. 22). This approach diluted aesthetic standards, according to handwriting historian Ray Nash; it ensured only "a fairly decent average performance," which shoved penmanship "down the path of relaxing discipline and ever looser models."<sup>60</sup> For Jenkins, on the other hand, simplicity preserved practicality; moreover, it allowed students to focus on the genuine elements of beauty: proportion, slant, and spacing. With the six principal strokes "mathematically adjusted to each other," each letter had a "regular and uniform symmetry," Jenkins declared. When the proper proportion is realized, "the beauty and perfection of a

<sup>60</sup>Nash, *American Writing Masters*, p. 30, and *American Penmanship*, p. 3.



piece of writing is much enhanced." Likewise, "the elegance of writing depends much on the natural and easy slope of the letters, and the beauty and uniformity of the turns, both at the top and the bottom, as well as on the proper distance of the letters from each other." To ensure that this simple refinement would be achieved, Jenkins incorporated question-and-answer dialogues on proportion, slant, and spacing into his second edition. Upon mastery of these exercises, a perfect idea of form and function would be fixed in the mind, Jenkins proclaimed. The writer was then free to embellish, adding "as many ornamental strokes as are necessary" (2nd ed., pp. 28, 40, 41).

Jenkins modeled the social benefits of elegance by means of his own life story. The autobiographical sketch he introduced in the 1813 volume logically traced "the circumstances, by which the author was led to the discovery of his new System of Writing," but it was also an emotional, confessional tale of longing for a graceful hand—"the art in which he felt himself so very deficient"—and the humiliation he had experienced when he did not possess it. "From his early youth he had been highly gratified by examining beautiful specimens of penmanship, and felt a strong desire to imitate them," Jenkins recalled, referring to himself in the third person. As a student, he tried repeatedly to mimic these finely crafted samples, but like most of his classmates, he had little success and "for years despaired of ever obtaining a handsome hand" (2nd ed., p. viii).

Jenkins's sense of inadequacy crystallized years later when he was appointed master in a rural New England school. "He was mortified," he wrote, "at the thought of furnishing his pupils with the very defective models of his own pen, for their improvement in so elegant an art." Seeing no option but to teach as he had been taught, he supplied students with engraved archetypes crafted by master penmen. They diligently applied themselves to copying these handsome exemplars, but most fell short. Humiliated by these results and by his employers' observation that he "ought to be capable of instructing his students without a borrowed hand," Jenkins dedicated himself to finding a way to make refined penmanship more accessible. Experimenting with several innovative techniques over a

number of years, he discovered that once students understood “how each part, or parts, of one letter, was part, or parts, of several other letters,” they slowed their pace, analyzed forms, and thus worked to turn their scrawl into graceful strokes (2nd ed., pp. viii–ix). In 1789, while teaching the sons of several Vermont gentlemen, he made use of his invented method; two years later, he unveiled his “plain and easy” system in the first edition of *The Art of Writing*.

Jenkins's enthusiasm for elegance mirrored a broader craving for gentility among the middle levels of American society during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Rapid urbanization, a growing market economy, and increased democratization destabilized hierarchies and loosened traditional bonds during the era of the early republic, leaving many Americans existentially adrift and anxious, without a clear sense of personal identity and, perhaps more important, where they stood with others.<sup>61</sup> Eager to forge an identity with which to negotiate this newfangled reality, to gain respectable employment, or simply to find a stable footing in this perplexing muddle, many scrambled to acquire the traditional indicators of esteem—including “a genteel, legible, liberal hand”—enumerated in late eighteenth-century courtesy books such as Lord Chesterfield's popular *Letters to His Son*. As advice proliferated, norms of proper conduct eventually evolved into a cluster of characteristics that came to define the middle class.<sup>62</sup>

Following Chesterfield's lead, Jenkins emphasized the connection between graceful handwriting and social decorum. Sloppy handwriting was “a real defect, as to read or spell erroneously, or to speak ungrammatically,” Jenkins wrote, a flaw

<sup>61</sup>Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, p. 404; Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, pp. 58–63; Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 34–37, 192–95; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>62</sup>Chesterfield, quoted in Wilfrid Blunt, *Sweet Roman Hand: Five Hundred Years of Italic Script* (London: James Barrie, 1952), p. 33. For more on Chesterfield's *Letters*, see Lukasiak, *Discerning Characters*, pp. 55–72.

that conveyed “a want of taste, and little respect for those to whom we write.” Remembering a conversation with Benjamin Rush, he recounted how the esteemed physician and patriot complained about “two letters lying by him unanswered, as he could by no means decipher the names of the subscribers.” Careless penmanship robbed readers “of that pleasure and satisfaction, which naturally arises in the mind while reading the letter of a friend, written, not only in a good style, but in a fair, handsome hand,” Jenkins grumbled. It also damaged the reputation of the writer. Handwriting that obliged “friends to sit poring over a half written letter, with difficulty reading one part, and guessing at the other,” was “a poor compliment,” Jenkins wrote, a social burden that saddled the writer with “greater disadvantages and embarrassments than is generally imagined.” A fine pen, on the other hand, empowered any American to engage in “correspondence with others, from which they might receive many advantages” (2nd ed., pp. xix, ix–x).

Jenkins was, nonetheless, careful not to overstate the influence of an elegant hand. For him, a graceful pen was primarily involved in what Richard Bushman refers to as a “modest, vernacular gentility,” that is, private, middle-class respectability rather than the public esteem and authority of the eighteenth-century aristocracy.<sup>63</sup> Jenkins promoted a style that was both utilitarian and refined, a synthesis that would enrich a writer’s everyday life and solidify his or her social position, increasing one’s ability to display civility, to build personal relationships, to secure employment, and to gratify family and friends. Many, especially small shopkeepers, scribes, and other middling sorts, would certainly profit from a handsome penmanship; it had the potential to transform the script of these writing-dependent groups from an obvious sign of common rank to an emblem of refinement, thus bestowing upon them an air of respectability as well as competence. But, nowhere in either edition of *The Art of Writing* does Jenkins suggest that an elegant pen or any other aspect of genteel appearance would guarantee entry to elite social status, at least not in its public, civic dimension, as

<sup>63</sup>Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, p. 208.

imagined and exemplified by Washington, Hancock, Franklin, and other Revolutionary leaders. Instead, he proposed that a fusion of physical and mental work opened the door to social primacy in the early republic, unlocking the manual-intellectual distinction that had for so long separated elites from their fellow Americans.

### *Hand-Mind Work and Social Identity*

The hand-mind worker—the “ingenious mechanic”—was Jenkins’s exemplary citizen of early nineteenth-century America.<sup>64</sup> Designating a more exclusive group than all who worked with their hands, the term “mechanic” referred to the numerous artisans and master craftsmen in the early republic. At least 50 percent of the population in the coastal cities, many had property, supervised and taught apprentices, served customers, employed journeymen, and kept accounts. A few were manufacturers, builders, and inventors, with “ingenious” an adjective often applied to designate these entrepreneurial and innovative activities.<sup>65</sup> Dismissed by traditional political leaders as lacking academic education and other marks of gentility, skilled artisans in Philadelphia, Charleston, and other cities formed mechanics associations as early as the 1760s to voice their opinions and to demand a role in revolutionary political processes. The more vociferous among them assaulted the aristocracy with a discourse exalting diligence, inventiveness, efficiency, and other values associated with manual work. Productive labor, they argued, was a virtue, while leisure—one of the traditional cornerstones of gentility, privilege, and political authority—was a vice. The attack on aristocratic traditions continued into the early national period, as agrarian-oriented Republicans decried the Federalist gentry; on a different front, the rise of early industrial towns like Lynn, Massachusetts, encouraged a “mechanics

<sup>64</sup>Jenkins, *The Art of Writing* (1813), p. x.

<sup>65</sup>Charles S. Olton, *Artisans for Independence: Philadelphia Mechanics and the American Revolution* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1975), pp. 7–9. See also Carl Siracusa, *A Mechanical People: Perceptions of the Industrial Order in Massachusetts, 1815–1860* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), p. 35.

ideology” that promoted labor and production, not gentility, as the legitimate source of social status.<sup>66</sup>

Jenkins contributed to this ideology with a brief but compelling portrait of the ingenious mechanic in *The Art of Writing*'s 1813 edition. A master of manual technique, the ingenious mechanic understood the “nature and use of tools.” But he also used his intellect, obtaining “as far as possible, a clear and distinct idea of all the component parts of the machine which he is about to form.” “Otherwise,” Jenkins concluded, “he might labor for months to no purpose” (2nd ed., p. x). A thinking worker with a craftsman’s technique and the reflectiveness of a gentleman, Jenkins’s ingenious mechanic contested one of the cornerstones of aristocratic privilege: the ancient assumption that physical labor degraded the mind, that those who did manual work were incapable of rational deliberation. As Jenkins presented him, the accomplished artisan’s analytical thought gave vision and purpose to his hands and, in the process, transformed skilled craftsmanship into an honorable enterprise, dignified by its intellectual engagement as well as its productivity.<sup>67</sup>

Jenkins’s conception of the ingenious mechanic embraced accomplished writers as well as traditional artisans. “As writing is in some measure a mechanical art, it should be mechanically taught,” Jenkins wrote, convinced that his hand-mind method would merge mercantile efficiency and productivity with genteel aesthetics. Following this model, students would learn to write in “less than one fourth of the time consumed in the common way,” and the hours thus conserved could be

<sup>66</sup>Olton, *Artisans for Independence*, pp. 20–26. See also Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, p. 243; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, pp. 276–86; Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp. 44; and Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1860–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 58–65.

<sup>67</sup>Thomas Jefferson perceived a similar hand-mind balance on the farm, reinforcing his classically-inspired belief that agrarian life was morally superior and the bulwark of government. Jefferson, however, shared little of Jenkins’s enthusiasm for mechanics, whom he considered part of the urban mob (*Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden [New York: W. W. Norton, 1982], pp. 164–65). See also Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 117–44.

beneficially applied to either a commercial or an educational endeavor. By eliminating “great waste of time and stationary [*sic*], and other contingent expenses,” the method resulted in an unexpended reserve of one hundred dollars per student, according to a group of Massachusetts officials. All told, they calculated, Jenkins’s innovation would save the commonwealth four million dollars over three years, “and all this with a certainty of [students] being able to write a fair and legible hand.” Modernizing “the laborious, tiresome, long, and expensive way of learning to write heretofore practised,” Jenkins maintained, would also free up time for learning “the various branches of knowledge necessary to be acquired,” whether those pursued by the aspiring scholar, businessman, or mechanic (2nd ed., pp. x, 1, 69–71).

As clerks, hand-mind writers would bring an increased measure of both refinement and accuracy to the workplace. “It is certainly desirable that [personal] letters should be so written that they may please, not only by their sentiments, but also by the legibility and elegance of the handwriting,” Jenkins commented. “But it is of still more importance in mercantile and all public business, that writing should be executed in a fair hand.” Clerks following his method would ensure the quality of “book accounts, bonds, deed, notes, & c. [that] very much depend on the legibility of the writing, and often on a single letter,” a skill that, according to Jenkins, would impress employers. “A handsome chirography,” he crowed, had introduced many “of indigent circumstances, into business, which has procured them support and affluence” (2nd ed., pp. x, xix).

In comparison to his otherwise tutored counterpart, the hand-mind writer also matured morally. For generations, the genteel behavior and disinterested civic life of the aristocrat were considered to be the highest expressions of virtue, the most legitimate paths to moral development. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, commercial settings had become the primary moral proving ground for middle-class Americans.<sup>68</sup> Anticipating this transition, Jenkins argued that his

<sup>68</sup>Augst, *The Clerk's Tale*, pp. 5–7. See also Michael Zakim, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes,” *Journal of the*

method would help initiate this lifelong process of character building and character testing. A hand-mind method would “strengthen [writers’] memories” and “improve their minds,” he promised in his 1813 edition. Attention to the spacing, form, and slant of letters would instill “patience and perseverance” in the writer, thus purging “the hasty and rapid motion of the pen” triggered by “a want of proper rules to guide the mind.” In addition, because the system was readily mastered, it helped shape character by providing writers with more time to transcribe moral maxims that “hold forth virtue in the most engaging charms, and such as [they] expose immorality, might be a great barrier against profaneness and vice of every kind” (2nd ed., pp. xviii, xx, 42).

Finally, because the hand-mind writer was able to learn easily, he had less need for formally trained experts and, in some cases, even schools. Jenkins admitted that school, under the guidance of a capable instructor, was the best place to learn writing, particularly if the teacher created a comfortable environment with carefully arranged desks, well-carved pens, suitable paper and ink, and a pleasant room temperature (2nd ed., pp. 61–63). But such ideal classrooms were not widely available; moreover, many who wanted to learn could not even attend school, especially those “of a slender and weakly constitution.” With his manual and its hand-mind system, students would quickly grasp the writing process without additional assistance, Jenkins claimed, and since early success would “awaken their curiosity, and interest their feelings,” a watchful taskmaster was unnecessary. As a result, “the robust and healthy” would be “freed from long and painful confinement in school,” and the workforce would gain well-trained workers much more quickly (2nd ed., pp. xvii–xviii).

Eager to promote his system, Jenkins pressed even further. “This whole work,” he boasted in the conclusion to his 1813 edition, “is so contrived, that young gentlemen and ladies, who

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*Early Republic* 26.4 (2006): 563–603, and Stephen Milm, “Clerks, Classes, and Conflicts: A Response to Michael Zakim’s ‘The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary,’” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26.4 (2006): 605–15.

have not been under advantage to learn to write, may immediately become, not only their own instructors, but the instructors of others" (2nd ed., p. 63). Jenkins's most radical claim, it links *The Art of Writing* to what historian Nathan Hatch refers to as "the crisis of authority in popular culture," a multifaceted challenge to religious and other cultural leadership during the first decades of the American republic.<sup>69</sup> The overall tone of Jenkins's manuals suggests, however, that he was hardly a staunch egalitarian; his closing assertion was undoubtedly an expression of self-promotion rather than ideology. Jenkins surely wanted all Americans to have access to fine handwriting and the opportunities it presented, but he also favored a standard script and method. He lambasted those who literally acted on his advice and, after reading his manual, set themselves up as writing masters. Moreover, he insisted that his method promoted virtue and respectability—aristocratic and middle-class characteristics aimed more toward separating oneself from inferiors than obviating difference.<sup>70</sup> Wittingly or not, however, Jenkins added one more log to the bonfire that fueled democratic and egalitarian passions in the early republic. He may not have realized the implications of his "overreach," as Ray Nash suggests. Nonetheless, his boast "open[ed] the gates to a crowd of self-anointed professors of penmanship."<sup>71</sup>

### Conclusion

*The Art of Writing* was a practical expression of the competing values circulating during the early decades of the American republic. At the core of Jenkins's system's many promises—a common script to help unify the new nation; a simple, cost-effective method; easy access to elegance and middle-class respectability; skilled craftsmen who merged elegance, morals, and productivity—was a synthetic worldview that faced forward while not completely turning its back on the past. The

<sup>69</sup>Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 17–46.

<sup>70</sup>Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, pp. 409–13.

<sup>71</sup>Nash, *American Writing Masters*, p. 34.



progress of the new nation and its citizens, according to Jenkins, depended upon their ability to fuse old and new, intellectual reflection with manual skill, aristocratic aesthetics with commercial needs. Although ultimately idiosyncratic, the method's popularity suggests that many Americans—especially in New England, where the text was conceived, published, and widely used—shared Jenkins's vision.<sup>72</sup>

Within the handwriting community, Jenkins's system had its detractors. Traditionalists grumbled that dissecting letters was faddish and that thus disemboweling them would damage, not advance, writing's beauty. Alarmed by Jenkins's affront to expertise, they also complained that he had weakened professional standards and thereby unleashed a horde of poorly qualified teachers.<sup>73</sup> And for all his promises of efficiency, business people objected that Jenkins's system retarded the flow of commerce. A rapid pen interfered with the proper execution of the letters, Jenkins's protégé James Carver declared in 1809. Pupils learned best "writing a little, and writing that little slow, with a good will and inclination to perform it well, according to the system."<sup>74</sup> That ideal, however, ran counter to the fast-paced demands of the workplace.

In 1830, Benjamin Foster offered a detailed alternative to the Jenkins approach with his *Practical Penmanship*. Claiming that the Yankee schoolmaster had stressed the intellect and aesthetics at the expense of physical motion and speed, Foster promoted "arm movement" as a way to achieve the rapidity required in a competitive market economy. His physical method, Foster pledged, was also easier to teach and learn. Students could begin writing after only a brief introduction to the letters—no elaborate, protracted question-and-answer sessions

<sup>72</sup>Henry Dean, a schoolmaster from Salem, Massachusetts, and Philadelphia's James Carver also wrote popular manuals based on the Jenkins system: *Dean's Analytical Guide to the Art of Penmanship* (Salem, Mass., 1805); and Carver's two texts, *A New and Easy Introduction to the Art of Analytical Penmanship* (Philadelphia: W. Hall Jr. and G. W. Pierie, 1809), and *The Analytical New Invented Wood Impressed Copy Book* (Philadelphia: J. and A. I. Humphries, 1810).

<sup>73</sup>Nash, *American Penmanship*, p. 5, and *American Writing Masters*, p. 34.

<sup>74</sup>Carver, *A New and Easy Introduction*, p. 23.

for Foster's students—with the help of a ligature that immobilized the fingers and forced correct arm movement. Foster's copybook quickly became a best seller, and like Jenkins's manual several decades earlier, spawned a host of imitators. By the mid 1830s, Foster's "practical" model had replaced Jenkins's "plain and easy" system.<sup>75</sup> Although Foster never completely rejected the importance of intellect and aesthetics in writing, his method marked a decisive victory for physical movement over deliberation and grace.<sup>76</sup> Platt Rogers Spencer attempted to restore a balance to penmanship in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but by 1900 it was gone again, displaced by the "practical handwriting" and "muscular movement" of A. N. Palmer.<sup>77</sup>

Outside the handwriting world, a synthesis of hand and mind also proved untenable. Rhetoric praising the manual worker was certainly common, even popular, during the first half of the nineteenth century. Benjamin Franklin, remembered more as a leather-apron artisan than an aristocratic statesman, evolved into a national hero, and popular orators like Edward Everett eloquently equated industrious work with "The Art of Being

<sup>75</sup>Benjamin Franklin Foster, *Practical Penmanship being a development of the Carstairsian system* (Albany, N.Y.: Packard and Co., 1830). Overall, Foster sold nearly two million copies in the U.S., Britain, and France, where his system was called the "American Model." For examples of other 1830s and 1840s manuals with a physical focus, see Dolbear and Brothers, *The Science of Practical Penmanship*, 3rd ed. (New York: Collins, Reese, and Co., 1837), and James French, *A New System of Practical Penmanship, Founded on Scientific Movements*, 14th ed. (Boston: James French, 1848).

<sup>76</sup>See Benjamin Franklin Foster, *Penmanship, Theoretical and Practical, Illustrated and Explained* (Boston: Benjamin Perkins, 1843), pp. 22, 33, and *Prize Essay on the Best Method of Teaching Penmanship* (Boston: Clapp and Broaders, 1834), p. 24.

<sup>77</sup>[Platt Rogers Spencer], *Spencerian Key to Practical Penmanship* (New York: Ivison, Phinney, Blakeman and Co., 1868), and A. N. Palmer, *Palmer's Penmanship Budget: An Epitome of Plain and Ornate Penmanship* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Western Penman Publishing, 1898). A small cadre devoted to italic script has continued to advocate for beautiful penmanship, yet for most today, elegant handwriting, or even handwriting itself, is an anachronism. For discussion of the twentieth-century italic movement, see Rosemary Sasson, *Handwriting of the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 117–19, and Richard S. Christen and Thomas G. Greene, "The Medium Is the Message: Lloyd Reynolds and the Origins of Italic Handwriting in Oregon Schools," *American Educational History Journal* (Summer 2001): 39–46.

Happy.”<sup>78</sup> Some were concerned, however, about a gap between rhetoric and reality. In an 1826 lecture to the trustees of the Albany Academy, newly appointed professor Joseph Henry sharply attacked commonplace idealizations of the ingenious mechanic. Although widely credited with technological advances, most mechanics were not thinking workers, Henry argued. They were either unaware or contemptuous of the value of scientific experiment and placed their trust wholly in knowledge gained through hands-on activity, which Henry derided as “the habitual dexterity [of] fingers.” Theoretical concepts, not practical insights, were the keys to technological advance, Henry insisted. Unfortunately, most mechanics and Americans ignored these basic principles, which had the effect of impeding innovation. Despite his harsh rhetoric, Henry, like Jenkins, lauded workers who understood general principles as well as tools, but, he lamented, such exemplary hand-mind laborers were extremely rare.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, as Henry observed, hand and mind grew more distant as the nineteenth century progressed. With the expansion of large-scale production, many skilled craftsmen became what Stuart Blumin refers to as “non-manual businessmen,” entrepreneurs and engineers who marketed and designed products but did not actually make them. Less-skilled factory workers increasingly performed the job of fabrication, thus disrupting the hand-mind process of making advocated by Jenkins.<sup>80</sup> Jenkins’s blend of intellect and labor still existed among the growing ranks of white-collar workers, the clerks and other business types who swelled the ranks of the mid-nineteenth-century middle class; despite public rhetoric to the contrary, however, the status of strictly manual, blue-collar workers declined.<sup>81</sup> Although traditional artisans did not disappear,

<sup>78</sup>Zakim, “Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary,” pp. 601–4. See also Newman, “Franklin and the Leather-Apron Men,” and Everett, quoted in Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, p. 284.

<sup>79</sup>Arthur P. Molella and Nathan Reingold, “Theorists and Ingenious Mechanics: Joseph Henry Defines Science,” *Science Studies* 3.4 (October 1973): 323–51.

<sup>80</sup>Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, p. 70.

<sup>81</sup>Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale*, and Zakim, “Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary.”

Jenkins's vision of a pervasive hand-mind culture had become but a distant dream. In the end, the Jenkins handwriting system represented a relatively brief moment, during the first decades after the American Revolution, when some Americans believed that skilled craftsmanship and the thinking artisan would define the identity of the new nation.

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