Reading Old Handwriting

requires patience and persistence.
It is a tedious process,
but it is of utmost importance to transcribe the original documents.

http://copland.udel.edu/~tdoherty


Practice makes perfect
Several handwriting examples with transcriptions
Learn the old alphabets

http://www.genealogical.com/item_detail.asp?afid=1000&ID=5513
The English Alphabet
1640-1790  1600s

Upper Case vs Lower Case

I=J, i=j
U=V (upper)

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Upper = Lower:
E  g  m  n  x

I=J, i=j
U=V (upper)

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Upper = Lower:
a  c  E  g  K  m  n
o  u  v  x  y  z

Source: Sperry, “Reading Early American Handwriting” (1998), p49-52

The Uncommon English Alphabet
Everybody has their own style!

Easier to transcribe in word/phrase context

Source: http://www.iltrails.org/handwritingA-T.html

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ALL Class site: http://copland.udel.edu/~tdoherty
Transcribing Handwriting

- Learn the scribe’s handwriting style
  - compare same letters/words in document
  - copy pages before and after page you want
  - local sources to identify misspelled place
  - common phrases often repeated
- Scribes abbreviated (paper was dear)
  - names: Jno=John, Jos=Joseph
  - “=” used to extend a word to next line
  - mostly chronological: get bearings by mo/yr

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Transcribing Handwriting

- Transcribe slowly - evaluate with care
- Be aware of the context of the sentence
- Transcribe with a friend or relative – it’s more fun than a day at the beach! ?
- Indexes and abstracts are transcribed, as are many vital records
  - but you should try to find the originals
1798 New Castle Co DE Probates, Benjamin Reynolds, administrator for both George Spain* & Joseph Reynolds

* George Spain married Elizabeth Reynolds 16 Nov 1793

Use original documents to compare signatures

Transcribing Example: Martha (Ranlet) Melcher’s 1881 Diary

Martha Ranlet is the first wife of Samuel Melcher, Civil War surgeon and a difficult guy to live with.
Homoeopathic Hospital
I was not able to write at
the beginning of the year, but
I will now say that I have
been here since the 12 of Dec
have treatment [x’d out] for my knee
came here from Laconia to
and nervous condition
I reed New Years card
Sam’s 1st wife also
I reed New Years card
had mental problems!
from Charlie. I am able
have treatment [x’d out] for my knee
to rest better nights, but
and nervous condition
my stomach and bowels
You might want
have been troubling me
your descendants
to read your diary –
or would you?