

George A. Gaskell

Mr. Ross Green of Orem, Utah, professional pen master, prolific researcher, proponent of the copperplate style of American calligraphy, proprietor of Vintage Penpoints (email him for a catalog), and profluent contributor to Cyberscribes (formerly the Calligraphy Listserve) posted the following to Cyberscribes in May 1999. I'm looking forward to reading more articles like these! (NOTE: Ross' introduction, below, as well as his notes and comments throughout the articles, appear in brown.)

Introduction

George A. Gaskell (1844-1885) was one of the most famous calligraphers in America. Gaskell's Complete Compendium of Elegant Writing was a bestseller, with over 250,000 copies sold in ten years. It inspired a whole generation of penmanship students, many of whom became prominent calligraphers later on (Louis Madarasz, for example). Gaskell was also the author of The Penman's Hand-Book (1883), another excellent calligraphy manual, and he was the editor of what was almost certainly the first monthly journal dedicated to calligraphy and penmanship.

[Note: However, Gaskell was perhaps most famous as the author/compiler of a book called Gaskell's Compendium of Forms, Educational, Social, Legal and Commercial --a massive tome on etiquette, etc., that no self-respecting Victorian gentleman or lady could do without reading. Therefore, the title "Gaskell's Compendium" signifies *two very different* famous publications! --but all references in the following are to the writing manual, Gaskell's Complete Compendium of Elegant Writing.]

The article below was written by Charles T. Cragin, and published in May, 1903, in The Western Penman. This was the penmanship & calligraphy magazine edited by A. N. Palmer, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa (which was considered "the West" in 1903). Soon after this the magazine changed its name to The American Penman. It was a major showcase for calligraphers and teachers of penmanship.

This article deals with Cragin's memories of George Gaskell, Austin Norman Palmer, and William E. Dennis, the famous engrosser. Please note that Cragin's derogatory comments regarding Gaskell's Complete Compendium of Elegant Writing should not be taken too literally; Cragin also writes that "Gaskell certainly was, at his best, a first-class penman, the Compendium to the contrary notwithstanding." There are aspects of the Compendium that are eccentric, including a few outright blunders, but they do not (in my opinion) detract from the overall elegance of the work.

Ross Green, Orem Utah

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Some Reminiscences of a Queer Genius and a Couple of Promising Youngsters

by Charles T. Cragin
Business Institute, Rochester, N.Y. (May 1903)

It was in July, 1876, that I received a large and showy parchment diploma which bore the dashing signature of H. G. Eastman, and certified that I was a "Master of Accounts." In the light of future events I have sometimes thought that possibly the diploma flattered me, but I had no doubts about it then and could have settled, off hand, any of the great questions agitating the community if they had been left to me for adjustment.

Armed with this formidable document, a good digestion, and a moderate amount of self-assurance, I started out to "open the world, mine oyster."

But in 1876 the oyster was by no means fat, for the panic of '73 had struck the ship of state amidsthips and business was flatter than the proverbial pancake.

The advertisements of Eastman College in those days did not underestimate the value of a course at that famous institution, and we country boys rather had the idea that the leading businessmen of New York and Brooklyn were waiting on the curb at Poughkeepsie to snatch the graduate of the E.N.B.C. and put him in charge of their business. Such was not, I regret to say, the case in 1876.

When I came out there was no one waiting for me and so I went down to New York to get a job, but New York was a regular graveyard and "masters of accounts" with three months' experience in a business college were a drug on the market, and New York is a mighty lonesome place for a young fellow with no job and only a few dollars in his pocket.

The prairie, when the wind moans at night and you see the dim rolling waves of gray-green grass stretching away for miles and miles and only the faint stars above, and hear only the movement of your mustang and the yelping of a distant coyote, is lonesome. The fishing banks, when the fog has settled down and you are out in a boat picking up fish along the trawl line and you hear only the swash of the waves and the hoarse toot of a distant steamer's foghorn as she cleaves her way through the misty pall, is lonesome. The depths of the Canada woods, where you sometimes see the sun at midday and only your compass tells you what direction will bring you to creation, and where big bobcats, lynxes, and an occasional panther come and sing "Home, Sweet Home" around your campfire at night, are lonesome, but none of these places ever made me feel so utterly all gone and forsaken as did New York in that summer of 1876, as I tramped its streets in vain search of employment - and I was glad to get back to the hills of old New Hampshire again and take my bearings from their glorious elevation.

I was quick at figures and had taught school a few terms. I *thought* I knew all about accounting, but I couldn't write worth a cent and I knew it. [Note: The best professional bookkeepers were also expected to be excellent penmen, hence Cragin's need for further education.] George A. Gaskell, by means of his extensive advertising, was then about the best known penman in the United States, and he was at the head of the Bryant & Stratton Business College at Manchester, New Hampshire. It occurred to me that he and I might possibly do business together, so I wrote him a letter telling him what I could do and what I wished to learn, and he replied that if I would act as assistant in his business college he would give me all the instruction in penmanship necessary to make me proficient, and enough money to keep me from starving to death, and so I went to Manchester, and for the next two years I knew intimately the queer genius, and the brace of lively youngsters who form the subject of this reminiscent sketch of long ago, which may interest the old-timers even if the boys do not care for it.

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Part 2

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I do not imagine that G. A. Gaskell was greatly impressed by my personal appearance when I presented myself at his office early in September. I had put in July in the hayfield, and August in removing by fire the underbrush from a large timber clearing, and as a result I was about the complexion of

a well-smoked Eskimo, and so thin that it was only on very clear days that I cast a shadow. Mr. Gaskell welcomed me, however, in his reserved way and at once installed me as first and only assistant in the Bryant & Stratton Business College, which was reached by ascending four of the longest, crookedest, and dirtiest flights of stairs I ever saw, in the old Merchants Exchange Building at Manchester, then a thriving city of twenty-five thousand.

As I walked into the big square room which composed the B. & S. B. C., I saw at a long table, folding papers, a couple of lads of, I should say, sixteen or seventeen. One was tall and slim and rather pale-faced, and if Gaskell introduced me to him at all, which I doubt, for he was amazingly absent-minded about social amenities, he called him Palmer. The other was a boyish-looking chap of slight dimensions, and he answered to the name of Dennis. I grew to know these youngsters very well in the next two years, and I contracted a liking for them which has worn extremely well through the twenty-five years that have passed, though our meetings have been few and far between.

George A. Gaskell was at that time, I should say, about forty years of age [actually, he was about 32], of medium height, with very dark hair and clear-cut features. He always dressed quietly, but with faultless taste, was reserved and low of voice, yet he at once impressed a visitor as a man of ability and refinement, and such he was on most occasions. He was born in Ohio, at Ashtabula I think [Note: Gaskell was born in New York; see the second article for more accurate biographical info, below], and was a pupil of the Log Cabin Pen Art School of Platt Rogers Spencer, whom he greatly admired. He came to New York after the war and worked with John D. Williams and others who taught him off-hand flourishing, and he had been sent to Manchester by the manager of the Bryant & Stratton chain of colleges. The death of Stratton broke up the chain and Gaskell acquired the Manchester college which was badly run-down, for obvious reasons, when I went there in 1876. Gaskell had ceased to take any interest in educational matters, his whole mind being given to the sale of his Compendium, which his shrewd advertising had made a very profitable source of income. Gaskell's Compendium was a series of pretty bad copies. At any rate, they would be termed pretty bad in this day of good business writing. They were made up of full-arm capitals and finger-movement small letters, but there was a dash and go about them that caught the eye of the untrained far more effectively than did the more correct, but less showy, copies of other penmen of his day, and they set thousands of boys to practice writing, and indirectly did a lot of good in spite of their defects. Given a fine pen with plenty of ink and paper and a little instruction about throwing full-arm capitals and the student found he could soon turn out copy nearly as bad as some in the Compendium, and that encouraged him. Gaskell knew how to advertise, though he occasionally showed poor judgment in selecting his medium. I do not know that he was the originator of the 'before and after using' style, but he was the first to adapt it to educational advertising. For instance, young Thomas Jones, who wrote by main strength with a pure finger movement, sent for a Compendium and signed his name. Now as likely as not young Thomas had penman's stuff in him; the copies in the Compendium and the instruction would wake him up, and in a month or two would come a letter from him with a greatly improved signature. Gaskell kept all his original letters. He would send for Jones' photograph, have a copy of his signature, *not improved*, reproduced by the photoengraver, and a copy of the second signature, perhaps slightly *touched up*, and the next number of the Youth's Companion, in a full-column ad, would contain the photograph of young Jones, with the

'before and after using' signatures, along with several others. These advertisements were put together with considerable art, and as a result he sold more than one hundred thousand copies of the Compendium. [250,000 copies in ten years, according to the next article.]

The school compared to this was a small source of income and it is perhaps not to be wondered at that he lost interest in it. He turned the classes over pretty much entirely to me after he was satisfied that I knew enough to steer the not over large attendance through the business course, which was not elaborate. He did some teaching of penmanship occasionally however, and heard some law classes in a queer absent-minded manner which sometimes astonished his pupils.

He had many fine penmen come to him from all parts of the country, attracted by his advertising, expecting to receive superior instruction, of which they received very little, though he took an interest in the best of them in a quiet sort of way, and this interest rose to as near enthusiasm as he ever got, in the case of his talented pupil William E. Dennis.

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Part 3

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Dennis was a New Hampshire boy from the neighboring village of Chester and was a natural-born penman, though the superb work he does at the present time has been acquired by patient study of the art models of the big metropolis, and is widely different from the somewhat lurid specimens of off-hand flourishing and writing he did in those early days. He was an earnest and untiring worker, and we had hard work to get him away from the big sheet of Whatman's hot pressed long enough to feed him when he did his first copy of John D. Williams' bounding stag jumping over the Atlantic Ocean. He didn't sleep over three hours out of twenty-four while engaged upon the American eagle dropping the boa constrictor upon the Western continent, and when he did the pen drawing of the sweet little dickeybird feeding the fat grub to his mate on the nest, from Williams' and Packard's gems, he lost flesh at the rate of a pound a day. His tastes in those days ran largely to off-hand flourishing, and he thought Michelangelo, Raphael, and Murillo mighty small potatoes beside John D. Williams, Fielding Schofield, Hinman, and Gaskell.

He was then a devoted admirer of Gaskell's work, and Gaskell certainly was, at his best, a first-class penman, the Compendium to the contrary notwithstanding. He [Dennis] wrote a fine unshaded muscular-movement business hand which I have never seen excelled. It was somewhat like that of the late S. S. Packard, and he did it with an ease and rapidity that were enviable. His off-hand flourishing was characterized by a dash and vigor not far short of that of John D. Williams at his best, and it was very much superior to the two or three large specimens by Williams which hung upon the walls of the Bryant & Stratton Business College. His pen drawing was also of a fine quality, but he never did anything of this after I knew him.

In a recent article in the Penman's Art Journal, Fielding Schofield, in his interesting gossip of old-timers, speaks of Palmer as a disciple of the muscular-movement fad "originated" by Gaskell. In fact Palmer never got much muscular movement from Gaskell, for Gaskell did not teach it to his school

at that time. Palmer and the rest of his pupils practiced full-arm capitals and finger movement small letters mostly, and it was after he got out into the free air of the prairies that the robust and genial editor of The Western Penman developed his hobby of muscular-movement writing and became one of its best exemplifiers.

Gaskell, in spite of his rather flamboyant advertising, was a very modest and unassuming man. He never bragged about his own writing and he was ever ready to admit the excellence of the work of others. He was a devoted admirer of Packard. Schofield, Flickinger, Lillibridge, Knauss, Hinman, and the Spencers all received a good word from him, and when he got out his amazing publication, "Gems of Pen Art" I think it was called, he put in specimens of their work, to the great wrath of some of them, for the book was thrown together without any regard, looks or anything else, and he slapped in "any old thing" he happened to have lying around as a specimen, without saying anything to them about it. Gaskell was nothing if not eccentric. I worked for him a year before I had any idea whether he regarded me as a man of decent abilities, or as an imbecile, and then I got a notion of his estimate only from the fact that he doubled my not-over-princely salary.

Young Palmer was a Manchester boy; that is, he was living with his mother in the city at that time, though it is my impression he is a New Yorker by birth. He was very much more of a general student than Dennis, and I don't think I shall hurt his feelings if I say he was very much less of a genius with his pen. He had not then developed any special talent as a writer, though he was far above the average of students and was constantly practicing. He and Dennis with myself attended to the mailing and addressing of wrappers for that rather eccentric monthly The Penman's Gazette, which was the pioneer of penmen's papers and was published by Gaskell largely in the interests of his Compendium. It was a somewhat erratic publication, occasionally skipping a month, and its contents were varied and yet, on the whole, it was rather interesting.

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Part 4

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Dennis, Palmer, and I constituted ourselves the editorial staff. Dennis and Palmer addressed the wrappers, and the three of us mailed the edition of 1,000 copies, more or less.

It is my impression that I wrote some alleged humorous articles for the paper, which amused the editorial staff, if they did not anybody else. The editorial staff was certainly highly appreciative of anything funny, and we had some joyous old times which I like to recall, but Gaskell, I regret to say, was sadly lacking in this respect and had no more sense of humor than a graven image.

As a financial venture the paper was anything but successful, but as an advertising medium for the Compendium it probably paid well enough. George A. Gaskell was a shrewd man of affairs in spite of his eccentric methods. He watched a dollar closely and didn't throw money away as a rule, and he had the most persuasive way of getting cash in advance out of a newcomer that I ever saw. If he had been as persistent in giving his patrons value received

for their tuition the school would have been more popular, but that didn't worry Gaskell. He was the coolest man under fire it was ever my fortune to meet, and rarely lost his temper. Occasionally he got a terrific blowing up from some husky student who came there from the South or West expecting to receive superior instruction from the greatest penman in America, and after paying his money received only an occasional word. Gaskell would take lurid denunciations with an imperturbable calmness which would make the young fellow wonder how he ever dared to break out in that manner, and Gaskell's only comment to me would be "That Smith is a *singular* fellow. He don't seem quite satisfied." But Smith never got any money back, and his instruction kept on just the same.

Dennis became the superb penman he is, not because of any special assistance he received from Gaskell, although his influence is plainly to be seen in the work of his talented pupil. There is the same dash and go in his off-hand flourishing which characterized that of his teacher, and his writing is more like that of Gaskell than any other I can call to mind.

Palmer after he left Manchester took quite a literary course and then drifted West. He did some teaching with Worthington of Chicago, and found that the life of a teacher is not free from hardship, but it was not until he struck the prairies of Iowa that he really developed his specialty of talking muscular movement days and nights and Sundays. He has a prosperous school, and his recent photos indicate that he is becoming of aldermanic proportions.

Dennis has a fine [engrossing] studio in Brooklyn, his extreme piety leading

him to select the city of churches as his permanent home.

Poor Gaskell has long since joined the great majority and his tragic death in the marshes adjoining Jersey City gave the newspaper boys a paragraph. He had his faults, but so have other penmen, and I am sure the old editorial staff will join with me in saying "peace to his ashes."

You couldn't give away the Compendium nowadays, yet it served its purpose and stimulated to practice many a fine writer of the present day.

And I, well, I am not quite so elastic as I was in those days, and I did not become a great penman as the result of my two years with Gaskell, Dennis, and Palmer, but a number of boys and girls scattered through the length and breadth of this broad country have been kind enough to say that my teaching has helped them to some measure of success and shown them how to take the buffets of outrageous fortune with philosophy--and if this be true I have not lived in vain. And I thank God I can still laugh at a joke, love my friends, forgive my enemies, if I have any, and take thankfully the gifts the gods give me.

--Charles T. Cragin, 1903

The Golden Era of Ornamental Penmanship
by Horace G. Healey

Originally published in The Business Educator , December 1922, page 24.

This era was characterized by the universal use of copybooks in the public

schools, the invention of photoengraving, and the publication of numerous professional [penmanship] magazines.

It is very difficult to submit a complete list of all those who were actively identified with professional penmanship during this era. The various branches of the work, which included engrossing, card-writing, teaching, and publishing, had many followers. Also there were some penmen and artists who were locally famous and yet did not achieve nationwide reputation. Those who did become known beyond their immediate neighborhoods owed much to the professional journals of the period for this publicity.

The invention of photoengraving made it possible to reproduce the pen work of the expert. [Note: This became standard in the 1880's.] Prior to the introduction of photoengraving, all such work was limited to the art of lithography.

In submitting the subjoined list, I solicit the cooperation of the older members of the profession to extend it so that it will eventually include everyone who in even the slightest degree made a contribution to the guild. The following names will readily occur:

Ames, Daniel T.
Aument, H. A.
Blanchard, H. S.
Burdetts, C. A.
Burdetts, F. H.
Burnett, E. L.
Byrne, J. P.
Cagle, Jackson
Carver, H. C.
Clark, H. C.
Collins, R. S.
Crandle, C. N.
Curtis, C. C.
Dudley, A. W.
Farley, D. H.
Ferris, W. N.
Flickinger, Henry W.
Gaskell, George A.
Gray, L. A.
Haley, C. S.
Henkel, H. B.
Hibbard, H. E.
Hinman, A. H.
Huntsinger, E. M.
Isaacs, E. K.
Kelly, B. F.
Kendall, H. C.
Kibbe, H. W.
Knauss, J. T.
Lamson, W. H.
Lillibridge, D. R.
McKee, Uriah
Mehan, J. M.
Miller, J. C.
Miller, William Allan

Moar, J. F.
Musselman, D. L.
Osborne, A. S.
Patrick, W. H.
Payson, J. W.
Pierce, Chandler H.
Preston, I. S.
Rider, A. J.
Risinger, T. J.
Robbins, C. W.
Rollinson, Charles W.
Root, A. P.
Sadler, W. H.
Schofield, Fielding
Scott, John R.
Shaylor, Horace W.
Swank, J. W.
Thompson, Langdon S.
Vincent, J. M.
Walworth, C. A.
Wells, Charles R.
Wiesehahn, F. W. H.
Williams, L. L.
Williams, S. C.
Worthington, B. M.

[Note: The above list has *many* important omissions; perhaps Healey just reeled off these names without much thought. A much larger list of notables (approx. 160 names) can be found at the end of vol. 1 of Michael Sull's book on Spencerian penmanship (first edition), although that list has some major problems, too. There were other large lists published in the old penmanship/calligraphy magazines, often with little correspondence between lists, except for the most famous calligraphers. All these lists do give some idea of the huge number of professional calligraphers active during this golden age of fine penmanship, circa 1850-1940.]

All would agree that from the foregoing names one could select a name at random and find sufficient material for an article. I shall hope in this series to write of several of them. This month we shall say a few words regarding the somewhat spectacular career of one whose name was possibly more familiar to the general public than any other penman in the list: George A. Gaskell.

Gaskell was born at Penn Yan, New York, April 21, 1844, and died in Jersey City the latter part of April, 1885. He surely crowded a great deal of life into his forty-one years.

When Gaskell was six years of age his father removed the family to Richmond Center, Ashtabula Co., Ohio. His father was a physician, interested in the manufacture and sale of patent medicines. He also manufactured an ink which was widely used in that section of the country. When Gaskell was in his early teens he went to Geneva and spent a short time with the elder Spencer. [Platt Rogers Spencer.] Then, at the age of sixteen, he entered the academy at Dundee, New York, where he pursued a course in the literary branches, at the same time teaching penmanship in that institution. After remaining there something like two years, he set out to see the world, and organized

penmanship classes in several states. In 1864, at the age of twenty, he came to New York, and engaged with the Bryant & Stratton school in Newark, New Jersey. He taught a few months in Trenton, and then returned to Newark. In 1871 he went to Manchester, New Hampshire, where he had bought the Bryant & Stratton Business College on credit. He was there for several years, and then returned to New Jersey, conducting a business school in Jersey City. His school work from 1873 until the time of his death was entirely subordinated to the interests of his famous Compendium.

This was the pioneer publication of its kind. It consisted of a pamphlet of instructions, a large chart, and twenty plates of rather crudely [photo]engraved copies. More than two hundred and fifty thousand of these Compendiums were sold in ten years, at \$1.00 per set. The source of the attractiveness of this Compendium lay in the fact that it was the photolithographic product of actual pen work. Prior to this time, and even much later, the usual penmanship book represented the skill of the engraver more than that of the writer. [A popular misconception, even among people who should know better.] The very crudeness of the copies, therefore, made a strong appeal to the uninitiated, and thousands of country boys who purchased it were led, through it, to the very apex of penmanship attainment.

Gaskell was always a splendid writer. Make no mistake about that. No off-hand penman of his day could excel him. Coupled with his artistic genius was an equally strong talent for business. He knew how to reach the common people, and as a successful advertiser he took first rank. He spent thousands of dollars annually in the largest and best magazines, frequently using entire pages.

He also published several journals, most of them advertising his schools and publications, but the Penman's Gazette, which he published for about ten years, was a highly successful penmanship periodical. [...]

Personally, he was a very attractive man, somewhat reserved and shy. Although he was constantly surrounded by fellow workers, yet no one could ever claim to be very intimate with him. He was tall, always well-dressed, and gave one the impression of refinement. In common with many others of that day, he was an unfortunate victim of the habit which the Eighteenth Amendment [prohibition of alcoholic beverages] is designed to prevent. One morning in April, 1885, some boys found his lifeless body among the marshes outside the city limits of Jersey City, and the world was poorer from that day, because George A. Gaskell had passed on. He left a widow, but no children.

His business, which had been built up entirely on his own personality and genius, was continued for a short time, but now his name is but a memory. A roll call of his former students at Manchester, and later at Jersey City, would include the names of many of the best known penmen of this country.

--Horace G. Healey (1922)