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Origin of. the Character "&"

By Philip R. Dillon in Editor & Publisher

All of us in America who went to public school thirty years ago will perhaps easily recall that we were taught to recite the Alphabet, ending sonorously---" X, Y, Z, And I " In England they used to say " X, Y, Zed, And! " The school primers of those days, and for more than a hundred years prior, printed the character "&" at the end of the alphabet * Sometimes it was printed " &ct " meaning "and so forth." The fashion of printing the character -!&" as an addition to the alphabet seems to have gone out entirely.

I doubt that many newspaper men, or other writers, have spent time in researching for the origin of the character " & " as used in the title Editor & Publisher, and so I will take the risk of talking about it.

From that fine book " Words and their Ways in English Speech" (published by Macmillan in 1901) written by James Bradstreet Greenough and George Lyman Kittredge, both Harvard professors, I take the following part of a paragraph: ". . . Accounts were kept in Latin down to a pretty recent date. Most striking of all is the sign &, which, though merely a short way of writing et, is always called 'and' and used to be annexed to the English alphabet under that designation."

Reading further we learn that the name of the character "&" is "Ampersand," which is a corruption of the phrase "and per se-and." Literally translated, the phrase is "& by itself-and." All the dictionaries give "&" under the name "Ampersand."

The original script combination of the letters in the Latin et was & which was, in fact, a pretty sort of flourish such as experts in penmanship are fond of, even nowadays. The writers and copyists of manuscripts in the Middle Ages, who were mostly men of the religious orders, seem to have been in the habit of writing the Latin et always with this capital letter combination, and very nicely. A page of such manuscript, before the invention of printing, shows the & standing out frequently, and one is led to believe that it was used for the double purpose of conjunction and punctuation.

But the earliest printers, who had to engrave in wood their own type; probably were unable to reproduce the delicate flourishing of the expert penmen and 'so they changed the & into the &, a distortion, but easy to engrave. The new arbitrary, & stood out in the printed page quite as saliently as the old & in the written books. De Vinne, in his " Correct Composition," reproduces part of a page of " Doctor John Scott's Commentary on the Your Books of Sentences;" printed at Venice in 1475. Here one, sees the & almost exactly in the form now used. The sign is used, invariably for all significancies of the conjunction "and."

Recently I have studied somewhat the first Plymouth Patent granted by King James I to the London Adventurers, dated June 6, 1621. In this printed document, the use of & is limited, though wider than nowadays. Thus we note the phrases "theire heiries & assigns," "severally & respectyvlie," all such Liberties, pryviledges, profit & Conundyties" "the said Undertakers & Planters," "at their own cost & charge." But the abbreviation is not used in such phrases as " John Peirce and his Associates," "and to that intent they have granted," "already transported and undertaken to, transport."

A century later the sign & was as commonly used in the body of the printed page, or at least in letter correspondence, as it was at the time of the Pilgrim adventure. Here is a formal letter, written by judge Samuel Sewall (who became chief justice of Massachusetts in 1718) to the Governor and the Council of the colony, in 1713:

"There is a Rumor, as if some design'd to have a Play acted in the Council-Chamber at Boston, next Monday which much surprises me; And as much as in me lyes, I do forbid it. The Romans were very fond of their plays; but I never heard they were so set upon them, as to turn their Senat-House into a Play-House. Our Town-House was built at - great Cost & Charge, for the sake of very serious and important Business; the Three Chambers above, & the Exchange below; Business of the Province, County-& Town. Let it not

be abused with Dances or other Scenical divertisements. 'It cannot be a Honor to the Queen to have the Laws of Honesty and Sobriety broken in upon. Ovid himself offers invincible Argument against publick Plays:

Ut tamen hoc fatear; Ludi, quoque setnina praebent Nequitiae: Let not Christian Boston goe beyond Heathen Rome in the practice of shameful Vanities.

"This is the Voice of your most humble & obedient servant, SAMUEL SEWALL"

I regret that we have not gone back to the correct and graceful & (et), instead of perpetuating the arbitrary distortion &. Yes, I do know that a few printer artists do use the &, but not many.