The art of transcribing

By Richard Rands

Transcribing documents is an essential skill needed by genealogists to deal with records that are difficult to read, written in a foreign language, or recorded in an audio or video file.

Occasionally an abstract, or shortened version of a record, may be acceptable, but in most cases transcribing the entire document, word for word, is necessary to ensure that every detail of an original record is part of a family history.

Often the expressions, tone, idioms, or terms used in wills, deeds, letters, and obituaries will provide valuable clues about a documents that would be lost in an index or abstract.

For example, in old wills, the use of religious verbiage such as "I commit my soul to the God in Heaven, and my body to the earth," was typically used to remind the ecclesiastical probate judges that the testator was a Christian, in hope that the judge would administer the will honestly. Unless these words are conveyed in a transcription, an important aspect of the testator (person who has made the will) might be lost.

In some cases, the wording of a will can explain that the testator died intestate (without a will). A deed that mentions appurtenances on the property being conveyed, such as a flour mill on inherited property, may suggest an occupation that could otherwise go unknown. Transcribing a document is also widely recognized as a surefire way to ensure that every detail of the record has been examined as closely as possible. Simply recording the names, dates, and places of a record is generally considered incomplete.

As such, rules have been established by recognized genealogical authorities to help us get the most out of a transcription exercise. (See box, above.)

Basic Rules of Transcription

Everything should be transcribed exactly as shown on the original document or record.

Do not change something because you believe it to be wrong.

Record everything as it is, including—

- Names
- Grammar, or lack of it
- Dates
- Abbreviations
- Places
- Superscripts and subscripts
- Spelling and capitalization
- Deletions (strike-through)
- Punctuation, or lack of it

Whenever possible, use the same page layout as the original document, including the length of each line.

Replace obsolete characters with their modern equivalents.

Any illegible parts should be underlined and enclosed within square brackets.

Brief clarifications, spelling corrections, or interpretations may be inserted in the text, enclosed in square brackets.

Long notes or comments should be footnoted or added at the end of the transcription.

Adapted, Board for Certification of Genealogists, www.bcgcertification.org/skillbuilders/skbld961.html

The rules create consistency, ensure that the transcription is accurate, and provide a means of clarification and interpretation. You also will discover that modern methods of creating a transcription file have not been formally added to the rules, such that this article will discuss some concepts that need to be considered.

Whadya think this is?

Whadya think this is? *(Answer is on page 8.)*

A. A fowl plucker's work bench

B. A shingle splitter's work bench

C. A harness maker's work bench

D. A corn husker's stool

Transcribing (continued)

On the surface, these rules may seem simple to follow, but the real challenge is being able to decipher very old or sloppy handwriting, poor document images, or both. For example, an image may be so badly preserved that artifacts on the image may appear to be punctuation, or may appear to be dots over letters that will make it difficult to capture the correct information.

Consistent spelling rules were very late in developing in most countries, and many authors of documents did not have any training in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, or sentence structure. Common abbreviations at the time the document was created may have changed. Slang and idioms certainly have evolved.

It is important to remember that the significance of the document may be inherent in the quaintness of its content, so any editing that might detract from being old fashioned might destroy its real value. As mentioned above, creating a transcription provides a mechanism for inserting brief clarifications or interpretations into the text, albeit clearly identified by square brackets.

Deciphering the handwriting of old documents can be the most difficult aspect of transcribing. Numerous websites offer training in palaeography, the study of old handwriting styles. For help in reading old English handwriting, the English National Archives offers a free tutorial at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/ that covers several different handwriting styles.

For early American Colonial handwriting, a popular book by Kip Sperry, *Reading Early American Handwriting*, can be useful. Once you become aware of some of the more common handwriting styles, transcribing will be significantly easier.

Sometimes it is necessary to be creative to capture the format of the original document. For example, a will written in 1739 for Israel Rand contains some insertions squeezed in between lines:
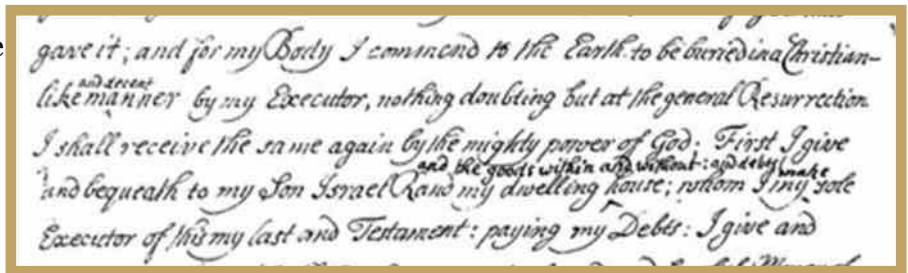
Portion of a 1739 will for Israel Rand of Wolverston, Suffolk, England

One method for representing the insertions might be to use the carat symbol (^) as follows:
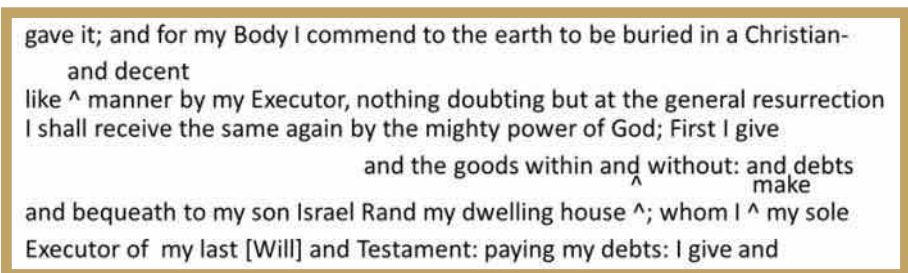
Notice the missing word *[Will]* in the last line, enclosed in square brackets.

An important aspect of transcribing that is not part of the current rules has to do with the file format used when creating the transcription. The typical process is to open a digital version of the document

Transcribing *(continued)*

image on a computer screen and then use a word processor, such as Word, to enter the text of the transcription. This technique will require a split screen or dual monitors. One solution may be to print out a hard copy of the document to work from.

In any case, the concern you need to keep in mind is that the transcription file format probably will not last forever. At some point in the future, unless you take steps to prevent obsolescence of the transcription file format, the work you did to transcribe the document may be lost. (See Ask The Doctor on page 4 of this issue.)

At least two document transcription-aid software products come in free versions. GenScriber by Les Hardy is a full-featured transcription tool for both PC and Mac (www.genscriber.com/genapps/genapps.php) It allows a user to open an image of a document in the upper portion of a screen and create a transcription file in the lower portion into which the text of the transcription can be entered. The toolbars for both the image file and the text file offer plenty of flexibility.

A second similar tool, is Transcript, by Jacob Boerema; it runs only on PCs (www.jacobboerema.nl/en/Freeware.htm). It too supports a convenient split screen format, with toolbars to manipulate both

windows. Both tools make it an easy matter to have both parts of a transcription project open together on a single screen.

However, the primary consideration is the format of the output file. The default output formats for both programs is an RTF file – the virtually obsolete Rich Text Format created by Microsoft. RTF files have all but disappeared because of Adobe's PDF format. GenScriber supports an alternative, a text (.txt) format, the format most likely to survive well into the future. Transcribe does not offer the text file format alternative, but I found that I could overwrite the file extension with .txt and get away with it.

It is critical to understand that in both programs the output will not maintain the "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" structure of your transcription. You might follow all the transcription rules on page 1 of this issue; but if you use some of the features the programs offer, you may find that they disappear, or that the spacing will be unpredictable, rendering your transcription a jumbled mess.

In whatever way you generate the text file, I suggest that after you finish, you reopen the file in NotePad or MacWriter and make adjustments to correct all the anomalies caused by the program used to generate the text file in the first place.
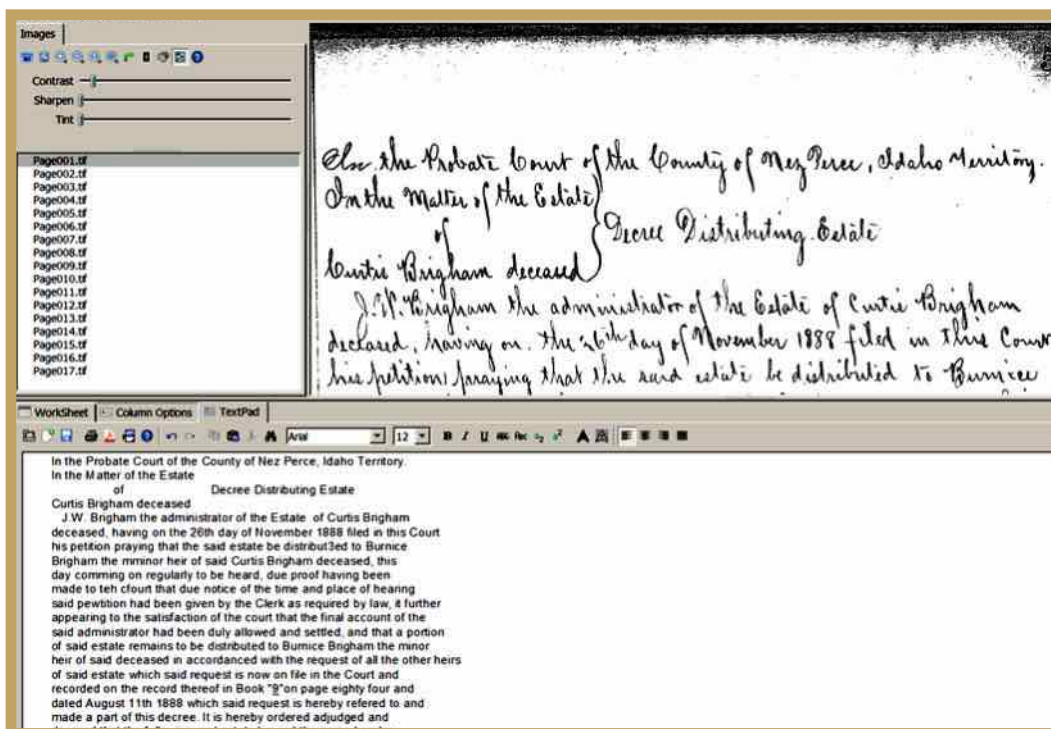
This transcription was created with GenScriber, The user uploads a document to be transcribed (upper right portion of the interface), then enters the transcription as text (bottom section), which also can be in spreadsheet or column formats.

Ask the Doctor — *What will be readable?*

Q Over years of research, I have generated many document files that contain family stories, research logs, transcriptions, and correspondence with family members. My earliest documents were written in the now-defunct word processor WordPerfect. Newer documents have been written in Microsoft Word. It has occurred to me that future descendants may not be able to open my MS Word files, just as I am not able to open those old WordPerfect files. (Fortunately, I converted them to MS Word files before WordPerfect disappeared.)

Is there a recommended file format that I should use for documents that I want to be readable on computers in the future?

The Doctor definitely cannot predict the future. When WordPerfect was introduced as the word processor of its day, the Doctor could not imagine that it would be made obsolete so quickly.

Today, MS Word is perhaps the most commonly used word processor in the world, but its cost and incompatibilities have led to free alternatives (Open Office and Google Docs, for example) and have helped Adobe's free Acrobat Reader become a ubiquitous tool for reading document files.

Your question points out the vulnerability of document file formats becoming obsolete. In the period of time before a widely used document file format goes obsolete, we should take the time to convert documents to a newer format.

Avoiding the conversion process will likely prevent a potential disaster. The answer to this dilemma lies in the way the text of a document is represented on the digital media you have used to store it.

In the early development of computers, designers had to assign binary codes to each of the characters (letters, numbers, and symbols) that were needed to handle a typical document. Back then, it was determined that 128 different binary codes would be more than enough to cover all of the characters we might need.

That covered the upper and lower cases of the 26 alphabet letters; ten digits (0 to 9); plus a dozen or so symbols including the period, comma, semicolon, and question mark. Apparently few envisioned that the general population of computer users would want codes to represent italics, bolding, hundreds of different fonts, many font sizes, and so forth.

To implement the ability to handle the explosion of new features that are now commonplace in our documents, developers began to write word processors that gave us the ability to change fonts and font sizes, add italic and bold characters, and use virtually innumerable ways to enhance a document.

Remember WordStar? The Doctor's first introduction to WordStar was in a small computer lab at a university; an entire wall of the lab was devoted to a giant cheat-sheet of WordStar codes.

The problem we now face is that the binary codes used in the different word processors are not interchangeable. Consequently, a document written in WordPerfect cannot be opened in MS Word unless you have access to a specific conversion program.

To save a document in the file format that is likely to survive the longest, the best solution is to avoid using a word processor that embeds binary codes in the file for characters that go beyond the basic letters, numbers, and symbols.

The best way to control such a process is to use a *text processor* rather than a *word processor*. Two good text processors come with most PC Windows computers, NotePad and WordPad. On a Mac, use the TextEdit app.

Ultimately, try to avoid using word processors that entice you to embed superfluous text elements.

File extension	Description
doc	Microsoft Word (97 - 2003)
docx	MS Word (beyond 2003)
pdf	Adobe Portable document format
prn	Printer output file
pub	MS Publisher file
rtf	MS Rich Text File
sdw	OpenOffice text format
odt	OpenOffice Writer file
wps	MS Works text file
wri	MS Write file (Win95)
xps	MS XPS Creator & Viewer
txt text	Simple text file
xml	XML document file
eml	Email message file

These are a few of the 1,577 types of textual files, indicated by different file extensions. Which will be readable in the future? (From file-extensions.org.)

Discovering Our Ancestors' Records

Naming a ship *Discovery* has a long history. The *Discovery* was one of the ships whose voyage led to the founding of Jamestown, Virginia. *Discovery* was James Cook's last vessel on voyages to the Pacific, and a ship named *Discovery* had six voyages in search of the elusive Northwest Passage. Of course, *Discovery* was one of the orbiters in the U.S. Space Shuttle program.

Discovery will once again be the word of the day this October 10, when the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group co-hosts an all-day seminar titled **Discovering Our Ancestors' Records**. Co-hosting this seminar will be the Santa Clara and Los Altos Family History Centers. The seminar will be part of the worldwide RootsTech Family Discovery Day series under the auspices of FamilySearch.

The two Family History Centers are supported by the Saratoga and Los Altos stakes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

SVCGG has co-sponsored seminars with other groups in the past, so co-sponsoring is not a departure from previous practice. Although the group has met at the LDS meetinghouse on Quince Road in Santa Clara, California, for 26 years, this is the group's first experience co-sponsoring a seminar with Family History Centers.

Family History Centers and SVCGG seminars are open to the public and are provided free of charge. Persons of any race and any faith are welcome. Adults and children ages 12 and older are invited to participate in the seminar. Babysitting service for younger children will not be available.

Free registration is available at: **svcgg.org/pages/FamilyDiscoveryDay2015.html** . All that is required for registration is a name and an email address. SVCGG will contact registrants by email regarding lunch options, a seminar syllabus, and seminar updates.

Those who do not have an email address can contact SVCGG by telephone or by mail through the contact information listed on the back page of this newsletter. Questions about the seminar can be emailed to:
October10FamilyDiscoveryDay@gmail.com

The October 10 seminar will be at the Quince meetinghouse, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, from 9 A.M. to 4:15 P.M. The building will be open from 8 A.M. that morning. A lunch will be available for purchase, or participants can go out for lunch or bring sack lunches (which can be refrigerated). Those registering for the seminar will be provided with lunch ordering information in coming months. A seminar syllabus with handouts from the presentations will be available for purchase. Registrants will be notified of its availability and cost by email.

Keynote speaker will be Rodney DeGiulio, executive vice president for records at FamilySearch. He also is head of FamilySearch Indexing. Keynote address topics will include FamilySearch digitizing, Indexing, and documenting family history with records. The keynote address will be followed by a question/answer session. After the keynote address, several tracks of classes will be offered throughout the rest of the morning and the afternoon. Tracks, linked to genealogy skill level, will be (1) **Getting Started**, (2) **Experienced**, (3) **Videos**, and (4) **Youth**. The Videos track will feature presentations from the 2015 RootsTech conference; videos will be available in English and in other languages to meet the needs of participants. The Youth track will have classes taught by youth, for youth. Participants can attend classes in any track.

The tentative schedule has Getting Started classes on these topics: How to start family history, census records, cemetery records, vital records, and family documents.

The Experienced track classes are planned on these topics: transcribing, land records, immigration records, civil registries, and census analysis.

Throughout the class periods, a team of family history and personal database software tutors will be available in the Santa Clara Family History Center to help attendees with questions about selecting and using personal genealogy database software (i.e., Reunion, RootsMagic, Personal Ancestral File, Family Tree Maker, Ancestral Quest, Legacy, and others). FamilySearch Family Tree help also will be available.

This test drive of personal genealogy database programs will help users learn program features.

How I found it Which Bernice is the right Bernice?

By Richard Rands

One of the most common research problems we encounter involves the need to decide which of several similar individuals is our real ancestor.

In my direct Rands line I have researched two men named Isaac Rands. Only one can be my second-great-grandfather, although it appears that both men could have been born on the same date, 1 May 1781, in Debenham, Suffolk, England. I have found two separate marriage records and two separate death records, but only one birth record.

My predecessors and I have spent considerable time and a fortune in funds over about eighty years trying to determine which Isaac is conclusively our ancestor. This search is still at the very top of my personal objectives.

Such situations arise frequently. Recently I was able to settle the issue of two similar women to establish which of them fit correctly into a family tree. As is often the case, this was a situation in which the marriage index for a Bernice Bartels, who married Paul F. Burnham in 1925, did not specify Bernice's parents' names. Furthermore, the marriage took place in Indiana, not in Illinois, where both Paul and Bernice lived. Consequently, when I tried to identify

Bernice's family, I discovered that at least two Bernice Bartels were born in 1907 in Illinois.

The first Bernice Bartels appeared as a four-year-old in the 1910 U.S. Census in Chicago, Illinois, in the family of William F. Bartels and his wife Augusta. Bernice was listed in the 1920 U.S. Census in Wheaton, DuPage County, Illinois, as a 13-year-old. In 1930, she was not listed in the census with her parents, who had moved to Proviso, Cook County, consistent with the documented fact that Bernice had married Paul Burnham in 1925.

The second Bernice Bartels appeared as a three-year-old in the 1910 U.S. Census in Bloomington, McClean County, Illinois, in the family of Edward J. Bartels and his wife, Bessie. This Bernice was listed again in the 1920 U.S. Census as a 13-year-old in Little Mackinaw, Tazewell County, Illinois. In the 1930 U.S. Census, this Bernice was listed in the home of her parents in Minier, Tazewell County, Illinois, as a single 23-year-old—which, of course, is not consistent with a marriage to Paul Burnham in 1925.

Plenty of circumstances evident in census records might explain an inconsistency such as this. Along with other corroborative details, the evidence might constitute a preponderance of evidence that the first

The 1910 U.S. Census listed (on two adjacent pages) the Bartholz (Bartels) family, which included daughter Bernice, age 4; her parents and siblings; and apparently some of her mother's relatives. (Ancestry images.)

The 1920 U.S. Census showed Bernice Bartels with her parents and siblings. (Ancestry image.)

The 1930 U.S. Census showed Bernice Bartels with her husband, Paul Burnham. (Ancestry image.)

(Continued from page 6)

Bernice is the correct ancestor. In this case, it seemed important to find more evidence that the second Bernice's family was not related to the family of the first Bernice. It might have been that William Bartels and Edward Bartels were closely related and both had named a daughter Bernice. In this case, I would want to record both families in the family history.

It was difficult to find Edward Bartels in the 1940 U.S. Census, but by working in city directories, I finally found him listed as E. J. Bartels in the same town where he had been living in 1930. He was living alone as a widower in 1940. Then I discovered a second marriage record for Edward to a much younger woman in 1943, also in Indiana. If the Bernice who had married Paul Burnham in 1925 had married in Indiana, and now Edward had also married in Indiana, perhaps there was a connection that would put the second Bernice back in contention as the correct person.

At this point, I set about to find more details about Edward's later life. I located his first wife's FindaGrave.com memorial, but it did not contain any information about their children. Switching to newspaper records, I discovered an obituary for Edward J. Bartels published in *The Pantagraph*, the newspaper for Bloomington, Illinois, where Edward had been born, and where I first located him in the 1910 U.S. Census.

Dated 16 November 1963, the obituary recounted details about him that confirmed that he was the same Edward Bartels, the father of the second Bernice, who had been married to Bessie Fickel in 1905. He worked as a harness maker, living in Minier, Illinois, until retiring back to Bloomington.

Near the end of the obituary, where his survivors were listed, his daughter was listed as Mrs. Bernice Engelbrecht. Now I knew that Edward's daughter Bernice had married a man named Engelbrecht, and that Bernice's mother's maiden name was Fickel.

Realizing that Bernice could have been in a second marriage, I was able to collect the final detail that gave me a preponderance of evidence that the first Bernice, the daughter of William F. Bartels, was the correct Bernice for the research I was conducting. I located a death record in the California Death Index that stated that the correct Bernice's mother's maiden name was Rosenberg. This turned out to be the maiden name of William's wife, Augusta.

The case of two Bernice Bartels was closed.

What didja think it was? Were ya right?

(Answer to question on page 2:) **C.** A harness maker's work bench

As the harness or saddle maker worked to stitch the various pieces of leather together, the wooden jaws would grip the assembly; the maker used the foot pedal to hold the pieces together.

Join the worldwide indexing event

Both experienced and new indexers are invited to join a worldwide FamilySearch Indexing event August 7 to 14.

SVCGG indexers have transcribed hundreds of thousands of names through FamilySearch Indexing. Emphasis on indexing helped make records from several censuses available quickly worldwide — particularly the 1940 U.S. Census in 2012.

The FamilySearch Indexing event on August 7-14 has a goal of 100,000 indexers and arbitrators each submitting at least one indexing batch in during the week. (Arbitrators reconcile differences in transcriptions from the two indexers who independently index a record.)

Indexing projects are available in many languages, and many types of records are available for indexing — including obituaries, passport records, passenger lists, and parish registers.

To sign up for FamilySearch Indexing before the worldwide event, go to this site: **familysearch.org/indexing/**

When you sign up as an indexer, you can join the SVCGG indexing team. Email SVCGG (siliconvalleygroup@ earthlink.net) if you need help signing up or getting started.

The worldwide indexing effort particularly will benefit from indexed records in French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish .

Indexers and arbitrators can do as many batches as they choose during the week.

Upcoming meetings

The Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group **meets monthly except December**, on the second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 A.M. at the meetinghouse of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California (see map at right). SVCGG is not affiliated with any church or other organization.

11 July 2015, 9–11 A.M.
* Genealogical transcribing
* Archiving photos, part 2
* Using Ancestral Quest
* Reunion 11 overview
* Getting started in genealogy

8 August 2015, 9–11 A.M.
* British immigration to North America
* Real-time organizing and cataloging
* Using Ancestral Quest
* Reunion 11 for the Mac
* Reunion 11 Basics
* Getting started in genealogy

Meeting site has ample free off-street parking, with a wheelchair-accessible entrance at the front.

About the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group

SVCGG, the former Silicon Valley PAF Users Group, is a nonprofit group of more than 500 genealogy users. We are based in Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of northern California; members live all over the world.

SVCGG offers classes, seminars, and publications to help family historians improve their skills in using technology for genealogy research.

PastFinder is published monthly except December. It is distributed at meetings to members and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter digitally by emailed link.