

## 1-HL-Chris and Hilary.mp3

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:00] From Trinity College, this is Hidden Literacies.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:18] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast, this is a podcast where we'll explore the text contributed to Hidden Literacies and speak with contributors about the meanings they found there. Hidden Literacies brings together leading scholars of historical literacy to investigate this surprising, often neglected roles, reading and writing have played in the lives of marginalized Americans from indigenous and enslaved people to prisoners and young children.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:00:47] By presenting high resolution images of archival texts and pairing them with expert commentary, Hidden Literacies aims to make these writers and texts, which too often lie below the radar of American literature curricula, more available and accessible to teachers and researchers. On this episode, we'll hear from the founders of Hidden Literacies, Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager, both of Trinity College there. Chris Hager is a professor of English and Hilary Wyss is the Allan K. Smith and Gwendolyn Miles Smith, professor of English. They'll help introduce us to Hidden Literacies by talking a bit about what hidden literacy means, what inspired the project and how they hope students and researchers will make use of it. To understand what hidden letters literacies means, we should begin by hearing from Hilary and Chris about some of their experiences in archives as researchers.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:01:38] These experiences and the questions they provoked helped inspire this project. Hilary became familiar with this concept early in her career.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:01:48] So when I started out in graduate school, the field of indigenous studies was really kind of taking off and it really didn't have an enormous presence in early American literature. So I knew that I was interested in early American literature and I was fascinated by this kind of emerging field. And I was sort of drawn to the possibility that those could get connected. And there were a number of publications that emerged right when I was in graduate school that really made me start to believe that that was actually going to be possible. One was the the collection of a 19th century pequot man named William Apess, and his writing sort of became known more generally. And I thought he was the most fascinating writer I'd ever encountered. And I just kept thinking, but what's before him? That's the 19th century, that he can't be the first. He can't be the only one. And so I just kept moving backwards in time and trying to get to William Apess, who published you have to read a lot of unpublished texts. Right, because he may be one of the earliest people to publish, but that doesn't mean he's the earliest writer. This led her to consider literacy in new ways. It meant that I had to think in complicated ways about what what do I mean by writing? What do I mean by being a writer? What do I mean by literature? How do I understand these people's connection to this practice of reading and writing when so much of their experience is really about shutting them out of these practices or making these practices so onerous and so attached to a colonial project that they feel ambivalent about? How do we read not writing? All right. How do we understand an absence of writing as something that can be read as opposed to just writing, which we're used to reading and we're comfortable reading? So just the asking different kinds of questions meant that I was looking for different kinds of things, which then led me to a different set of questions.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:04:10] Chris Hager had a similar reckoning with the limits of his training in appreciating the value of texts that defy traditional notions of literacy.

**Christopher Hager** [00:04:19] I got interested in studying things written by people who weren't fully literate quite a while ago now.

**Christopher Hager** [00:04:25] I was finishing grad school and I found this one document. It was published in a book, but it was a document from the National Archives. And when I read it, it wasn't perfectly spelled and some of the sentences didn't really make sense. And I still remember sitting on the floor in the library reading this document. And it was a really strange experience because I was about to get a Ph.D. in English, and it was a really uncomfortable feeling that I was about to become this highly credentialed professional reader of texts. And I had opened a book and I'd found a text that I really didn't know how to read. And from that moment, I began to realize that texts that aren't written in a way that we would normally call well are actually really fascinating and have a lot to teach us and in some ways can teach us things that really well-written texts don't teach us. Well written texts don't necessarily teach us about how people from certain groups in society read and write and think. They also don't always tell us as much about how reading and writing are related to other ways that people communicate. So, for instance, if you read a text that's written by somebody who didn't know how to spell properly and spelled everything phonetically, you learn what that person's voice sounded like. So linguists actually use texts like this sometimes to learn about the histories of different dialects of English speech in America, because people who spell things phonetically are giving you a clue to how they actually pronounced words, which otherwise we wouldn't know.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:06:00] As scholars, they had to develop methods of reading unpublished sources, of interpreting literacy in broader ways and finding text by groups traditionally underrepresented in archives and special collections. Chris described one such encounter with a group of letters at the National Archives.

**Christopher Hager** [00:06:19] So I was at the National Archives looking at military records from the Civil War era because I wanted to find documents.

**Christopher Hager** [00:06:27] This was from my first book. By former slaves, people who had just become emancipated during the war and there are a lot of those kinds of documents that ended up in military archives because the union army oversaw what are called contraband camps, places where fugitive slaves who fled the place where they were enslaved and came under the protection of the union army. They were fed and sheltered in these camps. Well, I was looking in the files of one of these, and I found these letters that were addressed to Abraham Lincoln and they were signed by people who were ostensibly residents of a contraband camp in Arlington, Virginia. And they were similar to other letters I've been finding in that they were not perfectly spelled. Their penmanship was not highly polished, but something about them was unusual. They sounded funny to me. And at this point, I'd read a lot of letters written by recently freed slaves. And these ones were they were just different. One of them included a profane word, which I'd never seen before in a letter written by an African-American to a white authority figure. And that struck me as odd. Well, I kept going in the file and what I learned was actually these letters were written by a disgruntled former federal employee who was white, who wanted to discredit the guy who got his job. And so he pretended to be a former slave, writing a letter the way he thought a former slave would write it and sending it to the White House to get the White House to intervene and maybe get him his job back. So it wasn't actually a letter written by a freed slave, which was in one sense a disappointment to me. It wasn't what I was looking for.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:08:09] While he may have felt initially disappointed by a collection that wasn't what it appeared to be, it revealed something of value to Chris's research.

**Christopher Hager** [00:08:17] It actually showed me something about the literacy of freed slaves that would have otherwise been totally hidden. And that is it was actually more widespread than we probably think, because for somebody to be able to imitate or parody something, it's got to be something that's familiar enough that you expect your audience to recognize its attributes. So this disgruntled former employee clearly believed that if he wrote in ungrammatical sentences and misspelled some words and made his penmanship a little shaky, that the White House would believe that his letter was written by a former slave. So that tells me that he who had been employed in one of the contraband camps must have seen a lot of these kinds of letters, and that even if I was only finding dozens or hundreds of them in my research, there had to have been thousands of them, because if there weren't, the idea of parodying or imitating, one would never have occurred to this guy.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:09:12] As Hilary describes, sometimes really valuable texts are hiding in plain sight, hidden in part, by the way, these materials are cataloged in archives and special collections.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:09:23] One example that I really like to tell is of a moment when I was in the American Antiquarian Society and I was doing some research on Samson Occum, who is an 18th century Mohegan missionary. And when you have a fellowship at an archive like the American Antiquarian Society, they ask you to do presentations to the other people who are also doing research at the time. So everybody kind of knows the work that's happening. And at the time, there was somebody who was doing work that was completely unrelated to what I was doing.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:09:58] But he was looking at 18th century diaries and he came up to me at one point and he said, didn't you say you were working on a guy named Samson Occum? And I said, yeah. And he said, there's a description of his home in this diary that I'm reading.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:10:18] And that selection wasn't marked, wasn't documented because nobody had ever thought that there was any connection between that guy that he was reading and Samson Occum. And there shouldn't have been. It just happened that he was doing a trip through the area and he happened to stop at Samson Occum House. So there's this extended description of this Mohegan home in the 18th century that nobody knew was there. That was only kind of uncovered because two scholars happen to be talking to each other and happened to be in the same institution at the same time. So there's one moment that is just a wonderful, wonderful experience of it.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:11:03] The description of Samson Occum home is extraordinary and of great value to scholars like Hilary who explore indigenous histories. It's amazing to think Hilary or another scholar of indigenous literature would not have found it. But for this moment of archival kismet, Hilary explains how this text became hidden, likely because it wasn't cataloged to note its references to Samson Occum.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:11:25] It's likely that that diary was given. Years ago, before anybody was looking at the kinds of things we're looking at now, and so it wouldn't have been marked in this particular way, like archives are just these enormous collections of books and papers. And they kind of they keep getting reinvented over and over and over again by different generations of scholars. But it means that along the way, knowledge just gets lost or

forgotten. And it's our responsibility just to keep going in there and refining it, rediscovering it.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:12:00] Hilary hits on an important point that archives themselves can contribute to how things get hidden based on changing priorities and interests in collecting along with the shifting gaze of scholars. This is but one factor that contributes to how techs get hidden.

**Christopher Hager** [00:12:15] As Chris describes, there are a lot of reasons that something somebody writes might not survive in an archive. It could be that it got used in whatever way it was supposed to be used. It was a letter that was received. It was something that was read so well that it fell apart. That could happen to books as well as manuscripts. It could also be that it was held by people who just didn't have the luxury of preserving stuff for private papers to come down through generations and survive in an archive, even if they stay in a family's attic for many generations until they're finally brought forward into some setting where the public could use them. That requires that you had an attic. And some families don't have the kind of continuity of domicile. They don't have the economic ability. They don't have the stability in the passage of generations to steward papers across time the way that, you know, many wealthy white families have. There also may be ways that things didn't get into archives because their value wasn't recognized by people whose hands they did pass into. One thing that I found when I was doing research in Civil War letters is that while there are millions of letters from soldiers, there aren't as many letters from soldiers wives. One reason is that the letters from the soldiers were sent to homes, often in places that were peaceful, and so they survived, whereas letters that were sent from wives to soldiers were sent into battle zones and the chances of there surviving was less likely. But it also proved to be the case that sometimes it looked like people had made historical judgments over the years, that the letters of the soldiers were more valuable. So sometimes even in archives or libraries, catalog or finding aid would only talk about soldier letters being in the collection, even though if you actually looked at the collection, it did have letters from other people in it from the soldier's family back home. But it was the soldier's experience that was regarded as most important in why those got preserved. And so I have to assume that sometimes people either in families or collectors or archivists in the past may have made decisions to exclude letters from soldiers wives, but to collect letters by soldiers. As a scholar of literature, I care about how people use writing to create meaning and to communicate. And people have very diverse strategies for how they do that. And oftentimes the most unusual or innovative or experimental ways of using language are going to be seized upon by people who were desperate or excluded from more conventional ways of using writing, people who had to be resourceful, whether it was an enslaved person for whom literacy was illegal, or the wife of a soldier who didn't know whether her letters were reaching her husband in battle. The kinds of writing that people do when they aren't the sort of person who has access to publishing or expects their writing to be perceived as important by a broad audience is a kind of writing that often shows us ways of using language to express ourselves that wouldn't have been used in other settings or by people who are formally educated.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:15:33] Their understanding of the value of these texts and a desire to share the insights of scholars of these kinds of literacies led to the creation of hidden legacies.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:15:42] So this project really came into being when I came to Trinity in twenty seventeen and when I joined the faculty here, it was my great good fortune to be working with Chris Hager, who is also working on, in many ways exactly the same kinds of

questions that I'm interested in. But he's coming at it from a really different angle. So we've been thinking about these questions and asking ourselves these questions and asking our archives to kind of offer up some of this stuff. And so it just seemed like a perfect collaboration. And the English department was ready to sponsor us to just think creatively about how we could best formulate something. Would that be? Symposium, would that be an anthology? Would that be a print tax? And what we landed on is, well, let's do as many of those as make sense.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:16:40] Hilary and Chris welcome the contributors Hidden Literacies to Trinity's campus, in the spring of twenty nineteen. The contributors shared the text they plan to submit to the anthology, along with preliminary commentaries on their significance. Their finished essays, along with digitized scans of the text themselves, appear in the Hidden Literacies anthology, as Chris describes working with the contributors to hidden letters. This has been an inspiring experience.

**Christopher Hager** [00:17:06] There are people who show a real ingenuity and a real freshness about where they look for interesting kinds of texts that might have eluded other scholars because they weren't in those typical places, because they weren't published, because they don't fit people's expectations.

**Christopher Hager** [00:17:27] So Karen Sanchez , who who's been working for a while with manuscript creations by children, children who in their homes with their siblings, wanted to make their own little books or magazines, which is something that most people would say, well, of course, that happens. People see it probably in their own children or they did it themselves, that they tried to create their own versions of the kinds of books and magazines that were coming into their home. But it's not something that most people would think of collecting or archiving or treating as an object of study. But that's part of what all these contributors work does, is it shows us if we direct our attention to something that doesn't sound like it would be a profoundly important work of literature, like a household inventory or an account book, that there are, in fact, things that we learn about how people use literacy and how people relate to the world around them through literacy from these kinds of texts, because it features experts helping to surface it in texts that invite us to read in new ways.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:18:32] Hilary and Chris hope Hidden Literacies will be of use to a broad audience and help teachers be able to integrate these kinds of texts into the classroom.

**Christopher Hager** [00:18:42] So we recognize the need for people who teach literature, people who study literature to find ways of understanding the range of texts that have been produced by people throughout history and a lot of the kinds of texts that really interest us, texts that may have been created by people who weren't formally educated or whose ways of reading and writing might not have been mainstream in their own time, or that maybe haven't been preserved very well, that a lot of those kinds of texts are very hard for people who aren't specialists in this kind of work to access them. And we wanted people who might be interested in learning more about.

**Christopher Hager** [00:19:26] The history of literacy and in maybe teaching these kinds of texts to their students could have a way that they could not just get access to those texts in the form of digitized materials from archives, but also hear from experts about those texts, some ideas for how to read them and how to understand them and how to make them come alive.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:19:48] For students, these texts can help bring writing in the past to life, Chris adds, because they actually resemble the more informal styles of written communication students to play themselves on a daily basis.

**Christopher Hager** [00:20:00] One of the things that observers of our own time have noted is that as telephones have become less important and text based communications media have become more important, that writing and writing in relatively informal ways is becoming a more important part of people's daily lives than it has been in a while, and that many people's interactions are becoming increasingly text based. And I think if our historical understanding of the written word is primarily based on carefully written, highly polished, published texts, it's not necessarily giving students today the same kind of engagement that they can get with historical writing. That's more like what they do every day. Writing, that's in formal writing, that is based on a need to be resourceful in a given moment and communicate something to somebody. So I think that. As students learn about what were Hidden Literacies in the past, they might be learning something about the different kinds of literacies that factor into their own lives as students and as citizens.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:21:12] Today, outside of the classroom, these texts and the commentaries that explore their meanings can offer questions for anyone curious about the past to think with.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:21:21] We have a really ambitious audience in mind. We think of it as having relevance for students in classes, for scholars and really for anybody who's curious about the past. So we sort of think that we are in a moment of redefinition and a lot of scholars are trying to think about what is the past, who gets heard, who gets left out of conversations and what does it mean to speak and write. And we feel like this project has something to contribute to.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:21:57] That conversation, Chris and Hilary invite you to explore the anthology online and read the text and commentaries compiled there. These texts from a range of dates and our shared past invite, investigation, curiosity, and as Hilary reminds us, a willingness to sit with uncertainty.

**Hilary Wyss** [00:22:16] One of the things that our Hidden Literacies Project is really invested in is reminding those of us who are scholars who have expertise who are invested in texts and writing that sometimes the answers are more complicated than what archives can give us. And sometimes our own literacy skills are limited such that we don't understand how to read the designs on basket's. We don't understand how to read other markers of culture and identity, and that sometimes we're required to come to our own sources with humility and a recognition of the limits of our own literacy practices.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:23:08] In future episodes, we'll hear from contributors to hidden letters about the text they submitted and what they can tell us about the past. In the present and the next episode, we'll hear from archivists whose institutions preserved some of the texts you'll find in Hidden Literacies. And that episode, we'll hear more about Hidden Literacies in the archives and the stakes of digitizing text for the public.

**Mary Mahoney** [00:23:42] Hidden Literacies is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and

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