

Letters and Characters

Illegibility of Handwritten Documents

The illegibility of handwritten documents in archives can present considerable challenge to readers. Decoding letters and characters in handwritten documents presents a necessary first step in finding the word-for-word meaning in a document. But the real excitement and challenge of working with early American archival documents begins when one connects that literal meaning to the larger meaningfulness that the text has for its audiences then and now. Witness Walter Duncan's letter to his mother, Dollie Duncan, written from the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in 1951. On the one hand it is remarkably legible as a sample of handwriting in the Cherokee language using the eighty-six character Sequoyan syllabary. The handwriting itself closely matches the print that was by that time ubiquitous in Cherokee Baptist churches and households (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick). On the other hand, it is remarkably illegible to those trained to read any language written in the roman alphabet. What does it take for readers to understand the Sequoyan characters, □-□-□-□, not as the string of letters R-A-B-and T, but rather as □□□□ /svhiyei/ evening? Breaking out of the alphabetic bias, then, is the necessary first step in order to gather meaning from this document¹.

The next step involves building the larger understanding of meaning from each word in this document, what this document meant to Dollie and Walter as the remarkable feat it was to be written in the first place from that context, and what this document marks in the long march of the history of writing for Cherokee people. Figure 2 presents the free translation of this letter while Figure 5 offers the word-for-word interlinear translation.² This remarkably clear written

¹ For more on the alphabetic bias see (Baca; Ruiz and Baca; Parins; and Bender)

² Tommy Lee provides the free translation in the Yale [words missing here?] Many thanks to Jeffrey Bourns, historical linguist, who collaborated on this detailed translation in Figure 5.

example of Cherokee writing is at once highly legible and illegible — begging the question of legibility as a key indicator of what is seen and unseen in the writing of Cherokee people and in the early Americas generally. This letter, and the translations of it offered herein, are an invitation to take up research and work with indigenous writings in archives around the country and the world to begin to find not just their meaning, but their meaningfulness as examples of writing in the early Americas and for indigenous peoples' perseverance.

The Cherokee Syllabary

Walter Duncan wrote this letter using the Cherokee syllabary, an eighty-six-character writing system invented by Sequoyah during the first decade of the nineteenth-century and later adopted by the Cherokee tribal council in 1821. The writing system itself was remarkably easy to learn, and spread throughout the nation within three-five years of its introduction without the aid of print or mass education. Long before this document was written on Oklahoma State Penitentiary stationery, the Cherokee syllabary had been widely adopted by the Cherokee people who had published thousands of pages of print and handwritten pages. Let's begin with a close look at the materiality of this document before moving on to its translation and situation within the larger social scene of Cherokee writing.

The Legible Characters of "A Letter to Dollie Duncan"

By the time Ama, a fellow Cherokee inmate, scribed this document for Walter Duncan, over 2000 handwritten Cherokee language documents in archives across the United States. Each individual writer of Cherokee had their own unique style of forming the characters; indeed, those writing culturally sensitive documents often adopted a penmanship style so idiosyncratic as to make it legible to only the initiated few (Leopold). Documents written in Sequoyan, or the Cherokee syllabary, have no capital or lower case characters in either print or manuscript forms.

In many manuscript pages, punctuation if present is inconsistent. Anna Gritts Kilpatrick, a native Cherokee speaker and scholar who translated several of these documents with her husband Jack Kilpatrick, once lamented: “Some degree of uncertainty is always present in arriving at the translation of any document in Cherokee. Manuscripts in Sequoyah ordinarily have no capitalization and no punctuation; the symbols are formed with the widest exercise of personal taste” (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, viii). As a result, documents written in Sequoyan can be quite difficult to decode.

Duncan’s neatly handwritten letter is a remarkably legible sample in this light. Indeed, finding a Cherokee language manuscript written with such legible handwriting is noteworthy, precisely because it so closely matches the printed characters one might find on Worcester’s arrangement of the “Cherokee Alphabet” (Mooney and Ellison). Each character in Duncan’s letters is formed with precision along a straight line to the point that it looks to be identical to Cherokee type. Each of the characters rests along a ruled baseline in every line of this letter, as though Duncan’s friend Ama was faithfully replicating a printed page in Cherokee type. Cherokee type has no ascenders rising above the ascender line nor does it have descenders or loops that fall below the baseline of type. Ama’s artful script uses clear serifs and loops to distinguish between similar characters. Note the distinction between his precise and serif free □ /gv/ and □ /sv/ in line two in contrast to the curled serifs in the characters □ /quv/ and □ /e/ in line three (see figure 3 [please list under contents on website #3]). There’s no mistaking those characters from each other in the syllabary or from “E” or “R” in the Roman alphabet. Note as well his punctuation including periods at the end of most sentences and especially the use of an underscore-cum-hyphen to show the continuation of a long word between lines seven and eight when he writes, “□□□□□ - □□□□□” /dodvgilvhwi-sdaneli/ meaning “I will work.” He uses

another hyphen between lines 14 and 15 for the compound noun, “□□□_” /gawaya/ “□□□□□” /digelisgi/ or huckleberry pie. The legibility of this letter on this stationary raises interesting questions: Why might have such pains been taken to make this letter so legible? And what to make of the context in which this letter was written?

Walter and Dollie Duncan

The Duncans lived in the Stilwell area of Oklahoma and may have been descendants of one of the old families of Cherokee people (Starr). Walter Duncan was born in Stilwell on May 22, 1921 and died there on February 9, 1989. He is buried with many other members of the Duncan family, including his mother Dollie, at the Salem Indian Cemetery in Bell, Adair County, Oklahoma. Walter married Lena Mae, who lived from 1919 to 1985. In May 19, 1944, he enlisted in the Army at Ft. Still, Oklahoma, and served for one year and three months as a Private during World War II. His enlistment record shows a grammar school education and employment as a “semiskilled lumberman, raftsman, and woodchopper.” He was married at the time he had enlisted. The two had at least one son, Daley C. “G-boy” Duncan, who was born March 4, 1948, in the Bell Community and died on August 9, 2018 in Tahlequah, Oklahoma³

A few years after serving in the army, Walter was found guilty of burglary and sent to the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester to serve a minimum two-year term (though he was released after one year). His prisoner card included here [Figure 4] is reproduced courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, OK and reveals that he had a third grade education and was Baptist⁴. Soon after arriving Walter was assigned to the #1 Gang and then

³ For images of the headstones on their graves visit: <http://www.okcemeteries.net/adair/salem/salem.htm>. For enlistment records see: <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/record-detail.jsp?dt=893&mtch=4&tf=F&q=Walter%2C+Duncan++oklahoma&bc=sl&rpp=10&pg=1&rid=7480371&rlst=2082138,7304773,7480371,7663636>. The obituary of Daley C. Duncan can be found here: <https://www.robertsreedculverfuneraldirectors.com/memorialpage.asp?page=odetail&id=95103&locid=88>

⁴ Walter Duncan Prisoner’s Card. Box 69, Record no. 50875. Photograph Cards, Oklahoma State Penitentiary Collection [2010.055].

moved to the trusty building. Directions and conditions for correspondence between prisoners and their families are outlined in the heading of the letter in Figure 1. Prisoners were instructed to “write plainly, using one sheet only, regarding business or family matters, nothing else.” Despite its legibility to other Cherokee, Walter’s letter to his mother written in Sequoyan likely would not have been understood as plainly written to guards who might be reading prisoner letters to ensure the content was of business or personal matters. It’s not clear if the address to his mother is written by him, since we have no sample of his writing in English to compare it to, if he indeed had learned to write in English during the course of his third-grade education. Were the guards able to read Cherokee they might not have let this letter be sent as it provides a clear picture of life in the prison among the Cherokee inmates.

Contents of the Letter

The letter opens with a greeting on a Sunday evening during which Walter has “prepared to talk with” his mother, Dollie, “a little on paper.” The next phrase is particularly interesting in light of the penitentiary’s directions regarding correspondences between prisoners and their immediate family: “We are really having a lot of trouble conversing with letters, but it will only be a short time longer.” Was this trouble one of learning to read and write with the syllabary itself as Duncan’s recourse to Ama’s pristine handwriting might suggest? Could he have been making his script so legible for her benefit to be able to use a Cherokee syllabary chart to easily decode the individual ‘letters’? Or was it that the guards themselves were uncomfortable with the letter itself written in Sequoyan, a language that in all likelihood was illegible to them? How could they ensure he wasn’t sending information beyond that which was permitted in the instructions that open this stationary?

His letter mentions that he had received her previous correspondence to him in Cherokee and that this letter is his response to her letter's questions to him, as though they were talking with each other: "Yes, I received this letter in Cherokee" that she had written to him, and "he was glad" she said in that letter that she was well. This suggests that he had the ability to read her letters in Cherokee, or at least access to another prisoner who had the ability to read Sequoyan, though it is not clear whether Walter was also able to produce the script itself. Perhaps his incarceration presented an opportunity to learn to write Sequoyan in order to correspond with his mother in their shared language, a language that would provide them privacy.

Changing Employment Conditions

He goes on to say that his employment conditions were changing as of Monday, March 12, 1951 when he would move from milking the prison's cows to working with another Cherokee person, named □□□□□□ "A-li-s-da-wa-ti [a name]" who works "alone at the front, where the leaders walk around." As his prisoner card indicates, he had already been "assigned to trusty building" almost a year earlier. The trusty system employed prisoners in a hierarchical system of organization. Those at the top of the prison hierarchy guarded and punished other prisoners, while other jobs included working with prison civilian employees, monitoring halls to deliver mail and distribute medicine, and working the floor as cage bosses to maintain peace in the barracks. Those assigned to the 'trusty building' would have had license to dole out harsh punishments to other prisoners or adopt other administrative functions (Gutterman). Walter Duncan was explaining his life in prison and that he was moving somewhere within this system hierarchy, to a position of working with "leaders" who "walk around."

We know as well that Walter is in the good company of four Cherokee-speaking prisoners, including Ama the scribe, all of whom seem to be responding to Dollie's previous

queries in line 14 of this letter: “This is what Johnson said, he is really craving huckleberry pies and said for you to bring some, he’s telling you to.” By the end of the letter in lines 20 and 21 respectively, two additional Cherokee-speaking prisoners say hello to Dollie: “I, a prisoner, □□□ /noquisi/ Star. Also I greet you hello are you well.” And □□ /Tuya/ Bean says: “As for me, no, they still haven’t killed me.” They look forward, we learn in line 16, to Dollie’s visit planned for next Sunday. The friendly way they address Walter’s mother and familiarity they have with her suggests that Walter has found a small community of what literacy scholar Deborah Brandt may call literacy sponsors in the penitentiary (Brandt). Sponsors support the reading and writing of those in institutions when such sponsorship might produce a benefit for the sponsor. In this case, Ama was scribe for Walter and the others, while □□□□□□□□ /Aliswadawati/ was helping Walter find his way into a new position. Those must have been good huckleberry pies. More can be made of this point of sponsorship in learning to read and write in Cherokee in this prison, especially since at least five other such letters from Walter Duncan to his mother Dollie, some as long as two pages, are also included in the Yale collection.⁵ Suffice it to say, this group of Cherokee men were finding ways to support each other with gifts that carried with them implicitly the obligation of reciprocity.

Hidden System of Support

What remains illegible to the guards who might have read this letter was an entire system of support that extends beyond the prison and coheres in and through the Cherokee language. The ability to describe their positions and reveal their exchange systems in this letter seems particularly telling in light of the context of this being a trusty system in a maximum security

⁵ This particular letter and its free translation are also available as part of the Transcribe Yale project: <http://transcribe.library.yale.edu/projects/transcribe/1328/3174>

prison. These men were able to converse with each other in a code, written and oral, that few others would find legible, and in doing so, found ways to connect themselves to each other through systems of sharing and mutual benefit. In the end, this remarkably legible letter presents as much as it obscures, and sheds light on a small community of Cherokee men in this prison who were legible to each other but not to their guards.

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Sources

Much scholarship has treated Sequoyah's early life and the invention of the syllabary including Margaret Bender's *Signs of Cherokee Culture Sequoyah's Syllabary in Eastern Cherokee Life* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and my own book, *The Cherokee Syllabary Writing the People's Perseverance* (Oklahoma Press, 2011). The invention of the syllabary led to the production of uniquely Cherokee intellectual traditions overviewed in James Parins's *Literacy and Intellectual Life in the Cherokee Nation, 1820–1906* (Oklahoma Press 2013) and the establishment of Cherokee governing documents as discussed in Steve Russell's *Sequoyah Rising: Problems in Post-Colonial Tribal Governance* (Carolina Academic Press, 2010) and Kirby Brown's, *Stoking the Fire: Nationhood in Cherokee Writing, 1907-1970* (Oklahoma Press, 2018). The creation of the syllabary helped elders memorialize cultural practices (Kilpatrick; Mooney; Walker and Sarbaugh; Carroll) histories (King), and stories (Teuton). Translations of the everyday reading and writing practices can be found in the collected works of Anna Gritts Kilpatrick and Jack Kilpatrick, including *The Shadow of Sequoyah: Social Documents of the Cherokees, 1862-1964*, Oklahoma Press, 1965 and *New Echota Letters: Contributions of Sammuel A. Worcester to the Cherokee Phoenix*, Southern Methodist University Press. Modern uses of the Cherokee syllabary are found online in Wikipedia pages and in the *Cherokee New Testament*: <https://www.cherokeewtestament.com/>. The Cherokee syllabary remains an important symbol of Cherokee identity (M. C. Bender; Cushman, "We're Taking the Genius of Sequoyah into This Century"; and Cushman, "Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story").