



Questioned Documents – 2019

J1 A Pre-Osborn Timeline of Events and References Concerning Handwriting Examination and Forgery

Judith A. Gustafson, BS, Internal Revenue Service, Chicago, IL 60607*

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of pre-20th century events and references to handwriting identification, document examination, and forgery law.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by increasing awareness of significant events concerning handwriting examination that occurred before the modern era of document examination.

In most standard document examination reference books, the history of document examination generally begins with Albert Osborn in the early 20th century. Osborn is widely considered to be the founder of modern document examination. Information prior to 1900 is treated briefly and spread among several sources.

This presentation will expand upon material presented in previous publications, providing a summary of these events and references in a brief, chronological format. This information may be of value in court testimony where document examiners may be asked about the history of their field.

The earliest mention of a law dealing with forgery may have occurred as early as 80 BC in ancient Rome with a law concerning the falsification of documents. In the 1500s and 1600s, the English Parliament created laws concerning forgery, with a “comparison of hands” said to be good evidence in such criminal cases.

Early courts sometimes relied on the use of “recognition witnesses”—people who were familiar with a given writer’s handwriting and would testify to it in court. The late 1700s saw the first specially qualified witness in an English-speaking court testify on a handwriting identification based on a direct comparison rather than on the use of a recognition witness.

While there is little written history of document examination in America until the late 19th century, there are references to an 1808 Louisiana law code that allows for an examination by “two persons having skill to judge of handwriting” and a recorded handwriting testimony in the early 1800s. In mid-century, a notable debate concerning handwriting examination occurred over the authorship of controversial Revolutionary War-era writings known as the Junius Letters. In Europe, handwriting examination also played a part in the “Dreyfus Affair,” a late 19th-century French political scandal.

Legal decisions of the 1880s and 1890s affirmed the importance of handwriting evidence and the use of experts and saw the first testimony on typewriter identification. Several early texts on handwriting examination were published in the decade of the 1890s by authors Daniel Ames, William Hagan, and Persifor Frazer, setting the stage for Osborn and the modern era of Document Examination.

Document Examination, Handwriting, Early History