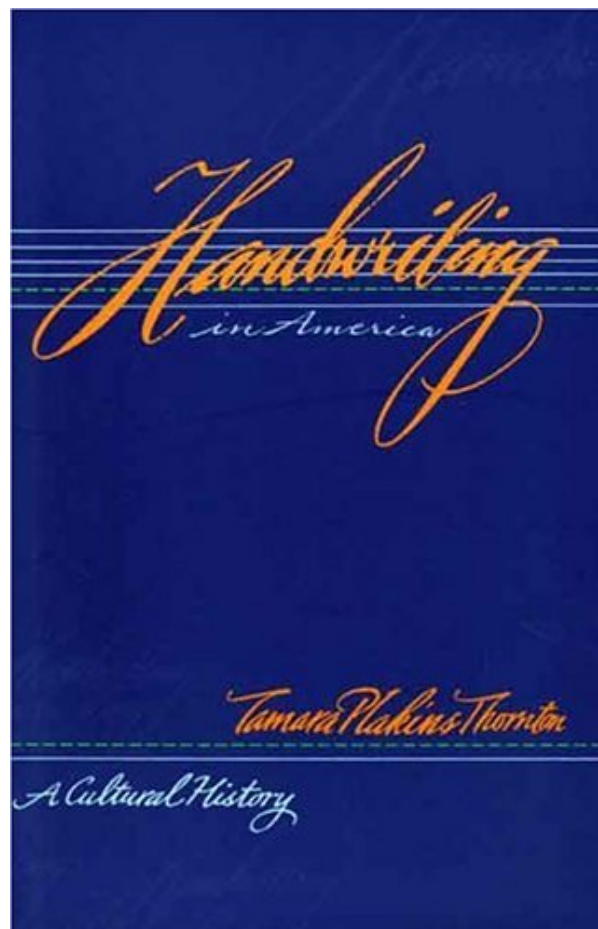
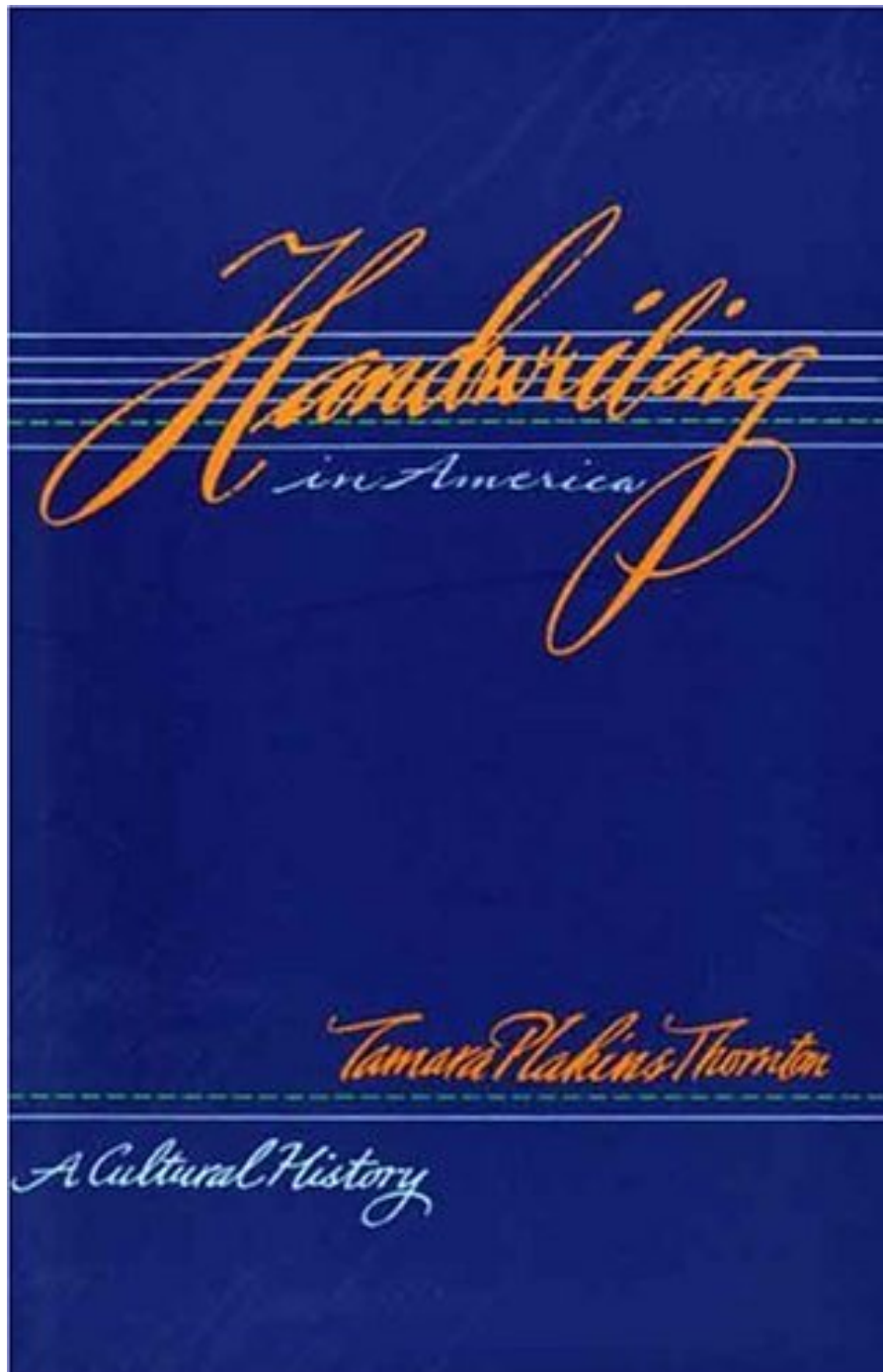


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Copybooks and the Palmer method, handwriting analysis and autograph collecting—these words conjure up a lost world, in which people looked to handwriting as both a lesson in conformity and a talisman of individuality. In this engaging history, ranging from colonial times to the present, Tamara Plakins Thornton explores the shifting functions and meanings of handwriting in America. Script emerged in the eighteenth century as a medium intimately associated with the self, says Thornton, in contrast to the impersonality of print. But thereafter, just what kind of self would be defined or revealed in script was debated in the context of changing economic and social realities, definitions of manhood and womanhood, and concepts of mind and body. Thornton details the parties to these disputes: writing masters who used penmanship training to form and discipline character; scientific experts who chalked up variations in script to mere physiological idiosyncrasy; and autograph collectors and handwriting analysts who celebrated signatures that broke copybook rules as marks of personality, revealing the uniqueness of the self. In our time, concludes Thornton, when handwriting skills seem altogether obsolete, calligraphy revivals and calls for old-fashioned penmanship training reflect nostalgia and the rejection of modernity.

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- Binding: Paperback
- 264 pages

About the Author

Tamara Plakins Thornton is professor of history at the State University of New York, Buffalo.

Most helpful customer reviews

3 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

A fascinating history of handwriting teaching in our schools

By Robert V. Rose, retired education researcher

Most of this book seems to be written from the typical university left-wing point of view, in which handwriting practice in years gone by was just a way of making conforming "assembly line" citizens for capitalists.

But at the end of the book, Professor Thornton seems to realize that the pendulum has swung too far, and that today's pampered youth could use a bit of discipline in school.

I only hope she will soon realize that fluent handwriting is a key to literacy and to education reform, which is now apparent from so many on-line articles.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Marvelous book!

By Lady Eleanor

Such a comprehensive history of handwriting, so well researched and a joy to read. I would recommend this to anyone interested in cultural or social history.

17 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

Handwriting in America: A Cultural History

By Dottie

An interesting book, but it should have been titled "The Teaching of Handwriting in America". Also, it missed a kind of writing which I can't name, but know when I see it - for example, something like "California" on California auto license tags. It was taught in America, and it was the model in England for many years - a Life magazine article around 1950 showed such examples from the winners in an English schoolboy competition. (My father learned this style in a preparatory school in the South in the early 1900s, and one of our daughters-in-law was taught the same way.)

One reviewer adversely criticized this book for harping on, perhaps even imagining, sexism in the early teaching of handwriting, and I don't think the comment was deserved - I believe the author was accurately describing what was actually taught, and gave it no more space than is warranted.

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