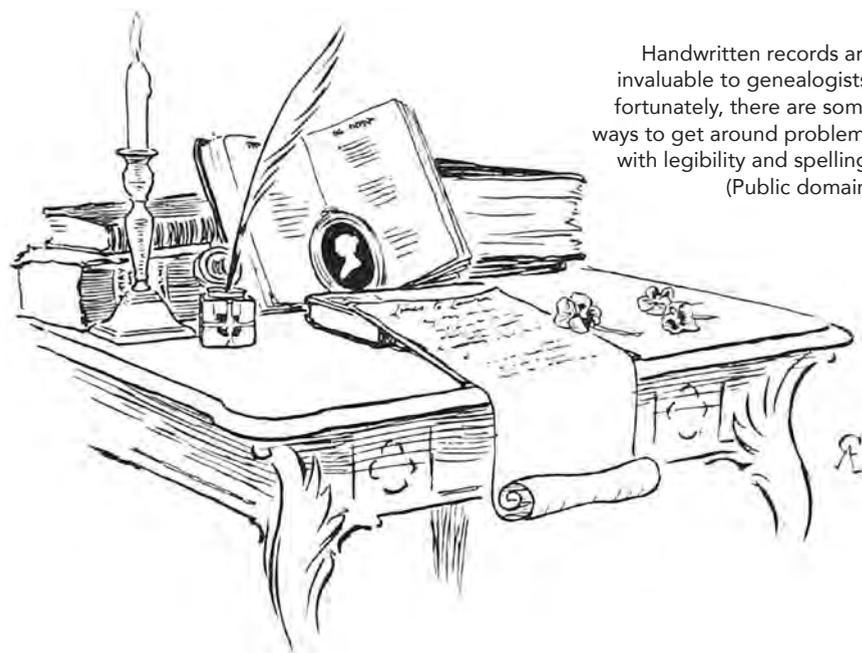




## Deciphering Elusive Surnames

David A. Norris looks at coping with troublesome handwriting and smudged letters

**T**EXT-SCANNING HAS BEEN A WONDERFUL GIFT TO GENEALOGISTS. Ideally, it can search out the names of your ancestors in millions of pages of documents in a split second, saving years of reading and skimming. But, your ancestor's names might not always show up in every instance. From pages with archaic or illegible handwriting; faded ink; or discolored paper; and in printed sources, worn type and smudged ink, your family names might remain elusive even from sophisticated scanning technology. We'll look at a few ways you can increase your chances of locating your ancestors in digitized sources, some of which may also help with original manuscripts as well.



Handwritten records are invaluable to genealogists; fortunately, there are some ways to get around problems with legibility and spelling. (Public domain)

Let's say you're checking online census rolls for an ancestor who should be in a particular time and place, but the surname doesn't show up in a digital search.

First, you can try a first name search for your ancestor. Then, you can glance at the surnames that do turn up. After weeding out most of them as wildly unlikely matches, there may remain a selection or two that look like variants or misspellings of the family name. You can also try a search by initials.

A first name search will of course work better when searching a smaller area, so if you know the city ward, township, militia district, or other small unit of the county your ancestors lived in, it will considerably shorten the time you'll need to check the result.

If you know the names of other members of your ancestor's household, you can also try searching for them. A successful "hit" will bring up your ancestor in that household.

Some census indexes let you add keywords. So, if you know this ancestor's occupation from other information you have, you might search with that job term as a keyword.

The place of birth might be a good search clue, as that would stand out if the ancestor had moved from another state or country.

You can also temporarily give up searching by keyword or name and simply browse the pages for a particular county or town. To speed up browsing a large city's census pages, look for your ancestor in a city directory. If you find him or her, note the names of several neighbors who have address numbers close by on the same street.

Then, look up those neighbors in the census. With luck, the enumerator's handwriting is not so bad that you can find at least one of their surnames. Using that "hit" as an anchor for your search, carefully check that page of the census. Perhaps with a closer look, you will recognize your ancestor's name, or something else such as the likely patterns of the names and ages of the family. If needed, flip back and forth to check neighboring pages.

If the collection you need is available to you on more than one platform (say, U.S. Census rolls which can be searched from multiple