The Halcyon Days of Fine Penmanship

William E. Henning
Augusta Larrabee masters the pen

In the copybooks of Augusta Larrabee (right), we see the developing penmanship of a young girl in the late 19th century.

The first page (below) testifies to Larrabee’s endless practice of individual letters. The page is from Book 1 of the Spencerian System of Practical Penmanship. The outside cover (see page 133) bears the name “Miss Gussie Larrabee.”

The other three pages shown here are from Books 5 and 8 of Babbittonian Penmanship, another system taught in the 19th century.

On these pages, Augusta Larrabee progresses to more interesting material. First, to series of alliterative words—Hydraphathy, Hymns, Huns. Then, to poetic sentences—“Farewell! a word that makes us linger”—and various arrangements of her name. Finally, on the bottom page, she applies her penmanship to an everyday situation befitting a young lady, as she practices a written response to a formal invitation.

Born in 1864, Augusta Larrabee was the daughter of Anna and William Larrabee (Iowa’s 12th governor). Their home, Montauk, is just beyond Clermont, Iowa, and is now a historic site of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

—The Editor