Cursive as we think of it developed as an alternative to the heavy, dark Gothic script of the Middle Ages. By the 1700s, penmanship schools had begun training scribes in a more flowing, elegant script resembling what we today would call “cursive.” In the mid-1800s, Platt Rogers Spencer developed the flowing Spencerian script, meant to be legible and quick to write. Spencer started a school to teach his method and graduates went on to spread the method widely. It was the de facto standard of writing in the United States until the 1920s when the Palmer method took over in popularity. The Palmer method was developed in the late 19th century by Austin Palmer as faster and simpler than the Spencerian method. Eventually the Zaner-Bloser method of learning cursive took over, as a more streamlined version of Spencerian script. Then followed the D’Nealian method many of us are likely familiar with, developed in 1978 by Donald Thurber and deriving from the Palmer method. Cursive instruction seemed to be disappearing from schools but very recent trends indicate a resurgence! What will the future of cursive instruction hold?
Has technology ruined handwriting?

A 2012 study found that **33%** of people couldn’t read their own handwriting. Even as early as 1955, the Saturday Evening Post called the US a “nation of scrawlers” and things have not improved since. We might think of “technology” as the introduction of computers, but what of the technology of **writing surfaces**? They’ve progressed from clay to papyrus to parchment to paper. And **writing implements**? Triangular styluses, reeds, quills, fountain pens, ball point pens, and wooden pencils, which are a later invention than most people realize! All of these have had an impact on the then-current style of writing. For example, the **ball point pen** must be held very differently from a **fountain pen** and much greater pressure exerted to use it. Thus, the introduction of the ball point pen may have helped the decline of cursive simply due to the physical mechanics of pen use.
Some celebrate the absence of cursive education, regarding it as an unnecessary archaic art in modern times. They say “nobody needs to write in cursive anymore!” - save for maybe signing their name on official documents. But isn’t there more to it than that? Those who lament the loss of cursive education point to the necessity of being able to at least read cursive in order to make sense of hundreds of years of primary source materials in scholarly research. Additionally, some studies show that taking notes by hand, instead of typing, can aid learning and retention. So get out those pens and practice your notetaking!
from proto-writing symbols and cuneiform of ancient times,

to Egyptian hieroglyphics,

still-undecipherable scripts from 3000 BC, on through the development of the Greek alphabet,

Blackletter of the Middle Ages,

modern cursive and...beyond?
MWWC holds handwritten items from the early 1800s to the present day, showcasing a wide variety of handwriting, in cursive more often than not. These range from the meticulous, tidy, pre-Spencerian script of an 1809 letter from Mary Parker to the larger, angular hand of Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat or the impeccable writing of George Wallis Haven in the late 1800s. There’s the large, loopy, pencil-written text in a letter from Mollie Clifford (in the voice of her cat) from 1911 and the similarly-formed, easy to read, cursive letters of Rachel Carson over 50 years later in 1963. On the other hand, we also have the artistically formed (sometimes hard to decipher!) letters of Sue McConkey from the mid-1960s. Mister Rogers also had interesting handwriting—a creative print-cursive hybrid we see in a letter to May Sarton in 1992. More modern writers sometimes forego cursive and may even write in all capitals, as in a letter from Lib Butler in 2002. The variety of scripts represented in archival collections is impressive—even an individual’s writing can change significantly over time. Some people believe you can tell a lot about a person by their handwriting.

What might we learn about the correspondents represented here?
**Paleography** is the study of *ancient and historical handwriting*. It is an important skill for historians who need to decipher and understand historical texts. Written text can evolve quickly and the paleographer or historian needs to know how to decipher not only the **individual letterforms** of the then-current alphabet, but also the **abbreviations**, **ligatures** and **punctuation** of the era. Paleography should not be confused with **graphology**–an often-controversial **pseudoscience** that claims to be able to identify many characteristics of the writer—including **personality**, **gender**, **race**, **class**, and **ethnicity**, to name a few–based on their handwriting. It has been used in medicine, psychological analysis, and employment profiling but has been criticized on ethical and legal grounds. Three basic categories to examine when looking at handwriting are: **gradient** (slant to the right or left), **structure** (evenness of letter size), and **concavity** or roundedness. What do you think your handwriting says about you?