

Professor A.S. Pratt

Inform the Mind and Train the Hand

by *Lynne Belluscio*

There has been a lot of discussion about whether students today need to spend the time and effort to learn how to write. It is thought that they are using computers, and their time is better spent becoming proficient with the keyboard. Reflecting on this, I wondered if the invention of the typewriter in the 1860s, created a similar reaction. In fact, at the time the typewriter was introduced, there was greater emphasis put on standardized, handwriting. It was introduced by Pratt Spencer and became known as the Spencerian method. Pratt Spencer admired the elegant signature of John Hancock on the Declaration of Independence. After Spencer's death, his five sons carried on his method of teaching penmanship. They prepared instruction booklets as an "aid to educating the mind, which must always accompany the training of the mind." This flowing Spencerian penmanship was taught in the classroom from the 1860s to the 1920, when it was replaced with the Palmer method. (Spencerian was thought to be flowery and effeminate and the Palmer style was said to be more masculine and more appropriate for business.)

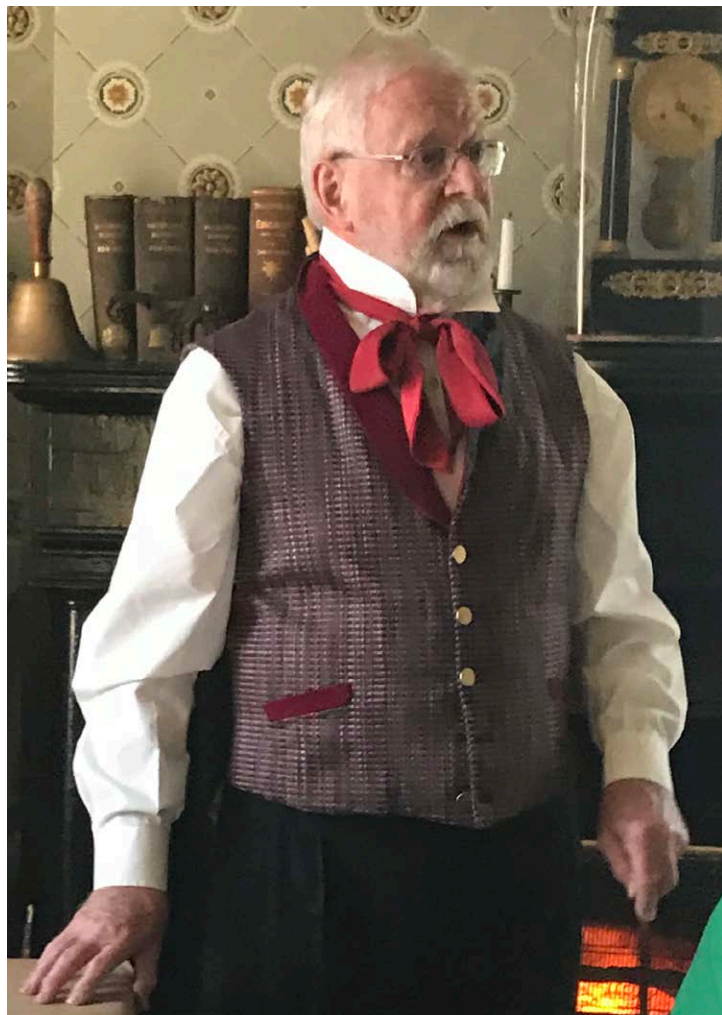
One of Spencer's proponents was A.S. Pratt of Batavia. It is believed that he had studied with Spencer, and Professor Pratt was well known in Genesee County. He taught at the LeRoy Academic Institute behind LeRoy House and was on the faculty of Ingham University. A newspaper article stated "As a teacher, he has no superior and in the practice of his art, it is no flattery to call him the Champion Penman of America. Long may the graceful lines of his pen and the cheery tones of his voice greet the many pupils and friends who have learned to appreciate his high character as a teacher." During the

Candlelight tours of LeRoy House this year, Sam Leadley portrayed Professor Pratt and helped visitors write Christmas messages in their very best handwriting.

Writing equipment included a pen, ink, blotters, a sander (with fine sand to shake on the paper to absorb the ink), and a felt pen wipe, (to clean the "nib" or pen point. Quill pens were replaced with steel nibs in the early 1800s, with the invention of the steel point in the 1820s. Quill pens were made from a goose feather from the left wing. This gave the right angle for the right hand. Quill pens had to be sharpened frequently and students had to carry a pen knife to school. (Imagine that today!) Carving a point on the quill took a lot of skill and practice. Left handed people were usually forced to write with their right hand, because their left hand would drag through the ink as they wrote. The only solution was to write "from above."

Ink could be purchased or made from scratch. Some ink was made by collecting the carbon residue from candles for fires. This was mixed with a variety of liquids – sometimes animal glue. Another type of ink was made from oak galls, which were pounded and then mixed with a variety of liquids. The problem with oak gall ink was that in time, the acid in the ink destroys the paper. Some of Beethoven's original music scores have disintegrated because he used oak gall ink.

It's hard to imagine, but at one time paper was very expensive. In fact, Pratt Spencer wrote that when he was young, he saved up money to buy some paper, but he could only afford one sheet. The best paper was made from pulp made from old rags -- and early newspapers were often called rags. It was not until the middle of the 1800s, that pulp paper, made from wood



pulp was manufactured. Millions of trees are cut to make cheap pulp paper and the term "pulp fiction" come from the cheap paper they were printed on. An interesting side note: LeRoy had a paper mill. It was owned by Albert Jones and was located north of town, near the creek near the present water-treatment plant. The building was the former flourmill built by Jacob LeRoy and was often called the Railroad Mill. The price of paper is one of the reasons why students carried slates to school.

Introductory remarks in the front of the "Theory of Spencerian Penmanship" which has been reprinted by Mott Media, states: "Writing is almost as important as speaking, as a medium for communicating thought. For this reason, it is said that 'Writing is a secondary power of speech, and they who cannot write are in part dumb.' Scrawls that cannot be read



may be compared to talking that cannot be understood; and writing difficult to decipher, to stammering speech. Theory directs, and Art performs; therefore inform the mind and train the hand. If you would attain high excellence in penmanship, you must master the principles, and faithfully practice them."