

Joe Nickell,

AUTOGRAPH DETECTIVE

"The person who thinks he can't be fooled has just fooled himself." —JOE NICKELL

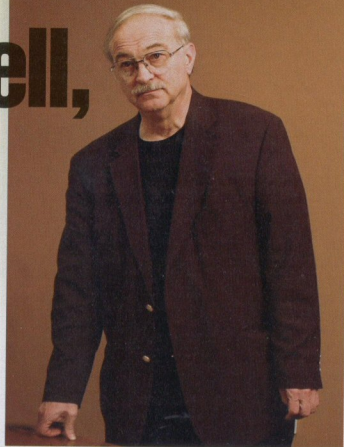
By David Grossberg

In my determination to grasp all the dimensions of autograph collecting, I stumbled upon a book in 2000 that changed my way of thinking forever and made the hobby even more fascinating. The book was *Pen, Ink, & Evidence* by Joe Nickell. I couldn't put it down. Nickell gives the history of paper, ink and writing instruments from ancient times to the late 20th century, traces the development of autograph collecting and explains how to detect forgeries. Bookman's Weekly called it "in a class by itself." Nickell followed up in 1996 with an in-depth book titled *Detecting Forgery: Forensic Investigation of Documents*.

If you're a serious autograph collector, these books are indispensable. Now when I look at a Lincoln-signed commission, I see if it was signed with a quill or a steel-nibbed pen, what type of ink was used, what era the style of the handwriting is from, if it's signed with Lincoln's typical stair-stepped baseline and what type of paper it's on. I'll never look at historical documents the same.

Bill Butts, of Main Street Fine Books & Manuscripts in Galena, Illinois, says, "Joe Nickell is an anomaly in the autograph world: Neither dealer nor collector, but simply an extraordinarily knowledgeable and talented autograph detective. His objectivity is admirable, for he has no financial stake or agenda of any sort—he simply wants to get to the truth behind an autograph, and this he does articulately and expertly in books such as *Pen, Ink, & Evidence*."

Authenticating historical documents is only one of Joe



Joe Nickell

Nickell's professions. My wife and I watched a National Geographic show recently on the Nazca Lines in Peru. Some believe these line formations are a giant blueprint created from the sky by ancient astronauts. There was Joe Nickell, hired by National Geographic to help prove or disprove this theory. He showed that these "spider" lines could have been made at ground level.

Nickell is a skeptic. Whether an historical document's authenticity or the existence of Bigfoot, he believes they should be systematically investigated before acceptance. Nickell's been a stage magician, a private detective, a college professor and now is a full-time paranormal investigator. He has a Ph.D. in English literature, authored 22 books and has made countless TV appearances. He only authenticates documents today for spectacular cases. Don't contact him for less than the letters of Shakespeare.

Autograph Collector: How did you become interested in forgery detection?

Joe Nickell: Ever since I was a child I wanted to be a number of things, including a detective. I grew up on Sherlock Holmes stories, which have many document questions. I was an artist and a calligrapher. I read all I could on forensic science. Preparing to become a detective, I took courses in handwriting and typewriting comparison. I was interested in the history of handwriting, and one day I found an antique writing kit in a store. Then I found an inkstand.

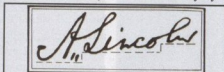


Figure 2.8. Authentic signature of Abraham Lincoln typically exhibits a stair-stepped baseline, a feature that forgers often miss. (Note also Lincoln's characteristic pen lift between the s and the c.)

Authentic Lincoln signatures typically have a stair-stepped baseline, a feature forgers often miss. From *Detecting Forgery*.

Soon I was collecting antique writing equipment and began my historical research for my doctoral degree.

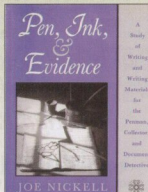
I wanted to know more about the historical nature of documents—how they were made, and how to tell if one had been forged. Soon people started asking me if I could tell if a document was authentic. Thus I began my self-taught journey into the world of forgery detection.

The roguish nature of forgeries greatly interested me. I contacted the legendary Charles Hamilton, whose background was as an autograph dealer. He was a practical guy with a good eye. He agreed to tutor me.

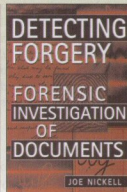
One time Hamilton sent me a blank sheet of Revolutionary-era paper and challenged me to do a Benjamin Franklin. He was mischievous. He knew I'd have to learn how to mix the proper ink composition and cut a quill pen. I sent the finished signature to Hamilton, who responded tactfully that it "was good enough to fool a librarian."

Hamilton would send me books on inks or other related matters. I began to sign my letters to him with the signatures of different personalities—George Washington, Walt Disney, Daniel Boone, Harry Truman and Adolph Hitler to name a few. Hamilton once responded, "That was a magnificent signature of Hitler that appeared at the end of your letter. It shows you have the instincts for becoming a dic-

tator." The next time he wrote, "I loved your Washington signature! You get more skilled all the time, and when you perfect the art, you can forge a letter of Shakespeare, which I will sell and then we will both retire to the South of France where we can both luxuriate with the beautiful girls."



Pen, Ink, & Evidence (\$29.95) and *Detecting Forgery* (\$19.95), both by Joe Nickell.



What are the easiest and most difficult forgeries to detect?

The easiest are traced forgeries and slowly drawn forgeries. Slowly drawn forgeries have a labored look and shaky appearance known as forger's tremor. Highly-skilled freehand forgeries are the hardest to detect. We can unfailingly compare fingerprints. Bullets can be

matched. But no two signatures are ever the same, making comparison difficult.

A highly skilled forger can mimic what I call the dance of the handwriting—especially the signature. Pens go through a series of movements. A freehand forger who studies a signature can learn it fairly well and become practiced at it. This is why forgery detection can get very complicated. Of course, it's easier to forge a signature than a multi-page letter.

What equipment should a collector have to help them authenticate?

A stereomicroscope is a must. It lets you see with both eyes the subtleties of pressure, the build up of ink, etc. Depth perception is reduced using only one eye.

How can a collector find a bonafide authenticator?

First, let's define the difference between those who authenticate historical documents and those who forensically examine documents in criminal cases. By and large, forensic experts well-versed in modern methods and materials know little about things like quills or the history of paper. They may be out of their element with historical documents.

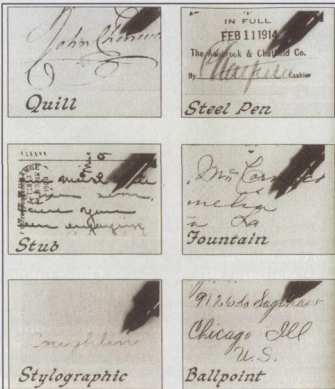
There is an organization called the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners. You must be a full-time document examiner to join. This group has a certification process and they police themselves. But most members are not specifically trained in the examination of historical documents.

On the other hand, few historical document authenticators have a forensic science background. I wanted to bridge that gap, which is why I wrote *Detecting Forgery*.

One problem with modern autographs is that the cost of authentication often outweighs their value, so it's generally best to buy from reputable dealers that stand by what they sell.

What was the hardest case of forgery detection you've been involved in?

A man once asked me to authenticate some documents he purchased from the notorious forger Mark Hoffman. One



From the ancient quill to the modern ballpoint, pens leave evidence of their form in the lines they draw. From *Detecting Forgery*.

was a list of marriages by Cotton Mather. I remember first thinking it was a Hoffman forgery. I looked at the paper. The paper was good, so I thought Hoffman had just gotten an old sheet of paper. I looked at the writing, and it was done with a quill. I was determined not to be outsmarted by Hoffman! Eventually I saw a sparkle in the ink that looked like mica writing sand. I took the sample to a geology laboratory, which positively identified the speck as mica. If Hoffman was going to use writing sand he surely would have used a lot. Ultimately, after doing further research on the item's provenance I was satisfied it was original.

Have your books helped forgers?

My books are useful to forgers, but also make it harder to ply their trade. That's the trade-off. Have I published every secret I know? I have a few in reserve. I try to make my books helpful to the honest collector, dealer and archivist. There are many more honest people than forgers.

Other than your own books, what other reference books do you recommend?

For historical documents, I recommend looking at the works of Charles Hamilton and Kenneth Rendell. Orday Hilton's book *Scientific Examination of Questioned Documents* is also essential. In the back of *Detecting Forgery*, I put an extensive list of recommended works, too.

Do you collect autographs?

No. I donated the entire collection of writing materials I amassed for *Pen, Ink, & Evidence* to the University of Kentucky Department

Nickell is a skeptic. Whether an historical document's authenticity or the existence of Bigfoot, he believes they should be systematically investigated before acceptance.

of Special Collections. I do, however, collect interesting paranormal items, like spirit trumpets and antique Ouija boards.

What would be your advice to beginning autograph collectors?

Buy my books and follow the advice in them. The books are a training course and useful in all aspects of forgery detection. They have advice on materials that collectors can use themselves for forgery detection. ☺

Go to Joe Nickell's website for more information or to purchase his books, www.joennickell.com.



DAVID GROSSBERG is a long-time collector who specializes in U.S. presidents. He established the speaker's bureau for the UACC. You can reach him at dgrossberg@charter.net.



Babe Ruth Game-Used Baseball Bat (c. 1917-1921)



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