

Making a Quill Pen

*"To know how to make a pen is almost as necessary as to know how to use it."
The Connecticut Common School Journal, 1842*

Though rarely used today, a plumed feather pen, or quill, is still recognized by many as the way in which handwriting was accomplished in the days before our modern ball-point pens, mechanical pencils, and permanent markers. In comparison, a quill pen seems pretty simple, right? But, did you know that a bit more effort went into the making of a quill pen than just picking up a feather and dipping it into a pot of ink? No? Luckily for you, you're about to find out!

In the 19th century and earlier, every student would have been taught from an early age the art of pen-making and pen-mending, and been expected to use those skills on a daily basis.

Opinions regarding pen-making were plentiful, ranging from the proper technique one should use to to prepare and cut a feather to which feathers made the best pens. Crow, goose, swan and turkey were all popular choices in Arkansas, with each species boasting it's own special attributes when dipped in ink.

Are you ready to commence the "quill dressing" in the Woodruff Printshop? Come on in!

An abundance of wild turkey in the early days of Arkansas meant there would have been no shortage of their feathers for quill making.

Incredibly hard and long-lasting, a turkey quill pen would have been a logical choice as a reliable writing tool.



We've chosen our feather. It needs a good soak in hot water to soften the shaft. This will make cutting off the tip much easier.



Cutting off the top of the feather is the next step.

Personal preference is the rule here. I cut this one so that it's about the same length as a modern pencil.



Have you ever heard someone refer to a pocket knife as a pen knife? In those days, a pen knife or quill knife would have been used to carve one's quill, and then folded up and stuck in a pocket.

I'm using an exacto knife instead, and shaving off the extra barbs. I left a little at the top, though, just for fun.



Here's the part that makes you glad you just soaked your feather in hot water. The shaft of this feather is as tough as nails!

Even after a hot bath this still took several minutes to slice through without crushing it.



Now that the top is cut off, we'll remove the membrane inside the hollow feather shaft. It's called the pith, and it slides right out.



With my exacto knife, I'll begin to carve the nib, or the tip, of the pen that will be dipped in ink and used for writing.



It's really starting to look like a proper pen!



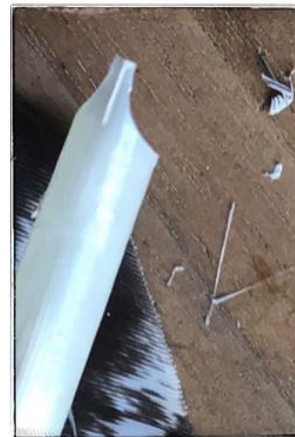
The nib is looking good. Using the exacto knife, we'll cut a slit in the very tip of the nib. This will help the ink flow evenly when pressure is put on the pen.



It takes a steady hand!



Finished!



If you'd like to try writing with a quill, but happen to find yourself lacking in the feather department, never fear.

Next, we'll show you how you can make a dip pen with a stick, a sharp cutting tool, and a responsible adult to assist and supervise.

No ink? No problem! We'll share a recipe for ink using some common items in your kitchen.

*And last but not least, we'll include some **Spencerian** writing charts, practice sheets, and letter folding instructions you can print at home, so that you too, can write a letter like an early citizen of Arkansas!*

