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Lost Art of Writing

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It is hard to imagine life without email and cell phones. These methods of communication have become indispensable parts of our busy lives. But in the 1800s, long distance communication was done by writing letters, an art that is sadly almost extinct.

Juan Bandini's correspondence to Abel Stearns (found at the Bancroft Library) unveils details about political matters, business issues, health, weather, and all kinds of everyday events that happened in San Diego, in Tijuana, or on their ranches. Thanks to these invaluable written documents we are able to better understand the past.

By reading these letters one can see that writing was a very important part of Bandini's life. He must have spent a lot of his time writing letters and business documents, which he would send via messenger, or even by ship. Some of these letters were written at night, and one can imagine how hard it must have been to write a letter under the light of a candle or an oil lamp.

He once asked Stearns to send him ink when his ink bottle broke on a trip to the Guadalupe Valley in Baja California. In an 1840 letter from San Juan del Rio, he says that he is writing on his last piece of paper, and asks if Stearns could send him one *resma* (ream) of paper.

Bandini had beautiful handwriting, especially considering how he had to dip his pen in ink every few words, and his handwriting changes from time to time. One letter dated in 1847 was particularly hard to read. The words were crooked and very shaky, with big ink stains, and mistakes; not characteristic of Bandini's letters. It is only at the end of the letter that he mentions having an accident and cutting his finger.

In a letter written in 1842 Bandini says that Juanito, his son, asked to stay with his brother José María at Stearn's house specifically so Juanito could keep learning and practicing his writing skills.

Back in the 1800s people used pens and pencils, but the pens had metal pen nibs mounted in wooden pen holders, and the pencils were graphite sticks, which were sharpened with a knife. England was the most important graphite manufacturer. American graphite pencils were made by mixing glue, wax, and other materials (American Heritage.com, Fall 2004, 20:2).

The ASM archaeology crew discovered a rusted metal pen nib and several pencil lead fragments while excavating the Cosmopolitan Hotel, the former Bandini House. These writing utensils could have been used by somebody working at the hotel front desk, or maybe by Don Juan Bandini himself, and are witnesses to his long working days and nights writing the letters that speak for him now.