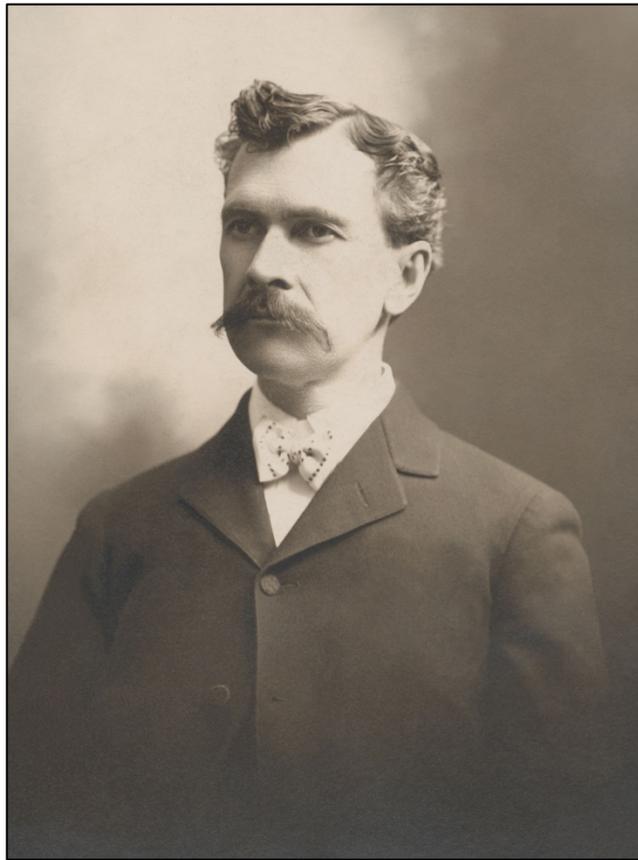


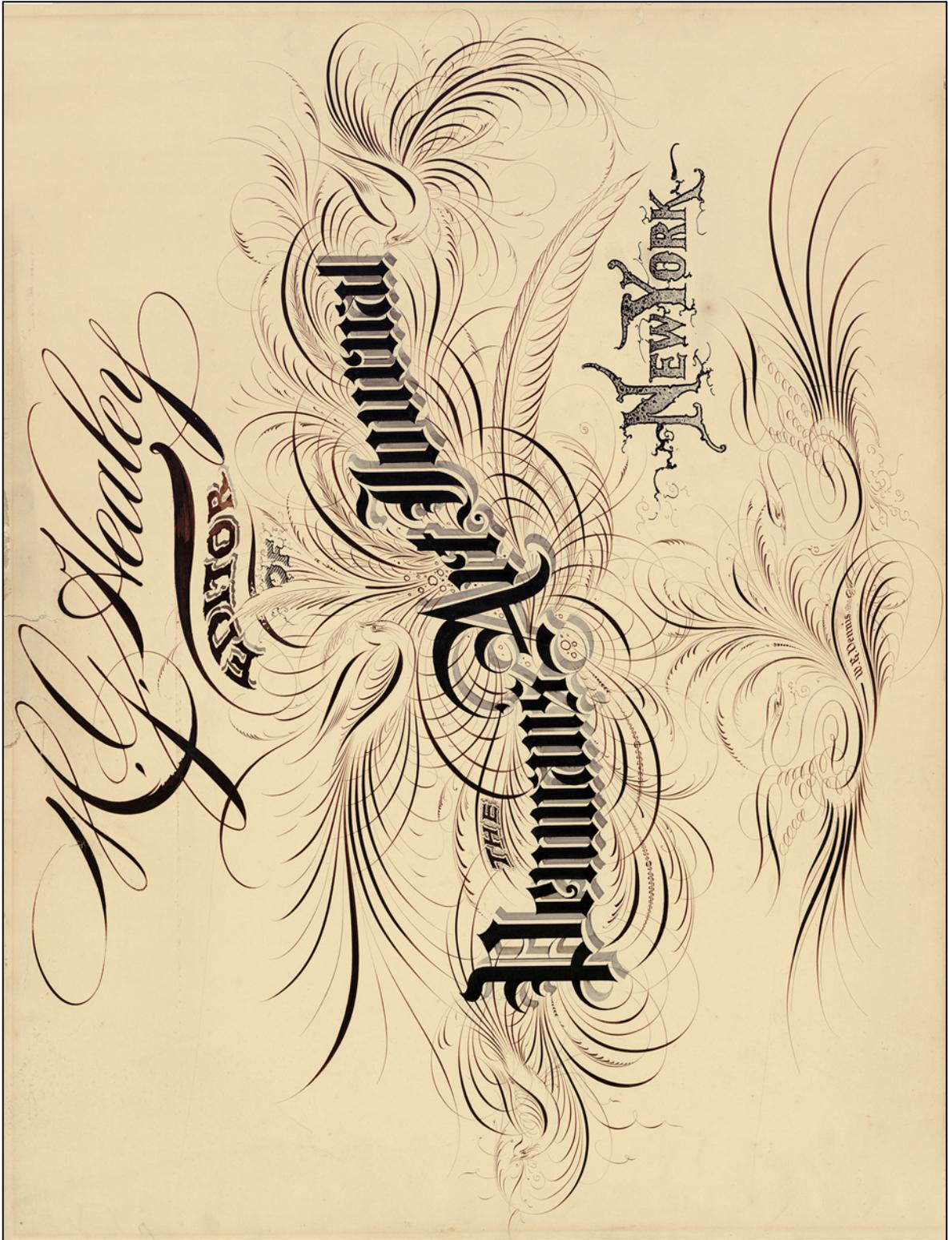
The Life & Works of
William E. Dennis
(1860-1924)



Compiled by Dr. Joseph M. Vitolo, 2017
Penman and IAMPETH Historian

Thank you to Michael Sull and Tom Costello for making the above portrait image from the Zaner-Bloser Collection available to us.

Image courtesy of Neil McCaffery



The following biography is used with permission from Michael Sull's Spencerian Script and Ornamental Penmanship, Volume I.

William E. Dennis
(1860-1924)

Among the ranks of penmen, there were few indeed who earned the respect and admiration of his peers to a greater degree than William E. Dennis. As a man, beloved by the members of his profession, he rates with E. W. Bloser, C. P. Zaner and even P. R. Spencer. As a skilled penman in every field of penmanship and pen art, he ranked above them all. In the eyes of his contemporaries and those penmen who followed after his death, he was often regarded as the finest all around penman who ever lived. To this day, his work remains unchallenged and undoubtedly will remain so.

Born in Manchester, New Hampshire in 1860, Dennis' interest in penmanship started in 1875 at the age of 15 when he secured a copy of Gaskell's Compendium of Penmanship. He studied the plates in the text and sent his lessons to Gaskell for critique. Two years later he enrolled in Gaskell's school and was widely promoted by the great penman as "Gaskell's boy wonder" It was at that institution where Dennis made friends with his new classmate A. N. Palmer, a treasured association that lasted through both men's lifetimes.

While a young man in his twenties, Dennis tried several lines of work as a clerk, but found them too boring for his taste. He decorated the ledger books in his charge with fancy birds and scrolls, but it seems that this did little to impress his employers, for he was fired from no less than three jobs! His fortunes changed and his career path became guided when shortly thereafter he met A. R. Dunton one of the most skilled penmen of the 19th century. Under Dunton's guidance, Dennis learned much practical use for his pen, as well as many advanced techniques of penmanship.

During his career as a penman and engrosser, W. E. Dennis was known as an expert of the highest caliber in all forms of ornamental penmanship, shaded "display" scripts, and text lettering. He was considered a genius at offhand flourishing, and was acclaimed as "America's Dean of Engrossing." In 1909, he met Mr. Willis Baird, and in 1914 the two men formed a partnership in Brooklyn, New York. It was also in that same year that the American Penman published a superb collection of ornamental penmanship by Dennis entitled "Studies in Pen Art," copies of which were eagerly sought by penmen of his day and are prized by collectors today.

For many years until his death, William E. Dennis maintained his studio in Brooklyn and produced work of superlative quality. His death at age 64 on June 6, 1924 was a shock to the penmanship profession. A slightly built man of 5'6" and 135 pounds, his passing resulted from pneumonia after an illness of only three days. Numerous Master Penmen eulogized him, but perhaps none better than his dear friend Samuel E. Bartow: "Dennis was to the penmanship profession what such painters as Whistler, Sargent and Da Vinci were to the art world. His book known as 'Studies in Pen Art' forms one of the most enduring monuments to that Greatest of Great all around penman, W E. Dennis."

“How They Became Penmen”

By W. E. Dennis*, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Taken from The Penman's Art Journal, November 1907

(Text Converted by Dr. Joseph M. Vitolo)

You have asked me to give the boys some idea of how I got started in my special line of work, I assure you it is not with the least bit of egotism that I rake up a few facts regarding my experience; but still, if I can help the younger ones by pointing out some of my mistakes, I readily comply with your request. So here goes:

When quite a little shaver I was guilty of filling up a few copy books with boyish attempts at fancy lettering and scroll work. Of course, then I had no idea that I would ever follow it as a business, but did it just for the fun of it. A little later, when I got hold of "Gaskell's Compendium" and gazed with wonder at the strikingly beautiful specimens contained therein, I was seized with a sudden desire to learn to execute those wonderful things, then go forth into the world and make a colossal fortune at once-not only for myself, but sufficient to put on Easy Street all my friends and distant relatives.

It beats all what crazy notions get into a young fellow's head and make him a sort of temporary lunatic, but such is life. Well, after I had shed quarts of ink on birds, swans and other funny things, I finally landed at Gaskell's Business College, Manchester, N. H., where I was bent on becoming initiated into the mysteries of flourished stags, spread eagles, etc. I had such unbounded faith in this wonderful art (?) that I thought when I was ready to strike out I would only have to walk into some business house and show a few swans and fancy flourished capitals; then if I wanted the book keeper's job he would at once be fired out and I would step into his place with double his salary. But somehow things didn't go that way.

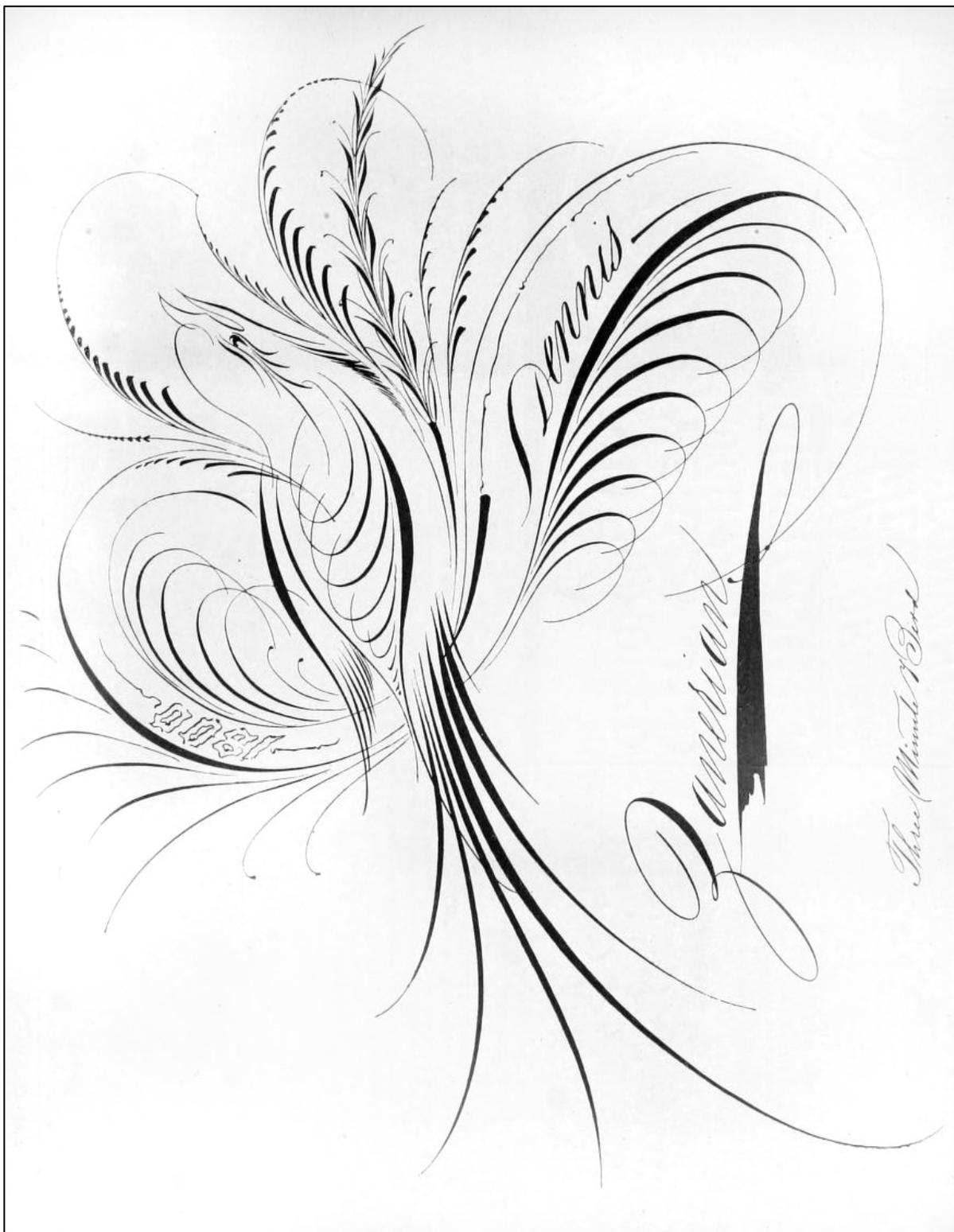
I did at last hook on to a job in an insurance office at the immense salary of \$3 per week, where my clerical duties were to be rather light—simply to hold the place down when the boss was out. The boss did go out finally for several days, much to my relief, and when he returned he found me working up a couple of flourished stags on a sheet of Whatman's drawing paper five feet long. I well remember the look of astonishment, mingled with profound disgust, that spread over his usually immobile features, but I simply thought he didn't know a good thing when he saw it. I even had the unmitigated nerve to ask him for a few days off that I might finish up the bounding stags. He told me I could have the whole Summer off, and the coming Fall, Winter and Spring. Thus, you see I was "bounced."

Manchester being too small a place to hold me, I lit out and went on a "wild goose chase" (flourished geese of course) until I struck Boston—the Hub, and the city of education and culture—just the place where a young giant who could flourish birds and swans would soon roll in wealth. But the market for flourished geese, birds, swans, eagles, etc., was away down, and I began to wonder what in the world had caused such a panic. However, I wasn't destined to starve exactly, and thereupon secured a fine job in a large bookstore at the large salary of \$3 per week to make myself generally -useful. Seeing that I was handy with the pen, they set me to writing circular letters—a kind of work which soon grew monotonous, so I began to sprinkle in a few flourished birds, etc., with the regular work assigned me. Being hardheaded, practical businessmen, they of course didn't stand it long, and accordingly I was suddenly and unceremoniously "bounced."

My next step towards fame and fortune was a job in a Mercantile Agency—copying, at the usual boys' salary of \$3 per week, but there was a ray of hope, as it was hinted that I might get a raise soon by becoming familiar with the work. Copying soon grew dull and my interest lagged. Pens, ink and paper were handy, so I began a series of birds, scrolls, swans, etc., which I felt sure would raise me to a higher pinnacle in this big business institution than that of a mere copying machine. And, sure enough, they did make an impression, for, after covering my desk with what I thought was something dazzling in the flourish line, I was informed that the manager wanted to see me. Thinking he was going to give me a shower bath of compliments and double my salary, I went with great alacrity to his desk, and there I was simply told to gather up my flourished birds and quietly vanish. "Bounced" again!

After that I believe I should have withered up and blown away if good fortune hadn't thrown me in the path of old A. R. Dunton, "author and teacher of the Duntonian System of Writing, used all over the entire country," as he always proudly announced himself. Dunton was filling out the Boston diplomas and getting tip sets of copy books. He showed me how copies were prepared for the engraver and soon had me in harness doing practical work, for at that time copy book work was quite a big thing, and what I learned in this particular branch was something that was afterwards the means of bringing me considerable money. Here was work for which there was a market, and it may be well to say to the young penmen that there is yet a demand for good commercial script for reproduction; and the young fellow who combines good sensible script work with a facility for practical lettering and designing will not go long without employment.

The Pen Work of William E. Dennis

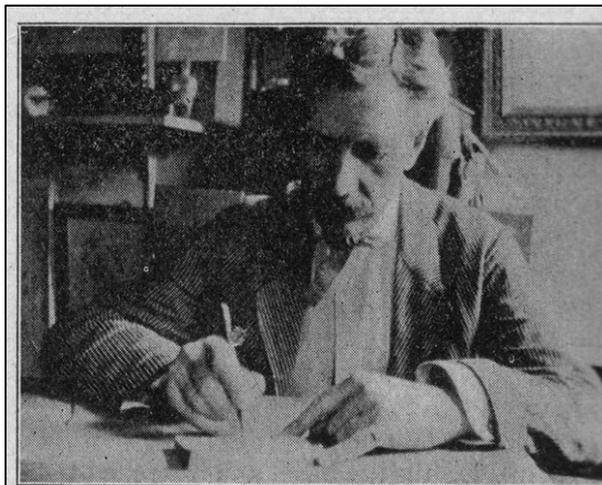


The Lord's Prayer

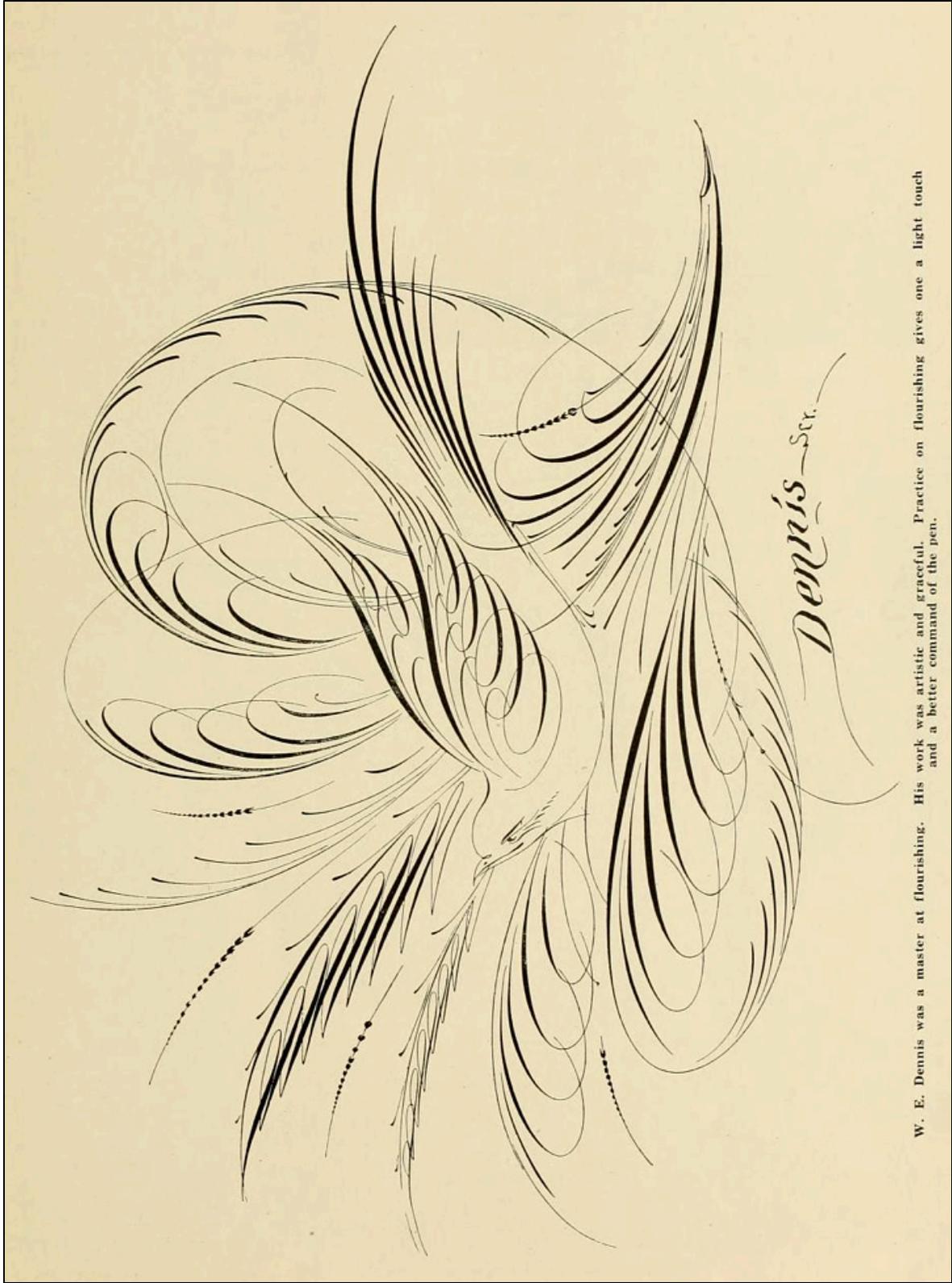
Our Father which art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our Daily Bread and forgive us our Trespases as we forgive those who trespass against us: and lead us not into Temptation, but deliver us from Evil. For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever

W. E. D.

This is one of the finest pieces of work ever produced by any penman. It shows that W. E. Dennis had a wonderful conception of form, grace and beauty.



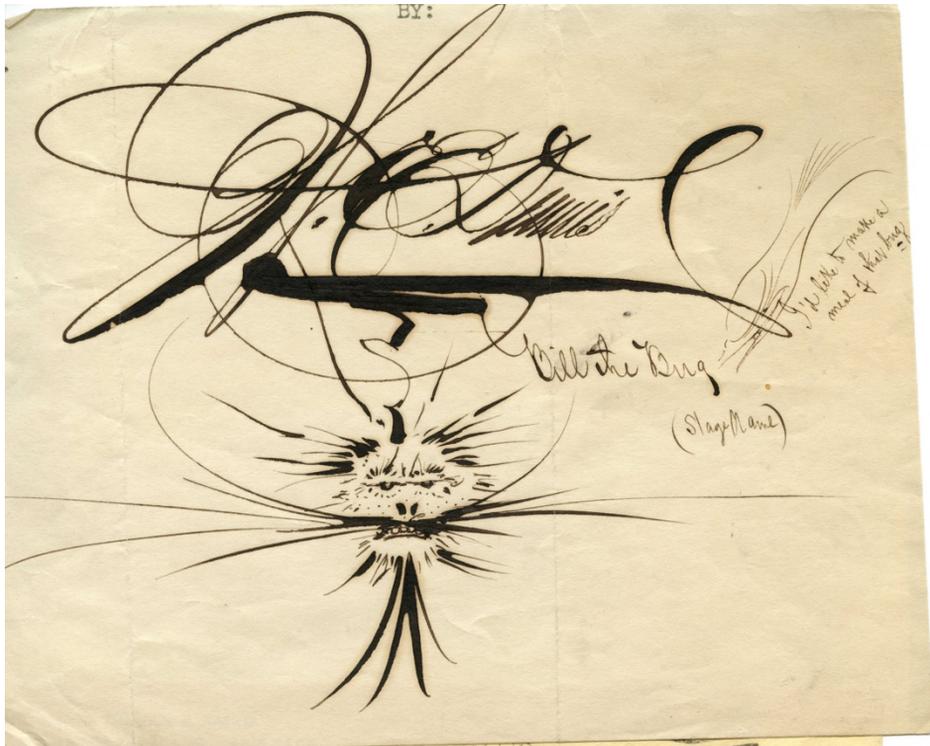
Mr. Dennis at work, photo by D. Beauchamp
engrosser, Montreal, Can.



Dennis - *scr.*

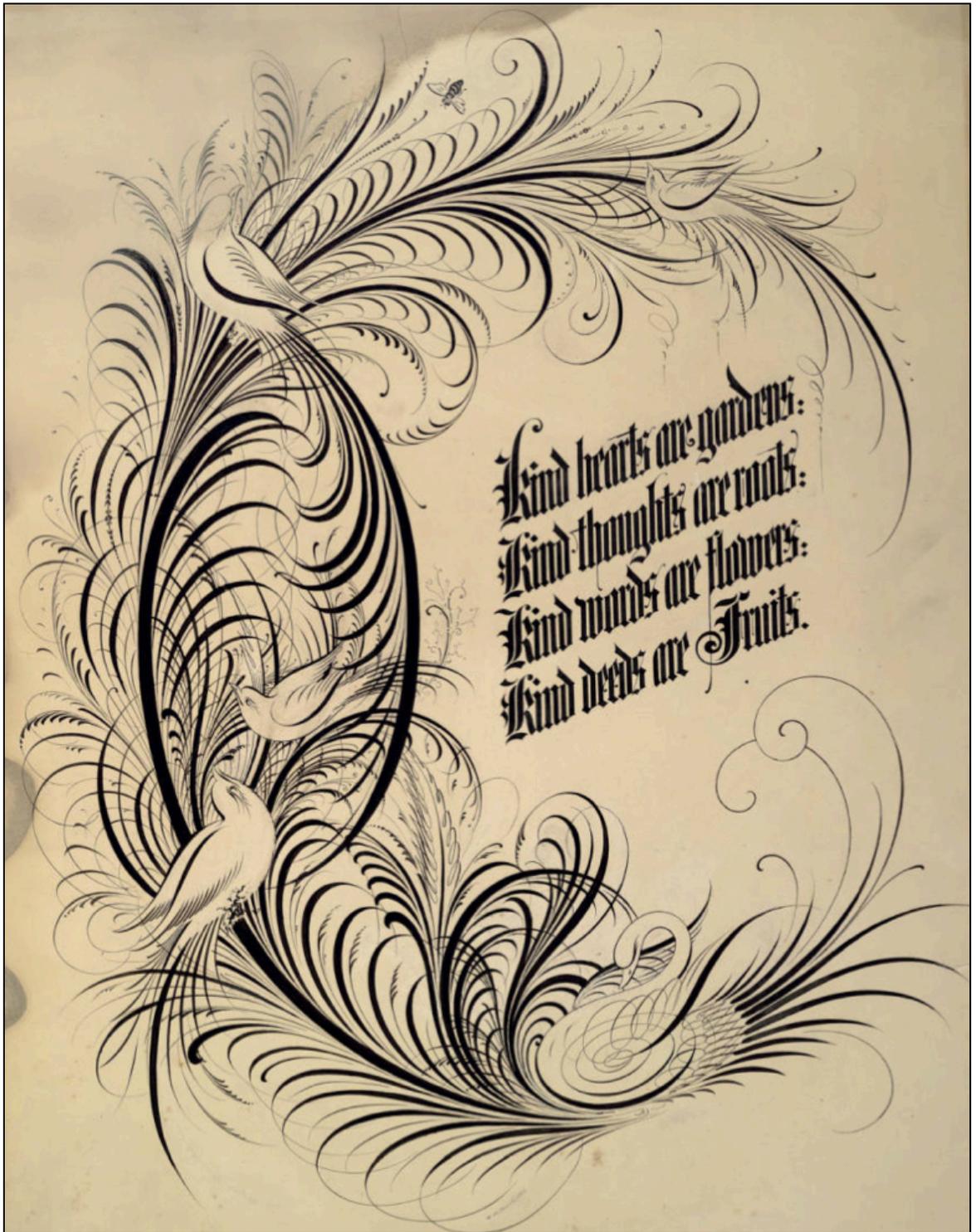
W. E. Dennis was a master at flourishing. His work was artistic and graceful. Practice on flourishing gives one a light touch and a better command of the pen.

Dennis Envelopes Courtesy of Don Tate

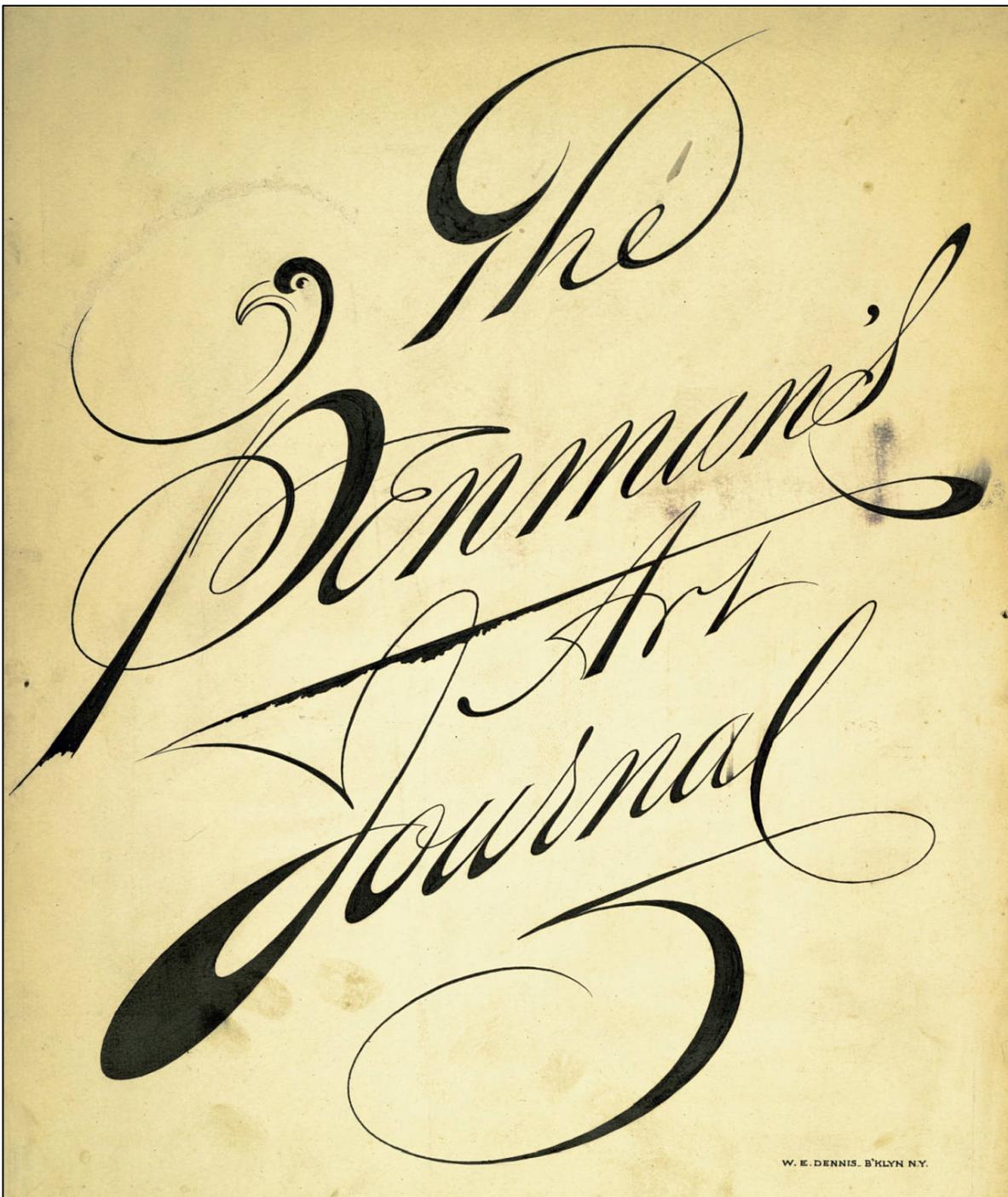


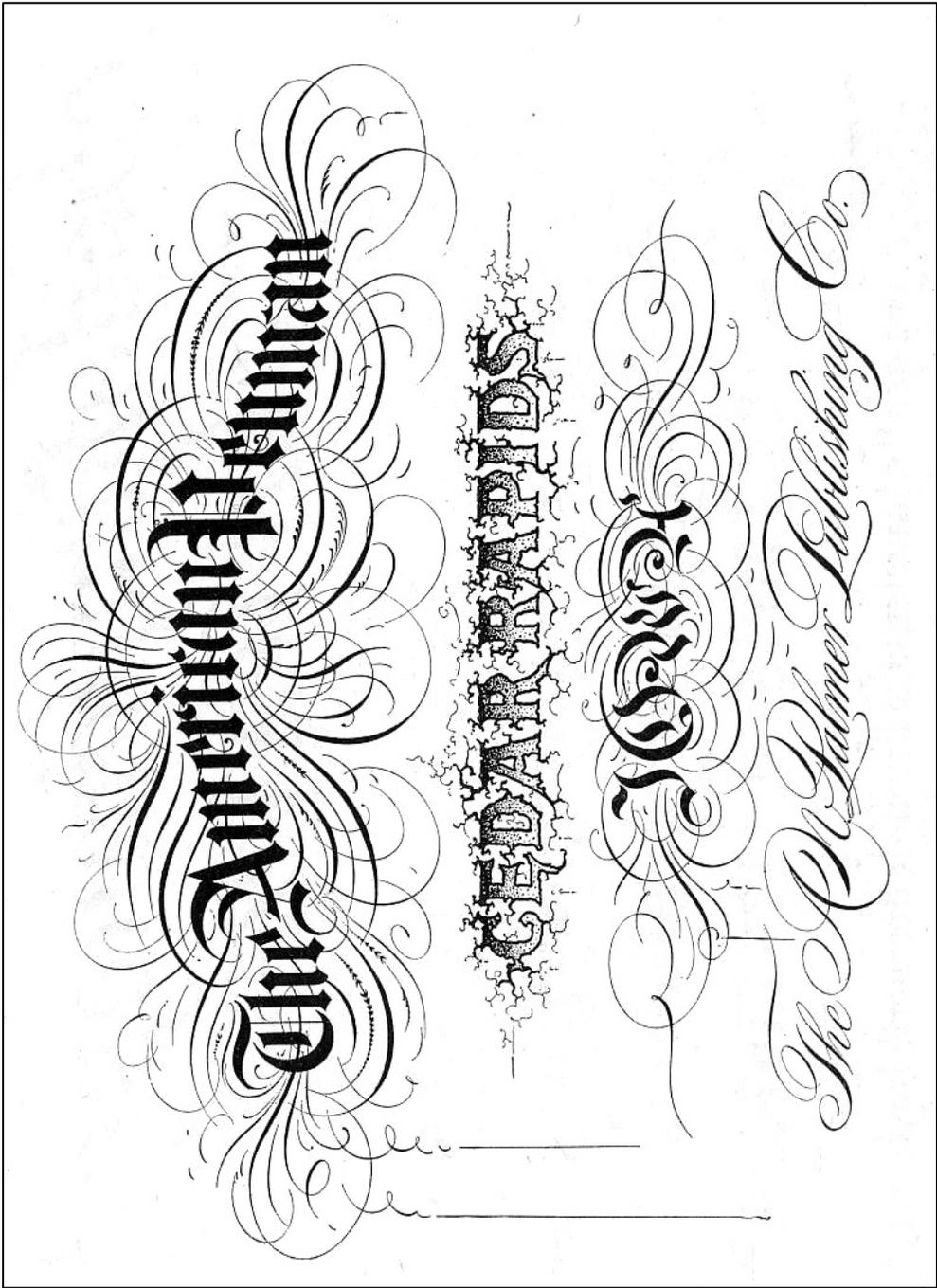
*A Grammar of Writing, Illustrated with
The Muscular Movement. W. G. Linnis
January 31.*











German Text
W. E. DEWING
A B C D E F G H I J
K L M N O P Q R S
T U V W X Y Z

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890

&c



Dennis' Studio (1898)



An interesting view of the W. E. Dennis Studio, Brooklyn. Any young man who is interested in penmanship and engraving can have a similar studio of his own and develop a profitable, interesting business. Every good sized city will support an engrosser. The engraving business has grown not only in quality of work but in quantity until today the opportunities are excellent for those who have talent and are willing to hustle. 20

The Dennis & Baird Studio

Dennis partnered with Willis A. Baird (1882-1954)

Diplomas
Resolutions
Dennis & Baird
357
Fulton Street
BROOKLYN, N.Y.
Designers,
Engravers,
Tenmen & Co

CALL
WRITE
OR
PHONE

TELEPHONE
2624 MAIN

AT A
REGULAR MEETING
OF THE
MEMBERS
OF THE
P. F. COLLIER & SON
EMPLOYEES
Beneficial Association

THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTIONS WERE ADOPTED:

WHEREAS
Our worthy and highly respected employer
Peter Fenelon Collier
WAS CALLED FROM OUR MIDST BY DEATH ON APRIL 24, 1909.

By his untiring
zeal and energy
his strict devotion
to the interests of
our Association



and by his noble
example he has
endeared himself
to every member,
therefore — he it

RESOLVED

That we express our appreciation for the work he has done for us, and trust
that we may continue to labor in the way he has exemplified, knowing that it
will lead us on to still greater achievements; and be it further

RESOLVED — that this tribute of respect to the memory of our deceased
employer be entered on the records of this Association and
a copy presented to the family of our DEPARTED FRIEND.

WILLIAM H. SMITH, PRES.
FRANCIS J. WILSON, VICE PRES.
JOHN J. MURPHY, SECRETARY

Committee

FRANCIS J. WILSON, CHAIRMAN
WILLIAM H. SMITH, SECRETARY
JOHN J. MURPHY, CLERK

ADOPTED
THURSDAY, MAY 6, 1909.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRODUCTION FROM THE ORIGINAL, EXECUTED IN OLIVE GREEN ON GRAY BOARD, WITH A HAND MADE PORTRAIT. ORIGINAL 22 x 28 INCHES.

GENTLEMEN:

Enclosed is check for resolutions recently executed for School No. 150. We thank you for the beauty and artistic planning of the sentiments expressed. The book is very satisfactory.

Cordially,

June 2, 1915.

LYDIA A. MILLER.

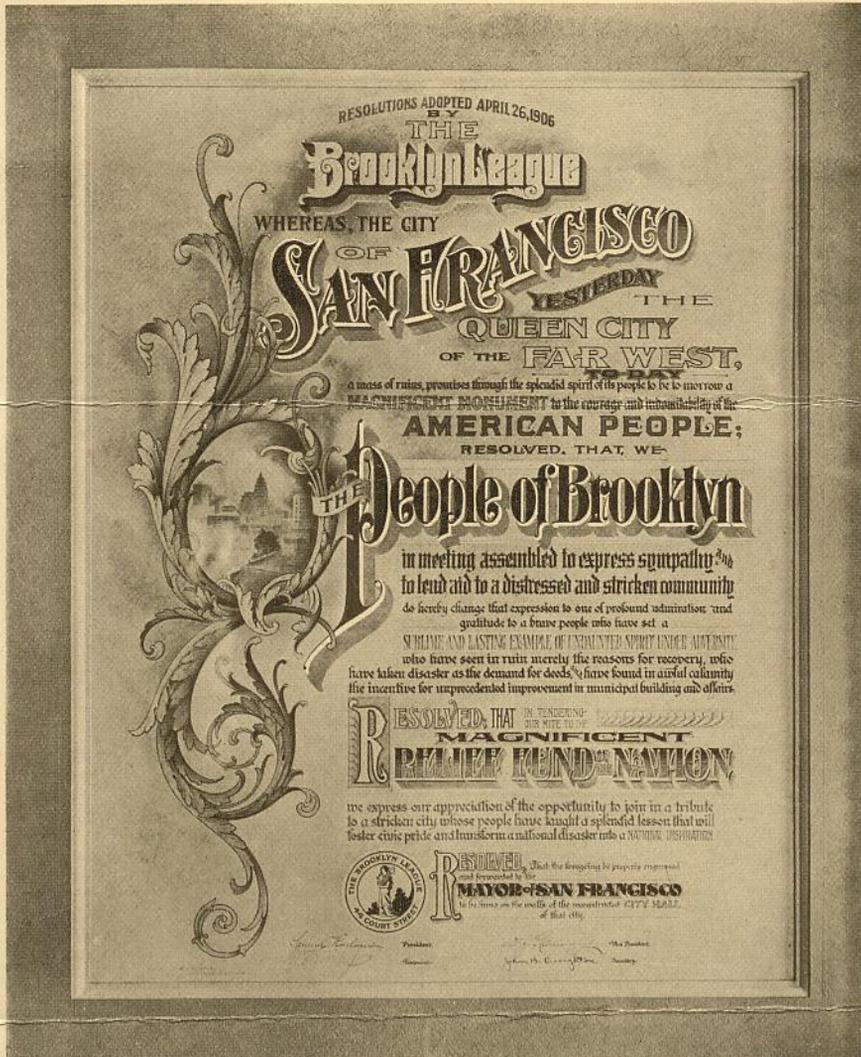
ST. ANNE'S RECTORY,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

March 27, 1915

DEAR SIR:

Enclosed please find check in payment for the engrossed set of resolutions you made for the Allied Societies of this parish for the Rev. Joseph F. Curran. The Societies, as well as myself, admire the beautiful workmanship of the resolutions and are perfectly satisfied with the reasonableness of the charge.

THOMAS F. HORAN, Rector.



SIZE OF ORIGINAL 18 x 24 INCHES
 THE ORIGINAL WAS DONE IN WATER COLORS, AND THEREFORE
 MUCH OF THE BEAUTY AND EFFECT CANNOT BE REPRODUCED.

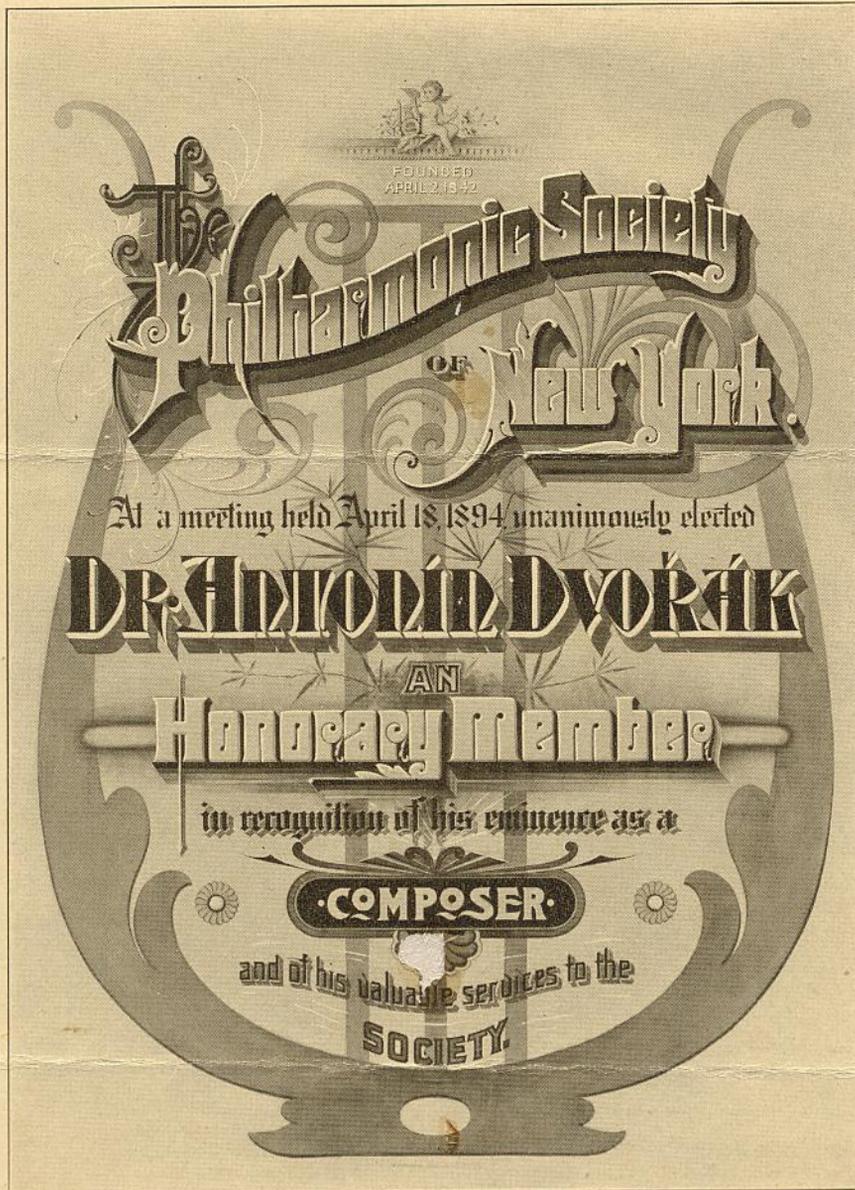
OUR LADY OF VICTORY RECTORY,
 Brooklyn, N. Y.

April 21, 1915.

GENTLEMEN:

Enclosed you will please find check for Engrossed Resolutions. The work displays splendid judgment, artistic taste and painstaking care. The design is original, the lettering admirable and the coloring rich, varied, modest. You should feel justly proud of such a production. It is a masterpiece.

Yours truly,
 JOHN J. MORAN.



SIZE OF ORIGINAL 16 x 20 INCHES

EXECUTED ON GRAY BRISTOL BOARD

UNITED STATES RUBBER COMPANY,
New York.

May 7, 1915.

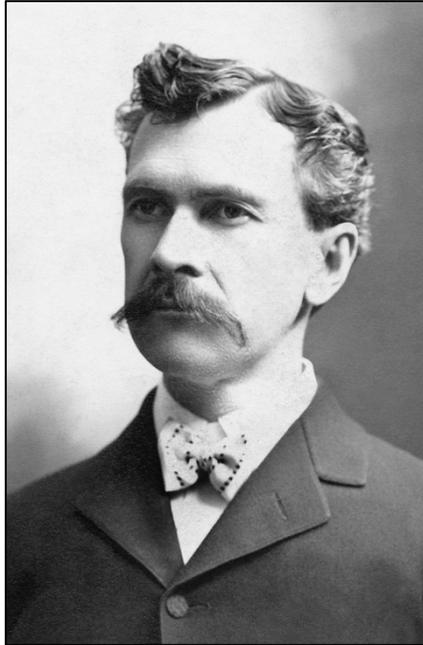
GENTLEMEN:

Your favor of April 30th was duly received and I wish to thank you for the careful and painstaking way in which you executed the resolutions regarding our Mr. Gordon.

I now enclose some resolutions regarding the death of one of our directors, which I would like to have you engross in your usual careful manner and send the bill made out in name of United States Rubber Company to me.

Very truly yours,

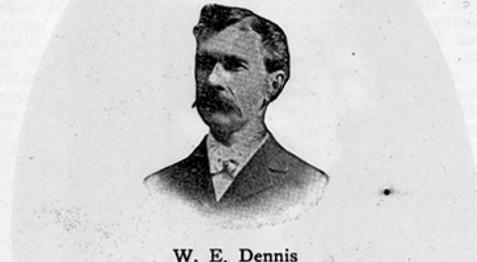
JOHN D. CARBERRY, Assistant Secretary.



William E. Dennis, Dean of Penmen

Mr. W. E. Dennis passed from this life on June 6, 1924, and the world of professional penmen mourns the passing of a master. Mr. Dennis was born in Manchester, N. H., in 1860.

His interest in penmanship started at the age of fifteen and he practised industriously for several years without a teacher. At the age of seventeen young Dennis enrolled at Gaskell's Business College, Manchester, N. H., a fellow student of A. N. Palmer. His course at this school completed, Mr. Dennis became an itinerant writing teacher and later took up engrossing under the instruction of A. R. Dunton.



W. E. Dennis

Mr. Dennis taught in Wright's College, Brooklyn, N. Y., for several years and also for a period at Peirce School, Philadelphia, following which he took up the work of pen artist and engrosser and was known best for the artistic engrossing of resolutions, etc. That his work had a high standing is evidenced by the important commissions for resolutions put in his care.

In 1914 Mr. Dennis collected specimens of his best work and these were published in book form with special instructions prepared by Mr. Dennis, under the title "Studies in Pen Art."