

Fleeting Evidence: A Case Study of Handwriting and History

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Moses Fleetwood Walker, major league baseball's first black player, lived between 1857 and 1924 and left behind a trail of evidence too scant for a thick description, yet so compelling as to beg historians to speculate about the man. I am among these historians, and my investigations resulted in the 1995 publication of the biography *Fleet Walker's Divided Heart* (University of Nebraska Press). Therein I related the known facts of Walker's life as others had previously revealed them: born in Ohio in 1857; educated at Oberlin College and the University of Michigan law school; played seven years in high-level white leagues before the 1889 imposition of a color line; stabbed a man to death in 1891, but acquitted on grounds of self-defense; briefly edited a newspaper; called, in a 1908 treatise on Negro history, for the emigration of American blacks to Africa; operated for a decade and a half a theater in Cadiz, Ohio, patenting several ideas for film reel technology; and died in Cleveland in 1924.

My interpretation of Walker's life differed from previous accounts, however, in its assertion that what gave Walker distinction was not that he was black, but rather that he was mulatto, a fact of biology and culture that left him always on the fault line of race relations and was the primary cause of his divided heart.

Further, Walker's treatise *Our Home Colony*, seemed to me, when read carefully, to be more than a bitter diatribe against the exclusion of blacks from the American dream; it comprised shame and despair over his mixed bloodlines and embraced some of the least defensible tenets of turn-of-the-century race theory. Supporting this portrait of something more than a black man made bitter by baseball were several other revealing aspects that previous writers and researchers had either failed to find or neglected to bring to light. Thirty years before his film reel innovations, Walker had patented another invention: a guaranteed-to-explode artillery shell. Though he was acquitted of murder, eight years later he served time for mail embezzlement. He liked to nip at the bottle; his older brother William ran a saloon; his younger brother, Weldy, once the major league's second

black player, became a bootlegger during Prohibition; one of Walker's sons, Thomas, once was a numbers bookie. And a rumor still quietly afloat in the 1990s alleges that Walker had a white mistress in West Virginia by whom a son was born and raised white. I exacted these additions by exhausting every piece of traditional historical evidence I could find (though it does not mean that another historian could not have imagined and found more): census records, newspapers, interviews, correspondence, government documents, photographs, city directories, city maps, legal papers.

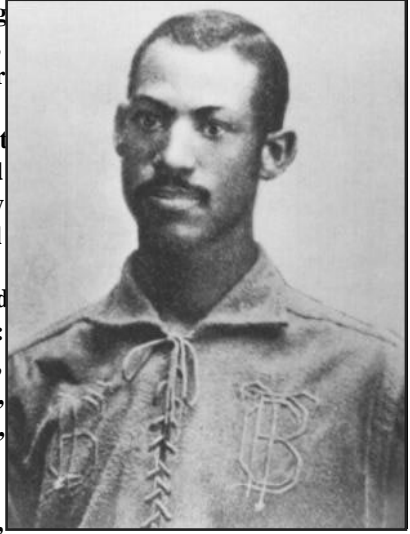


Photo courtesy of the National Baseball Library, Cooperstown, NY

While standing over Walker's grave for the tenth or eleventh time, however, my detective work seemingly complete, my sense of the man was remarkably incomplete. In fact, before Oberlin's John

Moses Fleetwood Walker in 1884, his major league season.

Heisman Club placed a headstone on the grave a few years back, I often stood in the midst of Steubenville's lovely Union Cemetery and, wondering if I'd read the caretaker's map correctly and was indeed standing atop the grave, mused about digging up Walker's bones. Maybe, as in the case of John Wilkes Booth and Russia's royals, the physical evidence of a skeleton could erase some of the mysteries about the muscle and brain that once moved it about among the living.

It was such musings that eventually led me to consider more deeply the meaning of a passage from *Divided Heart*. Trying to defend Walker's decision to pursue the playing field more arduously than the classroom at Oberlin, I wrote that the only wholly satisfactory rationale I lay in the secrets that muscles whisper only to the athletically gifted. Did I mean this literally? I could not have said at the time I wrote it, but I believe the answer now is an unqualified *yes*. The secrets that the muscles whisper to the brain contain, for athletes and nonathletes alike, a deeply rooted sense of personal identity.

That sport historians should, like most historians, treat the physical as matter-of-fact, after-the-fact, or beside-the-fact is understandable but regrettable, because there is no denying that those who have played sports take as an article of faith the connection between the physical style of athletes and their personalities. NFL football of the early sixties was a bloodied and bowed Y.A. Tittle; of the late sixties was the dark hair curling from the back of Joe Namath's helmet. In the case of Fleet Walker, his oiled and straightened hair told as much about him as his written protest of black women's emulation of white fashion.

Ironically, as John Hoberman contends in *Mortal Engines*, we can no longer know an athlete's person unless we know his body. We have come to sense that high-performance athletes reveal themselves to us through their physiological

pathologies. The last century of scientific inquiry into performance has meant that the integrity of the body has replaced the integrity of the person. The public, if not historians, believes in the power of engineered foods, weightlifting, or surgery to supplement high-level performance, and suspects that the real answers to any athlete's being can be had only by delving into their secret and oftentimes forbidden lives of drugs, herbal elixirs, and training regimens, the stuff of physical transformation.

This is a long-winded way of arguing in defense of a consideration of handwriting, an intuitive and common argument necessary because by the time an academic has finished with handwriting, its possibilities have almost always been boiled down by statistical factors and matches against multiphasic and other personality tests to this one word: unproven.

True enough, but graphology shares many interpretive similarities with other psychological graphomotor projective tests that yield equivocal results, but that clinicians nonetheless use widely. A measure of the public reluctance to graphology is that companies that use it to gauge personnel (one survey indicates that up to 85% of European companies use it to screen job candidates as have some 5,000 American companies, including Ford, General Electric, Mutual of Omaha, H&R Block, and Northwest Mutual Life Insurance) do so quietly, unwilling to engage the ethical debate implicit in the tactic. Still, graphology has hung on long enough to have a history of its own, and that, in itself, should make it as viable as many schools of psychology when fathoming the unfathomable.

Modern handwriting analysis divides into two schools. The atomistic or analytic school, now usually referred to as graphoanalysis, descended from the tradition of a French priest, Jean-Hyppolite Michon, and emphasizes isolated handwriting signs believed to have a specific psychological meaning. The other school, graphology, uses Gestalt theory in appraising the entire handwriting specimen. Graphologists look at the space between letters and words, where one chooses to write on the page, and how margins are used, whether one writes quickly or slowly, the pressure used, the slant, slope, size, and shape of letters; the way letters connect, the added flourishes, the dot on the i, the cross of the t, the loops of y and a. An examination of a writer who leaves no margins, for example, would likely render an interpretation that they are tight with money or have no aesthetic appreciation—a very practical, frugal person.

Some graphologists further divide the space consumed by letters into three zones: the upper usually has to do with spiritual matters; the middle with daily routine; and the lower with the unconscious—things like sex, roots, money. Felix Klein, the founder and onetime president of the National Society for Graphology, told a journalist in recent years that whether you had difficulty with your mother shows clearly in the handwriting. One of the signs is the large distance between words. When I noted my own tight handwriting and measured it against the immense difficulty I had with my mother, I immediately reinforced a more important point of Klein's: that while graphology may have as much scientific validity as psychology, its interpretation is an art.

Indeed graphology leans so heavily on the individual doing it, that many argue it has little scientific validity at all. Like fortunetellers, convincing handwriting analysts tend to be very verbal and persuasive, sometimes inducing in their examinees the Barnum effect, which is the tendency of subjects to ascribe to very vague descriptions of their personality a very high accuracy rate. Edward Karnes of the Psychology Department at Metropolitan State in Denver did a study in 1986, gathering student handwriting samples and passing back bogus personality profiles. Almost all said the bogus profiles were highly accurate. This seems damning until one realizes that laboratory subjects would likely agree with any profile, regardless of its accuracy. Subjects tend to be intrigued by studies that offer feedback, and they have shown in experiments in which protocol offers them a chance to apply electrical shocks to others, a naive trust in the good intentions of their examiners. Further, whether a subject would agree with a handwriting assessment is beside the point—the assessment could still be very accurate.

Caveats in mind, I submitted samples of Fleet Walker's handwriting to two renowned graphologists. The entire text of each evaluation is printed at articles close to ensure that the reader can resupply any context I may unintentionally leave behind here. Barbara Harding, of Westport, Massachusetts, is a court-qualified forensic document examiner with more than 20 years' experience in graphology. Her company does personality profiles for companies hiring personnel—one of the most hotly debated points of graphology. She once helped solve a mystery concerning anarchist graffiti written on the walls of a Boston college dormitory.

Roger Rubin, of New York City, studied with Felix Klein in the early 1970s. He was the president of the National Society for Graphology from 1986-89 and was re-elected in 1995; he has served as a court-appointed handwriting examiner/expert, and has participated in two doctoral dissertations on graphology's validity.

Harding and Rubin examined three identical samples of Walker's handwriting. Because they had been culled from archives where only employee photocopying was permitted, the samples were not originals and, in one case, suffered from fading print. Both examiners were told that the samples were those of a black male born in 1857, and the samples were identified with the years in which they were written: 1899, 1920, and 1922. All content that would have revealed Walker's character, behavior, or frame of mind were excised (portions of Walker's writing and an excised sample are pictured).

Harding's evaluation begins with some broad strokes—passion. . . need for challenges. . . keen vitality—but gets quickly to specifics that certainly characterized Walker. It points out his need to communicate his thoughts and ideas as well as to be physically active, and then moves astonishingly to his fluent use of mental images and conceptual thinking, and his frequent fantasy about sex, power, and money. Perhaps this is not surprising in light of Walker's considerable ambition and stubborn insistence in many matters, but it took me aback and in so doing brought me to the heart of graphology's value: opening bolder and more inquisitive lines of inquiry. I had sheepishly slipped mention of

Walker's rumored white West Virginia mistress into the book's epilogue. I had timidly explored the meanings of his invention of a guaranteed-to-explode artillery shell and his hopes that it would lead to a financial windfall. I had, in short, examined Walker's enterprising nature with a desire to see him as less flawed by fantasies about power, sex, and money than most other men. In doing so I unintentionally left him with a victim's legacy of passiveness and powerlessness. In trying to free him from what I viewed as stereotypical and overly sympathetic portrayals by other writers, I avoided some of his obvious dynamism, which put my writing at odds with Harding's next paragraph:

Most likely of a modest background, he seems pulled between extravagances and economy. He has a strong desire to be generous; is courageous and a risk taker at heart. He possesses many of the earmarks of the true entrepreneur who believes in his own ability to move past obstacles with a vision of the possibilities planted firmly in his mind. He is not one to shirk responsibility and seems to have a natural instinct toward putting things right between people.

Had I had this evaluation during my research, it would have led me to rethink my own approach, to reexamine his many visions as possibly more genuine, and to see his struggles with alcohol in a different light.

Indeed throughout my reading of the assessments of Harding and Rubin, I rethought aspects of Walker that might have benefitted from further exploration, wider interpretation, or different shading. Herewith are some of their findings and the thoughts they inspired:

There is enough instinctual savvy here to ensure that he will use tact and diplomacy in communicating when it will serve the necessary purpose, but will be authoritarian when it is necessary to defend his point of view. (Harding)

In fact, Our Home Colony is very authoritarian, an air that allows it to disguise contradictory and inaccurate passages. Rubin noted that Walker, although knowledgeable in some areas, likes to give the impression of a broader range than he actually possesses. Again, this seemed characteristic of Our Home Colony, which, at close reading, turns out to be a very curtailed history of the Negro race. Rubin also noted (similar to Harding) that Walker communicates effectively and with ease and is used to influencing persons or situations. This is precisely what Walker was trying to do when he wrote the Assistant Postmaster General, begging for leniency in his mail theft case. I had assumed that Walker's manipulative plea was born of deferential racial tactics rather than of personal skill.

In a similar vein, both graphologists agreed on Walker's powerful means of expression, Harding noting it as a natural ability to sway the opinions of other people through the power of his words, springing from a need to get his message across to others; Rubin finding him a natural presenter and persuader (who can get people to believe in what interests him). Because Walker never applied for a passport and never made good on the Negro emigration plans advocated in Our Home Colony, I questioned his sincerity. If, however, he knew and believed in

the powers of persuasion that his handwriting reveals, might he not have been a candidate to take more seriously than I figured the idea of being a "Black Moses"? How much more intently should I have heeded his emigration plans? Where else might I have looked for its evidence? On the other hand, if Walker had the leadership ability and a tremendous driving force which keep him moving toward his objectives that Harding saw in his script, then why the stalled ambition with regard to the African return? Why, further, had Walker never finished law school or taken the bar exam? Harding uncovered his desire for advocacy (which Walker in fact did), and Rubin recognized that he knows how to manipulate or maneuver a given situation to his advantage.

The answers may lie in the irrecoverable realm of details of Walker's life. As biographer I was loath to address what I could not flesh out through traditional sources. Harding and Rubin offered explanations that many would claim are insupportable, but that nonetheless reaffirmed for me that the good intentions and exhaustive searches of a biographer do in fact lead to a sharpening of their intuitive compasses. Wading into the slippery area where terms get prefixed by "psycho-" (the most frightening of areas to historians, but the only one truly compelling to a biographer's readers), the graphologists claimed that the handwriting revealed some crucial inner qualities. Of interest is the underlying sadness (identity issue or his own concern that he had not lived up to his own potential), wrote Harding. Had he lived up to his potential? Does anyone? Regardless, it is an interesting contention. The underlying theme of most prior articles on Walker was that a racist American society had failed Walker; never was it hinted that he had in any way failed himself, or believed so. But the observation was repeated by Rubin, who found that despite the fact that Walker functioned very comfortably as an extrovert. The appearance of a strong self-confidence or inner security is belied by troublesome feelings of personal esteem that swing between an over- or underestimation of himself. These troublesome feelings were also expressed by the quality of emotional release he experiences that vary between a curbing and denial of the emotions and a shutting down of the feelings, and an easygoing, freewheeling interaction with others. When I read this, I immediately wondered whether in an inebriated state Walker got caught between these two poles on the day he killed Patrick Murray, his engaging manner drawing him to a conversation with a group of white men, his denial of the emotional distance separating them from him keeping him engaged beyond the limits of good sense. Regardless, I accepted these ideas with a measure of pride. *Divided Heart*, after all, claimed the same sort of personal schism. Like many before me, however, I thought it largely a result of societal pressures. While I thought the mulatto designation made the pressures of a different sort than did previous writers who saw Walker as only black, and while I know of no other biographer who mentioned his drinking, I too tended toward a depiction of Walker as a man made miserable by the problem of skin color.

Certainly, there can be no debate about the extent to which the idea of race cast a shadow over Walker's life and its meaning for sport historians, I would like to think further that his heart was divided by issues of class, education, and

thwarted ambition, all of which I wrote of, but all of which again returned to skin color for their source. I thought rather simplistically that his family must have stood united against the many affronts with which they were assaulted. Rubin, however, believed that the troublesome feelings were:

likely to have been fostered by his response to his parents. From his point of view they do not seem to have been well matched. It appears they had differing styles of child rearing. The mother more caring and emotional, the father more restrictive and critical. He carries both these modes and the unresolved contradictions they embody into adulthood.

I had assumed, before the last-minute arrival of documents detailing Walker's father's separation from the family and subsequent death in Detroit, that the family would have been together, his father being a minister, after all. Rubin's supposition about the father again made me rethink the impetus for Walker's restless ambition, particularly with regard to an African return, a feat that, if accomplished, would have surpassed the father's own civil rights activism. In making Fleet the "Black Moses," it also would have reversed the standing of the two Moseses in the Walker household. Perhaps this possibility, rather than a real desire for an African return, lay behind the suggestion of a black exodus and may also have been a reason it failed to come to fruition. These possibilities might have arisen naturally in the mind of a Freudian, or even another historian. They did in mine, but not to a degree that encouraged me to push further in that direction. The thought of a frightful father-son relationship being encoded deeply in Walker's handwriting stirred in me visions of a young Fleet working arduously to turn his graceful penmanship into one more disguise for the divided heart.

If it was so, it was yet one more failed attempt. Just as his physical abilities finally betrayed him on the ballfield at the exact moment he needed them to face down those bent on discarding him because of skin color, so perhaps his handwriting betrays him into eternity, echoing across the years his troubles and triumphs. As Rubin noted, Walker's "later samples are somewhat looser in structure, showing less care in the execution of forms. This could be the result of a loss of focus due to illness or, as I have often observed, the result of alcohol abuse over the long term."

Maybe the whole question of handwriting is on the way to obsolescence. People don't write as much, Palmer method or otherwise. And while historians nonetheless continue to feast on paper, the data of cyberspace carries great implications for the future of traditional documents. The computer threatens over time to leave a trail of evidence both stupefyingly voluminous and stupefyingly impersonal in its substitution of keystroke for penstroke. A sense of that loss may explain the current modest revival in the popularity of expensive fountain pens, implements that seem to promise a more personal commitment to one's ideas and their means of expression.

In the Preface to his *Culture As History* Warren Susman advises historians that they "must learn how people do in fact reckon with words: is not part of the reckoning a wrestling, a physical struggle with pen against paper? The past

brought to life through connection with its tangible physical remains is clear. Historians, archaeologists, and curators know about the impact of the artifact it is why we want to reach out and touch King Tut's death mask, why the search for the Ararat ark consumes imagination and dollars. I was profoundly moved by the unfolding of Walker's letter asking for a presidential pardon. Finding this document was very much like digging up his bones—an artifact of irrefutable physical meaning and revelation. To say that it existed only as paper rather than as a link to his physical presence is to shortchange what we know as sport historians.

APPENDIX A

Barbara Harding

Evaluation: Male, Born 1857

Passion, a need for challenges, ambition, and keen vitality motivate this writer to be active and on the move. He feels it important to reach immediate results and appears to have a well-integrated mind/body/spirit over which he has exercised self-discipline and given a sense of purpose and direction.

This writer seems very absorbed with a need to communicate his thoughts and ideas as well as to be physically active. There is a good body rhythm, which gives grace to his physical movements ensuring good coordination as his mind skillfully directs the physical action. There is fluent use of mental images and conceptual thinking, and there is frequent fantasy about sex, power, and money.

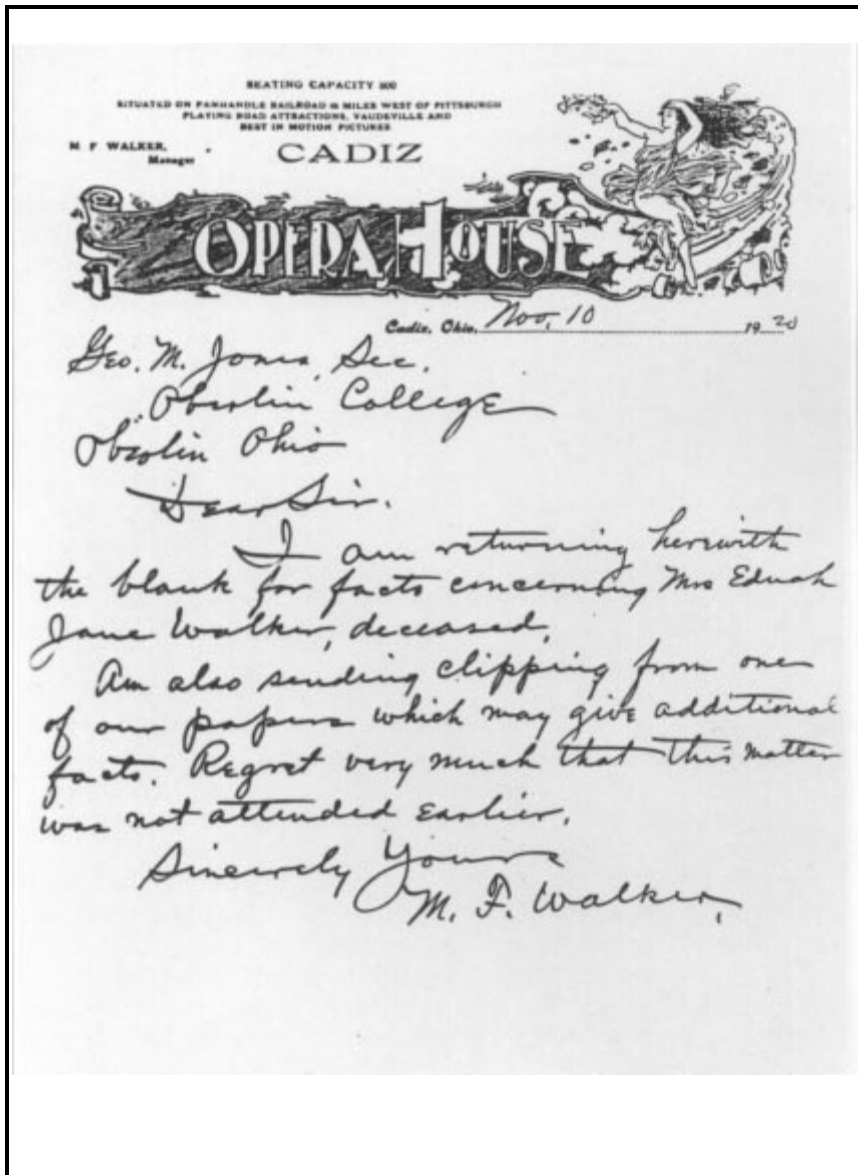
Most likely of a modest background, he seems pulled between extravagances and economy. He has a strong desire to be generous; is courageous and a risk taker at heart. He possesses many of the earmarks of the true entrepreneur who believes in his own ability to move past obstacles with a vision of the possibilities planted firmly in his mind. He is not one to shirk responsibility and seems to have a natural instinct toward putting things right between people.

There is enough instinctual savvy here to ensure that he will use tact and diplomacy in communicating when it will serve the necessary purpose, but will be authoritarian when it is necessary to defend his point of view.

He is compassionate when dealing with other people and shows more gullibility in the 1899 letter than in those written at later dates. There is a service-to-others orientation here—a desire for advocacy—a law of awareness—lecturing—somehow this man needed to get his message across to others. This writer has a literary skill and style enabling him to express his opinions fluently both in the verbal and written form. He has a natural ability to sway the opinions of other people through the power of his words as his enthusiasm is often contagious. There is leadership ability and a tremendous driving force, which keep him moving toward his objectives.

His self-esteem varied in the 1899 letter but did not diminish the inner fire of his quest for culture and self-expression.

Of interest is the underlying sadness (identity issue—his own concern that he had not lived up to his own potential), which was masked by the enormous enthusiasm for the task at hand and perhaps was indeed the motivating force for his achievement.



ABOVE: A letter that theater owner Walker wrote in 1920.

PRESENT OCCUPATION *Retired*

OCCUPATIONS SINCE LEAVING OBERLIN *Professional Base 13000*
Newspaper Editor, Hotel Prop.,
Moving Picture Showman

WHAT CHURCH DO YOU ATTEND? *Methodist*

PUBLIC OFFICES HELD—*Business, Social, Civic, County, State, National,—Elective or Appointive.*
 (Judges, Presidents of Corporations, College Trustees, Secretaries of Chambers of Commerce, Mayors,
 Legislators, Congressmen, Government Officials, Etc.)

ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN SCIENCE, INVENTION, ART, LITERATURE, JOURNALISM, SOCIAL
 SERVICE, EXPLORATION, ETC.
Several inventions in Moving Picture
industry. Author of "Our Home Colony" a
treatise on Part Friend's Future of American
Negro.

HONORS CONFERRED UPON YOU.

WHAT OTHER COLLEGES HAVE YOU ATTENDED?
University of Michigan, 1881-1882

WHAT DEGREES DO YOU HOLD? (Including Honorary Degrees)

DID YOUR FATHER, MOTHER, SON, OR DAUGHTER ATTEND OBERLIN? *No*

ABOVE:
In 1922 Oberlin College surveyed its former students. This is a page from Walker's response.

any Court of law! But as no objection was entered during the whole trial

in the case of one Registered letter # 64 Allentown Pa, addressed to P.M. Grafton W.D. Inspectors Holmes and H.P. [unclear] did under oath represent this letter to be a genuine Registered letter

genuine Registered letter. The Inspectors named above testified that the Registered letter was made up in a certain hotel in Pittsburg Pa, and afterwards placed by Inspector Holmes in a sack labeled to the P.O.

I will cite Sec. 1045 P.L. and R. which defines the authority of P.O. Inspectors to interfere with the mail. Sec. 1045 P.L. and R. also Sec. 1048 P.L. and R. which defines when mail becomes registered.

The P.O. Inspectors named further testified that the Registered letter envelope contained a letter addressed to one John Akers, a fictitious person. In this they violated Sec. 1035 P.L. and R. which defines the matter which must not be registered, is clearly defined.

ABOVE:
Walker wrote in 1899 requesting appeal of his mail theft conviction: a portion of the letter as edited for analysis by the graphologists.

APPENDIX B

Roger Rubin

Handwriting Analysis for Unidentified Male

The outstanding quality for this writer is his smooth skillfulness and ability to get things done. This will apply in whatever context he chooses to operate within. Over his lifetime he is likely to have chosen a variety of occupational interests, which would be a reflection on his versatility and adaptability. He communicates effectively and with ease and is used to influencing persons or situations. Presenting himself or his ideas to others is one of his strengths. And he knows how to manipulate or maneuver a given situation to his advantage. This writer functions very comfortably as an extrovert. The appearance of a strong self-confidence or inner security is belied by troublesome feelings of personal esteem that swing between an over- or underestimation of himself. This is also expressed by the quality of emotional release he experiences that vary between a curbing and denial of the emotions and a shutting down of the feelings, and an easygoing, freewheeling interaction with others. This is likely to have been fostered by his response to his parents. From his point of view they do not seem to have been well matched. It appears they had differing styles of child rearing. The mother more caring and emotional, the father more restrictive and critical. He carries both these modes and the unresolved contradictions they embody into adulthood.

His original easygoing style became tempered by his willingness to be more disciplined and consequential in the effort to achieve his objectives. Clearly, he is a goal-oriented person and approaches his pursuits with an uneven determination but with an underlying desire to persist, and ultimately win. Avoiding friction is his first preference but when compelled to he will stand his ground. His beliefs or points of view are projected forcefully when he is interested in a project. He enjoys variety and is bored by excessive routines. This will incline him to seek interests or work that change periodically. His flexibility can border on the impulsive at times. But that also fuels his basic optimism and willingness to take risks. Although he is knowledgeable in some areas, he likes to give the impression of a broader range than he actually possesses. This is due in part to his need for admiration and the need to bolster his ego.

He is a natural presenter and persuader and can get people to believe in what interests him. Couple this with his enthusiasm and above-average intelligence and it should add up to a person who should have attained a fair measure of success in his endeavors.

APPENDIX C

(From a second correspondence in which I asked Mr. Rubin to comment upon Walker's signature and any differences across the two decades of the samples.)

His signature style is very much consistent with the rest of his script.

The later samples are somewhat looser in structure, showing less care in the execution of forms. This could be the result of a loss of focus due to illness or, as I have often observed, the result of alcohol abuse over the long term.

*The author gratefully acknowledges the cooperation and generosity of graphologists Barbara Harding and Roger Rubin.

1. John M. Hoberman *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), pp. 132, 22.
2. Sono Motoyama, "The Handwriting is on the Wall," *City Paper* 17 (Dec. 31, 1993), p. 14.
3. George Langer, "Graphology in Personality Assessment: A Reliability and Validity Study," Ph.D. dissertation, Adelphi University, 1993, pp. 45.
4. Motoyama, p. 14.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
8. Warren I. Susman, *Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. xi.