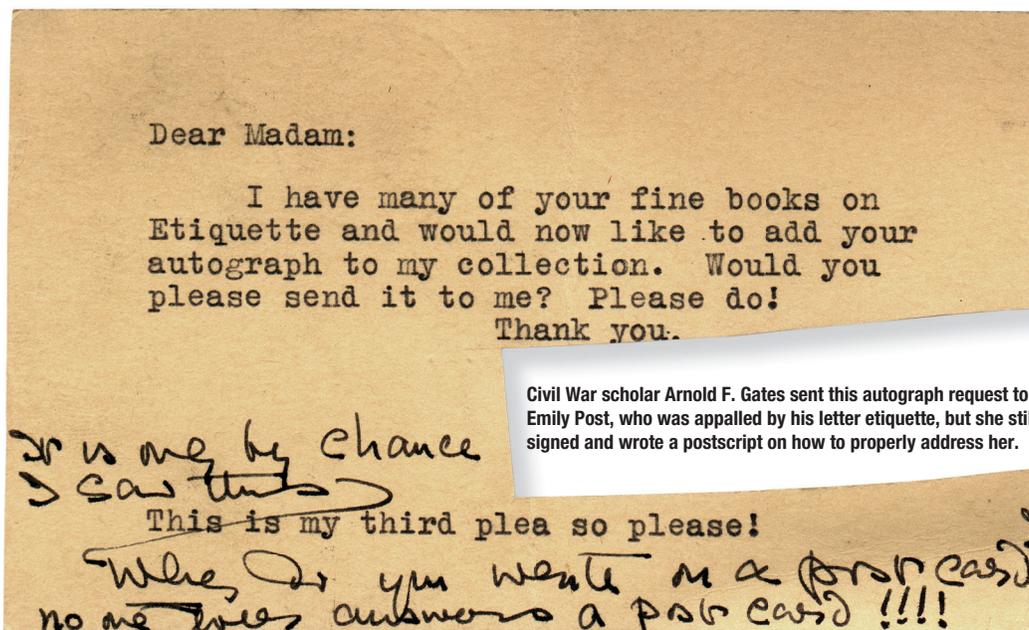


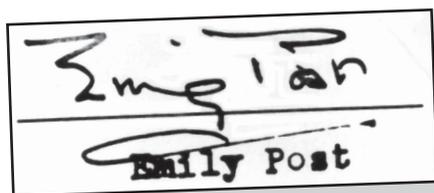
How *Not* to Impress Emily Post

ARNOLD F. GATES (1914-93) was not a professional historian, but he was a serious and well-respected Lincoln and Civil War scholar for half a century; long-time book review editor of the *Lincoln Herald*, officer of the Civil War Round Table of New York, contributor to the 1960 anthology *Lincoln for the Ages* and other books, friend and unofficial agent of many a noted author.

As a 23-year-old autograph collector in his hometown of Cleveland, though, Gates' letter to Emily Post (1873-1960)—well, let's say it *failed to impress* the 64-year-old queen of etiquette. In other words, he violated about every rule in the book, provided your book is Post's 1922 landmark guide, *Etiquette*.



Civil War scholar Arnold F. Gates sent this autograph request to Emily Post, who was appalled by his letter etiquette, but she still signed and wrote a postscript on how to properly address her.



"Dear Madam," writes Gates on a printed one-cent postal card. "I have many of your fine books on *Etiquette* and would now like to add your autograph to my collection. Would you please send it to me? Please do! Thank you." And a postscript: "This is my third plea so please!"

Near the bottom of this missive the doyenne pens: "It is only by chance I saw this. Why do you write on a postcard? No one ever answers a postcard!!!!" One can imagine Ms. Post shuddering, exclaiming Margaret Dumont style, "Well! I never!"

Gates' request seems straightforward enough—polite, sincere, to the point. By today's lax standards, this note contains no embarrassing faux pas. Gates sounds enthusiastic about Post's work and genuine in his desire to own her signature.

But to the redoubtable Ms. Post, this

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and Gates' previous requests lacked the "old-fashioned grace of speech and deportment" demanded in her 1922 manifesto. There's no "fresh turn of phrase," no "delightful keenness of observation." It is typewritten, he failed to use matching paper and envelope, and worst of all he chose a lowly *postal card*. Even the address portion on the verso is objectionable, addressed simply to "Emily Post." Naturally, Post noticed this and took the time to pen a bold "Mrs" in front of it, adding a large pointing arrow to make sure Gates noticed her correction. The only reason she bothered to reply, I've no doubt, is his mention of this being his third request. Clearly Post knew if she didn't reply she would continue to get peppered with more postal cards.

Perhaps this case study is a clue as to why Emily Post autograph material is mildly scarce today. Letter writers had to live up to her high standards of letter writing if they were to be graced with a reply. Unless, like Arnold Gates, persistence won out over manners. Even a damaged example such as this,

given its amusing content, catches the interest of etiquette autograph collectors.

Serious autograph collectors, especially collectors of historical documents, are more aware than non-collectors of how handwriting styles have changed over the decades—even more so of how differently we phrase things today, how Hemingwayesque our sentence structures are compared to days of yore. But every age tends to think that earlier ages had better penmanship and expressed themselves better. Post noted in 1922 that the younger generation of her day "don't care a bit whether they write well or ill... so they let their mental faculties relax, slump and atrophy." What would she make of today's text messaging?

Perhaps as a way of thumbing his nose at her upbraiding, Gates got the last laugh: He simply clipped her signature out of her chastising note. Likely he glued it into his copy of one of her "fine books." Left behind is this curt, defaced reminder of an age when etiquette was everything to some. **A**