

## The Letter B

By Allan Haley

Many people consider shelter to be the second most important ingredient for human survival. Coincidentally, the second letter in our alphabet evolved from the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph signifying shelter. Although the designs are somewhat different, there is a recognizable correlation between this Egyptian hieroglyph and the second letter of the Phoenician alphabet. The Phoenicians called this letter beth, their word for "house." The name was eventually carried over into names and places in the Bible, including Bethel (house of God) and Bethlehem (house of bread).

Beth was one of 19 characters acquired from the Phoenician traders that became the basis of the Greek alphabet. In assimilating these letters, the Greeks made slight changes to some of the names. Beth became beta, providing us with the second part of the two-letter name that makes up the word alphabet.

While the name change was minor, the eventual Greek beta looks quite different from the Phoenician beth. Over many years the letter evolved from a pennant and right-angle shape into something that is quite similar to our present-day 'B.' First the character was inverted so that the triangle was at the base. Then, through continual use, and perhaps because symmetry was important to the Greeks, a second triangle was added and the two triangles ended up on the right side of the character.

The Greek beta further developed in the hands of the Romans. They changed its name to Bay, and formalized the curved strokes.

The Romans were some of the first calligraphers in the western world. Although they brought flowing lines and graceful curves to our alphabet, their art was born of technology. The early Greeks drew letters by scratching through a soft wax coating applied to a wooden board, which forced them to work primarily in short, straight lines. By the time the Romans inherited the precursor of our present alphabet, however, letters were drawn using flat pens and brushes on a smooth writing surface. The result was the gracefully-proportioned letters we are now familiar with.

From the square house, the B grew into one of the most beautiful letters of our alphabet.

