Boothwyn, Pennsylvania

Railwayman OBEDIAH KELLY, it was said, put his initials on bills of lading to show that he had checked them as correct in his official position as railway freight agent.

Yet, still others contended that the ORRINS-KENDALL Company during the Civil War marked their boxes of high quality hardtack with their logo.

But did not various German officers during the American Revolution endorse papers with the abbreviation for OBERST KOMMANDANT, "colonel commanding", or for OBER-KOMMANDO, "high command"?

Further, an old English word for "feast at harvest" was HOCKEY, HAWKEY, HOOKY, HORKEY, or HOAKY -- clearly the first use.

The Oxford English Dictionary (Main Section): no entry for O.K.

Surely it must be from the French. For a Haiti port famous in Colonial times for excellent rum was AUX CAYES. Or was it the expression O QU'OUI, an emphatic "yes"? Also possible was the exhortation by French sailors to American girls during the Revolution: AUX QUAI(S), meaning "to the wharves". Or simply AU QUAI, "on quayside", hence "ready for shipment".

But everyone knows the Scotch expression OCH AYE, "oh, yes". Who could deny that?

Webster’s First Unabridged: no etymology given for O.K. (1909 printing)

Yet do not ignore the Finnish OIKEA, meaning "correct". And their neighbors, Norwegian and Danish sailors, used the term H.G. (pronounced hah-gay) for "shipshape; ready to go".

However, still earlier, school examination papers that passed were said to have been noted with O.K. from the Greek words ὅλος καλός meaning "all correct". Not to be outdone, Latin teachers used the same notation, but for the supposed Latin equivalent OMNIA KORRECTA.

Funk and Wagnalls: "Of uncertain origin".
Cyrus Byington’s Grammar of the Choctaw Language convinced Merriam-Webster to add the credit "Prob. fr. Choctaw okeh it is so and not otherwise" in the 1919 printing of the First. President Woodrow Wilson firmly believed it was indeed from the Choctaw, and he used OKEH on his state papers, never yielding to the common O.K.

Nonetheless, Byington’s Dictionary of the Choctaw Language gave only "hoke, an affirmative particle, and oke, part. (icle), it is".

Webster’s Second Unabridged: "Prob. fr. Choctaw oke, hoke, yes, it is". (1934 printing)

Other Indians got into the act. The admirers of Iowa chief Keokuk called him OLD KEOKUK, adding "He’s all right" -- and so Old Keokuk, and finally the initials, came to mean the same thing.

The New York Herald on March 30, 1840 attributed O.K. to Andrew Jackson. In the 1830s he purportedly examined papers accusing Kitchen Cabinet member Amos Kendall of misdeeds. Deciding him innocent, he marked the papers O.K. and ordered them filed. His lack of schooling led him to use an abbreviation for OLL KURRECK in ignorance of the American "all correct". This tale was embellished on April 2, 1840 by the Commercial Advertiser, mentioning a still earlier use by Jackson to approve court papers. Evidently these fabrications were picked up and widely published by other newspapers: the Boston Transcript, the Boston Atlas, and various Ohio newspapers during the next few months.

The Oxford English Dictionary (Supplement): "Used as an abbreviation for 'oll korrect', misspelling of 'all correct'."

The above explanations are but a sampling of the many attempts to explain and define the abbreviation and word O.K. This word -- now listed as an abbreviation, noun, adjective, adverb, and verb (but also deserving an entry as an interjection) -- is probably second only to MAMA as being found today in nearly every language in nearly every corner of the Earth. (Come to think of it, wasn’t it also used on the Moon?)

Probably strongly influenced by the newspaper reports in midyear 1840, Webster’s Second Unabridged defined it as: "Correct; all right; orig. endorsed or put on documents, bills, etc. to indicate approval; colloquial, exc. as used of the approval of documents, etc."

Proud of their reputation for searching out the first printed use of every word, the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement cites an example in the Boston Transcript of April 15, 1840. Note this is close to, but after, the reports in the Commercial Advertiser on April 2 and the New York Herald for March 30. The Oxford discounts alleged uses in 1790 and 1828 without stating what they were. They admit the meaning was vague in the unquoted April 15 reference and also in two later instances in April and early June. Finally, on June 18, 1840, the Transcript printed: "The band rode in a stage, which had a barrel of Hard Cider on the floor."
Cider on the baggage rack, marked with large letters 'O.K.' - all correct." (For further early quotes, see the OED.)

It was not until July 19, 1941 in The Saturday Review of Literature that the origin of O.K. was carefully researched by Allen Walker Read. He traced the word back to the formation in March 1840 of a political club by the committee to reelect the President (Van Buren) and the dirty tricks bunch. At first it was suggested to name the club the OLD KINDERHOOK CLUB, in reference and deference to Van Buren's home town, Kinderhook, New York. Then some inspired wardheeler shortened the name to the O.K. CLUB.

On Tuesday evening, March 24, 1840, at the home of member Colin at 245 Grand Street, the O.K. CLUB held its first meeting. Three days later, perhaps assisted by various hired hoodlums and thugs, the zealous and dedicated members broke into and disrupted a mass meeting by the Whigs in Masonic Hall. They routed the opposition with the cryptic battle-cry, "O.K! O.K!"

The morning papers of March 28 were filled with accounts of the break-in by the (500?) disrupters and of O.K. Naturally, New York City and soon many other parts of the country knew not the OLD KINDERHOOK explanation of O.K., for the cover-up was perfect, the truth being concealed behind a stonewall silence by the Club members privy to its meaning.

Read reasoned that the Herald's account of March 30 as ALL KURRECk and the subsequent elaborations in other papers soon converted the meaning of O.K. to "all correct", as we know it today.

The distinguished author and editor Henry Louis Mencken discussed various etymologies for O.K. in the fourth edition of his landmark book The American Language, published in 1937. Later, he put his stamp of approval (O.K.) on the Read explanation with an article entitled "Postscripts To The American Language" in the New Yorker Magazine for October 1, 1949. Most of the early explanations of O.K. in this article are taken from his 1949 review.

Webster's Second Unabridged: "From the O.K. Club, a Democratic organization supporting (1840) President Van Buren for re-election, fr. Old Kinderhook, N.Y., his birthplace." (1950 printing)

Skeptics, purists, and realists were slow to accept the Read Report. For example, Bergen and Cornelia Evans, in their 1957 book, A Dictionary of Contemporary Usage, regarded it as having "the most authoritative backing" but could not resist mentioning the Choctaw OKEH, the humorous or illiterate OLL KORRECT, and possible originators Andrew Jackson, John Jacob Astor, and Obadiah Kelly. (Was his given name Obadiah or Obadiah? Kelly being mythical, we may never know.)

The Read explanation was broadly accepted in the sixties, appearing in Webster's Third Unabridged in 1961, The Random House Dictionary
in 1966, and Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary in 1970, as well as many later printings of these works.

But in the interim, Professor Read, who had "settled" the matter twenty years earlier, had second thoughts after further newspaper research. In 1963 and 1964 he published in the journal American Speech reports of an abbreviation craze in Boston in 1838. An improper Bostonian wasn't with it without saying D. U. (done up), D. L. E. C. (do let 'em come), or G. T. D. H. D. (give the devil his due). In particular, those in-the-know used O. W. for "all right" as if spelled OLL WRIGHT. In 1839 -- a full year before the O. K. CLUB -- Bostonians evidently spoke to all but the Cabots, Saltonstalls, and Lodges with O. K.

Webster's Third Unabridged: "abbr. of all KORRECT, alter. of all correct." (1963 printing)

The earliest known reference in typeset print to O. K. now appears to be in the Boston Morning Post for March 23, 1839, which described the reception of travelers at the harbor in Providence, Rhode Island, where the train from Boston met the packet boat from New York. The context was perhaps a pun for the French "on the quayside" and for the American "all correct".

But hold on! A planter's diary for 1816 in Jamaica recorded a black man as saying, "Oh ki, massa no need be fright, we no want to hurt him". And another diary for 1815 described how the coach arrived "ok" at Princeton, New Jersey on a trip to New Orleans.

These last references were cited by David Dalby in The New York Times for January 8, 1971 in support of an African origin for O. K., earlier proposed in The New York Times on November 10, 1970. The Mandingo language of West Africa has O KE, "that's it; certainly; do it". The Wolof language has WA W KA Y, "yes indeed". Did O. K. arrive in Boston from runaway Southern slaves originally from Africa?

Mr. O. Kelly, we need you, now! Please tell Merriam-Webster, who kindly furnished the history of O. K. in their dictionaries and helpful background information, that you, and you alone, were responsible for O. K.

Or were you?