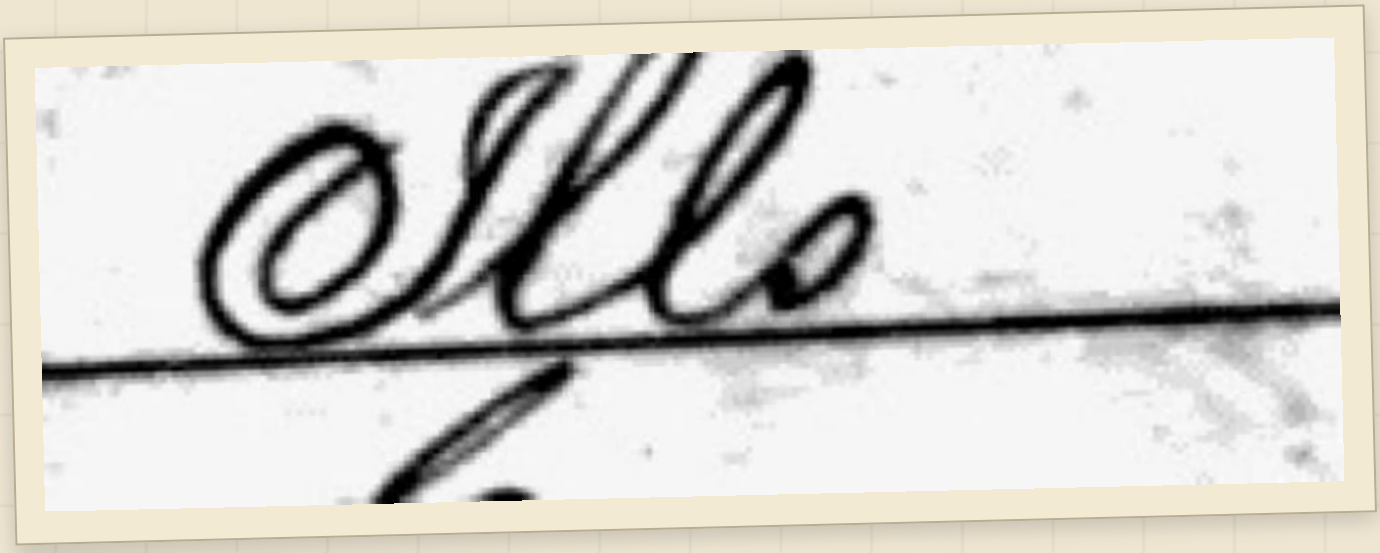
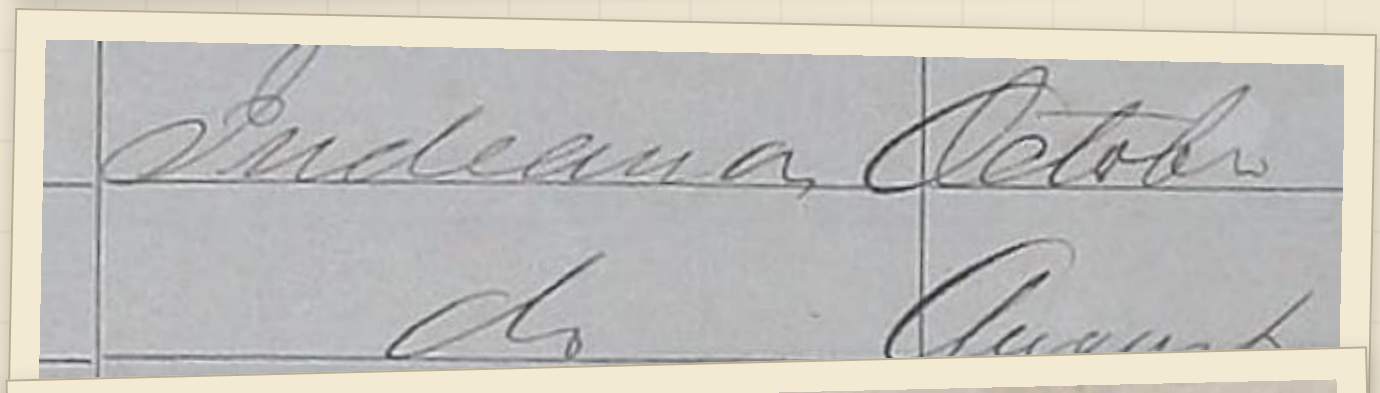
12 LESSONS ON REAL RECORDS

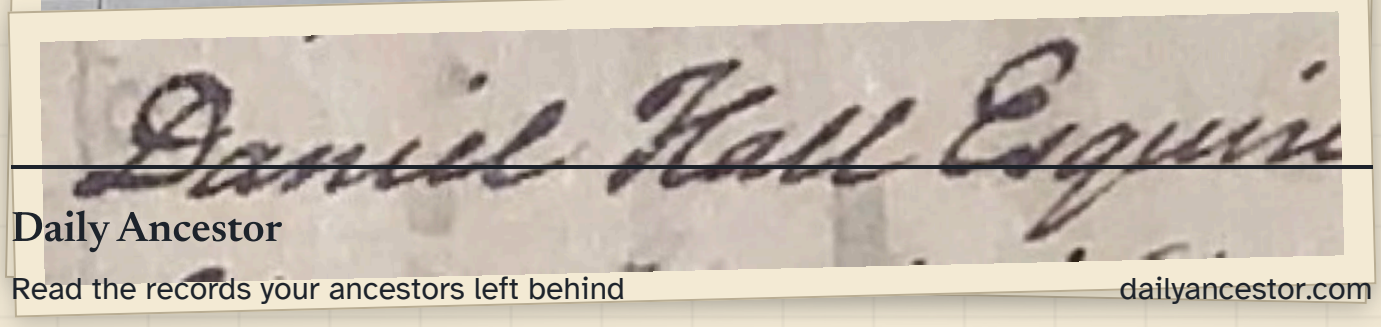
Old Handwriting Workbook

LARGE PRINT EDITION

Letter by letter on real records, 1700 to 1920







Daily Ancestor

Read the records your ancestors left behind

dailyancestor.com

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Contents

Each lesson starts with the problem, then shows the letter or habit on real records with notes on what to look for. Then it is your turn: read the practice words and circle an answer. The answers and explanations are at the back.

1. Capital letters that fool everyone: I and J, L and S, T and F — 1800-1880

2. Census enumerator hands, 1850 to 1880 — 1850-1880

3. Reading clerk's hands in deeds and wills — 1780-1880

4. Copperplate and Spencerian basics — 1850-1900

5. The double s: ss written as ſs or a ß-like shape — 1720-1850

6. The long s (ſ) and how to spot it — 1700-1830

7. Lowercase e, c and r in 19th-century hands — 1800-1870

8. Numbers: 1 and 7, 4 and 9, and old dates — 1730-1880

9. Palmer method basics — 1900-1920

10. Superscript abbreviations: Jno, Wm, Sam'l, yr — 1780-1880

11. Thorn: why ye means "the" — 1690-1820

12. Reading signatures and marks — 1780-1900

LESSON 1 · 1800–1880

Capital letters that fool everyone: I and J, L and S, T and F

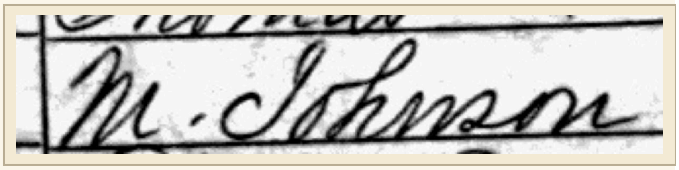
In old hands the capitals I and J, L and S, and T and F are drawn almost the same way, so names and places get misread in indexes.

Many wrong index entries start with one capital letter. A Virginia judge writing his will in 1806 or a census taker in 1860 wrote I and J with the same big looped stroke, made L and S from nearly the same curve, and gave T and F the same wavy cap. To a modern eye, Isaac becomes Jsaac, Lawyer becomes Sawyer, and Frank becomes Trank.

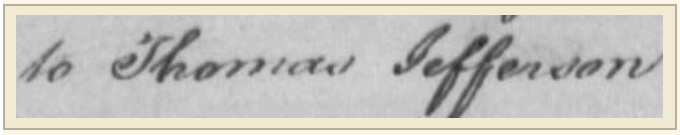
The fix is not to stare harder at the capital. Read the rest of the word first, compare the capital with other capitals the same writer made on the same page, and ask which reading makes a real name, place or job. The examples below come from a real 1806 will and from census pages of 1860 and 1870.



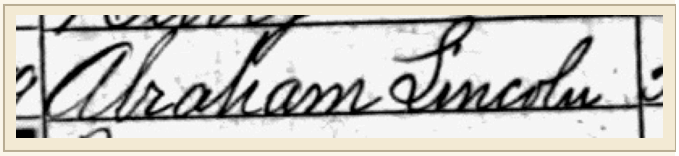
I (Ills). This I opens with a big oval loop on the left, then a tall stem. It sits on the line and has no tail below it. On this page the same writer's J (next example) looks almost identical, so the clue is the word: "Ills" is the usual abbreviation for Illinois.



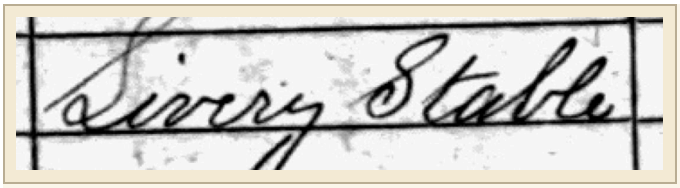
J (M. Johnson). Here is the same writer's capital J in Johnson. It has the same looped start and tall stem as his I. Only the word tells you it is a J: "Iohnson" is not a name, Johnson is.



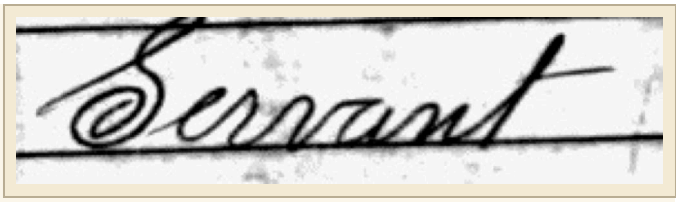
T and J (to Thomas Jefferson). Two traps in one line. Wythe's T in Thomas is a stem with a curly hat that hangs over the next letters. His J in Jefferson is a tall loop that stays on the line with no tail, the same shape he used for the word I. Read it as Jefferson because "Iefferson" is not a name.



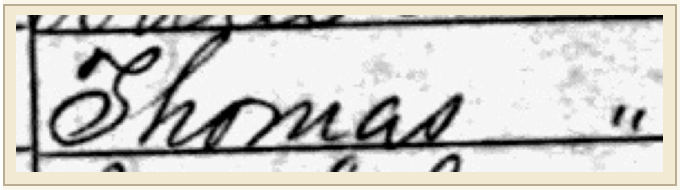
L (Abraham Lincoln). The L in Lincoln starts high, comes down, and ends in a flat loop lying on the line. Many readers see an S here. The surname Lincoln (and the occupation Lawyer on the same line) settles it.



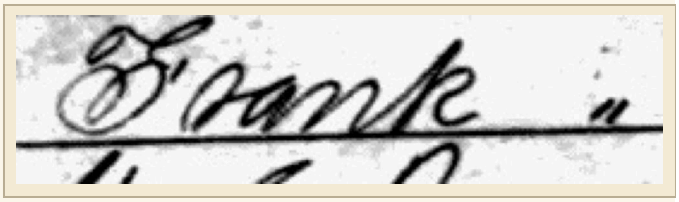
L and S (Livery Stable). Both letters in one crop: "Livery Stable". The L of Livery has its loop flat on the line and runs straight into the next letter. The S of Stable has a small loop at the top and a big round belly that closes at the bottom left. Put a suspected L next to a known S from the same page and compare.



S (Servant). A capital S from the same writer. Notice the small loop at the top and the large closed curve at the bottom. Compare it with the L in Lincoln: the L has no top loop.



T (Thomas). This T is a wavy cap stroke over a stem that curls to the left at the bottom. It looks very much like the writer's S and F. In names, T and F are the pair that trips readers most.



F (Frank). The F in Frank is built like the T, with one extra mark: a short stroke at about the middle, on the right of the stem or crossing it. That little stroke is often the only difference between F and T, so look for it before you decide.

- Read the rest of the word first, then decide what the capital must be.
- Collect capitals from the same page: find a word you are sure of (a state, a month, a common job) and use it as your key.
- Check whether the letter drops below the line. Some writers gave J a tail and I none, but many gave both the same shape.
- Before you decide between T and F, look for a small stroke across the middle of the stem.
- When searching indexes, try both readings: Isaac and Jsaac, Lemuel and Semuel, Thomas and Fhomas.

Your turn