



TOPIC: Transcribing Historical Documents

Many museums, libraries and other repositories have historical documents in their collections. These documents are often used by researchers or displayed in exhibits, but reading them can be a challenge, especially if the writer had poor penmanship. To make these documents more accessible, a transcriber converts the text into a format that is easier to read and access. The transcription might be handwritten but more likely it is entered into a Word document, which provides formatting aids and search capability.

Transcribing historical documents can be tedious but many people think it's fun! One thing that is consistent about many historical documents is the writer might be inconsistent when writing the same word, even in the same sentence. Or the writer might sometimes capitalize a word but not all the time. Prior to modern day manufacturing processes, paper was expensive. Writers often abbreviated words to save space, squeezed in as many words or sentences as possible, and re-used paper (as you will see in this historic letter). A key to transcribing documents written by the same person is to read them several times and try to learn their writing and spelling style.

Many sites have tips for transcribing:

- The National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/transcribe/tips>
- Family Search: [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Transcribing_Historic_Documents_\(National_Institute\)#Obsolete_Letters](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Transcribing_Historic_Documents_(National_Institute)#Obsolete_Letters)
- The Library of Congress: <https://crowd.loc.gov/help-center/how-to-transcribe/>

Materials:

- William Smith letter, 2 pages
- Pen or pencil and paper or access to a computer

Questions:

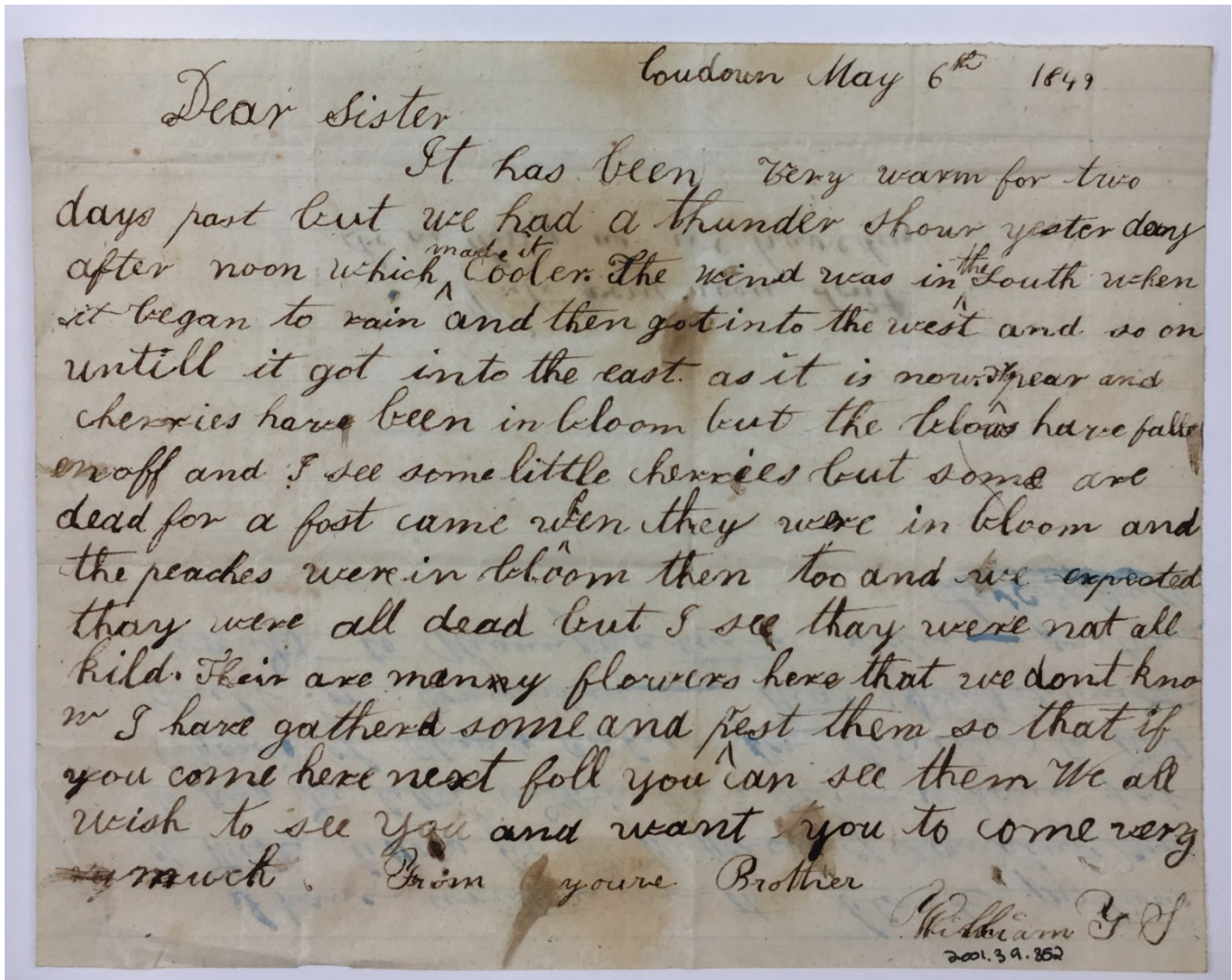
- What is a repository?
- What is a transcription?
- William Smith's father, James, voted against Virginia seceding from the Union. What does "seceding" mean?

To further your transcribing skills, use this lesson in conjunction with Cursive Writing is Fun! [link to the lesson].



James Smith was born October 5, 1791 in Kelso, Scotland. In 1795, the family left for America, arriving at the port of Boston in June. They settled in Westchester County, New York in 1796. James met Sarah (Sally) Redfield, and they married on May 5, 1817. James and Sally had 11 children, born between 1818 and 1838. In November 1848 they moved to Loudoun County, Virginia. James opposed slavery and voted against Virginia seceding from the Union.

A large collection of James Smith's personal papers, journals, and other materials was donated to the Loudoun Heritage Farm Museum. This letter was written by his son William at age 12. It is in the Museum's archives.



I have written on the blank portions
of these letters for the purpose of saving paper
to keep the letter within the 2 oz. - I have got
8 yards of cheap Calico for lining to that
quilt or coverlet that Aunt Jemima
wants to manufacture. I am
L. Scott Spill

Write very soon don't
be as long as we have been