

Signatures as Identity Tool: Implications for Name Authority Work in Historical Collections and Beyond

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Abstract

Name authority control allows for consistent identification, disambiguation and collocation of creators and their respective works, and as such, remains a crucial part of information work today. However, providing authority work on agents in historical collections can be challenging, particularly when the information in an authority file is sparse, agent names are commonplace, and there is little distinguishing information about the agent on the collection item (e.g., the manuscript, map, or historical record) under description. In these cases, it can be difficult to match the agent to an authority file—if one exists—with certainty.

Fortunately, another form of identifying information about the agent is often available in these contexts: the agent's handwritten signature. Because of their frequent occurrence on historical records, signatures can serve as relatively consistent and unique forms of identification and therefore have the potential to identify agents as well as to facilitate disambiguation of authority records of agents with similar names.

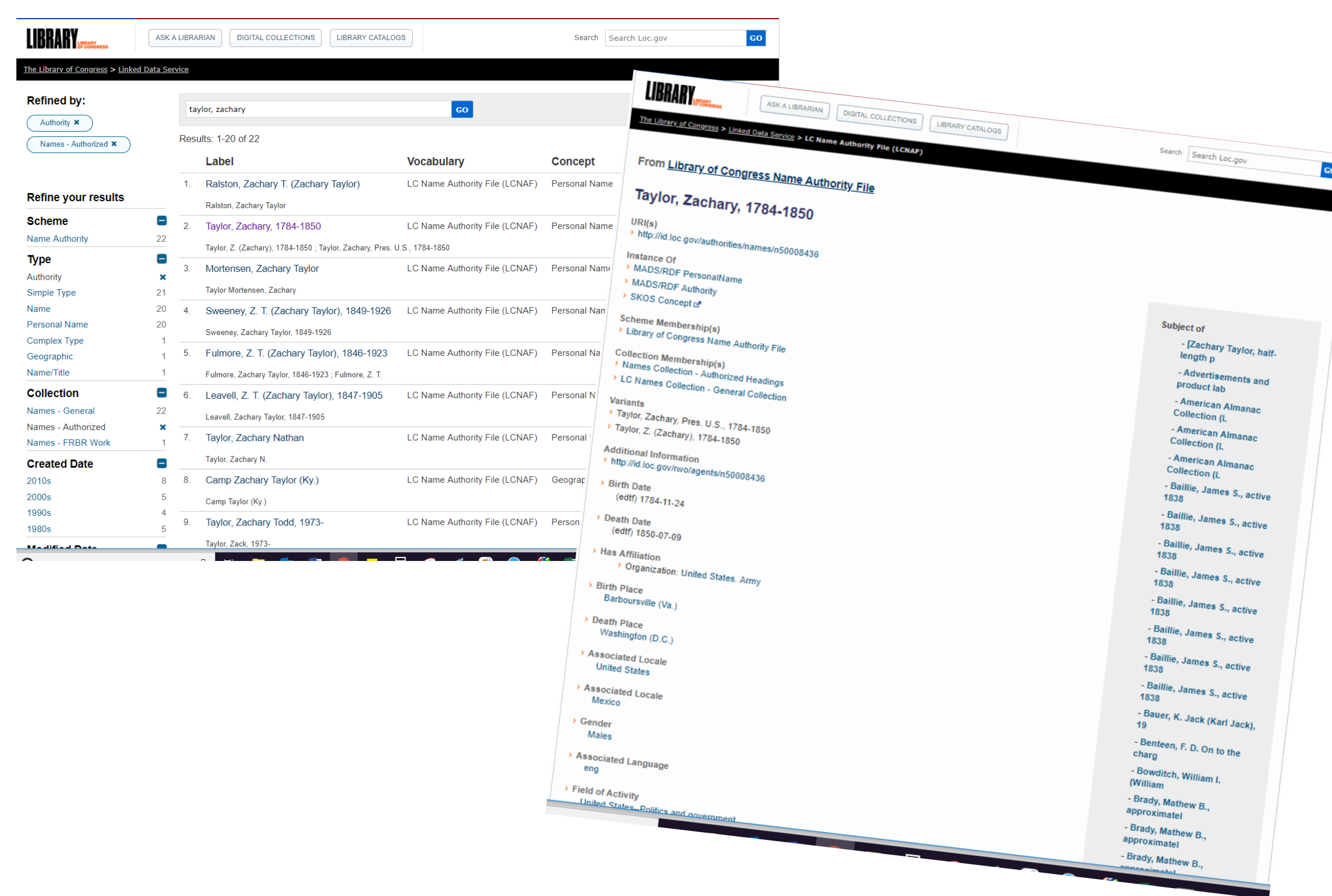
Drawing from the author's independent study project at University of Tennessee, this poster discusses the use of signatures to support name authority work in historical collections.

Challenges for Name Authority Work for Agents Appearing in Historical Collections

- Agent names are abbreviated or missing on documents (e.g., "Zachary Taylor" is represented as "Z. Taylor")
- Familial names are similar or are ambiguous on documents (e.g., two cousins living during the same era with similar occupations are named "George Evans")
- Names are commonplace (e.g., "John Brown")
- Documents are missing dates or other information to identify the agent
- NAFs are brief and lacking enough identifying information to match agent with certainty

In these contexts, signatures may aid in agent identification or disambiguation

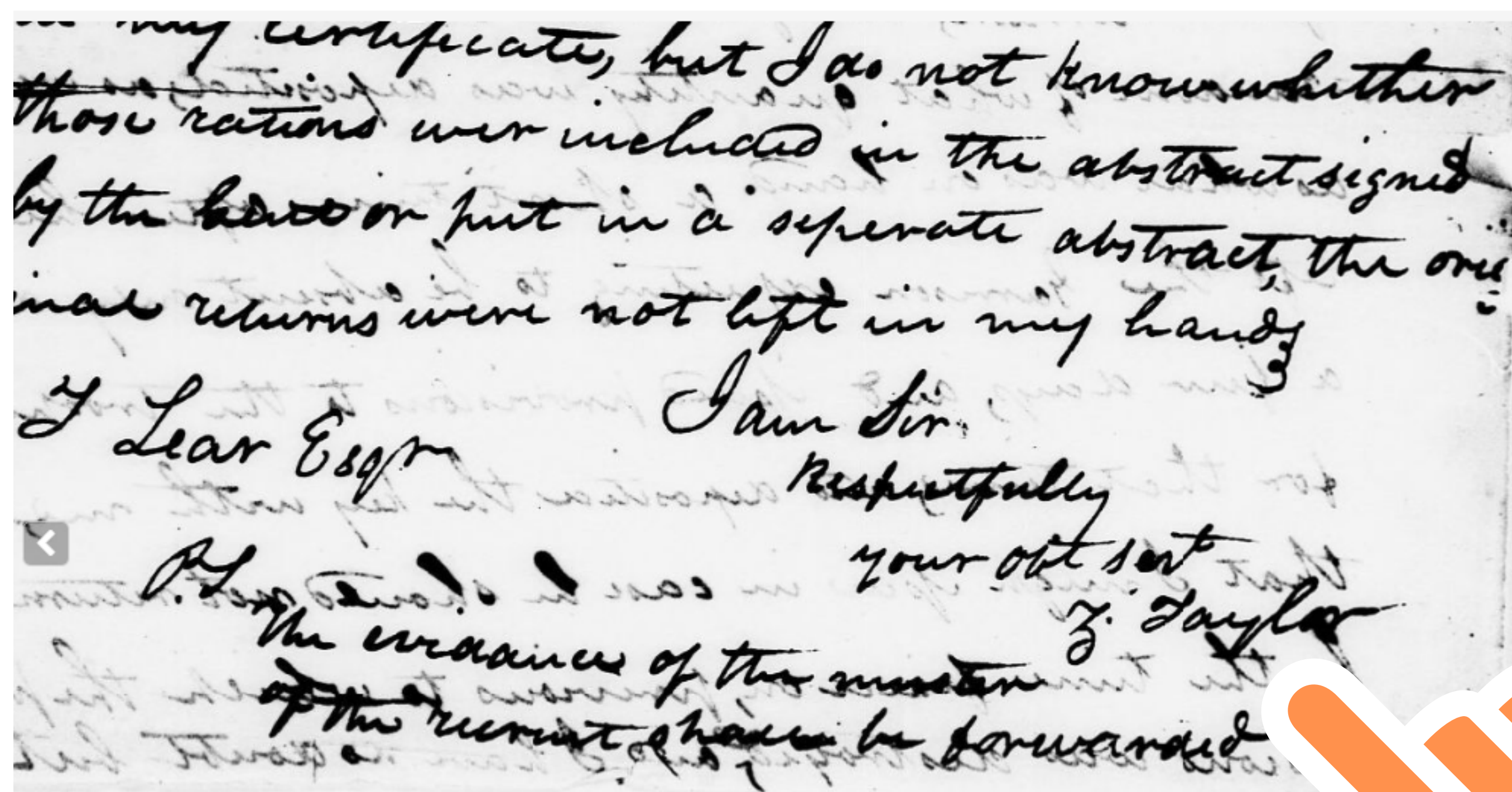
What's in LCNAF?



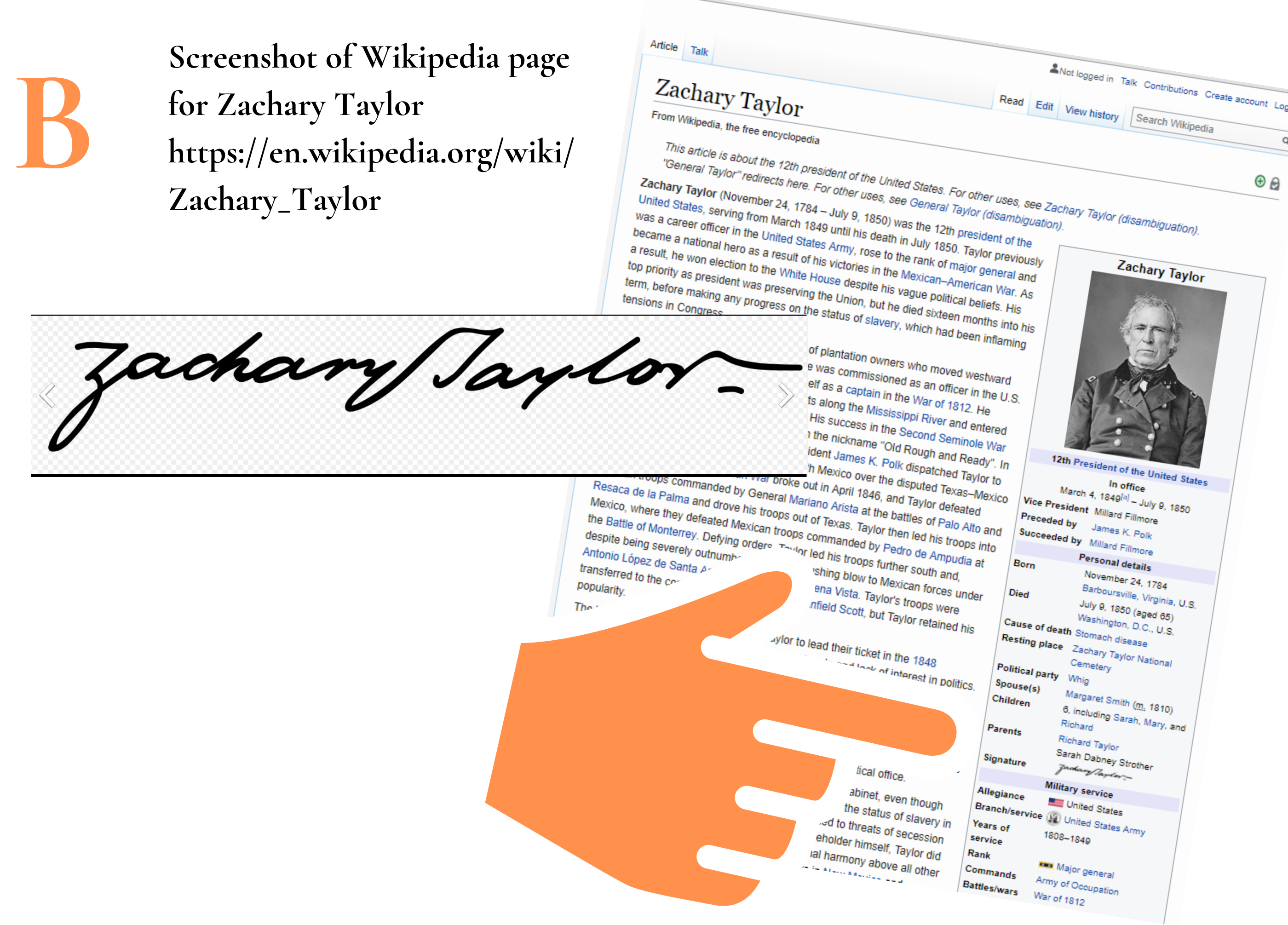
Screenshots of LCNAF results for Zachary Taylor. Taylor's authority file provides a significant amount of identifying information (e.g., dates, affiliations, occupations) about him but no image of his signature. To match a signature, information professionals must search other tools such as Wikipedia.

Signature as Authority Tool in Action:

Do "A" and "B" Match? Comparing Zachary Taylor's Signatures



A Screenshot of Zachary Taylor correspondence Taylor, Z. (1814) Zachary Taylor Papers: Series 2, General Correspondence, -1850; -1850. - 1850. [Manuscript/Mixed Material] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss42440002/>.



B Screenshot of Wikipedia page for Zachary Taylor https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zachary_Taylor

Questions for Future Research

- How reliable are signatures as an identifier?
- How to capture, search and share signatures as a broader-scale effort?
- Who has authority and on which platforms? e.g., VIAF? LC? Wikidata?
- What role might emerging technologies play in matching signatures?
- In what contexts, if any, do signatures play a role in modern identity management?
- How can signatures serve as building blocks of the Semantic Web?

Conclusion

The author found the examination of handwritten signatures to be a valuable strategy in facilitating identification of agents where little information could be gleaned about them either from the LCNAF or the historic document on which their signature appeared. In some cases, the signature allowed the author to distinguish agents with similar, commonplace, or abbreviated names. While many questions remain regarding the practical role of signatures in authority work, the author believes the practice has potential for authority work in several contexts (e.g., historical collections, genealogy), especially given the possibilities for linked data applications and using current and emerging technologies (e.g., image recognition software), which could make such practice more efficient but where further research is needed.