Genealogy: Names: What's In A Name?

- Genealogy: What’s in a Name? (Family Education)
- Creativity Required: Surname Spellings & Variations
- Searching for Common Surnames
- Do Not Assume – Common Mistaken Assumptions in Genealogy Research
- Name Variations in United States Indexes and Records (FamilySearch)
- Cyndi’s List: Names
- Name and Word Spellings (Genealogy.com)
- The Importance of Given Names (by Donna Przecha on Genealogy.com)
- 18th Century PA German Name Spelling Idiosyncrasies
- 18th Century PA German Naming Customs
- They Changed Our Name at Ellis Island (by Donna Przecha on Genealogy.com)

Information about Names

American Surnames by Smith, Elsdon C.

Family Names and their Story by Baring-Gould, S.

German-American Names by Jones, George F.

Popular Baby Names (online) (Social Security Administration)
Includes a list of popular names by decade. A list of names may help decipher hard to read documents.
Identifying Variant Spellings

- **Standard Finder (FamilySearch)**
  Generates a list of name variations.
- **Ancestry Archive (My Trees)**
  From the search page, select Name Variants to generate a list of spelling variations.
- **Spelling Substitution Tables for the United States and Canada (FamilySearch)**
  Commonly Misspelled Letters Table and Phonetic Substitutes Table.
- **First Name Translator**

Genealogy Guides

**In Search of Your British and Irish Roots: A Complete Guide to Tracing Your English, Welsh, Scottish, & Irish Ancestors** by Baxter, Angus

Not available at the University of Delaware Library.

Handwriting

**Handwriting of American Records for a Period of 300 Years** by Kirkham, E. Kay

Sources for Surname Associations

- **Surnames, Family Associations, & Family Newsletters (Cyndi’s List)**
- **Higginson Book Company**
  A publisher that specializes in local history books and published genealogies. Offers a print on demand service for books that are out of print.

Sources for Family Histories: Books

**Directory of Family Associations** by Bentley, Elizabeth Petty

**Genealogies in the Library of Congress: A Bibliography**

Immigration and Names

- **They Changed Our Name at Ellis Island** (by Donna Przecha on Genealogy.com)
- **American Names / Declaring Independence**
  From the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

What’s In A Name? Tips on Searching for Personal Names in Genealogical Resources

**Names Question (click image for the “key”)**

Of all the problems encountered in genealogical research, names are some of the toughest.

Here you will find some common problems you may encounter and some tips for working with them.
1. Different Persons with the Same Name

Relatives can have the same surname and given names. Children can be named after relatives, living or dead. First names may even be repeated in the same family in the same generation. If a child died young, the next child of the same sex may be given the same name.

Many cultures believe in honoring their elders by naming children after them.

Pay attention to religious or ethnic or national practices. Use genealogy guides to learn about the culture and society.

In some cases, repetition of names follows a formal pattern.

Example of a common naming pattern (from In Search of Your British and Irish Roots.

- First son was named after the father’s father
- Second son – the mother’s father
- Third son – the father
- Fourth son – the father’s eldest brother
- First daughter – the mother’s mother
- Second daughter – the father’s mother
- Third daughter – the mother
- Fourth daughter – the mother’s eldest sister

Example of common religious naming pattern (from 18th Century PA German Naming Customs)

Children might be given a "spiritual" (or saint’s) name and a "secular" name (a use or call name Rufnamen). All the children of the same gender might have the same first name. Johan (Johann, John) and Georg (George) were popular for boys and Anna (Ann), Catherine, and Maria (Mary) were popular for girls.

Johan Geog, Johan Frederick, Johan Jacob. Each of these people would use their "middle" name as their given name.

There are coincidences; be careful not to make too many assumptions.

Person marries someone with the same last name. Man has a wife and sister with same name. Man’s first and second wives had same name.

2. Same Person with Different Names

"Your" person's name may be written or spelled in various ways in different records.

- Bad or difficult to interpret handwriting
- Bad copying
- Damaged or difficult to read documents
- Illiteracy
- Spelling variations; spelling wasn’t “fixed”
- Phonetic spellings
- Translations – sometimes people used a translation of their name; Stein becomes Stone; Zimmerman becomes Carpenter (especially common with occupational or place names)
- Transliteration rules change. Names in different languages and different alphabets (transliteration: to represent or spell in the characters of another alphabet).
  - Example of Russian names: the name first written as Chaikovski was later written as Tchaikovsky
  - People change their names and the spelling of their names for various reasons, such as to americanize (latinize, anglicize, or otherwise change) names
  - And sometimes people just change their names
  - Not everyone in the same family may choose the same spelling
  - Jr. and Sr. – these do not always mean a father and son of the same name. Could be uncle/nephew, cousins, or two unrelated individuals with the same name. A Delaware example: Gunnning Bedford, Jr. (a signer of the U.S. Constitution), was the younger cousin of Gunning Bedford (a governor of Delaware). Both were active in Delaware politics after the American Revolution. They adopted the Jr. and Sr. to avoid confusion.

Note: it is often stated that family names were deliberately changed by Immigration officials at Ellis Island. But studies show that this is overstated. Changes could have been due to bad communication, transliteration, phonetic spellings, people wanting an
3. Nicknames

4. Abbreviations

Records will often use abbreviations for names that were common in those times. Additionally, there may be alternate forms. William=Wm. or Wm or Thomas=Tho. or Thom.

5. Problems with Researching Women Ancestors

6. Gender Names

Gender names – names that specify a sex.

Some names have masculine and feminine forms. But not all instances of these names follow any “rules.” Marion is usually masculine and Marian is usually feminine. But not always.

Non-gendered or unisex names – names that do not specify a gender or could be either. Bailey, Dale, and other names give no clue whether the person is male or female.

7. Different Names that Sound Alike

Names like Aaron and Erin that sound alike can cause problems.

8. Other

First name could be last name

- Lewis
- Paul

No fixed last names (last names built on fathers’ names; patronyms)

- Andersson, son of Anders (Scandanavian)
- Sigurdardottir, daughter of Sigurd (Scandanavian)
Suggestions

Be alert, be aware.

Know your family. Don’t neglect the collateral lines (brothers, sisters, etc., not in your direct line of descent). Brothers, sisters, cousins, etc., often named their children for each other. Look for patterns.

Educate yourself:

- National/ethnic/religious customs. Lineage associations. Genealogy guides can provide information about the culture and society.
- Meanings of names. Dictionaries of names and other sources of information about Names
- History of country. Example: Alsace “changed hands” between France and Germany.
- Handwriting differs over time. Guides to handwriting and penmanship.

Make a surname list with spelling variations. Keep good notes on what you have searched and what spellings you searched where.

Help for finding variant spellings:

Think of possible phonetic spellings, say the names out loud, ask someone else how they would spell the name.

See left box: Identifying Variant Spellings

Surname resources and family histories: is there a published genealogy on your family? Is there a surname association or society? Is anyone researching your name?

Surnames, Family Associations, & Family Newsletters (Cyndi’s List)

Try varying your search strategies. (Ancestry offers these possibilities)

- Search with fields (e.g., last/first name) rather than keyword or search by keywords instead of last/first name fields
- Search by first name instead of surname
- Use middle name or initial (or initials for first and middle names)
- Omit last name and search by place or name of relative
- Place only. Browse by area and examine all schedules (only works for a small area)

Soundex (sounds like)

- Formal – Soundex refers to a system of coding names used to index records for the 1880, 1900, and 1920 Censuses. The indexing was not complete for the 1880 Census. Work done in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Later: in the 1960s, a similar coding system called Miracode was used for the 1910 Census, but did not include all states.
- Informal – some search systems (example: Ancestry Library Edition) provide a “soundex search” they have devised
- Create your own list (and add to your surname search list)

Special search features:

Wildcards

- An asterisk * matches zero or more characters – so Ann* matches Ann, Anne, Anna, Annabelle, etc. La*rence matches Lawrence and Laurence
- A question mark ? matches one character – so Ann? matches Anne or Anna

Fuzzy searching (“Did you mean?“ – word roots or spelling variations). Used by Google, other search engines, and some databases. Example: search for Phillipines in Google.

Search the same information in other databases or the old print indexes or on microfilm. Different indexes or formats may omit names or interpret handwriting differently.

Be creative.
Nicknames

"A Rose by any other name might be called Polly, Molly or Maude."

"Deciphering The First, Middle and Nicknames of our Ancestors." By Kathy Jones-Kristof. [Webpage no longer available.]

There are many common nicknames. Knowing nicknames can help you identify or verify individuals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nickname</th>
<th>Given Name Equivalents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
<td>Aggie, Nancy (a Scottish tradition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Andy, Drew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward or Edwin</td>
<td>Ed, Ted, Ned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>Elle, Ellie, Ellen, Helen, Nell, Nellie, Nora, Lenora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth or Elisabeth</td>
<td>Beth, Betty, Bess, Betsy, Libby, Liz, Lizzie, Eliza, Liza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Peg, Peggy, Maggie, Madge, Margie, Midge, Mitzi, Meg, Daisy, Rita, Margo, Greta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>Patsy, Patty, Mattie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Molly, Polly, Mae, May, Mamie, Marie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Ann, Nan, Agnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Sally, Sallie, Sadie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill (meaning the third)</td>
<td>Tre, Trey, Terry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although not aimed at genealogy and family history, the collections of the University of Delaware Library (Morris Library) include materials useful to genealogists and family historians.

This Genealogy Research Guide is provided as a service for genealogists. It presents topics and resources to assist researchers. The UD Library does not specialize in genealogy and does not have staff responsible for genealogy. Library staff cannot conduct research.

For questions about library resources and holdings, use the Ask the Library service.

For questions about getting research assistance, see the suggestions on the home page of this guide or on the topic/resources pages.
### Names Question Key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name Pairs</th>
<th>Key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron and Erin</td>
<td>Sound alikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andersson and Anderson Goldschmidt and Goldsmith</td>
<td>Anglicized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andersson, son of Anders Sigurdardottir, daughter of Sigurd</td>
<td>No fixed last names (built on father's name) (Scandinavian naming tradition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew and MacAndrew</td>
<td>Add Mac (Mc) or O’ before name (Irish and Scottish naming tradition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey (as first name)</td>
<td>Non-gendered / indeterminate sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behle and Bailey Conn and Quinn</td>
<td>Transformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaikovski and Tchaikovski</td>
<td>Transliteration rules changed, e.g., C became T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean and John Johann and Johanna Jean and Jean</td>
<td>Translation or form of name Gender names: masculine and feminine forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johann and John Zimmerman and Carpenter</td>
<td>Translation or form of name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis and Lewis Ingels and Engels</td>
<td>Variant spellings Variant spellings (first letter differs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy and Agnes Margaret and Daisy Mary and Polly Andrew and Drew</td>
<td>Nicknames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Lewis (Louis) Bailey</td>
<td>First name could be last name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawlowski and Paul</td>
<td>Translation (“Paul's place” in Polish) and shortened form</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Thanks to Sean Diffendall, University Library, Museums, and Press, for creating the graphic.*
What’s in a Name? Barbara Krasner-Khait December 1, 2000 updated on August 18, 2017. Understanding the secrets of surnames can Unlock answers about your ancestors. You think you’re researching the genealogy of the Santos family and suddenly you’ve got Maria Maria. Or you have an ancestor named Sven Andersson and it looks like his son is named Magnus Svensson. To deal with such challenges and to make the most of the answers surnames suggest, it helps to know and understand the naming practices in the cultures and geographies of your ancestors. For starters, remember that last names are a relatively recent invention. Many genealogical software programs have utilities that can easily code names for you. Common or uncommon? Start Your Genealogy Research. Genealogy Tutorial (Powerpoint). Genealogy Research Topics. Charts and Forms. Genealogy Guides. What do you want to do today? Search Censuses by Year and Ancestor’s Name. Learn about Census Records. Order Copies of Census Records. Ask our Staff a Question on HistoryHub. Visit a NARA Research Room. Hire an Independent Researcher. This page was last reviewed on December 11, 2018. Contact us with questions or comments. Research Guides. Getting Started. Guide to Federal Records. Genealogy: A Research Guide Researching one’s family history can be a lifelong journey. Uncovering records and documents that help to piece together the past lives of ancestors is a labor of love for many. If you are new to genealogy research this guide will provide you with a great place to start. The resources listed below present the most standard resources in the field. Many of them will point you to even more resources. If you need assistance in locating books that the library does not own the librarian can help you find it at another library. The terms and phrases listed in the subject h