



Unit 1 - Lesson 5 - What's in a Name? ~ Surname Searches



Did you ever wonder where your surname comes from, when we began using family names or what we did before we used them? How were your ancestors identified in their communities?

The use of patrilineal hereditary surnames as we use them today started in China during the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) for the purpose of census taking.

The use of surnames in western culture began much later. In European culture, the use of surnames was initiated in Venice, Italy around the 10th or 11th centuries and not until the 13th century in Great Britain. Initially, surnames were used by the aristocracy or nobility. Eventually it became an established custom that was adopted by all peoples and is in common use today.

Among the Native American people the use of surnames was not developed until the civil war era. Those serving in the war were required to have two names and were issued an anglicized name or were allowed to choose one of their own. In general, the way we began to use surnames varies greatly with cultures and traditions.

For the purpose of this lesson you will focus on the development of surnames originating in Europe and Great Britain. You will look carefully at how surnames were acquired, and delve into the origins of some common surnames. More importantly, you will be gaining knowledge of surname practices as they are used in the field of genealogical research.

How Surnames Developed

Prior to using surnames, people in Europe developed a number of practices for naming an individual; frequently these names were descriptively colorful in nature. Generally for Europeans they were indicative of personal attributes, occupations, parentage and place of origin. In many cases these descriptive names became surnames, many of which are still used today.

History is rich with examples of surnames derived from personal attributes. In some cases your surname will be derived from a distant ancestor's physical appearance or personal character. Names such as *Pollard* and *Coot* were a reference to baldness and *Crookshanks* is a name describing crooked legs. Some names are self explanatory, such as *Swift*, *Strong* and *Smart*. Some names taken from a person's nature or character are *Fairweather*, meaning happy; or *Hardy*, meaning brave. Some of the more curious surnames come from nicknames that were not flattering; for instance, *Fogarty* was an expression for an outlaw and *Woodcock* described someone who was gullible.

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