



Unit 1 - Lesson 6 - What's in a First Name?

You may be surprised to discover just how much you can uncover about your ancestors merely by looking at their forenames.

Forenames are usually given at the time of a child's birth and are usually a matter of public record, such as on a birth or baptismal certificate. The use of forenames as we know them in western culture, follows the typical pattern of given name, middle name, and then surname. It is most familiar to us that a given name comes before the surname, such as Mary Cooper rather than Cooper Mary. In countries like Hungary, some regions of Africa and in most East Asian cultures, the given name comes after the surname or family name. In your genealogy research you will need to understand the importance of how the given name is used. Knowing this could help you add branches to your family tree.

In this lesson you are going to expand your knowledge of how forenames can be used as a means of tracking your ancestors. You will become familiar with frequently used naming patterns and the custom of using surnames as given names and middle names. You will gain an understanding of why and when these customs were used and how to employ them to your advantage when hunting for your unique past.

Naming Patterns

The naming patterns used by past generations present you with valuable hints as you seek out your roots. In contrast to your surname, which is an inherited constant, the name given to you at birth or baptism is the name that makes you unique and distinguishable from other members of your family. Learning to use your ancestor's given names as a tool in your research can provide you with invaluable clues to tracing your roots. During your journey into genealogy you are very likely to notice a pattern in the naming of children. These patterns can endure through several generations. It is the wise genealogist who understands how to put them to use.

Some naming patterns are area specific as we learned in Lesson Five about the Scandinavian patronymic naming system. However, there are as many naming patterns as there are diversified cultures, far too many to explore within this lesson. With that said, today's lesson will focus in the area of the British Isles which represents the largest segment of early immigrants to the Americas. The naming practices used here are the ones most common to the majority of today's North American researchers.

Table of Contents

- *Introduction - page 1*
- *Naming Patterns - page 1-3*
- *Surnames & Middle Names - page 3*
- *Practice - page 4*
- *Wrap-up - page 4*

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