



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.

Table of Contents

- Introduction - page 1
- How Surnames Developed - page 1-2
- Practice - Surname Search - page 3
- Wrap-up - page 3

*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.*

Another popular source of common surnames has come from the occupations held by your ancestors as well as their status within their community. The surname *Powers* is a description of someone who has taken a vow of poverty while *Smith* - one of the most common surnames to date - was used for a blacksmith.

One root source for surnames is location specific, being taken from the area where your remote relative resided. For instance, the name *Hartley* would belong to someone who lived near a field where there were deer, as *hart* is the Old English word for deer and *ley* was the word for field. You will not always have to resort to the use of a translator however, as in the case of *Royston*, who is someone who came from...Royston. While a study of these types of family names can be entertaining, they can also offer you critical hints and clues about your ancestors.

Certain types of surname practices are isolated by region. A very good illustration of this is the patronymic naming system commonly used in Scandinavian countries. Patronymic systems follow a pattern where the name of the child is a result of the name of the father. Looking at the Scandinavian example you will see how this works.

For instance

- If the father's name is John and his child's name is Albert, the child would be known as Albert Johnson (or Johansson).
- If Albert then has a son and names his son John; then his son would be known as John Albertson.
- The system is also true for female offspring. If Albert had a daughter named Karen, then his daughter would be named Karen Albertsdaughter (or Albertsdotter).

This can certainly make genealogy research very challenging and is the reason for Lesson Seven on searching by location.

Surnames have historically come from a person's attributes, their occupation, parentage, or place of origin or residence.

The Scandinavians were not the only culture to use this practice of patronymic naming; it is also widely used right through Great Britain and Europe in various forms. The Irish equivalent is the use of *O'* before the name, for example Patrick O'Brian would be Patrick son of Brian. In Scotland the equivalent is *Mc* or *Mac*, *Fitz* for old English as in FitzAllen, *Ez* or *Es* for Spanish and Portuguese, *D'* or *Di* in Italy and *Wicz* in Poland.

In Scandinavia, the Patronymic naming system began to yield to surname use in the 1800s when they began using the farm name as a family name.

For a case in point, let's look at two brothers from Norway in the 1800s. Simon Tollekson and Johannes Tollekson, who were both the sons of Tolle Simonson. Simon Tollekson lived on a part of the family farm called *Undset* while Johannes Tollekson lived on the *Rugsven* acreage. When the brothers immigrated, they both adopted their farm names. Simon became known as Simon Tollekson Undset and Johannes became known as Johannes Tolleksen Rugsven. Eventually the patronym was dropped to the usage of just the farm name and their descendants are now either Undset or Rugsven.

Without knowledge of this particular naming practice it would be very easy to lose these two ancestors.

Practice

Surname Search

For this lesson's practice exercise perform an internet search on your own surname. Can you find out where it originates and what it means?

Wrap-up

Now that you have become aware of the roles that surnames play in genealogical research, you will be able to proceed confidently and competently from here forward.

When you have completed your practice exercise we can meet on the forum [Beginning Genealogy Lesson 5; What's In A Name?](#) to discuss your findings and/or any questions you may have about this lesson.

In the next lesson, we will discuss given (first names), naming patterns, and how they can be used to track your ancestors.

See you on the forums!

Articles: <http://www.genealogybeginner.com/category/lesson-5-articles>

Glossary: <http://www.genealogybeginner.com/category/glossary>

Forum: <http://www.genealogybeginner.com/community/whats-in-a-name-all-about-surname-searches-lesson-5/>