genealogybeginner
STEP BY STEP GENEALOGY GUIDE

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.

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Today's lesson will focus in the area of the British Isles which represents the largest segment of early immigrants to the Americas.

A specific naming pattern widely used in the British Isles up until the late 1800s consisted of people naming their children after their elders as a way of honoring them. The result of this pattern is the repetition of names throughout family groups for several generations.

As a genealogist you can sometimes use this pattern to discover the names needed to move back a generation. This method can also give you a direction to look in by indicating the names of parents and grandparents. These methods must be used discriminately as there are always exceptions to the rule. It will help you to keep your eyes peeled for potential ancestors by looking at their Christian names.

The pattern itself looks like this:

EARLY BRITISH ISLES NAMING PATTERN

Sons

First born male child

Named for the paternal grandfather (his father's father)

Alternative - named for the maternal grandfather (mother's father)

Second born male child

Named for the maternal grandfather (his mother's father)

Alternative - named for the paternal grandfather (father's father)

Third born male child

Named for the father

Fourth born male child

Named for the father's oldest brother

Alternative - named for the paternal great grandfather (father's paternal grandfather)

Fifth born male child

Named for the mother's oldest brother

Alternative - named for the maternal great grandfather (mother's paternal grandfather)

Daughters

First born female child

Named for the maternal grandmother (her mother's mother)

Alternative - named for the paternal grandmother (father's mother)

Second born female child

Named after her paternal grandmother (her father's mother)

Alternative - named for the maternal grandmother (mother's mother)

Third born female child

Named for the mother

Fourth born female child

Named for the mother's oldest sister

Alternative - named for the maternal great grandmother (mother's maternal grandmother)

Fifth born female child

Named for the father's oldest sister

Alternative - named for the paternal great grandmother (father's maternal grandmother)

Using this table, let's look at the family of Peter Sinclair who married Catherine Calder to see how the pattern works.

Peter Sinclair's father was James Sinclair and his mother was Catherine Sinclair. Catherine Calder's parents were William and Isobel Calder.

Their children in order of birth were:

1st son – James Sinclair *(named for paternal grandfather)*

1st daughter – Isabella Sinclair *(named for maternal grandmother)*

2nd daughter – Catherine Calder Sinclair *(most likely named for paternal grandmother – who shares the same name as her mother)*

2nd son – William Sinclair *(named for maternal grandfather)*

3rd daughter – Jane Sinclair *(named for mother)*

3rd son – Peter Sinclair (named for father)

4th son – Robert Sinclair *(Peter was the oldest of his siblings, but his next oldest brother was Robert)*

5th son – Richard Sinclair *(unknown)*

If you did not know the name of Peter's parents, this system would provide an excellent source by giving you a possible place to look for them by looking for a James Sinclair who lived in the same area who was of a fitting age to be Peter's father.

As much as I encourage you to use this method, I caution you to use it responsibly. It is not one hundred percent accurate, as you can see by the above example. It would be dangerous to make an assumption on the basis of a naming practice that we have found an ancestor. It is a system that can only provide you with possible places to look. It will not give you the answers and you still have to follow up on these clues, confirm your suspicions, and then document your sources.

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Use caution when applying any naming pattern in your search.
It would be dangerous to make an assumption on the basis of a naming practice that we have found an ancestor.

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Surnames as Given Names and Middle Names

Another common system used by past generations was to use a surname as a given name or a middle name.

Whenever you run across this situation in your research you should write it down, it may be a clue. The maternal line of your family may be discovered by the use of family names given to children as a way of honoring the mother's family. This method can also be a tool for discovering the parents of the ancestor you are researching.

Look again at the Early British Isles Naming Pattern chart for the 2nd daughter of the family named Catherine Calder Sinclair. If you did not know who Peter Sinclair's parents were, this would be a good clue as the middle name of the second daughter is the mother's maiden surname. A search for a Sinclair married to a Calder could point you in the right direction.

Be careful here, surnames used as middle names are not always an indication of relationship. There are also cases where the surname/middle name was taken from a favorite aunt, a family friend or even from the Parish minister. It was also a common practice to use the name of a king or a president as a middle name as in the case of a George Washington or a Lincoln.

You may also come across two children with the same name in a family. This often occurs when there has been the death of a child. For instance, if the deceased child had been named for a grandparent it would not be unusual for the next – same sex – child born to be given that name; more so if that child had been named for another family member such as a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle.

This lesson would not be complete without looking at some of the common given name issues you will run across during your research. If you are having problems searching an ancestor, it may be due to a number of reasons that involve their given name. If your ancestor has immigrated he may have changed to the English equivalent of his name, for instance the Danish *Jan*, Russian *Ivan*, French *Jean* and Scottish *Ian* are all forms of the name *John*. In other instances, you may find that a name derivative has been used such as *Robby* or *Bobby* for *Robert* or *Roberta*. Names also can become shortened or nicknames and abbreviates may have been used in identifying documents. When you are looking for your ancestors and can not find them, it may be time to try a different search, such as *Jim* for *James*, *Beth* for *Elisabeth* and in the case of abbreviation *Jos* for *Joseph*. Some search sites automatically look for name variations, though with others you may have to manually use the alternatives. Don't give up, you will find them.

Practice
Search For Naming Patterns

For this weeks practice exercise look through some of your family's given names. Do you see any patterns? Can you find any surnames used as middle names or forenames? Are there any names that could be shortened or abbreviated? Make a list of these names and we will discuss search strategies on the Beginning Genealogy Lesson 6 Forum.

Wrap-up

In this lesson we have covered some naming practices common in the British Isles. Be sure to check out the articles for more information or come to the Forum if you have any questions or need additional help.

In the next lesson, we will be covering changing place names and searching for your ancestors when they suddenly "disappear."

See you on the forums!

Articles: http://www.genealogybeginner.com/category/lesson-6-articles

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

Forum: http://www.genealogybeginner.com/community/whats-in-a-first-name-how-to-use-in-searches-as-hines-and-clues-lesson-6/