



# The Genealogy Superpowers of a Name

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A name – that which not only identifies a person, but sometimes describes an ancestral occupation or background – is an essential fact used by genealogists. What's in a name? Well there are many types of names – middle, surname, given – and even those assigned through religious rituals such as a confirmation name. A full understanding of a name allows you to harness its full power in your genealogy research.

## The Anatomy of a Name

A surname can have many different origins – some based on location, others on trade or profession, and others on physical attributes or qualities. In England, the use of surnames didn't develop until the 13th and 14th centuries when there was a need for legal and commercial purposes to distinguish one person from another. The use of surnames in some cultures is much earlier – the Irish use can be traced to the 10th century – while others are much later such as the 19th or even 20th centuries.

The best way to determine all the elements of a name is to trace its origin, its culture, its location and its history in your family tree.

## Where to Find Names and Name Information

- **Census records:** The names of all household members were not listed until the 1850 US Federal Census. The results vary for different state censuses.
- **Vital records.** For most vital records will you find the full names for those directly involved in the event, such as parents for a birth record etc. For marriage records, some states don't list parents' names or only during later periods; also check for names of witnesses. For death records, pay close attention to the name of the informant as well as the physician name and funeral home director.
- **Church and synagogue records.** For some sacramental records such as baptism and confirmation, witness or sponsor names are listed – check to see how they are related to the family.
- **City and business directories.** Locate names in directories, with families grouped together. Also check the advertisements in the directories.
- **Passenger Lists.** Don't believe the "urban legend" that names were changed at Ellis Island or other arrival locations. Names on passenger lists were required to match up with actual passengers before leaving for the United States. Any name changes likely took place after arrival.
- **Newspapers.** Names can be found in a variety of locations including legal notices, personals, and more.



- **Property records.** The legal name of a person is likely to be found in property records especially those involving a legal transaction.

## Research Strategies Using Names

Whether looking for a name or using a name to expand your search, here are some strategies that have proven effective for other genealogists:

- **Determine surname variations.** The current form for a surname may be a derivative of its original form. Determine any and all possible variations and use them in your research.
- **Don't forget nicknames!** Our ancestors had nicknames too and used them. They may not be familiar to you so access resources such as **Wolfram-Alpha** where you can determine the variety of nicknames for a given name. Branch out with your research using nicknames to discover new finds.
- **Understand birth name order.** Some ethnicities use a formula for naming children depending upon the birth order such as the first male child is named after the father's father. Also, some cultures will re-use a child name if that child has died while others will not.
- **Look for ethnic practices related to name usage.** Besides birth order, some cultures also use other naming conventions such as a confirmation name after the child has been confirmed in a church and is recognized as an adult. Other examples include the use of the middle name instead of the given name.

## Sharing Your Family History Using Names

Besides recording a name in your genealogy database, there are several ways in which you can use that name information in different family history-related projects.

- **Cluster maps:** Using a mapping program such as Google Maps, pin locations where your ancestor surnames can be found. Especially in small towns, you'll notice groupings of names together in different areas. A visual depiction of cluster research data can help your research.
- **Word clouds:** Create a list of ancestor surnames and then generate a graphic using a word cloud program such as Tagul or Wordle. You can then print this graphic and frame it, give it as a gift, or even produce items such as t-shirts and mugs using the graphic.
- **Set up a one name study:** For more uncommon surnames, create a group on Facebook or start a blog with a focus on researching all descendants with the same surname. You might be surprised at how easy it is to connect with others researching the same surname.



- **Document name changes.** While names were not changed at Ellis Island, a genealogy urban legend, immigrants would often change their name once they were settled in a new location or new occupation. Trace the evolution of how a surname changes, who made the change and where you can find evidence of the old and the new names.

## Resource List

- **Ancestry: Last Name Meanings and History**  
<https://www.ancestry.com/learn/facts>
- **Cyndi's List: Names**  
<http://www.cyndislist.com/directories/>
- **Google Maps**  
<http://maps.google.com>
- **Spelling Substitution Tables for the United States and Canada**  
<https://abundantgenealogy.com/spelling-sub-table>
- **Tagul**  
<http://tagul.com>
- **The Guild of One-Name Studies**  
<http://www.one-name.org>
- **Traditional Nicknames in Old Documents**  
<https://abundantgenealogy.com/trad-nicknames>
- **Translations of Female Given Names in Multiple Languages**  
<https://abundantgenealogy.com/female-names-multiple-lang>
- **Translations of Male Given Names in Multiple Languages**  
<https://abundantgenealogy.com/male-names-multiple-lang>
- **uencounter.me**  
<http://uencounter.me>
- **Wolfram-Alpha**  
<http://www.wolframalpha.com>
- **Wordle**  
<http://www.wordle.net>