SURNAME ORIGINS & HISTORY

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"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."
from *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), by William Shakespeare

*W*hat's In a Name? - This is included in one of the most widely quoted phrases in English. Every casual writer about names feels that he must use the phrase at least once in his article if, indeed, he does not make it the title of his sketch.

Shakespeare's assertion has had an influence on the thinking of many - that names really do not matter. Most of us are interested in names and how their origins derived. Surnames are fossilized echoes of ancient voices of ancestors singling out each other in fields, castles, manor halls, monasteries, and medieval villages.

Now, the term 'surname' comes from the medieval French word '*surnom*' translating as "above-or-over name". Ancient French legal documents and records differentiated a particular Pierre and a particular Marie from other Pierre's and Marie's by inscribing a second name over a first name as with the following examples:

du bois (the woodcutter)
Pierre

la blanc (the blonde-haired one)
Marie

Now, how did so many different surnames originate? Many in their genealogical search have found, for instance, that different branches of their family have come to spell their name differently, or that some members have changed the name entirely, or perhaps that an immigration officer or some other public official a century ago wrote down a wrong form which now has become the accepted one. Others have learned for the first time the original, literal meaning of their name, for instance, that the first Frenchman to have the name *Lesueur* was named for his job, making shoes, or that the surname of *Ramsbottom* has nothing to do with ovine anatomy. The ancestral surname of *Ramsbottom*, by the way, came from the village of that name in Lancashire, with the term ram meaning 'wild garlic' and bottom indicating the 'lowland' where it grew.

When the world's population was small and even a city might hold only a few thousand people, and when most folks never got more than ten or fifteen miles from their birthplace (usually walking), and when messages were sent by personal messenger rather than by impersonal post, there was hardly a necessity for
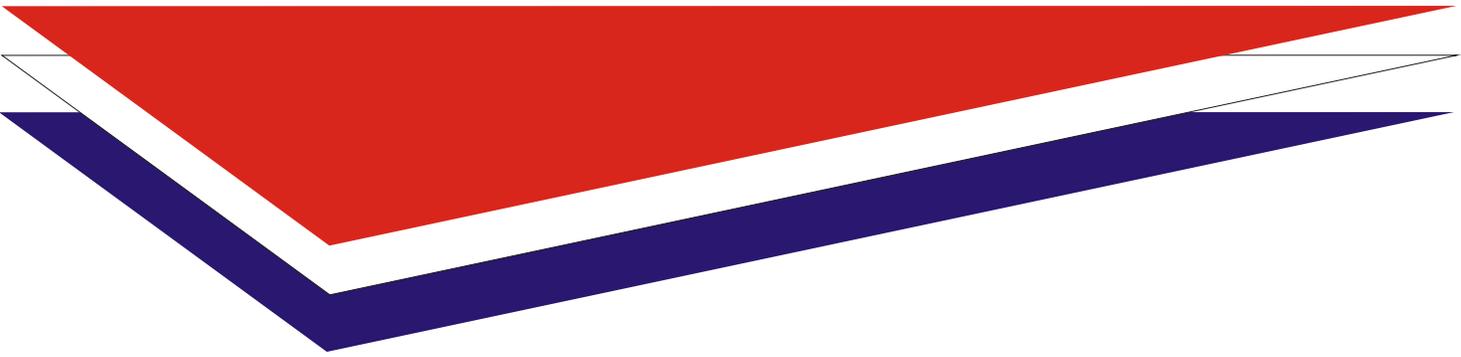
more than one name. Even kings got by with a single name. When someone referred to King David, there was no need to ask David who?

No one knows who first felt the need to apply any name at all to himself or any of his fellows. According to the Roman statesman Pliny, some ancient tribes were *anonymi* <nameless> and it is barely possible that a few *anonymi* may still exist in remote corners of the world. But for the most part personal names of some sort exist wherever there are human beings.

"A distinguishing label" - that of course is what a name is. It differentiates one person from another, allowing a mother to single out one child's attention, helping an officer to address a command to an individual, assisting any of us to carry out our daily tasks that depend on distinguishing one person from another.

Almost all the occupational names, for example, refer to work done mainly or entirely by men in the Middle Ages, and countless fathers but few mothers were memorialized in names that would become family names.

If the Middle Ages had been urbanized, no doubt the use of second names would have accelerated as well. If a city has three thousand Williams, ways must be found, of course, to indicate which William one talks about. A typical medieval village, though, might have had only five or ten Williams, a similar number of Johns, and maybe two or three Roberts or Thomas'es.

Even so, distinctions often needed to be made. If two villagers were talking about John, misunderstandings would arise if each had a different John in mind. So qualifications were added, as in imaginary bits of conversation like these:

> *"A horse stepped on John's foot." "John from the hill?"*
> *"No. John of the dale."*
> *"John the son of William?"*
> *"No. John the son of Robert." "John the smith?"*
> *"No. John the tailor."*
> *"John the long?"*
> *"No. John the bald."*

In the rush of conversation the little, unimportant words could drop out or be slurred over so that John from the hill became John hill, and the other persons could be John dale, John William's son, John Robert's son, John smith, John tailor, John long, and John bald (or ballard, which means <the bald one>). The capital letters that we now associate with surnames are only scribal conventions introduced later on. Distinctions like those illustrated in the conversations were a step toward surnames. But the son of John the smith might be Robert the wainwright <wagon maker>. That is, he did not inherit the designation smith from his father. There were no true English surnames - family names - until Robert the son of John smith became known as Robert smith (or Smith) even though his occupation was a wainwright, a fletcher <arrow maker>, a tanner
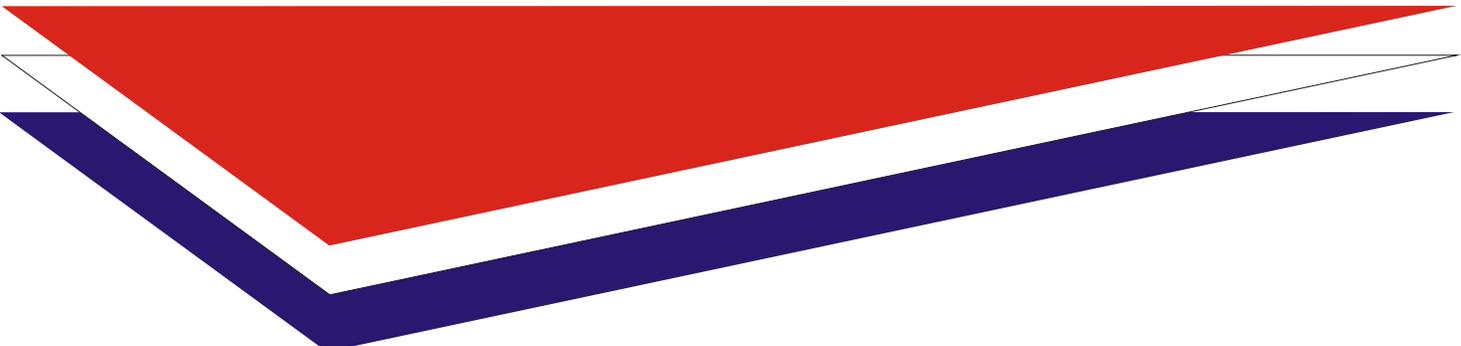
or barker <leather worker>, or anything else. Only when the second name was passed down from one generation to the next did it become a surname.

That step did not occur suddenly or uniformly, although throughout most of Europe it was a medieval development. Before the fourteenth century most of the differentiating adjuncts were prefaced by *filius* (son of), as in Adam fir Gilberti <Adam, son of Gilbert>, by *le* <the>, as in Beaudrey le Teuton, by *de* <of, from>, as in Rogerius de Molls <Roger from the mills>, or by *atta* <at the>, as in John atte Water <John at the water>, which later might be John Atwater. These particles often dropped out. Thus a fourteenth-century scribe might have began writing his name as David Tresruf, but other evidence shows that Tresruf was simply a place name and that David de Tresruf was the way the scribe earlier wrote his name. It was not until about 1500 A.D. that most surnames became inherited and no longer varied with a change in a person's appearance, job, or place of residence.

It can now be said that almost all English and Continental surnames fall into the four categories:

1).	**Place Names**	John Hill, John Atwater
2).	**Patronyms** (or others based on personal names)	John Robertson, John Williams, John Alexander
3).	**Occupational Names**	John Smith, John Fletcher
4).	**Descriptive/Nicknames Names**	John Long, John Armstrong

With a few exceptions the million-plus surnames that North Americans bear are of these four sorts. If we were mainly an Oriental or an African nation, the patterns would be different. But we are primarily European in our origins, and in Europe it seemed natural to identify each person during the surname-giving period according to location, parentage, occupation, appearance or other characteristics.

The proportion in each category of names may vary from one European language to another. Thus 70 percent or more of Irish, Welsh, and Scandinavian surnames are patronyms. Spanish families have also preferred patronyms, but place names are not far behind. In France patronyms lead once more, but names of occupations are in second place. In Germany, however, patronyms of the simple English sort are relatively few, although hereditary combinative descriptions are common, occupational names are frequent, and place names not uncommon. In most countries personal descriptive surnames lag behind the others.

The first immigrants to North America were probably those people we call Indians or, more recently but not much more accurately, Native Canadians & Native Americans. But scientists still argue about just where the Indians came from and when and how. And we know nothing of the names they carried with them in our prehistory. The total number of "*Indians*," including any possibly surviving descendants of the other early European settlers, was not large when Columbus came. Some demographers estimate that north of Mexico there were barely a million inhabitants in the fifteenth century.
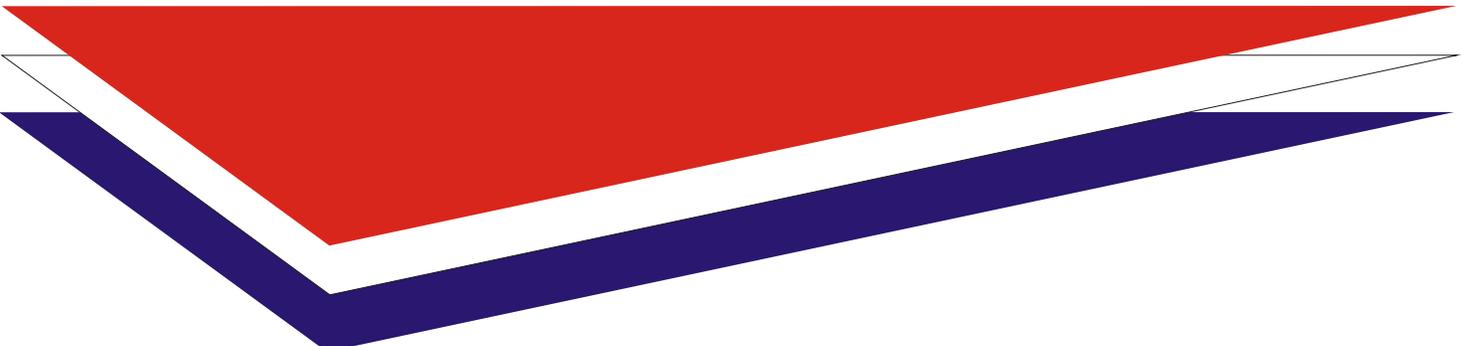
The first European settlers after Columbus whose settlement has survived were the Spanish founders of Saint Augustine, Florida, in 1565. The English were responsible for the ill-starred Jamestown Colony, starting in 1607. With 1608, Canada, itself, saw the establishment of a French Colony at Port Royal in Nova Scotia, British settlement there later in 1623 and the very important Hudson Bay Company traders of 1670. With the advent of ever-increasing immigration to the New World, Canada saw more settlers from the European communities in small numbers but wasn't until the mid-19th century that these ethnic groups started to immigrate to Canada and the U.S. in large numbers.

It is uncertain as to the proportion of British settlers to non-British ones but they certainly were the majority by the turn of the century and even today, our British ancestry remains the most influential on our Canadian fabric. As a result, the British influence on the names that exist today in this country has been immense and follows basically the four naming conventions already mentioned.

It is estimated that approximately 10% of our Family Names come from **NICKNAMES**. As with today, people who lived in a small village in the Middle Ages knew everyone in their small settlements and they too joked and gossiped about each other. Nicknames were easy to invent, for everyone knew a great deal about each other's personality and physical characteristics. A person with a large head might be called *Broadhead* or *Bullitt* (bullish). A thin person was nicknamed *Baines* (bones) or *Spriggs* (sprig of a bush). The very tall one may have been identified as *Longfellow*, *Crane*, or *Biggs*.

Personal appearance nicknames were popular in the Middle Ages, the recipient being easily identifiable from amongst his or her family members or gatherings of townspeople. Sources for nicknames included: unusual size or shape of the body, bald heads, facial differences, deformities, and comparisons with birds. Nicknames also were used to differentiate or compare people: whether they were fat or thin, tall or short, dark or light skin, young or old.

In addition, throughout the ages cute infants have always been admired. The influx of Flemish immigrants into England in the late 12th century introduced their vernacular use of *quin* (kin). By 1300 A.D. the suffix "*kin*" was frequently added to a cute youngster's name: *Hawkin*(s), *Watkin*(s), *Perkin*(s), *Hopkin*(s), etc. The final "s" identified the child as "son of--". It should be noted that '*kin*' suffix was used almost exclusively by the English lower classes.

We also often identify people by mentioning their **OCCUPATIONS**. We say "the dry cleaner", "the mailman", "the preacher", or "the plumber". Our ancestors were no different and also identified persons by their occupations. It is estimated that 15% of our Family Names come from occupations.

Occupational names are of interest and variety. They also differed depending upon their gender origins. Some female workers in the Middle Ages often had occupational names that were slightly different from male
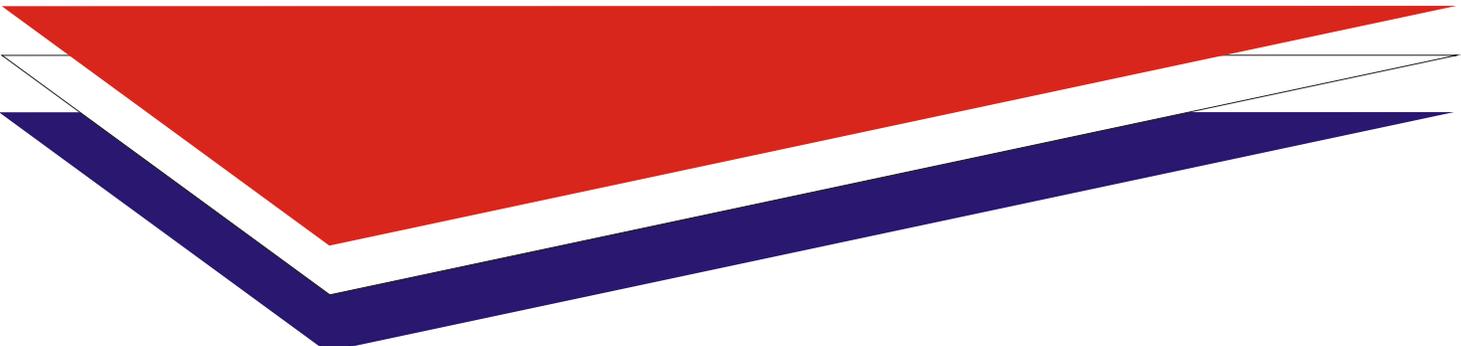
workers who did the same kind of work. The difference was the addition of '*ster*' to the occupation names. Occupational names came from the gamut of vocations that existed during the Middle Ages. No occupation escaped the naming convention development.

In 1066 A.D. William the Conqueror and his Norman-French army invaded and gained possession of the British Isles. This military conquest changed the naming customs of the British people forever. The French language quickly replaced Anglo-Saxon ways of speech and writing. A new style of personal or first names gradually was accepted by the conquered Anglo-Saxons. So influential and complete was the Norman invasion that just during the first fifty years of the Norman-French government most of the original Anglo-Saxon names had already disappeared. By 1150 A.D. the French language of the Normans had established new customs for the British people. The earlier English (Anglo-Saxons) now used the Norman-French naming system when they baptized their babies.

It has been estimated that almost 50% of the male babies born by 1200 A.D. were using just four common first names: William (15%), Robert (12%), Richard (11%) and Henry (10%). Such percentages show the need, even by the Middle Ages, for a second name of identification. As a result, **PATRONYMIC** naming conventions came into play whereby son's were named after their father's, and sometimes even after their mothers. Examples of this naming convention are as follows:

> *FROM FATHER:*
> William Robertson (William son of Robert)
> Richard Peterson (Richard son of Peter)
>
> *FROM MOTHER:*
> Richard Addison (Richard son of Addie [Adela])
> Hugh Ibbotson (Hugh son of Ibbo [Isobel])

It must be said in regard to the patronymic naming convention that if your family name does not end in '*son*' or '*sen*' that it is not of patronymic origin. This is simply not the case. Most names have been misspelled and mispronounced over the centuries dropping many of these endings for more abbreviated versions that many names are impossible to determine their root origins anymore. The root origin for over one-third (35%) of our family names, however, originate with the patronymic naming convention.

Lastly, by far the largest root origin of our family names is by way of **ADDRESS or PLACE NAMES** (40%). Peasants of the Middle Ages were keen observers of the geography where they lived. Any outdoor feature was often a special kind of landmark. Neighbours were usually identified by a hill, rock, well, swamp, building, or even a ditch near the place where the neighbour lived. Such an address reference also became a second name for the neighbour.

Our telephone books are littered with family names offering us clues and hints of the medieval landscape where some early ancestors once lived:

ANCESTOR	ADDRESS
Atfield	lived at a field or meadow
Atgate	lived at or near an estate gate
Atkirk	lived at or near a church
Atwood	lived at a place in a woods
Kirkham	lived in a village with a church

The four directions of the compass were also common identifications in the Middle Ages:

| ANCESTOR	ADDRESS
Eastwood	lived in a nearby woods easterly
Westbrook	lived near a western brook of the village
Sudlow	lived on a mound in the southern part of the village
Norwood	lived in a nearby woods to the north

Ancestors who lived in a village sometimes also were named and identified from the nearest shop with a signboard. Since most Middle Age ancestors were unable to read, all shops displayed a large signboard with a drawing. Thus a village ancestor could be named as follows:

ANCESTOR	ADDRESS
John BELL	lived near the shop sign of a bell
Mary CROSS	lived near the shop sign of a cross
Richard CONEY	lived near the shop sign of a rabbit

Again as with patronymic names, misspellings and mispronunciation of medieval address names over the centuries for ancestors have confused the results in so many ways that it may be next to impossible to determine what the root origin was of some of these family surnames.

Surname spelling and pronunciation has evolved over many centuries, with our current generations often unaware of the origin and evolution of their surnames. Among the humble classes of European society, and especially among the illiterate, individuals had little choice but to accept the mistakes of officials, clerks, and priests who officially bestowed upon them new versions of their surnames, just as they had meekly accepted the surnames which they were born with.

In North America, the linguistic problems confronting immigration officials at Halifax, Quebec City, Ellis Island and elsewhere in the 19th century were legendary as a prolific source of Anglicization, though not as
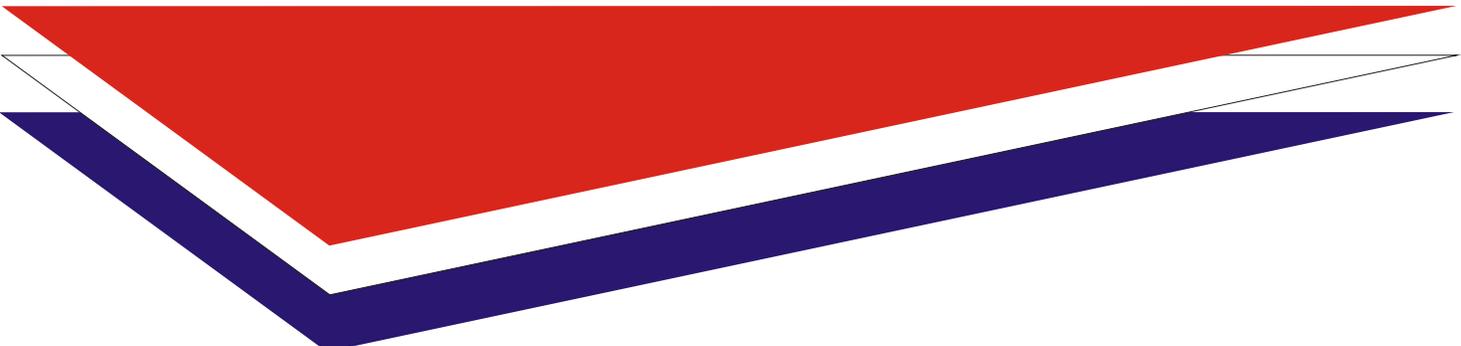
often as professed. Many of the Anglicizations came from the immigrant who themselves who chose to better fit into the mosaic. In the United States and Canada, such processes of official and accidental change caused for example, *Bauch* to become *Baugh*, *Micsza* to become *McShea*, *Siminowicz* to become *Simmons*, etc. However, as mentioned, many immigrants deliberately Anglicized or changed their surnames (and first also first names) upon arrive in the New World, so that *Mlynar* became *Miller*, *Zimmerman* became *Carpenter*, and *Schwartz* became *Black*.

Hence, regardless of the current spelling of your surname, the spelling and pronunciation of your surname has evolved over the centuries. In many cases, the current generation may be aware of the change. However, in most cases the change of the surname occurred to long ago that they are not aware of the original spelling and pronunciation of the surname.

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