

# What's in a Name? Every Surname Tells a Story

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As genealogists and family historians, we do lots of research. We search through vital records, church records, censuses, city directories, land and tax records, military records and newspaper articles – just to name a few things – all in an effort to make connections. When we find those pieces of information, we add the events and facts to the story that is our ancestors' lives. But one of the “facts” we tend to ignore is the individual's surname, which is unusual because that surname is probably the first connection we make when we do our research. The surnames that make up our genealogy tell a fascinating story of who we are and who our ancestors were, where our people started out, migrated to, and ended up. Surnames identify us and oftentimes they connect us to others who share our surnames.

Most of us have never considered doing a bit of research on the surnames in our family tree and adding that information to our individual and family stories. Today online and offline resources have made this type of research easily available. But before adding this information to our family history, we need to understand the terms and methodology used, look behind the data and information provided, and put together the information we gather about our surname in a way that is interesting and useful to our audience (those who read our blogs, visit our websites, or read our published family histories).



*These are the top 100 surnames in the USA – do you see your surname here?*

Some surnames resonate with us – perhaps it is the one we were given at birth, the surname adopted through marriage, or the surname of a long-ago ancestor. Surnames are a calling card of sorts. By studying various aspects of a surname (the origin, meaning, distribution, and frequency) we learn a bit more about that surname and the people who share it – whether we are related to them or they are complete strangers. And many of us hope that by studying that surname we will learn that at some point we are connected in some way to those “for now” complete strangers. Whether you want to learn a bit more about surname research to add some basic information to your family’s history or you decide to take your surname research further as a one-name study, there is something about surnames to interest every family historian.

### ***Surnames in Your Own Family Tree***

After today’s session, I want you to choose 3 surnames from your family tree – perhaps your own surname, surnames from grandparents or great grandparents, or a “married in” surname that you have wondered about.

For each of the 3 surnames, try to answer the following questions.

- (1) where does the surname first appear in your family file?
- (2) do you know the origin of the surname?
- (3) do you know the meaning of the surname?
- (4) how did the surname migrate?
- (5) did the spelling of the surname change over time?
- (6) do you think the surname is common or uncommon?

If you are able to answer the questions (and support those answers) GREAT. I hope you have included the answers in your family tree program. If you are not able to answer the questions, how could you start the research process to discover the answers? That is what we will discuss in today’s session.

### ***Overview of What We Will Cover***

- ◆ brief overview of the history of surnames
- ◆ origin of surname (personal, locative, occupational, descriptive)
- ◆ meaning of surname (language roots & locations, resources to use both offline and online)
- ◆ frequency of surname (the baseline determination)
- ◆ migration of surname (where the surname started, where it traveled, and where it is today)
- ◆ adding surname information to your family history
- ◆ researching, publishing and sharing your findings
- ◆ taking on a one-name study, deciding on a surname, and getting started with your study
- ◆ resources available at the Guild of One-Name Studies (in front of and behind the paywall)

## ***Some Resources to Get You Started***

### *Offline Resources*

*The Son Also Rises: Surnames and The History of Social Mobility*, Gregory Clark (2014, Princeton University Press)

*The Surnames Handbook: A Guide to Family Name Research In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Debbie Kennett (2012, The History Press)

*What's In A Surname?* David McKie (2014, Windmill Books)

*A Dictionary of Surnames*, Patrick Hanks & Flavia Hodges (1989, Oxford University Press)

*American Surnames*, Elsdon C. Smith (2003, Genealogical Publishing Company – originally published 1969)

*Dictionary of American Family Names*, edited by Patrick Hanks (2003, Oxford University Press)

*A Dictionary of English Surnames*, David Hey (1997, Oxford University Press)

*Surname Atlas of Germany: Distribution Maps of the 2001 Most Frequent Surnames in Germany*, Kenneth D. McCrea, Ph.D. (2011, McCrea Research, Inc.)

*The Surnames of Ireland*, Edward MacLysaght (1985, Irish Academic Press)

*Our Italian Surnames*, Joseph G. Fucilla (2003, Genealogical Publishing Company – originally published 1949)

*Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland*, E.R. Seary (1977, McGill-Queen's University Press – corrected edition edited by William J. Kirwin, 1998)

*The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning & History*, George F. Black with Mary Elder Black (2015, Churchill & Dunn, Ltd.

### *Online resources (websites, videos, & software)*

[www.ancestry.com/learn/facts](http://www.ancestry.com/learn/facts) (fast facts about surnames)

[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) (wiki, state research guides, video tutorials, records & indexes from around the world AND rootsweb.com – check out surname mailing lists)

[www.americanlist.names.com](http://www.americanlist.names.com) (fast facts about surnames)

[www.archersoftware.co.uk](http://www.archersoftware.co.uk) (Surname Atlas – mapping surnames using the UK census data)

[www.britishsurnames.co.uk](http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk) (meaning, origin, and history of surnames)

[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) (statistical analysis of surname ranking & frequency in the USA using census data)

[www.earth.google.com](http://www.earth.google.com) (mapping surnames & migration)

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) (wiki covering location and surname research, video tutorials, and records & indexes from around the world)

[www.namethesaurus.com](http://www.namethesaurus.com) (meaning, origin and surname data)

[www.one-name.org](http://www.one-name.org) (methodology, registered surnames, member profiles, wiki, ongoing and archived research)

[www.pharostutors.com](http://www.pharostutors.com) (courses on family history topics include surname research and one-name studies)

[www.surnameorigins.ca](http://www.surnameorigins.ca) (meaning and origin of surnames)

[www.surnamestudies.org.uk](http://www.surnamestudies.org.uk) (data and methodology used with surname studies)

[www.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki) (topic research - surnames, one-name study, surnames, and locations)

[www.worldnames.publicprofiler.org](http://www.worldnames.publicprofiler.org) (meaning, origin, mapping surnames)

[History of Surnames](#) on YouTube (published by GensVideoWebChannel)