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What's In A Name: Clues to Ethnicity & Alternative Spellings

Surnames were initially used, often associated with geography, physical appearance, occupation, farm names, and naming patterns (patronymic is one variation) to identify a particular person or family especially as population centers grew. In researching our family, “road blocks” sometimes occur because we forget to try name changes and variations in records searches.

There are four basic ways that surnames vary in development over the centuries:

- Locale names – Boisvert (French; someone from near a forest; translated to “wood green”), Surrey (someone living near the village of Surrey), Woods, Fields
- Names of office or occupation – de la Salle (French; added to a name, in this case, a famous explorer – his title was Sieur (Lord) of la Salle), Carpenter, Chevalier (French for soldier)
- Nicknames or descriptions of physical appearance or behavior – Philip the Bald, Robert the Red, Richard the Lion-Hearted
- Patronymic naming systems – Primarily in the Scandinavian countries; Peter, son of Harold Jorgenson, is Peter Haroldsson.

There are four basic ways that surname variations and changes occur:

- Simple spelling changes: Elliot, Eliot, Elliott, Elliott, Elliotte
- Changes made legally: Using the courts, an ancestor may have changed their name permanently.
- “Anglicizing” surnames in coming to America: Making names easier to pronounce.
- Moving from foreign languages into and out of English: Did the ancestor live in an area where another language was spoken? Or come from a region where there was a language other than English?

A very basic “Cheat Sheet” from the Editors of Family Tree Magazine, March/April 2022 issue, insert and online information: <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/surnames/>

Books (Hardbound, Softbound or Kindle):

Adamic, Louis. *What's Your Name?* New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1945.

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McKie, David. *What's In A Surname? A Journey from Abercrombie to Zwicker*. Windmill Books, 2014. Kindle & paperback book, Amazon.com.

Price, Nancy. *The Encyclopedia of American Last Names: Family Genealogy and Meanings for 1000 Surnames of Early European Settlers to the United States*. Gilbert, Arizona: Synchronista, LLC. 2017.

Redmonds, George, and King, Turi and Hay, David. *Surnames, DNA and Family History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Secretary of the Commonwealth,, Editor. *List of Persons Whose Names Have Been Changed in Massachusetts, 1780-1892*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1972.

Sims, Clifford Stanley. *The Origin and Signification of Scottish Surnames*. New York: Avenel Books.

Websites of Interest:

Acadian-Cajun Genealogy and History <http://www.acadian-cajun.com/surnamr.htm>

African Last Names with Meanings and History:
<https://kidadl.com/articles/african-last-names-with-meanings-and-history>

Behind the Name: Meaning of Surnames <https://surnames.behindthename.com/>

Chabad.org, *10 Keys to Understanding Many Ashkenazi Surnames*
https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4825070/jewish/10-Keys-to-Understanding-Many-Ashkenazi-Surnames.htm.

Cyndi's List - Surnames, Family Associations & Family Newsletters
<https://www.cyndislist.com/surnames/>

Database of Jewish Family Names at ANU, Museum of the Jewish People
<https://tinyurl.com/2p8wrmpt> (use Google Translate to assist you)

Finnish Surnames - Nordic Names Wiki - Name Origin, Meaning and ...
https://www.nordicnames.de/wiki/Finnish_Surnames

Frequently Occurring Surnames from the 2010 Census - Census Bureau
https://www.census.gov/topics/population/genealogy/data/2010_surnames.html

Forebears, *Surnames Meanings, Origins & Distribution Maps* forebears.io/surnames

The Guardian, by Stephen Morris: *Dictionary of 50,000 surnames and their origins published* <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/nov/17/dictionary-of-50000-surnames-and-their-origins-published>

Military Roots of Dit Names, Je Me Souvien (publication of American French Genealogical Society), Volume 2, 2004, p 17 (<http://www.afgs-olb.org/jms/2004-2.pdf>)

Most common surnames by country in Europe - Jakub Marian
<https://jakubmarian.com/most-common-surnames-by-country-in-europe/>

Sponsored by the Guild of One-Name Studies in Great Britain, the **Surname Studies site** was once called "Modern British Surnames" <http://www.surnamestudies.org.uk/>

Surname Files | Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society <https://mennonitelife.org/document-category/surnames/>

The Meanings and Origins of Spanish Surnames <https://www.thoughtco.com/spanish-surnames-meanings-and-origins-1420795>

The 200 Most Common Surnames from the South Asian and Chinese surname lists (Ontario)
<https://bmcmmedresmethodol.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2288-10-42/tables/1>

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