

Last Name Meanings - Surnames

Last Name Meanings - Surnames Except for Romans during a period of the Roman Empire, hereditary surnames - the last names passed down through the males of a family, didn't exist until about 1000 years ago. While it may be hard to believe in today's hustle and bustle, surnames just weren't necessary before that. In a world that was much less crowded than it is today -- a world where most people never ventured more than a few miles from their place of birth and every one knew his neighbors -- first, or given names, were the only designations necessary. Even kings got by with a single name.

During the middle ages, as families got bigger and villages got a bit more crowded, individual names became inadequate to distinguish friends and neighbors from one another. One John might be called "John son of William" to distinguish him from his neighbor "John the smith" and his friend "John of the dale." These secondary names, weren't quite yet the surnames as we know them today, however, because they weren't passed down from father to son. "John son of William," for example, might have a son known as "Robert the fletcher (arrow maker)."

True surnames, hereditary names used to distinguish one person from another, first came into use in Europe about 1000 A.D., beginning in southern areas and gradually spreading northward. In many countries the use of hereditary surnames began with the nobility who often called themselves after their ancestral seats. Many of the gentry, however, did not adopt surnames until the 14th century, and it was not until about 1500 A.D. that most surnames became inherited and no longer transformed with a change in a person's appearance, job, or place of residence.

Surnames, for the most part, drew their meanings from the lives of men in the Middle Ages, and can be divided into four main categories:

1. Patronymic Surnames

Patronymics, names derived from a father's name, were widely used in forming surnames, especially in the Scandinavian countries. Rarely, the name of the mother contributed the surname, which is referred to as a matronymic surname. Such names were formed by adding a prefix or suffix denoting either "son of" or "daughter of." English and Scandinavian names ending in "son" are patronymic surnames, as are many names prefixed with the Gaelic "Mac," the Norman "Fitz," the Irish "O," and the Welsh "ap."

Examples: The son of John (JOHNSON), son of Donald (MACDONALD), son of Gerald (FITZGERALD), son of Brien (O'BRIEN), son of Howell (ap HOWELL).

2. Place Names

One of the most common ways to distinguish one man from his neighbor was to use a geographical designation, creating a class of local surnames derived from the place of residence of the bearer. Such names denoted some of the earliest instances of surnames in France, and were quickly introduced into England by the Norman nobility who chose names based on the locations of their ancestral estates. If a person or family migrated from one place to another, they were often identified by the place they came from. If they lived near a river, rock, hill, or other geographic feature, this would be used. Some surnames can still be traced back to their exact place of origin, such as a particular city or county, while others have origins lost in obscurity (ATWOOD lived near a wood, but we don't know which one). Compass directions were yet another common geographic identification in the Middle Ages (EASTMAN, WESTWOOD). Most geographic-based surnames are easy to spot, though the evolution of language has made others less obvious, i.e. DUNLOP (muddy hill).

Examples: NORMAN was from Normandy; BROOKS lived along a brook; CHURCHILL lived near a church on a hill; NEVILLE came from Neville-Seine-Maritime, France or Neuville (New Town), a common place name in France; PARRIS came from -- you guessed it -- Paris, France;

The meaning of my name comes from this:

HALLAM - English

Pronounced: HAL-am

From a surname which was derived from a place name meaning either "at the rocks" or "at the nook" or "dweller at the rocks" in Old English.

3. Descriptive Names (Nicknames)

Another class of surnames, those derived from a physical or other characteristic of first bearer, make up an estimated 10% of all family names. These descriptive names are thought to have originally evolved as nicknames during the Middle Ages when a man, familiar with everyone in his small village, might jokingly create nicknames for his neighbors and friends based on personality or physical appearance. Thus, Michael the strong became Michael STRONG and black-haired Peter became Peter BLACK. Sources for such nicknames included: an unusual size or shape of the body, bald heads, facial hair, physical deformities, distinctive facial features, skin or hair coloring, and even emotional disposition.

Examples: STOUT, a large person; BROADHEAD, a person with a large head; BAINES (bones), a thin man; MOODY, a moody individual; ARMSTRONG, strong in the arm

4. Occupational Names

The last class of surnames to develop reflect the occupation or status of the first bearer. These occupational names, derived from the specialty crafts and trades of the medieval period, are fairly self-explanatory. A MILLER was essential for grinding flour from grain, a WAINWRIGHT was a wagon builder, and BISHOP was in the employ of a Bishop.

Different surnames often developed from the same occupation based on the language of the country of origin (MÅfÆ'Ã...âœL for example, is German for Miller). When researching occupational surnames, the most important point is to remember that most evolved during the Middle Ages, based on the occupations and trades of the time, so some are not what they may seem. A FARMER, for example, was not an agricultural worker, but instead collected taxes.

Examples: ALDERMAN, an official clerk of the court; TAYLOR, one that makes, alters, and repairs garments; CARTER, a maker/driver of carts; OUTLAW, an outlaw or criminal. Others, such as Butcher, Baker, Miller, Carpenter or Smith are obvious examples.

Despite these basic surname classifications, many surnames of today seem to defy explanation. The majority of these are probably corruptions of the original surnames -- variations that have become disguised almost beyond recognition. Surname spelling and pronunciation has evolved over many centuries, often making it hard for current generations to determine the origin and evolution of their surnames.

Such derivations of family names, resulting from ignorance of spelling, variations in pronunciation, or merely from the preference of the bearer, tend to confound both genealogists and etymologists. On my own research, my family name of HALLAM has been spelt many different ways in parish records and in the early census, where the person visiting the house to take the census, wrote the name as he heard it – such as HALLOM, HALLUM, HALUM.

It is fairly common for different branches of the same family to carry different surnames as the majority of English and American surnames have, in their history, appeared in four to more than a dozen variant spellings. Therefore, when researching the origin of your surname, it is important to work your way back through the generations in order to determine the original family name, as the surname that you carry now may have an entirely different meaning than the surname of your distant ancestor. It is also important to remember that some surnames, though their origins may appear obvious, aren't what they seem. BANKER, for example, is not an occupational surname, instead meaning "dweller on a hillside."

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