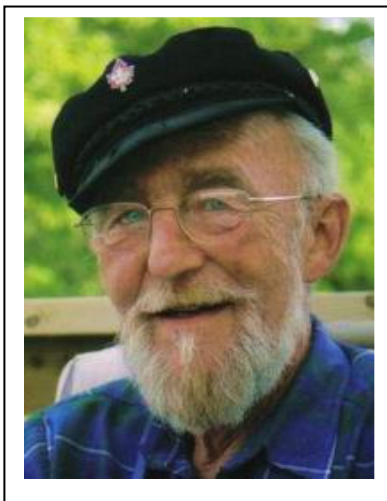


The Family Historian

Patrick Wohler

Column #87

Changing Names



I have occasionally mentioned the need to be alert for possible name translations (e.g. Roi-King) but Laurie Dougherty, the Archivist in Arnprior, found a winner for me. In the town's BMD Register for 1902-1908 is an entry for a family by the name of 'Raspberry'.

If you were researching the 'Laframboise' family, would you think of also checking 'Raspberry'? In this case, the clerk had indicated the correct name in parentheses after the translated one, but you would never find it because it was in the 'R' section of the index.

Clearly we have to be careful when researching French names in English records or English names in French records. If the name is translatable, it is best to be on the safe side and check out the translation as well.

But it does not end there. The German name 'Jaeger', which I have seen metamorphosed into 'Yaeger' (based on pronunciation), could also appear in a French record as 'Lechasseur', or in an English record as 'Hunter'. 'Brown' could easily become 'Lebrun', which interestingly enough, is probably the Norman original of the name.

The possibilities are staggering.

Sometimes the changes are just based on pronunciation. I knew a family by the name of 'Peryea' in New York State. Originally their name had been 'Poirier'. My own 'Mason' family appears in some French records as 'Masson'. On many internet searches, if you can't find the name you are looking for, you can do a soundex search which will look for names that sound like the one you give. When searching through actual records or microfilms we have to be on the lookout for possible variants that could be the person we are looking for.

Judy and I are transcribing some marriage records and we found nine variants for the name 'Daoust'.

Since so many of our ancestors could not write, it was the clerks and census takers who decided how to spell a name. The violence that was done to Gaelic, Slavic, Hungarian and other names must be a caution to us all.

Of course, some of our immigrant ancestors changed their names themselves when they arrived in North America and that can make it very difficult to trace them back to their European roots. Difficulties in pronunciation, 'foreignness', and previous criminal activity could all promote creative renaming.

Finnish immigrants had a particularly difficult time with the pronunciation of their names in English. The Finnish language has sounds for which there is nothing close to equivalent in English. Many of them changed or altered their surnames. Syllables were deleted, names were Swedized or translated, and some were abandoned entirely.

While on the subject of names, we should note a special characteristic of many Spanish names. It is traditional for many Spaniards and Latin Americans to have two family names. The first is the father's paternal surname and the second is the mother's paternal surname. The women do not change their name when they marry.

Luiz Garcia Lopez is the son of a father whose surname was Garcia and a mother whose surname was Lopez. Sometimes this is written Luiz Garcia y Lopez ('y' = and).

If an ancestor moved from one town to another, his home town was sometimes added to his name to distinguish him from others of the same name. So we could have Luiz Garcia de Cordoba y Lopez de Letona. If this Luiz marries Maria Torre Mendoza, their children will bear the family names: Garcia de Cordoba y Torre.

Surnames in Iceland follow the old Norse custom. Children are given a first name and then their father's name followed by 'son' or 'dottir'. Here also, the women do not change their name when they marry- it would get too complicated.

I have an Icelandic cousin whose name is Svavar Nokkvason. If he has a son, his family name will be Svarvarson. This might look a little complicated for genealogy but since most Icelanders can trace their roots back to the 13th century, it doesn't bother them at all.