

Finding Ancestors Using Name Variations

by Loran Braught

If you cannot find the names you expect in records, you might want to consider these approaches:

1. SPELLING VARIATIONS

- A. Soundex--Use a Soundex Guide or computer generated Soundex.
- B. Accidentals--Poor penmanship in recording or translating (a,o,u, etc.)
- C. Misinterpretations--Bickle recorded as Pekkel or person said Selma and recorder wrote Thelma, etc.
- D. Phonic spellings--Phlaum recorded as Flamm, etc.
- E. Lexicon/Linguistic factors--Example: English long "a" is often spelled a, ay, au, or e, plus the non-descript sounds of "short a." Even the letter position in a word can affect both the spelling and pronunciation (try explaining how an English word spelled as "ghoti" would logically be pronounced as "fish" ... Solution = enouGH, wOmen, naTIon)

2. CULTURAL-ETHNIC TRANSLATIONS

- A. Desire to "Americanize" names--Croneski to Crone, etc.
- B. Desire to simplify names--Summerschein to Summers, etc.
- C. Desire to avoid ethnic bias--Schwartz (German) = Black (English), etc.
- D. Lack of translation potential--Umlaut spelling, etc.
- E. Maiden vs. married surnames.

3. SIMPLE PREFERENCES

- A. Unrecorded name changes--particularly before the Civil War period.
- B. Desire to hide (AKA, alias)
- C. Selective preference of name form--Charles Mason Jones = C.J., etc.
- D. Legal changes--Just did not like birth name, so legally changed it.
- E. Substitutes--Elizabeth=Betty, Margaret=Peggy or nicknames (Slim, Ace).

4. FAMILY OR CULTURAL TRADITIONS

- A. "Junior" for son of (but it could be a very different connotation)
- B. Named for systematic maternal or paternal selection (mother's maiden surname or paternal grandfather's given name as middle name, etc.)
- C. Named for favorite relative, friend, famous person, Bible name, etc.
- D. Named for a deceased sibling or relative (either the first or middle name)
- E. New name when grown (Example: all the sons being named Johannes until "of age," then using only their middle names, so Johannes Adam becomes Adam).

5. OTHER

Depending upon how important you consider finding this person to be, you will decide how persistent and how creative your analysis will become. Using systematic approaches should be attempted before using wild guessing. Here are a few systematic approaches:

1. Go to the basic plan of working from the known to the unknown and squeeze data.
2. Go to living relatives with the challenge of providing the last known name of the ancestor.
3. Look at all possible records of the time and/or the location when the name was last known.
4. Look at records of people close to the ancestor in family, friendship or location and stretch the connections.
5. Consult experts in genealogy, the family culture, locations, family languages, etc.