

# Origin of Surnames

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<http://www.searchforancestors.com/surnames/origin/>

A surname, also known as a last name or family name, is a fixed name shared in common with the members of a family and is passed down from generation to generation.

The use of a surname is relatively new in history and was adopted in order to legally distinguish two individuals with the same first name.

At first, these last names were not passed down to the next generation.

The Chinese were among the very first cultures to adopt the use of hereditary surnames about 5000 years ago. In Europe, surnames weren't used until the 10th or 11th centuries AD in Venice. Gradually throughout Europe, all nobility and gentry adopted surnames until eventually surnames were used by all Europeans of all classes.

What does my last name mean? If you have ever wondered about the meaning of your last name, where your family lived, what they did, or how they looked, you may find your surname may answer some of these questions about your ancestors from many hundreds of years ago.

**Surnames were generally derived from one of four sources:**

## **1) Patronymic (from the first name of father).**

Examples:

Peters - son of Peter (English, German)

Peterson - son of Peter (Swedish)

Petersen - son of Peter (Danish)

O'Reilly - grandson of Reilly (Ireland)

Mc- /Mac- - son of (Scottish)

d' - / di- - son of (Italian)

-ez / -es - son of (Spanish / Portuguese)

-wicz - son of (Poland)

Fitz- - son of (Old English - sometimes incorrectly associated with being an illegitimate)

## **2) Lives near locality or place.**

Examples:

KirkPatrick - Church (kirk) of St. Patrick

Cliff - steep hill

Fairholm - the fair island

Ashley - field surrounded by ash trees

## **3) Occupation or social status.**

Examples:

Cooper - barrel maker

Wagner or Waggoner - wagon maker

Knight - knighthood conferred by the king

Smith - blacksmith

Powers - poor or taken a vow of poverty

#### 4) Nicknames describing person or personality.

Examples:

Reid - red, ruddy complexion or red hair

Stout - Body size

Small - Body size

Armstrong - strong arms

Sharpe - sharp, smart

Surname spelling has evolved over centuries and until the 20th century, the spelling of a surname was not fixed. Before then, it was not unusual to see the same person's surname spelled in different ways from record to record. In the 1800's and before, when many people were illiterate, names were written by clerks, officials, and priests as they heard the name pronounced. This led to different spellings for the same name. Spelling continued to evolve until this century. So as you are looking for your surname history, it is important to check out spelling variations.

Don't assume your surname was always spelled the way it is spelled today. If you can't find your surname origin on this website, look for a sound-alike surname. You can check for alternate spellings of a surname at the [soundex \(sound-alike\) machine](#).

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Try to uncover the meaning and origin of your last name. If all else fails try to find out about your first name.

Use this free online Last Name Dictionary <http://www.searchforancestors.com/surnames/origin/>

or try Surname dictionary at <http://www.ancestry.com/learn/facts/default.aspx>

or try google to search your name ~**genealogy** (i.e. van leuven~genealogy)

First name search - <http://www.zelo.com/firstnames/index.asp>

Last Name & Meaning/origin: