

GERMAN GENEALOGY FROM A TO Z

German Surnames in Genealogy

The search for roots has often been called a quest for identity, and there are precious few identifiers more striking than one's surname.

The challenge for American researchers with German-speaking ancestors often revolves around deciphering what the "original" name in Europe really was – as opposed to the modern-day permutations that may represent it in the New World.

My "Rule No. 1" for this process is as follows: "Do not get hung up with finding different spellings for a given surname." That is because – difficult as it is for us to believe from our modern perspective – standardized spelling of names (or anything else, for that matter) is a young concept.

"Rule No. 2" is just as important: "Quit saying 'I do not know why my ancestor changed his or her name.'" The reason you should ban that phrase from your genealogical vocabulary is that on most records, the name you are seeing is not the result of *your ancestor's* spelling for it; instead, everything from census schedules to tax lists to recopied deeds and wills is the result of how *someone* else – and probably a someone else who did not speak German – was spelling it for the ancestor. (Only when you see a signature on an original document should you pay any attention to it, and even then be flexible.)

The origins of different types of German surnames may hold clues to how these names evolved in America.

The first class of surnames are the ones that are often the least helpful because they are the so-called *Ecknahme* or "occupational names." Many of these names end with the final syllable of -er or -mann. Some common examples are Hoffmann, Fleischer, Gerber, Schneider, Zimmermann, and Schiffmann. (Mueller, the German form of

"Miller" fits this category – a joke in Pennsylvania German genealogy is that "When you find you have an ancestor 'John Miller,' that is a good place to stop the search.")

Other occupational suffixes are -macher ("maker") or -hauer ("cutter"), and examples are Rademacher, Eisenhauer, and Fenstermacher. Occupational names seem to be the ones most likely to be literally translated into English – there are records of Zimmermann families becoming "Carpenters," Schneiders changed to "Tailors," and even Eisenhauers called "Ironcutters" (though obviously not in President Dwight D. Eisenhower's family).

Geographic surnames – that is, those created from either specific or general places or physical features – are another broad category. Some examples of the "general" subcategory are Bachmann ("Man of the creek"), Bergman ("Man of the mountain"), and Dieffenbach ("Deep brook"), while examples from specific places are Anspach, Marburger, and Schweitzer.

There is an interesting fact on specific place-based surnames that perplexes the many genealogists who use the name as an indication of the European village of origin. These surnames usually come about after the individual has moved from the area – oftentimes in the early Middle Ages when surnames were adopted – and, therefore, they usually are not an immigrant's home village nor have they been the home of his family for many generations. However, since many people in those early times only moved a village or two away and then stayed in that place a long time, villages near to the "surname village" are a legitimate possibility to be checked for immigrant origins.

There are also many surnames that developed from characteristics of the individual – such as Lang, Weisskopf, Braun, Klein, and Unruh. (That last one means "restless" – who has ancestors like that?)

Scandinavian-style patronymics were also used in Schleswig-Holstein and Ostfriesland until the 1800s. The effect of these "unfixed" patronymics is that the surname changes every generation; for example, Peter Stephensohn is the son of Stephen Christiansohn, who is the son of Christian Petersohn, and so on.

Patronymics were a portion of the fixed surname mix in other parts of Germany – common examples are Martin, Friedrichs, and Jakobsohn.

Just to add further confusion, in some parts of Germany surnames called *Hofnahme* ("farm names") were in common use into the nineteenth century. In this case, surnames were taken from the name of the owner of the farm – and changed when the ownership of the farm changed! Fortunately, these were common only in the border area between Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia with occasional use in Hesse and Hannover.

A third rule that I will add to those in the beginning of this article is "Learn German pronunciation quirks as a way to figure out what types of surname spelling variants are likely."

Among the consonants that interchange: B and P; C and K with G; D, T, and Th; V and B. With vowels, the umlauts – the "two little dots" above the letters A, O, and U that take the place of an E and that create chaos with English pronunciation of the names – are the prime pitfall. For example: the German surname Krück has morphed into Krick, Crick, and Creek.