

Search for Meanings & Distribution of 11 Million Surnames

Origin of Surnames

A surname is part of a personal name that is passed from either or both parents to their offspring. Customs on the format of surnames change from region to region and their use has changed over time. In most Western nations, the surname occurs at the end of a personal name, after a given name or names. Conversely some East Asian countries and Hungary place the surname before given names.

In most regions and time periods, surnames were assumed based on descent from a male ancestor (usually the father), but in some cases were passed by the mother. Use of the mother's surname is usually due to extenuating circumstances (illegitimacy, posthumous birth, inheritance etc.), though in some regions culture dictated the use of the mother's surname. Many Spanish-speaking nations use both the mother and father's surname to create dual surnames. Historically some families used family or house names that are considered different from surnames. Some examples are the royal houses of Carolingian and Plantagenet. In some cases, those of a house may use a surname other than their house name, or no name at all.

Surnames and family names have arisen throughout history as civilisations advance and become increasingly useful to distinguish people when they are recorded in written records, particularly tax records.

The earliest surnames in Western Europe grew out of existing methods of distinguishing people. Thus, a noble ruling from Savoy may have been known as Umberto de Savoy, a blacksmith may have been known as John le Smith and a bald man may be known as William the Bald; much in the same way we refer to people in similar ways today, such as John the Gob or Rachel the Bean Counter. These names were not necessarily hereditary, but were dictated by circumstance. The son of the noble, Umberto de Savoy, may rule at Lorraine and be known as Lothair de Lorraine, the son of John le Smith may be a cheese-maker and known as Dominic Cheeseman and the son of William the Bald may have a head shaped like an onion and known as Darren Onionhead. Surnames only arose when families decided they were going to stick to a 'pseudo-surname'. This change occurred at different periods in different regions. For example, surnames were largely adopted between the 11th and 16th centuries in England, between the 16th and 19th centuries in Wales and between the 11th and 19th centuries in Scotland. Each family has to be taken on a case by case basis. Though it is not possible to prove the origin of most surnames, it is possible to make educated guesses in some cases.

A surname's origin is influenced by the progenitor's social class and the culture they lived in. Those of higher social status often took surnames that are uncommon today; whereas people of lower social status often took what are today common surnames. It is also clear that people of lower social status had less control over their surnames, no doubt handed to them by aldermen, lords and other authorities. Thus we find numerous insulting surnames, such as 'Tew', Welsh for fat; Tardiff, meaning sluggish and Dullard, meaning a hard and conceited man.

There are a number of different origins of surnames. Tribal and more patriarchal societies often have surnames derived from male names, while more developed societies with trades and established rulers often have a large number of surnames derived from occupations and place names.



Patronymic Surnames

Recently Researched

Ćirić

Ćirić (Serbian Cyrillic: Ћирић) is among the most common surnames in Serbia. Many bearers outside of Serbia are likely to be of Serbian origin. The name is derived from the name of a male ancestor, Ćiro, or Ćira. Before widespread adoption ...

Prevalent: **Density:**

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Prevalent: **Density:**

Zhuanginyu

This is a Shona surname taken from the name of a clan. Clan's were named by their founder after an animal or body part (known as a totem.) In this case the clan was named after the elephant (nzou.) To differentiate from other clans with the ...

Prevalent: **Density:**

Common Surnames

Smith

Smith is an occupational surname - the smith - common to every village in England, north, south, east and west. The name Smyth is the almost invariable spelling in early rolls, so that it cannot exactly be styled a modern affection. There are ...

Prevalent: **Density:**

Jones

Jones is a patronymic surname, meaning the son of John, or Johan or Jone; as at first written and pronounced, both masculine and feminine. In the 13th and 14th centuries Johan stood for both Johannes and Johanna. This being awkward, the masculine ...

Prevalent: **Density:**

Williams

Williams is a patronymic surname derived from the forename William. Its early origins are in medieval England, but the primary source of the surname is from Wales, where most surnames were adopted between about 1500

The majority of surnames are derived from the name of a male ancestor. These evolved from pre-existing non-permanent naming customs whereby an individual was identified by reference to a male ancestor or ancestors. Some example are: Bedo ap Batho ap Heylin (Welsh: Bedo, son of Batho, son of Heylin), which would become Bedo Batho; Lars Andersen (Scandinavian), Andrew MacDonald (Scottish: Andrew son of Donald) and Henry fil. Grimbald (English: Henry son of Grimbald). Such names are essentially the name of the father, sometimes with a suffix or prefix to denote the name as a patronym. For example, Armenian patronyms typically end in -ian, Polish patronyms end in -ski and Irish patronyms begin with Fitz-.

Patronymic surnames are indistinguishable from clan surnames, which may be assumed by subjects of a clan leader.

Occupational Surnames

Surnames derived from the occupation of an ancestor are also common, with Smith being the most common surname in the UK. This category of surnames is divided into two groups: standard occupations and titular occupations, such as Stewart, derived from an ancient clan title in Scotland.

Topographical Surnames

Topographical surnames can be derived from features of a landscape (Hill, Ford) or from place names (London, Aston, Eaton, Molyneux). Those surnames derived from place names were initially adopted by families that held land. However, later such adoptions of surnames derived from place names occurred when people moved from one place to another.

Surnames derived from characteristics **Descriptive**

Surnames

Descriptive surnames are less common, partly as they were often derived from unflattering characteristics such as: stupidity, girth, baldness and sometimes outright insults like Blackinthemouth. Many of these surnames have disappeared. There is on the other hand good survival of surnames derived from positive or neutral characteristics; Trow & Triggs (meaning trustworthy), Young, White and Good.

Surnames derived from female ancestors

Matronymic Surnames

Matronymic surnames are derived from the name of a female ancestor (usually the mother) and are uncommon in most parts of the world. Such names may arise due to illegitimate or posthumous births and occur amongst nobility when the mother was higher ranked than her spouse or 'bit on the side'.

and 1800. Before surnames ...

Prevalent: **Density:**

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