

# Understanding British and American Naming Patterns

Craig L. Foster, AG

## Introduction

Names and naming patterns is an important way to identify people. Names identify race, ethnicity, religious persuasion and social background.

Names, according to Scott Smith-Bannister, *Names and Naming Patterns in England, 1538-1700*, were/are used for:

- Define the named as human
- Class someone according to his or her gender
- A means of defining the named as a Christian
- Classified people to their geographic origins
- Classified people to their social status
- Classified people to the time in which they were born
- A symbol or symbolic of some deeper meaning

## England

Abraham D. Lavendar, “United States Ethnic Groups in 1790,” stated that William the Conqueror brought to England, “Bible names, Saint names, and his own Teutonic names.”

According to Dave Postles, *Naming the People of England*, until at least the twelfth century, the English name pool was quite small.

Richard Woodruff Price, “Child-Naming Patterns in Three English Villages, 1558-1740,” lists the classifications of given names:

- Old Testament
- New Testament
- Calvinist or Puritan
- Neo-Classical (post 1750)
- Family Surnames
- Non-Religious “English” Names

English society, especially before 1750, was strongly patriarchal and older children were usually named for their father’s family. Sons were named for paternal

grandfathers, fathers and then maternal grandfathers. First daughters were usually named for their father's mother.

Early English naming patterns reflected a familial rather than individual view of children.

A practice that gained popularity among the upper classes in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was using the mother's maiden name as a given name for the son.

English naming patterns varied by both time and place with certain names being popular in some parts of England as opposed to others.

Puritans placed significance on names as an indication of hoped-for personality traits and religiosity. They also placed more emphasis on the nuclear family than the extended family and names reflected this shift in familial emphasis.

## **Ireland**

Names and naming patterns in Ireland depended upon the family's heritage. The three main divisions were:

- Gaelic
- Old English (Anglo and Cambro-Normans)
- New English and Scots

Some English names, according to Clodagh Tait, "Namesakes and Nicknames," were adopted by the Irish because of their similarities to Gaelic names. Some examples are:

- Hugh – Aodh
- Daniel – Dónal
- Denis – Donough
- Morris – Murtogh
- Geoffrey – Seathrún

## **Scotland**

There were, according to John Barrett Robb, "The Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern," two Scottish naming patterns:

- Ancestral Onomastic Child-naming Pattern
- Parental Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern (the better known of the two naming patterns)

## **American Naming Patterns**

British emigrants were not united culturally as those of Celtic heritage (Irish, Scottish and Welsh) were different than the English.

### **New England**

New England naming patterns differed drastically from England and the other American colonies because of the Puritan influence.

A greater emphasis was placed on the nuclear rather than the extended family.

Three types of naming:

- Names of English origin
- Names of Hebrew origin
- Names intended to have a moral significance with grace and hortatory names

### **The South**

Traditional English names were more important in Virginia than New England. Popular names in Virginia came from Teutonic warriors, Frankish knights and English Kings.

Extended family was very important in Tidewater Virginia and other parts of the South.

### **Backcountry**

Clans and extended family were very important to backcountry people and these extensive relationships were represented in naming patterns.

Popular names in the backcountry reflected not only English but also Irish and Scottish names.

### **Concluding Thought**

Not every family nor every generation within a given family followed naming patterns. Carefully analyze whether or not your family did.

### **Bibliography**

Richard Breen, "Naming Practices in Western Ireland," *Man*, new Series, 17:4 (December 1982): 701-13.

David Hackett Fischer, "Forenames and the Family in New England: An Exercise

- in Historical Onomastics,” in Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Ralph J. Crandall, eds., *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History* (Macon, Ga., Mercer University Press, 1986), 215–41.
- Ned C. Landsman, “Border Cultures, the Backcountry, and ‘North British’ Emigration to America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, 48:2 (April 1991): 253-259.
- Abraham D. Lavender, “United States Ethnic Groups in 1790: Given Names as Suggestions of Ethnic Identity,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 9:1 (Fall 1989): 36-66.
- Gloria L. Main, “Naming Children in New England,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27:1 (Summer 1996): 1-27.
- Dave Postles, *Naming the People of England, c. 1100-1350* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006)
- Richard Woodruff Price, ““Child-Naming Patterns in Three English Villages, 1558-1740 Whickham, Durham; Bottesford, Leicester; and Hartland, Devon,” (Provo, Utah: Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1987)
- John Barrett Robb, “The Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern,” (2011), <http://www.johnbrobb.com/Content/TheScottishOnomasticPattern.pdf>, accessed 5 December 2015.
- Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, “‘In Nomine Avi’: Child-Naming Patterns in a Chesapeake County, 1650-1750,” in Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Ralph J. Crandall, eds., *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History* (Macon, Ga., Mercer University Press, 1986), 246-247.
- Daniel Scott Smith, “Child-Naming Practices, Kinship Ties, and Change in Family Attitudes in Hingham, Massachusetts, 1641 to 1880,” *Journal of Social History* 18 (1985): 541-566.
- Scott Smith-Bannister, *Names and Naming Patterns in England, 1538-1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- James A. Still, “Christian Names in the Cumberlands,” *American Speech* 5:4 (April 1930): 306-307.
- Clodagh Tait, “Namesakes and Nicknames: Naming Practices in Early Modern Ireland, 1540-1700,” *Continuity and Change* 21:2 (2006): 313-40.
- Edward H. Tebbenhoff, “Tacit Rules and Hidden Family Structures: Naming Practices and Godparentage in Schenectady, New York, 1680-1800,” *Journal of Social History* 18:4 (1985): 567-585.