

HELLO  
my name is

# What's in a Name?

## Diane L. Richard examines the challenges of tracking ancestors with ever-changing names!

RESEARCH OVER THE last couple of weeks has reminded me how much ancestors can challenge a researcher with a name that is often not the same document-to-document and/or has evolved over time. The challenges range from interpreting handwriting, to the issues of phonetic spellings, to dropping a few letters here and there to being listed with different surnames at different times, along with the always ubiquitous initials, plus many more ways to keep us guessing on “who” our ancestor is and if the person found is the “correct” person!

### Some Name Challenges ...

Let's scratch the surface and talk about “some” of the ways that names can challenge and frustrate us in our research.

- Initials
- Forename or middle name or nickname
- Dropping Mc, O', etc.
- Phonetic spelling
- Handwriting interpretation by transcribers/abstractors
- Surname confusion with another surname

At one time or another, one, if not all, of these have given you a headache as you research an ancestor or ancestral family. There are many challenges that come about due to just figuring out someone's name! Here are some examples of the above and lessons to be learned from them.

### 1. INITIALS AND OTHER PERMUTATIONS OF NAME PRESENTATION

There were some census enumerators who seemed to economize by just using initials. When you have a common surname, this can be real challenging. Of if you barely “know” the family, and certainly don't know middle names or initials, these short entries can be very frustrating when combined with variations on age, location, etc.

Or, how about the family where three brothers all had the same initials! Through some extensive research, I finally determined that E.H. Williams could have been Ex(um) Hardy Williams, Eugene Harper Williams or Ebb H. Williams — all brothers!

To further complicate matters, Eugene and Ebb co-owned a business. Unfortunately, the siblings were not listed together in any surviving census.

And it's not just census enumerators who used shorthand when listing ancestors. Research into Paul Judson Knox — part of the Tin Pan Alley period of early 20th century music, was quite the traveler. So far, he has been found in Chicago, New York, London, Scotland, Berlin (German), Paris (France) and Australia. A version of the above name has always been used; it just depends on how it's presented. The many search engines that access the digitized material now available are very powerful and yet do, sometimes, have limitations in “what” they can search on. For Paul Judson Knox, we have so far found P. J. Knox, P. Knox, Paul Judson-Knox, Paul J. -Knox (with a hyphen), Paul J. Knox (no hyphen) — no single search criteria will cover all of these permutations.

### Lessons Learned:

- When looking at records —

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focus on surname, age, birth location and other identifying information — don't just focus on a name — you might either miss an entry that is just initials and/or you might confuse like-named people.

- Keep a list of every name variation you find — whether forename or surname. Such a compiled list becomes a great resource when you need to look into a new group of records and you are not finding someone who you "know" was there. And, it also helps when you do search, Internet or database, and need to manually check out each name variation.

## 2. FORENAME OR MIDDLE NAME OR NICKNAME

Depending on our ancestors and/or who was reporting the information, we often find that some ancestors just didn't have a name and stick with it through time. Some seemed to have a different name each time you come across them (and not because of bad-handwriting or faulty ears).

Take, for instance, the person who died as W.C. Norris and whom we eventually came to know as W. Chester Norris, Chester Norris, William C. Norris, etc.

So, he interchangeably used his middle name, first name and then variations with initials.

And, don't forget those nicknames — take my mother's name, Margaret — her nicknames included Peggy, Maggie, Madge, Margie, Meg, Margot, Marguerita, Rita, Greta, Gretel, Gretchen, Marjorie, Margery, May, Daisy and more!

I don't think there is a family that I have researched where there has not been one person who, in the census, is found with a middle name listed instead of a forename, a nickname instead of the formal name or some name derivatives that I have yet to decipher the significance of.

## Lesson Learned:

- Treat a name like the pieces of a puzzle. Move them around on the table as if you were solving a puzzle — try out each position and see how that works. In our situation, it might be a case where the puzzle solution is slightly different for each time you try to solve the puzzle.

## 3. DROPPING MAC, MC, O', ETC.

Over time, some names have lost what once was their prefix — sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. In the latter case, different clerks in the same

- O'Connors became Connor or Connors, O'Grady becomes Grady, etc.

## Lessons Learned:

- For any name which historically could have had a Mac, Mc, O' or other prefix — consider the possibility that it was dropped for modern records. Hence, as you research older records, add in what might have been an appropriate prefix.

- Related to the above lesson, having an idea of your families ancestry and/or the ancestry of others in the area and that history

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SCHEDULE 1—Free Inhabitants in *Marquette Dist* in the County of *Coffey* State of *Kan.* enumerated by me, on the *25th* day of *Aug.* 1850. *W.C. Norris* Agent

Post Office *Marquette, Kan.*

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Color	Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each person, male and female, over 15 years of age.	Value or Market Value		Place of Birth, Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict.
						Real Estate	Personal Estate		
1	<i>W. C. Norris</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>25</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
2	<i>W. C. Norris</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>21</i>		<i>Carpenter</i>			<i>Kan.</i>	
3	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>18</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
4	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>12</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
5	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>10</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
6	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>11</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
7	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>9</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
8	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>7</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
9	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>6</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
10	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>11</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
11	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>3</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	
12	<i>W. C.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>1</i>					<i>Kan.</i>	

Here is an example of an 1850 census entry for the Ireland family. Notice that other than a non-related laborer, all the family is only listed by initials!

locale and documenting the same generation of a family have varied in whether they did or didn't include the prefix. This is a slightly different issue than when "with time" the prefix is permanently dropped.

Here are a few examples:

- Remember our Carroll example earlier? Further research revealed that in the same geographic area, in records for the same time period and slightly earlier, one finds these two variants — McCarroll, McKerrall.
- McCurry, over time, frequently became Cury, Currie, Currey or Curry.
- What about a name "gaining" a Mc — Mahoney became McHoney.

(e.g., Quaker, Irish, Scotch-Irish, German, Scandinavian, Eastern European, etc.) can help you identify whether your ancestor's name could have morphed through time in this fashion.

- Alternately, as you look around records, be aware that older records often had Mc (space) Carroll, where we write it today as McCarroll.

## 4. PHONETIC SPELLING

Too often, people assume that because a name is spelled a certain way today, that it was always spelled that way. The short answer is no. Going backwards from the early 20th century, many individuals did not write their own names, they signed with a mark.

Court, ecclesiastical, and other clerks wrote what they heard — they wrote “phonetically”; often guessing how to spell a name — evident in some 18th century documents where one name might be spelled four different ways and if the person could sign their own name, it might be a different spelling yet (e.g., the clerk wrote the document first, didn’t ask

on them in the search engines of digitized databases. Or this example for Kittrell — Kittrel, Kitterell, Kitherell, Kitterile, Kitrel, Kitrell, Kitterlin, Kitterill — they all pretty much start the same.

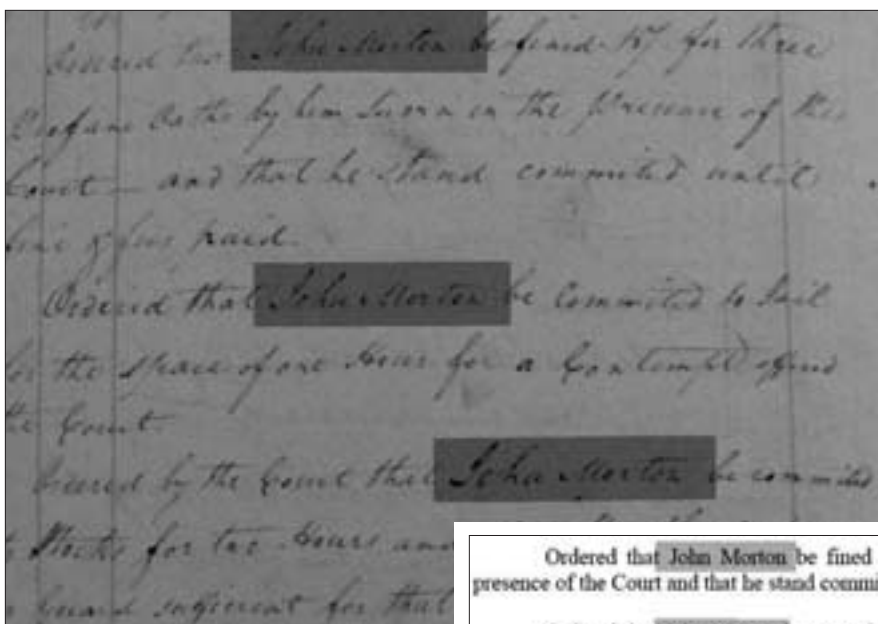
Next, you can have confusion over “e”, “a” and “o” — both in terms of handwriting and phonetics: Raino, Rayno, Rono, Reno, Rano, Reyno and Reynes.

at the end.

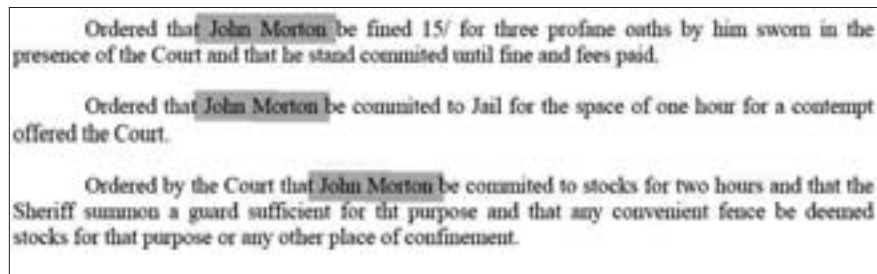
And, my favorite recent example has to be the surname Haase. Through a mix of creative spelling by the clerks, as well as some transcriber/abstractor errors (more on this below), I have so far found this name spelled in the following ways during one 20-year time span in Lincoln County, NC court and deed records: Haas, Haus, Hass, Hase, Hoss, Haws, Hause, House, Horse and Haise. I’m sure, with a bit more research, even more variations will be revealed!

#### Lessons Learned:

- Unless you get too many results, only put as many letters as needed to bound the types of names that might result from the query and yet might yield name variations you were not aware of. For example, Tootle, might be searched on as T\*t\*!\*
- “Say the name out loud” — what do you hear? Jot down every



These are from the “actual” Guilford County, NC court minutes (1781-88), where it is clear that the name was Jehu Morton, and not John Morton, as the transcription, right, shows.



“how” to spell the person’s name, and then the person signed). Extend this thinking to an emigrant who might have a thick accent, who may or may not speak any English and whose documentation is not written in English or using a recognized alphabet (e.g., Chinese, Finnish, Arabic) and you can imagine the creativity needed to figure out how to “write” a name that the clerk had never heard before.

A simple example of the “variants” that come about is: Carroll, Carrel, Carrell, Carrole, Carille, Carol, Carrall and Caral.

Notice, though, that these versions of the name “Carroll” all start with the same three letters, making it easier to readily spot these in documents and/or search

What about a name permutation that doesn’t start with the same few letters? For example, the slave name Cesar. Some spellings that I have come across include: Cesar, Sesar, Seasar, Seazer and Seasor. Notice that most of them actually start with an “S” and not a “C” since it’s a soft C and not a hard C.

Or what about the name Tootle, where these variations have been spotted — Tutel, Tutle, Totle and Tuttle. In this case, it’s the long “u” verses double “o”, along with a few other differences.

Or this example, in which the “i” and “y” are used interchangeably, along with “e” and “o”: Mainer, Maynor, Maynard, Mainor, Manor and Maner. Also, note the variant which adds a “d”

way you “hear” the name to give you a broader starting point than the spelling you are used to.

- If a found name/index entry is at all close, check it out. It’s better to do that and eliminate the data than to never have really looked at it and possibly overlook a “gem”.

#### 5. TRANSCRIBER/ABSTRACTOR ERRORS

A recent favorite has been the confusion of the forename Jehu versus John. Yes, there was a person whose forename was Jehu and he was NOT John. In researching for clues for Jehu Morton, many entries were found for John Morton. Yet, it became clear over time that different sources were recording the same events occurring to both a “Jehu” and a “John”

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Morton. The best way to clear this particular issue up was to look at the “original” document (in this case court minutes). The images below show what the transcription states and what was found in the original court minutes. Clearly, the name is Jehu and not John. It is easy to see how the names could be confused — both have 4 letters, both are similar in appearance, and Jehu is an uncommon (and possibly unexpected) forename to see. As is oft repeated — get copies of original documents!

And, what about some of those look alike letters — i and l, h and l, e and a and o, g and j, and the list goes on. Look at any handwritten document with a critical eye — what does the document appear to say and what was real or true.

Transcriptions and abstracts are an invaluable tool in our research. They can allow us to access information not readily available otherwise. Recognize, though, that it is challenging to decipher handwritten documents.

## Lessons Learned:

- When looking at transcriptions, look for names that are in the “ballpark” of the name you are looking for — in this case, John.
- Obtain a copy of the original document for any “close” entries found.

## 7. SURNAME CONFUSION WITH ANOTHER SURNAME

Though we like to think that surnames are distinct, no matter how different they may be spelled, sometimes there are similar surnames which can be confused. Recent research into the Andrews family revealed that often the name was documented as Anders. To add to the confusion, both were surnames of the time — the way to distinguish them was further research into land and will/estate records which clearly allowed one to confidently “separate” out these two families.

## Lessons Learned:

- Do not limit your research to just the document group that you are focusing on. You may need to

look at other records to better understand the families living in the neighborhood (tax and census records can be great for this), to make sure that you don’t assume two names as being the same



when there actually are two different names, or think there are two families when it ends up that there is only one.

## A FEW OTHER “NAME” CHALLENGES ARE:

1. Translations of a name from one language to another. Through a mix of marriage, baptism records across two states (VT and MA), we learned that someone who, in later records, was Maria Greenleaf, was actually born and married as Maria Vertefeuille — Vertefeuille, which is French, translates to English as Greenleaf since Verte is Green and Feuille is Leaf!
2. Name simplification of a name challenging to say in English. My Finnish ancestors were named Hedvig Hildur, Lempi Maria and Isak Rikhard — they became Helen, Lillian and Richard soon after arriving in the US in 1900.
3. Reversed names. Not once, but twice in the same family, years apart, were the names reversed on the passenger record — Bazyl Barna was listed as Barna Bazyl and years later his wife, Kladyga Barna was listed as Barna Kladyga.

## Conclusion

Don’t limit yourself to one spelling of a name. Be open to anything that might be close, whether in sound, spelling, handwriting, translation, etc. The fur-

ther back you go in time, the more likely that an ancestor’s name will be spelled many different ways. Though, don’t discount this issue in 20th century records also — I have seen people whose name on their SS-5 is not the same name they were using at the time of their death.

You may find that your hidden ancestor was really hiding in plain sight, except that you didn’t recognize the person due to a slightly, or very, different name being used.

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*Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for over 23 years. When, through one of her first research projects she learned that her unusual maiden name of Acey wasn’t the emigrants’ surname, that it was Kujanpää — she was aware of how challenging “names” could be. She currently does professional research in NC and DC and can be found online at [www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy](http://www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy)*