

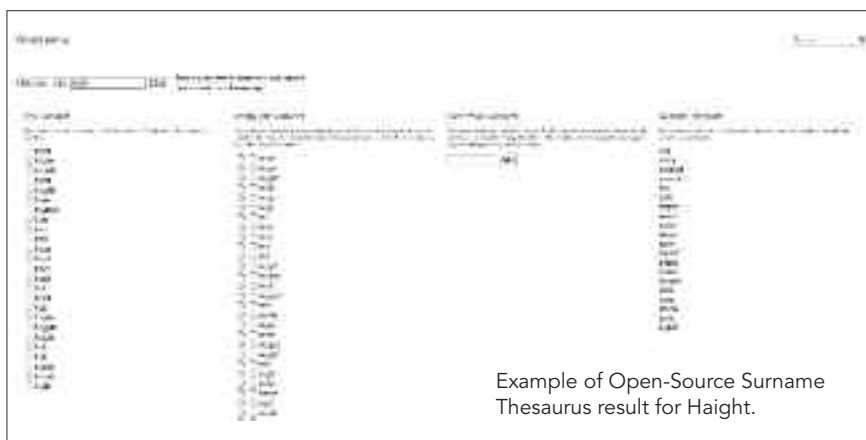
always spelled it Diane or Dianne; where did those other 87 options come from?

Open-Source Database of Name Variants

Along the same lines, Ancestry.com, BehindTheName.com, and WeRelate.org have created an open-source database of name variants that is free for any website or genealogy software developer to use. Learn more about the project at www.werelate.org/wiki/WeRelate:Variant_names_project.

This database was started by Ancestry.com and WeRelate working together to create an advanced algorithm for determining the level of similarity between two names. It was used to find similarly-spelled names for the 200,000 most-frequent surnames and 70,000 most-frequent given names in Ancestry's database. This includes every name that appears more than once in every 5 million names in Ancestry's database. On average, 26 variants were found for each surname, and 32 variants were found for each given name. In addition, BehindTheName.com donated their excellent list of given name variants. Other variants from the WeRelate community, The New American Dictionary of Baby Names, and A Dictionary of Surnames were also included.

Since this is an open-source project, the genealogy community is asked to help by adding variant spellings to the database. To see what variants are currently included, go to this page, www.werelate.org/wiki/Special:Names, and on the drop-down menu, select Surname or Given Name and enter the name of interest. For example, I revisited the Haight



Example of Open-Source Surname Thesaurus result for Haight.

surname discussed before, and you can see how the results are presented in a different format. Again, I was impressed with how many ways my forename, Diane, can be spelled!

Conclusion

Recognize that any tool, and not just the two mentioned, can't fully help us identify variants as found in indexes, abstracts or transcriptions where a person confused a P with a T or an F, or an m with n. Since these aren't name variants based on phonetics, they add another layer of complexity to identifying all the name variants one might consider when doing research.

And, as we know from George and Ira Gershwin's song, *Let's Call The Whole Thing Off...*

You say eether and I say eyether,
You say neether and I say nyther,
Eether, eyether, neether, nyther,
Let's call the whole thing off!
You like potayto and I like potahto,
You like tomayto and I like tomahto,
Potayto, potahto, tomayto, tomahto!

So, now let's imagine that poor clerk trying to figure out what you are saying, and then let's throw a heavy accent on it, a lack of uniform spelling rules, inconsistent penmanship, rushed writing (just think of all the notes you've

written to yourself when in a rush that you couldn't decipher later!), hard-to-use writing materials and sometimes it's amazing we can read anything!

Even with all the caveats I've presented about what these two tools can't do, and which we shouldn't expect them to do, they are really great tools to help us consider other ways that names might have been spelled. I've had too many discussions with clients who think that there is a right way to spell their name, until I show them the evidence of how many different ways I found their surname spelled.

These tools give me a head start in thinking beyond the modern conventional spelling as to how any name might have been spelled. I guess this means I won't be talking out loud to myself as much anymore, as I try to "sound out" how a name might have been said and then spelled! ©

DIANE L. RICHARD has been doing genealogy research for over 25 years. She is currently a professional genealogist and can be found online at www.mosaicrpm.com.

(Or scan the QR code with your mobile phone or table device.)

