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Final Paper

## Probing a Sire's Name: The Roots of Surnames

### **Prologue: My Interest in the Topic**

Since my childhood, the use of surnames has intrigued me. In elementary school, I noticed that everyone had a last name. It appeared evident to me that a person's last name makes them unique. I discovered that there are many Craigs in the world, but only one Craig Kanalley (that I knew of anyway).

I learned that a surname also ties people together, in terms of relatives. Typically for those of European descent, which this paper will focus on, an individual's brother, father, and father's father all share the same surname. Having such an uncommon surname like Kanalley (at least uncommon in the way it is spelled, as it actually derives from a quite popular Irish surname), I originally thought that all Kanalleys were related to me. Besides, all the Kanalleys I knew of were related to me. I later learned that people can share a surname and not be related, at least closely enough for it to be traced genealogically.

Perhaps all Kanalleys are in fact related if one goes back far enough. But even if that is true, I now know that not *all* surnames can go back to a common ancestor. Most notably, many Smith families exist in the world, with origins in different countries, that are not related through a common Smith ancestor. The name was an occupational one that was born around the same time in various nations across Europe.

I remain interested in surnames, as I continue to be interested in researching my family history, a hobby that I started in 1998. One of the most exciting parts of genealogy, for me at least, is to discover new surnames that my ancestors held. My parents have two surnames, my grandparents have four, my great-grandparents have eight. This pattern seems to continue endlessly, and all of these surnames can be uncovered, as long as one stays focused enough to keep searching (and the records exist).

When I first uncover a new surname that I'm descended from – coming from the maiden name of a female ancestor – I search that name on-line. I try alternate spellings and I try to find as much

information on the name as possible. I try to locate the origin of the name, something I always find fascinating.

Other people may not have as great an interest in surnames, but I'm sure at least occasionally everyone wonders where they come from. Or perhaps, at times, people are curious about their own surname – where it originated and what it first meant. So where do surnames come from? Let's find out.

### **The History Behind Surnames**

Since the beginning of written history, humans have always needed a way to identify themselves. Evidence of this lies in one of the oldest books available, the Bible, where individuals like Adam and Moses appear in the Old Testament. These people could easily be identified in the Scriptures by their given names.

For some time, these given names were enough. However, when populations increased and cities were established, it became common for two or more individuals to have the same given name. The need for an additional form of identification arose.

Ancient civilizations established the western tradition of having a family name. This is discussed in the book What's in a Name?, written by Leonard Ashley, an expert on etymologies. Ashley notes that the Ancient Romans used *cognomia*, family or clan names, but these did not catch on in all of their ruled territory until the Middle Ages (34). Starting in Rome itself, the tradition began for those of nobility and slowly but surely spiraled throughout the Roman Empire, eventually reaching those of lower classes.

The author Joseph Fucilla, who wrote the book Our Italian Surnames, discusses the use of surnames in another ancient civilization, Ancient Greece. Fucilla says that adults living in Athens often had three names: a given name, the name of their father, and a “dime” or “gens,” referring to the founder of their lineage (12). For example, Fucilla notes that an Athenian Greek named Demosthenes Demosthenous Paianius would be translated as Demosthenes, son of Demosthenes, descendant of Paianius, founder of the family (12). The Paianius part of the name would be the part most like a modern surname.

In ancient times, the most common form of family names, and the type first used by the Romans, were patronymics. These were names derived from father's names. They would literally translate to: [given name] son of [given name]. This form of naming was also used by Jews in ancient times (Ashley 34). One would be called [given name] "ben" (son of) [given name].

Originally, these patronymic names were individual-based, based on an individual's father. However, this changed over time. Ashley writes that patronymics eventually shifted to more formal "surnames" (from the French *surnom*), names passed down hereditarily from one generation to the next (34). The rise of surnames was helpful in written records, as alluded to earlier. Censuses and other government records could effectively record individuals and track their families over time.

Eventually, more and more people felt the need to adopt surnames. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, surnames were common across the European continent. As surnames were being coined, Ashley notes that other types were developed, including those based on locations, occupations, and nicknames (35).

## **Types of Surnames**

### ***Patronymics***

As previously mentioned, the earliest surnames were patronymics, names based on father's names. For example, a Joannis may have a son named Leonardis. This child will grow up to be called Leonardis Joannis. Then, perhaps Leonardis has a son named Josephus. This child will be known as Josephus Leonardis. Likewise, the son of Josephus would inherit the second name of Josephus.

When surnames first became hereditary – family names passed on from generation to generation – most were based on patronymics. The most obvious form of a patronymic name to modern-day English speakers is one that ends in the suffix *-son*. Surnames in this category would include Johnson, Williamson, Watson, and Wilson, all very clearly of patronymic origin (Ashley 34). In my own research, I have learned that another suffix to suggest patronymic origin is the Polish *-yk*. This holds true in surnames like Bartczyk (son of Bartłomiej), Hendryk (son of Hendrych), and Fredryk (son of Fredrych). Even Graczyk, my mother's maiden name, is patronymic, despite not giving a father's given name. It

gives the Polish *gracz* meaning “player” or “musician,” but the suffix still means “son of,” giving it patronymic origin. According to Fucilla, Italian suffixes that point to patronymic origin include *-esi*, *-escu*, and *-io* (17-18). In addition, the prefix *Di-* in Italian surnames denotes patronymic origin (Fucilla 14). Fucilla adds that surnames with these affixes are among the oldest in all of Italy (14).

Some countries, even today, use purely patronymic systems, similar to the ancient systems described earlier. Their children do not carry family names that their parents, grandparents, and so on also carried; rather, children take their father’s name for use in their second name. Scandinavian surnames are formed in this way. Denmark adds the suffix *-sen* at the end of surnames to denote “son of,” while Sweden uses the suffix *-sson*. Dutch surnames use the ending *-szen*. In Scandinavia, even daughters are given patronymic names. For example, Lavransdatter would be the surname for a girl whose father’s name is Lavran. In Iceland, the suffix for a female’s patronymic is spelled *-dottir*. Similar to Scandinavia, many surnames in Russia are patronymic. The suffix *-ov* or *-ova*, depending if the person is male or female, is added to an individual’s surname. A girl named Anna whose father is Fedor would be Anna Fedorova. This Anna could have a brother named Ivan Fedorov. (Ashley 36)

One country that commonly uses patronymic surnames is Ireland. Instead of adding suffixes, Irish surnames use the prefixes *O’-* “grandson of,” *Mc-* “son of,” and *Fitz-* “illegitimate son of.” Similarly, patronymic surnames in Scotland use the prefix *Mac-* “son of.” The use of these surnames, however, differs from that of Scandinavia and Russia in that these are true “family names,” passed down from generation to generation.

English has had a profound impact on Gaelic – the language Irish surnames were originally created in – and this is obvious in many Irish surnames. These names have lost the *O’-* or *Mc-* they once inherited or the spelling of the names themselves have altered considerably to more “English-sounding.” I have found this in my own research, through looking up the origins of Irish surnames I descend from. The best example I have is my own surname, Kanalley. The changes in this name are much more complicated than some Irish surnames. Not only has it lost the *O’-* that once preceded it, and not only has it lost its Gaelic spelling and pronunciation, but it also went through Americanization, which will be

discussed later. The name is best known in Ireland today as Kennelly or Kenneally, which became Kanaley and Kanalley among my relatives in North America. Without knowledge of Gaelic or the Irish culture, one would probably be surprised to learn that this name derives from the Irish Gaelic surname O'Coingheallaigh, meaning "son of Coingheallach." The origin of the Gaelic personal name *Coingheallach* can also be dissected, as it means "one that is faithful to pledges," according to the Dictionary of American Family Names. Other versions of this Irish surname include names as diverse as Kenaly, Keneely, Canaley, and even Connolly.

Like Kanalley, many other Irish surnames are complex. Who knew that the surnames Burns and Byrne are related, coming from the same Irish Gaelic clan name? McCraney and Rainey are related as well, as are Friel and Farrell, and most mind-boggling of all Short and Geer (*Gheairr* is Gaelic for "short man"). The diverse pool of Gaelic personal names, from *Odhar* (McGuire) to *Athairne* (Hartney), *Cillin* (Killeen) to *Uaid* (McQuaid), made for interesting patronymics that are hard to initially discern unless serious research is done.

Ireland is not the only country that tends to "hide" patronymic surnames. Surnames with patronymic origin in other countries are sometimes difficult to pick out. These include Adams, Bartlett, Dixon, Hobart, Jeeves, Hammond, Opie, and Price, according to Ashley (34). All are based on the "son of" principle, but the names evolved over time to lose that literal translation. The name Price, for example, comes from the Welsh *ap Rhys*, with the *ap* meaning "son of" (Ashley 35). Therefore, knowing if a name is patronymic does not just end with whether it has "son" in it. One must also have some knowledge in the country of origin, the language the name comes from, and other background information that likely requires research.

### ***Habitational***

When a surname has origins in a place name or location, it is said to be habitational, according to the Dictionary of American Family Names (DAFN). Habitational names are common throughout Europe.

Related to them are topographic names, which for classification purposes often fall under the same category.

Poland is best known for its habitational surnames. While there is a common perception that names ending in *-ski* are patronymic, the DAFN proves that this is not always the case. Many *-ski* names, like Andrzejewski, Maciejewski, Michalski, and Romanowski, derive from Polish given names (Andrzej, Maciej, Michal, and Roman), but are actually habitational names. People with these surnames had ancestors who once lived in towns that were named after the Polish given names, and there are many towns in Poland named after given names. Some common towns named in this way include Andrzejewo, Maciejowa, Maciejowice, Michale, Michaly, Romanow, Romany. This way of naming towns is so common in Poland that many of these town names repeat as town names elsewhere in the country. The *-ski* ending roughly translates to “inhabitant of,” therefore making an Andrzejewski, for example, an “inhabitant of Andrzejewo.”

Another country that is abundant in habitational surnames is Germany. The DAFN tells us that the *-er* ending in German surnames often translates to “inhabitant of,” strikingly similar to the Polish *-ski*. Examples include Edinger (inhabitant of Edingen), Hinsberger (inhabitant of Heinsberg), Rohrbacher (inhabitant of Rohrbach), and Schillinger (inhabitant of Schilling or Schillingen). Other habitational surnames that are German include the less obvious Bach (one who lives by a stream), Biemann (inhabitant of Biela, Biela, or Biele in East Germany), Bormann (one who lives by a *born* or spring), Graebel (inhabitant of a place called Krahenbuhl, meaning “crow hill”), and Roos (one living at a house distinguished by a rose).

Habitational names in French can be characterized by a prefix of *De-* or *Du-*, meaning “from” or “from the,” according to the DAFN. The French surname DeLevy can be a name for one who lived in Levy Saint Nom, France. The French surname DuPont is a topographical name for one who lives near a *pont* or bridge. Italian surnames with habitational origin include those with the ending *-ese*, as in the family names Calabrese, Veronese, and Genovese (Fucilla 106). Related to this is the suffix *-esi*, also denoting habitational origin, as in Milanese (Fucilla 106). Lastly, habitational surnames are known to

occur in England. These can be tricky though because many of them do not derive from English words as they are used today, but rather they have roots in Old or Middle English. An example is the surname Lake. According to the DAFN, it comes from the Old English *lacu*, meaning stream. Therefore, Lake is a surname for one who lives in a place with a stream, not necessarily a place with a lake.

### ***Occupational***

Occupational surnames are common in England and Germany. As their meaning suggests, they originate based on what a person does for a living. Many such surnames are easy to pick out for modern-day speakers of the language of origin. These include the English occupational names of Baker, Smith, Cartwright, and Stringer.

However, some occupational surnames are not apparent to native speakers at first glance since the occupations are outdated. There are many examples of this discussed by Ashley in his book. For example, in England, the name Reeves comes from the old occupation of *reeve*, a town official. A Clark is a cleric or someone who could write. A Redman works with thatched roofs, a Fletcher dealt with feathers, and a Lorimer made things for horses. Then there are the common misconceptions over the surnames Mailman and Farmer. Today a mailman delivers letters, but back when the surname was created a mailman was a tenant paying rent. As for farmer, the type of farmer we know today did not come along until long after the surname was created. Back then, a farmer was a person who collected rents. (Ashley 35)

Germany is home to numerous occupational surnames. Like in England though, some of the occupations are outdated and additional research needs to be done to discern the true origin. Among the occupational family names I descend from (and their meanings from the DAFN in parentheses) are Backer (baker), Bender (cooper), Eschenbrenner (glassworker), Faber (ironworker), Fenger (trapper), Fischer (fisherman), Huther (herdsman), Kaisler (kettle maker), Koch (cook), Leder (leatherworker), Muller (miller), Schlosser (locksmith), Schmidt (smith), Vogler (birdcatcher), Wagner (carter), Wannemacher (basketmaker), Weber (weaver), and Wurtz (greengrocer).

Of course other countries have occupational names as well, but I did not run across them much in the research of my own family names. However, nearly every country has its equivalent for Smith, the occupation. For example, Ashley notes that in Italy alone there are several surnames meaning ‘smith,’ including Ferrari, Fabri, Forgione, and Magnani (40).

### *Nicknames*

The final type of surname is one based on a nickname. Often times these names are simply adjectives strung together (or a single adjective) that describe the first person to have the surname. Like occupational surnames, I have found this type to be exceedingly popular in England and Germany.

Ashley put it this way in his book:

Your average person, if not named from his father, or his place of origin, or his occupation, got a nickname, as a king might be Charles the Bold, Charles the Handsome, Richard Crookshanks, Ivan the Terrible, etc. Thus we got John Long, John Short, John Black, John Read and names derived from a person’s manner (John Wise, John Proudfoot, John Makespace, John Strangeways) or something else associated with him (John Shakespeare, John Ford, John Tremaine [the man who lived in a stone homestead]).

(Ashley 35)

Surnames for families I descend from coming from nicknames in German (and their meanings from the DAFN in parentheses) include Braun (brown hair or complexion), Fess (small person), Freisse (someone with a menacing appearance), Fuchs (sly or cunning person), Greiner (quarrelsome person), Hand (someone with a deformed hand or who has lost a hand), Heimlich (secretive person), Karg (tricky person), Keiffer (quarrelsome person), Klein (small person), Lang (tall person), Link (left-handed person), Neu (newcomer to an area), Poupart (puppet or coward), Printz (prince), Rechin (mouth of an animal), Weissmann (white hair or pale complexion), Winter (frosty or gloomy temperament), and Zahn (large or peculiar tooth).

While many Irish names derived in a patronymic sense from personal names, as discussed earlier, many of these personal names to begin with were created by nicknames. Ashley points out that the Irish surname Coyne goes back to a Gaelic name meaning “well-born,” Docherty back to one meaning “stern,” Kennedy with one meaning “ugly head,” Madden with one meaning “dog,” and O’Connor with one meaning “high will” (39).

Italian has used nicknames in the creation of surnames as well. In fact, the most popular surname in Italy, Rossi (or related Russo) is in fact a nickname meaning “red-headed” or “red-skinned,” according to the DAFN. Ashley discusses some nickname surnames in Italy, including Benedetti which means “orphan,” Parlaparla which means “talk back,” and Boccaccio which means “bad mouth” (40-41).

### **Americanization of Surnames**

Ashley writes, “Always remember...in the US names have been translated, mangled, or dropped altogether for ‘American’ ones” (41). Through researching my family history the past seven years and talking to many experts on the subject, I could not be more familiar with this. Ever since immigrants have started to come to the United States, surnames have been toyed with, altered, changed, and some lost completely. I have learned that this was sometimes intentional, but many times it was not. Often times immigration officials, who were not familiar with the immigrant’s foreign language, would copy their name down in records and sometimes the immigrant stuck with whatever spelling the official wrote in the New World. Other times, immigrants were uneducated, so they had no set spelling of their name, only the pronunciation of it to go by from their family back home. This would subsequently get butchered by government officials or priests at churches. For many immigrants though, their last name was one of the least of their worries. They were trying to get used to their new setting and fit in to the American Dream.

For some immigrants, “fitting in” was precisely the reason they *changed* their surname upon arrival in America, and some did consciously change their surname. Sometimes it was just the spelling of a name, altered to sound “more American.” Koch became Cook, Schmidt became Smith, and Mueller

became Miller. In my own family, Baecker became Baker, Bieser became Beaser, and Romann became Romane. But it was not just Germans doing this. It was individuals of all backgrounds.

As mentioned earlier, my Kennelly family had the spelling of their name changed over time – or perhaps they didn't care much for how it was spelled. The name is spelled inconsistently in Canadian records (they settled in Ontario from Ireland) right up until about 1920. I see just about everything, including Kenaley, Kanaly, Conaly, Keneely, and Kenailly. From then, it is spelled Kanalley up until present day, for at least my line. Yet my ancestor James' brother Martin and his descendants preferred the spelling Kanaley, which they use to this day.

In my genealogical research, I have seen some significant changes in spellings from when immigrants left their old country and reached America. I have relatives who went from Wannemacher to Wanamaker, Heckenlaible to Hickenlooper, Muir to Moore, Vogelgesang to Vogel, and Uebelhoer to Ebelhar. It's something I've realized I always need to be on the look out for when I'm looking for my relatives – if they're straight from Europe, there's a good chance the spelling may have changed, even if it's just slightly (as in German Lenhardt, to just Lenhard).

So how many surnames are in America, anyway? Ashley notes that there were 346,417,726 registered surnames in the United States in 1984, according to social security statistics (42). He adds that surnames in America range from Aaaaa to oddities like Vlk, Srp, and other strange combinations (Ashley 46). The country is truly a melting pot, with origins in so many different countries. Based on this infrastructure, it is appropriate that deciphering etymologies of American surnames usually brings one back to foreign territory.

## **Works Cited**

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