

They Haven't Disappeared!

A Practical Genealogist's Guide to Names That Change in the Records

NAME VARIANTS · NICKNAMES · PET NAMES · HISTORICAL FORMS

Practical strategies for
finding ancestors hiding in the records

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Stories In The Branches

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This publication is intended as a genealogical research aid. Name variants and examples should be used as potential research clues and not as proof of identity. Conclusions should always be supported by appropriate evidence.

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1. When an Ancestor Disappears

Most family historians experience it sooner or later.

You find somebody as a child, but they apparently vanish before the next census. You know a couple had children together, but cannot find their marriage. A person appears in one census and is nowhere to be found ten years later. Or perhaps you find a household in exactly the right place, with the right ages, occupations and relatives, but the name is not quite right.

Before deciding that the person emigrated, died, left the family or was somehow omitted from the records, ask another question: What else might they have been called?

After around forty years of family-history research, I have learned not to expect a person's name to remain perfectly consistent from one record to another.

Sometimes the difference is obvious: William → Will; Elizabeth → Lizzie; Thomas → Tom. Sometimes it is less obvious: Margaret → Peggy; John → Jack; Alexander → Sandy. Sometimes the spelling changes: Perks → Parks → Parkes. And occasionally the name used in everyday life appears to bear no relationship at all to the person's official forenames.

The reasons are numerous. Names could be shortened, translated, Latinised, Anglicised, misheard, misspelled or mistranscribed. Regional pronunciation could affect what a clerk heard. A person might prefer their middle name. A family nickname could replace the registered name almost completely.

The person may not have written the record themselves. And even if the original record was perfectly correct, somebody indexing it a century later may have interpreted the handwriting differently.

This guide is about recognising those possibilities and, more importantly, knowing what to do with them.

2. A Note About the Scope of This Guide

No guide could contain every name, nickname, pet name, abbreviation or spelling variation ever used. Nor should any responsible researcher claim that it could.

Names are affected by period, geography, language, dialect, literacy, family tradition, fashion, personal preference and the individual who happened to write the record.

During approximately forty years of researching my own family and the families of others, I have encountered countless variations. I certainly could not now recall every single one, and new examples still appear.

This guide therefore has two purposes. The first is to provide a substantial reference to many of the forms and patterns a researcher is likely to encounter, particularly in British family history. The second, and ultimately more important, is to teach you how to recognise and investigate a variation that is not listed here.

Some examples in this guide come from established historical usage. Others are examples I have encountered during my own research, while a number were shared by other family historians when I asked about variations they had discovered.

A family-specific nickname is evidence that one particular person was known by that name. It is not evidence that everyone with the same registered name used the same nickname.

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A name variation is a research clue, not proof of identity. Use it to find candidates. Then use evidence to establish who those people actually were.

3. Why Names Change

We tend to think of a name today as a fixed identifier. Historical records are often less tidy.

The same person might be baptised with a formal forename; called a diminutive by their family; recorded under a middle name in a census; married under their full name; listed under initials in a directory; mentioned by a nickname in a newspaper; recorded with a phonetic surname by a clerk; and subsequently mistranscribed in a modern database.

None of those events necessarily means that the person deliberately changed their name.

Instead of asking only "What was their name?", ask what they were registered or baptised as, what their family called them, what they called themselves, what officials recorded them as, what name they signed, and what name their neighbours knew. Those answers may not all be identical.

4. Understanding the Different Types of Variation

Spelling variant.... A name may simply have been spelled differently, such as Ann/Anne, Catherine/Katherine or Isabel/Isobel.

Abbreviation.... Records, directories, newspapers and indexes may shorten names: Wm (William), Jas (James), Chas (Charles), Thos (Thomas), Geo (George), Margt (Margaret).

Diminutive or pet form .... Familiar forms historically associated with a longer name, such as William → Will/Bill/Billy; Elizabeth → Eliza/Lizzie/Betty/Bessie; Margaret → Maggie/Meg/Peg/Peggy; Robert → Rob/Bob/Bobby.

Regional form.... Some names have particular historical or linguistic associations with a place. Regional forms should retain their geographical context.

Language form.... A name may appear in Latin, Welsh or another language. This is not the same as a spelling mistake.

Phonetic variation.... The writer may have recorded what they thought they heard.

Family or personal nickname.... Potentially the least predictable category. It may have no recognised linguistic relationship to the registered name.

Transcription or indexing variation.... The historical record may say one thing while the modern database says another.

5. Who Actually Supplied the Name?

Whenever a name appears unexpectedly, ask: Who supplied this information? And who wrote it down? They are not always the same person.

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Information could pass through the individual, a parent, spouse, other relative, employer, institutional official, registrar, clergyman, census process, clerk, indexer and, much later, a transcriber.

Every stage creates another opportunity for variation. An official record is evidence; it is not automatically infallible.

6. Nicknames, Pet Names and Diminutives

Some of the most useful historical connections are the ones modern researchers do not immediately recognise. Use these to generate searches, not to merge identities.

Principal name	Forms worth considering
Alexander	Alex, Alec, Sandy
Ann / Anne	Annie, Nan, Nance, Nancy in appropriate contexts
Catherine / Katherine	Kate, Katie, Kitty, Kat,
Dorothy	Dolly, Dot, Dottie
Edward	Ed, Eddie, Ned, Ted, Teddy
Elizabeth	Eliza, Liz, Lizzie, Beth, Bess, Bessie, Betty, Betsy
Frances	Fran, Fan, Fanny
Francis	Frank
Frederick	Fred, Freddie
Henry	Harry, Hal
James	Jim, Jimmy, Jamie
John	Jack, Johnny; Jock in Scottish contexts
Margaret	Maggie, Meg, Peg, Peggy
Mary	Molly, Polly
Richard	Rich, Rick, Dick
Robert	Rob, Robbie, Bob, Bobby
Sarah	Sally, Sal
Thomas	Tom, Tommy
William	Will, Willie, Bill, Billy

7. Elizabeth: Why Exact Searching Fails

A woman baptised Elizabeth might later appear as Elizabeth, Elisabeth, Eliza, Liz, Lizzie, Beth, Bess, Bessie, Betty or Betsy. In Scottish contexts additional historically associated forms can include Elspeth and Elsie.

Rejecting a Betty solely because the census does not say Elizabeth would be poor research. Accepting her solely because Betty can be associated with Elizabeth would also be poor research. The name tells you to investigate; the other evidence tells you whether she is your Elizabeth.

8. Margaret, Meg and Peggy

Margaret may appear as Marg, Margt, Maggie, Meg, Peg or Peggy. Peggy can look entirely unrelated to Margaret to somebody encountering it for the first time. Knowledge of historical pet forms can break a research dead end.

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Enjoyed the sample?

This free sample is only the beginning.

The complete first edition continues with practical guidance on nicknames, middle names, Latin forms, dialect, Welsh and Scottish naming, surname variation, migration, handwriting and indexing.

It also includes an A-Z forename research reference, the 10-level Name Ladder search method, a worked example, a research checklist, quick reference and ten rules worth remembering.

Continue with the complete guide

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