

# She has the Same Name Is She her Sister?

## Naming Conventions of our Ancestors

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Fires that destroyed census records, court house records, and church and cemetery records present obstacles for genealogists that have tested us for years. Equal to these challenges are the numerous naming conventions used by our ancestors. Growing up in a society that bestows first, middle, and last names to children, it is often unnerving to discover all cultures don't conform to this rule.

Why did Uncle Albert name all his daughters Maria? Why would I search on someone's middle name to locate their record? How many Christiana's can one family have? These are just a few of the questions that plague beginning as well as seasoned researchers. Not only did our ancestors bring their families to America, they brought their language, traditions, and customs.

### German Naming Conventions

A good understanding of the conventions used by German families for naming children is essential to German genealogy research. This knowledge helps identify family relationships and explains multiple children with similar or, in some cases, the same name. Both Catholic and Protestant religions adopted this method of naming children.

Customarily at baptism a child was given two names. The first was a religious name and the second their call (Rufnahme) name. Unlike today, people were known by their second or middle name. Johann Ludwig Steck was called Ludwig or Louis. However, he can be located in various records as Johann, John, Ludwig, and Louis. Families often used the same saint's name for most or all their children's first names. Mary or Maria were popular for girls and St. John and St. George were popular for boys. Consequently, 12 Georges in the same family!

Male and female children were named in a pattern that held true for generations. This naming scheme is defined below:

- 1st son after the father's father
- 2nd son after the mother's father
- 3rd son after the father
- 4th son after the father's father's father
- 5th son after the mother's father's father
- 6th son after the father's mother's father
- 7th son after the mother's mother's father

- 1st daughter after the mother's mother
- 2nd daughter after the father's mother
- 3rd daughter after the mother
- 4th daughter after the father's father's mother
- 5th daughter after the mother's father's mother
- 6th daughter after the father's mother's mother
- 7th daughter after the mother's mother's mother

Where a duplicate name occurred, the next in the pecking order was used. Often children were named after a deceased sibling. To complicate this trend of same name designation, when there is a second marriage, the method is often repeated from the beginning. It isn't unusual for half-brothers or half-sisters to have the same name.

Unfortunately, you cannot make an assumption that this method was followed faithfully by all families. At best, it was used as a starting point for most parents.

Children were also named for their baptismal sponsors, who normally were a close relative or trusted friend. The baptismal records of St. James Catholic Church in Baltimore, Maryland, illustrate this among the first generation of German immigrants. Many children were named after Christiana Würz Lauer, who was a prominent midwife in nineteenth century Baltimore.

If all this isn't confusing enough, the German language added an 'in' or 'en' to the surname of females.

### **Other Nationalities**

Many nationalities followed similar naming patterns as the Germans. Variations include naming fourth and subsequent children after brothers and sisters. Patronymic naming is common among various nationalities such as Russian names, Irish names, and Welsh names. Spanish and French names are also high in patronyms.

### **Puritan Naming Conventions**

A fundamentalist English Protestant sect of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Puritans varied in their naming of children. Some used biblical names; however, many thought it was blasphemous to use names from the Bible and relied on vocabulary words instead. Names like Temperance, Prudence, Faith, and Hope started to become everyday names. Even names coined as virtue names are found in church records. Many of us have ancestors named Peace-of-God, Faithful, Charity, or Grace.

### **Family Surnames**

It isn't unusual to find children who were given family surnames. Women often used their maiden surname as either a first or second name for a son or daughter. Several of the female descendants of John MacCubbin of Maryland named their sons MacCubbin as a given or first name. This was often a way of honoring and preserving family names.

### **Nicknames**

Nicknames can be found in every form of vital records and shouldn't be overlooked when searching for those elusive ancestors. The same goes for aliases, author pseudonyms, pen names, stage names, etc. Every possibility needs to be explored.

## Origin of Surnames

When there were only a very few of us, name differentiation wasn't necessary. About 1200 A.D., the four most common male names were William, Robert, Richard, and Henry. However, it was not long before the necessity for a second name evolved. People started calling each other names such as John, son of William (Williamson), or George the Tailor. Surnames originated from landscape descriptions such as At the Field (Atfield), At the Woods (Atwood), or East of the Brook (Eastbrook).

## Spelling Variations

Our ancestors weren't as finicky about the spelling of their name as we are today. Often they created their own spelling and pronunciation as an expression of their individuality. When John MacCubbin of Maryland passed away, each of his six sons spelled their surname differently from that point on.

However, most name spelling variations derived from foreign accents not understood by immigration officers, census takers, or clerks. Many of our ancestors couldn't read or write so didn't recognize errors in the spelling of their names.

## Conclusion

What does all of this mean to the genealogist? First, keep meticulous records always carefully citing all sources. Second, don't limit your search to just the first or second given name. Check them all and keep an open mind. As stated earlier, Johann Ludwig Steck is listed in various records as Johann, John, Ludwig, and Lewis.

When documenting your family history, don't use just one name for an individual. Be specific and, if necessary, include birth and death dates. Often this is the only differentiator between two Marias and helps to avoid confusing relatives and generations.

Maria (1784-1828)

Maria (1849- )

Maria E. (1877-1877)

Maria E. (1882-1918)

Maria G. (1816-1875)

Maria W. (1858-1884)

Be cautious of other writings, both published and unpublished. The name may be the same, but the person could be different. Not all earlier researchers were aware of the naming schemes and assumed too much when documenting their research.

On the bright side, if you pay attention to the naming patterns of your ancestors, you can find valuable evidence as to the identities of previous generations, aunts, uncles, and siblings. It is no easy task to sort some of them out. Some may remain mysteries forever.