

What's in a name? Spelling & other issues.

TIP: Assume wild and crazy phonetic spelling, pre-1850.

Surnames were not spelled in a standardized way until well into the 1800s in most of the Western world. You will find many variant spellings a century or so ago. You need to enjoy puzzles when searching for clues to your correct ancestors!

For example, my greatgreatgrandfather was a Francis William Pettygrove, originally from the state of Maine, who moved with his wife Sophia to Port Townsend WA. He is listed on various records as Francis W., F.W., F.Wm.; surname spelled Pettigrove, Pettigrew, Pettygrew, etc.

Another example is an ancestor Henry Luther Rice – sometimes listed as Luther, or H. Luther, or Luther H., or sometimes just Henry. On one census, his first wife had the wrong name, and on another census his second wife's name wasn't listed at all – perhaps one of the older stepchildren answered the census-taker's questions!

Nicknames are particularly challenging – use all possible name varieties for a nickname, being open to unusual origins. Often a maiden name of a mother or grandmother would be used for a first or second name of a child. For example, Randy could be from Randolph, Randall, Ranulf, Rand, Randsome; Betty could be from Beth, Elizabeth, Bettina, or even Alberta. Jack is often from John, but could also be from Jackson. Never make assumptions about names and their spellings when you're looking for the correct ancestor's family.

By the mid-1800s spellings became more standardized, and most adults were able to read and write so could spell "correctly". In the earlier years, many people had limited knowledge of reading and writing, and rarely filled out any forms. I have seen "X" as signatures of some of my ancestors, on their marriage registers.



Researchers with a particular surname have developed websites or family associations with detailed proven family trees. This can be a great help for the amateur genealogist in finding correct ancestors with research sources as well.

Questions? Email Celia@RootsBasic.com

TIP: Google "[a surname]" and "family association" for online websites on your surname. For example, I have found Graves, Terwilliger and Rice surname associations online.