

Not Who He Once Was: Tips for Finding Your Name-Changing Ancestor

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Perhaps your ancestor shows up out of nowhere. You've picked up his trail somewhere, but there is no backstory, or the backstory that you have just doesn't pan out for you to find him. Or maybe you have him, perhaps with his family or origin or a family he made with a wife and children, and then he just disappears – poof! - without a trace. At some point, you may begin to consider whether he might have changed his name.

First run through your strategies:

Simple fixes:

- Do you know how to pronounce your ancestor's name? Could the spelling of your ancestor's name be pronounced multiple ways?
 - HowToPronounce - <https://www.howtopronounce.com/>
 - Forvo - <https://forvo.com/>
- Work that backwards – could one of those alternate pronunciations be spelled differently?
- Change in letter combinations: Laughren > Lockren

Motivations for Name Changes:

- Immigrant's desire to assimilate
 - Frustrated with mispronunciation
 - Anti-ethnic sentiments
- German farm name or house name – husband may change to wife's name to maintain farm name
- Formerly enslaved – adopt a surname after Civil War – may be multi-step process
- Hiding from criminal past
- Hiding from family

Sources for a new name:

- an emigrant may have translated his old name to the language of his new home. Here are a couple of sites that might give you ideas of what surnames mean. Your ancestor may have kept the meaning of their surname but changed to an English equivalent
 - Behind the Name: The Etymology and History of Surnames
<https://surnames.behindthename.com/>

- Last Names by Country of Origin - <https://www.familyeducation.com/baby-names/browse-origin/surname>
- e.g. Bianchi > White or Zimmerman > Carpenter
- May have been changed to sound more American/English – e.g. Rabinowicz > Robbins
- May have selected a family name – change to mother’s or grandmother’s name
- Celebrity – actor, author, etc...
- May take name of foster parent, informal adoption. Could be temporary name change.
- Enslaved may change name to former enslaver, possibly not the immediately prior one. Or may have pointedly adopted a name of a hero, i.e. Washington

Legal name changes:

- People often did not go through legal process – just began using new name
- Newspaper searches:
 - “take the name of”
 - “be known as”
- Question whether there is motivation to legally change name – birth parent still living?
- If legal name change, may have done so at time of naturalization, but rarely “at Ellis Island”

Additional strategies:

- Look for clues in family trees – even unsourced! - i.e. a specific death date and place. Who else died on that date in that place?
- “Bag a Live One” – (see “Bagging a Live One” at https://familytreewebinars.com/download.php?webinar_id=225 Descendants of name-changer’s siblings may know things, have letters, have kept in touch with name changer or family
- Newspaper research – once a criminal always a criminal(?) – check for name you know with “aka” or “also known as” as search terms. Newspaper may carry arrest accounts with both names
- DNA – your DNA results may not show any matches with Great-grandpa’s surname. What surnames do you match with? One of those could be his “other” name

Proving it: Name changes are direct conflicting evidence. Document your proof that those two different names apply to one man

- Timeline the surnames, including dates, places and surnames used.
- Can you determine when he switched? – does that give a clue as to motivation?
- Why was surname used on a particular record?
 - Possibly family of origin gave name, not name-changer himself
 - Could a marriage have used original surname (in case he wanted to leave open the possibility of children

- Prove the negative – that there isn't a man with the alternate name in the same time and location. Or if there is, that it's not the same one because occupation, addresses, associates, etc. don't overlap

Resources:

"Why Did My Ancestor Change His Name?" Kimberly Powell, *ThoughtCo*, 11 February 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/my-ancestor-changed-his-name-1422655>

"How Do I Trace an Ancestor Through a Name Change?" Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Zachary Garceau, *The Root*, 5 June 2015, <https://www.theroot.com/how-do-i-trace-an-ancestor-through-a-name-change-1790860046>

"Tracing Your Roots: Is My Ancestor's Surname From Slavery or Marriage?" Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Meaghan E.H. Siekman, *The Root*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.theroot.com/tracing-your-roots-is-my-ancestor-s-surname-from-slave-1793585686>

"Tracing Your Roots: Were Slaves' Surnames Like Brands?" Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Meaghan E.H. Siekman, *The Root*, 16 June 2017, <https://www.theroot.com/tracing-your-roots-were-slaves-surnames-like-brands-1796141007>

"How to Look for Records of... Changes of Name," The National Archives, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/changes-of-name/> (This article discusses records for people who *legally* changed their names)

"How to Find Ancestor's Legal Name Change Records with Newspapers," Thomas J. Kemp, 12 Oct 2011, <https://blog.genealogybank.com/how-to-find-ancestors-legal-name-change.html>

Garrett–Nelson, LaBrenda. "Resolving a Modern Genealogical Problem: What was Rainey Nelson's Birth Name?" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 104 (September 2016): 203–213.

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