EUROPEAN SURNAME NAME MEANINGS

I n Europe surnames (or last names) did not become necessary until around 1,000 A.D. Before this time, the common person just did not come into contact with many other people. As Europe's population expanded, there came a point that people could no longer be distinguished by only their Christian (first or given) name. Suddenly there were three Thomases in town, so how did you tell between them? The techniques for coming up with surname differed from place to place, but these were some common techniques.

Occupational: Identifying people based on their job or position in society. Calling a man "Thomas Carpenter" indicated that he worked with wood for a living, while someone named "Knight" bore a sword. Other examples: Archer, Baker, Brewer, Butcher, Carter, Clark, Cooper, Cook, Dyer, Farmer, Faulkner, Fisher, Fuller, Gardener, Glover, Hunt or Hunter, Judge, Mason, Page, Parker, Potter, Sawyer, Slater, Smith, Taylor, Thatcher, Turner, Weaver, Woodman, and Wright (or variations such as Cartwright and Wainwright). Some people named themselves after the wealthy people they worked for (Prince, King, Hickman "man or servant of Hick").

Personal characteristics: Some surnames, often adjectives, were based on nicknames that described a person. They may have described a person's size (Short, Long, Little), coloring (Black, White, Green, or Red), personality (Moody, Gay, Wise), or another character trait (Beardsley, Rich, Stern, Strong, Swift). Other people were named for resembling animals (Fox, Wolfe, Bird).

Geographical feature of the landscape: Some people were named after the geographical features by which they lived. Examples: Bridge, Brooks, Bush, Camp, Fields, Forest, Greenwood, Grove, Hill, Knolles, Lake, Moore, Perry, Stone, Wood, and Woodruff. Atwood probably means from someone who lived "at the wood," and Hamby may mean someone who lived "by the hamlet or town." A last name could be an actual place where the person was born, lived, worked, or owned land. Some examples: Bedford, Burton, Hamilton, Hampshire, and Sutton.

Patronymic surnames: Some surnames come from a male family member's first name. Examples: Benson ("the son of Ben"), Davis, Dawson, Evans, Harrison, Jackson, Nicholson, Richardson, Robinson, Rogers, Simpson, Stephenson, Thompson, Watson, and Wilson. There were a variety of ways to make a surname from your father's first name.

Irish	O' or Mc + father's name	Norman/French	Fitz + father's name
Scottish	Mac + father's name	Dutch	Van + father's name
Scandinavian	father's name + son	German	Von + father's name

Matronymic surnames: Other surnames derive from a female family member's given name, include Molson (from Moll, for Mary), Madison (from Maud), Emmott (from Emma), and Marriott (from Mary).