

The Wild Origins of Your Last Name

Do you ever wonder where your last name is from? Last names are also called surnames or family names. Long ago, most people only had first names. As towns got bigger, people needed a way to tell who was who. So last names started to get popular.

Many last names came from people's jobs, like Smith, Baker, or Tailor. Other last names told what people looked like, such as Short, Little, or Strongarm. Some names came from places people lived, like Hill, Brook, or Wood.

Later, children would take their father's last name. If John Baker had a son named Thomas, his son was called Thomas Baker. This told everyone Thomas was John's son. Some names changed spelling over the years too. "Smith" once was spelled many ways like Smithe, Smyth, and Smythe before becoming Smith.

Last names also started when kings said everyone must have one. So people picked last names or made them up! Some chose animal names like Wolf and Bear.

Other last names came from nicknames. Let's say there were two men named John. To tell them apart, people might call one John the baker, and the other John with red hair. Over time, those names stuck as Baker and Redman.

Lots of old first names told about strengths or skills parents hoped their kids would have. That's how we get names like Charles which means "man," or Theresa which means "to harvest." Some names are about beauty, like Linda meaning "pretty." Others expressed parents' happiness when the baby came, like Grant meaning "great" or Jocelyn meaning "joyful."

Of course, many names come from family too. Using grandparent or aunt/uncle names as first names has long been a tradition. Or last names get used as first names, which is why we have Jacksons and Madisons today.

In the past, only rich nobles had last names. It showed their family had power. Peasants often just had first names. So having an official last name became a sign of freedom. That's why many black Americans after the Civil War picked unique last names like Freeman.

Today our last names connect us to our ancestors and family history. No matter where it's from, your name tells a story about your heritage! Think about what your last name's wild tale is.

Glossary

- surname - the last name or family name shared by family members.

- heritage - beliefs, traditions, languages, etc. passed down from previous generations.
- noble - a person from a rich and powerful family.
- peasant - a person from a poor farming family.

Questions

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What did most people only have long ago?
a) Last names b) Middle names c) First names d) Nicknames
2. Where did last names like Smith and Baker come from?
a) Places people lived b) People's looks c) People's jobs d) Family names
3. How did last names change over the years?
a) They got longer. b) They changed spelling. c) They sounded different.
d) They added nicknames.
4. What did some rich nobles have that peasants did not?
a) More money b) Special privileges c) Last names d) Large families
5. What does your last name connect you to?
a) Your parents b) Your aunts/uncles c) Your ancestors d) Your siblings
6. What is the main idea of the article?
a) Last names tell a story about your family.
b) First and last names have surprising origins.
c) Many names came from people's jobs.
d) Last names show your family's power.

Answer Key

1. c
2. c
3. b
4. c
5. c
6. a