

M A V E R I C K A I

WHAT YOUR LAST NAME ACTUALLY MEANS

THE FULL FAMILY HISTORY GUIDE

You have written your name ten thousand times. Somewhere back there a real person was handed that word for a reason. Here is how to find out what it was, wherever in the world your family is from.

Why your name is younger than you think

The four types of surname, with examples from a dozen countries

Both prompts from the newsletter, plus four you have not seen

How to check what the AI tells you, for free

What to do when the name turns out to have been changed

The questions to ask the oldest person you know

2026 Edition

Nobody Knows Their Own Name

Here is something strange when you stop and think about it. You have written your last name on forms, on school books, on job applications and on things that mattered, probably tens of thousands of times in your life, and there is a very good chance you have never once asked where it came from or what it meant to the first person who was handed it.

That is not a failing on your part. Almost nobody knows. Most of us treat our surname the way we treat our own heartbeat, as a thing that is simply there, and it never occurs to us that it was invented at a specific moment, in a specific place, for a specific reason, and that a real living person was the first to carry it.

Your name is younger than you think

The biggest surprise for most people is how recent all of this is. Fixed family names that get passed down from parent to child are not ancient. For ordinary people they are a fairly new invention, and for a long stretch of human history almost nobody had one.

Before surnames, most people simply had one name plus a description that helped everyone in the village tell them apart. You were John who works the mill, or Maria who lives up on the hill, or Ahmad son of Yusuf. The description was not your name. It was just how people found you in a crowd, and it usually died with you rather than passing to your children.

In England the Normans brought fixed family names over after 1066, but at first that was mostly a thing for the nobility, because they were the ones with land and titles that needed to pass cleanly from one generation to the next. It took several more centuries to work its way down to everybody else, and across Western Europe surnames only really settled into the form we would recognize by the 16th and 17th centuries.

SO WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR YOU

If your family is from Western Europe, your surname is probably somewhere between 400 and 900 years old, which sounds like a lot until you realize humans have been around rather longer than that. Everyone who has ever carried your name is descended from a fairly small starting group, and in a lot of cases from one person.

It Happened Later Than That In Most Of The World

That Western European story is the one that gets told most often, and if your family is from somewhere else it can leave you thinking the whole topic is not really about you. It is. The surname just arrived on a different schedule, and in a lot of places it arrived so recently that there are people alive today whose grandparents remember it happening.

Place	When ordinary people got fixed surnames
Western Europe	Gradually from the 1100s onward, mostly settled by the 1500s and 1600s
Japan	1875. Commoners were required by law to take a surname, and most families picked one on the spot, often from the fields and hills around them
Thailand	1913. A law made surnames compulsory, and many were newly created rather than inherited from anywhere
Turkey	1934. Every citizen was required to adopt a fixed hereditary surname, with a deadline of the following year
Iceland	Mostly never. Icelanders still use the older system where your name comes from your father's or mother's first name, so it changes every generation
Parts of Indonesia	Still not universal. Plenty of people, including some very famous ones, have a single name and no surname at all

If your family comes from one of those places, that changes what you should expect from this whole exercise. A Japanese or Thai or Turkish surname may have a beautiful and completely readable meaning, because it was chosen deliberately by someone in your family who could have picked anything, and that is its own kind of story. It just is not a thousand year old inheritance, and knowing that up front saves you from feeling like the answer you got was somehow thin.

TIP

Tell the AI where your family is from if you know, even roughly. The same spelling can mean completely different things in different languages, and giving it a region is the single fastest way to get an answer that is actually about your family rather than about somebody else's.

The Four Types Of Surname

Almost every surname in the world falls into one of four buckets, and once you know them you will start recognizing them everywhere, in the names of people you work with and people you went to school with. This is the part people find genuinely surprising, because the meanings are usually hiding in plain sight.

1. From the job somebody did

The most common type in a lot of countries, and the easiest to spot once you know. Somebody was the village blacksmith, and after a while everyone just called him Smith, and then his children were the Smiths, and here we are.

Name	What the job actually was
Smith	Blacksmith, the person who worked metal
Baker	Baked the bread
Carter	Moved goods by cart
Fletcher	Made arrows
Cooper	Made barrels
Miller	Ground the grain
Taylor	Made clothes
Mason	Worked in stone
Weaver	Made cloth
Schneider (German)	Tailor
Muller (German)	Miller
Boulangier (French)	Baker
Charpentier (French)	Carpenter

Notice how Schneider and Taylor are the same job in two languages, and Muller and Miller are too. Different countries independently landed on the same handful of names because every village everywhere needed the same handful of trades.

2. From your father

The second big group, and the one that covers an enormous share of the world. The name means son of somebody, or descendant of somebody, and the original somebody was a real man whose first name got frozen into the family forever.

Pattern	Where from	What it means
Johnson, Harrison, Anderson	English	Son of John, Harry, Andrew
Fitzgerald	Norman French	Son of Gerald. Fitz comes from the French for son
Andersen, Johansson	Scandinavia	Son of Anders, son of Johan
Mac and Mc	Scotland and Ireland	Son of, so MacDonald is son of Donald
O'	Ireland	Descendant of, which reaches back further than son of
Rodriguez, Martinez	Spanish	The -ez ending means son of, so son of Rodrigo
-ovich and -evich	Slavic languages	Son of, as in Petrovich, son of Peter
ben and bin	Hebrew and Arabic	Son of, as in ben David or bin Ahmad

A NICE THING TO NOTICE

If your name is this type, you are carrying somebody's first name around with you. There was one specific man, hundreds of years ago, whose parents chose that name for him, and it stuck so hard that you are still using it. You will never know anything else about him, but you know what he was called.

3. From where they lived

Some names describe a place. Sometimes a big obvious place like a city or a region, and sometimes something much smaller and more local, like the fact that your family lived by the ford in the river or at the top of the hill.

Name	Where from	What it describes
Hill, Wood, Marsh, Ford, Rivers	English	Lived by that feature. Ford means the shallow river crossing
de Clare, de Warenne	Norman England	Of that place, brought over after 1066
Di Napoli, Fiorentino	Italian	From Naples, from Florence
Del Rio, Montoya	Spanish	Of the river, and a place name in the Basque region
van	Dutch	From, as in van Gogh, from Gogh
von	German	From, and often signaled nobility

4. From how somebody looked or behaved

This is the fun one, and it is also the one that occasionally stings a bit. Somebody in your family got a nickname, and rather than dying with him it got handed to his children and then to theirs, and now it is on your passport.

Name	What it originally meant
Brown, White	The color of their hair or their complexion
Short, Little, Long	Exactly what it sounds like
Strong, Armstrong	Physically powerful, and Armstrong means strong in the arm
Goodfellow	Pleasant company, a decent sort
Legrand (French)	The tall one
Cameron (Gaelic)	Crooked nose
Campbell (Gaelic)	Crooked mouth

Cameron and Campbell are worth sitting with for a second. Two of the most recognizable names in the world, carried by millions of people across every continent, and they started as somebody pointing at a man and describing his face. Nobody asked him if he minded.

HEADS UP

Worth knowing that some names have more than one credible origin, and Cameron is one of them, since it is also a place name in Scotland. When you run the prompts coming up, the answer you want is the one that gives you the competing theories rather than picking one and sounding certain, which is why the prompts ask for exactly that.

The Two Prompts From The Newsletter

These are the two from Sunday, in full, so you have them somewhere you can find them again. Works in ChatGPT or Claude, either is fine, and you do not need a paid account for either of them.

Prompt one: what the name means

PASTE THIS IN

My last name is [YOUR LAST NAME]. Tell me everything about it. What language it comes from, what it literally translated to when it was first used, and why a family would have been given that name in the first place, whether it was a job, a place, a father's name, or something about how someone looked. Tell me roughly when surnames like mine started being used, what my ancestors were most likely doing for a living, and where in the world the name is most common today. If there are competing theories about the origin, give me all of them and tell me which one is best supported and why.

Prompt two: the journey

Stay in the same chat and paste this underneath.

THEN PASTE THIS

Now trace the journey. Where did this name start, how did it spread across the world, and why did families carrying it end up where they are now. Then tell me every way the spelling has changed over the centuries, and what my name was most likely spelled as before it became this, especially if it was changed or shortened when a family moved country. Tell me what you are confident about and what you are guessing at, and be honest about the difference.

TIP

That last line about separating what it knows from what it is guessing is doing real work, so do not drop it. Without it the AI will give you one smooth confident story, and a confident story is exactly what you do not want when a good chunk of it is inference.

Four More Prompts You Have Not Seen

These are the ones that were not in the newsletter, and honestly a couple of them get better results than the originals.

The one almost nobody thinks to run

Everybody looks up their surname. Almost nobody looks up the other side of the family, which is half of where you came from and usually the half that gets lost first, because in a lot of cultures that name stops being passed down.

THE MATERNAL LINE

My mother's maiden name is [NAME]. Do the same full breakdown you just did for my surname. Where the name comes from, what it originally meant, what type of surname it is, and where in the world it is most common. Then tell me what it suggests about that side of my family, how it might have travelled, and whether it is likely to have been changed or respelled at any point. If you know nothing reliable about it, say so plainly rather than guessing.

IF YOU DO NOT KNOW IT

Plenty of people do not know their mother's maiden name, and there is no version of this where that is a problem. Run it on any family name you do have, from any side, including one you only half remember hearing. A name you are not sure how to spell is still a perfectly good starting point.

What your first and last name say together

This one surprises people. Your first name carries a date stamp and often a religion and a region, and when you put it next to your surname you get a much narrower picture than either one gives you alone.

THE FULL NAME READING

My full name is [FIRST NAME] [LAST NAME]. Looking at both names together, what does the combination suggest about where and when my family was living, what language they spoke, and what religious or cultural community they were likely part of. Tell me what era my first name was popular in and in which countries, and whether the pairing of these two names is common or unusual. Explain your reasoning so I can tell which parts are solid and which are educated guesses.

The coat of arms question, asked properly

You have seen the websites that will sell you your family crest on a mug for nineteen dollars. Before you buy one, it is worth knowing how this actually works, because the honest answer is more interesting than the mug.

THE CREST REALITY CHECK

Is there a coat of arms historically associated with the surname [YOUR LAST NAME]?
If so, describe what it looked like and what its symbols were meant to represent.
Then explain honestly whether someone with my surname today would have any real claim to it, how coats of arms were actually granted, and whether they belonged to individuals or to everyone sharing a name. Tell me what the companies selling family crests online are actually selling.

HEADS UP

Here is the short version so you are not surprised by the answer. In the traditions these things come from, a coat of arms was granted to a specific person, not to a surname, and the right to use it passed down a documented line of descent rather than to everybody who happens to share the spelling. So the crest being sold for your surname is a real historical design belonging to somebody, and the odds that the somebody was your ancestor are usually not good. It is still genuinely interesting to look at. It is just not yours in the way the website implies.

The one that actually matters

This is the one I would run if you only run one. Everything above is a story on a screen, and the people who can confirm any of it are not going to be around forever.

QUESTIONS FOR THE OLDEST PERSON YOU KNOW

Based on everything you have told me about my surname, its likely origins and the ways it may have been changed, write me a list of 12 specific questions to ask the oldest living person in my family. Focus on the things only a person can answer and no record can, like how the name was pronounced or spelled differently by older relatives, family stories about where they came from, any mention of the name being changed, and names of relatives further back. Order them so the easy ones come first and the harder or more emotional ones come later. Keep the questions warm and conversational, not like an interview.

TIP

If there is no older relative to ask, and for plenty of people there is not, this prompt still earns its place. Run it and read the questions anyway, because they will tell you exactly what to go looking for in the records, and that list is a genuinely good research plan.

How To Check Any Of This

Now the important part, and the reason this guide exists rather than just the two prompts. The AI is not reading your family tree. It has never seen your family. What it knows is patterns, which is how names in your language and region were generally formed, and it is applying those patterns to your name.

That is genuinely useful and it is usually right about the type of name and the language it came from. It is not the same thing as evidence about your family, and keeping those two apart is what separates people who enjoy this from people who end up repeating something untrue at Christmas for twenty years.

The AI can reasonably tell you	Only a document can prove
What language your name comes from	That your specific family carried it in that place
What it originally meant, and which of the four types it is	Who your great-great-grandparents actually were
Roughly when names like yours started being used	The date your family arrived somewhere
Where in the world the name is common today	Which of the people with that name you are related to
That the spelling was likely changed at some point	What it was changed from, and when, and by whom

Where to look, for free

You do not need a paid subscription to start, and in most countries a surprising amount is free and online. These are the categories worth knowing, and they exist in some form almost everywhere.

What to look for	What it gives you
Your country's national archives	Most have a free online search. This is the single best starting point wherever you live, and it is free almost everywhere
Census records	A snapshot of a whole household on one day, with ages, jobs and birthplaces. Often the fastest way back a generation
Civil registration	Births, marriages and deaths recorded by the state. Where it exists it is the backbone of everything else
Immigration and passenger records	Names, ages and origins at the moment a family moved. Often shows the older spelling of a name
Parish and religious records	Baptisms, marriages and burials kept by churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. These usually go back further than government records
FamilySearch	Free to use, run by a nonprofit, and holds an enormous amount from outside the United States as well as inside it

TIP

Start with the most recent person you are sure about and work backward one step at a time. Everybody wants to jump straight to the 1600s, and everybody who does that ends up attached to the wrong family. One generation at a time is slower for an afternoon and faster for a lifetime.

When The Name Was Changed

This is where it stops being a fun prompt for a lot of people. An enormous number of surnames were changed at some point, and if yours was, then the meaning the AI gives you may be the meaning of a name your family only started using recently.

It got shortened because nobody could spell it

The most common one by far, and the least dramatic. A family arrives somewhere their name does not fit the local alphabet or the local mouth, and within a generation the long version has quietly become a short one. Nobody decided this in a meeting. It just wore down, the way a stone in a river does.

A clerk wrote down what he heard

Records were written by people who did not speak your family's language, listening to somebody who was tired and possibly frightened, and they spelled it the way it sounded to them. Do that across four different records and you can end up with four different spellings of the same family, which is one of the most common walls people hit when they start researching.

THE ELLIS ISLAND STORY IS NOT QUITE TRUE

Almost every American family has a story about the name being changed by an official at Ellis Island, and historians have shown pretty clearly that this mostly did not happen. The passenger lists were written at the departure port, in Europe, usually by someone who spoke the language. What actually happened is that families changed their own names afterward, over years, to make life easier. Which is a quieter story, and in a way a sadder one, because it means somebody chose it.

It was translated

Some families translated the meaning rather than the sound. A German Schneider becomes an English Taylor, a Muller becomes a Miller, and the name looks completely different while meaning exactly the same thing. If your surname is a plain occupational word in the local language, it is worth asking the AI whether it might be a translation of something else.

It was changed to fit in, or to be safe

And this is the part I want to be careful with, because a real number of people reading this are carrying a name that was not passed down to them so much as put onto them.

Families have changed their names to avoid being identified as Jewish, or Irish, or Muslim, or foreign in a hundred different places and centuries, sometimes to get a job and sometimes to stay alive. Jewish families across parts of Europe were required by law to adopt fixed surnames in the 18th and 19th centuries, and some of those names were assigned by officials rather than chosen. Indigenous families in many countries had their names replaced by colonial administrations or mission schools. And for a great many people descended from enslaved Africans in the Americas, the surname traces back to the family

that owned their ancestors rather than to any ancestral line, which means the AI will hand you a confident English or Scottish etymology that is describing somebody else's history entirely.

If that is your situation, it is worth knowing before you run the prompt rather than after, so the answer does not land wrong. It also does not make the exercise pointless. Plenty of families chose their own names at emancipation, deliberately and with meaning, and that choice is its own piece of history worth knowing about. The record of it is just somewhere different, and the prompt below is a better starting place than the general one.

IF YOUR NAME MAY HAVE BEEN IMPOSED

My surname is [NAME] and my family history includes [slavery in the Americas / forced migration / religious persecution / colonial name changes]. Rather than giving me a general etymology, explain how surnames were assigned or changed in that specific context, what records exist for tracing families through it, and what the realistic limits of that research are. Be direct with me about what is likely to be findable and what is not.

What To Actually Do With This

Here is the whole thing in the order I would do it, if you want to just work straight down the list.

STEP 1: Run the first prompt on your surname

Two minutes. Add where your family is from if you know it, even roughly, because it changes the answer a lot.

STEP 2: Run the second one in the same chat

This is the one about the journey and the spellings, and it is where most people get the moment that makes them sit up.

STEP 3: Run the maternal line version

Half your family, and the half that usually goes missing. Use any family name you have if you do not have that one.

STEP 4: Get your list of questions

The twelve questions prompt. Then actually go and ask them, or if there is nobody to ask, use the list to decide what to search for.

STEP 5: Check one thing in a real record

Just one. Pick the most recent generation you are unsure about and find them in a census or a civil register. That single document will teach you more about research than anything else on this page.

THE ONE THING WORTH DOING TODAY

If there is an older person in your family and you have never asked them about the name, ask them this week. Not because it is urgent in any dramatic way, but because that knowledge only exists in a few heads and it is not written down anywhere. Every family that has ever lost it lost it the same way, which is by assuming there would be time later.

One last honest note

This whole thing is a starting point rather than a proof, and the AI will sound equally confident whether it is telling you something well established or something it worked out from the shape of the word. That is not a reason to skip it. It is a reason to enjoy it for what it is, ask it to separate what it knows from what it is guessing, and then go and check the parts that matter to you.

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Somebody was handed that name first. Go and find out who.