

The surname ROBB

The surname ROBB (I use this generic all-caps representation to stand for all close phonetic equivalents to this form of the name) is a common name in Scotland, and is one of scores of surnames derived from the personal name Robert. Many of these derivatives also have patronymic forms (e.g. Robertson, Robson, MacRobb), and it seems quite likely that this complex of surnames had a complex history of morphing into different forms along the same descendant line, e.g. Rob->Robb->McRobb, then being anglicized as Robertson, and finally, perhaps, in some branches, dropping the “-son” and returning to just Robb.

It's important to keep in mind, though, that with ROBB, as with all other surnames, it represents many different [patrilineages](#), each wholly unrelated by blood to any of the others.

It's also important to understand that in mostly rural Scotland, a large proportion of the population deferred the adoption of permanent hereditary surnames until the 1700s or even later. Since most Scots lived in hamlets or neighborhoods of small extent, where everybody knew everybody else, a given name plus perhaps a non-hereditary byname that captured something distinctive about the individual was sufficient to distinguish him with others of the same given name. When late adopting Scots did assume a permanent surname for themselves and their progeny, they often took the name of local lairds or other worthies (or in the Highlands, the name of the local clan or sept), which has historically reinforced the continued clustering of particular surnames in particular areas, even though the bearers of those surnames may represent several different patrilineages.

Possible Clan and other origins for the surname ROBB

When one thinks of ancient Scottish surnames, one thinks of the clans, and the most authoritative and comprehensive source on the clans that I have found, is Frank Adam, *The Clans, Septs and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands* (see list of [SOURCES](#) below). The surname Robb, *per se*, occurs in this book only in an appendix that associates sept surnames with that of clans to which the septs were attached: ROBB is said here to have been a sept of the McFarlanes.

However, the book has a special chapter with sections for each of the principal clans, which touch on the high points of their origins, history, location(s) and traditions. More to the point, we find here an alternate rehearsal of the associated sept names, often together with some circumstantial detail. The sept name, “Robb”, does not appear in the section on the McFarlane clan, and the sept-clan index in the appendix is evidently *not* an index to the book as a whole; thus there is no comprehensive index. In fact, the chapter covering individual clans is quite possibly not even the compilation of Mr. Adam at all, but an interpolation by the modern editors of his work. Consequently, I have carefully scanned the sections for *all* the clans looking for the sept name, ROBB, without finding it anywhere.

The Bain *Clans and Tartans* book incorporates a similar sept-clan index. Here ROBB is said to be a sept of both clan McFarlane and clan Robertson. Again, there is no discussion of the sources for this index, although it is said to have been “carefully compiled.” A version of this Bain index is published also with the *Bartholomew Clan Map*.

Considering other surnames derived from Robert, Adam also reports sept associations with the clans Robertson, Drummond (but only in the form MacRobbie), Gunn, and Innes.

The variant MacRobbie alone has been identified with a particular group of individuals living in the same area and presumably related by blood. This group of MacRobbies was a sept of the Robertsons, but at one point they “followed” the Drummonds, who were next door neighbors of the Robertsons, and the MacRobbies' actual landlords.

The clans Gunn and Innes were smallish northern clans with a proclivity for spinning off sept surnames by attaching “son” to the given names of original clansmen: e.g. Jameson, Robson, Wilson, Georgeson. They do not, therefore, seem a promising source for a sept of “Robb”s.

That leaves only clans Robertson and McFarlanes as likely sources for highland Robbs.

Clan McFarlane was so given to banditry and predations on its neighbors that it began to be proscribed as early as the reign of Elizabeth. McFarlanes are to be found in the records throughout the history of Scotland nonetheless, but the clan would have ceased to be able to provide any kind of stable alliance or protection to a sept of ROBBs from an early date.

The Robertson clan was a different story. The Robertsons were a prominent central highland clan closely allied with the royal Stewart clan from whom all the Scottish kings and pretenders came. This clan held together and escaped overt proscription until 1746 (when all the clans were disbanded as political entities) even though they played an active role in every royalist uprising.

The MacFarlanes were located along the head of Loch Long, embracing modern Arrochar, and the much larger territory of the Robertsons was no more than 40 miles to the NNE of them. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to imagine that at least a rump of the orphaned McFarlane ROBB sept attaching themselves to the Robertsons.

ROBB Emigration/Immigration Data

I've canvassed just two sets of data to try to shed further light on ROBB immigration to America.

First, the multi-volume *Cavaliers and Pioneers*, is a compilation of all the names of importees to Virginia, the vast majority having been brought in as indentured servants (a third of these as criminal transportees) into the Virginia tidewater region, each person giving rise to a headright that could be used to acquire 50a of land by applying to the Virginia authorities in Williamsburg, or to the local county court for land warrants and ultimately patents. It has been estimated that no more than 50% of these headrights were ever so used, and copied into the VA patent books from which they've been abstracted and indexed. Often, these patents weren't lodged until years after the actual importation, whose port of arrival may have been in a different county from where the land was taken up, but these records do at least provide us with names and approximate dates and likely proximate locations. Also, not all of these importees were servants, though none of them were apparently able to afford their own passage to America. I find just two ROBBs in this source:

John Rabb (one of 15 importees), patent 10Jun1764 for 750a in YorkCo {C&P 1:291}
Thomas Robb (one of 12), patent 4Jun1655 for 600a in LancasterCo {C&P, 1:308}

As my second fairly comprehensive source for pre-1800 immigration records, David Dobson has compiled (across many books), probably most of the records documenting pre-Revolution Scottish emigrations to America. He has captured, in particular, the forced transportation to America of (mostly highland) clansmen who fought for the royalist (Stewart) cause during three epochs: the English Civil War, the 1715 Scottish rising on behalf of the Stewart Pretender, James Edward, and the final Scottish rising for James' son Prince Charles Edward ("Bonny Prince Charlie").

I found transportations as Jacobites (royalist rebels) of Robertsons, Robbs and MacFarlanes for both 1716 and 1746, but a substantial number (21) only for the Robertsons in 1716. Just three Robbs were transported in the aftermath of the 1715 risings: James, Thomas and John were transported to South Carolina, all on the same ship, *Susannah*, and sold there as indentured servants. There was only one McFarlane for 1716, and only a couple for each of these names for 1746. I focused on 1716 Robertsons with relatively uncommon given names (e.g. Leonard) and traced several of them to a couple of small villages in Perthshire in the old Robertson clan territory. I was also able to find a James Robb from one of those same villages, and a John and Thomas Robb from another small Perthshire village, all of the right age to have participated in the 1715 rising. I therefore suggest that these rebel Robbs were representative of a sept of the Robertsons, extant at least as late as 1715, and staunch Catholic royalists at that date.

Here are my abstracts of all of the ROBB emigres compiled and abstracted more completely in Dobson's *The Original Scots Colonists of Early America, 1612-1783*:
(these Scottish emigrants either "shipped" or were involuntarily "transported" as criminals)

7May1716	tr	James, John, and Thomas Robb, Jacobites, from Liverpool to South Carolina
Feb1744	sh	Hugh Robb, of Glasgow, tailor, to New York
5May1747	tr	Elizabeth Robb, of Aberdeen, b.1712, knitter, Jacobite, to Martinique, Lesser Antilles
bef1753	sh	James Robb, of Glasgow, factor, father William, to Port Royal, CarolineCo VA
Jun1766	tr	Alexander Robb, of Banff, thief
Jul1776	sh	John Robb, of Duffus, Moreyshire, b.1748, servant, to Philadelphia

The Five ROBB Families that came to Pennsylvania before the American Revolution were headed by

William¹ of ChesterCoPA, who appears on the tax rolls of New Garden Township by the end of 1720, and who settled thereafter in LondonGrove Township

John^{1?} of Sadsbury, ChesterCoPA, then of CumberlandCo, who appears first on the Sadsbury tax list for 1726

William¹ of Drumore Township, in LancasterCoPA, who appears there first in 1748, and was the father of the John Robb who married Barbara McKnight and removed to WashingtonCoPA about 1781, where he died about 1804.

Joseph¹ of Chanceford Township in YorkCoPA, who was there by the early 1760's, and who also removed to WashingtonCoPA, where he died about 1811.

and a fifth ROBB family that arrived just in time for the Revolution:

James¹ of Philadelphia in 1775, then YorkCoPA

Male Robb descendants of the first four of these families have been tested on their Y-chromosome (ySTR) yDNA and we know that they all belong to the same [genealogical patrilineage](#). Although the first three of these families were most likely Scotch-Irish—that is they came to Pennsylvania from Scotland with a sojourn in Ireland in between—there is one piece of credible evidence that Joseph¹, at least, came directly from Scotland—anomalously from Aberdeenshire on Scotland's far northeastern coast.

The two Williams died within five years of each other, and seem to be of the same generation; thus they can be no more closely related than first cousins. It's quite likely that John¹ of Sadsbury is either the oldest son, or a younger brother, of William¹ of Chester. I happen to be descended from Joseph¹, the last of these four immigrant patriarchs of this patrilineage to arrive in Pennsylvania.

The immigrant patriarch of the fifth and last Robb family to emigrate to Pennsylvania during the colonial period is known to have been a merchant who lived not far from Belfast in County Down, and who had merchant, if not also family, ties back to Glasgow. His descendants too have been yDNA tested and found to belong to a different patrilineage from the first four colonial Robb families, and another descendant of this line has also been traced back to Glasgow as far back as the early 1800s.

The Geographic Origins of the largest ROBB Patrilineages in Scotland

The IGI data shows ROBBs scattered pretty widely across Scotland, and unsurprisingly concentrated especially in the major cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, just as are most of the surnames of Scotland (I use ROBB in all-caps throughout this paper to represent all of its cognate spellings).

A [map of the distribution of Robbs in Scotland by county](#) shows by far the largest concentration of “Robb”s in Aberdeenshire, with some diffusion outwards into adjacent counties. Although this map is based on the 1881 UKCensus, thanks to the glacial pace of internal migration within Britain that has obtained down the centuries, this comparatively modern sampling is still the best indicator of the area or origin of the largest, and presumably most ancient, [genealogical patrilineage](#) of ROBBs.

—each probably representing a different, mutually unrelated, ancient patrilineage of ROBBs. As the map clearly shows, one of these patrilineages is centered in Aberdeenshire; the other in Lanarkshire, whose seat is the major port city of Glasgow.^[1]

These Robb groupings in Great Britain correspond nicely to the two patrilineages of ROBBs listed above who emigrated to Pennsylvania between 1720-1775, for which there is evidence that the first four families stemmed ultimately from Aberdeenshire, while the fifth had ties to Glasgow in Lanark. Although both of these sets of ROBBs are those located in primarily Lowland areas, with the latter group around the principal western port through which Scottish emigration flowed, it’s possible that the ancestors of this second ROBB family (and patrilineage) into Pennsylvania were originally of the ROBB sept that harbored with the MacFarlanes, whose territory in today’s Dunbartonshire lay along Loch Long that feeds into the Firth of Clyde at the head of which Glasgow is located.

Evidence of colonial Pennsylvania affiliations that may go back to Scotland

It has been supposed by some American genealogists, despite the absence of support from the Scottish authorities, that the ROBBs may have been allied with the MacDonalds, or, alternatively, the MacGregors, during their clan days.

The MacDonald connection is easily accounted for, and as easily dismissed. The John² (*William¹ of Lancaster*) Robb plantation in WashingtonCoPA (called “Omi”) was flanked on both sides by lands of John MacDonald, who was the principal landowner of Robinson Township (the present town of MacDonaldPA is named for him). However, to my knowledge, there aren’t even any intermarriages between Robb descendants and MacDonalds—not, at least for several generations—and I’ve encountered no other connection between these names anywhere I’ve looked.

The MacGregor connection is even more tenuous. It is true that the lands of the MacGregors adjoined those of the MacFarlanes. On the other hand, it was the MacGregor clan that produced the romantic and legendary hero Rob Roy. I suspect it is this latter circumstance, not the former accident of geography, which has prompted the unfounded family speculation that was passed down to me by my father, that the Robbs were somehow connected with the MacGregors.

But there is another argument from geographical propinquity that cannot be so easily dismissed. The MacFarlane lands were bordered even more closely by those of the clan MacNachtan or McNaughtan (other variants of this surname include McNaught and McKnight). The MacNachhtans were loyal supporters of the Catholic Stuarts and were dispossessed of their lands for it in 1691 after the accession of William & Mary in 1688. What became of them? The line of the MacNachhtan chiefs eventually migrated to Ireland, but I find two MacNachtans, Duncan and Malcolm, captured

¹ This surname distribution map was produced from Archer Software’s *British 19th Century Surname Atlas*, and it has been adjusted for county populations to attenuate the predominance otherwise of counties like Lanark and Midlothian that contain the large port cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh respectively. It also reduces the emphasis on Aberdeenshire which also contains a large port city, Aberdeen.

at Preston in 1715 and transported to America the next year, one in the same ship that took the three Robbs to South Carolina. I've noted above, some ROBB-ROBERTSON associations in my discussion of [ROBB emigration data](#) and IGI records, but I found no comparable associations in those records between ROBBS and McKNIGHTs (to use the fully anglicized and streamlined form of Scottish McNACHTAN). And while the McNACHTAN clan area lay adjacent to the lands of clan McFARLANE, and was some 40-50 miles SW of the main ROBERTSON clan area, I haven't heretofore mentioned that the Bartholmew clan map also shows a small MacNAUGHTAN territory just adjacent to the south of the ROBERTSONs. Finally, if we consider more particularly the derivative surname of McNAUGHT/McKNIGHT, both Surnames of Scotland, and the later surname distribution maps show McNAUGHTs tightly concentrated in Kircudbrightshire, in the modern Dumfries and Galloway border area from whence the majority of emigration, first to Ireland, then to America, came.

I've put this focus on the McNACTANs/McKNIGHTs because there were significant early associations between McKNIGHTs and two of the first four ROBB families on the western Pennsylvania (both of the same patrilineage).

John² Robb, the son of William¹ of LancasterCo, married Barbara McKn[ight] in 1757 in LancasterCoPA. The Rev. John Cuthbertson, who recorded this marriage, wrote or abbreviated this surname variously as "McK[n[ight]]" "McN[ought[an]]", and he was ministering to men named James McKnight and Neal McKnight in the same period when John² Robb came of age and was married.

Meanwhile John¹ Robb, of Sadsbury, then of Cumberland County (carved out of Lancaster in 1750), had his 1761 will witnessed by two McKnights. Although John¹'s wife wasn't mentioned in her husband's will and so presumably had died, one would still expect a Scotch-Irish frontiersman of this period to look first to close kinsmen or in-laws of his orphaned children, or failing that, to close and trusted friends in his near neighborhood, as witnesses to his will. We know that John¹'s wife was named Mary, from a deed in which she is a co-grantor: I think she was born Mary McKnight.

Finally, in the first WashingtonCoPA will book we find the 25Feb1781 will of James McKnight, which names wife Barbara (with the same less-than-common forename as John²'s wife, Barbara McKnight), and two grown sons, but makes John Robb Sr and Andrew Reed co-executors. Although the relationship to this John Robb is not specified, he was almost certainly the John² Robb, whom it can be shown had removed within the same year to fledgling Washington County, and who was therefore most probably McKnight's son-in-law.

Two Reeds are witnesses to James McKnight's will, and it's likely that James's wife, Barbara, was a REID (Reed, Read). And earlier there had been REIDs, as well as McKNIGHTs and ROBBS in Drumore township when its population still numbered just a few hundred. Given the Scottish locus for McNAUGHTs/McKNIGHTs in Kircudbright, it may well be that these ROBBS and REIDs came from there too, and perhaps even emigrated together.

On the clad side of things, it turns out that the principal group of REIDs were a sept of the ROBERTSON clan, so it's possible that members of the Robertson REID and ROBB septs were also close neighbors of the secondary group of McNAUGHTANs whose territory bordered the ROBERTSON territory to the north.

However, given the yDNA test results of descendants of the first four families of ROBBS into Pennsylvania, coupled with the one piece of fairly credible evidence that fourth of these families, the one headed by my own ancestor, Joseph¹, migrated directly from Aberdeenshire, I think it very unlikely that these Pennsylvania ROBBS had a clan or Highland background. On the other hand, the yDNA results show that Joseph¹ was only very distantly related to the other three ROBB families of his patrilineage, and I expect that they were Scotch-Irish who had first migrated away from Aberdeen, perhaps as far to the southwest as Kircudbrightshire where the McKNIGHTs were seated, so I still like the theory that these ROBBS may have come over together with them.

What About The Scottish Robbs: Were they Diehard Jacobites or What?

In trying to understand the attitudes underlying the virtual civil war in Scotland between Catholic royalists and Protestant unionists (and this was not strictly a highland-lowland division), I came across this sentence in Adam (he is discussing the reputation of a notorious highland chieftain of the clan Gunn): “About the middle of the fifteenth century the chief of the clan was George, who lived in what the dismal jimmies of modern degeneracy have termed barbaric pomp in his castle at Clyth.”

Suddenly it became clear to me what these diehard royalists were really fighting for. Or rather, against: namely, what they saw as the killjoy Puritanism of the English and Scots Presbyterians, and especially of the rival clans who embraced it in order to gain advantage in the new order of things. Of course these Scottish puritans saw themselves as fighting for decency and godliness, and, the more worldly and Anglicized of them would have added: civilization.

At any rate, it is crystal clear that the ones who settled in Drumore Township of LancasterCoPA, at least, were part of this new order of “dismal jimmies,” because they were wholehearted adherents of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (they were otherwise known as the “Covenanters”) from their earliest days in the New World. In fact, the oldest son, John² (*William*¹) Robb was a ruling elder (lay deacon) of the principal first Reformed congregation in America, ministered to by the first Reformed minister, the itinerant Rev. John Cuthbertson, and John made his house in Lancaster County available to Cuthbertson for performing marriages and christenings.

The Reformed Presbyterians were ultra-conservative “people of the book” who believed that the Bible alone represented God’s Word. They were strict Calvinist predestinarians, close in theology to the original New England Congregationalist Puritans, and not so different from them in church practice either while ministers were lacking on the frontier (the Congregationalists acknowledged only grudgingly any authority outside their own individual congregation, which hired and fired its own ministers). But the early generations of Reformed Presbyterians of the 1700s may have been even more closely analogous to the Leiden, then Plymouth Colony, Separatists, in their rejection of any civil (governmental) authority to regulate their lives. Really, the American frontier was one of the few places in the world that might be accomodative to these hardheaded and principled people.

The Robb families (or family) who settled first in ChesterCo, seem to have been of a different, more secular, temper, though I still think they were probably of the same blood, and there is no reason to doubt that they shared the common attitude of most of the Scotch-Irish toward civil authority.

On the whole, I think it most likely that the Robbs who came early to Pennsylvania are descended from a line of Saxons who made their way by boat to the coasts of Aberdeen, some of whose descendants found their way in time west to the port city of Glasgow. It is known that a couple of Robbs emigrated to the colonies as merchants or merchant factors—one to Virginia before the Revolution, and one to Philadelphia on the eve of it, but given that the Drumore Robb family were such uncompromising, conservative, Presbyterians, it is likely that they emigrated first to Ireland, probably between 1670 and 1690 when the more rigorous of the Scottish Covenanters were persecuted by the Restoration kings and their Scottish henchmen. We will probably never know for sure, because the Irish records are scant, and the evidences for direct Scottish emigration to America extant in the British Isles have been pretty thoroughly picked over by Mr. Dobson without profit to our inquiry.

SOURCES

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METHODOLOGY

History books tell us stories about the past. If these stories are well-written and resonate with what we would like to believe, we tend to swallow them whole. Yet the truth about the past can only be painstakingly reconstructed by working our way back through layers of interpretation to the original facts and their context. The primary facts survive, where they survive at all, only in documents contemporary with the events they record, and we desire further that these records be set down by reliable and unbiased persons—we are looking for the equivalent of eyewitness testimony.

The next best thing to such documentary evidence is near contemporary histories or chronicles, written by people who lived not too long after the events in question, when they may have had access to oral accounts or other direct or indirect evidence, now vanished; unfortunately, we cannot expect citation or even attribution in such sources. This sort of evidence is of less weight than what original records can provide, amounting, as it does, to hearsay.

Finally, it is worth taking into consideration the opinions of scholars, even those of old-fashioned amateur scholars who didn't bother to tell us anything about their sources, or to give us the full reasoning behind their conclusions. The evidential value of such “informed” opinion can vary from totally misleading and essentially worthless, to highly plausible and probably true.