Standardized Spelling and the Gentrification of America

Since 1850 or so, the ability to spell "correctly" has become the indispensable mark of the educated, and therefore worthy, man (or, in modern times, woman). But it wasn't always so. In colonial America, when few people owned books other than the Bible, or read anything but the occasional newspaper (when they could read at all), there was no such thing as "correct" spelling—at least of any but the most common words and names. Literate, and all but the most educated people, spelled unfamiliar words the way they heard them, with the vowels determined by the local accent—and there was no shame in it, or even our modern concept of "misspelling".

In Colonial America, there were basically three classes of men: unlanded laborers or artisanal apprentices (many of this sort being indentured servants); farmers who owned their own land or, in the few towns, small artisanal businessmen; and "gentlemen"—the latter modeled roughly on the lower classes' idea of the English gentleman.

Early American or colonial "gentlemen" are recognizable to us today by being styled "Esq.", "Gent.", or just "Mr." in the old records. What qualified them as gentlemen was one or more of the following (but these attributes typically went together, as in England): ownership of property well beyond the requisites for a relatively comfortable life; a secondary school education or beyond, with perhaps some familiarity with the law; erstwhile occupation of a relatively important governmental office, such as a county justice, ranking militia officer, or (in New England) one of the leading town selectmen. Missing from this list of possible qualifications for the American gentry is the one necessary attribute of the true English gentleman: traceable descent from the nobility.

Early Americans were at least inchoate egalitarians and it wasn't, therefore, considered polite to inquire into the ancestry of a putative American gentleman, probably because few such pretenders had any noble, or even gentry, ancestry. Rather, in America, gentlemen were self-made, and everyone knew who they were by their attainments, presentation, and reputation.

Over the ensuing decades, and especially from Revolutionary times, latent American egalitarianism became more explicit, and every ambitious young man not born to the American gentry made it one of his life's goals to acquire the marks of gentility, so that he, too, might qualify for the title "Mr."

This mass movement toward gentility dovetailed nicely with the burgeoning of universal education in America in the mid-1800s. Minimal literacy had been all-but-universal in New England from the beginning in the early 1600s, and the Scotch-Irish began establishing secondary schools and even colleges during the colonial period, even on the frontier. But as the population ramped up in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War (when immigration also swelled), and spread out into the vast hinterlands, education and literacy lagged behind.

Not coincidentally, it was during this period that Noah Webster, a scholarly Yale graduate, began publishing the first American dictionaries. His first edition, in 1806, had a limited circulation, but by the 1840s when subsequent editions had spread the word (or words), upwardly mobile Americans were champing at the bit for authoritative guidance in the matter of validating their pretensions to a gentlemanly education.

"Webster's Dictionary" eventually became a best-seller, and after the legion of rising public school teachers embraced it as their Bible, "the dictionary" quickly became the familiar arbiter of culture and social virtue that it has been until the present era of Twitterian illiteracy. So much so, that it takes some mental effort to imagine what the writing down of words entailed before this was regulated by dictionaries.

Some Guidelines to (Not Over-)Interpreting Particular Name Spellings

Inquiring genealogists want to know: do particular spellings of a surname run in families? If so, surname spellings could be used to buttress a circumstantial case for identity.

My answer would be: not usually. In general, during the phonetic era, even where family members were taught to spell their surname in a particular way, it was usually the ear and scribal conventions of each particular clerk or recorder that determined how the name actually appeared in the records. As for the modern imperative of consistency, one sometimes encounters documents, holographic and otherwise, where the same surname is spelled several different ways by the same writer. In the exceptional case where the recorder happened to be well read, his spelling is indeed more likely to evince a more consistent, if not wholly standardized, spelling, but these exceptions merely prove the rule.

However, it has been my experience, researching countless family lines over the last 30 years and more, that where certain individuals (not themselves professional clerks) were one way or another members of the American gentry, or strong candidates to be, meaning above all that they had an unusual degree of literacy or higher education (extending to at least secondary school) they were not only practiced writers of their own signatures on legal documents, but also had particular notions as to how their surnames were to be spelled, and they imposed these on recording clerks or hired drafters of their legal documents.

And it was these exceptional individuals who were most likely to have preserved and passed on to at least some of their progeny, their own surname spelling conventions, who otherwise would have fallen in with and adopted the spellings most popular with the recording clerks. This is a process very evident, I think, in the more recent American immigration records at places like Ellis Island, where only a minority, and these probably just some of the most literate, insisted on the "correct" spellings of their unfamiliar, often alien, surnames, and they and their descendants continued to resist the subsequent pressures for Americanization.

The surname GAY

Let us consider two examples. First a very simple one from my own ancestry—the Scotch-Irish GAYs of the mid-18th century western Virginia frontier.

The standard spelling of the surname is unequivocally "Gay", and "gay" is a common enough word in the English language that its standardized spelling thus in print, probably goes back at least to the 15th century when printed books first became available. Moreover, however rough and wild the Scotch-Irish population of colonial America was in certain respects, since the introduction of Presbyterianism into Scotland by John Knox in the later 1500s, this ethnic group were great believers in education for all, and minimal literacy or better was the rule in this population.

What we find in the records, however, is that the surname GAY is as likely to be spelled "Guy" as "Gay" (though almost never "Gey" or "Goy" since that would violate the phonetic rules).

At first, until I began to understand the rudiments of what I have written above, I puzzled over this, maintaining a high degree of skepticism that I was dealing with one and the same surname. But when I began to find both spellings in records evidently pertaining to the same well-identified subjects, and indeed, occasionally both spellings in the same record, I began to get the picture.

Now, the way I look at it is that the prevalence of the spelling "Gay" is indicative of a more-than-minimal degree of literacy on the part of the recorder, and perhaps also of the subject, while "Guy" tell us how the name was actually pronounced. Moreover I expect that some of these "Guy" spellings were recorded in spite of such literacy on the part of the recording clerk, but in deference to the principle of taking every man (and his surname) at his own self-appraisal—a characteristic American frontier trait.

English surname distribution maps predicated on the 1881 UKCensus suggest, though, that back in Britain, GAY and GUY had separate derivations (though spellings of the GAY surname probably also varied locally within the same family group. The surname distribution tables and maps accessible from my GAY Surname page (in the left column) show both GAYs and GUYs predominantly located

all through the southwest of England, though the greatest concentration of GAYs is in county Fife in Scotland. The GUYs are moderately concentrated in many of the coastal counties of Great Britain, and most heavily in the south central count of Dorsetshire—just as though the surname in that spelling had been brought over from France, with the original pronunciation "Gee" (with a hard "G"), which, in fact is thought to be the actual origin of this separate surname. However, from the extensive and widely scattered overlap in both surnames, I expect that there was a fair amount of the same dichotomy between print-conventional and phonetic spelling in Britain, and that the vast majority of 1881 Britons with either surname spelling had derivations from GAY.

My case in point from my own ancestry, is my gggGrandfather, who was usually styled in the old 18th century records "John Gay, Esq." to differentiate him from the several other John GAYs of the transmontane Virginia frontier. This John (son of another John Gay, who was reasonably well to do, but evidently lacked the higher education of his son and never held important public office) was very unusually chosen to be a county justice at the age of 21, and his qualification for that office can only bespeak both a secondary education and some training in the law. We have actual evidence that his oldest son, my ggGrandfather, John McKee Gay, had this degree of education (and was a county justice in his own time), and that father John Gay, Esq. married the adopted niece of Col. William McKee, who was the head trustee of the local secondary school, and one of the two ratifying delegates from his county to the Virginia federal constitutional convention. Thus, John Gay, Esq. and his son, though not his father, were members of the American gentry class. Now for the punch line: for all the other (numerous) GAYs in this area, their surname was spelled indifferently "Gay" or "Guy" (like it was pronounced), but for John Gay, Esq., it was always spelled "Gay", presumably at his insistence.

The Surname PIERCE, or PEARCE, or...

The standardization of this surname is evidently a vexed question to the present day. The authorities are agreed that it is derived from Middle English "Piers" (as in "Piers Ploughman"), which is itself derived from the ancient forename "Peter". But the Oxford surname dictionary tells us that the standard English form of the name is "Pearce", while in *American Surnames*, and in modern American phone books, we find that "Pierce" is by far the more common spelling (by a ratio of at least 4 to 1). Meanwhile, in old New England, the fountainhead of the American PIERCEs (it was the 32nd most common American surname in 1790), we find a well-established tradition also for the spelling "Peirce", which persisted well into the 1900s, but has evidently since been "corrected".

In 1882, Frederic Beech Pierce published his *Pierce Genealogy, ... the Posterity of Thomas Pierce...*[of Charlestown and WoburnMA]. He named as collaborator, Frederick Clifton Peirce who had published his own earlier *Peirce Genealogy*. Note the different spellings of these co-authors' names: not just Frederic/Frederick but Pierce/Peirce. This *Pierce Genealogy* was distinguished from most other works, both then and now, by the fact that the authors made the effort to find original autograph signatures of their subjects—which allows us to peer beyond the rule that it's mainly the clerks who determined the spelling of surnames according to their own orthographic preferences.

Principal author, Frederic Beech Pierce, also commissioned a prefatory note about the various spellings of the surname by one James Mills Peirce, a professor at Harvard, and a contributor to the *NEHGR* (then, as now, one of the leading scholarly genealogical journals of its day), and Frederic also inserted his own little preface on the same subject. So what did these gentlemen (self-styled "Esq."s all) conclude about the relationship of surname spelling to family line?

The Harvard professor and genealogist, James Peirce, opined that "a high degree of uniformity exists in the spelling... in any one family connection." He also thought that the spelling of the surname was fairly independent of how it sounds, chiefly because the name was most commonly pronounced (in his time) like "purse" but more often spelled "Pierce" or "Peirce". He also cites a more old-fashioned pronunciation, like the word "pairs", employed by a few people then still living.

To so divorce spelling from phonetics runs quite athwart my own experience (primarily with the records of the American colonial frontier), but it is, I suppose, consonant with the frequently divergent pronunciation vs. settled spellings of Old England, and can perhaps be accounted for by the long persistence of particular family lines in the same area, as speech sounds evolved over time—which was true also in *New* England, though to a far lesser degree.

Thus Professor Peirce's view has a certain plausibility, at least for the older towns of colonial New England, and I find my theory about the divergence between spelling and pronunciation in old British-rooted names confirmed by Professor Melwyn Bragg, in *The Adventure of English*.

In his author's preface, however, Frederic Pierce, the one who actually went to the trouble of collecting and studying all those autographic signatures, concludes otherwise: "The matter of the spelling... is entirely a matter of fancy or preference." By this he means, not an established idiosyncratic tradition (which could run in families, and thus signify for identity), but mere whim, as we see by the next sentence: "There are in existence autographs by the original Thomas, as being spelled in three different ways—Pierce, Peirce, and Pieirce." Frederic does go on to acknowledge that conventionalized spellings do occasionally seem to run in certain family lines (and these probably in more modern, post-Websterian times), but his bottom line is: "The matter of not belonging to the same family on account of not spelling the name the same way, as has been brought forward by some of my correspondents, has no force whatever."—perhaps overstating his position a bit.

So when it comes to surnames in early American records, *my* bottom line is that you have to think phonetically and disregard spelling *per se* (not intended as a Pierce pun)—although it is a convention of scholarship to always spell the name exactly as found in the record, just in case there may, after all, be some significance to the exact spelling. And when I see American spellings of a particular surname holding stubbornly to the older English spelling standardizations (their first modestly popular dictionaries go back to scholar Samuel Johnson's first dictionary of 1755), I'm not surprised to find that their subjects bear other marks of American gentry lines.

SOURCES:
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