

Onomastics and Genealogy

Onomastics is the study of naming practices and the formation of names and other proper nouns. Most people know that names tend to run in families and that certain child-naming patterns are common: e.g. children are often named for their parents, and maternal surnames are often used as given names. What isn't as widely realized is that various more specific child-naming patterns have prevailed for long periods of time in different areas of the world, and that these can have evidential weight when there is reason to believe that certain extended families were influenced by them.

At least three broad onomastic patterns have obtained in British colonial America and the early United States. These patterns were imported with the British sub-cultures that peopled the different regions of the American colonies, along the lines sketched out by David Hackett Fischer in his book, *Albion's Seed*,^[1] but since Americans have always been something of a polyglot people, local and regional influences filtered and enhanced certain of these imported patterns, while discarding others. The net results have been observed by genealogists of wide and deep regional experience and the patterns have also been subject to scholarly statistical studies whose results every serious genealogist would do well to become familiar with.

The most elaborate naming pattern by far was [the Scottish onomastic pattern](#). I've found two variations in this pattern that seem to have been of about equal popularity in Scotland, and which have persisted to some extent even into the modern era. These patterns were imported to America by a steady trickle of Scottish settlers, but primarily by the wave of Scotch-Irish who had removed, first, to Ireland in the 1600s, and then moved on to the back country of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and to a lesser extent, New England. As a result of the displacement of these families, the original formal pattern, which was heavily weighted toward remote ancestry, attenuated and dissipated, and the version of it that focused more closely on the parents prevailed. In particular, one of the characteristic identifiers of what I've dubbed the "parental" version of the Scottish pattern was the naming of the third son for his father, and the third daughter for her mother.

The Scottish onomastic pattern may be considered a special, elaborated, case of a general British onomastic pattern that has a strong tendency to name the first two sons for their father and paternal grandfather, and the first two daughters for their mother and their maternal grandmother. Subsequent sons tended to be named for paternal uncles, and subsequent daughters for maternal aunts, with preference either for the oldest uncles or aunts, or the ones closest to the parents in birth. There were, of course, many other minor tendencies, some of them specific to specific families, and when middle names began to become general in the generations after the American Revolution, the old naming patterns flared out and became more various and less recognizable. In fact in the wake of the Revolution, many boys were named for heroes of the Revolution instead of for ancestors. I won't pursue this topic into the 1800s because my focus here is on colonial roots.

Formal onomastic studies have been done for a typical colonial New England town (HinghamMA), and a typical tidewater Virginia county (Middlesex), and important statistical differences were found within the broad British pattern.^[2]

Some variation, of course, is to be expected because these were distinct cultural regions, with different original British population mixes.

¹ *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

² Both these studies have been published as chapters in Robert M. Taylor Jr. and Ralph S. Crandall, *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History* (MaconGA: Mercer University Press, 1986); David Hackett Fischer, "Forenames and the Family in New England: An Exercise in Historical Onomastics"; and Darrett B. Rutman and Anna H. Rutman, "In Nomine Avi: Child-naming patterns in a Chesapeake County, 1650-1750".

The Chesapeake Tidewater Pattern

The pattern relevant to the present inquiry is the Middlesex County, Virginia, one, and I've found in my practice that rough adherence to this pattern was common not only in the Chesapeake tidewater during the prime colonial period, 1650-1750, but that it generally extended out into the settlement of coastal North Carolina and the VA and NC piedmont regions. It is thus of broad significance to southern colonial families.

Where the Scottish onomastic pattern in America is usually distinguished by the naming of the third son (and/or the third daughter) for the same sex parent, with the general British pattern and particularly the tidewater pattern, the parental given name (or, let's simplify and just consider a father and his sons) was typically conferred on either the second, or sometimes, the first son.

More specifically, in the Chesapeake region, about 56% of the time the first son was named for either his father (F) or his father's father (FF), with the latter being preferred about 72% of the time, and for families that followed this practice, the second son was most often named for either the F or the FF—the opposite of what the first son was named.

Since many families in the insalubrious tidewater regions were started late by former indentured servants, and finished small, two or three given names tended to get concentrated in particular lineages, and about 29% of the time when the first son was named for either F or FF he was in fact named for both ancestors since they both had the same name. Adjusting for this, the chances that a second son would have been named for either the F or FF (whichever the first son wasn't named for) were about 66%.

For additional sons, or in families where this paternal ancestral pattern didn't prevail, the given names of uncles (usually paternal-side uncles) were most often favored, and overall only about 10% of sons weren't named for their F, their FF, or one of their uncles.

Finally, in the Rutmans' study, the homologous naming pattern was found for girls; in fact, the pattern was slightly more prevalent for them (first daughter named for M, 2nd for MM, or *vice versa*).

Of course, these are just statistics, and it's important to analyze specific families and extended families for their conformance to these patterns, and to be alert for characteristic family variations, as well as anomalous patterns or tendencies unique to particular extended families or lineages.

One of the most common variations I've seen was for a father *not* to name a son for himself, or perhaps to hide his own name as a generally unused middle name of one of his early sons, either to avoid ambiguity or for reasons of ego. However, since middle names were rare before the Revolution, even with these motives it must have been a hard choice for some fathers not to perpetuate their own given names amongst their sons, and I attribute the occasional popping up of the father's name with a late or last son as token of second thoughts.

Another common variation was to name an early son with his mother's surname, particularly if her family had a higher socioeconomic status—and status was very important in the colonial South. Or sometimes, the first or second son would receive the given name of his mother's father, rather than his father's father (this was a feature of the Scottish pattern). It's not coincidental, I believe, that sometimes grandfathers of means made special bequests to their namesake grandsons. Once middle names began to come in after the Revolution, one of the first two or three sons might be given the full name of his maternal grandfather as his first and middle name.

Finally, once naming got down to uncles (and aunts), either the oldest, or the one or two nearest in age to the father, were typically given preference. Naming an early son for an oldest brother who inherited all the father's land but happened to have no sons of his own might seem desirable to some parents, or in this region of high mortality it might be that an oldest brother had played the role of surrogate father in raising his siblings, which would supply a different motive for preference.