

This attempt to define a class of surnames is based largely on two kinds of sources: (1) the national censuses for the United Kingdom, and for the United States; and (2) assorted dictionaries and scholarly surname studies. It is also based, in a more informal way, on my nearly 20 years of experience in researching ROBBs, primarily in colonial Pennsylvania.

I use the all-caps term "ROBB" to designate all the surname variants whose spellings fall into a rather loose category of similar surnames of British origin, but it is the principal goal of this analysis to define that class, and to differentiate it from other, similar-sounding classes of surnames. Without resorting to one or another of the specialized phonetic alphabets, the broad class of names, and words, I mean to examine here will generally include all those of the form "R_b" or "R_p", with the "_" meant to represent any combination of vowels, and allowing for the possibility of a doubling of the final consonant, the addition of a silent "e", and/or the addition of a terminal "s" (whether meant as a possessive or a plural). Thankfully, only a fairly small subset of the possible permutations of these generic forms have practical significance—actually occur in the documentary records.

The surnames "Robb", "Rabb", and scores of other names are derived from the personal name "Robert", a popular given name in western Europe for 1000 years and more. Including the patronymic forms like "Robertson", Hanks & Hodges (1998) list about 120 such derivations without exhausting the variants. The most interesting derivation, perhaps, and certainly the most far afield, is the Breton form "Flaubert". Nearly all the other listings include the core sounds "R_b" or "R_p".

Since genealogists operating within cultures where the surname follows the male line are interested in particular patrilineages, rather than in surnames per se, one might think that any inquiry into a particular surname form within this protean surname complex, ought to try to begin by narrowing the geographic scope as much as possible. But this is a fairly hopeless task in areas like the British colonies, where extensive intercultural migration and mingling occurred before and during the 19th century when surname spellings finally began to crystallize out of their somewhat amorphous phonetic forms. Thus, in order to define a coherent class of closely related surnames in a place like America, it is necessary to consider the whole complex of soundalike surnames with their many variant spellings.

The Given Name "Robert"

Whereas most Americans would probably say that "Robert" is primarily Scottish, and secondarily English, the English themselves apparently tend to think of it as Norman French, which may be the closest to the truth. According to George Redmonds, the popular name Robert actually goes back to the ancient Germanic Franks, although it was the 4th or 5th most popular name in England during the late 1300s when surname adoption peaked.^[1]

The English/Scottish Surname "Robb"

Since my principal genealogical focus, and that of most of the people I write for, is on the subcultures which have emanated from Britain, I begin by noting that Hanks & Hodges classify "Robb", and "Rabb" as the principal *English* diminutive forms of Robert. Redmonds calls "Robb" a "pet" form of "Robert", distinguishing it from true diminutives like "Robbins" and "Robbie", or the Scottish "Roblin". Leaving semantics aside, most of the derived forms listed in Hanks & Hodges fail to qualify as soundalikes—the class I am attempting to define here. However, "Rabb" certainly does, and so does "Rapp", which is not a British surname at all, as we shall see.

¹ Redmonds, *Christian Names*, 10, 18, 30-31

Most Americans who have reflected on the surname “Robb” would probably tell you that it’s Scottish, or Scotch-Irish, and the statistics bear them out, as I shall demonstrate below. I note that Hanks has corrected the derivation of “Robb” to Scotch-Irish in his more recent work, *Dictionary of American Family Names* (2003), where, interestingly, he now identifies “Rabb” as specifically Scottish.

Convergence in America on the Spelling “Robb”

Regardless of original derivation, many of the families who brought to America surnames from the group of soundalikes being considered here, eventually converted their spelling to the most common Anglicized form “Robb”.

Black ROBBs

An additional wrinkle emerges in the US. After the Civil War, when millions of former slaves were cut loose into the general population, and suddenly needed surnames, the process of surname adoption undergone in Britain many hundreds of years ago was reenacted amongst this new class of American citizens. It is well known that the most popular choices for many blacks were the surnames of their former masters—a pattern reminiscent of the tendency of Scots to adopt the surnames of clan chiefs or of local established landed families. However, there were few white ROBB slaveowners in America, and when many blacks surnamed ROBB emerged in the decades following the war, it is probable that they were following, instead, the ancient pattern of fashioning a surname from the personal name Robert. I have broken out the statistics for American ROBBs below into “Black” and “White” categories for the different surname variants found in the USCensus as of the period 1880-1900, in order to shed light on this process, and also to try to keep the “White” statistics comparable to those for the British-originated ROBBs during the same period.

The Evidence of the UK & the USCensuses

The census data presented here comes from the Ancestry.com indexes to the UKCensus for 1901 and the USCensus for 1900. However, I do not show a simple tally of individuals found in those censuses bearing particular surnames. Instead, **I have extracted the number of individuals born within the 20 year periods immediately preceding these censuses.** I have chosen comparable periods, of course, to allow surname frequency comparisons between Britain and the United States, and I have picked the most recent terminal years for which comparison is possible, to maximize the degree of surname standardization on both sides of the pond

At the same time, I have restricted the sampling period for several reasons. The 1880-1900 period was the high tide of immigration from the European continent to the United States, and therefore the period most conducive to capturing the raw foreign forms of the Germanic and other non-British ROBB soundalikes, and to showing the national origins of those who bore these surnames. Instead of going for maximum comparability, as I have for the British-originated surnames, with these foreign surnames my intent was just the opposite— to differentiate the continental surnames from their British counterparts as much as possible, and from each other.

For each surname variant below, I have shown the number of individuals born in Eng)land and Sco)tland between 1881-1901, and the number born in the U.S.A. between 1880-1900. The U.S. data is further broken out by race: black or white, and additional columns are provided to indicate the national origins of those foreign-born.

SCOTTISH Robb/Rabb, etc.

	Eng	Sco	----U S A---- Total	Black	white	Foreign born (in 1900 USC)
Robb	484	2529	2807	278-10%	2529	19 Britain (.7%): 12 Sco (8 fams), 6 Eng (3 fams), 1 Ire); and 2 Germany
Rob	13	6	338	92-27%	246	5 Britain, 5 Germany
Robbs	87	1	302	72-24%	230	1 Britain, 0 Germany by the 1930 census, the "Robbs" spelling is concentrated in the southern tier of states, though only about 10% are black
Rabb	10	18	681	242-36%	439	1 Germany, 1 Austria about 80% of the white Rabbs were born in the south or the border states
Rab	1	0	115	29-25%	86	3 Portugal, all 1 family, and, anglicized from different surnames: 1 Russia(A), 1 Italy(A)
			----- 4243	---- 713		

From the above statistics, it is clear that the "Robb" form (including the patronymic "McRobb") is overwhelmingly of Scottish derivation. In fact these statistics understate the Scottish proportion, because about 10% of Robbs resident in England in 1901 were born in Scotland.

However, when the surname traveled to America, its spelling often crystallized out phonetically as "Rabb", which was probably closer to the way the name was pronounced by the Scotch-Irish immigrants who brought it over to colonial Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. At least one line of colonial PA Robbs, though, settled on the spelling "Robe", which is more difficult to account for. since the vowel sound is so different. A Scottish correspondent has told me that the surname "Robb" even today is often pronounced over there like "Rabb" (as in "rabbit"), but also occasionally like "robe" (the garment), and I have often heard the same mispronunciation of my own "Robb" surname, right here in America, and marveled at how the speaker came up with that sound, given the pronunciation of our English words "cob" and "cobble", "hob" and "hobble", and of course "rob" and "robbed".

At any rate, considering the ROBB DNA project data as well as my own research, it appears that the first four Scotch-Irish ROBB families who settled in Pennsylvania were all probably related (within Patrilineage 2), and their surnames appear in the records variously as "Robb", "Rabb", or "Robe", and waht's more, there are modern descendants of these families who still spell their name in these three different ways!

If the form "Robe" is a phonetic puzzle, the form "Rabb" is an historical one because one has to suppose that as part of the convergence of surname spellings in America, many of the German "Rapp"s would have become "Rabb"s, but I do not think that this occurred to any great extent in colonial PA despite the extensive intermingling of Robbs and Rapps; I think this is because most of the colonial clerks of Pennsyylvania became highly experienced in sorting out the German surnames from the Scotch-Irish.

Black American ROBBs in the 1900 USCensus

There were, in the USCensus of 1900, a substantial percentage of blacks bearing the surname ROBB in various spellings: about 10% of the "Robb"s, but 27% of the "Rob"s, and also 36% of "Rabb"s and 25% of "Rab"s. I think that these proportions, and the uncertain spellings, bear out my theory that many former slaves and their children created surnames out of their personal name,

Robert, and its more familiar derivative, “Rob”. The major alternative, that these blacks adopted their master’s surname, ROBB, is not borne out by the statistics, which show comparatively few antebellum ROBBs in areas where slave-owning was prevalent:

Distribution of “Robb”s in the 1860 USCensus, by state:

693 PA	51 VA	118 MO
401 OH	20 NC	124 KY
90 WI	31 SC	---
183 IN	17 AL	242
346 IL	15 MI	
90 MI	30 LA	
296 NY	21 TX	
----	83 TN	
2099	10 AR	

	278	

Total:3141

I also note with interest, that by the time of the 1930 USCensus, the proportions of these black ROBBs had declined markedly, from 7% to 4%, with most the variant spellings (really misspellings) “Rob” and “Rab” practically disappearing altogether.

Distribution of ROBBs in the 1900 and 1930 USCensuses:

	---1900---		---1930---	
	All	Blk	All	Blk
Robb	6881	278	8657	200
Rob	758	92	72	7
Robbs	625	72	765	70
Rabb	1429	242	1712	174
Rab	250	29	164	11
Totals:	9943	713	11370	462

This suggests that surnames were still somewhat free-floating for blacks as late as 1900, and that most of these black ROBBs probably learned from their more educated white counterparts that they weren’t supposed to just use personal names for their surnames—they were supposed to have “proper” surnames, spelled the “correct” way—said whites being unaware that a very large proportion of all surnames were originally derived in just this way—from personal names—and that their own recent ancestors generally spelled their own names phonetically.

North German, Frisian, & Dutch Robbe/Robe, and Breton French Robé

	Eng	Scot	----U S A----	Foreign born (in 1900 USC)
			Total Black white	
Robbe	3	0	146	10 Germany in 5 families (6.8%), 6 Finland, all 1 family 1 of the 3 English was b. Fra 3 families
Robbes	0	0	6	

[The following forms, “Robe” and “Roby”, may have independent British origins: “Roby” in Scotland and also as a possible locative derived from Roby, Lancashire, and/or Robey, Derbyshire]

Robe	86	3	294	9- 3%	285	2 Britain (same family), 1 Holland
Roby	399	5	1756	280-16%	1476	1 Britain, 3 Germany

The most striking thing about this class of surnames is that “Roby” seems to be an odd man out, and perhaps it is. Hanks & Hodges list it as yet another Scottish derivation from Robert, and I have included it here for comparison only because its phonetic similarity to the Breton Robé suggests that it might have a common origin (there was actually quite a bit of cultural commerce between Scotland and France at various times). And it might have an independent origin in England as well: Reaney and Wilson suggest a locative derivation from roby, Lancashire, or Reobey, Derbyshire. On the whole, my inclination is to consider “Roby” a wholly separate surname, not of the class of ROBB.

The other three forms of the surname, though, do probably belong in the class of ROBBs, and they seem to reach back deep into the past, to the time when an early Germanic population began to spread out around the North Atlantic and North Sea littoral, most notably in the Anglo-Saxon “invasion” of southern England dating from the 4th Century CE, in the wake of the Romans.

It is Hanks, *American Family Names* (2003) which assigns “Robé” a derivation from the Breton French, and which calls “Robbe” north German and Frisian, which would give it a pronunciation like “robe” (the garment). I have already noted that Patrilineage 2 of the ROBB DNA project includes, not only “Robb”s, and “Rabb”s, but also “Robe”s. Is it possible that the Scotch-Irish of colonial PA who settled on the surname spelling “Robe”, were descendants of a family which came over to Britain and Scotland late enough from NW Germany, French Normandy, or Brittany, to have preserved the phonetic form of one of these old Teutonic surnames? As it happens, although the early colonial Pennsylvania ROBBs with the “Robe” spelling were almost certainly of Scotch-Irish descent, as members of Patrilineage 2 they do in fact have deep genetic roots in the same northern Germanic and Frankish population from which these Robbe/Robé forms are supposed to have come.^[2]

Central German Rapp, Rabe, Raub, and Rupp

	Eng	Sco	----U S A----	Total	Black	White	Foreign born (in 1900 USC)
RAPP (from Middle High German—also Swedish)							
Rapp	43	0	3096				54 Germany (1.7%) 15 Sweden (in 7 families) 8 Austria (2 ManhattanNY families) 9 Eng (7 from the same Buffalony family) 3 New Zealand (same Massachusetts fam with
father b.Eng)							2 Switzerland (2 families) 5 Russia (1 Manhattan fam, and 1 Brooklyn) 2 Hungary (same fam) 1 France 1 Germany, sev Hawaii (anglicized from a
Rapps diff surname)	24	0	83				
RABE (German for “raven”)							
Rabe	7	0	856	12-	1%	844	23 Germany (2.7%) all the blacks are of one TX family 1 of the 7 English was b. Ger
Raab	17	0	779				18 Germany (2.3%) 2 Austria, 1 Bohemia, 1 Switzerland, many from Germany; 3 Britain (none in Sco)
Raub	0	0	407				5 Germany
Raup	6	0	164				3 Germany
Rupp Norway,	24	0	2157				17 Germany, 2 Austria, 2 Switzerland, 1
Rup	8	0	105				1 Russia, 1 Eng-Canadian

² Their haplogroup is I2b (I-M223) appears to stem from northwestern Germany and Frisia.

The *OED* has a couple of entries for “Rab” referring to an obsolete trade tool and a manufacturing process, but nothing for “Rabb”, “Rabe”, or “Rapp”. Cassell’s *German Dictionary* says that the German noun “Rappe”, means “black horse”, while “Rabe” means raven or crow. However, HANKS-2003 says that “Rapp” is a variant in German for “Rabe”, and that both mean “raven”.

Hanks & Hodges gives an additional Swedish derivation for “Rapp” (also noted in Hanks-2003): it is said to be one of the earliest Swedish surnames, one of a class of “soldier’s names” adopted in the 17th century before surname usage became general. In Swedish, the word means “prompt” or “quick”—a good sobriquet for a military ranker.

The words “Raub” and “Rauber” in German mean “rob” and “robber” (from the middle high German “roup” says Hanks), and I suspect that “Raub” and “Raup” form a distinct surname group.

HANKS-2003 lists “Rupp” as yet another variant of “Robert”, but the absence of this form in Britain, and the significant representation of immigrants named “Rupp” from the Germanic areas in the 1900 USCensus, clearly marks this surname—as found in America anyway.

I have encountered this distinct form amongst the colonial PA German population in association with favorite German Christian names, and in scanning through the census entries for immigrants in 1900, I discovered that 40% or more of those bearing the surname “Rupp” in 1900 still lived in PA, with most of the remainder scattered across OH, WI, and the upper midwest, Also, the given names of these people in 1900 were still concentrated upon favorite German names, and there was a “Gerhard” amongst them. One thinks also of the famous American basketball coach, Adolph Rupp, whose paternal line ancestry obviously requires no further explication. Cassell’s also lists a German adjective “ruppig”, meaning coarse, unmannerly, or loutish, which could be another possible derivation.

REPPs

	Eng	Sco	----U S A----			Foreign born (in 1900 USC)
			Total	Black	White	
Repp	15	0	574			3 Germany, 3 Italy (all same family)

This rather rare name remains a mystery. HANKS-2003 says that “Repp” and “Rep” are variants of “Roper”, an English occupational name, which seems dubious. Interestingly, “Roper” is also listed in Hanks & Hodges as a Breton French variant of “Robert”, like Robé.

Conclusion

Thus, the surnames “Rapp”, “Rabe”, “Raub”, and “Rupp” are clearly of German origin, while “Rapp” also has an independent Swedish origin. “Repp” is indeterminate.

Interestingly, the American “Rapp”s have been running neck and neck with the American “Robb”s in the proliferation derby. In the 1900 USCensus there were 6975 “Rapp”s and by 1930 this number had increased 25% to 8777, while for the Robbs, the corresponding figures are 6881, and 8657.

The SOURCES ...

Patrick Hanks, *Dictionary of American Family Names*, 3 vols (Oxford University Press, 2003)

Patrick Hanks & Flavia Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames* (Oxford University Press, 1998)

R.A. McKinley, *A History of British Surnames* (Longman Group Ltd, 1990)

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George Redmonds, *Christian Names in Local and Family History* (Toronto: The Dundurn Group, 2004)

Elsdon D. Smith, *American Surnames* (1969; reprint GPC, 1994)

The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971)

This is the original, complete dictionary, "reduced micrographically".

The New Cassell's German Dictionary (Funk&Wagnalls, 1958)

...and what they say about the above surnames:

REANEY-1997 (many of the early surname usages were as bynames)
no Peaver, Pever, Peover, or Pover

ROBB Robb, Robbs, Robe;
 pet form of Robert, giving other early usages: Robbe; Robes; Robbes
ROBBIE Robbie, Robey
 Scottish diminutive of ROBB; Robey may also be a locative surname
 from Robey, Derby or Roby, Lancs.
ROBBINS Robins, Robyns, Robbins, Robbings, Robbens, Robens
 a diminutive of Rob; Robin and Robert are used interchangeably

There are entries also for the patronymics ROBSON, ROBINSON

HANKS(&HODGES)-1998

ROBB Robb, Rabb are listed as English diminutives of the personal name,
 Robert, while Robin, Robey are listed as Scottish derivatives

RAPP Swedish soldier's name; German and Jewish (Ashkenazic), cognate of "raven"

HANKS-2003
no ROB, RAB, or ROBBS

Hanks usefully provides frequency counts for each surname variant,
out of a 1997 American telephone database of 88.7 million listings

	Freq	(surname derived from Robert unless otherwise indicated)
ROBB	5441	Scotch-Irish
ROBE	153	French (Robé), English, N German
ROBBE	135	N German, Frisian, from the German personal name "Robbe"
ROBBEN	448	N German patronymic of personal name "Robbe"
RABB	1019	Scottish
RABBITT	466	Scottish-pet form of RABB (presumably includes "Rabbit"—there were 1000 for the two in 1930)
RAPP	5996	German nickname from Middle High German Rab(e), Rapp(e) = "raven"; Swedish-18th century "soldier's name"—surname cooked up to differentiate soldiers
RABE	1828	German nickname from Middle High German Rab(e), Rapp(e) = "raven"
RAAB	2160	variant of RABE
RAABE	833	variant of RABE
RAUB		not checked yet
RAUP		not checked yet