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EVOLUTION OF FAMILY NAMES IN FRANCE

DECEMBER 23, 2014 | ALISTER

Like many other countries, family names in France have evolved for centuries and still are. It is closely linked to the history of the country and reflects its evolution from the Roman times to today.

In France, family names can find their origins to the times of Ancient Rome. Rome's influence having spread inside the borders of its empire, the inhabitants of Gaule often referred as Gallo-Romans have adopted parts of its culture. The *tria nomina* (use of three names) became common in Gaule with a forename, a surname and a nickname.

However, with the decline of Rome and what is called the *barbaric invasions*, this system tended to decline and the *barbaric* tradition of a single name spread.

The naming system changed again with the spread of Christianity inside the borders of actual France. At first, most names were from Frankish influence as we can see with the names of the Merovingian kings (Vth century - VIIIth century). Generally, during the Merovingian period people had a unique name which was a mix of his father's and mother's surname. Later on, the attribution of a name which once was the name of a great person (such as a king, a landowner or a local hero) became a more common practice.

It was during the Merovingian period that Catholicism spread among the population and the attribution of a name referring to a saint of the Church appeared. At first, family names were almost

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aristocrats added to their forenames a *filiation* name which became hereditary. These early surnames were often the name of the land they own or the name of their lordships. Under the Carolingian, the heredity of nobility spread along the heredity of the surnames.

However the common people were still only referred by a single name (for most people, they were no difference between a forename and a surname yet) which was most of the time enough to designate a person as the societies and communities were still relatively small. With France knowing an important increase of population and villages and towns growing quickly, this system a single name became a problem. The list of names was much smaller than it is today and identifying an individual in a small village with ten Jean or Martin was problematic which is why people adopted the use of a nickname. It became a common practice, not only in France but also in England, actual Germany and many other countries.

People attributed nicknames between each other. Jean le Grand (Jean the Tall, because of his height) was now easier to differentiate than Jean le Boucher (Jean the Butcher) and Hugues de Jean (Hugues the son of Jean) was no longer confused with Hugues de la Forêt (Hugues who lived near the Forest). By the twelfth century, the heredity of these nicknames was common practice and became family names. The members of the family living near the local river was known as the Rivière or Larivière or De Larivière and were differentiated by a forename.

There are two important dates in France that sealed the fate of family names. In 1474, king Louis XI the Prudent enacted a law forbidding people to change their surname without an authorization. This was a law more destined to the aristocracy than to the general population. The second date however is more important and should be well known to genealogists researching their ancestry in France : 1539.

In 1539, king François I and the parlement of Paris enacted a reform with 192 new articles and laws, the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts. This Ordinance was such a turning point in France's legislative history that some articles or parts of them are still enforced today.

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One of the reforms in the Ordinance was the obligation for every parish inside the territory of France (which was not yet looking like actual France) to create a register of the baptisms made in the parish. These registers were mandatory for everyone of the Catholic faith. With these baptisms came the obligation to write a family name, unchangeable (unless with the approval of authorities) however with no spelling rules (hence the different spellings of the surnames, even for the same individual). It is in 1539 that family names became mandatory for every catholic family in France despite the fact that most people already made use of surnames since several centuries.

The Ordinance of 1539 also obliged the registers of baptism records to be kept in the French language. However, most people outside the Parisian region were unfamiliar with this language since they spoke a regional language or a local dialect. Many people were still unfamiliar with the French language during the last century. This is a reason why France has such a vast diversity in family names despite that they may come from actual France, the origins of many surnames can be found in local or regional languages. For example, while a Parisian carpenter could be named Pierre Charpentier (Peter Carpenter), a carpenter from Brittany could be named Péron Calvé or Le Calvès (Peter Carpenter).

French family names can found their origins in Flemish, Breton, Catalan or Alsatian dialects or the Occitan language. In South-Eastern France, many surnames can have similarities with the Italian languages due to migrations of populations or the evolutions of the borders.

With the French revolution, the registration of births were applied to everyone without distinction of faith. Aristocratic surnames also suffered changes with the revolution as many nobles (or ex-nobles) modified their family names to sound less aristocratic. For example, the wife of the emperor Napoléon Bonaparte, empress Joséphine de Beauharnais was neither born with this name or called as such. Joséphine was born Marie-Josèphe Rose Tascher de la Pagerie (her family previously beings lords of La Pagerie). Before the revolution she married the Viscount Alexandre de Beauharnais (hence her surname) and after her divorce and the end of the Ancien Régime

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was known as Marie-Josèphe de Tascher, or Marie Rose Tascher. The same example can be found with the deposed king Louis XVI or became Louis Capet and not Louis XVI or Louis de France or Louis de Bourbon.

Traditionally in France, a child was given the surname of his father (a patronyme) and if he was an illegitimate child could be given the surname of the mother (a matronyme). Since 2003, a law enabled the choice of the surname for a child and women are not forced to take their husband's name. When married, a woman is given the two names (her maiden name and marital name) but can choose to use both or one of her choice. The same can be applied to a newborn who can be given his father's name, mother's name or both. Since 2013 after several judicial cases, a child is given both names with alphabetical order in case of disagreement among the parents.

Surnames are hard to change but everyone can make the request to have it changed. In order to do so, one has to officially make the request to the Journal Officiel and the Departmental Special Office of Publicity. If the request is accepted, it will be examined by the Minister of Justice or the Prosecutor of the Republic. The request will only be accepted if the reason is legitimate. It can be due to the wish to change a surname because of the difficulty or trouble it can cause to the person, because someone else's (famous or infamous) has the same name as yours or because the name sounds too foreign. These are examples but the most common reason once may want to change his surname (or complete name).

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