

3-1-2018

Swedish Naming Customs

Geoffrey Fröberg Morris AG

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morris, Geoffrey Fröberg AG (2018) "Swedish Naming Customs," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 38: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol38/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Swedish Naming Customs

BY GEOFFREY FRÖBERG MORRIS AG®

Have you been confused by a first or last name in Swedish records? Maybe you can not find your ancestor because their given name was recorded differently? Or, maybe their last name changed completely? But why would a person change their last name? The answers to these questions depend on the time period, social standing, and the laws at the time. Let's start with given names, then to surnames, and finally look at tips for genealogists.

Medieval – 1500's

Given Names

During Viking and early Medieval times people used old Germanic names such as Erik, Torbjörn, Gunhild, and Estri. When Christianity arrived, many given names from the Bible and liturgical calendars became popular, for example, Andreas, Johannes, Maria, and Christina which later might become Anders, Johan, Maja, and Stina.

You will also see that some given names were more popular within a region. People with advanced education, the clergy, and the burghers (in cities) often changed their given names to a Latin or Greek form, for example: Olof to Olaus, Björn to Bero, or Petter to Petrus.

Surnames

Before the 1500's very few people used hereditary surnames the way we do. Most people used place names to be identified in the village or to a farm, for example: Aslak of Frölunda.

By the late 1500's and early 1600's the practice of using surnames spread from the nobility¹ to the educated and the clergy, to the burghers in the cities, and to the peasants in rural areas. The practice of using a surname didn't have cultural roots in Sweden but instead came largely from Germany and England. Let's look at each group:

Nobility

The nobility was the first group to use family surnames by using a patronymic name (father's given name with the ending of -sson or -dotter) to be identified to their father. Other members of nobility created a surname in various ways. Some used single or double words to create one by describing a family shield, or using the names of animals, plants, weapons, or places.²

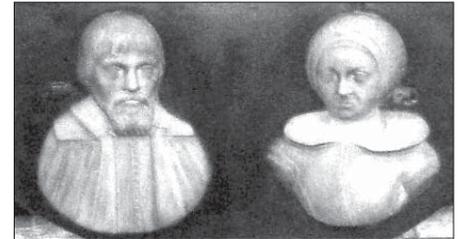


Coat of arms of the Örnflycht family.

Scholars and civil servants

Some university men and clergy kept their patronymic surname. Most others changed their surname to a Latin or Greek form such as: Karlsson to Caroli, or Erichsson to Erichius, or Colliander from Kulla farm in Växjö (Kron.). They sometimes based their new name on the place where they came from like Meurling/Mörling from Mör-lunda (Kalm.), Lovén from Loshult (Krist.), and Fallenius from Fallebo in Kristdala (Kalm.).

If a family was descended from a prominent foreign family they usually kept that name: Wohlfahrt, Hamilton, Eiserman, Aminoff, and Calissendorf.



Uno Troilius (1586–1664), rural dean of Leksand (Dala.), and his wife Margareta Hansdotter (1594–1657). Uno's father was named Truls Larsson. Picture from epitaph in Leksand church.

Peasants and rural people

Peasants in rural areas traditionally used their patronymic surname. Local craftsmen like tailors and millers often used surnames like Landberg and Blomberg.

Blacksmiths that worked in the iron works often had specific surnames that were used for generations: Aldrin, Bröms, Hjulström.

Peasants who moved to the cities often changed their last names to become more singular and modern.

1600's – 1901

The time of Sweden's wars and expansion in the 1600's brought names from other countries, especially France and Germany.

Given names from other countries became popular in the 1700's (Jeannette, Oscar), starting in the larger cities and by the 1800's throughout the rest of the country.

The burghers³ in the cities followed the example of the nobility but did not use terms that were associated with nobility. They often combined two words to create a surname, for example Ek and Berg to make Ekberg.

Or perhaps the first in the family to move to the city used a variant form based on their place of origin, combined with an ending such as -ström, -berg, or -man. For example: someone from Nordmaling using Nord and -ström to create Nordström. The

farming class traditionally continued to use patronymic surnames.

With increased population and cultural shifts in society, by the mid-1800's many people had common given names with patronymic and non-patronymic surnames all over the kingdom. By the late 1800's many people started using a patronymic surname as a set family surname.

Children born out of wedlock

Some illegitimate children were given unusual first names because 1) the unwed mother may have been employed as a household servant by a burgher (*borgare*) and was influenced by non-traditional names, and 2) having a child out-of-wedlock had a negative social stigma so the mother might break from family traditions. In rare cases, you will see a matronymic surname based on the mother's given name, like Annasson. These kinds of names seems to have been mostly used in northern Sweden.

Military Surnames

Military surnames were assigned by the commanding officer or may have been assigned to the soldier's (or sailor's) residence.⁴ When the military service ended, many went back to using their patronymic name. Other members in the family (i.e., wife or children) may or may not have used the soldier surname. This was not so common in the 1700s, but became increasingly common during the 1800s.

If a family had for instance 5 sons that all joined the military, they would all have different surnames. Some families kept the military surname over multiple generations. Examples: Sträng (harsh), Sköld (shield), Bergschöld (mountain + shield).

Towards modern times

With the increase in population by the mid-1800's, many people who had a common first name with a common patronymic surname decided to change their surname to something else. They often followed the pattern of people living in the cities.

If an ancestor changed his or her last name before 1901, you should look for the change in the parish records. This is often seen with the word "född" meaning the person was born with another surname, for example "född" Olofsson. Or the cler-

gyman might have written "calls himself Dahlberg" (*kallar sig Dahlberg*).

In cases of the military, the patronymic name might be mentioned on the first or last registration in the muster rolls. Conscripted soldiers did not have military names.

1901 – Present

Prior to the Name Ordinance of 1901 (*Namnlagen*), persons could change their last name to almost whatever they wanted. The regulation also encouraged all Swedes to use a set family surname. The 1920 Swedish marriage law required a woman to take her husband's surname at the time of marriage.

If the last name was changed after 1901, there should be a record of it with the Swedish National Archives (*Riksarkivet*) within the Swedish Ministry of Education,⁵ with records preserved between 1901 and 1947. After 1947 the Patent and Registration office⁶ (*Patent och registreringsverket*) handled the records of changing surnames.

The Name Ordinance of 1901 was revised in 1919, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1931, 1946, and 1962. The ordinance was legally replaced by the Personal Names Act of 1963 which was dominated by the idea that name stability was in the public interest.⁷ The practice of using a patronymic name based on a father's given name was outlawed in 1966. Another Names Act was passed in 1982 which was very liberal, essentially anyone could change their surname to be almost anything they wanted⁸ if it has a linguistic form that fits well in Sweden. Most recently the Swedish government proposed a naming law bill which took effect July 1, 2017. From this date it is the Swedish Tax Agency (*Skatteverket*) that handles all given names and surnames. Changes in the law include scrapping the limits on how many times a person may change his or her name to allow individuals to change their names an unlimited number of times. Moreover, the law removes protection for surnames that are carried by at least 2,000 persons, making these names available for adoption by all.

Tips for Genealogists

1. The tradition to name a child after a grandparent, for example 1st son after the father's father, 2nd son after mother's

father, and 3rd son after the father, with the same pattern for daughters and mothers was "tradition," not a law.

2. There are many ways to spell personal names, so be flexible when reading records or searching databases.
3. A female born in the time of patronymics who lived into the late 1800's might have a different patronymic surname, i.e., changing maiden name Larsdotter to Larsson, or her husband's patronymic surname.
4. If one parent was previously widowed, then some couples will name their first child (of the deceased's gender) after the deceased spouse.
5. A child's given name might have been influenced by the minister. For example, a child's name might be written in the Latin form in the birth record, and a common variant in the household records (i.e., Petrus in the birth record and Pär in the household records.)
6. Some given names are interchangeable, such as: Johannes, Johan, John, Jon, Jöns, Jan, Jean, and Jaen. A good list of interchangeable names can be found at: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Sweden_Names_Personal
7. As some given names were more popular within a region, combined with patronymics, you'll find there are many people with similar names in an area. Use additional evidence to support relationship conclusions.
8. When persons changed their last name, there is no guarantee that anyone in the family changed surname name too (some did and some did not).
9. In Dalarna and Gotland people used the residential farm names (*gårdsnamm* [see SAG 2017/4 p. 11], as part of their name. The farm name was placed before the given name, i.e., Liss Lars Olsson (Lissgården) in Dalarna. It was before (if a hired hand) and after (if belonging to the owners) in Gotland.⁹
10. Before 1901 it's not unusual to see multiple generations using different non-patronymic last names.

References

Kjällerström, Per August. *Svensk Namnbok. Dopnamn, Ättenamn, Ortenamn.* (Ulricehamn, 1895).

Sveriges radio Släktband, *Släkthemligheter* – Margareta Svahn on given names, (Nov. 21, 2004).

Sveriges Radio Släktband, *Släktband besöker mormonkyrkans center; Eva Brylla on surnames* (Dec. 5, 2004).

Brylla, Eva. *The Swedish Personal Names Act 1982 and the impact of its interpretation on the surname stock*. In *Studia Anthroponymica Scandinavica* (SAS), *Tidskrift för nordisk personforskning*, 23:2005.

Johansson, Carl-Erik. *Cradled in Sweden*. Everton publisher, (2002).

Allén Sture – Wåhlin, Staffan, *Förnamnsboken* (Stockholm 1979).

Malmsten, Anders *Svenska namnboken* (2001).

Otterbjörk, Roland: *Svenska förnamn: kortfattat namnlexikon* (1992).

Endnotes

- 1) The House of Nobility was created in 1626 which required family genealogies and registration.
- 2) For example: Ulf (wolf), Örnflycht (eagle flight), Gyllensvärd (golden sword), Söderhielm (southern helmet).
- 3) a citizen of a town or city, typically a member of the wealthy bourgeoisie.
- 4) Military surnames were often assigned to the residence between the 1680's and the early 1900's and would have been used by whoever the soldier (or sailor) was at the time. The surname cannot be used to assume relationship to the previous or subsequent soldier (or sailor.)
- 5) *Ecklesiastikdepartementet* was a department handling reform between 1840 to 31 December, 1967.

- 6) Patent- och registreringsverket (PRV).
- 7) Brylla, Eva. *The Swedish Personal Names Act 1982...*, 23:2005 p. 73.
- 8) Many are changing their name to sound more anglicized by translating their name into English, others are using nobility sounding or nobility names that have died out if it is not prominent in the culture or history.
- 9) Kjällström, Per August, *Svensk Namnbok, Dopnamn, Ättnamn, Ortnamn*, p. 125.

Author Geoffrey Fröberg Morris lives in Salt Lake City.
E-mail: gfrobergmorris@gmail.com

Some notes on Swedish legal records

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

The first common law for all of Sweden was written in the 1350s, called *Magnus Eriksson's Landslag*, and remained in use until 1734, when the new common law was instituted and accepted by king and parliament in 1736. Parts of that law have been in use until recently.

Swedish legal records are preserved from many levels in the legal system. The basic court is the *Häradsrätten* (district court) in rural areas and the basic legal unit was then the *härad* (legal district), which consisted of a number of neighboring parishes.

The parish (*socken, församling*) is always the basic unit in all types of Swedish genealogical research. But what is a parish? A parish is a geographical area, the smallest administrative unit in Sweden. All people in the same parish went to the same church, were registered in the same books, and were buried in the same churchyard.

The *häradshövding* (district court judge) was a university-trained law graduate, but he also had the assistance of the *nämndemännen* (permanent jurymen), which were twelve local men of good repute. It was considered a big honor to be a *nämndeman*, and in many cases this honor was carried on through several generations of the same family.

The court met three times a year. These meetings were called *Vinterting*, *Sommarting*, and *Hösteting*. Each *härad* had a designated meeting place, the *tingsplats*, where there also was some kind of a prison, where miscreants were kept during the *tingsmöte*. At other times prisoners were kept in the county government seat (*residensstaden*).

If a serious crime, a major theft, or a murder happened, then the court would be assembled for a meeting, called *Ur-tima ting* ("out of time"). The records from that meeting can be found in a special book for such meetings, or in the ordinary minutes.

The preserved records of the district courts usually start in the 1600s, and they are of many types. But two kinds are of special interest to genealogists, the *domböcker* (court minutes) and the *bouppteckningar* (estate inventories, probate).

In the *domböcker* you will find almost everything under the sun that people could drag each other into court for, minor misdemeanors and capital crimes.

Every death sentence had to be referred to a *Hovrätt* (Court of Appeal). The first *Hovrätt* was started in 1614, *Svea Hovrätt*, which tried cases from

the whole country. In 1623 the *Hovrätt* for Finland was instituted in Åbo. In 1634 the *Göta Hovrätt* for southern Sweden was instituted in Jönköping.

The *Hovrätter* should scrutinise the the sentences from the *häradsrätter*, and they often changed the sentence to prison or fines.

Death sentences were sent from the *Hovrätt* to the King, who had to sign them, or could commute the sentence to, for instance, hard labor for life.

In the cities

In the cities there were usually two levels of courts, the *Rådhusrätt* and the *Kämnärsrätt*. Smaller cities had only the *Rådhusrätt*. The *borgmästare* (mayor of the city) was the judge, and handled many different kinds of cases. This court also had a permanent jury that consisted of the *Rådmän* (pl.), of which there were two categories, those with a law exam, and those without. Normally there was a court meeting every week with the *borgmästare* and three *rådmän* present.

In the *Kämnärsrätt* all less serious cases were handled: disputes, fighting in streets, pilfering, paternity cases, and much more. From the *Kämnärsrätten* people could appeal to the *Rådhusrätt* if they were not satisfied with a verdict. These courts were abolished in 1849.

(More on estate inventories in next SAG).