

Sweden's Multiple Naming Systems & How They Changed in the 1800s

The importance of names

As genealogists, we recognize that names are important in our research.

- They are individual identifiers (although seldom unique).
- They are carriers of information, suggesting gender and ethnicity (although sometimes erroneously).
- They are often the starting points in our research on the history of families.
- They are the primary search term in many digitized databases.

Names must be right if we are to trace individuals and determine their positions in family genealogies.

Unfortunately, they are often incorrect in databases and family trees. An illustrative example is the large number of errors made regarding Swedish names. Why are so many Swedish names given incorrectly?

Names and naming systems in Sweden

The recording of names

Time line:

Recording of Swedish names goes back at least to the Viking times, when names were inscribed on stones and pieces of wood. The names of Swedish nobility were first recorded on parchment in the 1200s.

Parish-level records, including names and vital statistics for all persons living in each Swedish parish, began in the 1600s and became well established during the 1700s. The Lutheran Church, which was the state church, acted as the census taker for the King and government.

Types of records:

For centuries, names of Swedes were recorded in church books many times during their lifetimes—when they were born and baptized, when they were confirmed, when they became engaged and married, when they had children, and when they died. From 1860, church book extracts were sent to a central authority, SCB.

Individuals' names were recorded repeatedly in the parish household examination rolls (*husförhörslängder/HFL*) and in moving lists. Names of individuals could also appear in court records, tax records, burgher lists, guild membership lists, and military rolls, and—beginning in the 1800s—emigration and passenger lists.

A city-wide civil census agency (*rotmansinstitution*) operated in Stockholm from 1877 to 1926.

Personal names were also written in letters, diaries, newspapers, and local publications. In such cases, the names given were often unofficial ones. These included names that referred to a person's residence, kind nicknames (*smeknamn*), and mean nicknames (*öknamn*). In the church books, the columns for names often included non-name terms referring to an individual's position in the family (*hustru, barn, syster*), occupation (*åbo, bonde, dräng, piga*), social status (*oäkta, oäk, fattig*), character, or home place.

Alphabets, scripts, and spelling—including spelling of names:

Viking records were written in the Runic alphabet. When Sweden was Christianized in the 10th to 12th centuries, the monks introduced the Latin alphabet, which has been used in Swedish ever since. Although similar to the Latin alphabet used in English, it includes extra vowels with diacritic marks (*å, ä, ö*) and the occasional use of accents (*é*). *W* is considered identical with *V*, and *Q* and *Z* are seldom used.

Through the 1700s, Gothic was the predominant script in both printing and handwriting. It was replaced in the 1800s by the Humanistic script with Roman and Italic fonts.

Before the 1900s, spelling was not codified. Certain letters and letter combinations were often interchanged, e.g., *c* and *k*, *f* and *ph*, *t* and *tt*. Abbreviations were often used. Overlined *n* and *m* were used to signify *nn* and *mm*. The double *s* (*ss*) was written with a so-called long *s*, giving the appearance of *sj*, *sf*, or *st*.

The patronymic naming system

The basic system:

Traditionally, the patronymic naming system was the predominant one in Sweden. It was used by the families engaged in agriculture, who made up the bulk of the population.

Each personal name consisted of a *förnamn* (literally, before name) and an *efternamn* (literally, after name).

A *förnamn* was usually comprised of one or two names, *e.g.*, Anna, Anders, Karin, Mats, Anna Brita, Sara Maria, Carl Axel, Anders Magnus, *etc.* The concept of middle names did not exist.

Certain *förnamn* were common throughout the country, but some followed regional distribution patterns and were strongly associated with certain counties.

An *efternamn* was created by adding the suffix *-son* (for males) or *-dotter* (for females) to the father's *förnamn*.

The father's name was written in genitive form (with an *s*) but without an apostrophe, since that punctuation mark is not used in Swedish. If the father's name already ended in an *s*, no genitive *s* was added. A double *ss* in a patronym was sometimes shortened to a single *s*, *e.g.* Anderson, Person

Since spelling was not codified, the same *förnamn* or *efternamn* could be spelled in alternative ways. Some entire names were also interchangeable and could appear in different records in different forms, *e.g.*, Anna Karin as Anki, Olof as Olle, Petter as Pehr, Olofsson as Olsson, Johannes as Jan, Ericsson as Ersson, *etc.*

Variations:

The patronymic system existed in regional variations. The best known of these was in Dalacarla (Dalarna), where an extra name was placed before the *förnamn* to distinguish individuals with the same name. The extra name was usually passed from one generation to the next, but it could change, *e.g.*, if a family moved.

The extra name could refer to a personal trait, an occupation, a place, or a person. Extra names referring to a person often carried a genitive *s* (Bengts) but sometimes did not (Barbro).

The non-patronymic System

The basic system:

A non-patronymic naming system co-existed beside the patronymic one from the Middle Ages on.

The non-patronymic naming system was followed by non-agricultural families, including urban dwellers, burghers, craftsmen, officials, clerics, academics, nobility, and soldiers. Persons moving from country to city or taking up a non-agricultural occupation often changed to the non-patronymic system.

Many variations existed, the common factor being that the *efternamn* was not a patronym and that it was usually a family name that was passed unchanged from one generation to the next.

Variations:

The most common non-patronymic names were the "natural" names, comprised of one or two elements referring to natural features such as trees and mountains. Others were constructed of artificial elements.

Classical non-patronymic names with Latin or Greek construction were originally used primarily by priests, by professors and other scholars, and by families of wealth and power.

Noble non-patronymic names existed from the 1200s. They varied widely, some being extremely simple, others sounding grand and incorporating nobiliary participles.

Soldiers' non-patronymic names were extra names assigned to allow distinction between men of the same name.

Soldier names often referred to weapons, fierce animals, or traits desirable in a fighting man or to weapons, but others were meaningless or even derogatory.

Treatment of women's & children's names

In both the patronymic and non-patronymic systems, women normally retained their own names when they married, although exceptions and local variations occurred. A widow might adopt the *efternamn* of her dead husband; in the non-patronymic system, that *efternamn* might be given in Latin genitive form.

Most children received only their förnamn at baptism and were listed in records with just this name until they were confirmed at 15–16 years. At that point, they became known by their efternamn.

The name of a dead children was often re-used, being given to the next child of the same gender.

Children whose status required clarification—foster children, illegitimate children, *etc.*—were listed in church books with efternamn. Names of illegitimate children did not follow a set pattern, but the förnamn and/or efternamn of an illegitimate child often pointed to the biological father.

Before the 1800s, the efternamn of priests, professors, and soldiers were not always passed on to their children. Thus the father could have a non-patronymic efternamn while his children had patronymic ones.

The non-Swedish naming systems

Sweden has always been multicultural. Even though most inhabitants have been ethnic Swedes, the population has also included indigenous folk groups and people coming from many other cultures and countries. Each of these groups has had its own naming traditions.

Changes in the 1800s and later

Industrialization and railroads came to Sweden in the middle of the 1800s and brought huge social changes.

Major changes in names included women using *-son* instead of *-dotter*, more women taking the efternamn of their husbands, and a marked increase in name changing. Multiple efternamn became common, including ones that were patronymic, non-patronymic, or hybrid. Siblings sometimes chose different efternamn.

During this period, a woman's efternamn consisting of non-patronyms and/or patronyms with the *-son* suffix could be difficult to interpret. She could be single, married, or widowed; all the names could be hers, or one or more of them could be her current husband's and/or her late husband's.

The great wave of emigration began in the mid-1800s. Most emigrating Swedes went to America, where they anglicized their names. Married female immigrants took their husbands' surnames; single female immigrants did the same if they later married. These customs can make it difficult to extrapolate Swedish-American names back to the original Swedish form.

Name regulation began in Sweden with the naming law of 1901, which did away with the patronymic naming system and forced individuals to choose a family name. Siblings often chose different family names.

Since then many more naming laws have been passed in Sweden. These laws affect the chances of tracing families forward in time. Name changing continues to be a common practice. The composition of names still differs from that in the United States. *Tilltalsnamn* (the names by which persons are known) are formally recognized, *mellannamn* (middle names between förnamn and efternamn) have been allowed but are being phased out, *flicknamn* (maiden names) are seldom used as part of women's surnames.

Name errors & a strategy for avoiding them

The errors

Online genealogical databases and family trees are full of incorrect names—including Swedish ones—which often lead to errors regarding the identity and family relationships of the people who bore them. The errors in names are of many sorts. Those common among Swedish names include:

- incorrect transcriptions of names and incorrect interpretations of abbreviated names,
- failure to recognize the same name in different spellings, alternative forms, or as a nickname,
- misidentification of two or more persons with the same name as being the same individual, including in cases in which a dead child's name was re-used,
- misidentification of a person who has changed her or her name as being two individuals,
- mistaking non-name terms, including place name, as parts of personal names,
- application of the wrong naming system, usually incorrect application of the patronymic system,
- erroneous interpretation or handling of women's and children's names, *e.g.*, assuming that part of a double surname was a maiden name or including children's surnames in birth and baptism records, and
- incorrect interpretation and description of name components.

A major underlying problem is assumptions. Perhaps the most common trap is assuming that names in other countries follow the patterns we ourselves are used to, *e.g.*, personal names are comprised of first, middle, and last names. Another major pitfall is assuming that a generalization about names in another country—*e.g.*, Sweden had a patronymic system—applied to everyone in that country.

A strategy for avoiding the errors regarding Swedish and other foreign names

- Be aware and beware of assumptions about names.
- Acquire knowledge, not only about the naming systems of the culture or country, but also about its history, social structure, traditions, and geography, all of which can be important in interpreting names. Learn as much of the language as possible, especially genealogically relevant terms. To the extent possible, seek information in refereed and documented sources, preferably in the language of the culture.
- Employ high-quality resources. In identifying names, use indexes that are carefully constructed. Don't stop with these indexes but look also at names in original and scanned documents. Use top-notch reference materials, including dictionaries, atlases, directories, and encyclopedia.
- Work to professional standards. Keep careful notes about names and naming patterns, special handling of names, and exceptions to general patterns. And, perhaps most importantly of all, check and recheck names, ideally tracing people from cradle to grave to find all the names by which they were identified.

To sum up, the strategy for correct identification of foreign names—Swedish or otherwise—is the same one we use to guarantee high quality in other aspects of our genealogical research.

Annotated list of resources

Background about Sweden and specific aspect of Swedish genealogy

Clemensson, Per and Andersson, Kjell. *Your Swedish Roots*. Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2004.

Books published and/or sold by Sveriges Släktforskarförbund, including their genealogical handbook series, available for sale at <https://www.rotterbokhandeln.se>

These and other publications available at the Family History Library and Family History Centers.

Searchable databases of Swedish names (in Swedish):

Riksarkivet (Sweden's National Archives). *Sveriges befolkning* (national censuses), ongoing project, with 1880, 1890, 1900, and 1910 completed to date, available online by subscription via SVAR, Riksarkivet's Digital Research Room at <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/folkkrakningar>. Also available at Family History Library and Family History Centers.

Sveriges släktforskarförbund. *Sveriges dödbok 1901-2013* (Swedish death index 1901-2013), electronic resource on CD. Solna: 2014. Available at Family History Library and Family History Centers.

Linköping University Electronic Press. *Centrala soldatregister* (central soldier register), free online at <http://www.ep.liu.se/databases/soldatregister/search.sv.aspx>

Free online reference works for place names and non-name terms (in Swedish)

Institutet för språk och folkminne, Uppsala. *Ortnamnsregister* (register of place names), free at

<http://www.sprakochfolkminnen.se/sprak/namn/ortnamn/ortnamnsregistret/sok-i-registret.html>

The Swedish Academy. *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok* (dictionary), free at <http://www.saob.se>

Martha J Garrett, PhD, CGSM

Swedish Homecoming

Uppsala, Sweden

www.SwedishHomecoming.com