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Spelling

Few of the early European immigrants could read or write. And those who could just jotted down what sounded right to their ear. After all, spelling wasn't the focus of their writing -- getting the message across was. Life in the 17th and 18th centuries was harsh. People struggled just to survive, to find food, shelter and protection from Native American tribes and other European settlers. Spelling took a back seat to getting through one day at a time.

The 1659 will and inventory of John Sr., for example, shows his last name as "Parmaly" and "Parmely," and his son's name spelled as "Parmile" -- all on the same document! For all we know, John Sr. may never have been literate; no copy of his signature survives. (No, that is not his signature on the contemporary copy of the Plantation Covenant.) Most of the family's Colonial era tombstones in Connecticut spell it Parmele, while today's most popular spellings are "Parmelee" and "Parmley," according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In our nation's earliest days, when the majority of the population could barely read and write, many relied on others to do their writing for them. Early census records often reflected what the census taker thought was the "right" spelling. Even as late as 1870, census records show that one in five Americans under 21 was illiterate.

The Civil War in the 1860s helped bring spelling to the forefront. Since the telegraph had made long-distance communication possible, the folks back home wanted to know if those names on the Union and Confederate casualty lists that they were receiving were those of their sons. At this point uniform spelling became important -- not only to get the right amount of dots and dashes transmitted -- but to know if that casualty on the list was theirs.

Various branches of the family have handed down stories about why they changed the spelling of their last name -- a dispute between father and son, a run-in with the law, etc. Tales like these are common in most families. These may very well be true -- or not! Take them with a grain of salt.

However, it is important to note that "Palmer" (a corruption of it that's come to be "Parmer") and "Parmenter" and their various spellings are not associated with our family.

Surname's Meaning

It's believed that our name is a compound of "palmer" and "lea."

In 1086, William the Conqueror ordered a statistical survey of England be done to register the landed wealth of the country to determine taxes. It was at this time that many families first came up with their surnames. About 43% of surnames today are the names of places -- Brooks, Woods, Hill, Moore, Atwater (at water), etc.; another 32% are descendant names -- Johnson (John's son), McDonald (son of Donald), Petersen (son of Peter), etc.; another 15% are occupational names -- Baker, Smith, Cooper (maker of barrels), Chapman (merchant or trader), etc.; and about 9% are nicknames -- Stout, Goodman, Longfellow, Smart, Reid (for a red-haired man), etc.

'Palmer" -- and there are relatively a lot more of these families than ours -- is the name many men who participated in the Crusades at various times from 1095 to 1270 chose for their surname. The legend goes that these warriors returned home with palm fronds to show that they'd returned from the Holy Lands.

"Lea" is another word for field, or meadow.

Thus, our name means "the palmer's field" -- a combination of occupation and location.

Chances are the first families to have this name lived in a field that belonged to someone who fought in the Crusades -- or the head of the household himself was a Crusader who lived in a field.

While there are a few instances of surnames sounding like ours on the Continent, there are only two places in England where the name existed in the late 1500s: the North, where it's usually spelled "Parmley" and can still be found today, and the South where the family only lived a few

What's in a Name?



generations before settling in New England in the 1630s.

Taken from thefamilyparmelee.com