

Change-of-Name Petitions of the New York Courts: An Untapped Source in Historical Onomastics

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One of the most interesting and least-discussed aspects of onomastics is the process whereby individuals legally change their proper names, and the motives involved. Although most of us have thought about changing our names at one time or other, few have actually done so. Surprisingly, historians and other scholars have devoted little time to analysis of the nature and extent of name change among European immigrants who arrived in the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth.¹ This is especially lamentable because petitions for change-of-name between 1848 and 1924, brought by individuals and religious organizations in New York City before the Court of Common Pleas (pre-1895) and the State Supreme Court (after 1895), are on file in the Surrogate's Court-Hall of Records Building at 31 Chambers Street in Manhattan, where they occupy the seventh and eighth floors. These change-of-name petitions and the judicial decisions respecting them comprise but a small part of the civil and criminal records of which the county clerk is legal custodian.

Recently, a nonprofit organization, Historical Records of the New York County Clerk, Inc., undertook the task of appraisal, inventory, survey and preservation of the civil court records, 1674-1910, and criminal court records, 1684-1925, in New York's judicial archives. Most of the civil records, except those relating to divorce and adoption, are open to the general public, constituting a mine of information for the onomatologist, historian, genealogical investigator and interested layman.² New York City was the port of debarkation for most European immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; thus the student concerned with discovering what motivated newcomers to American shores — as well as native citizens — to request legal name change, and what this tells us

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about the interaction between the individual and his culture at a given historical juncture, stands a good chance of answering his questions here.³ In the hope of encouraging such future onomatological and historical investigations by others, we would like here to use a small sample of these voluminous records to illustrate their nature, indicate the information they contain, and outline what, in conjunction with other resources, they may be able to tell us about American life and values.⁴

The Court of Common Pleas, which had jurisdiction over petitions for change of name, was New York City's oldest civil court, holding sessions from 1674 (when it was called the Mayor's Court) until its abolition in favor of more extensive jurisdiction for the State Supreme Court in 1895.⁵ Since most change-of-name petitions pertained to individuals rather than religious institutions, and the latter contain little valuable information, we will confine ourselves to a brief examination of the former.

Petitions presented by individuals for change-of-name, and the judicial decisions respecting them, yield much information of a demographic nature, and cast fresh light on American social norms and values in revealing the motives of those who sought new names. The details petitioners were required to give relating to occupation, country of origin, family relationships, and residence, render these documents essential sources for the student of urban, ethnic and social development, constituting an invaluable, as yet untapped mine of data to those engaged in the "new social history" that has occupied a prominent place in the past decade's scholarship.⁶ Publication of court orders favorably adjudicating name changes was legally mandatory; usually notices of the alteration were printed in specialized journals like the *Daily Register*, *New York Law Journal*, *Journal of Commerce*, and *New Leader*, although occasionally they appeared in mass-circulation dailies like the *Times*, the *World*, and the *Tribune*.⁷ Law stipulated that petitioners be American citizens and New York State residents over twenty-one years old.

Since attorneys usually represented the petitioners, the literary style of their requests was invariably legalistic, although the petitioner's feelings emerge from time to time. Slight variations in the format of petitions exist for the period 1865 to 1895, but the petitioner was generally required to sign an affidavit that he did not seek to change his name in order to escape creditors, marital responsibilities, or agents of the law, and attest that the facts he presented were true to the best of his knowledge; the law is still the same on these matters.⁸

Far from evincing eccentric or whimsical desires for uniqueness, fame or notoriety, change of name petitioners invariably had practical

considerations of family or financial advantage in mind, seeking further integration into the mainstream of American society via its traditional avenues of occupation and inheritance. In most cases brought before the Court of Common Pleas between 1848 and 1895, pressures of monetary incentive arising from family, work or business relationships, combined with a desire to strengthen ties within an extended or foster family, prompted the petitioner's request. The earliest petition included in the Common Pleas series, dated August 1848, in which James Hardwick Snare requested permission to abridge his name to "James Hardwick," was of this nature. His motive was monetary gain, his sister-in-law having offered him a hundred dollars with which to buy land in Morrisania if he dropped his surname and adopted the other, which was borne by several relatives. A thirty-year-old orphan, Annie Crinion, sought to assume the surname of the aunt she lived with, vaguely explaining that "it will be of a pecuniary advantage to her to be permitted to assume said name" (1895). Carl Simelles (1889) was more articulate: he wished to change his name because an uncle living abroad had promised him a lot of money if he altered his surname to his mother's maiden name. Moreover, he informed the court, his brother had already successfully applied for a name change for the same reason.⁹

Similar motives operated with more socially prominent families like the Delmonicos, millionaire restaurateurs and wine merchants. Charles, Josephine and Lorenzo Delmonico Crist (1884) requested the Court's permission to change their surnames to *Delmonico* in honor of their deceased uncle, who had left them half his estate. As Charles explained, he and his brother and sister had lived with the Delmonico family since they were orphaned in childhood, and felt closer ties with it than to their dead parents. He was sure that the business would be better conducted if he changed his name, since "there is no aspect in which the retention of his present name would be an advantage," while its alteration "is likely to result in substantial pecuniary benefit to your petitioner." Josephine, an "infant" petitioner (i.e. not yet twenty-one years of age), agreed that growing up in the Delmonico household — Lorenzo Delmonico, Sr., founder of the family fortune, was her mother's brother — had contributed to "a decided preference for the family name of her mother over that of her father."¹⁰ The incentive of pecuniary benefit merged with a desire to cement ties within the extended family to motivate these name changes.

The case of Harry Lucas Sims (1881), in which he asked the Court's permission to change his name to *Harry Marion-Sims*, is another instance in

which family and financial considerations merged among the wealthy. A physician working in partnership with his father, a world-renowned author, Sims wanted to take his parent's middle name in order to be more closely associated with him in the public eye. His father attested approval of the petitioner's objective in a deposition presented by another doctor, Miles H. Nash, who verified the signature since the senior Sims had gone to Florida for his health. After a family lawyer testified that the applicant's father favored the revision, the Court agreed to the request.¹¹

On the other hand, the desire to obtain money from relatives operated as a stimulus to the *resumption* of Old World surnames among poor recent immigrants. Charles Carroll (1867) petitioned the Court to restore his original surname. This fifty-one-year old Italian immigrant, who had arrived in the United States at the age of seventeen and was an American citizen, explained that at the time he was naturalized in Boston in 1840 under the name *Charles Carroll* he was not sufficiently familiar with the English language to protest. Now he wished to alter his surname to its original Italian form because he would thereby gain "pecuniary benefit," since his father in Italy had informed him that if he resumed the family name he would send him a thousand dollars. "It appearing to my satisfaction thereby that the said Charles Carroll will derive a pecuniary benefit by assuming the name of Charles T. Caglieresi," the judge complied with his request.¹²

In another case of reverse name-change, the Goldschmidts, a German family, wished to change their surname to *Gussenrode*, the cognomen of many of their relatives (1900). Mrs. Goldschmidt alluded to a financial incentive, declaring "that her pecuniary condition would thereby be materially enhanced for the reason that some of her relatives have agreed to contribute to her support ... as her said husband does not adequately contribute to her support and that of their said child and his education and maintenance."¹³

Petitioners often sought legal recognition of new cognomens for which they had earlier secured acceptance by common usage. Patrick John Cullinan asked permission to legally change his name to *Paul Joseph Cullinan* (1867), since that was how he was known by his friends, as one of them attested. Similarly, Hannah Valeria Croxson wished to assume the surname *Civill* in accordance with the wishes of her uncle, with whom she had lived since her parents' death. Her petition (1869) explained that she was unmarried, over the age of twenty-one, and that it was widely believed she was her uncle's daughter. For this reason she wanted to

change her name to ratify public usage, since her friends and acquaintances called her by the name *Civill*.¹⁴ Charles Edwius Cady of Kinderhook in Columbia County, New York, wanted to alter his surname to *Edwius* because he had called himself *Charles Edwius* for the past seven years, in compliance with the will of a relative who had granted him land: he sought legal authority to use an appellation he already employed by common law. As he put it, his property interests were at stake: "Without such confirmation he will be unable to acquire, or hold or convey property except by surrendering what has become a valuable possession to him ... A refusal of this court to grant him the relief he solicits will work him grave injury, and subject him to serious vexation, trouble, and disability" (1870).¹⁵

Affection for foster parents, as well as the social inconveniences entailed in not bearing a surname identical to theirs, was a major reason individuals petitioned to change their names before 1895. In an era when mortality rates were higher than they are today, children often found themselves living with relatives or foster parents after a father's death. Caroline Cahen, a twenty-one year old American of French descent, lived with her mother and stepfather and was commonly known by the latter's surname, *Bertier*; therefore, she requested that it be legally changed, since "she suffers great inconvenience and loss by reason of her name being Cahen" (1889). Similarly, Harry Carey sought to change his surname to that of his stepfather Lewis Olrick, who had taken care of him since his father's death when he was a year old. Commonly known by the cognomen *Olrick*, he thought Mr. Olrick was his natural father, even establishing an engineering firm using that surname, so "that the resumption of the name Harry Carey would place your petitioner under great disadvantages and subject him to pecuniary loss." Moreover, he had always employed the name in business and legal transactions.¹⁶

Petitions brought before the Supreme Court after it took charge of change of names in 1895 listed similar motives. Gilbert A. Stone, an unmarried twenty-four year old, petitioned for the legal adoption of *Robbins*, the surname of his foster father, whom his mother had married after his father's death. His family submitted affidavits approving his request (1900). In a petition filed in 1914, Louis Frank Spatz, out of respect for the man who had raised him since his father's death when he was a child, requested legal authorization to change his surname to *Schieffer*. He was addressed as *Schieffer* in the community and at his job on New York's elevated railway. George Marcus Kane, a twenty-one year old who had lived with relatives named De Vries ever since his father deserted his

mother, wished to adopt their surname, by which he was generally known in the neighborhood, despite his mother's recent remarriage.¹⁷ An unmarried twenty-five year old Irish immigrant sought to change his surname to his foster father's, that being the cognomen by which he received mail and was known in "Business circles" at B. Altman's, the department store where he worked. His father had died when he was a child and all his younger brothers and sisters carried his stepfather's surname. Since both his mother and stepfather had recently died, he had additional sentimental reasons for adopting his "mother's name at the time of her death."¹⁸

When a mother wanted to change the name of a minor child, she stood in the child's place as "next friend." For instance, Ann E. Kidd, mother of a nine-year-old daughter, appealed to the Court of Common Pleas for permission to change her child's surname to that of her present husband, since the child's father had died. The "next friend" was required to assert that her child owed no debts and was not trying to escape creditors by changing her name.¹⁹ A similar petition, involving two minors and their mother as "next friend," was "*In Re* the application of Margaret Ann Austin and John James Austin for an order authorizing them to change their names" (1874).²⁰

Marital fulfillment or the lack of it sometimes was a motive in women's petitions to change their surnames. Mary Ann Campbell applied to change her cognomen to *Beaumont*, which belonged to her first husband, whom she had lived with for forty years, and whose property she had inherited. Afterwards she had married Walter Campbell, a shiftless man who died insolvent after two years. Contending that her relationship with Campbell had been unhappy and that she had not slept with him, she felt that use of his surname hindered her in social and business transactions, since friends, unaware of her second marriage, still called her by the surname *Beaumont*. Thus, for motives of social prestige, she wished to legally retain her former married name (1884).²¹

One divorced woman, a dressmaker, seeking to protect her children, over whom she was legal guardian, from their father's dissolute reputation, asked the Court of Common Pleas' permission for them to assume her maiden name (1878). Since their father's "notoriously abandoned character" was well-known in the community and he had deserted his family and it received no support from him, she wanted her teen-age children to take her maiden name, which they could not themselves have legally done before they reached the age of twenty-one. Explaining that she found it "annoying and embarrassing" to explain to her customers that she was divorced when they inquired why her children's surname differed from her

own, she told the Court "that her family name of Richards is one of the oldest and most respected in the Eastern States, and that the infants above named are anxious to start out in life with a name unsullied by any stain of dishonor." Thus she asserted that her self-esteem and quest for social respectability took priority over her feckless relationship to her estranged husband.²²

Sometimes changing one's name was a means by which one legally ratified an earlier escape from family ties. John Joseph Kalbert had used the false surname *Worth* since 1896, when he enlisted in the navy as a way to escape his family, and had employed it ever since, he explained in his petition to the Supreme Court (1911). This thirty-nine year old New York City fireman was about to marry and wanted to legally use his new name on his marriage license.²³

A poignant case of an individual changing his name to defy family tradition and reassert his identity was that of Sussie Lisenfeld, a twenty-two year old Manhattan furrier and Austrian native, who wished to change his name back to its natal form, *Abraham Isaac Lisenfeld*. The circumstances were tragic: eight years earlier, his brother, whose name was Sussie, died, "and my father who loved him dearly, and in order that his name should not die out, substituted the name of Sussie instead of my true name ... and since then I was called Sussie Lisenfeld." Now that he was an adult, the petitioner explained, he wished to resume his original name despite possible parental objections. Moreover, his present name bore an uncomfortable similarity to the American slang term *sissy*, tending to deride and asperse his sexual identity. As he reported, "I have been several times held up to ridicule and laughter, and in order to avoid any further inconvenience, I pray that I may be allowed to again use my true and right name." The wish to affirm his own identity rather than that of his dead brother combined with pressure to conform to the customs and prejudices of his adopted country in motivating him to change his name back to its original form.²⁴

Many petitioners hoped by changing their names to advance their business or professional careers or improve their relationship with their clients. For instance, Otto Cahn wished to change his name to the more ornate *Otto Tendleau Canotto*, thinking that would improve his standing with his French customers. Having already assumed the surname *Canotto* without knowing that a court order was required to validate it, Cahn assured the court that his new middle name had been his mother's maiden name, which he sought to adopt for sentimental as well as business reasons.²⁵

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Similarly, Annie Irene Callahan requested to change her name to *Annie Irene Temple*, her show business cognomen, having been promised "permanent employment" if she made the alteration. The judge approved the change as well as the worth of the petitioner's motives, being "satisfied that the applicant will derive a pecuniary benefit" (1873). Another actor, East European immigrant Aaron Levy, asked the court's permission to change his appellation to his stage name, *Selmar Romaine*, by which he had conducted his personal affairs for almost twenty years. The forty-eight year old actor, a Louisiana Jew, son of Gabriel and Sophie Levy, wanted to use this as his legal name when he married (1914).²⁶

An interesting instance from the 1880s, which revealed how changing one's name may be a means of changing one's self-perception to bring it further into accord with one's ideal, involved Arthur H. Smith of Centreville, Indiana, who wanted to change his name to *Joseph Arthur*, a pseudonym he had employed as writer and reporter. Perhaps by legally changing his name to comport with that which had brought him success, Smith sought to create a new self to compensate for the recent death of his parents.²⁷

The change-of-name records tell us much about the assimilation, or failure to assimilate, of the millions of immigrants who arrived in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anglicization was not the *summum bonum* for all immigrants. Several newcomers, claiming that pressure from the authorities or sheer ignorance precipitated their decision to change their names in the first place, petitioned the Court to resume their original cognomens. These reverse name-changes, as we have called them, often revealed the defiant integrity of those who sought separation rather than acculturation to the mainstream American society. Patrick Carroll of Brooklyn, an unmarried twenty-nine year old Irish immigrant who became an American citizen in 1886, revolted against intimidation by naturalization officials, petitioning the Court of Appeals to correct its records and restore his original name (1889). Explaining that he had inadvertently signed his name "Patrick Carroll" on his citizenship papers "without any ulterior design," he "surmised" that he had done so at the suggestion of the person who served as witness to his identity and residence, and "being in this country but a short time [he] signed the record of this court as said witness told him." Now he wanted the court clerk to correct the record by restoring the name *Patrick McArdle*, which it had been his original intention to retain. He had not adopted the surname *Carroll* since receiving his citizenship papers and had "no reason to correct the record concerning his name other than the

ease it shall bring to his mind."²⁸ By restoring his natal name, this poor Irish immigrant reaffirmed the authenticity of his Old World heritage and choice of his earlier experience and traditions.

Another petitioner, apparently regretting the pitfalls of assimilation, asked that his surname *Homberg* be corrected to its original form, *Humborg* (1900). Although he had spelled his name "Homberg" on his citizenship application to make it "sound more American-like," he now disavowed his action for the vague reason that "the mis-spelling of his name may result in domestic difficulties to him, followed by pecuniary disadvantages."²⁹ Perhaps this was a way of stating his remorse over his opportunistic rejection of his Old World heritage in pursuit of the material gains of the New World metropolis.

Holders of a common American surname, Balthaser and Amelia Smith, natives of Baden, Germany, asked the court's permission to resume use of their old surname, *Schmidt*. Although now American citizens, this couple, contending that the State Supreme Court had spelled their name *Smith* instead of *Schmidt* on their application, "without their desire, or previous use of the name Smith," they protested that the surname was too common as well as "distasteful to them" (1867).³⁰ These immigrants did not think it necessary to conform their names to American standards.

As one might expect, the surname *Smith* was most often involved in early petitions for change-of-name. In 1864 John Smith, possessor of a truly "American" name, sought to alter his given name to *McPherson*. He had experienced "inconvenience" in business because his name was so common. A brewer in partnership with his brother, he wanted to adopt his mother's maiden name as his given name.³¹

After 1895 East European immigrants far outnumbered any other ethnic or national group among those who altered their surnames. Abundant examples of their petitions, most of them from the first quarter of the twentieth century, exist in the Miscellaneous Recorded Papers on file at the Hall of Records for the years 1869-1924, consisting mostly of proceedings before the Supreme Court. Unfortunately for the scholar who wishes to undertake a systematic survey of onomastic trends for this period, the arrangement is not topical and petitions for change of name are interspersed among other documents. However, since they include name-change proceedings conducted before the Supreme Court as well as New York City's Court of Common Pleas (which was abolished in 1895) among a people in the throes or rapid change, increased immigration, and industrial growth, they are invaluable.³²

Eastern Europeans changed their names out of diverse motives: a sometimes reluctant attempt to assimilate to the dominant culture; a belief that alteration of foreign names, difficult to pronounce or spell, to comport more with those common among older American stock would help them in business affairs; a desire to distinguish themselves from other members of their ethnic group, whether for reasons of strong "American" feeling or increased economic opportunity. Especially among Jewish immigrants, a desire to escape the stigma attached to their race and religion was a prominent factor.

Practicability often dictated the East European's desire to change his name. Borehert Droge, a twenty-five year old wishing to surmount the obstacle of its difficulty of pronunciation, asked permission to change his given name to *Henry*, an appellation he had employed over the past ten years and by which he was known to friends and business associates (1880). An unmarried twenty-three year old Russian, Isaac Smigelsky sought to abridge his name to *Smigel* because he was entering a business partnership and, having experienced previous difficulty with people who found it difficult to spell or pronounce, thought he would be more successful if he shortened it (1891).³³ Max Wakskerz's motives in seeking to change his name were identical: its difficult spelling and pronunciation hindered his receipt of mail, resulting "at times ... [in] financial losses by reason of his not receiving letters sent to him ... with his name misspelled." Moreover, people often "improperly pronounced" his name, causing him "embarrassment" in his occupation as a salesman.³⁴

Another salesman, Samuel Rothkugel, an unmarried twenty-eight year old Bronx resident born in New York City, found his original name an obstacle in his business. In fact, people tended to shorten it to *Roth* if they knew him. Contending that he lost orders when merchants misspelled his name on postcards he never received, he wanted people to be better able to remember it, which he thought the uniform use of *Roth* as his surname would facilitate (1911).³⁵

A Russian-born, unmarried, twenty-seven year old Bronx pharmacist, Max Feinstein, fearing business losses if he retained his original name, requested the Court's approval of its alteration to *Fensten*, a cognomen he had already used in several cities. He thought it was less difficult to remember and spell correctly, and would save him further "discomfort and considerable pecuniary loss in conducting his business" (1911).³⁶

East European immigrants sometimes celebrated their acculturation and adoption of "Americanism" in their name-change petitions. Russian-born tailor Max Shakofsky, who emigrated to the United States in 1887 at the

age of seventeen and became a Brooklyn citizen in 1894, was married with three sons and two daughter. At the age of forty-four, when he petitioned to change his surname to *Shaw*, he obviously felt himself much a part of the community. Explaining his desire to change his name after twenty years as a citizen, he declared that devotion to his adopted country was his major motive. Not only was his present surname "difficult to pronounce and spell," it was "suggestive of Russian birth and Russian Characteristics, and your petitioner desires a name thoroughly American and in accordance with and suggestive of the American ideas and ideals which your petitioner for the last twenty-five years has had and which he has endeavored to instill in his children." Moreover, his sons, who were training to become teachers and believed the cognomen would "hinder them in their American name." Although he pointed out that people in the neighborhood already called him *Shaw* in abbreviation of his longer surname, it seems that Max Shakofsky, who had fled an empire notorious for its pogroms, was trying to use his request for a name change to help guarantee his children's successful assimilation into American life.³⁷

Other Jewish families, less scrupulous in their rationale for adopting new names, made a blatant appeal for acculturation into the Protestant core of American society on their children's behalf. In one such case, Samuel Solomon and his wife Emilie requested, as "next friends," that the Supreme Court grant their sixteen year old son, an "infant" under the law, permission to assume the name *Harry Albert Pemberton* (1900). Of his desire to change his surname, his parents explained that many New Yorkers were named *Solomon* "that ... such name lacks individuality and is likely to lead to confusion and mistake is [*sic*] business and social life, and that unless his name be changed," he would "labor under considerable disadvantage during his future life and business career which may be avoided by this proposed change of name early in life."³⁸ Driven to assert his Americanization, the East European employed the device of changing his surname to that of venerable Anglo-Saxon families like the Pembertons of Quaker Philadelphia.

An important auxiliary reason for changing one's name was its usefulness in blending the new immigrant into the indistinguishable mass of Americans. When an unmarried thirty-five year old Hungarian journalist, Stephen Ivor Szinnyey, requested to change his surname to the briefer *Sinney*, he listed among the factors in his decision the desire to make his name easier to pronounce for his social and business associates. But this "loyal American citizen by naturalization" also wanted his name to attest to his patriotism "as an adopted American citizen" who wished "to assume

a name that is more American sounding than his ... present name, thereby also evincing his predilection for his adopted country" as well as "considerably enhancing his pecuniary interests."³⁹

Many East Europeans changed their names because they expected it would expedite their business affairs, as well as help them achieve social esteem, acceptability and integration into the larger community. In a petition to change his name to *William Ladinsky*, Woolf Ladesensky, a longtime wholesale fruit merchant who used both cognomens, stated he "found it very embarrassing to be known by both names, and this has caused a good deal of confusion among his friends and business associates as to his identity" (1911).⁴⁰ For the Jewish immigrant, an alteration of his name often ratified the fact of upward mobility and his acceptance by his neighbors. When importing merchant Meyer Yaer Levi applied to change his name to *Meyer J. Daniel* (1901) it was clear that he was seeking to establish security. He had sold Mexican and Oriental goods and laces for over six years, was married, thirty-one years old, and had no children. People usually called him "Meyer J. Daniel," a variant of his father's name, and now he wanted to take it as his legal appellation. Heyman Kuritzky, a thirty-one year old unmarried immigrant from Russian Poland, had assumed the surname *Gelston* by which he had commonly been known ever since his arrival on American shores. Since he was on the verge of forming a business partnership it was "a matter of necessity" that he now have it legally changed (1900). Similarly, thirty-eight year old Aaron H. Mannes, born in New York City and partner with his father in a retail furniture business, requested permission to change his given name to *Owen*. Claiming that his friends in public school had always called him *Owen* instead of *Aaron*, Mannes said that even his family called him by that name, and he wanted to make his legal cognomen conform to that usage. He found his name a handicap in business, because when he signed legal documents for the firm, the use of his actual given name caused "confusion and annoyance ... necessitating explanations" to others (1900).⁴¹ Perhaps he was as much concerned with escaping the "Jewishness" of his given name as with obtaining the conformity of his legal name to common usage.

Some Eastern Europeans found that problems they experienced with educational institutions required that they change their names if they were to achieve the professional careers to which they aspired. Myer Zaslavsky, a thirty-seven year old unmarried Russian attending Columbia University, sought to change his name to *Myer Zaslav*, since students and professors had trouble correctly spelling and pronouncing it; consequently, he was

known to different people by different names, "which is a great inconvenience to your petitioner, and which the petitioner believes will be greatly in his way [in] the profession he is preparing for — civil engineer." Since his father and brother (possibly having similar problems) had already changed their names, Zaslavsky thought his request had added merit.⁴² Another Russian Jew attending Columbia University, a twenty-three year old unmarried teacher named Samuel N. Kaplowitz, asked permission to shorten his cognomen to *Caplow*, a surname by which he was commonly known at the Board of Education, the New York City public schools, Columbia Teacher's College, and as a private tutor. His request gained urgency when the Board of Education ruled it could not grant him a salary increase based on his degree unless he legally changed his name to *Samuel N. Caplow*, as it appeared on his diploma from Teacher's College. As he concluded, he "will suffer great hardship and a loss of his years of study at Columbia University for professional advancement unless the Board of Education accepts his creditals [*sic*] from Columbia."⁴³ The quest for social and professional gain often made it incumbent on the East European to "Americanize" his name.

An unusual petition for name change by earlier standards, but of a type that became increasingly common among second-generation immigrants amid the mushrooming prosperity of the 1920s, was presented by Sidney Vincent Goldstein, who requested the court's permission to change his surname to *Harrison*. Since he had converted to Roman Catholicism and was engaged to marry a Catholic, he wished to eliminate a sign of belonging to "the Jewish race ... and Faith" which would have hindered him "both in business and socially." More than in earlier requests for name change, petitioners after 1900 wished to "Americanize" their form. As many of their petitions attested, they were often born here and felt no attachment to the Old World. Moreover, they felt that by conforming to American norms in this vital aspect of their social identity they could get ahead in the business and social world and realize to the full the promise of American life.⁴⁴

A confession of the objective of prosperity, as well as slightly hidden resentment at its price — abandonment of the culture and traditions of the country of one's birth — emerges in a few change-of-name petitions. Krikor Chiboukjian, a twenty-nine year old unmarried Armenian immigrant who sought to abridge his surname to *Chibouk*, elucidated the tensions he experienced (1900). Somewhat bitterly, he explained that Americans who found his name difficult to pronounce and spell derided him because of its alien tenor, in contrast to the respect with which his name

was treated in his native land:

where names more formidable for articulation than his name are common and are uttered with ease and keen appreciation of their euphony and intrinsic beauty; but that your petitioner is now a naturalized citizen of the United States of America, is established in business in this country, intends to stay and to do business here, and has found by experience that Americans with whom your petitioner has had commercial or social intercourse, do not seem in attempting to pronounce his surname, Chiboukjian, to evince anything like the degree of pleasure such attempt would call forth in the old country, and usually manifest an inability, sometimes indelicately expressed in embarrassing and jocular terms, to pronounce the name in an understandable manner.

Pointing out that his surname's exotic character and strangeness to Americans were "to some extent a drawback or stumbling block to his business, entirely undesired and unmerited," he asked "that this hindrance be removed, so that punishment for the sins of ... [his] ancestors in adopting his said surname may not be visited upon him by hurting his business in this country."⁴⁵ Although this bitterly ironical tone was exceptional among change-of-name petitioners, it is likely that Chiboukjian expressed sentiments that others felt but feared to admit.

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Although a far more detailed analysis of change-of-names petitioners than the random sample presented here, one employing quantitative as well as traditional modes of analysis, is necessary in order to reach any reliable conclusions as to who they were and what ends they sought, let us venture a few suggestions: Evidently the individual who changed *his* name — far more men than women pursued this course—was motivated, either directly or indirectly, by the expectation of social and economic advantage. In most cases of request for name change among American-born citizens, who constituted the majority of petitioners before 1895, the client sought to obtain personal benefits from relatives within the family nexus. Following the Civil War, petitions for change-of-name became more common among those of high economic status — or at least those aspiring to such status — than among the general population, while after the turn of the century these were outnumbered by first- and second-generation immigrants.

Most petitioners before 1900 were married, middle-aged men; their successors in the early twentieth century, especially among the East Europeans who arrived in New York City in such great numbers, were younger and

more often unmarried. Although those who changed their surnames – given names were seldom altered--usually did so as a means of advancing their status or manifesting a recent rise in social prestige, a subtle difference persisted between natives and immigrants in this respect; the latter sought such recognition and assimilation from society as *outsiders* striving to attain a place within it, while the former more often looked for social gains for themselves and their families from a secure position *within* the community. The Eastern European who changed his name had generally arrived in New York impoverished; had since achieved upward mobility in small business, the professions, and service occupations; and wanted to "Americanize" his name as final testimony to his assimilation.

People who changed their names did so out of serious rather than trivial motives. Often thoughts of family and children's futures guided them. At times, changing his name marked an important juncture in the career or social role of the petitioner or in his relationship to his community. In composition, name-change petitioners evolved from a majority of American-born middle-to-upper class married males in the nineteenth century, when requests for name change were fewer, to a majority of European immigrant males, usually unmarried young adults, but sometimes older first-generation immigrants who made the change for their children's benefit. Most petitioners sought to achieve security or advance their socio-economic and professional status rather than attract attention or achieve notoriety by assuming an outlandish new name. From family network to wider society; native citizen to immigrant; beneficiary of inherited wealth to self-made man; the people who changed their names in New York City from 1848-1924 sought further integration into their society, not separation from it.

Of course, these speculations can only be adequately verified by intensive investigation and careful analysis of onomastic documents on file at the New York Hall of Records and its counterparts in towns and cities throughout the country. Far better than the bare outline given above, the diligent scholar in onomastics and related disciplines in the humanities and social sciences can employ these materials to help us more fully understand the origins of present-day urban society. Although Shakespeare asked, "What's in a name?" the documents on file at the New York Hall of Records-Historical Records of the New York County Clerk can greatly illuminate the thoughts and feelings of both old and new citizens of a great American city; the motivations of the inhabitants of a modernizing, urban-industrial metropolis in the throes of growth; and the reciprocal impact of individual, family and society. Systematic research

by careful, efficient, and perceptive investigators is called for. The purpose of this essay will have been fulfilled if such studies are undertaken in the future.

Notes

¹Among those recent historians who have discussed the immigrant experience in New York City but failed to examine the process of name-change are: Thomas Kessner, *Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) and his many other studies of the Jewish immigrant experience.

²Joseph Van Nostrand et. al., "New York County Court Structure: The Courts and their Records: Scope of the Project," unpublished paper, Historical Records of the New York County Clerk, Inc., 1981. The project's inventory goals include the accessioning of 14,600 cubic feet of files and 6,880 bound volumes of inactive records, comprising the records of four defunct courts: Chancery; Common Pleas; Court of Oyer and Terminer (a criminal court); Superior; and the files of the Supreme Court, civil branch, to 1910 and criminal branch (Court of General Sessions) to 1925.

³In 1930 the total number of foreign-born in the population of New York City was 2,358,686, followed by Chicago with 859,409 immigrants. Brooklyn alone had 881,571 foreign-born residents, more than any other American city. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *15th Census of the United States: 1930: Population* (5 vols., Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1933), II, 540.

⁴The sample includes names from the Change of Name records in the Court of Common Pleas, 1848-1895, letters "A", "C", and "S"; and from Miscellaneous Recorded Papers (comprising documents from both the Court of Common Pleas and the Supreme Court), 1869-1875, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1911, 1914, and 1924. Court of Common Pleas Change of Name records are arranged in thirteen metal cans — twelve for individuals and one for religious organizations — in alphabetical order by original last name of petitioner, and are indexed in a card file under heading of both petitioner's actual surname and that to which he proposed to change it, with plaintiff vs. defendant format in each case. Miscellaneous Recorded Papers, consisting of 106.7 cubic feet of records in 132 metal cans, are kept in chronological file number order, and are indexed in a card file.

⁵Studies of the Court of Common Pleas (1674-1895) include Richard B. Morris, ed., *Select Cases of the Mayor's Court of New York City, 1674-1784* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1935); James W. Brooks, *History of the Court of Common Pleas of the City and County of New York, with full reports of all Important Proceedings* (New York: pub. by subscription, 1896). Unfortunately, neither volume discusses the Court's role in change-

of-name proceedings.

⁶Several good collections of essays using the techniques of the "new social history" exist. These include: Tamara K. Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971); Herbert G. Gutman and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Many Pasts: Readings in American Social History* (2 vols., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973); Elinor Miller and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Plantation, Town, and Country: Essays on the Local History of American Slave Society* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1974); Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Samuel P. Hays, *American Political History as Social Analysis* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1980).

⁷The law required publication of a copy of the court's order "within ten days" in a newspaper specified in the decree, and that the petitioner file all pertinent documents with the county clerk within twenty days.

⁸A study of current law respecting change-of-name is Edward J. Lander, *Change of Name and Law of Names* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1973), esp. chap. 3. See also Robert D. Burns, "Student Notes: Right to Change One's Name," *Journal of Family Law*, 5 (1965), 220-231.

⁹"In the Matter of the Application of Annie Crinion for leave to assume the name of Annie E. Cullivan: Order Granting Petition," filed May 4, 1895; petition of Carl Simelles, filed June 18, 1889, Court of Common Pleas. Numbers in parentheses refer to date of petition.

¹⁰Petitions of Charles D., Josephine O., and Lorenzo D. Crist, filed Feb. 21, 1884, Court of Common Pleas.

¹¹Petition of Henry Lucas Sims, filed Feb. 11, 1881, Court of Common Pleas. The petitioner's father, Dr. James Marion Sims (1813-1883), was a world-renowned gynecologist and president of the American Medical Association. See Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1928-1935), XVII, 186-188, s.v. "Sims, James Marion."

¹²Petition of Charles Carroll, filed Aug. 21, 1867, Court of Common Pleas.

¹³Petition of William and Eva Maria Goldschmidt, filed Dec. 6, 1900, Court of Common Pleas. Mr. Goldschmidt was forty years old and was born in Hamburg; his thirty-five year old wife was from Frankfurt.

¹⁴Petition of Patrick John Culliman, filed May 14, 1867, Court of Common Pleas; petition of Hannah Valeria Croxson, filed Feb. 24, 1869, Court of Common Pleas.

¹⁵Petition of Charles Edwius Cady, filed and recorded, Jan. 18, 1870, Court of Common Pleas.

¹⁶Petition of Caroline Cahen, filed March 23, 1889; petition of Harry Carey, filed March 15, 1880, Court of Common Pleas.

¹⁷Petition of Gilbert A. Stone, filed Dec. 7, 1900, Miscellaneous Recorded Papers; petition of Louis Frank Spatz, filed May 1, 1914; petition of George Marcus Kane, filed Nov. 28, 1900, Miscellaneous Recorded Papers.

¹⁸Petition of Jeremiah O'Malley, filed Oct. 2, 1900, Miscellaneous Recorded Papers.

¹⁹"In the Matter of the Application of Grace Garden Slocum by Ann E. Kidd, her next friend," filed 1881, Court of Common Pleas.

²⁰"*In Re* the application of Margaret Ann Austin and John James Austin for an order authorizing them to change their names," filed Jan. 31, 1874, Court of Common Pleas.

²¹"Application of Mary Ann Campbell to change her name to Mary Ann Beaumont," filed May 1, 1884, Court of Common Pleas.

²²"Application of Abbie M. Richards, mother and guardian of Winthrop," filed April 8, 1878, Court of Common Pleas.

²³Application of John Joseph Kalbert to change his name to John Joseph Worth, filed July 29, 1911, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

²⁴Application of Sussie Lisenfeld to change his name to Abraham Isaac Lisenfeld, filed Sept. 19, 1900, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers). On the significance of one's name in establishing one's personal identity, see Kenneth L. Dion, "Names, Identity and Self," in *Names: Journal of the American Name Society*, 31 (1983), 245-257.

²⁵Petition and Order — Otto Cahn; filed March 25, 1881, Court of Common Pleas.

²⁶Petition and Order — Annie Irene Callahan; filed July 1, 1873, Court of Common Pleas. Petition and order, Aaron Levy; filed May 1, 1914, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

²⁷"In the Matter of the Application of Arthur H. Smith for change of name to Joseph Arthur," filed July 12, 1888, Court of Common Pleas. A recent perceptive discussion of this topic is Mary V. Seaman, "The Unconscious Meaning of Personal Names," *Names*, 31 (1983), 237-244.

²⁸"In the matter of the application of Patrick Carroll to change his name to Patrick McArdle," filed March 18, 1889, Court of Common Pleas.

²⁹Petition of John Humborg, filed Sept. 1, 1900, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

³⁰"Application of Balthaser Smith and Amelia Smith his wife to be authorized to assume the names Balthaser Schmidt and Amelia Schmidt respectively," filed 1867, Court of Common Pleas.

³¹Petition of John Smith, filed Feb. 15, 1864, Court of Common Pleas.

³²Certain differences existed between the Court of Common Pleas and the Supreme Court in types of decision rendered respecting changes of name: Although the petitioner presented a notarized affidavit that his statements were true in his testimony before both courts, occasionally Supreme Court justices who approved change-of-name petitions added a proviso that the petitioner would still be liable to sue and be sued under his previous name, a feature absent from Common Pleas orders. In some cases, petitioners before the Supreme Court had forty days to file the published name change with the county clerk instead of twenty, as had earlier been customary.

³³Petition of Borehart Droge, filed Aug. 21, 1880, Court of Common Pleas (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers); petition of Isaac Smigelsky, filed May 20, 1891, Court of Common Pleas.

³⁴Petition of Max Wakskerz to change his name to Max Waxman, filed July 14, 1911, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers). Wakskerz was a forty-two year old married Manhattan resident.

³⁵Petition of Samuel Rothkugel, filed Aug. 8, 1911, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

³⁶Petition of Max Feinstein, filed July 21, 1911, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

³⁷Petition of Max Shakofsky, filed May 11, 1914, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

³⁸"Petition of Harry Albert Solomon, by Samuel Solomon and Emilie Solomon, his parents, for leave to assume another name," filed Dec. 13, 1900, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

³⁹Petition of Stephen Ivor Szinnyey, filed Dec. 8, 1900, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

⁴⁰"In the Matter of the Application of Wolf Ladesensky, for leave to change his name and to assume the name of William Ladinsky," petition and order, filed and recorded July 1, 1911, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

⁴¹"In the Matter of the Application of Meyer Yaer Levi for leave to assume the name of Meyer J. Daniel," filed July 8, 1911; petition of Heyman Kuritzky, filed Dec. 13, 1900; petition of Aaron H. Mannes, filed Nov. 26, 1900; all in Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

⁴²Petition of Myer Zaslavsky, filed Sept. 25, 1900, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

⁴³"In the Matter of the application of Samuel N. Kaplowitz," filed and recorded, July 5, 1911, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).

⁴⁴Petition of Sidney Vincent Goldstein, filed Nov. 13, 1924, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers). Many similar petitions exist from the 1920's. See, for instance, "Petition and Order" for Nathan Schmolowitz, filed Nov. 20, 1924, *ibid*. In his brief discussion, Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951), 253, 282, contends that immigrants willingly anglicized their names, although it did little to improve their position in the wider society.

⁴⁵Petition of Krikor Chiboukjian, filed Sept. 13, 1900, Supreme Court (Miscellaneous Recorded Papers).