

# Common American Surnames and Their Relation to Eminence

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**H**OW DOES A NAME AFFECT one's race for fame and material success in this life? Aside from having a father who was a famous governor, senator or president, does it help, at least at the start? You know it helps. But what about other names?

Does a common name aid one in achieving fame? Or does it hinder him? Three of the thirty-four presidents of the United States bore surnames that were among the ten most popular family names — Andrew Johnson, Woodrow Wilson, and Zachary Taylor.

But nine others bore names found in the 200 most common family names in the United States — Washington, Adams (two), Jackson, Harrison (two), Grant, Hayes and Kennedy. Thus twelve of our presidents had names everyone knew — one-third of the entire number. Others bore names which were familiar but not quite in the first 200 — Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Tyler, Pierce.

There are really too few presidents to afford a basis for a decision. Let us look at the eighty-six individuals who have been elected to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans. Three of them have surnames found listed in the top ten — John Paul Jones, Roger Williams, and Woodrow Wilson; altogether twenty-nine have names in the 200 most frequently found surnames, again a third of the entire number.

But before any decision can be made about those names that everyone can spell and everyone can pronounce, a study will have to be made of a much larger group of prominent and successful people. Today, that big red reference book, *Who's Who in America*, attempts to list in alphabetical order all those in America who have achieved eminence, a fair criterion of success. Leaving out the supplement and allowing for foreign residents listed, there are approximately 50,000 persons listed in the 1960–1961 edition.

We have a list of the 200 most common family names in America<sup>1</sup> and estimates have been made of the approximate number of persons bearing each name in each 50,000 of the population. Opposed to these common names are more than a million uncommon family names as shown by the government's Social Security list, a quarter of a million being so rare that they appear only once in the Social Security list. To be more likely to achieve outstanding success and prominence which group should you be in? Are Smith and Jones better than Snuggs and Prystowsky?

There are approximately 12,451 persons bearing one of these 200 most common names for each 50,000 of the population, one in four, and there should be that many in *Who's Who*. Counting them in the 50,000 names in *Who's Who* one finds only 11,013 with these 200 common names, 88 percent of what one would expect.

The ten most common surnames, Smith, Johnson, Brown, Miller, Jones, Williams, Davis, Anderson, Wilson, and Taylor, designate 2961 in each 50,000 persons, yet only 2153 with these names are found in the 50,000 persons in *Who's Who*, about 73 percent of what one should expect to find. The fewer persons who bear your family name the more likely you are to be selected for inclusion in *Who's Who*.

Most of the 200 popular family names are English, 127 in all; fifteen are Scottish; fifteen are Irish; twenty-seven are Welsh, five German and eight are Scandinavian. Cohen is Jewish, Snyder is Dutch, and Beck is German, English, Norwegian, Swedish and Icelandic (in the table these last three are listed as Scandinavian). Many other common names have their origins in more than one nationality and only the nationality providing the greater number is credited.

The common English names are 8459 per 50,000 of the population but are represented by only 7603 persons in the *Who's Who* count or 90 percent of what they should show. Indeed, only the Scots have a higher proportion of their common names in *Who's Who* than their numbers warrant, slightly above 100 percent. The Irish percentage is 79; the Welsh is 86. The Scandinavians have only 65 percent, but the Germans shine with 94 percent.

Does one class of surname, through heredity, designate more able, energetic people? Surnames may be classified as Local, Occupation-

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret K. Odell and Earl P. Strong, *Records Management and Filing Operations*, New York and London, 1947, p. 191.

al, Patronymical, and Descriptive. The Local name designates the place the original bearer came from, as Hamilton and Crawford; or the topographical feature near where he lived, as Hill and Shaw. Names like Smith, Clark, and Weber are Occupational. Patronymical names tell who the original bearer's father was, so we find Jones, Anderson, and Hudson. Descriptive names or nicknames designate the bearer by referring to some prominent feature, as Brown, Young, and Kennedy. Some names may be included in more than one classification, but each is here given the most usual classification.

The first people to bear hereditary family names were those named after the manors or lands they owned. But when a villager left the lord's manor he often came to be known by the name of the manor in which he had previously resided, so only a very few named after villages were originally lords of the manor. But this slight proportion of the ruling class bearing surnames after village names might be expected to cause this class of family names to make a better showing in *Who's Who*. And it does.

Four English village names, Bradley, Graham, Hamilton, and Washington and four Scotch villages, Crawford, Cunningham, Gordon, and Johnston are among the 200 popular surnames. In every 50,000 of the population 295 persons will be found bearing these village names and 291 bearing these names appear in *Who's Who*. The proportion would be better if Washington were omitted. This name is popular because many Negroes adopted it after the Civil war and while there are thirty Washingtons in every 50,000 names, only four are listed in *Who's Who*.

However, taking all local names together, the proportionate number who achieve *Who's Who* are about the same as for occupational and descriptive names as shown by the following table:

Number of Persons per 50,000	Common Surnames	Number in <i>Who's Who</i>	Percentage
6224	Patronymical	5097	82
1284	Descriptive	1203	94
2822	Occupational	2698	96
2121	Local	2015	95
Totals <u>12451</u>		<u>11013</u>	<u>88</u>

It must be remembered that family names were seldom consciously adopted by the person bearing them. Rather they were generally arbitrarily applied to the person by the manor clerk when he needed to identify the man properly. Neighbors might apply the same or a different appellation and as one came to be known by a surname that man consciously or unconsciously accepted it.

If a man needed to be identified, it was natural to refer to his occupation. Even today we refer to the Postman, the Doctor and the Plumber. In medieval times when surnames came into common use the villagers who had special skills were respected. If the man had some outstanding or abnormal characteristic, he would be identified thereby, and we have the names of Reed (red), Gray, and Long (tall).

If the villager came from another village, he might be so identified. If he lived by or on a prominent Hill, or in or near the Hall (the manor house), such words would be applied to him as surnames.

But if he were not outstanding in any way and was just a mild, colorless individual, he might be identified by a reference to his father, a patronymical surname. So the son of Will became Wilson; the son of Harry became Harrison. Would such persons be less likely to have descendants in *Who's Who*? The table above bears this out. Out of 50,000 people, 6224 would bear common patronymical family names but only 5097 with common patronymical names are found in *Who's Who*.

Since we have divided all surnames into the 200 most common and the rest which we therefore classify as uncommon or rare, at least not as common as the 200, it appears that if one has an uncommon or unusual surname, he is more likely to attain fame. If the fact that the ten who bear the most common surnames are not as successful as the rest of the 200 most common names, as previously stated, it may be that the more unusual surname you possess the more likely you are to be eminent.

Dividing the 200 most popular names by nationality and by class, the following summary is obtained:

## Summary of 200 Most Popular Surnames

Number of Names	Nationality	LOCAL		OCCUPATIONAL		DESCRIPTIVE		PATRONYMICAL	
		Number in 50,000	Number in Who's Who	Number in 50,000	Number in Who's Who	Number in 50,000	Number in Who's Who	Number in 50,000	Number in Who's Who
127	English	1739	1637	2571	2470	1086	970	3063	2526
15	Scotch	318	337			130	154	199	170
15	Irish	39	25			68	79	566	426
27	Welsh							2011	1725
9	Scandinavian	25	16					385	250
5	German			181	170				
1	Hebrew			28	26				
1	Dutch			42	32				
200	Totals	2121	2015	2822	2698	1284	1203	6224	5097

In each case the number in 50,000 and the number in *Who's Who* should be approximately the same if those persons with common family names are to be proportionately represented in *Who's Who*. Of course only one Hebrew (Cohen) and one Dutch (Snyder) name are not sufficient to provide a basis for comparison.

One explanation of the high proportion of unusual names in *Who's Who* is the number of highly-educated refugees who have come to America in recent years. Some of the most active, adventurous, colorful personalities from all over the world have arrived in America to pursue their goal in life free from arbitrary and unreasonable limitations.

Perhaps people remember your name easier when it is odd or unusual, and vote for you. Or when they need the services of a doctor, lawyer, plumber or electrician, the unusual name comes to mind and the possessor's reputation is enhanced.

Although most of the unusual names can be included in one of the four classes if their real origin and meaning is ferreted out, for our present purposes we might put all odd and unusual names in two classes: (1) they are a common word in the English language, or (2) they are, to the English mind, an unpronounceable conglomeration of consonants and vowels.

The first class would include novelty names like Addition, Bacon, Crook, Damp, Evergood, Favorite, Gaylord, House, Ivy, Jump, Kettle, Learned, Moose, Needy, Outlaw, Puffer, Queen, Reason, Stretch, Top, Upp, Vest, Whitecotton, Young, and Zink, all found in the current edition of *Who's Who*.

Avoiding those queer Asiatic and South American names of foreigners listed in *Who's Who* because of their political positions in their home countries, we nevertheless find in the other class such names as Alajalov, Badeau, Ceaglske, Dallapiccola, Erb, Feezor, Gjelsness, Hjelle, Ijams, Jeuck, Kalijarvi, Lemieux, Morkovsky, Niedringhaus, Odlozilik, Prioleau, Quaal, Rothaermel, Szigeti, Tschebotarioff, Umstattd, Vogelgesang, Wylegala, Xceron, Ylvisaker, and Zakhartchenko. Each of these names are listed in the 1960–1961 edition of *Who's Who*. Perhaps you have known some of these men; they are prominent in the community and if you have known them since infancy, their names will not appear to you to be queer and unusual.

Some in *Who's Who* give pronunciations of their names, and since all of the same surname do not pronounce alike, it is necessary. For example, five of the seven named Soule insert the pronunciation in their sketches. Of these five two pronounce it sōl, one sou-lá, one sool and one sōō'lā. How you should address the other two Soules remains a mystery.

Others may be found in *Who's Who* with just a hint of humor in them. In this group would be Airey, Allgood, Angel, Bellow, Countryman, Dear, Dingle, Dowdy, Evergood, Friendly, Gasser, Goodenough, Gump, Jeeves, Looney, Lovejoy, Lovewell, Nepple, Noggle, Oddy, Peachey, Pew, Query, Quick, Rainwater, Reckless, Rippy, Sample, Sizoo, Smart, Swindler, Teeter, Tingle, Tippy, Tuggle, Twitty, Udy, Virtue, Walkup, Youngman, and Zwicky. Each of these men would probably be delighted to hear a wisecrack about their names that they had not heard before. Don't try; they have heard them all. One can imagine the taunts and insults these men endured in school by reason of their names, which must have served only to spur them on to success.

When it comes to Christian, or first names, the parents of outstanding men have generally stood solidly by the common, well-known boys' names — John, Robert, Henry, etc. Two psychologists,

Albert Ellis and Robert M. Beechley, have discovered that boys with peculiar first names are more likely to be emotionally disturbed than boys with popular forenames.

Old world influences have affected many who do not have common forenames. For example, *Who's Who* includes Mehemed Fehmy Agha, Novice Fawcett, Yella Pessl, Onorio Ruotolo, Eero Saarinen, Jesús Maria Sanroma, Folke Skoog and Yma Sumac, to name only a few. Pleasant Huber Hanes lists his full name but prefers to be known as P. H. Hanes.

Heredity is a major factor in sorting out those who have achieved national renown and thus have been included in *Who's Who*. Vanderbilt and Roosevelt are distinguished American names — not common names. *Who's Who* lists six Vanderbilts and twelve Roosevelts. Four Eisenhowers may be consulted. Ten men listed in *Who's Who* are surnamed Lincoln and four Washington. Kennedy leads Nixon with sixty-seven to ten.

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