



# AGS Ezine

*Newsletter of the Arkansas Genealogical Society*  
Vol. 21, No. 4, July 2026  
Chloe' Russell, Editor

## ***Note from the Editor:***

Greetings, fellow genealogists and family historians! It's July 2026, which means this month is America's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence! This month you'll find articles on the fascinating traditions behind naming practices and a thoughtful discussion on presentism and why historical context matters. Understanding historical context doesn't exclude the actions of the past, but it does allow us to interpret history with greater accuracy as well as empathy. As genealogists and family historians it's our responsibility to seek the truth, preserve the record, and tell our ancestor's stories as faithful as possible.

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# Arkansas Genealogical Society

## July 2026

### Kitchen Roundtable Talk



## *Scott Lee: DNA Oddities: Uncovering the Strange Truths of Genetic Research*

Our Zoom discussion will be presented on **Tuesday, July 21, at 6:30 p.m.**, free of charge.

Please join us for our free Zoom presentation! DNA and biological reproduction are more complex than most people realize. Misunderstandings about how DNA is inherited can lead to false assumptions and confusing, seemingly contradictory results. This presentation reveals fascinating and little-known facts about DNA that are crucial for interpreting unexpected genetic findings. Topics include: the importance of centimorgans, DNA crossovers, vanishing twin syndrome, chimeras, and the impact of endogamy. Technical details and jargon will be kept to a minimum, making these concepts accessible to all.

Scott Lee is a retired software engineer who has researched his family history since 1979. He has served as an officer in several genealogical societies and lectures on genealogical topics. Currently, he is president of the Arkansas Genealogical Society

Scott grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, but his work took him to Indiana, Oregon, North Carolina, and New York City. In retirement, he and his wife, Deirdre, have returned to their families in Arkansas. His career included the medical field, engineering computer graphics, and consulting in the process of building reliable software. In retirement, he is working in the design of deep learning neural networks and software for genealogy. In his spare time, he enjoys writing science fiction, studying ancient calendars, writing open-source software, keeping up with the latest advances in physics and astronomy, and of course researching his family history.

**[Join us online via Zoom.](#)**

Our monthly **Kitchen Roundtable Talks** cover diverse genealogical topics and methodologies, sparking lively online discussions among our engaged participants. This platform is a unique opportunity to establish meaningful connections with fellow genealogy enthusiasts, cultivate new friendships within the community, and link up with kindred spirits who share our passion for research.

We enthusiastically welcome suggestions from all participants for topics of interest and encourage volunteers to step forward as discussion leaders for subjects close to their hearts. As this initiative evolves, we anticipate refining it based on our collective experiences. Your active participation and invaluable feedback remain pivotal in shaping the future of our endeavors. For more information on our discussion topics, go to [argensoc.org/kitchen](https://argensoc.org/kitchen).

# July Events

## Thursday, July 2

Permissions Made Simple: Copyright for Family Historians, with Andrea Lister

6:00 p.m.

Ontario Ancestors

[Virtual](#)

## Monday, July 6

Volunteer Genealogy Assistance with D.A.R. Members

5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library, Genealogy Library (4th Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

## Wednesday, July 8

Genealogy Writing Workshop

12:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library, Ann Henry Board Room (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

## Wednesday, July 8

Genealogy Writing Workshop

12:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library, Ann Henry Board Room (3<sup>rd</sup> Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

# July Events

## Thursday, July 9

Verifying Unsourced Family Stories: Examples from the Saye Family of North Georgia, with Paul K. Graham

Georgia Genealogical Society

7:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

[Virtual](#)

## Friday, July 10

Cemetery Preservation with PAAC Junior

10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

William F. Laman Public Library - Studio A (Rotunda)

2801 Orange Street, North Little Rock, AR

## Saturday, July 11

Flora, Fauna and Faces: Reading Cemetery Symbolism

2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Presented by the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program

Sanders Library

10200 Johnson Drive, Sherwood, AR

## Monday, July 13

Volunteer Genealogy Assistance with D.A.R. Members

5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library - Genealogy Library (4<sup>th</sup> Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

Researching Your Revolutionary War Ancestors from Cradle to Grave

6:30 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.

Heritage Seekers

[Virtual](#)

# July Events

## Wednesday, July 15

Beyond the Obvious: Exploring Lesser-Known Civil War Records with Diane L. Richard

8:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Presented by Southern California Genealogical Society

[Virtual](#)

## Saturday, July 18

Exploring Hispanic, Indigenous and African Caribbean Roots

1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Presented by Miami-Dade Public Library

[Virtual](#)

## Monday, July 20

Volunteer Genealogy Assistance with D.A.R. Members

5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library - Genealogy Library (4<sup>th</sup> Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

## Tuesday, July 21st

AGS Kitchen Round Table Talk - Scott Lee - DNA Oddities: Uncovering the Strange Truths of Genetic Research

6:30 p.m.

[Virtual](#)

## Monday, July 27

Family History Research in Arkansas: An Introduction w/ Russell P. Baker

6:30 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.

Presented by Heritage Seekers

[Virtual](#)

Volunteer Genealogy Assistance with D.A.R. Members

5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library - Genealogy Library (4<sup>th</sup> Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

# Naming Traditions in Genealogy Workshop

## Interview of Mysti Gates

### by Regan Richardson



One of the most fascinating clues in family history research can be found in something we often take for granted—our names. Recently, Arkansas Genealogical Society board member Mysti Gates presented an engaging workshop on naming traditions and how understanding naming patterns can help genealogists uncover family connections, cultural heritage, and new research leads.

In this interview, Mysti shares insights from her presentation, discusses common naming practices found across different cultures and time periods, and offers practical tips for incorporating naming traditions into your own genealogy research.

Regan: What are some of the most surprising naming pattern changes you've encountered when families immigrated to the United States, and what motivated these transformations?

Mysti: A particularly striking example comes from Spanish-speaking families, where individuals traditionally use two surnames—one from the father and one from the mother. In American records, which typically allow for only one last name, this structure is often reduced or misunderstood. Some individuals retain only the paternal surname, others hyphenate both, and in some cases the maternal surname is treated as a middle name or dropped entirely. As a result, a single individual may appear under multiple variations of their name across different records.

# Naming Traditions in Genealogy Workshop

Mysti: Another – arguably more dramatic – change is the move from fluid or patronymic surnames to fixed family names, particularly among Scandinavian immigrants. What had been a flexible system tied to the father's given name – changing with each generation and between the sex of the children – became a permanent surname, often “frozen” at the point of immigration.

These transformations were motivated by several factors. Families were adapting to a new cultural and bureaucratic environment that required standardized naming formats. There was also a desire for assimilation, as well as practical concerns about pronunciation, spelling, and consistency in official records.

What makes these changes so significant for genealogical research is that they don't just alter names—they alter the logic behind the names. Understanding that underlying system allows researchers to reconnect records that might otherwise seem unrelated.

Regan: Can you walk us through some examples of how patronymic naming systems created challenges for American record-keeping and genealogical research?

Mysti: Sure. Patronymic systems in Scandinavian countries created significant challenges for American record-keeping because they didn't align with the American expectation of a fixed, hereditary surname.

For example, a man named Lars Andersson would have a son named Ole Larsson and a daughter named Anna Larsdotter. When Ole Larsson had children of his own, a son's surname would be Olesson, and his daughter's surname would be Olesdotter.

When that family immigrated, American officials often recorded them under a single surname—sometimes the father's patronymic, sometimes a simplified version, and sometimes even a farm name.

This creates confusion in genealogical research because:

- Surnames appear to change every generation
- Family members may be recorded under different last names in the same document set
- Later records may not match earlier ones at all



# Naming Traditions in Genealogy Workshop

Mysti: For researchers, understanding that the surname is actually a formula rather than a fixed identifier is key. Once that shift in thinking happens, records that initially seem unrelated begin to align much more clearly.

Regan: In your research, what are the most common reasons immigrant families anglicized or completely changed their surnames, and how can genealogists today trace these changes through historical records?

Mysti: The most common reasons for anglicization or surname changes include:

- Assimilation pressures: Families wanted to blend into American society and avoid discrimination
- Language barriers: Names were simplified for pronunciation and spelling
- Clerical standardization: Officials often recorded names phonetically or altered them to fit English conventions
- Personal choice: Some families intentionally reinvented their identity in a new country

It's also worth noting that the popular idea that names were broadly "changed at Ellis Island" is somewhat overstated; many changes occurred gradually over time through repeated interactions with schools, employers, and local governments.

To trace these changes, genealogists should:

- Track individuals across multiple record types (census, naturalization, church records)
- Look for phonetic variations and spelling shifts
- Pay attention to associates and family members who may retain earlier forms of the name
- Use immigration and naturalization documents to identify transitional versions

Regan: Are there particular naming traditions—such as naming children after godparents, deceased relatives, or following birth order patterns—that varied significantly between different cultural groups, and how can recognizing these patterns help DAR members in their research?

Mysti: Yes—naming traditions vary significantly across cultures, and recognizing those differences can be incredibly helpful.



# Naming Traditions in Genealogy Workshop

Mysti: Irish and Scottish traditions often emphasize birth-order naming, which can help predict grandparents' names. It's important to note that there will be differences between Irish name practices based on location - Lowlands versus Highlands, to be precise.

German traditions frequently use multiple given names, with a Rufname (call name) that may not be the first name listed. This Rufname is often misunderstood. It is not a nickname. While we may think of it as a middle name, it's really not. In reality, the first names are mostly ceremonial - often named for deceased relatives, godparents or sponsors (especially in Catholic regions).

For DAR researchers, or any researchers, recognizing these patterns helps transform naming from a source of confusion into a tool for building hypotheses, especially when working with limited or fragmented records.

Regan: What resources or techniques do you recommend for genealogists who hit a brick wall because an ancestor's surname was drastically altered at Ellis Island or in naturalization records?

Mysti: I am sure there are plenty of people more qualified than myself to answer this question. However, when a surname has been drastically altered, a few strategies are especially effective:

- Search for phonetic equivalents and common spelling variations
- Use wildcard searches\* in genealogical databases
- Focus on first names, ages, and locations rather than surnames alone
- Examine cluster research (neighbors, witnesses, sponsors)
- Look at church records, which often preserve original forms of names

\*A wildcard search allows researchers to search for multiple spelling variations at once by replacing unknown letters with symbols like an asterisk. This is especially helpful when names were recorded inconsistently across different records

# Naming Traditions in Genealogy Workshop

Mysti: Most genealogy databases (like Ancestry or FamilySearch) use:

- \* (asterisk) → replaces multiple letters
- ? (question mark) → replaces a single letter

Let's say you're researching the surname Anderson.

- Ander\*
- → finds Anderson, Andersen, Andersson, Anderssen
- And?rsen
- → finds Andersen and Anders en (if spacing or transcription varies)

This is especially useful when:

- Names were misspelled in records
- Names were anglicized
- Handwriting was misread during transcription
- Surnames changed slightly over time

It's important to remember that the goal is to follow the person, not just the name.

Regan: Beyond surnames, how did given names (first and middle names) also shift with immigration, and what cultural or practical factors influenced parents' choices when naming their American-born children?

Mysti: Given names often shifted just as much as surnames.

Common changes include:

- Direct translation (e.g., names adapted to English equivalents)
- Phonetic simplification
- Adoption of popular American names

# Naming Traditions in Genealogy Workshop

Parents often balanced cultural preservation with practicality. They might give a child a traditional name at home while using a more Americanized version in public records. In some cases, middle names became more important, especially in German families, where the Rufname might be retained even if the first name was standardized.

One of the most interesting cases involves Spanish-speaking naming conventions, where both given names and surnames function differently than in the United States.

In many Spanish-speaking cultures, individuals traditionally have two given names (for example, María José or Juan Carlos) AND two surnames (the first from the father and the second from the mother).

This structure can create confusion in American records. As a result, several types of changes occur:

## 1. Compound given names get shortened

Names like María José or Juan Carlos are often:

- Reduced to a single name (Maria or Juan), or
- Reinterpreted, with the second name treated as a middle name

This can make it difficult to match individuals across records if one document uses the full compound name and another does not.

## 2. One surname is dropped or inconsistently used

Because U.S. systems typically record only one surname:

- Some individuals use only the paternal surname
- Others may use both names hyphenated
- In some cases, the maternal surname is mistaken for a middle name

This leads to inconsistencies across records—for example, the same person might appear under slightly different last names in census, school, or legal documents.

# Naming Traditions in Genealogy Workshop

## 3. Name order and structure are misunderstood

American record-keepers sometimes:

- Reverse name order
- Combine surnames incorrectly
- Treat part of the surname as a middle name

This can make it appear as though individuals are different people when they are not.

These shifts are often motivated by the need to fit into American bureaucratic systems; simplification for schools, employment, and legal documents; and a desire to avoid confusion or repeated corrections. At the same time, many families try to preserve cultural identity by maintaining traditional naming practices within the family or community.

These changes reflect both identity and adaptation—families navigating how much of their heritage to maintain while integrating into a new society.

Regan: Thank you so much for your time today and sharing with your knowledge with us. It is truly appreciated.

Mysti: Thank you - I appreciate the opportunity to share this information, and I hope members find it both useful and encouraging for conducting their own genealogical research.



Mysti Gates  
Associate Editor,  
AFH Journal



Regan Richardson  
2<sup>nd</sup> VP and  
Managing Editor AFH Journal

# Presentism: Context Is Not Exoneration

*By Kate Penney Howard*

Sometimes, "don't judge them by today's standards" is asking us not to name the harm, not to talk about who held the power, telling us not to use words like 'exploitation.' It is asking us not to say that poverty was treated as a moral failing, not to mention that children were taken from families while the institutions doing the taking called it rescue, not to notice that some people were made comfortable by the very systems that wounded others.

Honest history does not ask us to believe that everyone in the past was cruel. Most people were not. Most were doing the best they could inside a world they did not design. But honest history also refuses to pretend that harm stopped being harm simply because it happened a long time ago.

And this is where we have to be careful, because legal is not the same as right. A thing can be legal and still be cruel. It can be orderly and still be unjust. It can be written into statute, blessed by the courts, defended from the pulpit, and quietly approved by respectable people, and still be wrong.

History is full of legal wrongs. Slavery was legal. Child labor was legal. Coverture was legal. Forced institutionalization was legal. The separation of families has very often been legal, and so has dispossession. In many times, genocide was legal. The law can tell us what a society was willing to permit, but the law can never tell us whether the thing permitted was good.

Our own founders understood something close to this. I can believe the Constitution is a remarkable document and still know that it did not say everything it should have said. That is why we have a Bill of Rights, why we have amendments, why citizenship expanded and voting rights expanded and slavery was abolished and equal protection was finally written into law. It is why rights had to be claimed, again and again, by people the original promises had left out. A founding document can be brilliant and incomplete at the same time. In fact, the capacity to be amended may be one of the wisest things about it: a document humble enough to admit it was not finished is a document built to keep faith with the people it did not yet see.

# Presentism: Context Is Not Exoneration

And the people who lived under unjust laws never needed us, never needed some future generation, comfortable and well-fed, to arrive and explain that something had been wrong. The enslaved knew slavery was wrong. The children worked past exhaustion and knew they were being used. The mothers who lost children to poverty and stigma and institutional power knew exactly what grief was. Indigenous families whose children were taken by policy knew their children had been taken. Women held inside laws that gave them almost nothing knew the cage was a cage.

The people of the past were never one undifferentiated mass, all believing the same thing at the same time. There were always people resisting, always people objecting, always people who said plainly, this is not right. There were always lives that testified against the official version of the story.

So when we hold a record in our hands, the question is not only whether a thing was legal at the time. The better questions are harder, and they are the ones worth asking. Who made it legal? Who benefited from it being legal? Who suffered because it was legal? Who objected while it was happening? Whose testimony was written down, and whose was left out? And what did the law make possible that conscience should have refused?

And then, because this is family history, and family history is rarely simple, we have to hold two true things at once. Many reformers genuinely believed they were saving children by sending them west or placing them in an institution. Many receiving families genuinely offered love and shelter and a future. Many children did survive because someone opened a door. And also: many children lost their names. Many were parted from brothers and sisters they would spend a lifetime trying to find. Many had living parents who were never able to get them back. Many were counted as labor. Many were handed a story about where they came from that was incomplete, or softened, or simply false.

Holding both of those at once is not presentism, it is the complex nature of a human life.



# Presentism: Context Is Not Exoneration

The work of the historian, the genealogist, and the family storyteller was never to turn the past into a rescue story, and it was never to turn it into a horror story. The work is to ask better questions. What choices were actually on the table? Who had power, and who did not? Who was helped, who was harmed, who benefited, who was silenced? What did people at the time believe they were doing? What did the law allow, and what did conscience resist? And, always this last one, what did the records leave out? Because the silence in a record is not empty. The silence is evidence too.

Context matters. It matters enormously, and we owe our ancestors the world they actually lived in.

But context is not exoneration. We can understand the past without romanticizing it. We can name a harm without flattening a human being into a villain. We can sit with a difficult story and tell it tenderly and tell it true.

That is not presentism. That is responsible history. And it is, I have come to believe, a form of love.





# Members Only Section

**New this year:** Check your email for your discount code to Heritage Books.  
[www.heritagebooks.com](http://www.heritagebooks.com)

Heritage Books is one of America's leading distributors of genealogy and history titles. Our curated online catalog features over 10,000 books that we have published, as well as 6,000 titles from other publishers, spanning the United States and select works from Canada, Europe, Australia, and the Caribbean. Whether you're tracing a single surname or mapping an entire migration, you'll find resources to move your research forward.

## Submit Your Queries

Genealogical queries are always a popular feature of the AFH. AGS members may submit as many Arkansas genealogical queries as they wish for publication in this quarterly during each year, without charge. The queries will appear in the order in which they are received. Each must relate to an Arkansas family or location. Be sure to mention the county or region of Arkansas where the family lived, as well as full names and dates. In addition, submitters must include contact information and email address, if possible. Follow the format used below. Queries may be submitted by using this link:  
<https://argsoc.org/query/>

## Watch Kitchen Round Table Talk Recordings

When accessing: <https://argsoc.org/kitchen/> you should now notice the button to View Recordings. Click this button and log in to the website to view previous Kitchen Round Table Talks.

[View recordings - AGS members only](#)

# Save the Date!

**Arkansas Genealogical Society Fall Conference**

**Saturday, October 17, 2026**

**9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.**

**Theme: "Finding the Forgotten: Reconstructing Lives, Families, and Communities."**

Guest Speakers:



Genealogist  
Dr. Deborah Abbott



Genealogist  
J.M. Lowe

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[ArGenSoc.org](https://www.ArGenSoc.org)

# So, You Have Arkansas Roots?

*At our annual AGS member meeting, we voted to increase membership dues to **\$35 per year in January 2026.***

*Members receive access to our quarterly publication, The Arkansas Family Historian, as well as many other benefits!*

*Sign up at [argensoc.org/join-us](https://argensoc.org/join-us)!*

## AGS Ezine Administrative Stuff

**Contributions:** If you have news for The AGS Ezine, send it to [ezine@argensoc.org](mailto:ezine@argensoc.org).

**AGS:** To learn more about the Arkansas Genealogical Society, visit our website at [www.argensoc.org](https://www.argensoc.org)

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