



AIATSIS

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Indigenous names

Names are a real challenge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family history research.

Many names may be used throughout a lifetime

Your ancestor may have used or been known by many names throughout their life:

- a traditional name
- a kinship name
- a European first name and/or surname, sometimes the name of the pastoral station where they worked
- a nickname.

Their name may also have changed with marriage, partnerships, adoption or fostering.

It was common for people to use names that were different from the names they were given at birth. Even today family members might use a name that's different from the one listed on official documentation. For example, Vera Lillian at birth might have been known as Lillian (or Lily, Lilli, Lilly and Lillie) throughout life. Or a woman known as Mary Jane throughout her life might have been Janet May at birth.

Sometimes people chose to change their names and used different names in different circumstances.

But often names were changed by employers or missionaries or when a child was removed to a foster home or training institution.

Indigenous people who performed in rodeos or boxing tents may have been given 'stage names'.

In your family history research you are highly likely to find a range of different names for the same person. You will also probably find some unexpected variations in the spellings of names, especially in older documents.

Spelling mistakes

You will find that some of the problems with names are caused by spelling mistakes. Until very late in the 19th century few people could read and write and names were often written down as they sounded. The result was a lot of errors.



Indigenous names were written down in different ways by different Europeans. For example, an English station manager and a German missionary would spell the same Indigenous name differently because they spoke different languages themselves and heard Indigenous languages through the filter of their own language.

Also common English given names were sometimes abbreviated. For example, Chas for Charles, Geo. for George and Wm for William. Search Wikipedia for a useful list of 'abbreviations for English given names'.

When you are looking for records about your ancestor, it is important to check every known name, nickname and every possible spelling variation you can imagine. When you take notes or compile your own family tree, write people's names out in full and record any variations.

Key points to remember as you research your ancestors

- Sometimes the only recorded names we have for Aboriginal people, particularly from the 19th century, are nicknames or joke names given to them by Europeans – for example, 'Little Jack', 'Old Mary' and 'Billy Boy'.
- Old records sometimes include terms like 'native' or 'Aboriginal' or 'Aborigine' alongside the names of Aboriginal people. However be aware that the word 'native' was also used on official certificates, such as death certificates, to indicate that a non-Indigenous person was born in Australia rather than having immigrated from England or Europe.
- They may also include 'caste' terms like 'full blood', 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', 'quadroon', 'octaroon' – derogatory categories used to indicate the 'amount' of Aboriginal heritage a person had etc.
- Many Aboriginal people were known by a single or common first name and no surname – for example, Nellie, Jenny and Lizzy for women, and Bobby, Jimmy and Charlie for men.
- Surnames were often assigned by European employers and Aboriginal people were sometimes given their employer's surname.
- Some surnames were derived from the names of rural properties or places of residence.
- Some Indigenous people adopted aliases to avoid control by police and government.
- Women often used the surname of their male partner or husband, and were known by many different surnames over their lifetime.
- Children often used the surname of a step-father.

- Names differ on documents because they were being recorded by different people. The spelling of names on early official documents such as birth, death and marriage certificates can vary depending on who was giving the information, who was writing the information down, and how neatly or accurately they recorded the names.

Examples of name variations

First name

Allen
Ann
Barney
Beverly
Bill
Catherine
Cecil
Charlotte
Christine
Desree
Dianne
Doreen
Dorothy
Edward
Elizabeth
Ellen
Ernest
Florence
Frances
Francis
Frederick
Helen
Jack
James
Jeffrey
Jessie
Joseph
Joyce
Judith
Katherine
Kathleen
Lesley
Lynette

Name variants

Al, Alen, Alan, Allan
Anne, Hannah,
Herbert
Bevely, Bev
William, Billy, Will
Cathy, Kate, Kay
Cec
Lottie, Tottie
Christeen, Chris, Crissy, Chrissy, Christie
Des
Diane, Dianna, Diana, Di
Dor
Dolly, Dot, Dorrie
Edie, Eddie
Betty, Bess, Beth, Liz, Lizzie, Eliza, Tibby, Libby
Nell, Nellie
Ernist, Ern, Ernie, Erny
Florrie, Florry, Flo
Fanny, Fanno, Fran
Frank
Fred, Freddy
Nell
John
Jim, Jimmy, Jimmie, Jas
Jeff, Jefferey, Geoffrey, Geoff
Jessica Jessy, Jes
Joe, Jo, Joey
Joy
Judy
Cathy, Kate, Kay
Kathline, Kath
Leslie, Les
Lyn

Margaret
Marjorie
Mary
Matilda
Michael
Nancy
Neville
Patricia
Patrick
Reginald
Robert
Ronald
Stanley
Steven
Valerie

Maggie, Meg, Peg, Molly, Daisy
Marjory, Marj
Maisie
Tilly, Mattie, Matie, Tilda, Mathilda
Mick, Micky
Agnes, Nance
Nevil, Nevel, Nev
Pat, Patty, Trish
Pat, Paddy
Reginal, Reg, Reggie
Rob, Bob, Bobby
Ron, Ronnie, Ronny
Stan
Stephen, Steve
Valery, Val

Family name

Hurley
Anderson
Holden
Hawkins
Henry

Alternative name

Early
Henderson
Olden
Orkins
Enemy