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SURNAME SHAPES AND SOUNDS: CIRCUMNAVIGATING SPELLING VARIATIONS, MISTRANSCRIPTIONS, AND CLERICAL ERRORS IN ELECTRONIC INDEXES

by **Aaron Goodwin**



Most researchers are at least somewhat accustomed to thinking about surname spelling variations when conducting record searches. Thankfully, many search engine results automatically include some of the more basic spelling variations for us.

Augustus and Mary Ann (Michell) Chevalier were French immigrants who arrived in New York City about 1822. Surprisingly, only about a third of the census and vital records sought for the family were found by entering the standard spelling and basic known information

into search engines, then viewing the results of that search. Discovering more about them, their ten children, and some of their grandchildren required a bit of trickery.

This article focuses on methods used to manipulate searches and identify unexpected results in a few standard databases. The state and federal census databases used are at both [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) and [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org),^[1] which

appear to have used the same indexes. The civil vital record databases used are at FamilySearch.org.[2] And the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York baptisms and marriages databases used are at FindMyPast.com.[3] Because the data referred to are search results rather than the records they refer to, only brief mini-“citations” accompany each spelling variation.

The Sound of Things

Perhaps the most common forms of surname spelling variation and clerical error are those based on the sound of a name. Electronic indexes at Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, and FindMyPast.com are generally good at recognizing slight variations, especially those for which vowels are the primary differentiators. Searches for the Chevaliers in some of these databases returned the following variations:

Chavalier (1860 census; 1947 civil death George Reis)

Chefalier (1887 civil birth Henriette Stelford)

Chevaliere (1880 census [widow] Marie’s household)

Chevelier (1850 census Augustus’s household)

Chevialer (1898 civil marriage George Frederick Reiss and Agnes Elizabeth Gallagher)

Cheuvelier (1879 RC baptism Margareth Helenam Reis)

Cheviler (1902 RC marriage Margaret Helen Reis and August Stramingen [Storminger])

Few, if any, of these variations are surprising, but they revealed only a fraction of the records sought. A different group of spelling variations were discovered when I considered the sound of the name *in context*. In this case, the French Chevaliers were consistently found living among Germans, intermarrying with Germans, and attending a German Catholic Church. If a German-speaking person was reporting or recording a name that was spoken to him or her, how might they render the name *Chevalier*? Considering this context, the following spelling variations were discovered in search engine results:

Schevalier (1849 RC baptism Catherina)

Shavelier (1884 civil birth Louis Agust Rice)

Schaflier (1881 civil birth Elizabeth Reis)
Schiweliar (1881 RC baptism Elizabetham Reis)

Once these Germanic variations are seen, it's easy to understand how they ultimately refer to *Chevalier*. But without consciously contextualizing the sound of the name, they may never have been found.

The Shape of Things

Of the surname variants discovered so far, all are based on sounds alone. But there may be more to discover by looking at search results in a different way.

Rather than looking at the individual letters that make up each entry, take a step back and look instead at the overall shape of the word. Is it short or long? Are there upstrokes (ascenders) or downstrokes (descenders) after the first letter? Are they near the middle? At the end? Picture the rough outline of the name you're looking at, and start looking for that overall shape in your search results.

This method is particularly good at finding surnames with significant mistranscriptions or original clerical error. In the Chevalier case, it revealed two additional records indexed with names that are scarcely recognizable otherwise:

Schowaldi (1884 RC baptism Attonem Reis)
Suwalgar (1877 civil birth Anthony Reiss)

In some instances, it may be wise to search for given names only, particularly when a sizable chunk of a family group is known. I was originally unable to find the Chevaliers in the 1855 New York State Census, but a search for Augustus and Mary with children Charles, Christina, Margaret, and Frances (surname left blank) led to the following:

Ch??I?? (Ancestry)/Ch**I** (FS) (1855 census Augustus Chevaliers household)

This is an example of a significant transcriptional error that thwarted any attempt to find the record by a surname search. But other types of errors may also be managed this way, including original clerical error. A similar search was made for

the 1870 census (removing the father Augustus, who died in 1863) and was the only way to reach the Mary Shubler [*sic*] household:

Shubler (1870 census [widow] Mary's household)

In this case, *Shubler* was not a matter of misindexing. *Shubler* was the name as clearly written on the census, but the details given for the household of six firmly identify the family as the Chevaliers. To be clear, Mary did not remarry. So Shubler does not refer here to a different surname.

Finally, and most baffling to me, were the results of given-name-only searches of the New York Roman Catholic records on FindMyPast. Those records have not yet been digitized, so the online extracts (omitting some material) are the only readily available version. I still have to get to those original records to examine and record all the evidence first-hand, but there is enough detail in the extracts to suggest that these entries almost certainly refer to the Chevalier family. If I hadn't been willing to overlook specific letters to consider the overall shape of the surnames, I may never have discovered them.

Conefioy (RC baps 1841 Joanes Evang; father is "Augusti or Chevalier")

Cornfroy (RC baps 1836 Carolus August)

Conefcoy (RC baps 1844 Margaretha; father Aloy, mother Maria Anna Mickel; searched for mother "Maria M*")

Confoy (RC baps 1838 no given name child [Christina], no father name, mother Maria Musul)

If you have been unable to find your ancestors in search results for specific record sets that should include them, try these tricks to see if you can break through. You may be pleasantly surprised. And if you have developed other methods for increasing your search results, leave a comment, and tell us about them.

[1]1850 United States Federal Census; New York, State Census, 1855; 1860 United States Federal Census; 1870 United States Federal Census; 1880 United States Federal Census.

[2]New York, New York City Births, 1846–1909; New York, New York City Marriage Records, 1829–1940; and New York, New York City Municipal Deaths, 1795–1949.

[3]New York Roman Catholic Parish Baptisms; New York Roman Catholic Parish Marriages.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Aaron Goodwin



Aaron is a genealogist and house historian specializing in New York City research across all time periods, from the Dutch colonial era to the 20th century. His book, *New York City Municipal Archives: An Authorized Guide for Family Historians*, won the National Genealogical Society's 2017 Award for Excellence: Genealogical Methods and Sources. He is also editor of *NGS Monthly*, former contributing editor of the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, and former editor of the *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine*. In 2011, he received the American Society of Genealogists' Scholar Award.

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