

Occupations Often Led to Names

by Dee Gibson-Roles

At some point in pursuing family history, almost every researcher encounters an ancestor's occupation that is foreign to him/her. Some have become completely obsolete, while others are today entirely different from the vocation in which the ancestor worked.

When surnames came into use, many elected to use their occupation as their surname, such as "Miller" or "Baker" or the equivalent in another language.

When names such as these are encountered, it is safe to assume that they and/or their ancestors were in the given profession. If only all names and occupations were this simple, how much easier research would be! We will attempt to clarify at least a few of these.

Almost everyone knows what a blacksmith or a silversmith is/was. However there are other "smith" occupations. For example, a brightsmith was a metal worker and a whitesmith was a tin worker, also known as a tinsmith or an iron worker who did the finishing work. A brownsmith worked with copper or brass. A blacksmith was sometimes known as a vulcan.

There were numerous terms for a peddler, depending on his wares. Alternate names were hawker and duffer, and a monger was a salesman, usually one who dealt in given commodity, such as an ironmonger.

A traveling salesman was known as a drummer, and a peever sold pepper. A wine merchant was referred to as a vintner. A more general term for a merchant was mercator. A chandler dealt in candles, either making or selling or both, and the term was also used for a grocery retailer.

A costmonger was a person who sold fresh fruits and vegetables. A seller of small wares was a huckster. A jagger was a fish monger or peddler. A female fish peddler was called jouser. A fish seller was also called a ripper.

Most folks are familiar with the term "tinker" (used as a noun, not a verb). In olden days the term referred to an itinerant seller and/or repairman of pots and pans. A book seller was known as a colporteur. A draper dealt in dry goods. A jobber was a gobar, a person who bought and resold goods, much as a wholesaler would be today.

Roots in agriculture

Occupations dealing with agriculture were also numerous. Hoes were made by a hacker (quite different from the present day meaning of "hacker"!) and a hayward was a fence keeper. A yeoman was a farmer who owned his own land, while a husbandman was a farmer who cultivated the land. Also related to these agricultural types of occupations was a squire, who was a "country gentleman" or farm owner. (The term also referred to a justice of the peace in some areas.) Many locals are familiar with the term drover, which referred to a person who drove livestock to market.

The well-known "Drover's Road" passed through present day Madison, Buncombe and Henderson counties as livestock was driven to market in South Carolina.

An occupation closely associated with agricultural vocations was that of farrier, which in olden days referred to horse doctor or the person in charge of horses.

Creators of goods

Occupational terms given to those who created goods are rather interesting. For instance, a cordwainer was a shoemaker, and the term originally referred to those who made shoes from leather from Cordova (or Cordoba), Spain and eventually came to mean any shoemaker.

A fletcher made bows and arrows and a hantsard was a person who made and/or dealt in weapons.

Other occupations were those in construction of buildings, such as a glazier, who made or repaired windows. A joiner or joyner was a person skilled in carpentry. The term mason referred to a brick layer, and the term was also used for stone carvers. A roofer was called a thatcher. The term wright was used to refer to a workman, usually in construction. Sometimes a prefix was used in front of the word wright to indicate an occupation, such as a wainwright who was a wagon maker or a millwright who built and maintained the equipment and machinery in a mill. A wheelwright was, of course, a wheel maker, and a carriage maker was known as a chaisemaker.

A cooper was a person who made and/or repaired containers made of staves and hoops such as barrels and casks, and the worker who made the hoops was known as a hooper.

Alchemy, pharmacy

Another interesting occupation was that of alchemist. In medieval times, an alchemist was a person who was thought or claimed to be able to turn metal into gold. Later, the term became used to describe what we would today call a pharmacist.

Another term for this calling was apothecary, which could refer to the person or to the place where he practiced his trade. Along the same line, a sawbones was a physician. This term has, of course, made its way into modern day slang for a physician.

A official in law enforcement might be known as a shrieve or a shriever, better known today as a sheriff. The jail keeper was known as a gaoler (and the jail was the gaol.) This word was pronounced the same as jail and is still in use in the UK today. A bailie or bailee was a baliff.

Another important official was a scrivener, who was a public copyist or notary public. The term copyist is common on Civil War service records, usually at the bottom of each page or card, where the person signed his name as the copyist.

Textiles were another source of occupations. A dyer was called a dexter and a webster was an operator of a loom. A person who wound yarn onto spools using a machine was a quiller.

Roles for women

Occupational terms reserved for women included accoucheur, today known as a midwife. (The act or time of giving birth was called acchouchment.)

Along the same lines was a wetnurse, who breast fed babies whose natural mother could not do so for some reason. The wetnurse usually charged a fee in past times. Another female occupation was that of lavender —a washer woman. The term alewife usually referred to an innkeeper's wife, although in some cases she actually acted as the innkeeper. An ordinary keeper was a keeper of an inn with fixed prices. An aqua-vitae maker was a whiskey distiller and a brewster manufactured beer.