

# “I” IS FOR IDENTITY CRISIS

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## THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY:

- What do we really mean by “identity”?
- A name is a label not an identity.
- Identity as a unique collection of facts.
- Claim: Genealogy is the reconstruction of ancestors’ identities.



## SHIFTING NAMES:

Names are not necessarily stable through life or across generations.

- Married vs maiden names.
- Patronymic names.
- “Official” nicknames
- Gendered names
- Soldier and status names
- Farm names
- Forced name changes
- Multiple distinct versions of names.

## SELF-IDENTITY VERSUS PUBLIC IDENTITY:

How people feel about themselves is not always the same as how they feel that they need to present themselves to the wider world. Differences are often the result of discrimination, but can also be the result of culture based perceptions that are specific to a time and place that aren't directly related to discrimination. Identity can be affected by trying to negotiate multiple cultures at the same time. Identity can even be tweaked for a business advantage.

One person can choose to identify in different ways at different times or in different places. This can lead to genealogical problems. The change in identity can be enough to stop our research. It can leave us suspicious that our conclusion is wrong because things “just don't quite match.” Perhaps worst, an identity change can lead us to both miss the correct connection and make a wrong connection.

The same push-pull idea that helps us think about migration from place to place can help us think about migration from identity to identity, whether that involves a slight shift in age or a total re-work.

Factors that a person might feel the need to change include:

- Ethnicity
- Cultural group
- Gender
- Race
- Out-of-wedlock birth status
- Age
- Religion
- Pauper or servant status

### IDENTITY DOCUMENTS:

Identity documents existed even before the age of the driver's license, school id, and employee access card. Examples of documents created with the explicit goal of establishing identity:

- Documents resulting from English Poor Laws
- Travel documents. If people traveled to where they would not be recognized, they might need an identity document.
- Records of released prisoners.
- City directories.

### FURTHER INFORMATION:

- The story of the Krasilovskys (<http://www.radiolab.org/story/happy-birthday-bobby-k/>) (starts about at about 12:50)
- Hobbs, Allyson. *A Chosen Exile : A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014)
- Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 2015)
- Hindle, Steve. "Technologies of Identification under the Old Poor Law." *The Local Historian*, volume 36, number 4, November 2006, pages 220-236
- Fischer, David Hackett. *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) [An excellent reference on English culture in colonial America, including naming practices, servitude, and poverty, all of which can influence identity.]

### ETHNIC NAMING PRACTICES:

Often books on genealogical research of a specific ethnic or national background will give information on naming practices. Some examples:

- Amdur Sack, Sallyann & Mokotoff, Gary, editors. *Avotaynu guide to Jewish genealogy*, (Bergenfield, New Jersey: Avotaynu, 2006)
- Shea, Jonathan D. *Going home : a guide to Polish-American Family History*, (New Britain, Connecticut: Language & Lineage Press, 2008)
- Geyh, Patricia Keeney. *French Canadian Sources : a Guide for Genealogists*, (Orem, Utah: Ancestry Publishing, 2002)

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