

Myth of Immigrant Surname Changes

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From the Random House Unabridged Dictionary:

Myth (mith), n. from Greek *mythos* story. Definition: 5. an unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social situation.

Myths abound--especially, it seems, in genealogy. Those pursuing their roots will inevitably encounter spelling variations of their ancestor's last name. One widespread genealogical myth concerns changes in the spelling of immigrant surnames. A convenient assumption has been to fault English-speaking clerks at receiving ports, especially Ellis Island where an estimated 17-22 million immigrants were processed between 1892-1924.

Not so! says John P. Colletta, Ph.D. "U.S. Immigration officials did not--as popular American myth persistently claims--arbitrarily and cavalierly change any immigrant's name!" Coletta, who has more than twenty-five years of experience researching ship passenger lists and lecturing on them at the National Archives in Washington, DC is author of the book They Came in Ships, Revised 3rd Edition, 2002. In it, Coletta supports his contention with the following facts.

Beginning January 1, 1820 the U.S. Steerage Act required the captains of ships arriving at American ports to submit lists of all passengers to the Collector of Customs. Shipping companies purchased commercially prepared forms that varied in size and layout to record the required information--minimally: name of the ship, her master, port of embarkation, date and port of arrival, and each passenger's name, age, sex, occupation and nationality. Customs Passenger Lists/Manifests held sway until 1891

In 1891, the newly created U.S. Office of Immigration assumed responsibility for immigrant arrivals. Forms were standardized, although still commercially printed, and the amount of information required about each passenger expanded from five columns to twenty-one. These are known as Immigration Passenger Lists/Manifests after the responsible federal agency. Both the Immigration and earlier Customs lists were microfilmed and are available to researchers in a variety of ways.

By law, the responsible U.S. agencies required that ship captains submit completed forms immediately upon arrival at American ports. Trained immigration officials, often multi-lingual and assisted by translators when necessary, used the completed forms to confirm the information contained therein with the arriving immigrants. Logically, completion of the required forms would have taken place before the ship left the port of embarkation--either just before or shortly after boarding passengers--by those likely conversant with the native tongues. Without the required documentation, immigrants would not have been allowed ashore at American ports and the ship companies would have been responsible for their return. A strong economic incentive.

However, between 1624 and 1855, Colletta says, there were no American immigrant receiving stations--therefore, no clerks to mutilate the spelling of immigrant names. Original research found that our immigrant Studebaker ancestors arrived at Philadelphia in 1736, thus they were not subject to later federal immigration laws. Instead, British and Pennsylvania laws and regulations that prevailed in Philadelphia prior to the American Revolution forty years later, did affect our Studebaker emigres.

Consequently, on September 1, 1736, passengers of the English ship Harle, that had docked the previous day, are said to have been marched to the public square in Philadelphia to sign an "Oath of Allegiance to England and to the Penn government, a proprietorship." The signatures of Clemens, Peder and Hendrich "**Stotenbecker**" or "**Stutenbecker**" appear on the handwritten list of 151 signers. The pertinent part of that primary source document is reproduced, with references, in The Studebaker Family in America, 1736-1976, page 128. Clearly, every signature on the list is unique, not penned by a single clerk.

A further point is that the spelling of the surname of all three emigres on the Oath of Allegiance is similar to those found in earlier church records going back to the late 16th century in and around Solingen, Germany. German researcher Herr Bernard Fretter found the family surname variously spelled as **Staudenbecker**, **Staudtenbecker**, **Stauttenbecker** and **Stutenbecker**--the latter identical to that on the Oath of Allegiance. Fretter's detailed report and ancestral tree of our "European Origins" can be found in The Studebaker Family in America, 1736-1976, pages 27-38.

Clearly, the surnames of our Studebaker ancestors were not "arbitrarily and cavalierly" changed upon arrival in America, as some may claim. (Even the Studebaker Family National Association can be cited for helping to keep the myth alive by occasional publication of uncensored articles written by myth-influenced contributors.) And, we know that brothers Clement and Peter were literate because of their lengthy letter written in 1737 to relatives back in Germany. So, no clerk would have been needed to add, or substitute, a signature to an illiterate's mark (X) on the required Oath of Allegiance.

So, if English-speaking immigration clerks didn't alter the spelling of our ancestors' surname, how and when did Stutenbecker become Studebaker? Although not the subject of this essay, one might posit that, with a few exceptions, it was primarily the result of assimilation into a largely agrarian population in mid-18th to mid-19th century America that was not overly concerned, or educated, about "correct" spelling. And, likely, the letters STUDEBAKER emblazoned on wagons beginning in 1852 and continuing world-wide for more than fifty years, standardized the spelling for later generations in a better-educated society more attuned to "correct" spelling.

For an interesting and informative article, please see "Thoughts on the Origin, Meaning, and Variation in the Spelling of the Name Studebaker" by Dr. Richard B. Studebaker in The Studebaker Family in America, 1736-1976, pages 125-6.