

Derivation of the Name "Wheeler"

A genealogy, while primarily an account of persons directly or indirectly connected with a certain family and a recital of their deeds, is, in a secondary sense, a recital of the deeds of those who bear the family name. It is difficult, indeed, to follow a genealogy through its manifold entanglements save by the clues afforded in the use of the family name or names, and it is therefore of primary importance to determine the variants of the original cognomen. The genealogy of the "Wheeler" family would be utterly incomplete, for example, if it did not include also the records of the "Wheler" and "Whaler" families; at the same time it would be incorrect were it to include the "Wheeland" family, which, in spite of the apparent similarity of the first syllable, seems to have sprung from an entirely different source and is the patronymic of an unrelated stock.

The name first appears in history in the eighth century, when one of the Saxon chieftains is recorded as bearing the name "Wielher." As the word shows progressive changes from that date onward, there is no great difficulty in tracing the character of that change. Thus, in the great Domesday Book of William the Conqueror, the name appears as "Weleret," the holder of the name being recorded as a landowner. "Hugh Le Welere" is mentioned on the One Hundred Rolls in 1273 and "Richard le Whelere" on the Close Rolls in 1348. The spelling "Wheeler" does not appear until later, not until a date which precludes its origin having borne any relation to a trade, such as a wheelwright.

Without entering into this question in too much detail, it may be pointed out that three dominant facts stand out from these early historical references. Of these, the significance of the early establishment of the cognomen comes first. No instance, prior to the ninth century, is blown of an Anglo Saxon family bearing on a surname from generation to generation, and there are not more than half-a-dozen in which a surname crops up frequently, every second or third generation. In such cases, these foreshadowed surnames, if such they may be called, are found in families strongly established, holding positions of quasi-chieftainship in their respective localities. When, therefore, the name "Wheler" is traced from the eighth century to the Norman Conquest, when it is found to have survived triumphantly the revolutionary overthrow of tenure in that Conquest and to have maintained its individuality until the period of the definite establishment of surnames, there is strong evidence of the solidity and enduring worth of the family that bore so honored a name throughout a period of such storm and stress.

Again, it is a matter of moment to note that in each case these early citations refer to landholders. In Saxon times, in the early period of the Norman Conquest and during feudal conditions, the position of "landholder" implied a great deal more than appears at first sight. Class distinctions were far more rigorous than they are today and the landholder was rarely a worker of his own land, rather an administrator. His land was farmed by villeins and tenants, the former representing the various forms of involuntary or voluntary servitude, the latter including the innumerable gradations from crop lien tenancy to approximate ownership. The more prosperous of this latter class developed into the yeomanry of England. Superior to all these were the landholders, from whom the knights were taken, or, to speak more correctly, who learned to serve in battle in such wise that they more readily fitted themselves for admission into the Order of Knighthood. Not all, however, entered military service, though nearly all sent a quota of armed men to the wars.

The third striking point is the meaning of the name "Wheeler" itself. For this, it is evident, determination must be made from the earliest form on record. How significant is this early appearance has been mentioned, a fact all the more remarkable when it is remembered that surnames do not appear in general use until the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This early spelling "Wielher" is evidently a compound of two Anglo-Saxon words "wel" or "wiel" meaning "prosperous" or "fortunate," from which derivation the modern word "weal" and "wealth" may be traced; and the Anglo-Saxon word "hari" or "heri" a warrior, a root traceable in the modern word "hero." The present spelling of the family name "Wheeler," therefore, is a spelling of words which in their modern form would be "Weal-Hero" or in the Anglo-Saxon words "wel-hari." The meaning of the family name, therefore, is clearly "the lucky warrior," or "the prosperous hero."

It may not be amiss to point out how utterly erroneous etymologically would be an attempt to trace the word "Wheeler" back to the combination of "Wheel" and the suffix "er." In the first place, at the time that surnames were being definitely determined, the name of the family was not spelled "Wheeler." In the second place, the wheelwright was not a distinct occupation as was the "Smith" and the "Carpenter," and the wheelwright and his ilk gave rise to the family name "Wright." Again, the very formation of the word "wheel" as an object made rather than as the name of a trade presupposes a different form of suffix from that which has been cited. To weave is a trade and in consequence there is the name "Weaver," but a web is an accomplished product and consequently there is no name "Weber" from this source ("Weber" is derived in far other fashion); but the name "Webster" is the outcome of "web." Even when trade and product are the same word this distinction can be noted, thus to "brew" will lead to the name "Brewer," while a "brew" is the origin of the name "Brewster." Consequently, while such a name as "Whelster" might perhaps indicate an origin referring to the trade of a wheelwright, it is highly improbable that any of the variants of the "Wheeler" name can have been derived from this source.

In Colonial records alone the variations in spelling the old "Wel-hari" name are as follows: "Weler" and "Weeler"; "Wheler," "Whelir" and "Whelor"; "Whaler" (which has nothing to do with whaling) and "Whalor"; "Wheelr" (probably a misspelling), "Wheelar," and "Wheeler"; "Whealer" and "Whealor"; "Wheller," and "Wheter" (which is probably a misspelling). It is notorious that great laxity of spelling persisted in colonial days in America, largely because pioneer life bred a disregard of fine distinctions of verbiage and because the occasions for writing the name were infrequent as compared with the present day. Bearers of any of the above names, however, may be reasonably sure of tracing back their ancestry to a Teutonic origin, and may rightfully think of their forbears as having been men and women of a rugged warlike race, fortunate upon the battlefield and prosperous upon their home estates, whose principal characteristic in those semi-barbaric times was that of solid worth. To this, the elapsing centuries have added honor and renown in many fields, and in America it is doubtful if any family can show a loftier standard or a more untarnished shield that can that one whose members, scattered throughout every State in the union, bear the name of "Wheeler."

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