Table of Contents

The ANCESTRAL Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern
Detecting the Ancestral Pattern and Drawing Inferences from it

The PARENTAL Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern
Detecting the Parental Pattern and Drawing Inferences from it

Comparative Incidence of the Two Patterns
Other Factors That May Apply to the Scottish Onomastic Pattern:
Prevalence; Re-Used Names; Middle Names

Example Lineages:
Scottish
Scotch-Irish or Scottish-American

APPENDIX: The Most Frequent Scottish (also English & Irish) Given Names
—a means of identifying Scottish-origin families without knowing the children's birth order

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026

The Scots have for many centuries followed a traditional pattern in assigning given names to their successive children—or rather, a traditional pattern, with variant. The American "Scotch-Irish" (whom the British call "Ulster Scots") brought this pattern to America, and no doubt Scots *emigrés* carried it to other places as well, but its origins and history in the mother country, Scotland, appear to be lost in the mists of time.[1]

Although onomastic child-naming studies have been published for the American colonial populations of New England and the Chesapeake Bay tidewater of Maryland and Virginia,[2] I know of no systematic studies of the naming practices of the important Scotch-Irish population who were the principal ramrods of the 18th and early 19th century American frontiers. This is probably due to the fact that since there are few extant vital records for this population, comparatively little solid work has been done on the reconstruction of Scotch-Irish families who arrived on the Pennsylvania and Virginia frontiers from 1720-1800, and the good work is both widely scattered and difficult for the non-expert to separate from the chaff.

For years, though, I've been using this pattern successfully to make genealogical inferences about American immigrant Scotch-Irish families, and having recently become aware of an important variation in the pattern, which may be, in fact, the original Scottish pattern, I have been able to validate the occurrence of both variants (about equally) across a limited set of Scottish family data.

The only basis I have for this paper, therefore, is my own extensive experience with the Scotch-Irish of the 18th and early 19th centuries, and the interested reader will simply have to try it on for size him or herself.

On the whole I'd estimate that the pattern was followed by 90% or more of these American families, at least for the first three children of each sex, while in my small Scottish sample, the proportion is virtually 100%. In both areas, though, I found a fair amount of minor variation within the pattern: switching the order in which certain children are named, or occasionally interpolating a name from outside the family circle.

I understand that the usage of the pattern has attenuated greatly in modern times in Scotland, and in America it flourished only during the period of extensive Scotch-Irish settlement, and until the sharers of this American sub-culture began to mix and assimilate with the general American population—roughly, the period from 1720-1820—although the pattern persisted in a few families beyond that time.

I have christened the two variants the Ancestral Pattern, and the Parental Pattern, though there is substantial overlap between them, and the theme of both is to commemorate the child's ancestors in the assignment of his given name. Although it is the Parental pattern that I usually expect to see amongst the American Scotch-Irish, I suspect that the original Scottish pattern was the Ancestral, and that it was adopted partly as genealogical device—an aid to keeping track of one's ancestors. The Parental pattern, on the other hand, truncates the ancestry with the child's grandparents, and is more suited to a transient population like the Scotch-Irish, who probably grew up without knowing much or anything about their great-grandparents—just like most Americans today.

---

[1] Several authorities I've consulted, including a Scottish-based professor of onomastics, have come up blank when asked about published scholarly studies on the history and application of this pattern in Scotland itself, and yet it seems to be almost universally known in that culture, as though by osmosis, if no longer extensively followed.

[2] David Hackett Fischer, "Forenames and the Family in NE: An Exercise in Historical Onomastics", and Darrit B. Rutman & Anita H. Rutman, "In Nomine Avi: Child-Naming Patterns in a Chesapeake County, 1650-1750", both in Robert M. Taylor Jr., and Ralph S. Crandall, *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History* (MercerGA: Macon University Press, 1986)

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026

I begin, therefore, with the Ancestral pattern, although on the American genealogical scene it is the Parental pattern that is the easiest to detect and make use of.

The ANCESTRAL Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern

The 1st son was named for his father's father.
The 2nd son was named for his mother's father.
The 3rd son was named for his father's father's father
The 4th son was named for his mother's mother's father
The 5th son was named for his father's mother's father.
The 6th son was named for his mother's father's father.
The 7th through 10th sons were named for their father's 4 great-grandfathers.
The 11th through 14th sons were named for their mother's 4 great-grandfathers.

The 1st daughter was named for her mother's mother.
The 2nd daughter was named for her father's mother.
The 3rd daughter was named for her mother's father's mother
The 4th daughter was named for her father's father's mother
The 5th daughter was named for her mother's mother's mother
The 6th daughter was named for her father's mother's mother
The 7th through 10th daughters were named for their mother's 4 great-grandmothers
The 11th through 14th daughters were named for their father's 4 great-grandmothers

And there is this rule, which applies to the Parental pattern as well: where a given name has already been used, one slips down the list to the next designated ancestor.

Of course, not only are there few families that have as many as 7 sons or 7 daughters, and few parents, probably, who can name many of their great-grandparents, but the pool of commonly used Scottish names is so small, thanks to the operation of the pattern itself, that chances are that most of the ancestral family names will have been used up before the 7th child of each sex is reached. The progressive shrinkage of the pool of family given names can be predicted from the fact that most of these families had between 5-10 children in all. Thus it's not surprising that my study of Scottish given names in the IGI finds that the top five boys names (John, James, William, Alexander, and Robert) account for about 72% of all the names I sampled.[3]

It's hard to find verifiable instances of the Ancestral pattern in America. Even where it may have been in play, the given names of the parents of the immigrant generation are only rarely known, and by the time enough generations have passed in America to follow the pattern there, it has begun to deteriorate under the homogenizing influences of assimilation, or has been distorted by the advent of middle names in the generation following the Revolution.[4] So far, I've found just one extended American family in which it runs, but now that I've become aware of it, I'm expecting to find it in others that I have heretofore dismissed as having strayed from the pattern.

---

[3] See the Appendix, below, for my statistics on the 20 most frequent names of each sex, in frequency order.

[4] Sometimes, for example, a first son will be named for both his paternal and maternal grandparents, one of these names used as a middle name, which most likely will not appear in the records at all.

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026

The PARENTAL Scottish Onomastic Child-naming Pattern

The 1st son was named for his father's father.
The 2nd son was named for his mother's father
The 3rd son was named for his father
The 4th son was named for his father's eldest brother
The 5th son was named for his father's next eldest brother

The 1st daughter was named for her mother's mother
The 2nd daughter was named for her father's mother
The 3rd daughter was named for her mother
The 4th daughter was named for her mother's eldest sister
The 5th daughter was named for her mother's next eldest sister

and the pattern continues with subsequent children of each sex named for the next eldest same sex parental siblings.

Clearly, this pattern, if followed in full, was sufficient to provide a pre-specified set of given names for all or most of the children of a large family. However, I have found that it was only occasionally followed strictly, beyond the first three children of each sex. Most of the subsequent children were indeed named for their aunts and uncles, but in no very predictable order, and father's sisters or mother's brothers might be remembered as well. I've also found instances of children being named for step-parents as well as biological parents, or even for family friends.

Detecting the Parental Pattern and Drawing Inferences from it

Bearing the possibility of these kinds of variation in mind, where the family is known to be Scottish (or Scotch-Irish) some adherence to the pattern can reasonably be presumed. At a minimum, it will usually be found that the first two sons were named for their grandfathers, and the first two daughters for their grandmothers.

What must also be known, though, is the birth order of the children, and this can be very difficult to determine for the Scotch-Irish frontier families who mostly lived in jurisdictions that kept no public birth records, and whose baptisms by Presbyterian ministers also resulted in no settled or preserved church records.[5] The exact structure of conjugal families can often nonetheless be pieced together from an analysis of wills or probate records, from deeds or tax records showing sons coming of age, and from many other kinds of sources.

Where the birth order of the children *is* known, the Parental pattern (though not the Ancestral) can usually be inferred conclusively from the names of the 3rd children of each sex, if these are the same names as those of the parents. "Conclusively" is a strong word, but here is my argument.

If we take the worst case, where the parents are named John and Margaret (the two most common Scottish given names),[6] and we find that the third son is named John, and the third daughter, Margaret, the probability that things just fell out this way, in the absence of any deliberate naming

---

[5] The ministers themselves generally kept records of the baptisms and marriages they performed in their own private journals, but not in registers belonging to the church, for there were none. And when the ministers moved on, the records went with them. Some of these diaries have survived and have found their way to the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, or at one of the other Presbyterian seminaries with archives, the principal one being the Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, but many, if not most of these old diaries have disappeared forever.

[6] See the Appendix below.

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026

pattern, is roughly .26 x .16 = .04, or 5 in 100; and for the 4th most common names, Alexander, and Elizabeth, the probabilities are .1 x .1 = .01, or 1 in 100.[7] These 95 or 99%ile probabilities of ruling out the "null hypothesis" (that there is no pattern) are sufficiently robust that if these were findings in a scientific study, both sets of names would be considered "statistically significant" evidence of a pattern, and worthy on that account of publication, as a probably significant and valuable result. In addition, some recent studies that have succeeded in quantifying what jurors understand by "reasonable doubt", the most exacting test of courtroom proof, suggest that a majority of jurors would be satisfied with a 95% probability that the accused was guilty, and virtually all would be satisfied by a 99% probability,[8] and I think most genealogists would be delighted if they could prove even half of their propositions to such an exacting standard; I know I would.

Knowledge of the names of one or more of the grandparents of the children being named would further strengthen the hypothesis that the pattern was in effect, and it would greatly strengthen the inference of the names of the other grandparents. Without such knowledge, one must contend with one of the most common variations in the pattern: the tendency for the namings of the first two same-sex children being switched between the paternal and the maternal lines, perhaps because one of these had a higher social standing, or more wherewithal to convey to namesakes by deed or will. However, where one has determined from the names of the 3rd children that the Parental pattern is in effect, and where the name of the 1st son is the same as that of the father's father, I would expect that the name of the second son would be the same as that of the mother's father at least 95% of the time.

However, it is characteristic of this pattern that beyond the 3rd children it becomes only advisory, and so not of much use for genealogical inference. There is at most merely a strong tendency to name the fourth child, and especially the fourth son, for the parental brother or sister, and to favor the older brothers and sisters..

Detecting the Ancestral Pattern and Drawing Inferences from it

Where the family is known to be of Scottish background, the birth order of the children is known, and neither of the 3rd children are named for their parents, one may reasonably presume that the Ancestral pattern is in effect. However, there may be some doubt about either of the first two premises, and quite often the names of the parents and grandparents will overlap, so that one cannot be sure whether a 3rd child is being named for a parent of grandparent. For these reasons, and in order to raise presumption to conclusion, one needs to be able to match the names of at least a couple of the children to those of their grandparents, according to the rules of the pattern. With such evidence in hand, the same sort of statistical argument can be applied to elevate one's conviction to beyond reasonable doubt.

Although my experience with this pattern is so far still limited, I believe it to be an essentially conservative pattern, and my Scottish data shows that it was followed quite rigorously for the first three children of each sex, with the only deviations being minor switches in the order in which the rules were applied. In fact, so predictably was the pattern followed for the first two children, that knowledge of the names of two or three of the grandparents, and of the first two children of each sex, permits a strong (95% or better) inference of the unknown name of the remaining grandparents.

---

[7] The name frequencies on which I am relying here come from a study I have done of Scottish given name frequencies, detailed in the Appendix below.

[8] Harry D. Saunders, "Quantifying Reasonable Doubt: A Proposed Solution to an Equal Protection Problem", in ***bepress Legal Series***, 7Dec2005, Working Paper 881.

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026

For the next, great-grandparental generation beyond that, my Scottish data suggest that the inference of unknown names becomes somewhat problematic because of quite frequent switching of the naming order (perhaps partly because the pattern is rather complex, and was not perfectly known by all), but where some, at least of the great-grandparents are known, the odds for correctly inferring the names of the others can approach the same levels of near certainty.

Comparative Incidence of the Two Patterns

While my experience with the families of Scotch-Irish emigrants to America is extensive, the Scottish data I have analyzed is quite limited, though I hope to supplement the latter in due course. Also, I have only recently become aware of the Ancestral pattern, so that I also have limited experience in applying it to the American context. However, I am quite sure that it's going to be difficult to find clear-cut examples of it here.

With this in mind, at present I would estimate that the Parental pattern was followed by American families of Scottish background between 65% and 85% of the time, and allowing for perhaps 5-10% of these families who didn't follow either pattern coherently, one might expect that between 5% and 30% of American families named their children according to the Ancestral pattern. Obviously, these are very loose estimates. Paradoxically, because American naming practices were always more open to variation, in the exceptional cases where the genealogy of three generations of these families has been worked out, one might expect to be able to identify the Ancestral pattern to a greater degree of certainty, than the Parental, given also the rather high likelihood of overlap between parental and grandparental names.

Although the Scottish data I analyzed was confined to about 20 families of four surname lineages, which converged to a single recent ancestral line, the rigor with which these families observed the pattern, gives me some confidence in the significance of the results. Nonetheless, the data was sufficient for pattern inference for only 11 of the families I looked at. Of these, 5 followed the Ancestral pattern, 4 the Parental, and the remaining 2 families were equivocal between the two (the pattern variants fit about equally well).

It also appears from the Scottish data, that the two variants were adopted at discretion, but were not mixed, and when the Parental pattern was the order of the day, it was followed much more rigorously than in America, especially with respect to the naming of children for uncles and aunts

The time period for these Scottish results was equivalent to that of the American Scotch-Irish colonists, from about 1700 to about 1900, but the patterning in America had largely died out by 1850 or so due to assimilation and other factors, and began to attenuate decades earlier.

Other Factors That May Apply to the Scottish Onomastic Pattern

Prevalence of the Pattern

An unstated assumption of the analyses above is that the pattern was more or less univerally in effect in Scottish-origined populations, at least prior to about 1900 in Scotland, and about 1800 in America, at least for the first three children of each sex. While I believe that to be the case, from my experience to date, I am unable to provide statistical backing for the proposition. *To be on the safe side, it might be well to discount the probability estimates that the pattern was in use in a given family* (based on the use of certain given names in a particular order), *by a factor of 10%*.

Re-Used Names

One rule that was generally followed as an adjunct to the Scottish onomastic pattern was to re-use the names of children who died in infancy at the next possible opportunity. Thus, if a first son,

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026

named for his father's father, were to die at age 5, after two other sons had been born, the next son (the 4th) would be given the name of the deceased 1st son. Fortunately for us genealogists, the majority of infant deaths occurred within the first two years, so that such re-namings merely generated an ignorable hiccup in the birth order.

I have no feel for the likelihood that this rule was followed, mostly because there are so few sets of comprehensive birth records for the American Scotch-Irish; no doubt many such infant deaths went unrecorded. For that reason, one must be wary of an occasional violation of the pattern by an apparently out-of-order name, although such an anomaly can be ruled out with a set of sufficiently tight birth date estimates, allowing for no sufficient gaps in the birth order.

Middle Names

Another operative factor was the advent of middle names. Middle names came into general use in America in the aftermath of the Revolution, probably because so many men with names unique to their small towns (or made unique by the suffixes "Jr" or "Sr", or perhaps "Esq"), were thrown together with men of the same names from other small towns. Be that as it may, I'd estimate that no more than 5% of American citizens had middle names in 1775, and if they did, they almost never figured in the records, while by 1800, probably 70% had middle names. Unfortunately, since most families settled again in small towns where middle names weren't needed, these middle names are often very hard to find in the early American public records; they are more likely to be found on gravestones, or in family bible records, or, eventually, on death certificates.

I would expect that in Scotland, where no national upheavals of comparable scope occurred, middle names trickled into use more gradually, and in such a way as to be minimally disruptive of the pattern.

The Scottish data suggest this, as only a substantial minority of Scots in the study were reported with middle names, which I'm guessing from the specific birth dates provided for each, were based on parish records and/or private family records. My main finding, though, is that in these Scottish families, when a middle name does appear, it is virtually always the full name of the ancestor for whom the person was named.

In America, by contrast, this is only the usual case, even for the first generation given middle names. Almost as popular was to commemorate both grandparents with a single child. Thus the first son of a man named James Craig, whose grandfathers were named John Lyle, and William McKee, might be named John William Craig, and not John Lyle Craig. Again, it seems that the Scottish pattern, whether it was Ancestral or Parental, was more conservative, and the American version more experimental, and given to variants—and therefore more problematic.

Example Lineages

I've worked up two extended lineage examples of the use of the pattern. One is based on a set of interrelated Scottish ancestries from two different areas of Scotland, extending roughly over the period 1800-1900. The other covers a good chunk of the four generation descendancy of a collateral relative of mine, the immigrant William Robb ("Rab") of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, from 1730-1830.

Both variants, the ANCESTRAL and the PARENTAL, will be found in both sets of examples, and in roughly equal proportions. However, it has been my experience that the PARENTAL pattern is overwhelmingly prevalent in America during the generations that the Scottish onomastic pattern persisted. Click the following links for: the Scottish examples; and the American examples.

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026

APPENDIX: The Most Frequent Scottish (also English & Irish) Given Names

Although many of the most frequent Scottish given names were also the most frequent British given names, the continually renewed concentration on the same small set of names from one generation to the next produced an extraordinary concentration on just a handful of names that is collectively distinctive of whole reconstructed families of Scottish background. Thus, over 72% of all Scottish lads were given one of the first five names: John, James, William, Alexander, or Robert

Compare this with the most popular English male given names as of about 1700: John, William, Thomas, Richard, and Robert—which covered, I would estimate, no more than 25% of English boys. The English list continues: George, James, Joseph, Edward, Simon, Henry, and Francis; and one would probably have to throw all these names in too to get the total of English names up to 72%.

The most popular Irish given names in 1864 were, for boys: John, Patrick, James, Thomas, Michael, William, Edward, Joseph, Daniel, Peter, Martin, Francis, Denis, Richard, Hugh, Timothy, David, Jeremiah, and Matthew; and for girls the list was: Mary, Catherine, Margaret, Bridget, Ann, Elizabeth, Ellen, Sarah, Hanora, Joanna/Joan. These Irish lists were almost as top-loaded than the Scottish lists, with more than 60% of all Irish lads given one of the first six names, compared with 77% for the Scots, and the first six girls names were 73%, with Mary alone constituting 25%.

These Scottish and English lists are so different collectively that families of Scottish background can quite readily be differentiated form the English by the set of given names in large families, even without the presence in the Scottish mix of such distinctive and popular Scottish names as Alexander, and Andrew, respectively 37th and 26th in England. Differentiating the native Irish from the Scots or the Scotch-Irish (the Ulster Scots) can be more difficult, though the high likelihood that one of the Scottish lads will be named Alexander, Robert, or Andrew, versus the Irish favoring of Patrick or Michael, may suffice.

This compilation is based on my canvass of roughly 200,000 given names in the IGI for Scotland, encompassing the surnames JAMISON, McARTHUR, McCRAE, McDOWELL, McFARLANE, McKNIGHT, and ROBB, with CUNNINGHAM substituted for McFARLANE for the female names. Here's more detail on my methodology.

For the data on the most popular English given names, I am indebted to George Redmonds, Christian Names in Local and Family History (Toronto: Dundrun Press, 2004).

The list of the most popular Irish given names comes from Irish Genealogy Toolkit, accessed 1May2026, which cites as its source an online governmental database at irishgenealogy.ie of first names assigned at birth in 1864.

The 20 Most Frequent Given Names in the IGI for Scotland

%	Totals	BOY's Names	%	Totals	GIRL's Names
26	24692	John	16.2	16529	Margaret
15.5	14673	James	12.3	12525	Mary
13.3	12616	William	11.8	12053	Jennet
9.5	9022	Alexander	10.9	11078	Elizabeth
8	7548	Robert	10.1	10348	Jean
4.37	4136	Andrew	7.4	7516	Ann
3.99	3784	David	7.2	7338	Isabella
3.81	3613	Thomas	7.0	7103	Catherine
3.7	3511	George	4.4	4456	Helen
2.8	2653	Archibald	4.3	4388	Agnes
1.72	1631	Patrick	1.2	1250	Sarah
1.67	1585	Charles	1.1	1115	Barbara
1.52	1446	Daniel	1.0	1070	Jessie
.75	710	Joseph	.76	776	Flora
.67	637	Samuel	.61	620	Susan
.54	507	Henry	.51	520	Martha
.42	395	Angus	.44	449	Grace
.27	267	Richard	.28	287	Rachel
.27	260	Adam	.25	255	Hannah
.19	177	Edward	.21	214	Rebecca
	900	OTHER Names[9]	2.1	2158	OTHER Names[10]
	94763	Total Sample Size		102048	Total Sample Size

[9] Other Names for men that just missed the cut were Ronald=55, and Benjamin=49.

[10] The most frequent female name after Rebecca was Esther=117.

© John Barrett Robb; originally published about 2012; most recently revised 1May2026