

Origins of the Name Meek(s)

By Christopher A. Meek

Many people have asked “What is the origin of the name Meek, or Meeks depending on their family history?” There are many fanciful stories floating around as well as a few Coat-of-Arms reportedly from heraldry book. While it can be interesting to contemplate these things it is doubtful that they will answer the basic question. Even surname dictionaries simply discuss the origins of the adjective and are not helpful in determining how any individual family came by the name Meek.

When one encounters a story about the origins of the Meek family name or a Coat-of-Arms keep in mind the following facts.

One thing we know through the DNA project is that there are numerous totally unrelated family groups named Meek or Meeks. Thus there can be no single origin of the name.

After the last Ice age people came out of their enclaves in southwest Asia and Iberia to repopulated Europe and eventually England. The people of England and Scotland were made up of different historical groups before the use of surnames. There were the pre-Roman populations of Celts and Picts. After the Romans left in the 5th century the Anglo-Saxons moved in and controlled many areas. Vikings raided and occupied some areas towards the end of this period. The Normans conquered England in 1066. The Normans were a mixture of English, French, Scandinavian and other people. People named Meek, Meeks and Meeke are probably represented in all of these population groups. However there is no evidence that any of them acquired the surname before the 13th century.

Many people searching for the origins of the Meek surname and/or Coat-of-Arms starts with the assumption that everyone with that surname came from the same family. That is not true. Surnames were mandated for non-royal families in England after the Normans conquered England and became common place during the 1200's. If people did not have a surname they had to make one up. They picked names that represented occupations, places, important people etc, etc. Thus, the name Meek sprung up independently in different families in different locations throughout England and Scotland.

We have no way of knowing what the original spelling of the name was although Meke seem likely. The adjective meek comes from Middle English and was of Scandinavian origins according to Webster's dictionary. Middle English was the language spoken in England at the time surnames became common and the word was spelled meke. The surname Meke does appear in early English records shortly after 1200. From that the name became Meeke and eventually Meek and Meeks.

There is no evidence that the surname Meek was bestowed on a man because his personality reflected the adjective meek or that the name was intended to reflect the adjective at all. Yet it does seem reasonable to conclude that some family might have selected the name for that reason.

Wales, Cornwall and especially Scotland have a different language background. In Scotland the name may originally have been spelled Meyk. Meyk transformed to Meik. It was not until the early 1700's that the Scottish "ei" became "ee" and the name was spelled Meek. The name Meek

Origins of the name Meek(s)

appears in Ireland after the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the plantation period between 1610 and 1700. Migration from Scotland and England continues up to the present.

Some families may well have come by their name as a result of an event where the name changed from one surname to another. The change may have been intentional or unintentional. It may have occurred hundreds of years ago or just a few generations back in time. Other than a few modern examples there is no documented case of a major group of the Meek families having a different surname at some point in history. If it happened there is no recorded history of the event.

Undoubtedly some Meek lines have died out and their history will never be known. It is not known to what extent the Meek name was used between the beginning of surnames and more modern times when a broad spectrum of records were maintained.

There is no evidence that any of the fanciful stories about the surname have been proven to be associated with any particular Meek family. Few genealogies about the Meek family go back as far as the 1500's with some barely getting into the 1600's. Thus, there is a 300 to 400 year gap in our knowledge of any Meek family and the beginning of surnames in England. That would be 10 to 12 generation before any written records of the Meek family existed and another 10 to 12 generations to the 20th century when stories about the origins of the name Meek began circulating.

When one considers (1) that there are numerous if not hundreds of unrelated Meek families that descend from separate groups before the use of surnames and (2) that we have no connecting genealogies within hundreds of years of the beginning of surnames it seems somewhat amazing that anyone ever decided to declare that the Meek name originated in such and such a place or in such and such a way. Nor does it seem possible that any single family historian in the 19th or 20th century ever had sufficient information to know how his family came by the name Meek.

Yet that does not seem to have prevented people with a limited knowledge of history from putting together bits and pieces of information to come up with nice sounding stories. If any of the old stories are even partly true we have no way of knowing if any of them apply to our own particular family.

The most likely explanation is that the name Meek came into use independently in different parts of England and Scotland during the 13th century. Why the name was chosen in each case remains a mystery. However it was likely selected for a number of different reasons which were simple but meaningful to the individual family at that time. This is not romantic nor does it provide an easy to understand explanation for how the family name came into being. The bottom line is that most families named Meeke, Meek, Meeks or Meik had those names long before written records had identify them.

Copyright © March 20, 2007 by Christopher A. Meek/Rev Apr 2009/Rev Nov 26, 2011/Rev Feb 25, 2013