

THE WEEK

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LANGUAGE

11 baby-naming trends of the past

The whole cities-as-names thing goes back way farther than you think

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Last week, the Social Security Administration released its list of the most popular baby names of 2012. Jacob and Sophia made the top of the list this year, but the SSA website has data on the 1,000 most popular baby names for boys and girls going back to 1880, when John and Mary came in first. A look at the old lists shows that the most popular names are always changing, but some of the naming trends have been around for longer than it might seem. Here, 11 naming trends of the past:

1. Important titles

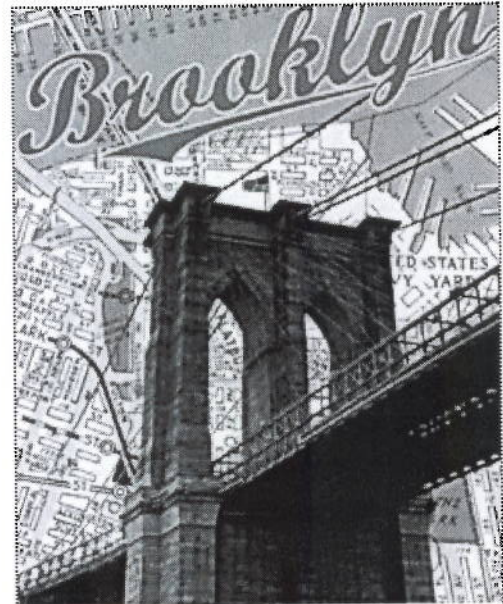
This year's list has some names that carry a grand sense of importance (Messiah, King, Marquis), but the 1880s and '90s also had its grand titles in the 200 to 400 range of ranked popularity. For the boys, there was General, Commodore, Prince, and Major. For the girls there was Queen, which hovered around the 500 mark until the 1950s.

2. Cities

This year has a number of cities as names on the list: Brooklyn, London, and Memphis among them. Cities as names is not a new thing, however. Boston was a boy's name in the 1880s. Dallas and Denver have been around since the 1880s, as has Cleveland (though it peaked in popularity during the presidency of Grover Cleveland, so perhaps should count as a president name instead.)

3. States

Some of our state names come from women's names, so it is expected that states like Virginia, Carolina, and Georgia should be represented on name lists. But other state names have made the list too. Missouri made the girl's name list



Brooklyn was one of the most popular baby names of 2012.

Photo: Thinkstock/Comstock

from 1880 until about 1900 and Indiana, Tennessee, and Texas also showed up a few times as girls' names in the 1800s.

4. Weird spellings

People have been coming up with their own spellings for common names for a long time. Some alternate versions of names that are more than half a century old are Hellen, Margaret, Julious, Deloris, Kathrine, Elizebeth, Benjiman, Peggie, Sharlene, Syble, Dorris, Suzan and Lawrence.

5. The 'Y' spelling

Recent years have introduced names like Madisyn and Madyson, where a 'y' replaces another letter, but names like Edyth, Kathryne, Alyce, Helyn, and Franklyn have all made the lists of yore. In the 1920s, it was fashionable to get the look of an inside-name 'y' by adding an 'e' to names already ending with 'y' as in Rubye, Bettye, Bobbye, and Billye.

6. Opulence

Diamond didn't make the list until 1986 and seems to be declining in popularity from its peak in 1999, but valuable gems have long been a part of our baby-naming repertoire. In the early 20th century, Ruby, Pearl, Opal, Beryl and Jewel were popular, along with other signals of preciousness like Goldie and Coral.

7. Going down in history

The last names of historical figures have long been used as first names. Lincoln has been on the list since the beginning of record-keeping, but in recent years it has been making a comeback, reaching 132 in 2012. Columbus made the list until the 1950s, and Napoleon was popular until the 1970s. Cicero had a short-lived run, barely making it into the 1900s, and Washington fell off in the 1920s. Roosevelt peaked in popularity during the runs of both Roosevelts. Sometimes it's wise to wait and see how a president's name will go down in history before you give it to your baby. Hoover was the 366th most popular boy's name in 1928, experiencing a sharp drop off after that.

8. Boys' names for girls

Charlie has become a popular girl's name, making the list at 305 this year, but it had an earlier run as a girl's name in the last century. From the 1880s until about the 1950s, there were a bunch of traditional boys' names that became popular for girls. Tommie, Billie, Bobbie, Frankie as well as William and George all made the list for many years in a row.

9. The -ford ending

These days there's a trend for the '-den' ending, as in Jayden, Camden, Caden,

Aiden, and Braden, but there was a time when it was all about the '-ford': Clifford, Wilford, Buford, Rutherford, Stanford, Crawford, and just plain Ford had a good run in the early 20th century.

10. Last names as first names

It may seem like little Harrison and Emerson are on to something new with their last names as first names, but last names have always been encroaching on first name territory. In addition to the history names and the –ford names above, this is the way we've gotten Scott, Vaughn, Spencer, Coleman, Hilton, Wilson, Preston, Conrad, and Haskell, among many others.

11. Nouns

You can name your baby whatever you want. Here are some regular nouns that have made the list in years past: Fairy (#625 for girls in 1905), Dimple (#800 for girls in 1919), Author (#558 for boys in 1883), Cherry (#430 for girls in 1948), and Love (#585 for boys in 1890).