

Chapter 2

Historical Background: Swiss Origins of the Surname Landis

The surname Landis has become widespread in the USA. Unfortunately, some unreliable ideas have been offered about the origins of the name, which have been repeated on internet sources. In this chapter I will summarize these speculations and present evidence showing that the real origins derive from early settlers along the shores of Lake Zürich, in Switzerland.

Swiss historians recognize that the earliest form of the surname was “Landös,” a Middle High German spelling that first appeared in 13th century records in Switzerland and the upper Rhine valley. An alternative spelling at that time was “Landoes,” which was an equivalent since “oe” was simply an archaic way to write the o-umlaut. The common form “Landis” had developed by the 1500s in the vicinity of Hirzel, in Switzerland. Branches of the family later emigrated to Alsace and Baden in the 17th century, where other variant forms of the name appeared, such as “Landes,” “Landas,” “Landeis,” and “Landaiss.”

The etymological roots of the surname cannot be traced back reliably much further than the 13th century since this takes us into that twilight period when surnames were being invented, spellings were very fluid, and records were scarce for those who weren't members of the nobility. There are tantalizing hints of possible precursor forms, such as “Landizo,” which may extend back as far as the year 600 A.D.

Some Misleading Guesses Based on Linguistic Coincidences

The first members of the Landis family that immigrated to the USA were Mennonites, who settled in Pennsylvania. Their descendants began holding family reunions in the late 19th century, which over time became well organized. Some members of the Landis Family Reunion Committee printed pamphlets containing sketches of the early history of the family and conjectures about the meaning of the Landis surname. At that time they were casting about for any possible clues or linguistic associations. For example, one pamphlet noted that there was a *Landesmuseum* in Zürich and a *Landes Zentralbank* in Heilbronn, and the author speculated that this might somehow allude to the surname. Unfortunately, these terms do not refer to a Landis family museum, nor to a family owned bank! The word *Land* in German simply means a locality or “region” and the “-es” suffix is a grammatical ending. The terms can be translated as “regional museum” and “regional central bank.”

Another speculation based on linguistic coincidence was the possible “French Connection,” which was proffered in the 1888 Landis Family Reunion Report. This conjecture was repeated in various later reports and Ira Landis, the leading family genealogist in the 1950s, also toyed with this idea. He noted in his European travelogue¹ that there is a region in southwestern France known as “the *Landes*,” along the Atlantic coast near Spain's Pyrenees mountains. The surname “Landes” crops up occasionally in modern Alsace, so he wondered if the family may have originated in the *Landes Département* in France. On the surface this might appear to be a plausible theory; however, the name of that region in southwestern France is simply a geographic term, which means literally “the wastelands” or “the marshlands,” and

¹ Landis 1954, pp. 14, 162

there is no record that it was ever used as a patronymic. The *Landes Departement* is a large, sparsely populated area of grasslands and marshes, bordered on the west by vast coastal sand dunes. Originally it was virtually uninhabited. The few peasants in the area grazed small sheep herds, and the ground was so loose that they were reported to have traversed it on stilts! Drainage efforts by the French government have reclaimed some of the marshes, but much of the area remains empty and useless.

While there is a remote possibility that the Landis surname could have derived from this region in southwestern France, the likelihood is very slim. One obvious discrepancy to this theory is that there are no historical records showing that the surname Landis (or its variations) was associated with this area, nor that it ever occurred there. As Ira Landis himself pointed out, most of the historical occurrences of the surname in France are in Alsace. As we shall see, historical documents show that members of the family emigrated from Switzerland into the Rhine valley in the mid 1600s, and from there into the neighboring areas of Baden and the Palatinate (*Pfalz*) in Germany. The occurrences of the Landis surname in Alsace and Baden are best explained by demonstrable historical linkages such as these, rather than by simple coincidences in the sound of a word.

The So-Called "Charlemagne Connection"

Another more intriguing speculation was made by Landers,² who stated that equivalent forms of the surname are found "in Saxony, Bavaria, Bohemia, Prussia, and the British Isles, [where] we find it spelled Lander, Landers, Launder...[and] in parts of France and French-speaking areas of Canada and New Orleans we find the form Landry used." She also stated that the equivalent forms of Landuno, Landon, and Landen are found in the Netherlands and Belgium. All these surnames, she speculates, derived from the descendants of "Pippin of Landen" (died in the year 640; some sources spell his name as "Peppin," and his estate as "Landes" or "Landis").

There is a village in Belgium called Landen, which was originally an estate owned by the Frankish nobleman, Peppin, in the year 600. At that time the Merovingian dynasty was in power, originally established by Clovis ("Chlodwig"), the leader of the Germanic Franks who first conquered northern Gaul in the 5th century. Peppin served as the Mayor of the Palace (prime minister) under Dagobert I. Peppin had great wealth and political power in the eastern portion of the empire, known as "Austrasia," which was centered in the Rhinelands and included the modern Palatinate and Alsace. After the death of King Dagobert in 638, Pippin's family grew increasingly prominent. His grandson, Peppin II, mobilized an army and seized total control of the Frankish kingdom in 687. Peppin II's son was the famous Charles Martel (Charles "the Hammer," ca. 686 - 741), who fought great battles against the Moors and expanded the empire of the Franks. Charles' son, Peppin III (Peppin "the short," 714 - 768), formally assumed the kingship of the Frankish empire in 751 and established the new Carolingian dynasty. His son was none other than the illustrious Charlemagne (*Karl der Grosse*, ca. 742-814), who became king in 768 and was crowned Emperor of the West in the year 800. In summary, the Carolingian dynasty sprang from a line of ambitious prime ministers who eventually replaced their overlords, all of whom descended from the original Peppin who owned the estate at Landen.³

² Landers 1985, pp. 91-83.

³ James 1982

Landers noted that Charlemagne traveled frequently, and that he usually took along a large entourage of family members. One of his castles was located in Münster, Switzerland, which she said is “not far from Hirzel” where the earliest records for our Landis family are found. She speculated that one of Charlemagne’s “Landen” cousins may have come along and this may explain how the family came to be established in Switzerland.

I was intrigued by this theory so in 1993 I corresponded with Landers to see if she had any documentation for the so-called Charlemagne connection. She acknowledged that there is no evidence to support this theory. The castle at Münster is in fact not even all that close to Hirzel. It is located in Valais canton, in southwest Switzerland, at the opposite end of the country from Hirzel. As tempting as it may be to claim a link with illustrious ancestors such as Charlemagne (indeed, this was the popular goal of much genealogical research in the past), there is simply no basis for these speculations.

There is also no demonstrable link between the surname Landis and other allegedly equivalent forms in Belgium, including Landen, Landuno, and Landry. The surnames Landers, Landor, and so on are found primarily in the British isles. One source cites them as descendants of Almaric de Landres from Lorraine, who settled in Buckinghamshire in the 13th century.⁴ Eshleman⁵ speculates that “Landuno” may have been the Dutch form of “Landis,” and there may be a relationship to John de Landuno who lived about 1350 in Ghent. Again, there is no basis for these claims, nor any evidence that John de Landuno’s family had any connection with Switzerland. We should note that when names are stated to be linguistically “equivalent,” this does not necessarily mean that they were genealogically linked. The “Smiths” in England are not necessarily related to the “Schmidts” in German speaking countries, even though these names are equivalent trade names.

The “Robbers,” the “Land Destroyers,” the “Landless,” and Other Guesses

Two of the standard references⁶ on Germanic surnames offer loose conjectures on the origin of the surname based on early occurrences of compound words which contain *Land* in various forms – for example, *Landsmann* (native resident), *Landvogt* (district judge), *Landverwüster* (destroyer of the land), and *Landschäder* (robber). Brechenmacher notes that the Middle High German word *oesen* means “to empty,” or “to take away;” hence, *landoesen* would refer to robbery. Historical records in Germany from about the 13th century indeed refer to robbers and other law-breakers, those who committed serious offenses warranting the death penalty, as *Landschädliche Leute*, or in the archaic spelling as *schedeliche lute*, the Latin equivalent of which was *nocivi terrae*.⁷ Brechenmacher and Bahlow do not specifically derive the surname Landis from these old compound words, but they do cite them as possible historical precedents. They also mention early occurrences of the surname “Landös,” without establishing any clear causal connection. Their logic is not stated and there is no supporting historical documentation showing that these labels became passed down in the form of patronymics, so these ideas remain simple guesswork. Unfortunately, this “robber” etymology has been repeated on some internet sources as if it were the undisputed origin of the Landis surname.

⁴ <http://www.houseofnames.com/landis-family-crest>

⁵ Eshleman 1917.

⁶ Brechenmacher 1935. See also Bahlow 1967.

⁷ Sellert 1990.

It's also possible that *Landschäder* may have referred to a tax collector. In Württemberg in the 15th century a special tax was levied in times of great need to repay the ruler for his financial outlays on behalf of the people. This developed into a regular annual tax in the 16th century, known as the "*Landschaden Steuer*" (i.e., funds to allay damages to the countryside), with a fixed amount levied to each district and collected from each individual taxpayer.⁸

Joseph Height offered yet another guess, suggesting that the early form was "*Landlos*," meaning "landless."⁹ This implies that at some remote point in history the ancestors were peasants without land holdings, which was a very common circumstance in Germanic society during the Middle Ages. His model requires that the second letter "l" was dropped over time. Height doesn't provide a source for this derivation. I am familiar with his other writings and we may assume that his derivation for the surname was just speculation.

Early Occurrences of "Landoes" in Alsace and Nearby Areas

Moving from these speculations based on linguistic coincidences or compound words that contain *Land* in some form, we are on firmer ground when we look at the earliest records for persons who had demonstrable precursor forms of the surname. A venerable old genealogical source by von Knobloch has summarized the early occurrences of the surname "Landoes" or "Landös" in Alsace and in nearby Baden. He describes it as a family or lineage (*Geschlecht*) near the headwaters of the Rhine river. A census of Strasburg in the year 1266 reports "Helfferic Landoese," who was the director of coinage.¹⁰ In 1281 the sale of the estate of the deceased nobleman, Lord Peter Landöse in Innenheim (near Strasburg) was reported. He was a knighted gentleman (*militis*) and a city banker. The estate had been inherited from his father, Ludwig Landoese. Lord Walter Landoese, a wine merchant in Morsweiler and Kaselthal in Alsace, rose in prominence and became a member of the city council and eventually the mayor¹¹ of Colmar. Lord Walter also was a knighted gentleman and a great benefactor to charity. He died in Colmar on March 16, 1360 and was buried with his wife, Hedwig, in the crypt of an abby in Paris. Brechenmacher¹² refers to Eberdictus Landose, who resided in Möhringen (northwest of Constance, near the Bodensee) in 1280. He also refers to a tax collector (*Zinsmann*) named Landöss who resided in Weingarten near Ravensburg (east of Constance) in 1295. Bahlow adds that there was an occurrence of the surname Landöse in Württemberg in the year 1295, but he doesn't provide any further information.¹³

The Swiss Origins -- "Ländisch Leute"

Swiss genealogical sources¹⁴ do not mention the "robber," "tax collector," or "landless" theories for the origin of the surname. Instead, they offer an alternative explanation, which

⁸ Fryde 1964, p. 248.

⁹ Height 1972.

¹⁰ Von Knobloch 1905 uses the term *Hausgenosse* for Helfferic Landoese's title. Ernest Thode's standard reference work reports this as an archaic word for the *Münzer*, the minter or director of coinage, sometimes also translated as "treasurer."

¹¹ *Scultetus* is a Latin equivalent for "*Schultheiss*" or mayor.

¹² Brechenmacher 1957.

¹³ Bahlow 1967.

¹⁴ Türler, Attinger & Godot 1927. See also Zwicky von Gauen 1947, pp. 335-344.

seems to have become generally accepted by Swiss family historians. They derive the surname from early references to dwellers on the boat-landings (shown as *dem Lander*, or “on the landings,” on old maps,) in the village of Uerikon in the parish of Stäfa on the eastern shore of Lake Zürich. What makes this theory reliable and credible is that they have been able to identify documented cases of persons with the early form of the surname, not only in Uerikon but in other communities near Hirzel where demonstrable lineages of the Landis family first appear in the churchbooks.



Map of Stäfa and Uerickon (Üricken), 1600s (looking south)
(Note the boat landings, referred to as “dem Lander,” above “Üricken” on the map)

Hans Georg Wirz, a Zürich historian who studied the families in Uerikon, found several early references to the “Ländisch Leute,” the “landings-people.” An entry in the archives of

Einsiedeln in 1372 refers to three tenant farmers, “Hansen Schmalbrot, Ueli Brun, and Hansen Landös,” who were given feudal use-rights to an estate in Uerikon by the Abbot.¹⁵ They were dwellers along the banks of a stream that flows into Lake Zürich at that location.

The Landös family, along with others along the southern shores of Lake Zürich, were *Gotteshausleute*, that is, tenants on lands owned by the cloister at Einsiedeln. St. Meinrad had originally built a hermit’s shack there around 828 A.D. After he was martyred, a chapel was built on the spot, and other hermits and mendicants were drawn there. By 948 it had grown into a cloister. A beautiful basilica was eventually erected, containing the renowned statue of the Black Madonna. Miraculous cures were attributed to the spring flowing from a fountain in front of the church. Einsiedeln became the principal pilgrimage shrine of southern Germany and Switzerland, an honor which it retains today. Einsiedeln also became the major administrative center south of Lake Zürich, with feudal territories extending up to Uerikon and Stäfa.



Dwellings on the Boat Landings

¹⁵Zwicky von Gauen (1947, p. 336) provides a detailed summary of the research by Wirz. Johann Frick, a former Archivist at the Zürich State Archive who is cited in Türler et. al (1927), may be the first scholar to note the early occurrence of the surname Landös in Uerikon. Bodmer-Gessner et. al., p. 112, also summarize the early records for Uerikon and Stäfa. See: Bodmer-Gessner, Verena, Kläui, Paul, frey, Hans, & Bodmer, Albert. (1968). *Stäfa, von den Anfängen bis zur Revolutionszeit*. Stäfa: Lesengesellschaft Stäfa



View from the boat landings at Uerikon, Lake Zürich

As the city of Zürich expanded its influence down the lake, Stäfa and Uerikon eventually were placed under its jurisdiction and its residents were declared to be “outside-citizens.” The early census records in 1412 show Heini Landös, a fishermen at Uerikon.¹⁶ The oldest *Jahrzeitbuch* of the village of Ufenau also mentions Rudi Landös at Uerikon in the year 1415.¹⁷

Does this theory concerning the Swiss origins of the surname conflict with the early records for persons named “Landoes” or “Landös” in Alsace and other nearby areas? In my opinion, these findings do not necessarily negate each other. All these early instances of the surname “Landös” or “Landoes” occurred close together, both chronologically and geographically - they were clustered near the headwaters of the Rhine, from Lake Zürich to Lake Constance, and in towns along both shores of the Rhine in Alsace and Baden. This strongly suggests that they may have derived from a common source. Populations were mobile, even at these early times, especially along the Rhine which was the major avenue for commerce and transportation. Zürich is only about 15 miles south of the Rhine. The Limmat river flows northward out of Lake Zürich through the heart of the city, where it joins the Aar and thence flows into the Rhine. Strasburg is only 78 miles from Basel, and the average travel time there by boat, following the direction of the current, is only about 32 hours.¹⁸

¹⁶ Bodmer-Gessner et. al. 1968, p. 70.

¹⁷ Zwicky von Gauen 1947.

¹⁸ Haller 1993, p. 242



Cloister of Einsiedeln

The legend known as “the journey of the Züricher porridge kettle” illustrates the high degree of communication that was characteristic of towns along the Rhine and its headwaters during these early years.¹⁹ The city council of Zürich once sent an offer to form an alliance with Strasburg, but they were politely turned down on the grounds that their cities were too far apart, and neither could send reinforcements to the other in the event of emergency. The youngest member of the city council in Zürich had a bright idea, and he announced that he could elicit a warmer reply from Strasburg. He ran home, told his wife to set the water boiling in their largest kettle, and to make a large batch of porridge. When the porridge was ready, he hired ten men to accompany him on a boat, moving as fast as possible down the Limmat, through the Aar, onto the Rhine, and thence to Strasburg. They carried the kettle into the *Rathaus*, where the council was in session. He placed the still-steaming kettle on the table, and said, “*Meine Herren*, you haven’t accepted the alliance with Zürich because you believe that our cities are too far apart, and that we couldn’t assist each other quickly enough; that will best be clarified for you by this porridge kettle.” When they saw that the porridge was still warm enough to eat, and that it was still steaming, they became ashamed of their rather cold reply.

¹⁹ The story has been set to verse by the poet Langbein, and appears in Guerber & Myers 1916.

They agreed to the alliance, and celebrated by jointly sharing the meal. The kettle is supposedly still preserved in the *Rathaus* of Strasburg, as a memorial to the alliance between the two cities.

In the final analysis, all that can be said with certainty is that the ancient roots of the Landis family are near the headwaters of the Rhine. The surname most likely originated as a reference to residents near the boat-landings at Uerikon on the eastern shore of Lake Zürich sometime in the 12th century. Members of the family probably filtered northward at an early date to towns along Lake Constance, and then to Strasburg, Colmar, and other major cities in the Rhine valley. Despite the antiquity of the Landis family in Baden and Alsace, this surname (or any of its variations) did not occur there in appreciably large numbers. It remains a relatively uncommon surname in Germany today. Historically the surname Landis (and precursor forms) has occurred with greatest frequency in the canton of Zürich, and most (perhaps all) occurrences of the surname in Germany appear to have derived from Swiss emigrants. These considerations strongly support the notion of a Swiss origin in the canton of Zürich, which has been broadly accepted by Swiss family historians.