RESEARCHING A COAT OF ARMS

The tradition of heraldry, the emblazonment of shields with unique designs, originated in medieval Europe as a means of identifying knights, whose faces were covered with armor. The shield designs offered a means of distinguishing one from another on the field of tournament or battle. To regulate the proliferation of designs, the crown offered grants of coat armor, consisting of both the shield with a unique, colored design, and a crest for the helmet, also of a specific but not necessarily individual design. Over the centuries, well after armor had disappeared, coats of arms remained as symbols of honor and distinction for members of royalty, nobility, gentry, and the middle class. Typically, families displayed their arms on silver, on stationery and bookplates, on seals, and on tombs and stained glass in churches.

Many misconceptions exist about the nature and proper use of coat armor. Above all else, it is important to understand that coats of arms do not belong to a "family name." They were granted to specific individuals, as one might think of a trademark or copyright today. Heraldic law varied by country, but it generally permitted descendants of those individuals in an unbroken male line to continue display of the arms. Siblings adopted variations of their fathers' arms with added heraldic symbols and designs, so as to distinguish their arms from those of brothers and cousins. Daughters could display their fathers' arms until they married, after which they sometimes divided or "impaled" the arms with those of their husbands. If a daughter remained the only heir of her father, the law permitted her children, in turn, to quarter her arms with those of their father. Less importance was attached to crests, which the law did not consider heritable. Hence, this portion of the arms sometimes varied with each generation.

Since the United States does not recognize heraldic law, anyone may adopt and use any coat of arms, so long as it does not infringe on an insignia or logo protected by copyright. Some people have designed their own coat of arms. Ethics suggest the impropriety of assuming the use of another's coat of arms, simply because that individual or family has the same last name. As there is no such thing as an "arms of your family name," one should prove direct male-line descent from an individual entitled to the coat of arms in order to display the arms. Such a task can prove exceedingly difficult for a variety of reasons. Heraldic records from medieval times remain fragmentary, and some families used arms illegally without ever obtaining a formal grant. In the British Isles, officials conducted visitations and assembled family pedigrees in order to determine the rightful owners of certain arms, but these efforts, too, were often incomplete. It is also true that while some immigrants to America were legally armigerous or related closely to families with arms, most were not, and thus their descendants will not find record of a coat of arms registered for a direct ancestor.

This pathfinder is designed to offer assistance in researching the coats of arms of specific British, Irish, and other European families, from sources within the collection of the Historical Genealogy Department. The researcher should begin by checking the online catalog under the heading "Heraldry," followed by the geographic area of interest. For visitation records in Great Britain and Ireland, check the catalog under the heading "Visitations, heraldic," followed by the specific location. None of the sources included in the collection or this pathfinder should be considered exhaustive, and in some cases it may be necessary to do further research in the heraldic office of the country of interest. The Family History Library catalog online at www.FamilySearch.org may prove helpful for additional references.
A typical shield in a coat of arms is divided into several distinct parts. Each of these may contain a specific heraldic design and color. The crest is typically displayed above the shield and often is not related to the shield's design (see the arms depicted at right). The colors have distinct heraldic names: *azure* (blue), *gules* (red), *or* (yellow or gold), *argent* (silver or white), *sable* (black), *vert* (green), *purpure* (purple), *tenne* (orange). Some arms also featured furs such as ermine and vair in their designs.

The following works provide background on the history and use of heraldry and offer assistance in interpreting the various parts of a coat of arms.


*Mottoes: A Compilation of More Than 9,000 Mottoes from Around the World and Throughout History*. Detroit Gale Research, 1986. /Gc 929.8 M85/


Wilkens, Cleo Goff. *Heraldry in Brief*. Fort Wayne: Public Library, 1963. /Gc 929.6 W65h/
ROLLS OF ARMS

The following works offer descriptions and, in some cases, illustrations of coats of arms used by British and European families. Some also contain information on the individuals to whom the arms were granted; others are of a more general nature and provide only the surname associated with the arms. For more heraldic works of various countries, check the Department catalogs.

**United States**


**Great Britain and Ireland**
Burke, John. *A General Armory of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. London: Edward Christian, 1842, London: Harrison, 1882. /Gc 929.80942 B912ge and B912g/ Popularly known as "Burke's General Armory," each of the two editions contain descriptions of more than 100,000 arms, including some used illegally. In a few instances the grantee is named, but usually only the residence of the family is listed.

Fairbairn, James. *Fairbairn's Crests of the Leading Families in Great Britain and Ireland*. New York: Heraldic Publishing Co., 1911. /Gc 929.80942 F15faa/ Illustrations of crests and mottoes (not full arms) for 50,000 names and includes much that is not in Burke's.


/Gc 929.72062.../ These series include most published heraldic visitations.


_________. *Visitation of Ireland*. 6 vols. London: Privately printed, 1897-1918. /Gc 929.720615 Aa1h/ Similar to the above work.


Knight and Butters' Crests of Great Britain & Ireland, Dominion of Canada, India, & Australia. Ed. by Joseph MacLaren. 2 vols. London: Thomas Jack, 1883. /Gc 929.80942 K74kn/ Volume one contains descriptions of crests; volume two has the plates.


Europe


Rietstap, J. B. Armorial General. 2nd ed. 2 vols, with 9 volume supplement. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1965. /Gc 929.6 R44ae & R44arb/ With two volumes of textual descriptions and nine volumes of supplementary plates, this French work includes 85,000 shields for more than 100,000 European families. No information on individual grantees is included, but this source is considered the most comprehensive for Europe.

Siebmacher, Johannes. Siebmachers Grosses und Allgemeines Wappenbuch. 82 vols. Nurnberg, Germany: Verlag von Bauer und Raspe, 1856-1938. /Gc 929.8 Si11a/ Descriptions and plates for thousands of German and eastern European arms with German text.
**ORDINARIES OF ARMS**

Ordinaries provide descriptions of arms arranged by feature or "device," rather than by family name. They are useful for tracing the owners of unidentified arms.


**HERALDRY INDEX**

The Historical Genealogy Department has compiled its own index to coats of arms, which appear in selected works in the Library's collection:

Genealogy Department, Allen County Public Library. *Heraldry Index*. 2 vols. Fort Wayne, IN: Allen County Public Library, 1989. /Gc 929.6 H412/ Provides access by surname to over 17,000 arms and includes the Genealogy Department call number and page of the source where the coat of arms is found.

**PERIODICALS**

The Genealogy Department's collection of periodicals include several titles devoted specifically to heraldry. The following are among the most noteworthy: *Coat of Arms, Heraldry in Canada, Armiger's News, Miscellanea Genealogica et Heraldica, Genealogy and Heraldry, American Heraldic Journal*, and *The Augustan*. Some are no longer published. Check the online periodical listing for the Historical Genealogy Department as well as the *PERiodical Source Index (PERSI)* for references to specific articles.

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