



From “Watson” to “Wasson” and “Wason”

Is it Watsoun, Watsoune, Watsone, Watson, Wawsson, Wawson, Wauson, Wasson or Wason? All of the above!

Our Scotland-born Wasson ancestors in America – John (Jane) Wasson and John (Jemima) Wasson – were both named “John Watson” on their parish birth records, and all their known male ancestors were also named “Watson” at birth. Yet our cousins who remained in Dailly for the most part have used “Wason” (rhymes with “mason”), and do so to this day.

I looked into an explanation for this, which included running a number of searches on various spellings of these names in the parish, statutory and census records found on ScotlandsPeople. All searches were run in 2012. When discussing those searches, keep in mind that the records are generally less complete the older they are. The Dailly Parish records, for example, start in the late 1600s and are missing some years through the 1700s.

Origins of “Watson”

“Watson” means “son of Wat (or Watt)”, a short form of “Walter”. The name “Walter” may have been introduced to the British Isles by the Norman-French as “Waltier” or “Wautier”. “Wat” shows up for the first time in English records in 1176.

The name “Watson” first appears in Scottish records in 1392, where a John Watson was a landowner. More examples of “Watson” and its variants appeared in the 15th century, and the name became much more common in the 16th century, especially in the Lowlands and in the northeast.

At least four variations of this name were in common use in early Scottish parish birth records. There were 238 “Watsoun” early birth records and 240 “Watsoune” early birth records, but these spellings no longer appeared in birth records after 1711.

“Watson” and “Watsone” were much more common in the early birth records.

In birth records up to 1600 there were 70 “Watson” records and 67 “Watsone” records, but there are a lot of gaps in the coverage of those early records.

Between 1601 and 1650, “Watsone” was the more common spelling, with 976 birth records versus 238 for “Watson”. But that didn’t last. Between 1651 and 1700, 2,306 birth records used “Watson” whereas 1,523 used “Watsone”.

The number of “Watsone” birth records dropped through the 1700s. There were 389 between 1701 and 1720, 168 between 1721 and 1740, 30 between 1741 and 1760, and only 6 more through the end of the century. The last “Watsone” birth record appeared in 1795.

“Watsone” for the most part disappeared at this point. “Watsone” did appear 11 times in the 1911 U.K. Census, but this involved all members of a single Aberdeen family, and the family did not use that spelling in the previous census. Searches of the statutory records between 1855 and 2012 did not turn up any “Watsone” birth or death records.

On the other hand, the number of “Watson” birth records steadily increased over time. There were thousands of “Watsons” born in each decade of the 1800s and beyond. The 1841 U.K. Census reported 12,161 “Watsons”; there were 23,108 “Watsons” reported in the 1911 U.K. Census. Searches of the statutory records between 1855 and 2012 turned up 76,823 birth records and 67,305 death records using “Watson”.

At the start of the 21st century “Watson” was among the Top 20 most common surnames in Scotland. It is widely used throughout Scotland, although it is still most commonly found in the Lowlands and in northeast Scotland. “Watson” is the 36th most common name in England; it is especially common in northern areas of England near Scotland.

Origins of “Wasson” and “Wason”

“Wason” first appears in the parish birth records in 1619. “Wasson” first appears in 1662. Through the 1600s, there were 13 “Wason” and 7 “Wasson” birth records, all but one for children born in Ayrshire, the county in southwest Scotland where our Wasson ancestors are from.

In the 1700s, there were 58 “Wason” and 21 “Wasson” birth records. Except for a cluster of “Wasson” birth records for people born in the Orkneys in the early 1700s, most of these “Wason” and “Wasson” birth records were for people born in Ayrshire; the rest were born in other southwest Scotland counties.

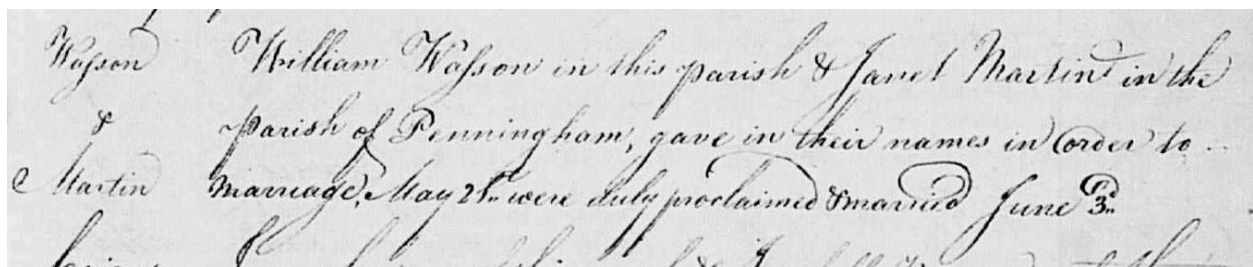
Spelling was not as fixed back then as it is today, so some of the variations of the name are due to errors or inconsistencies on the part of the people recording the names. Other “Wasson” and “Wason” spelling variants including “Wawsson”, “Wawson” and “Wauson” appeared albeit rarely in records back then.

During this time, there was a linguistic change occurring in southwest Scotland referred to as West of Scotland glottalization or t-glottalization. A glottal voiceless stop (e.g., the halt between syllables in “uh-oh”) can sound just like a mid-word “t” in some dialects, as “t” is also a voiceless stop. Glottal stops started appearing regularly between syllables in the regional spoken dialect, although they generally were not represented in spellings. So, a person keeping records may simply have heard the “t” in “Watson” as a glottal stop and thus did not spell the name with a “t” in the written records.

This transition is reflected in the birth records for John Watson and Jane Lambie’s eight children over an 18-year period:

- William “Watson”, 1803
- Robert “Watson”, 1806
- Twins Agnes and James “Watson”, 1808
- Janet “Wason”, 1811
- John “Watson”, 1813
- Helen “Wason”, 1816
- Hugh Wawsson, 1820

The spelling “Wasson” first appears for one of our relatives in the Dailly Parish Church record for William’s 1825 marriage to Janet Martin. “Wason” was used for John, Jane and son Hugh in their 1834 immigration (New York arrival) records, but their son John used “Wasson” in the 1841 U.K. Census, and John and Jemima used “Wasson” for their arrival in Québec. These ancestors and all of their descendants have used “Wasson” ever since.



William Wasson and Janet Martin’s 1825 Dailly Parish marriage record is the first documented use of “Wasson” as the surname of one of our family members.

“Wasson” was used for all subsequent Scottish and English records for sons James and William through 1841 (the last years with records for William and his family) and in the 1851 U.K. Census record for James. Subsequent records for James in Scotland, however, used “Wason”.

Three other variations of this name appeared primarily in the early 1800s: six occurrences of “Wawsson”, eight of “Wawson” and two of “Wason”. All but two of these were used in Ayrshire birth records, and at least eight of these were used for our relatives. Among the relatives with

these spelling variants, only Hugh Wawsson eventually ended up with “Wasson”. The others all ended up using “Wason”.

Between 1801 and 1840 there were 67 “Wason” and 22 “Wasson” birth records across Scotland. Except for a cluster of eight “Wasson” birth records in Lanarkshire between 1811 and 1820, most of these were in Ayrshire, and many of whom were relatives, The rest were primarily found in other counties in southwest Scotland.

Wassons Emigrate; Wasons Stay Behind

The 10-year U.K. Census records starting in 1841 continued to show “Wasons” and “Wassons” primarily in southwest Scotland. “Wassons” were mostly gone from Ayrshire after 1851, with most located in Glasgow and Renfrewshire (Paisley area). “Wasons” continued their presence in Ayrshire throughout this period; more the half of Scotland’s “Wasons” were in Ayrshire and a significant portion of these were in Dailly Parish through the 1861 U.K. Census. By the 1911 U.K. Census, only about a quarter of Scotland’s “Wasons” lived in Ayrshire, although the actual number was about the same as it was 50 years earlier. Like the “Wassons”, “Wasons” were increasingly common in Glasgow and Renfrewshire. This reflected the general migration towards urban industrial centers that was underway at the time.

By 1860 our relatives who remained in Ayrshire that used the “Wasson” and other spelling variants in the early-mid-1800s had generally settled on the “Wason” spelling. This includes John Watson and Jane Lambie’s son James, who was born “Watson”, named “Wasson” in the 1841 and 1851 U.K. Census records, and named “Wason” in his marriage and death records. John (Jane)’s father was named “Watson” at birth and marriage, but “Wason” appears on his headstone in the Old Dailly Churchyard. Based on my research into our Ayrshire relatives that stayed in Scotland, I believe it is safe to say that today we are only related to “Wasons” in Scotland.

On the other hand, our ancestors and other relatives who emigrated to North America used both “Wasson” and “Wason”. The only “Wassons” in the United States that we are related to are descendants of John Watson and Jane Lambie and a distant Dailly-born cousin, Henry Wason, who settled in Lewis County, New York in 1870. Some of his descendants switched to “Wasson”, although others continued to use “Wason”.

We are also related to the “Wason” descendants of a distant Girvan-born cousin, George S. Wason (he was named “Wauson” at birth), who originally settled in Lochiel, Ontario, and to the descendants of Dailly-born Elizabeth Downie Wason Alexander, who settled in Perry County, Ohio. I’m not aware that any of their descendants use “Wasson”.

Who are All of These American Wassons?

Neither “Wason” nor “Wasson” have been common names in Scotland. In the 1911 U.K. Census there were only 211 “Wasons” and 41 “Wassons” compared to 23,108 “Watsons”. I reported above that in the statutory records between 1855 and 2012 there were 76,823 birth records and 67,305 death records for “Watsons”. That compares to 849 birth records and 653 death records using “Wason” and 139 birth records and 160 death records using “Wasson”. The “Wasson” spelling continues to fade in Scotland, with just 22 birth records and 56 death records found in the statutory records between 1951 and 2012.

With so few people named “Wasson” in Scotland, where did all the “Wassons” in the United States come from?

Ulster is one of the four traditional provinces of Ireland, consisting of the six counties of present-day Northern Ireland and three counties in the Irish Republic. Ulster was conquered by the English in the Nine Years War (1594-1603). In the early 1600s, King James I(England)/IV(Scotland) and wealthy landowners confiscated land owned by the Irish chieftains and colonized what became known as the Plantation of Ulster.

Colonizers were required to be Protestants – new settlers were mostly Scottish Presbyterians and English members of the Church of England. Many of the Scots were tied to the Covenanter movement and thus were loyal to King James. As Covenanters were especially prevalent in southwest Scotland, a number of these new Ulster Scots were from Ayrshire and other southwest counties, and they brought their dialects with them.

Among the early Ulster Scots were some “Wassons” and “Wasons” – the names varied then, with “Wasson” more common in Northern Ireland today. Genealogist Linda Wason-Ellam has extensive research that traces her American “Wason” line back to 1631 Ulster, and has tentatively concluded that these “Wasons” and “Wassons” were descendants of James “Wason” of Mauchline, Ayrshire. It is likely that glottalization impacted Ulster-residing Watsons, too. After all, Northern Ireland is just across the Irish Sea from southwest Scotland.

A number of these descendants and other Ulster “Wasons” and “Wassons” migrated to the American colonies in five great waves of Ulster Scot emigration to the colonies that occurred in the 1700s. Most American “Wassons” are descendants of these Ulster Scot immigrants.

I have not found any connections between our Scottish ancestors and the Ulster Scots, but the Dailly Parish records do not go back to the early 1600s.

“Wasson” vs. “Wason”

I suspect that this difference began as nothing more than a minor spelling variation that became fixed as literacy expanded and spelling stabilized. But over time and distance, differences between American English and Scottish English pronunciations may have been magnified in some ways. The “mason”-rhyming pronunciation of “Wason” is very strong in Ayrshire. During my 2012 visit to Dailly, Ayrshire, the distant Wason cousins I met routinely “corrected” my pronunciation of “Wasson” when I introduced myself.

Other “Wasson” Origin Explanations

The “Wasson” name also emerged in Cornwall in southwest England before the Norman Conquest, and spread across southern England. Variations of the name included “Waison”, “Wayson”, “Gason”, “Gasson”, “Wasso”, “Waso” and a number of others (“g” was pronounced like “w”). A Latin version of the name, “Wazonis”, appeared in the 1086AD Domesday Book.

Although some American Wassons may have descended from Cornwall Wassons, the name has been quite uncommon in southern England dating back to the 1800s. So, I suspect that this was at best a rare source for the name among American Wassons. I only note it because the Cornwall Wassons have a family crest, but neither these Wassons nor their crest are connected to our family.

(For what it’s worth, the Cornish dialect includes the slang word “wasson”, which means “What’s going on?”)

Some have suggested a family name connection to the Vikings. According to a [History of Hillsborough County, New Hampshire](#) (1885) profile of early New Boston, New Hampshire settler Elbridge Wason, “There is a tradition that years and years ago some old Vikings came from Norway to the north of Scotland, and conquering in battle, gave the name of Wason Field to the place where the battle was fought, which name it retains to this day.” One source suggests that it was named after the Viking leader who won the battle at the end of the 8th century; another story ties it to the “-vason” from King Olaf Tryggvason, King of Norway from 995 to 1000. I have not found any documentation that supports either of these ideas, and nothing that connects those Wasons to our family.

Prepared by Mark David Wasson

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