

McKinniss vs. McKinnis

People sometimes ask about the spelling McKinniss vs. McKinnis. This summarizes my research to date on that aspect of our family's history. It should be thought of as hypothesis that may need refinement. It is relevant only to descendants of Charles-1 of Ft. Pitt fame. At least one other 18th century American family, based originally in North Carolina and Tennessee, also uses McKinnis. Descendants in this lineage are unlikely to be closely related to Charles' lineage because of the former's widespread use of more traditional Scottish given names.

The so-called "long s", written "f" (often uncrossed), was a feature of the English language before the printing press. It was intended to convey the hissing sound, rather than the "z" sound. It began dying out in the 18th century and was essentially gone by the 20th as the printing press and the typewriter became universal. A hiss at the end of a word usually was written "fs" in old documents; thus one sees "Agnefs", for example, in contrast to "James".

Frontier people by-and-large could only speak their names and communicate orally. This was true well into the 19th century or even later, when universal education caught up with them. For those who wonder, Charles-1 probably spelled his name "X". It's reasonable to assume that our family mostly spoke their names with the hissing sound. Scribes wrote them as they heard them and as their education reflected. Less educated scribes wrote Magines and other variants. The goal was simply to be able to read them back out loud [the original meaning of 'to read' is 'to interpret'].

By Charles-1's lifetime, the long-s already was disappearing from the language. McKinnifs, as written on some early documents, thus evolved to McKinniss, or to the simpler, arguably more progressive McKinnis.

Progenitor Charles-1 had six traceable sons and at least 25 male grandchildren. Not all those had (male) children. As best as I have determined, descendants of only five of Charles-1's grandchildren have maintained the -ss into the 20th century. The common thread to those seems to be ancestral presence in southeastern Ohio in the mid-1850's. Those who never lived there (sons of James-2, Joseph-2, and John-2 who left sons), or who departed from that area earlier (Robert-2 and family, and some of George-2's and Charles-2's sons), all seem to have dropped the second -s by the late 1800's or earlier. One daughter of John-2 and one son of Joseph-2 have Pennsylvania tombstones with -ss. A few other grandchildren evolved to McGinnis(s), but those were people who either had lost contact with their ancestry or possibly wanted to distance themselves from it. Charles-2's sons Joseph-3, Charles-3, and Granville-3; and George-2's sons Hiram-3 and Joseph-3 (latter lineage not fully covered in the 1914 document), were those living in Jackson, Ross, or Vinton Co., Ohio, in the early 1850's. Their sons seem to be the only family members who passed down the -ss, and not everyone still uses it.

By the early 20th century, with birth certificates and similar official documents, it became increasingly more difficult to change the spelling of one's surname, so family surnames generally became frozen. One of our modern 'cousins' (Richard A. McKinnis, 1917-2003) tried to reinstate -ss but was denied when he applied for his driving license, because his birth certificate had only one -s (yet, his social security record shows McKinniss). Through the 20th century, one occasionally will find other individuals' surname spelled differently in different documents, but not usually consistently.

Bill Smith, Ridgefield, WA birdsmiths@hotmail.com
5g-grandson of Charles-1 McKinnis