

Do you know my name?



What's in a Name?

By Patricia Kelleher Bartram



One of the first acts of free will exercised by man, according to the Bible, was the act of naming. God created Adam who named Eve and together they named their three sons, Cain, Abel and Seth. The act of naming human beings has continued ever since. Our names are among the first identifiers of who we are, to whom we are related, and the meanings behind names can provide clues to our personalities (at least that's what parents perhaps hope when bestowing names on their newborns). Given names reflect cultures, traditions, historical periods, gender, and other influences that may be specific to a family or region.

Last year, in gathering the information to write the book *Early Families of Boylston, Massachusetts*, I was among the researchers who came across a host of given names of early Boylstonians, some of which were unusual, seemingly old-fashioned, and sometimes amusing. This got me interested in learning more about which names were the most popular in Boylston circa 150 or so years ago and how they contrast with today's most popular names – and to consider the question of how different we are.

TOP 10 GIVEN NAMES				
	FEMALE		MALE	
	Boylston 19 th Century*	U.S. 2021	Boylston 19 th Century*	U.S. 2021
1	Mary/Maria/Mariah	Olivia	William	Liam
2	Elizabeth/Lizzie	Emma	John	Noah
3	Harriet/Hattie	Charlotte	George	Oliver
4	Sarah/Sadie	Amelia	Charles	Elijah
5	Abigail/Abby	Ava	Henry/Harry/Harold	James
6	Ellen/Ella/Nellie	Sophia	Francis/Frank Joseph Thomas (3-way tie)	William
7	Emily/Emma	Isabella	James	Benjamin
8	Florence/Flora	Mia	Oliver	Lucas
9	Ann/Anna/Annie Martha/Patty (2-way tie)	Evelyn	David	Henry
10	Henrietta/Etta	Harper	Nathaniel/Nathan	Theodore

Overlap and Meanings

Interestingly, several of the names for males appear in both lists: William and its Irish short form of Liam, Oliver, James and Henry. Emma appears in both lists of female names. (See chart above.)

The top 10 names for females from 19th century Boylston carry the following meanings:

1. “beloved” (Mary)
2. “God is my oath” (Elizabeth)
3. “home ruler” (Harriet and Henrietta)
4. “princess” (Sarah)
5. “my father’s joy” (Abigail)
6. “shining light” (Ellen)
7. “rival, laborious, eager” (Emily)
8. “blossoming, flourishing, prosperous” (Florence)
9. “grace” (Ann)
10. “home ruler” (Henrietta and Harriet)

The top 10 names for girls born in 2021, according to the Social Security Administration, mean:

1. “olive tree” (Olivia)
2. “entire, universal” (Emma)
3. “free man” (Charlotte)
4. “industrious, striving” (Amelia)
5. “birdlike, life, voice” (Ava)
6. “wisdom” (Sophia)
7. “devoted to God” (Isabella)
8. “mine” (Mia)
9. “desired, wished for” (Evelyn)
10. “someone who plays the harp”(Harper)

Similarly, the meanings of the top names for males are: “resolute protector, strong-willed warrior” (William and Liam); “God is gracious” (John); “farmer, earth worker” (George); “free man” (Charles and Francis); “house ruler” (Henry); “Jehovah shall add” (Joseph); “twin” (Thomas); “supplanter” (James); “ancestor’s descendants” (Oliver); “Beloved, uncle” (David) and “God has given” (Nathaniel). In 2021, they were: “rest, peace” (Noah); “the Lord is my God” (Elijah); “son of the right hand” (Benjamin); “bringer of light” (Lucas); and “God’s gift” (Theodore).

Same As It Ever Was

To me, it sounds much like the parents of both these times – 150 years ago and present – were and are interested in imbuing their children with similar characteristics by virtue of their given names, primarily: light, joy, wisdom, strength and peace. Although our society has moved light years ahead of the 1800s in so many ways, perhaps we are still more alike as humans than we may have thought. Something to think about.

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