

What's in a name? A travel through history, culture, and ethnicity through New Bedford's surnames: "Cabral"

Intro to Series: Skip, if you just want the "goods."

People are fascinated by their family's background and asking someone what they "are" will uncover a lot about a person's identity, family history, and their sense of identity – or lack of it. America being a melting pot more than any country on earth, a person's surname, ethnicity, or heritage is a popular topic of discussion.

When you tell someone you are Irish, German, Kenyan, Wampanoag, Mexican, Brazilian, et al you are sharing a quick symbol that describes a lot about you. Even if it's not accurate, or you call yourself "a mutt," are "half" this, a little "this, that, and this" you still say a lot about who you are. Often you will hear two sets of identity: "On my mother's side, I am 'x' and on my father's side, I am 'x.'"

It may come as a surprise to many Americans, but this is something very...well, American. The rest of the world thinks it's odd or even make us a butt of their jokes. The American fascination with heritage and ethnicity goes even further than that – we love to spend money on DNA kits, to debate and argue over race and/or skin color, and no political discussion is without it.

It's hard for most Americans to not filter everything through these things. A surname is more than just a person ethnicity and identity: it's also a connection to the "Old World," the history of those nations, and the cuisines. Those things make surnames an interesting topic of discussion!

The Surname Cabral, its origin, variations, and history

The surname Cabral has etymological roots in the Latin “Capraria,” and you will come across variations like Cabrallo, Cabrales, Cabrera, Cabrini, Cabrone, Cabrotti, Cabrilli and many more. As the more astute of you have already figured out or can see, the name has links to nearby Spain because of the close proximity and history of the two nations. However, it is Italy, specifically Aragon, Sicily, that it has its origin going back to 1040 A.D. where history records a Ponzo Cabrera who was Viscount of Cabrera, Girona, and Anger.

Being primarily a surname that is job descriptive, anyone who speaks Portuguese, Spanish or Italian can see the root “cabra” (“capra” in Italian) meaning goat and the obvious job description would be that of a goat farmer, or even one that lived near a goat farm. While that might sound strange and one may think “Who would be so high on living at a goat farm that they would adopt it as their last name?” we should recall that many of the first surnames meant “Son of” e.g., “Steven-son,” “Ander-son” or they meant “from,” e.g., De la Hoya, D’Augustine, De Cervantes, De Balzac, van den Vondel, von Goethe, etc.



The entire reasoning for the adoption of surnames was to specify *which* John one was referring to. Was it John the son of Anders? Or the John the son of Steven? As one might surmise, it would take long before there were multiple Johns that also had fathers named Steven. This led to using a person's city, town, village or, in this particular case, their job as a way to discern between the many Johns who also shared fathers with the same name. Combine them and you can get even more specific – John Stevenson Cabral, would then mean the John whose father is Steven and is also a goat farmer. Phew, that's a mouthful, so surnames were utilized for a very practical reason.

Alternatively, or fictitious John may not have been the farmer or landowner, but simply a worker. This highlights the idea that up to about as late as the 14th century, surnames initially were not used as actual names but part of a long sentence used to describe who a person was specifically by who their family was, the village they were from or their occupation. Eventually, out of practicality, that long sentence about who your father was, what you did for a living, or where you were from, was shortened and all the "fillers"

removed. Point being, that the surname was just used as a descriptor and not hereditary or a source of family pride as it is today. So, being “John, son of Steve, who works at a goat farm.” served a very useful function and wasn’t tied to your family outside of identifying your father.

Besides, what’s wrong with being a goat farmer or worker? Society is comprised of a myriad of parts and the quality of its whole is determined by a balance among those parts. Centuries ago, the goat farmer was a very necessary facet of society and was often a beloved one – he was the person who brought the community yogurt, cheese, milk, and meat. At one time in Europe’s history, the goat farmer was one of the most important jobs in any village, town or city! Especially during times that disease or viruses would sweep through cattle who served a similar purpose as the goat.



One of the interesting times in recorded history that the surname crops up is, believe it or not, 18th century Mexico with the name Ybanez Cabral. Spain was, of course, trying to

colonize Central America and parts of South America and start a New Spain, and a new line of the name was forged and found in high concentrations in Spanish speaking Mexico, Peru, and of course, Portuguese speaking Brazil. By this time European governments fell in love with the idea of a surname because it meant they could find you when you didn't pay your taxes and so they began to force the idea on citizens.

By the 19th century, the name began to spread north into the US, first through Puerto Rico and then into the continental mainland. I think it would be redundant to mention that the South Coast of Massachusetts was one of the very first places to have Portuguese communities of any size, but many Portuguese also made Hawaii home and you will find many Cabrals there as well.

In summary, Cabral is a name that has its origins in Sicily and from there spread into Portugal and Spain before arriving in the New World across both continents. While today, the surname is common here on the South Coast and is equated with being Portuguese, it is actually Sicilian and it is likely that those Portuguese Cabrals living on the South Coast will find Italian DNA if they use any of the tests that are popular these days. Some of those tests will only generalize and will show up as "Iberia" on those tests, which refers to the Iberian Peninsula of Spain and Portugal, but that spills into Italy and interestingly enough, France.

