

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

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.'"

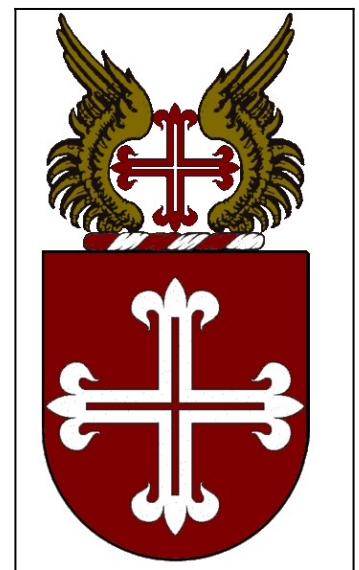
It may come as a surprise to many Americans, but this is something very...well, American. The rest of the world thinks it's odd or even make us a butt of their jokes. The American fascination with heritage and ethnicity goes even further than that – we love to spend money on DNA kits, to debate and argue 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 Portuguese surname Pereira or Perreira is common enough, almost ubiquitous, on the SouthCoast. Meaning "Pear Tree" it is generally considered a toponym or a surname based in a topographical feature, in this case it references a pear orchard likely owned by a family and/or business. However, it may very well mean a person who is a seller of the fruit.

The origin of the word itself is "pirum" or "pere" from the Latin which was meant a trusted companion or a friend that is helpful.

Some Portuguese spellings include Pereyra, Perera, Perreira, Pereiro and many more. In Spanish it is Perera, in French (including France, Belgium, Canada, and French Africa) you will see Pereire, Poirier, Perriere, Poirot and in Italy, Piras. Finally, in Yiddish and/or Hebrew it is Birnbaum.



A Pereira Coat of Arms. Photo by Damarco R. da Matta.

Believe it or not, most Pereiras are not found in Portugal, but Brazil then followed by Portugal, Angola, Mozambique, Venezuela, France, East Timor, Goa, India and Trinidad and

Tobago. This diaspora was due to Portugal's colonization and merchant efforts around the world. In America most Pereiras are found in California and Massachusetts, followed by clans in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Who was the first Pereira or with whom did it originate? Well, that's in dispute.

Spain claims the first, Portugal does as well. There are anecdotes of a Lombardian king by the name of Mendo "Irmao" of Desiderio. The Lombards were a Germanic people who ruled most of the Italian Peninsula from the 6th to 8th century. As the story goes, he sent a number of knights to sea for business or conquest when they encountered a hurricane at sea and were forced to dock in Galicia Spain. From here they migrated into Portugal.

Next, we hear of it is when a Frenchman Osbert Pere arrives in Buckinghamshire, England, in the year 1230. What was he doing there? Who knows? Maybe bringing them glorious linguica, natas, or malasadas since England wasn't exactly known for its cuisine and this must have blown their minds.

In the New World the first mention of the name is in 1555 when a certain Simon Pereira left Portugal and landed in Chile.

How did the name become Jewish? In 1492 the Alhambra Decree by the Catholic Church of Spain forced Jewish people into hiding and they had to disguise their last names or be persecuted. The nearest sanctuary was nearby Portugal so there was a wave from Spain into Portugal, but many felt that Catholic Decree would spread through Europe so they opted for Brazil and even Mexico.

Some of the more famous Pereiras:

- Kevin Pereira (b. 1982), American game show host and TV personality
- William Leonard Pereira (1909-1985), American architect

- Irene Rice Pereira (1907-1971), American abstract painter
- Stephen E. Pereira, American Democrat politician, Candidate for Presidential Elector for California, 1968
- Jonathan Pereira (1804-1853), English pharmacologist born at Shoreditch, London
- Renan Martins Pereira (1997-2017), known as Renanzinho or simply Renan, a Brazilian footballer
- Francelino Pereira dos Santos (1921-2017), Brazilian politician, Gov. of Minas Gerais from 1979-1983
- Kéfera Buchmann de Mattos Johnson Pereira (b. 1993), Brazilian actress, vlogger, writer, TV presenter
- Alessandro Silva Pereira (b. 1982), Brazilian footballer
- Robson Pereira de Andrade (b. 1977), known as Robinho, a Brazilian football player

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