Old Relationship Words

77 family words and what they meant in old records

Adopted child
An adopted child is someone taken into a family as its own child; after Massachusetts' 1851 law, adoption was usually made legal by a court.

Aunt
An aunt is the sister of your father or mother, or the wife of your uncle; in older usage Aunt could also be a courtesy title for an older woman.

Base-born
Base-born means born to unmarried parents, an older word for illegitimate found in church registers and court records.

Boarder
Boarder in a census means a person who paid for meals and lodging in the household, not a relative of the head.

Brother
Brother in old records could mean a brother-in-law or a fellow church member, not only a son of the same parents.

Brother-german
A brother-german is a full brother, born to the same mother and father, as opposed to a half brother or stepbrother.

Brother-in-law
A brother-in-law is the brother of your husband or wife, or the husband of your sister.

Collateral relative
A collateral relative shares an ancestor with you but is not in your direct line: brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews.

Common-law wife
A common-law wife was a woman married by agreement and living together as husband and wife, with no license or ceremony.

Consort
Consort in old records and on gravestones simply means husband or wife; Hannah, consort of Eli Dodge, means Eli's wife.

Cousin
Cousin in older records could mean any relative outside the direct line, such as a niece or nephew, not only an uncle's or aunt's child.

Cousin-german
A cousin-german is a first cousin: the child of your aunt or uncle.

Daughter-in-law
A daughter-in-law is the wife of your son, often found in census households living with his parents.

Double cousin
A double cousin is related through both parents; double first cousins come from two siblings who married two siblings, sharing all four grandparents.

Father-in-law
Father-in-law could mean stepfather in older records, the mother's later husband, as well as a spouse's father.

First cousin
A first cousin is the child of your aunt or uncle; first cousins share a set of grandparents but not parents.

First cousin once removed
A first cousin once removed is either the child of your first cousin, or a first cousin of one of your parents.

First cousin twice removed
A first cousin twice removed is either the grandchild of your first cousin, or a first cousin of one of your grandparents.

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Foster child
A foster child is a child raised in a family that is not its own by birth, without being legally adopted.

Fourth cousin
A fourth cousin is a relative who shares great-great-great-grandparents with you, but no closer ancestors.

Goodwife
Goodwife, usually shortened to Goody, was a polite title for a woman in England and colonial America, below Mistress in rank.

Grandchild
A grandchild is the child of your son or daughter; grandson and granddaughter are the words used in wills and census relationship columns.

Grandfather
A grandfather is the father of your father or mother; grandsire is an older word for the same man.

Grandmother
A grandmother is the mother of your father or mother; grandam is an older word for the same woman.

Grandnephew
A grandnephew, also called a great-nephew, is the grandson of your brother or sister: the son of your nephew or niece.

Grandniece
A grandniece, also called a great-niece, is the granddaughter of your brother or sister: the daughter of your nephew or niece.

Grass widow
A grass widow was a woman whose husband was living but absent: separated, deserted, divorced, or away for a long time.

Great-aunt
A great-aunt, also called a grandaunt, is the sister of one of your grandparents, or the wife of a grandparent's brother.

Great-grandchild
A great-grandchild is the child of your grandchild; great-grandson and great-granddaughter name the boy or girl.

Great-grandfather
A great-grandfather is the father of one of your grandparents; you have eight great-grandparents in all.

Great-grandmother
A great-grandmother is the mother of one of your grandparents, three generations above you.

Great-granduncle
A great-granduncle is the brother of one of your great-grandparents: an uncle of one of your grandparents.

Great-great-grandfather
A great-great-grandfather is the father of one of your great-grandparents, also written as a 2nd great-grandfather.

Great-uncle
A great-uncle, also called a granduncle, is the brother of one of your grandparents, or the husband of a grandparent's sister.

Guardian
A guardian is a person legally responsible for a minor or for an adult unable to manage their own affairs, usually appointed by a court.

Half cousin
A half cousin is the child of your parent's half-brother or half-sister; half first cousins share only one grandparent, not two.

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Half-brother
A half-brother shares only one parent with you; half-sister is the female form. Old records say of the half blood.

His heirs
His heirs in a deed or will is often a legal formula meaning full ownership that can pass on, not a list of actual living children.

In-law
In-law means a relative by marriage; in older records mother-in-law and father-in-law could also mean a stepmother or stepfather.

Infant
In older legal records an infant is anyone under the age of majority (often 21), not just a baby.

Inmate
Inmate in older censuses meant anyone living in a household or institution, such as a lodger or a patient, not necessarily a prisoner.

Issue
Issue in a will or deed means a person's children and all their descendants; died without issue means left no living descendants.

Junior
Junior, or Jr., meant the younger of two men with the same name in a place; it did not always mean the son of the senior.

Kinsman
Kinsman means a male relative of any kind; in old records it gives no exact relationship, only that the person was family.

Late wife
Late wife means a wife who has died; "my late wife" in a will refers to a deceased spouse, not one who arrived late.

Lineal descendant
A lineal descendant is someone in a direct line of descent from a person: a child, grandchild, great-grandchild and so on.

Maternal
Maternal means on the mother's side of the family, as in a maternal grandmother (the mother's mother) or maternal uncle.

Minor
A minor is a person under the legal age of adulthood, usually 21 in older American law; today usually 18.

Mother-in-law
Mother-in-law could mean stepmother in older records, the father's later wife, as well as a spouse's mother.

Mrs.
Mrs. comes from Mistress and before the 1800s could be used for any woman of standing, married or not.

Natural child
A natural child in older records usually means a child born to unmarried parents; natural son or daughter can also just mean biological child.

Nephew
Nephew in older records could mean a grandson or other descendant, not only a son of a brother or sister.

Next friend
A next friend is a person who brings a lawsuit on behalf of a minor or someone unable to sue alone, without being a formal guardian.

Next of kin
Next of kin means a person's closest living relatives, the ones who inherit when there is no will and who are notified at a death.

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Niece
A niece is the daughter of your brother or sister, or of your husband's or wife's brother or sister.

Orphan
Orphan in older records often meant a child whose father had died, even if the mother was still living.

Paternal
Paternal means on the father's side of the family, as in a paternal grandfather (the father's father) or paternal aunt.

Posthumous child
A posthumous child was born after the father's death; the law treated such a child as already born when the father died.

Relict
Relict means a widow or widower, the spouse left behind when the other died; "Mary, relict of John Smith" means John's widow.

Removed
Removed, as in a first cousin once removed, means the two cousins are one or more generations apart from each other.

Reputed father
Reputed father means the man named or believed to be the father of a child born outside marriage, as in bastardy and support cases.

Second cousin
A second cousin is a relative who shares great-grandparents with you but not grandparents: the child of your parent's first cousin.

Second cousin once removed
A second cousin once removed is either the child of your second cousin, or a second cousin of one of your parents.

Senior
Senior, or Sr., meant the older of two men with the same name in a place, not always the father of the junior.

Sister
Sister in old records could mean a fellow woman member of a church, as well as a daughter of the same parents.

Sister-in-law
A sister-in-law is the sister of your husband or wife, or the wife of your brother.

Son-in-law
A son-in-law is the husband of your daughter, the man who married into the family through her.

Spinster
Spinster in older legal and church records meant a woman who had never married; earlier still it meant a woman who spun thread.

Stepbrother
A stepbrother is the son of your stepparent from an earlier marriage; you share no parent with him.

Stepmother
A stepmother is the later wife of your father, not your birth mother; old records sometimes called her mother-in-law.

Stepson
A stepson or stepdaughter is your husband's or wife's child from an earlier marriage, not your own child by birth.

Third cousin
A third cousin is a relative who shares great-great-grandparents with you, but no closer ancestors: the child of a parent's second cousin.

Uncle
An uncle is the brother of your father or mother, or the husband of your aunt; in some places Uncle was also a respectful title for an older man.

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Ward
A ward is a person, usually a child, placed under the care of a court-appointed guardian, often after the father's death.

Whole blood
Whole blood means kinship through the same two parents or the same ancestral couple, as opposed to half blood, through only one.

Widow
A widow is a woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried.

Widower
A widower is a man whose wife has died and who has not remarried.

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