

Using DNA to Sort Out the Genealogical Hurdles of Amish-Mennonite Surnames

By Darvin L Martin

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Key Points:

- 1) Your DNA is not privately your own, but rather a complex conglomerate of your ancestors. Your DNA is shared with your closest relatives, becoming less similar but still traceable when compared to distant relatives.
- 2) There are ethnic markers within DNA, showcasing the origin of remote ancestors, but DNA does not parse infinitely—among distant ancestors some DNA is not represented in yourself and gets diluted out. Therefore, the percent ethnic origin of your DNA may actually not match the real diversity of your ancestry.
- 3) Most Americans with colonial European ancestors also have Native American ancestors, whether or not these show up in one's ethnic DNA profile. If Native markers do show up, you've proved your Native ancestry. If they don't show up, you have not necessarily disproved this ancestry. You still may have Native ancestry back perhaps more than eight generations, but these markers have diluted from your own DNA profile.
- 4) The three main types of DNA [autosomal (atDNA), Y-chromosomal (Y-DNA), and mitochondrial (mtDNA)] each reveal different aspects of ancestry. Your atDNA is the conglomeration of ancestors across all your lineages, maternal and paternal. Y-DNA is traced from father to son and represents the direct paternal lineage typically aligned to a surname. MtDNA is inherited from a mother to all her children and represents the direct maternal lineage (not corresponding to a surname).
- 5) The reasons for DNA testing can be medical, or for legal identity purposes, or for tracing family history; but DNA testing specifically for family history will purposefully only showcase markers used in genealogical or ancestral studies.
- 6) Y-DNA is a powerful tool to extend information about a surname back in time beyond the beginning of a paper trail (beyond the beginning of paper records).
- 7) Y-DNA can reveal which people of the same surname are related paternally, and which people of slightly different surnames or entirely different surnames are related paternally. Y-DNA is significant to determine if two immigrant ancestors of the same (or similar) surnames come from the same family.
- 8) The Y-DNA signatures of Mennonite and Amish surnames (mostly from Switzerland) parallel the distribution of DNA across Europe, and to some extent beyond Europe into the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Back further than 400 years these signatures are found among many other Celtic, German, Greco-Roman and Slavic DNA signatures forming a complex assortment of interrelated families we are only beginning to understand.