

The Road to Poplar—My Surname Is What?

By Dave Jordan

For many of us, wondering about our surname has been the origin of our genealogy pursuits. Usually it is our current name, but might be one associated with any of our four grandparents or eight g-grandparents. In the beginning we daydream that we are connected to the rich and famous or perhaps a well-known scoundrel or two.

My first questions about the Jordans arose when I was a boy of about 10 years old. My Uncle Herb Jordan related that the Jordans dated back a thousand years and were descendants of Irish knights. When I began my research I discovered that this wasn't quite the case, although the name **JORDAN** is said to have originated via knights returning from the Crusades after their visits to the Jordan River. Perhaps this is what my uncle had heard.

My *Jordan* investigation has turned into quite an adventure and continues still after more than three decades. It began in 1975. My father, Edward Jordan, recounted that his father, Herbert Arthur Jordan, was born on 24 July 1897 in Chicago and that Herbert's father, James Oscar Jordan, was born in London in the 1870s. The 1900 Chicago Census improved this information, indicating that Herbert was originally named Herbert O. (for Herbert Oscar), but showed that he was born in 1898. Subsequent data suggests that Herbert adjusted his birth year (1897) before he married in order to seem a little older, then continued to use the 1897 year. The 1900 Census also indicated that his father, James Oscar Jordan, was born in February 1872.

My father also provided me with the details that James Oscar Jordan's mother was Elizabeth Priscilla Jordan, born in London on 27 February 1847 and that James Oscar Jordan had a half brother, James Henry Jordan, who lived in Madison, Wisconsin. That there were two brothers named James Jordan in the same family seemed a bit odd, and at the time no one could explain it. Figure 1 shows a simple family chart based on this early information. James Henry Jordan is left off this initial chart but is added in a subsequent chart as more information became available.

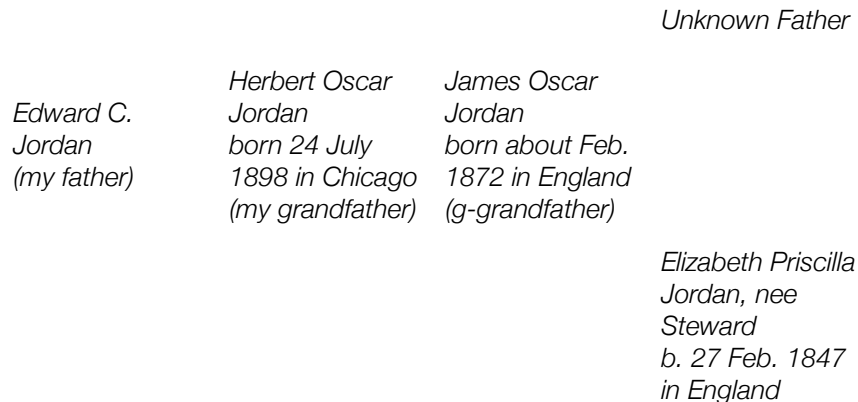


Figure 1: 4 Generation Jordan Genealogy Based on Early Input

In 1977, I requested both James Oscar Jordan's and Elizabeth Priscilla Steward's birth registrations from St. Catherine's House where these records were kept at the time.¹ Unfortunately, neither could be found. The reasons weren't because of a misspelling or a wrong date. Elizabeth's registration was eventually found under her mother's maiden name.² The search for James Oscar Jordan's registration turned out to be even more challenging. At my father's suggestion, I wrote to his uncle, Chuck Jordan (brother of his father, Herbert Oscar Jordan), who, I learned, had tried to compile a Jordan family genealogy in the 1930s, some 40 years before my endeavors. An excerpt from his important response follows:

November 1977
Chas Jordan
Carlsbad, California
Dear David,

Hope you have some success with your family tree. I will shake the cobwebs a bit and see if I can remember some things that may help you. I'll start with your family history.

My father James Oscar Jordan [was] born [in] London, England. My birth certificate [is for] Chicago, Illinois, October, 16, 1903 and it gives my father's age as 30 and my mother's as 25, and her birth date was March 19th, 1878 [in] Montreal Canada. I have no knowledge of [my] father's birth date. He had a brother James in Madison, Wisconsin, younger than he; also a brother (Charles or Charley) in between. We have a picture of the three brothers with their bicycles transferred onto a pillow cover (circa about 1895 or 1893).

Now the similarity of names can really open a can of worms. I was a very small boy, when first I heard some talk about my father being the son of his mother's first husband. This was not a topic of conversation to be bandied about, as I soon learned. However, from other branches of the family, there leaked out their version of my grandmother's secret.

To wit, her first husband had his own boat, sail and auxiliary steam, a small cargo ship as I remember the story. Now the plot thickens. He was in the Mediterranean when he was set upon by pirates, who tried to steal his cargo. Of course, they wouldn't give up without a fight, and a few heads got busted. An Egyptian warship captured them and took them into the port of Alexandria [and] claimed they were smugglers and pirates.

Those were pretty rough days and they were never seen again. The story got back to London that they were all hanged as pirates. The ship and cargo was confiscated as contraband. As soon as grandmother was convinced that she was indeed a

¹ "The Road to Poplar—Jordans," *Cockney Ancestor* (CA 121)

² "The Road to Poplar—Stewards," *Cockney Ancestor* (CA 127)

widow with two boys to support, she married and had another boy James Jordan (Madison, Wisconsin). He was born in London, England. We always refer to Madison because that's where he spent most of his life in [the] U.S.A.

This letter, of course, was both very helpful and exciting. At first that excitement prevented me from fully appreciating the significance of the following:

I was a very small boy, when first I heard some talk about my father [James Oscar Jordan] being the son of his mother's [Elizabeth Priscilla] first husband. . . . As soon as grandmother was convinced that she was indeed a widow with two boys to support, she married and had another boy James Jordan (Madison, Wisconsin).

Eventually, I realized that my James Oscar Jordan was not born a *Jordan* at all. While I was aware that James Oscar Jordan and James Henry Jordan were half brothers, I had assumed, because of their same surname, that they had different *mothers*, not different *fathers*.

Thus, I began referring to James Oscar Jordan's father as *Mr. X*. But who was he and what was my male line surname? This puzzle took over a decade to solve and was accomplished by broadening the search to include many more *Jordans* and *Stewards*. Meanwhile, there was considerable surprise in my extended *Jordan* family when they learned that their much loved *Jordan* name dated back only a little over a century.

I first pursued the origins of the half brother, James Jordan of Madison, Wisconsin, as only he was a "true Jordan." This search led to the discovery that the *Jordans* were from Poplar, England and that the father of half brother James Jordan of Madison was also named James Jordan.³ *Whew!* Now there were *three* James Jordans in the same small family! Later I determined that Elizabeth Priscilla Jordan's parent's names were Joseph and Elizabeth Steward and lifelong residents of Poplar.⁴ A search for the marriage registration for Elizabeth Priscilla's marriage to second husband James Jordan, however, failed because she used, as one normally might, the surname of her first husband, which, of course, I did not know.

In pursuit of the unknown name, I searched the early 1870s *London Times* reports from Alexandria, hoping to find information about the hangings. Before the 1881 Census was indexed, I requested the names of the inhabitants for 4 Wade Street, Poplar, the address at which James Henry Jordan was born in December 1879. Unfortunately, the *Jordans* had moved by 1881.

³ "The Road to Poplar—Jordans," *Cockney Ancestor* (CA 121)

⁴ "The Road to Poplar—Stewards," *Cockney Ancestor* (CA 127)

Then in early 1987, I commissioned a researcher at the Genealogical Library in Salt Lake City to search the 1871 Census for Joseph and Elizabeth Steward, the parents of Elizabeth Priscilla Jordan and grandparents of James Oscar and James Henry Jordan. An entry was found at 20 Wade Street, Poplar, but Elizabeth Priscilla was not listed, suggesting that she was perhaps living elsewhere with *Mr. X*. I then requested a search of the 1881 Census at the same 20 Wade Street. And there it was, after a decade of searching: Joseph and Elizabeth Steward with their three grandsons and *the missing name* third in the list in a very clear script. (See the extract in Figure 2.)

The image shows a handwritten census extract on a grid. The first column contains the address '20 Wade Street' and the number '1'. The second column lists names: 'Joseph Steward', 'Elizabeth - do', 'Oscar Schöldberg', 'Elizabeth - do', and 'James Jordan'. The third column lists relationships: 'Head', 'Wife', 'Grandson', '- do -', and '- do -'. The fourth column lists ages: '55', '56', '13', '7', and '1'. There are some handwritten marks and a checkmark in the first row.

20 Wade Street	1	Joseph Steward	Head	55
		Elizabeth - do	Wife	56
		Oscar Schöldberg	Grandson	13
		Elizabeth - do	- do -	7
		James Jordan	- do -	1

Figure 2: 1881 Census Extract for Steward Family

And what an unusual name it was: *Schöldberg* (thought to be pronounced *Sh-e(r)-ld-berr-(y)*⁵—a name unknown to my father, grandfather, and great-uncles. It is possible that even James Oscar himself didn’t know his real surname because in a 1930s letter that my Great-uncle Chuck wrote to the mayor of London requesting his father James Oscar Jordan’s birth registration, he mentions that it might be under a name other than Jordan. This was quite surprising because he and his father were in touch in those days.

Elizabeth Priscilla remarried a year after her first husband Oscar Schöldberg’s death, and it appears the young Schöldberg boys quickly adopted the name *Jordan*. Little Oscar Schöldberg (the James Oscar Jordan of this narrative) was just 7 years old at the time of his father’s death. Given the unusual name and young age, it might have been easier to just become a *Jordan*. Possibly, it was the custom of the times. Perhaps concerned because the census was an official document, the Steward grandparents entered the young boy’s original surname on the 1881 census—a helpful hint sent across the ages to future generations.

⁵ Bo Johansson provided the English phonetic spelling of Schöldberg in response to my request on the Ancestry Message Boards for Sweden, County of Blekinge. Details of how to pronounce **Schöldberg - Sh-e(r)-ld-berr-(y)** are as follows:

“Sh” = a thick sh-sound

“e(r)” = like er, but without any r-sound, like the vowel sound in girl

“ld”

“berr” with trilled r

“(y)” = consonant y-sound, like ya without the a.

It certainly takes some practice for an English speaker. Most readers will probably just revert to the way English speakers pronounce **Schöldberg** with the hard “g” at the end, which is the way I have been saying it for years. But I am trying to get used to **Sh-e(r)-ld-berr-(y)**.

With the long sought name finally discovered, I was able to quickly obtain Elizabeth Priscilla's marriage registrations (the first marriage to Knut Oscar Schöldberg in 1867 and the second marriage to James Jordan in 1876). In addition, I obtained James Oscar Jordan's birth registration for 14 February 1868 in Poplar. His name at birth was Joseph (after his grandfather Joseph Steward), Canute (alternate spelling of his father's name, Knut), Oscar (for his father), Schöldberg. His forenames evolved to Oscar for the 1871 and 1881 Censuses and later to James Oscar Jordan (James Jordan being his step-father). This somewhat confusing information is charted into the Figure 3.

Thus, after a decade of searching, I had finally discovered our unknown family name, a name perhaps no one had known since 1931 when Elizabeth Priscilla Jordan died. And the many Jordans in our clan were very surprised to learn that they were not *Jordans* at all but actually *Schöldbergs* instead.

So, who was this fellow Knut Oscar Schöldberg, and where did he come from? It was certainly an unusual name for Poplar, England. In the beginning I suspected German or Nordic origins. In 1997, after another ten-year search, I was able to confirm that he was from Sweden. It then took another decade to determine his likely birth city as Jämshog. The marriage of Elizabeth Priscilla, an Englishwoman to a Swede, was an unusual pairing even in the then cosmopolitan Poplar. While the Poplar Docks would have brought sailors in from all over the world, and many did settle there, my personal census scans have not revealed other pairings with foreigners. I am certain there were some, but it appears unusual for the times. As for my Great-uncle Chuck's fantastic story about pirates, it took until the mid-1990s to sort this out and will be the subject of a future article.

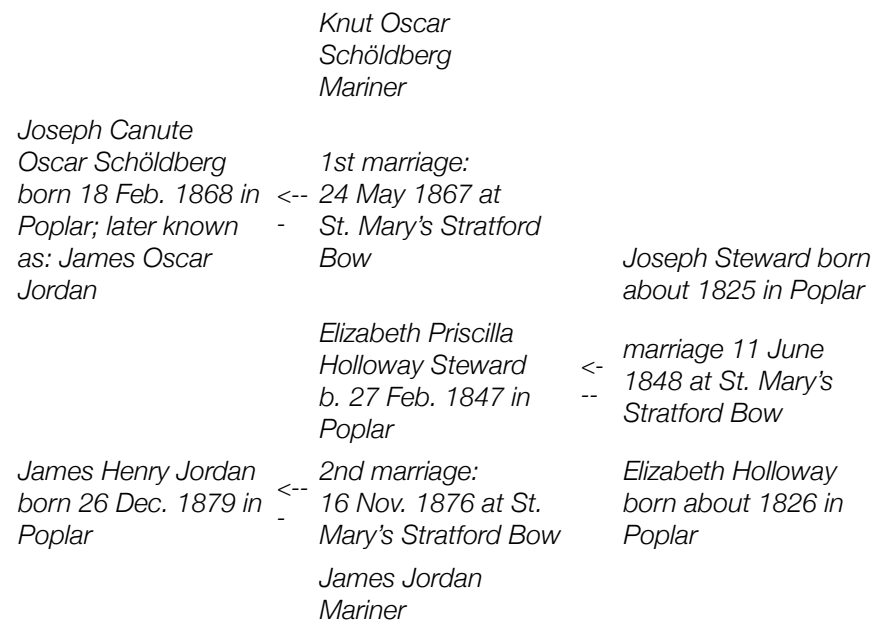


Figure 3: 3-Generation Jordan Genealogy

Regarding James Jordan, the man who gave our family his name, I know very little, even after extensive searching. He, like Knut Oscar, was a mariner. He married my 2x great-grandmother in November 1876 in Poplar and they had one child, James Henry, in 1879. Nothing has been found about where he came from or what became of him. But his legacy is the large number of Jordans in the USA that bear his name even though there is no biological connection.

In conclusion, I offer my fellow genealogy researchers the following advice: Do capture those remembrances from relatives early in the search. While their recollection of dates and events may be less than perfect, there generally is a good story and some useful facts. The hard data from registrations will always be there, but the stories from the relatives will someday be gone forever.

Notes

1. The original *Road to Poplar - My Surname is What?* article was written in during the summer of 2011 and submitted to the East of London Family History Society's quarterly publication, the *Cockney Ancestor* for publication. Because of the length, the editor asked that the article be shortened to 4 pages and thus the article was resubmitted in December 2012. The shortened article was published in November 2012 in *Cockney Ancestor*, No. 136, Autumn 2012. The above article is the original length version.
2. Special thanks are in order to my sister Marianne Garcher for her excellent proofreading and input in clarifying and telling this very complicated story.

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Initial Web Publication Date: 12/16/2012

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Contact: [Dave Jordan](#)

What's New

Going forward it is intended to briefly describe what major items were added since the last version of this document.

1. 10/18/2017: Miscellaneous format changes.
2. 12/16/2012: Initial Jordan Web Publication. Includes expanded version published in *Cockney Ancestor*, No. 136, Autumn 2012.

File Connections

As follows are other files that connect with The Jordan Story. All are available at [Jordan PDF Downloads](#) as individual pdf documents with titles and file names as listed below.

The Jordan Story

File: Stories_Jordan.pdf

Summary: The Jordan Story provides a written history of the origins of our Jordan family. As part of this story there are many appendices and sections.

Recollections of the Jordans

File: Recollections_Jordan.pdf

Summary: Recollections of the Jordans provides a collection of short anecdotes and memories of our Jordan family.

The Road to Poplar - Jordans

File: Stories_The_Road_To_Poplar_Jordan.pdf

Author: Dave Jordan

Published: East of London Family History Society/Cockney Ancestor

The Road to Poplar - Jordans

File: Stories_The_Road_To_Poplar_Steward.pdf

Author: Dave Jordan

Published: East of London Family History Society/Cockney Ancestor

The Road to Poplar - My Surname is What?

File: Stories_The_Road_To_Poplar_Name.pdf

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