The Blazon Truth

Don't let family crest peddlers catch you with your shield down: Learn if you really have heraldic heritage before you shell out for a bogus coat of arms.

BY SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK

ou open your mailbox to find an offer promising a lovely plaque featuring your family coat of arms. Vendor carts hawk heraldry mousepads and mugs in shopping malls. Gift catalogs and family history novelty shops sell certificates with "crests." You even can download them from the Internet. They're colorful, attractive and suitable for framing. Some even come with a generic history of your surname. In our supposedly classless, egalitarian society, nobility wannabes are fueling a craze for that symbolic representation of a person's heritage known as a coat of arms, often mistakenly called a "family crest." Rare is the family historian who doesn't hope to be descended from an ancestor who was armigerous (that is, according to *Webster's*, "bearing heraldic arms").

These appeals to the would-be armigerous have been around for years. When a postcard arrived in my parents' mailbox promising our alleged family crest, it wasn't all that expensive, so they sent for it. Even as a youngster, however, I knew—as did my parents—this was a bogus offer. Not because we were especially savvy, or because the exclamation mark-ridden letter was obviously junk mail. It was because my father had changed our surname years earlier to make it sound, well, more American. So we went from the romantic Italian DeBartolo to the plain-vanilla Bart. Yet the offer that enticed us with an exquisite coat of arms and enlightened us about our noble heritage was for our adopted, pseudonymous Bart. (And we knew the DeBartolos descended from the peasant class, so we had no false hopes.)

Our certificate arrived—you guessed it—suitable for framing. The coat of arms looked as if it came directly from the queen's royal herald himself. Though printed in an unappealing brown ink on faux parchment, it described the Bart Coat of Arms as silver, having a blue middle band with a gold fleur-de-lis in the center; two black anchors crossed on top of the band, and in the base was a red lion, "in profile walking."

Wow. I think we held our heads just a smidge higher the day it arrived. We also got a distinguished history of the Bart surname, dating to the Middle Ages and claiming the name was—what's this?—of English or possibly German origin. (Our beloved Italian peasant ancestors must've been spinning in their graves.) Finally came the fine print: "No genealogical representation is intended or implied by this report and it does not represent individual lineage or your family tree." Now, why didn't this surprise us?

But maybe it surprises you—if you don't know what's myth and what's history when it comes to heraldry.

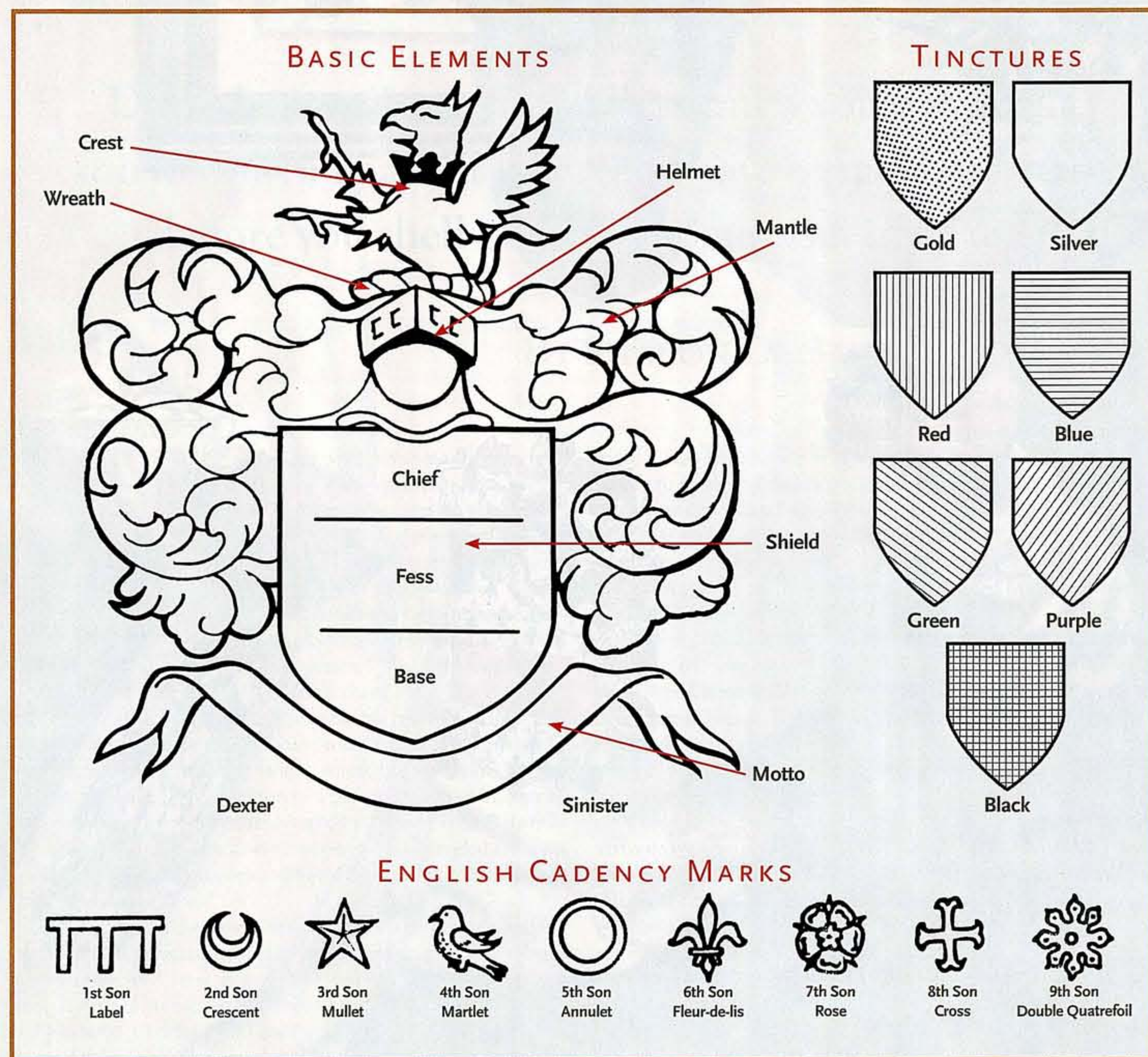
CHRISTINE POLOMSKY

Lie detecting

A key fact to keep in mind is that coats of arms are not and never have been granted to families. They're granted to individuals and belong to individuals. Arms can, however, be inherited. According to "Heraldry for United States Citizens," a brochure from the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG) <www.bcgcertification.org>:

- Anyone whose uninterrupted male-line immigrant ancestor was entitled to use a coat of arms has the right to use this same coat of arms.
- If the uninterrupted male-line immigrant ancestor has no such right, neither does the descendant.
- Anyone who claims the right to arms under European laws must prove the uninterrupted male-line descent.
- As an exception, US citizens can obtain a grant or confirmation of their arms—from the College of Arms in England or from another country's national heraldic authority (see box, opposite)—by paying the required fees.

The BCG's brochure also warns, "Commercial firms that purport to research and identify coats of arms for surnames or family names—and sell descriptions thereof under the guise of a 'family crest'—are engaged in fraudulent and deceptive marketing. The consumer's best defense is a proper knowledge of the laws of heraldry."



While each country's laws of heraldry differ, in some parts of the world it's actually illegal to display a coat of arms or to use it on stationery or a blazer breast pocket unless you're the rightful owner. Having the same last name doesn't entitle you to use the arms. Here in the United States, you won't be thrown in the slammer if you've already bought and proudly displayed in your living room what you thought was your family crest.

And who knows? You really could descend from an ancestor who rightfully inherited a coat of arms. To find out, let's journey back in time to learn how coats of arms originated, what they mean and how to discover if any of your ancestors had a legitimate claim to them.

Facing the facts

Coats of arms developed in the 12th century as a means to identify armored knights during tournaments and on the battlefield. Any fighting man owned a sword and shield, carried a banner and wore a helmet, all of which a son would one day inherit. Behind a closed helmet, it was impossible to tell one man from another except by the decoration of his shield and banner and the ornaments on the helmet. The term *armory* relates to the emblems, *armoury* to weapons. Warriors also wore a decorated surcoat, or fabric overlay, over their armor—hence the term *coat of arms*.

Over time, these emblems became a means of personal identification, allowing an owner to mark items of value, such as silver, and to engrave bookplates and stationery. With their growing use and popularity, disputes arose over who could legitimately use a particular design. In 1484, Richard III established the College of Arms and assigned heralds to visit households across England to record each owner's design. These "visitations" were made between 1530 and 1686.

Early on, arms signified nobility and rank, but eventually practically any man who owned land also had the right to bear arms. Thus, arms became a symbol of the gentry, and it became fashionable and prestigious to descend from a line with armigerous ancestors. Each country has its own laws as to who can inherit the arms. Commonly, the symbol was passed down from eldest son to eldest son in an unbroken male line. Other sons, and even daughters, might use variations of the main emblem, adding specific symbols—called cadency marks—to indicate birth order, illegitimacy and adoption (see the illustration on the opposite page).

Staying in arms way

Although we commonly refer to it as a coat of arms, the proper term is a *heraldic* or *armorial achievement*. A complete heraldic achievement is made up of a crest, wreath, mantle, helmet, shield and, although not essential, a motto (shown, opposite page). There also may be supporters to hold up the arms and a compartment (or ground) for the supporters to stand on.

The crest is a figure or symbol attached to the top of the helmet. Animals such as lions, tigers and bears are commonly used as crests, but you'll also find boars, foxes, horses, birds, insects, reptiles and mythical animals such as unicorns and dragons. These may stand alone or be combined with other symbols, such as flowers, trees, wreaths or swords.

The helmet (helm) supports the crest. Positioning of the helmet represents rank: For example, a helmet facing forward with the visor opened means a knight, while a helmet facing sideways with the visor closed is for a gentleman.

The mantle (lambrequin), originally a piece of fabric attached to the knight's helmet to protect him from the sun's heat, fills out the design. It represents the fabric being slashed in battle. The motto is a ribbon below or over the achievement, which carries a statement of fact, a hope or battle cry.

The wreath (torse), originally a piece of twisted silk showing two colors, is at the base of the crest and was used to attach the mantle to the helmet. Typically, the wreath shows six twists of alternating colors from the shield.

The shield is the most important part of the coat of arms. It comprises a field (the surface or background) and the charges (the symbols on the field). If the achievement belongs to a lady, the field will be diamond-shaped (a lozenge) rather than a shield. The field contains many different ordinaries and subordinaries—geometric bands or shapes that divide the field, such as crosses, chevrons and stripes. The shield can become quite complex, with more terms than you'd care to know and remember. In describing a coat of arms (known as blazoning), the field is always stated first and the components are described as being dexter (right side of the wearer), sinister (left side of the wearer), chief (top), fess (middle) and base (bottom).

Tinctures—the colors, precious metals and furs on a coat of arms—are also represented by words and patterns. The two

International Arms Race

Clans from many countries claim coats of arms. Use these nation-specific Web sites to sort out heraldry from foreign lands.

- **French Heraldry and Related Topics** <heraldica.org/topics/france>
- ***Genealogia e Heráldica Portuguesa* (Portuguese Genealogy and Heraldry)** <www.progenea.com/frameeng.htm>
- ***Heráldica y Genealogía* (Heraldry for Surnames of Spanish Origin)** <www.ctv.es/artes/arms>
- **Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies—UK** <www.ihgs.ac.uk>
- **Italian Heraldry, Nobility and Genealogy** <www.italiangenealogy.tardio.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=8>
- ***Societas Heraldica Scandinavica* (Scandinavian Heraldry Society)** <www.heraldik.org>
- **Uasal—A Source for Irish Nobility, Heraldry and Genealogy** <www2.smumn.edu/facpages/~poshea/uasal/welcome.html>

Hark, the Heraldic Designer

You may certainly design your own coat of arms, and you can register it with the American College of Heraldry <americancollegeofheraldry.org>. Follow these guidelines when creating your coat:

- **Seek help.** Consult books such as *Design Your Own Coat of Arms: An Introduction to Heraldry* by Rosemary A. Chorzempa (Dover Publications, $3.95). Also look into computer software, such as Achievement of Arms <grammarman.www8.50megs.com/aboutachieve.html> and the free Blazon95 <petebarrett.members.beeb.net/blazon.htm>.
- **Make your design unique.** Check the references on page 41 to be sure you aren't infringing on someone else's design.
- **Keep it simple.** The idea behind the design is to make it easily recognizable and remembered as yours.
- **Be true to your heritage.** If possible, design your arms in the style of your ethnic background. This will require you to research that country's heraldic style.
- **Avoid heraldic signs.** Don't use symbols that have particular meanings in heraldry, such as crowns, coronets and supporters.
- **Be yourself.** Use symbols that represent your personality, values, occupation or hobbies.

metals are gold (or) and silver (argent); the colors are red (gules), blue (azure), green (vert), purple (purpure) and black (sable); the furs are ermine and vair. In black-and-white illustrations, specific conventions are used to indicate the colors, metals and furs (these are shown on page 32). The written description (blazon) might read, "quarterly gules and or, in the first quarter a five-point mullet argent," which means the shield is divided into red and gold quarters, and in the first quarter, or the upper left as you look at the shield, is a silver, five-pointed star.

But wait—there's still more. Another aspect of heraldry is the funeral achievement, or hatchment. According to Theodore Chase and Laurel K. Gabel's essay "Headstones, Hatchments and Heraldry," in *Gravestone Chronicles II*, a hatchment is the "painted coat of arms associated exclusively with death, funerals, and mourning. ... They are often set in decorated frames that depict mortality symbols such as hourglasses, skulls or bones" against a black background. These funeral hatchments "indicated to the viewer the gender, marital status and often the family position of the deceased" and also may be found carved on Colonial New England and Virginia tombstones. Chase and Gabel continue, "In the United States, having a heraldic tombstone with a death date prior to 1750 is in fact sometimes considered proof of a legitimate right to bear arms." The duo is trying to find and record all the pre-1850 armorial tombstones in the United States. For information about the project, contact the Association for Gravestone Studies, 278 Main St., Suite 207, Greenfield, MA 01301, (413) 772-0836, <www.gravestonestudies.org>.

Hunting hand-me-down coats

Lacking a pre-1750 heraldic tombstone for your ancestor, how do you determine if one of your ancestors had a legitimate right to a heraldic achievement? Begin by checking genealogical libraries for the works of Sir John Bernard Burke and the Ten Rolls of Arms published in several volumes of the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (see Resources, page 41). Large genealogical sections in libraries may have them. Unfortunately, beyond these and other published sources, your search can get quite complicated and time consuming. It's not just a matter of looking up your surname—the proper descent must be traced and documented, which is why the bogus claims of "family crest" companies are so laughable.

As you research your family history, you may encounter a published genealogy on your ancestry that reproduces a coat of arms or "family crest," but be extremely cautious of these and research for yourself the accuracy of their use. When I began researching my Colonial Fitzhugh ancestry, I found two Fitzhugh coats of arms illustrated in volume two of *Genealogies of Virginia Families from the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (Genealogical Publishing Co., out of print). One was quite familiar to me; a colorful reproduction had hung in my great-aunt's living room for as long as I could remember (see illustration, right). The genealogy described the shield as "Azure three chevrons interlaced in base or, a Chief or"—three gold chevrons (upside-down Vs) interlaced in the bottom half of the shield, which is blue and has a gold band across the top. The other shield (below right) had a more complex description: "Quarterly, 1 and 4 ermine, on a chief gules, three martlets. 2 and 3 argent three chevrons sable each charged with a bezant." Can you translate the blazon?

William Fitzhugh, the immigrant from England who used the first achievement mentioned above, may not have been entitled to do so. According to the genealogy, William wrote his brother Henry in London to ask for an illustration of the arms. When William received it, he wrote back to his brother that it was incorrect, but Henry insisted it was the right one. The author of the family history, however, states that when he checked the College of Arms visitations, he could not find an armigerous Fitzhugh who had a son named William: "Though the Virginia Fitzhughs bear the same arms as the old Barons Fitzhugh, of Ravensworth, no descent from the ennobled family has ever been traced."

William the immigrant wasn't alone in wanting to display and use arms. It seems this coats of arms craze isn't just a modern fad. Colonial ancestors, many of whom were not eldest sons and stood no chance of inheriting land or a title in Europe, adopted heraldic achievements as status symbols once they settled and made names for themselves in America—whether they were entitled to arms or not. Between about 1750 and 1775, many wealthy Colonial families hired painters specializing in heraldic arts to create coats of arms. Some of these may have been legitimately registered with heraldic authorities such as the College of Arms in England; others, not.

Though frame-ready family crests didn't appear in their mailboxes, and no Web sites or mall vendor carts hawked mugs to them, our Colonial forebears coveted coats of arms just as we do. And no doubt those heraldic symbols inspired our ancestors to hold their heads just a smidge higher. I wonder if their family crests came with fine-print disclaimers, too.

Fitz Hugh

Research into the Colonial Fitzhugh family uncovered these two coats of arms—but William Fitzhugh may have been wrongly using the top one.

Contributing editor SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK is the author of *The Family Tree Guide to Finding Your Ellis Island Ancestors* (Family Tree Books, $19.99).

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