1. At baptism, if two given names were given to the child, the first given name was a *spiritual, saint's name*. The second given name was the secular or *call name*, i.e., "rufnamen", which is the name the person was known by, both within the family and to the rest of the world. This custom was originally adopted in Germanic and other regions in Europe from Roman Catholic tradition and continued by the Protestants in their baptismal naming customs. The immigrants from these areas brought the custom with them to Pennsylvania.

   The spiritual name, usually to honor a favorite saint, was used repeatedly and was usually given to all the children of that family of the same gender. Thus the boys would be Johan Adam Kerchner, Johan George Kerchner, etc., or Philip Peter Kerchner, Philip Jacob Kerchner, etc. Girls would be named Anna Barbara Kerchner, Anna Margaret Kerchner, etc., or Maria Elizabeth Kerchner, Maria Catherine Kerchner, etc. But after baptism, these people would not be known as John, Philip, Anna, or Maria, respectively. They would instead be known by what we would think of now as their middle name, which was their secular name. Thus these people would be known respectively as Adam, George, Peter, Jacob, Barbara, Margaret, Elizabeth, and Catherine in legal and secular records.

   For males, the saint's name Johan or John for Saint John was particularly heavily used by many German families, but also Saint George was used by some families for male children. The child's secular name was really John, if and only if, at baptism he was named only John, usually spelled as Johannes, with no second given name. The name John spelled as Johannes is rarely seen spelled as Johannes as a spiritual name, i.e., you rarely will see the name at baptism recorded as Johannes Adam Kerchner, etc. It is generally always found spelled as Johan or Johann when used as a spiritual name. Thus, you find the spiritual name of John recorded as Johan Adam Kerchner or Johann Adam Kerchner, not Johannes Adam Kerchner.

   Many researchers, new to German names, who find a baptism of an individual with a name such as Johan Adam Kerchner, thus mistakenly spend a lot of time looking for a John Kerchner, in legal and census records, when he was known after baptism, to the secular world, as Adam Kerchner. Also when reading county histories, etc., especially those written by individuals in the 20th century, and the author is referring to someone as John Kerchner, and you are not looking for a John Kerchner, but the history sounds otherwise familiar, further research may turn up that this person was really not a John Kerchner, but instead was someone else such as a Johan George Kerchner. You would thus find all his 18th century records recorded under the name George Kerchner and not John Kerchner and therefore after checking the data and correlating the facts you may find this is really a story about your missing George Kerchner.

As I said, the use of Saint John was the most common example of this custom, but Saint George was often used too. And thus one would find children in a family named George Heinrich ......., George Jacob ......., George Frederick ......., and of course simply George ...... by itself. In these examples the secular or call names would respectively be Heinrich, Jacob, Frederick, and George.

This naming custom slowly died out in Pennsylvania during the later part of the 19th century, i.e., after the 1870's.

Classic examples of errors caused by not knowing of this naming custom are seen in a work titled "Genealogical and Biographical Annals of Northumberland County PA", It was published
in 1911 by J.L. Floyd & Company of Chicago IL. One specific example of this misnaming error in that work is on page 659 in the paragraph in the upper left column which begins, "John Wetzel ...". This person is not a Johannes or John Wetzel but is instead a Johan "George" Wetzel and is known secularly in all legal records as George Wetzel. He was married to Eva Elizabeth Kerchner. There are many more examples in this work and other county histories written by people unfamiliar with 18th Century PA German Naming Customs.

Modern computer programs which generate automatic reports and books from genealogical databases are compounding the confusion because these programs tend to generate paragraphs and sentences using the first given name only, which as I have explained was not the real call name of the person in the 18th century. Computer programs need to be modified to allow the user to select which given name of the full series of given names is the proper call name, i.e., the first or second given name. Or better yet, the program should have a setting whereby both given names are always used together in tandem in the computer generated text when referring to an individual. Oh well, one can only hope. :-)

2. The term "Senior" and "Junior" following a name did not necessarily imply a father and son relationship, as it does now. It could have been an uncle and nephew who had the same name and lived near each other. It could be a grandfather and a grandchild living together, where the father has died. It could even be two unrelated individuals with the same name but of different ages who lived near each other. So to help friends and business associates keep track of who-was-who in their discussions and records, they added on the "Sr." or "Jr." which merely meant the older and the younger, respectively.

3. The term cousin was widely used to mean an extended family, not the specific legal definition we understand it to be today.

4. It was a common practice in some German families to name the first born son after the child's paternal grandfather and the second born son after the maternal grandfather. Here are several more detailed naming patterns practiced by some families.

Pattern A

1st son after the father's father
2nd son after the mother's father
3rd son after the father
4th son after the father's father's father
5th son after the mother's father's father
6th son after the father's mother's father
7th son after the mother's mother's father

1st daughter after the mother's mother
2nd daughter after the father's mother
3rd daughter after the mother
4th daughter after the father's father's mother
5th daughter after the mother's father's mother
6th daughter after the father's mother's mother
7th daughter after the mother's mother's mother
Pattern B

The pattern B for the sons is the same as the above but this pattern for daughters was different

1st daughter after the father's mother
2nd daughter after the mother's mother
3rd daughter after the mother
4th daughter after the mother's father's mother
5th daughter after the father's father's mother

Pattern C

1st son after the father’s father
2nd son after the mother’s father
3rd son after the father’s oldest brother
4th son after the father

1st daughter after the father's mother
2nd daughter after the mother's mother
3rd daughter after the mother's oldest sister
4th daughter after the mother

Whenever a duplicate name occurred in these patterns, the next name in the series was used. If a child died in infancy the name was often reused for the next child of the same gender. A rare twist occurred sometimes. A child's name would be reused when a spouse died and the surviving spouse remarried and had more children with the next spouse. I found this happened when a spouse had children in Germany and then his spouse died. He left his children behind in Germany, possibly with the grandparents, and then emigrated to Pennsylvania. Sometime after arrival he remarried and named his eldest son born in Pennsylvania by his new spouse with the same name as the son still living in Germany. This results in two adult children with the same name.

If you are lucky enough to find a family with a lot of children, who strictly followed one of these naming patterns, then it may give you useful clues to determining the possible names of family members in earlier generations.

5. An "in", added to the end of a name, such as Anna Maria Kerchnerin, is a Germanic language name ending suffix denoting that the person is female. Thus the correct spelling of the last name in the example would be Kerchner, not Kerchnerin.

6. An "er" or "ner", added to a surname based on the name of something, denoted that the person worked with that object or at that occupation, if the main portion of the name was an object or an occupation, or that the person was from that geographic location or city, if the main portion of the name was a geographic location. Examples: Forst is German for a forest, thus Forster is one who worked in a forest or with woodlands or was from a forest. Berlin is a city in Germany, thus Berliner is one who is from Berlin. Since English is a Germanic rooted language we do the same thing in English, i.e., Paint(er), Garden(er), New York(er).
The suffixes mentioned in 5. and 6. above are compounded in many cases. The nouns Kirche and Kerche are German words for church. Thus for the surname spelled in an early record as Kerchnerin, i.e., Kerch(ner)(in) we have a family name which means a person who worked in or near a church, and this particular person is female.

7. Frequently the secular name given to the child was also the same as the secular given name of one of the baptismal sponsors for the child. Said baptismal sponsors frequently were close relatives but also could be close and trusted friends and neighbors.

8. In the last half of the 19th century after the first and middle name naming convention switched to the way it is today, some families gave all the children the same middle name, which was often the maiden name of the mother of the children. This same middle name, which if it was a surname, could also be that of a famous patriot, such as Benjamin Franklin or George Washington. But, if all the children had the same middle name, this could be a clue to the maiden name of their mother.

I hope that the above information will be of assistance to individuals researching 18th Century Pennsylvania-German names and records.

Review, and order on-line if desired, the following research books in association with Amazon.com.

- German-English Genealogical Dictionary, by Ernest Thode
- German-American Names, by George F. Jones
- Dictionary of German Names, by Hans Bahlow, translated by Edna Gentry

Some other good genealogical research books:
- If I Can You Can Decipher Germanic Records, by Edna Bentz
- Evidence!: Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian, by Elizabeth Mills
- German Church Books: Beyond Basics, by Kenneth L. Smith

Learn How to Use DNA Testing & Genetics to Aide Your Genealogy Research.

Review, and order on-line the following Internet research tool offered in association with Net Detective.

Need help finding ADOPTED ancestors or finding LOST cousins. This program targets searching the Internet to find hard to locate information.

Click Here for More Net Detective Information

Other PA Deutsch Research and Help Pages:
- PA Dutch Are German Not Dutch
- PA German Nicknames
- PA German Name Spelling
- Genealogy Research Tips
- 1812 Project Home Page
- Kerchner Genetic Genealogy DNA Testing Info & Resource Page
- Kerchner Genealogy Home Page