



A “sept” is a division of a Scottish or Irish family. It is a term borrowed from Irish culture in the nineteenth century and explains the use of a variety of surnames by members of a single clan.

This variety of surnames should not be confused with the reasons for variations in the spelling of a major Clan name (e.g., MacDougall, McDougal, MacDougald), which usually resulted from differences in dialects, misspellings upon immigration, or simply personal preference or whim.

In general, Scottish septs can be parts of the extended clan family that hold different surnames or smaller clans that followed another, more powerful family's chief. However, there were a range of groups that led to the rise of septs:

- People who were linked through marriage--descended from the Clan Chief through the female line, with a different surname.
- Individuals and smaller clans who sought and obtained the protection of the Chief's Clan and became

dependents--an extended part of the family, with different surnames.

- Families who lived on the land of a powerful laird and would follow him whether they were related or not.
- Lesser chiefs and followers bound to more powerful chiefs through bonds of manrent. These bonds of manrent and friendship tied otherwise non-related kin groups into a wider military, political, and resource-sharing clanship.

Today, the relationship between septs and clans means that many surnames can be thought of as a subsection of another. Anyone who has an ancestor bearing a recognized sept name is entitled to wear or display the crest badge and the tartan of the major or parent clan.

So, if your family surname doesn't have a specific tartan associated with it, but you know you hold Scottish ancestry, you may well be entitled to wear the tartan of some other, often larger clan.