Septs of Clan Davidson

What is a Clan Sept?

We often get asked while manning a tent at Highland Games “What is a Sept?” This is a good question since many people are confused by the words "Clan", "Family", and "Sept" when these terms are used to describe the Scottish Highlanders and their way of life. They also ask questions such as "Is a Family different than a Clan?" and "How did Septs come into existence?"

A Clan or Family is a legally recognized group in Scotland, which has a quasi-legal corporate identity in the same way that a company, club or partnership may have a corporate identity in law. There is now a belief that “Clans” are Highland and “Families” are Lowland but this is really a development of the Victorian era. The Lyon Court recognizes both the Clan and the Family as being the same thing now.

A sept is a family name that can be related to a Clan or larger Family for various reasons. Usually this came about either through marriage or by a small family seeking protection from a larger and more powerful neighbor. Nowadays, this relationship is most often seen in the clan tartan that individual families are “entitled”** to wear.

"Sept" is actually a term borrowed from Irish culture in the nineteenth century to explain the use of a variety of surnames by members of a single Clan. Where Scots would say "MacGregor and his Clan" and Irish historian might say "O'Neill and his Sept".

Over time, many Septs have become Clans in their own right and, in the political turmoil that Scotland has seen over the centuries, many others came to be related to more than one Clan.

Even more telling in the origin of Septs in the USA is the name jumbling that happened to many of our ancestors who entered the country via Ellis Island or other ports of landing. The clerks registering the new arrivals did the best they could with trying to document the names as spoken by the immigrants, most of whom had heavy accents very foreign to the ears of the clerk. Modern day Western governments also tend to place much more emphasis on surnames that what was common in the past.

There is no “official” (i.e. legal) list of which Septs belong to which Clans. There also is a tendency for some Clans to try to claim as many Septs as possible for purposes of attracting as many new members as possible. CDS-USA does not hold with that position...

That said, the list we have complied here is not definitive but just a compilation of various Septs that Clan Davidson organizations and publications have listed in the past.**

The Septs of Clan Davidson are generally considered to be:

Davey, Davie, Davis, Davison, Davissoon, Daw, Dawson, Day, Dea(s), Dean, Deane, Deason, Dee, Desson, Devette, Dewis, Dey, Dow, Dye, Kay, Keay, Key, Keys, MacAdie***, MacDaid, MacDavid, MacDavitt, MacKay, Slora, Slorach.

*Note 1: For more information on the issue of who is "entitled" to wear what Tartan, see (Tartan Page Link)

**Note 2: From the book "The Davidson, The Clan, Its history & Its people" {Clan Davidson Association (UK)} the following clarification regarding the origins of some of the septs of the Clan is quoted:
The surname Davidson itself has a surprising variety of spellings including Deavidson, Dividson, Davidson, Davisoune, and Davyson, Daviderson, Divison & Daverson, Davison, Davis, Davies Davy, Davie, Day & Dey can in theory be derived from Davey /Davie as a Christian name.
Likewise Dyson could be derived from son of Dai, & Dawson from son of Dawi. A Davie in Ayr in 1750 was sometimes Davies and sometimes Davidson. Dawson in cursive handwriting may differ from Davison only by a dot which may or may not appear over the “I”. Some Mackintosh documents records a family of Deans in 1703 who were otherwise called Davidson.
The original Gaelic Dai in its vocative case Dhai can, because of the peculiarities of Gaelic pronunciation give rise to Kay or even Mackay...
It seems likely that Davidson in common with some other names, even some of Highland origin such as Farquharson, came into use as a surname in its English form although it may also have arisen as translation from the Gaelic.
Our early Clan Records compiled by Flora Davidson show ... Day & Dey in Aberdeenshire... spelling is variable and often dependent on the whim of the scribe on a particular day, especially when the person being recorded was illiterate as most were in earlier centuries.

*** Note 3: There is much confusion about the meaning of and the use of "Mac" among the Gaelic peoples of the world. In truth, the Gaels used the "Mac" prefix simply to indicate that the person was the "son of" someone, such as in John MacDye was John, the son of Dye. This prefix can be found in many different forms including Mac, Mc, Ma, and even, M'. The most often heard myth is that the Scots always use the "Mac" form while the Irish always use the "Mc" form. This just isn't so. The reality is that Mac, Mc, Ma, and M' were frequently used interchangeably, depending on the whims of the person doing the documenting, what period in history we're discussing and where in the Celtic world is being considered.