

# *Methods for Identifying German Origins of American Immigrants*

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

All of us with German ancestry will eventually reach the stage of our research where we need to cross the Atlantic. Further research within European resources and repositories is nearly impossible unless we know the town of origin of our German-speaking ancestor. Many of us are fooled by American resources that show our ancestor born in “Germany,” only to find out they originated from Switzerland or France. Our German-speaking ancestors inhabited European lands far different than the Germany we know today. A basic knowledge of history and geography is vital to the German genealogist.

## **HISTORY:**

Germans immigrants started coming to the shore of America as early as 1608 when glassmakers and carpenters arrived at the Jamestown settlement in Virginia. German families were integrated into Dutch New Netherlands. The most celebrated German immigrants of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were the thirty-three settlers from Krefeld, Germany, who arrived with Daniel Pastorius in 1683 and founded Germantown, Pennsylvania.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw an enormous influx of German immigration to America with the 1709 Palatine immigration to New York via England and the subsequent swelling tide to Pennsylvania between 1715 and 1775, with it’s peak year being 1749. Groups that have gained lesser notoriety include the emigrants to the Germanna Settlements in Virginia in 1714 and 1717, the Salzburgers to Georgia in 1731, the Germans to Broad Bay, MA, in the 1740s and 1750s and the Hessian soldiers hired by Britain to fight in the war who remained after 1783. A quarter of a million Germans resided in the United States at the time of the American Revolution with nearly half of them in Pennsylvania. By the 1790 census, almost 10% of the population was German. Numbers vary, but it is estimated that nearly 85,000 German immigrants arrived to this country prior to the Revolution.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century wave of German immigration dwarfed the one preceding it, bringing nearly five million more Germans into the United States. Immigration begun in earnest around 1815 after the end of the Napoleonic era, and grew with the crop failures of 1816-1817. Immigration streams steadied, but rose significantly during the middle part of the century. This emigration favored the larger cities and the Midwest. Cities with predominant German populations included Chicago, Detroit, New York, Baltimore, Louisville, St. Louis, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Hoboken, Dubuque, Davenport, Fort Wayne and Richmond. This steady arrival of Germans did not slow until World War I, with New York being the primary port of entry. Galveston, Texas, as well as other parts of the Deep South saw German immigrant arrivals swell from the port of New Orleans.

Germans comprise the largest ethnic group of origin for Americans today. It is no wonder as genealogists most of us struggle with identifying their origins on the other side of the pond! The lecture today will concentrate on research tactics designed to find the town of origin in Europe of your Germanic ancestor. All of the techniques will have their strengths and weaknesses depending on several factors, among them being: (1) port of departure; (2) port of arrival; (3) time period of immigration; (4) religious affiliation; and (5) availability of European records.

### **EIGHTEENTH CENTURY:**

The tools utilized for finding place of origin will differ for the time period in which your ancestor arrived into this country. Geographically, the bulk of the immigrants that came to our shores between 1709 and 1775 were from southwest Germany, especially the Pfalz, Württemberg, Hesse, and the Elsaß-Lothringen area.

Although the first wave of immigrations is comprised of a significantly fewer individuals, it has been more significantly researched. A literature search is always in order to see if the place of origin has been identified for the person in question, or anyone else who intimately associated with him or her in this country.

Authors whose works MUST be consulted are Annette Kunselman Burgert, Werner Hacker, Henry Z. Jones, Brigitte Burkett, Friedrich Krebs, Strassburger and Hinke, and Don Yoder, Ella Grieg, and many, many others.

### **NINETEENTH CENTURY:**

This wave brought over 5 million Germans to our shore from all over the German-speaking lands of Europe. Time period no longer provides a localization tool. One of the largest works available as a literature search is Glazier and Filby's seventy-four volumes of *Germans to America* that covers ship lists from 1840 to 1897. Its strengths and weaknesses will be discussed.

### **AMERICAN RECORDS:**

Passenger lists and naturalization records will be discussed as they pertain to identifying place of origin, but they will not be discussed in detail. This may sound obvious, but I am always surprised at the level of frustration from people trying to find their European connection without doing their American homework. This is just a matter of practicing efficient methodology skills and conducting thorough research. German origins can be found in Bibles, vital certificates, deeds, journals, letters, obituaries, military records, wills and a plethora of family memorabilia. Do NOT leave any stone unturned. Be broad in your research and include known relatives of your ancestor if they too were immigrants. Just because you cannot find specifics on your great-grandfather Friedrich, does not mean you will not hit the jackpot researching his sister Dorothea. Do "BIG PICTURE" research!

### **GERMAN-AMERICAN RECORDS:**

We still have not crossed the ocean, but we can review records of our German ancestors that are more German in origin but can be found in the United States. The one that is the most rewarding and the most under-utilized is American church records. Although on this continent's soil, they still retain a very German flavor. Religion was important to our immigrant ancestor – it retained its “German-ness” and it grouped friends, families and other immigrants from similar areas. Per Roger Minert, the probability that German places of origin can be found in pre-1900 church records reaches a whopping 70%. This far surpassed even the sources we assume will have this data, namely passenger lists and naturalization papers.

Another German-American resource that is grossly underutilized is German-language newspapers. Many (but not all) can be found using Chronicling America's “*US Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present*” at [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

### **GERMAN RESOURCES:**

Most American genealogists are afraid of the language barrier, and that keeps them from accessing wonderful German websites, books, periodicals, and databases. Some of them are listed below.

### **ONLINE RESOURCES:**

- **USCIS Genealogy Program:** <http://www.uscis.gov/historyandgenealogy>: simple a “must do” for any ancestor naturalized (*not arrived*) after 1906!
- **German Emigration Bibliography:** A good resource for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century arrivals at [http://www.genealoger.com/german/ger\\_emigration\\_records.htm](http://www.genealoger.com/german/ger_emigration_records.htm)
- **GenWiki** has both an English and German starting portal at [http://wiki-en.genealogy.net/Main\\_Page](http://wiki-en.genealogy.net/Main_Page) and <http://compgen.genealogy.net>. Many useful databases, including user-submitted trees from German genealogists.
- Never underestimate the power of periodicals! A great number of German periodicals have been indexed at *GenWiki* under “**Familienkundlichen Literaturdatenbank**” at <http://famlit.genealogy.net/fkld/maske.pl>.
- **Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde** (Institute for Palatinate History and Folklife Studies) <http://www.pfalzgeschichte.de/english/>. Approximately 600,000 emigrants from the Pfalz appear in their card file from a number of sources. This is just one example of regional historical and or genealogical institutes in Germany that can assist in locating place of origin. Genealogical societies in Germany are just as important as the county and state societies we are familiar with in the United States. A list of regional societies can be found at <http://wiki-en.genealogy.net/Portal:Societies>.
- **Ortssippenbücher/Familienbücher:** The Family History Library has an excellent collection of these on open stacks. Some are appearing online at <http://www.online-ofb.de/>. A list can also be found at <http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Kategorie:Ortsfamilienbuch> or by searching for specific town names at the German GenWiki site.

- German telephone directories and subsequent **German Surname Maps**: <http://christoph.stoepel.net/geogen>. For surnames that are unique or geographically limited, even resources based on current data can yield important clues for finding place of origin. Combined with Kevan M. Hansen's *Map Guides to German Parish Records*, this will often lead to locating your ancestor's ancestral town. A previous version of this site with much more user-friendly graphics and colors is at <http://christoph.stoepel.net/ViewSoftware.aspx?id=0200>
- **Ahnenforschungen: Der Katalog** (Genealogy: The Catalog). Think of it as Cyndi's List for German genealogy, but what can help the most in locating place of origin is the portal to "Immigration" links and webpages at <http://ahnenforschungen.de/genlink/Auswanderungen>
- Identify and locate **German-language newspapers** by searching the "*US Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present*" at **Chronicling America** <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>

### **BIG PICTURE RESEARCH:**

This is a favorite phrase of mine, and anyone who has heard me lecture will know what I mean by this. Our ancestors did NOT live in a bubble. They interacted with friends, relatives, business associates and extended family. Immigrants wrote home often and encouraged friends and relatives to join them. Members of neighboring families in Germany often intermarried for several generations in the America. Analyze not only the immigrant in question but his surroundings as well.

What was his religion? What church did he attend? Who sponsored the baptisms of his children? Who were the spouses of his children? Who sponsored his grandchildren's baptisms?

Was he living amongst several immigrants who arrived at similar times? Can we document the origins of a neighbor or friend more easily? Can we recreate a neighborhood from tax lists? If published passenger lists exist, how many people on the same ship lived close to the ancestor in question?

Does the geographic location of the ancestor's settlement and the time period in which he settled give more clues to the location of his European homeland? What do you know of the local history?

Is the name unique? Can you narrow it down to a small geographical area? What is available at the FHL in Salt Lake City? Is it feasible to start with one probable parish and work your way outward? This is surprisingly easier than it sounds.