Researching German Ancestors

Class 1: Getting Started

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As with many European countries, effective research in Germany requires that you know more than just the country that the family came from. In Germany, it is necessary to know the town at least, as many of the records were recorded by local bürgermeisters, priests, ministers, or police officials. It is always important to exhaust all records in the country in which the ancestor settled to see what they may hold regarding origins.

Waves of Immigration

Since there were ships bringing colonists to the American Colonies, there have been Germans immigrating. Passenger lists are often the first resource that people aim for, but such a record may not exist, or the search for it may be futile. The information needed to research in Germany may not have been recorded on the list at the time an ancestor immigrated. Studying the major waves of immigration may assist you in locating the origins of your ancestor.

Knowing when an ancestor emigrated from Germany and where they settled after arrival can help identify a possible region of origin in Germany. There are also some online and published resources that can help: for example, many emigration lists have been digitized by Ancestry.com and should be consulted.

Some of the major waves of German immigration include:

- **1683-1820:** Emigrated due to economic hardship, religious persecutions, and the Thirty Years' War. Many were Protestants primarily from the regions of the Rheinland, Westfalen, Hessen, Baden, Württemberg, and Elsaß-Lothringen.
- **1820-1871:** Emigrated due to economic hardships (including unemployment and crop failures), the avoidance of military service, and the government encouraging its poor to emigrate.
- **1871-1914:** Major increase in emigration as a result of affordability and continued economic and political programs in Germany. Large numbers from the eastern provinces of Preußen. Emigrants began to include Polish and Jewish people.
- **1914-1945:** Number of German immigrants significantly reduced as a result of the U.S. quota system instituted in 1924. Emigrants included political dissenters, Jews, and those unhappy with post-WWI developments.

The 1600s-1700s

Though there were no passenger lists during this period, many of the immigrants in this era, especially up until the American Revolutionary War, can be found on other town lists. Published resources can be essential to your research in this period. The major influx of Germans, especially

to the colony of Pennsylvania, was making some individuals nervous. As a result, those Germans who disembarked at Philadelphia were required to take an "oath of allegiance" to the British monarch.

The 1800s
As the United States began to grow and expand its boundaries, the enticements for immigrants increased. Newly created territories and states advertised abroad and, with the exception of the period during the U.S. Civil War, the number of immigrant arrivals increased each year.

Post-1906
The year 1906 is the year when the courts began to forward copies of naturalizations to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This year, while important, often causes genealogists to forsake repositories because they assume the records they want won't be there.

Tip: Create a timeline of your ancestor's migration pattern in America.

Identifying the Immigrant
When it comes to family history, the most important rule is to always work from the known to the unknown. When you know that there *is* an immigrant it's is often tempting to jump immediately to the person you assume is the immigrant. Instead, it's important to systematically work through the generations, using census records, vital records, cemeteries, probate records, deeds, newspapers, and church records.

Census Records
Census records hold much more information than just the name and age of your ancestors. It is important to look at each of the columns to see what they are telling you, especially as you get close to your immigrant ancestor.

- **1820, 1830:** Enumerated persons within the household who were foreigners, not naturalized (persons not named)
- **1850,1860:** Listed birthplace (may simply say "Germany")
- **1870:** Listed birthplace (usually gives name of region/kingdom for immigrant), noted if parents were foreign born
- **1880:** Listed birthplace (usually gives name of region/kingdom for immigrant), noted birthplace of parents
- **1890:** destroyed by fire
- **1900:** Listed birthplace (usually states "Germany"), noted birthplace of parents, plus year of immigration; number of years in the U.S.; status of naturalization
- **1910:** Birthplace; birthplace of parents (may include language spoken); year of immigration; whether naturalized or alien
- **1920:** Birthplace; birthplace of parents; person's and parents' native tongue, year of immigration, naturalization status, and year of naturalization

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- **1930:** Birthplace, birthplace of parents; person's and parents' native tongue, year of immigration, and naturalization status
- **1940:** Birthplace; status of naturalization; parents' birthplace and native tongue

Tip: The native tongue spoken could be a clue as to where in the Germany a family originated.

Newspapers

Foreign language newspapers published in U.S. towns, cities, and counties where Germans congregated can hold clues to the towns in Germany from where the inhabitants had emigrated. The news in these newspapers often deals with the families back in the old country or mentions the travel of individuals back to the home country for a visit. Such information may not be considered newsworthy in the English papers of the area.

Church Records

When the Germans immigrated to the United States, they often retained their German language in their church records, as well as recording information in the same manner as in their hometown churches in Germany. As such, it is possible that places of origin may exist in these records for the immigrant ancestors. At the very least, knowing their denomination may assist in understanding where they originated—especially for the earlier arrivals.

Finding Your Ancestor's Origins

The more recent your ancestor immigrated to the United States the easier it is to identify his or her place of origin. As passenger lists improved, they went from asking for country to identifying last residence and ultimately listing place of birth. Sadly, this was not always the case. Those passenger lists that date before approximately 1892 list only the country of origin.

If your ancestor came in the earlier waves of immigration, you will want to concentrate on where they settled and see if you can find information in church records or at the least naturalization records that identify the kingdom or duchy from which they were denouncing their allegiance. You will also want to look at compiled resources, such as the Palatine research done by Henry Z. Jones for those who settled in the Mid-Atlantic States:

- *The Palatine Families of New York: A Study of the German Immigrants Who Arrived in Colonia New York in 1710*
- *More Palatine Families: Some Immigrants to the Middle Colonies 1717-1776*
- *Even More Palatine Families: 18th Century Immigrants to the American Colonies and Their German, Swiss and Austrian Origins*

To effectively search in Germany, it becomes necessary to know the town, if not the parish, from which the family originated. In many instances, the most difficult step in your German research will be identifying this town of origin. However, as more and more records come online and are searchable, this is becoming slightly easier.

Tip: Before you can search many of these databases you will need to know a spouse (if married in Germany) or the names of the parents.

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The use of surname dictionaries, such as Hans Bahlow's *Deutsches Namenlexikon* (Frankfurt (am Main): Suhrkamp, 1985) or its translated alternative, Edda Gentry's *Dictionary of German Names by Hans Bahlow* (Madison, Wisconsin: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993) can help.

Geographic Implications of Unification

Germany as a country has gone through a variety of border changes, and for much of the period in question when researching of our ancestors it was not a country as it is today. Unification of the German Empire in 1871 is what many individuals work with but in fact, there are four major periods that need to be considered in regard to the lands of the German people.

- **Pre-1871:** Kingdoms, duchies, and other smaller principalities: It was the fighting amongst these kingdoms and duchies that caused many emigrants to leave the area.
- **1871-1918:** German Empire: This is the Germany that many researchers think of when they see Germany mentioned, but in fact it was still not a country, but a unification into a nation state that exposed cracks in the relationships of the German states.
- **1918:** Germany: At the end of World War I, the German Empire lost some of their lands to surrounding countries as part of the Treaty of Versailles. The largest section of land being given to a newly re-established Poland.
- **1945:** Post World War II Germany: At the end of World War II, Germany was once again forced to relinquish land, and with the Soviet Union an ally, some of those lands ended up behind the "iron curtain."

General Resources

When working with German records there are a number of issues that one must deal with including language, handwriting variations, boundary changes and more. There are some useful books and resources that can assist with words common in genealogical research as well as methods in working with and identifying records and repositories.

Guides
- *Beginner's Guide to Germanic Genealogy* by Lois Hemmeter Edwards
- *In Search of Your German Roots* by Angus Baxter
- *Finding Your German Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide* by Kevan M. Hansen
- FamilySearch Wiki – German Genealogy
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Genealogy
- Meyers Gazetteer www.meyersgaz.org

Dictionaries and Word Lists
- *Deutsches Namenlexikon: Familien-u. Vornamen nach Ursprung u. Sinn erklãrt* by Hans Bahlow
- *Dictionary of German Names* by Hans Bahlow, trans. By Edda Gentry
- *German-English Genealogical Dictionary* by Ernest Thode

- FamilySearch Wiki – German Word List
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German_Genealogical_Word_List
- FamilySearch Wiki – Germany Letter Writing Guide
  https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German_Letter_Writing_Guide
- *The German Research Companion* by Shirley J. Riemer, Roger P. Minert, and Jennifer A. Anderson