Researching German Ancestors

Class 2: Basics of German Language and Script

Rhonda R. McClure, Senior Genealogist

THE BRUE FAMILY LEARNING CENTER

American Ancestors
A National Center for Family History, Heritage & Culture

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Meet today's presenter

Rhonda R. McClure

Senior Genealogist

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OVERVIEW

- **Presentation** (60 mins.)
  - Understanding basic concepts of the German language
  - Key words for genealogists
  - Sütterlin and Kurrentschrift
  - Fraktur and blackletter
- **Q&A** (30 mins.)

3

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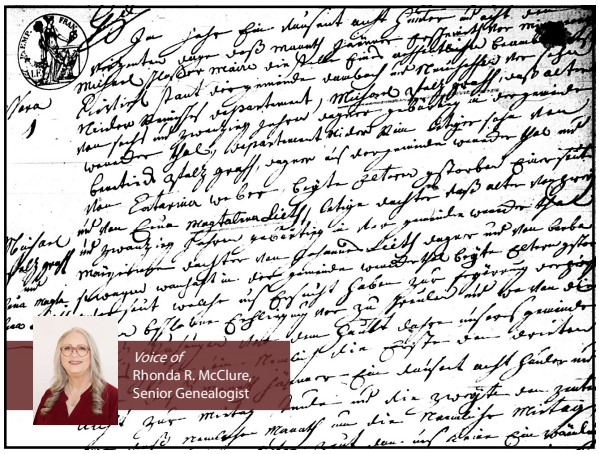

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Overview of German Language

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German Alphabet (*das Alphabet*)

- Same 26 letters as English
- Three vowels with umlauts – ä, ö, ü
  - An extra "e" can replace the umlaut – ae, oe, ue
- "Hard S"/double S/*Eszett* – ß
  - *die Straße* = the street

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The German Language (*Deutsch*)

- English is a *Germanic* language – there are many cognates (or similar words) between English and German
  - *der Mann* = man
  - *rot* = red
  - *schwimmen* = to swim (unconjugated verb)
  - There are also some "false friends" e.g. *die Art* = type, kind NOT art
- Like the English language, German has evolved over the past several centuries
- There are many German dialects based on historic regions

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German Dialects (*deutsche Mundarten*)

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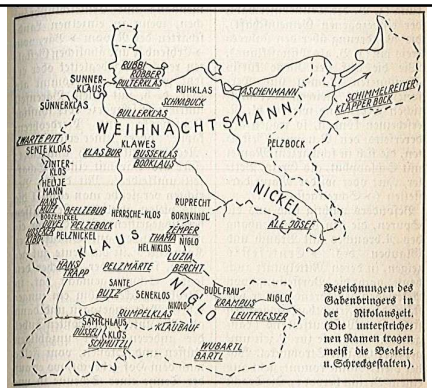

German Dialects – Santa Claus

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German Dialects

- Applies more to spoken than to written language
- *Nein* = no
  - Berlinerisch = *nee*
  - Oberösterreicherisch = *na*

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German Grammar (*Grammatik*)

- Nouns are capitalized
  - *ein Glas Milch* (a glass of milk)
- Nouns have gender
  - Three genders – *der* (m), *die* (f), *das* (n)
  - No hard and fast rule to determine the gender of a noun
- Compound words are common
  - *Militärdienst* = military service
- There are four cases, some of which alter the ending of an adjective, noun, or indefinite article (adding an –en, -ens, -er)
- Possessives can be formed by adding the –s ending as in English, but are not necessarily formed this way
- Plural forms often change the spelling of a noun
  - *ein Kuh, zwei Kühe* (one cow, two cows)

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Feminine Forms

- *-in* is a feminine suffix
  - Many surnames will take the –in suffix when applied to women
  - Many occupations for women take the –in suffix, similar to –ess in English
    - *der Musiker, die Musikerin* (the musician)
    - *der Weber, die Weberin* (the weaver)
    - *der Koch, die Kochin* (the chef)
- *-l* and *–chen* are diminutive suffixes, sometimes also used for female words, similar to –ette in English
  - *das Mädchen* (the girl) is the diminutive of *die Magd* (the maid/the maiden)

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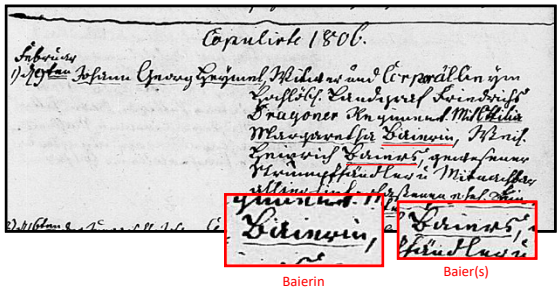

Marriage, Johann Georg Heymel and Ottilie Margarethe Baier, Fambach, 1806

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Standardization of Words

Original	Options
p	b
t	d
k	g
pf	f
z	tz
h	ch
D	T
f	v or w
s	z or sch
x	ks or cks
th (usually at end of word)	h may be omitted

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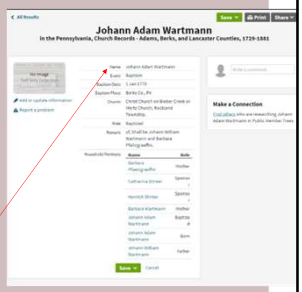
Why try to read the originals?

- Transcriptions can have errors
- Transcriptions often do not have all the details contained in the original



Baptism of Johann Adam Wartmann
Father Johann William Wartmann
Mother Barbara Pfaetzgraeffin

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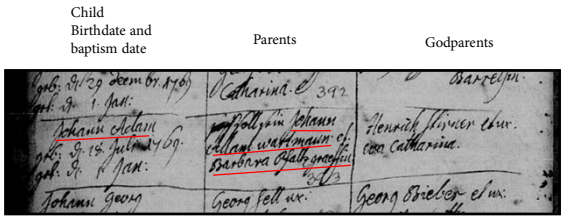

Baptism, Johann Adam Wartmann, Christ Church, Rockland, PA, 1770 [FHL Film 21107]

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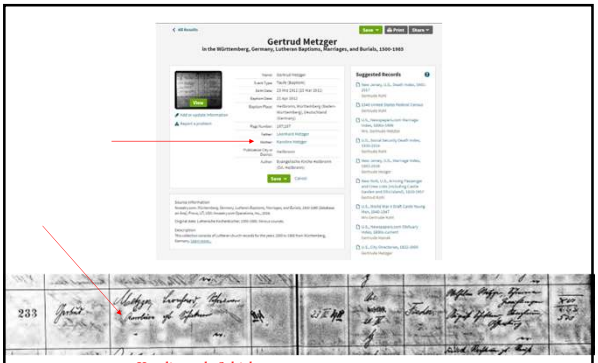

Baptism, Gertrude Metzger, Heilbronn, 1912

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Key Words

- You can understand and translate basic records without speaking the language
- Key record types include *Kirchenbücher* (church books such as baptism, marriage, and burial), civil registration records, and *Familienregister* (family register books)
- The same set of basic vocabulary will get you through all of these record types

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Key Words: Relationships

English	German
Mother	die Mutter
Father	der Vater
Male/Female	männlich/weiblich
Parents	die Eltern
Legitimate/Illegitimate	ehelich/unehelich
Daughter	die Tochter/das Töchterlein
Son	der Sohn/Sohnlein
Child	das Kind
Wife	die Frau, die Ehefrau, die Gattin, die Ehegattin, die Weib
Husband	der Mann, der Ehemann, der Gatte, die Ehegatte
Boy	der Jung, der Knabe, der Bube
Girl	das Mädchen, das Mädl
Widow/Widower	die Wittwe, die Wittib/der Wittwer, der Wittiber
Godparent	der Pate, der Taufpate

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Key Words: Life Events

English	German
Born	geboren
Birth (n.)	die Geburt
Baptized	getauft
Baptise (v.)	taufen
Baptism (n.)	die Taufe
Confirmation	die Konfirmation, die Firmung
Married	getraut, verheiratet, copuliert
Marry (v.)	trauen, heiraten, ehelichen
Died	gestorben
Die (v.)	sterben
Death	der Tod
Buried	begraben
Bury (n.)	die Beerdigung, die Bestattung, das Begräbnis

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Key Words: Time

English	German
Day	der Tag
Month	das Monat
Year	die Jahr
Age	das Alter
Years old	Jahre Alt
Morning	die Morgen, der Vormittag
Afternoon	der Nachmittag
Night	die Nacht
O'clock	Uhr

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Key Words: Months of the Year

English	German
January	Januar, Jänner, Hartung, Jenner
February	Februar, Hornung
March	März, Frühlingsmonat
April	April, Ostermonat, Osteren
May	Mai, Wonnemonat, Blütemonat
June	Juni, Brachmonat
July	Juli, Heuert, Heumonat, Heuet
August	August, Erntemonat, Hitzmonat
September	September, Fruchtmonat, Herbstmonat, Herpsten, 7ber, 7bris
October	Oktober, Weinmonat, 8ber, 8bris
November	November, Wintermonat, 9ber, 9bris
December	Dezember, Christmonat, 10ber, 10bris, Xber, Xbris

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Tip:

Use online German-word lists to aid in transcription and translation

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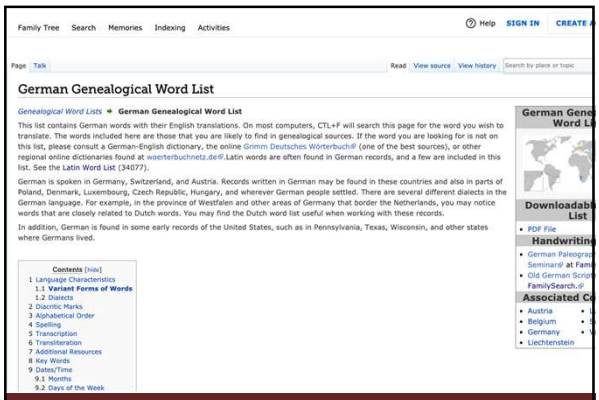

www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German_Genealogical_Word_List

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sites.rootsweb.com/~romban/misc/germanjobs.html

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https://pommerscher.org/cpage.php?pt=176

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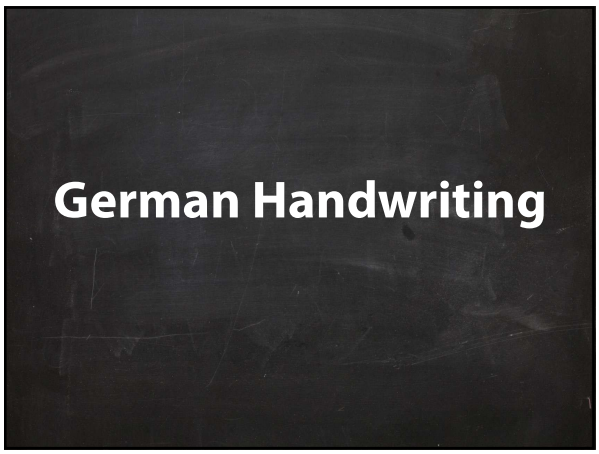

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Handwriting Types

- Latin script
  - Same alphabet, same letter-forms as English script
  - Used when church records were written in Latin
  - Used for titles/headings/names in records
- *Kurrentschrift/Sütterlin/*German script/Gothic script
  - "Running" or cursive writing
  - Same alphabet, different letter-forms
  - Used up to ca. mid-20th century
  - *Kurrent* is the general term, *Sütterlin* was a specific form taught from 1915-1941

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Kurrent/Sütterlin for Genealogists

- Where to find it?
  - Church books (esp. Lutheran)
  - Civil registration
  - Military service papers
  - Letters
  - Basically, any handwritten document written in German before about 1941!

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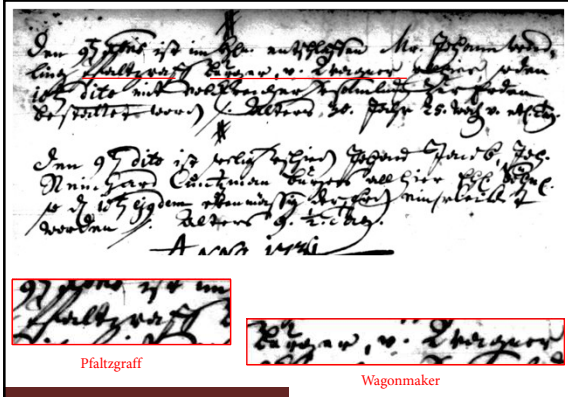

Pfaltzgraff

Wagonmaker

Death, ev. Lut. Kirche, Langensoultzbach

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The Alphabet in *Kurrent*

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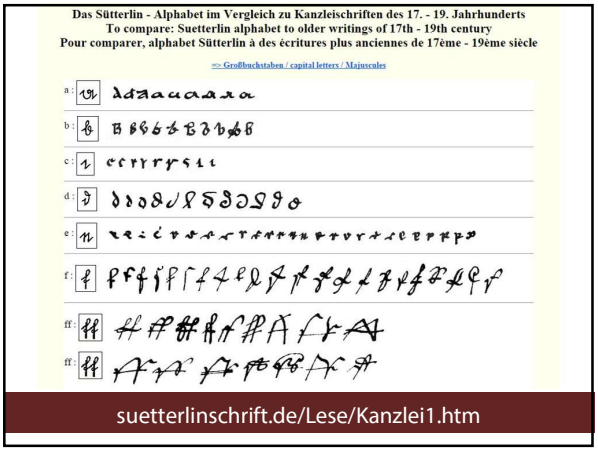
Das Sütterlin - Alphabet im Vergleich zu Kanzleischriften des 17. - 19. Jahrhunderts
To compare: Suetterlin alphabet to older writings of 17th - 19th century
Pour comparer, alphabet Sütterlin à des écritures plus anciennes de 17ème - 19ème siècle



suetterlinschrift.de/Lese/Kanzlei1.htm

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Tip:
Handwriting is individual

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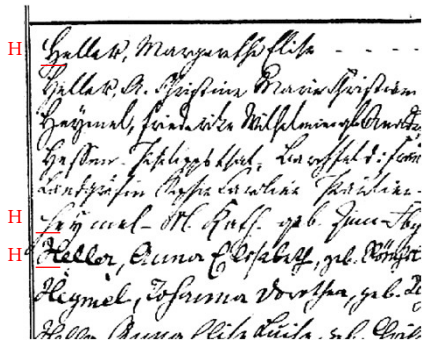

Church book index – letter "H"

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Easily Confused Letters

Lowercase Letters		Capital Letters	
• F and S	f und ſ	• M and N	M und N
• M and N	m und n	• D and V	D und V
• R and V	r und v	• B and L	B und L
• G and Y	g und y	• C and L	C und L
• E and R	e und r	• F and J	F und J

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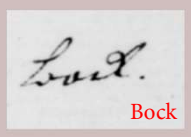
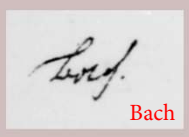
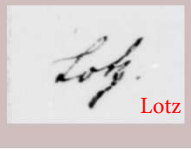
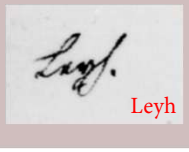
Surname Examples


Bock


Bach


Lotz


Leyh

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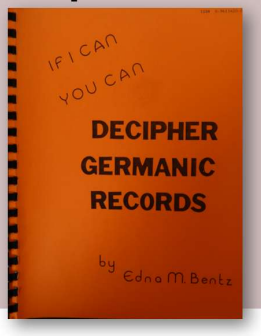
Old German Script - Guides

- *If I Can, You Can Decipher German Records* (1982) by Edna M. Bentz



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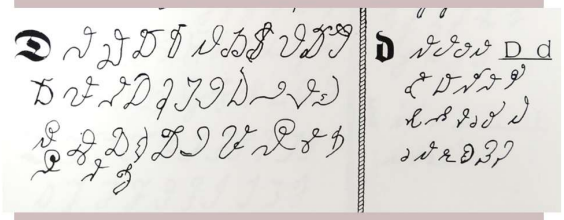
Old German Script - Guides



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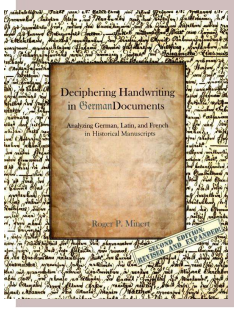
Old German Script - Guides



- *Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents* by Roger P. Minert (2nd ed., 2013)

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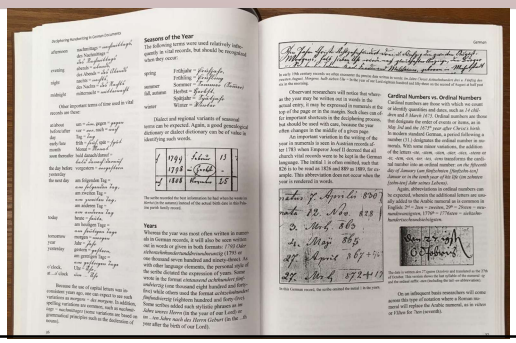
Old German Script - Guides



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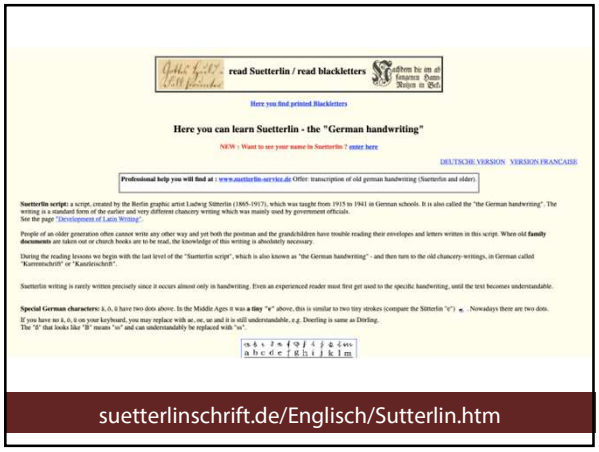

suetterlinschrift.de/Englisch/Sutterlin.htm

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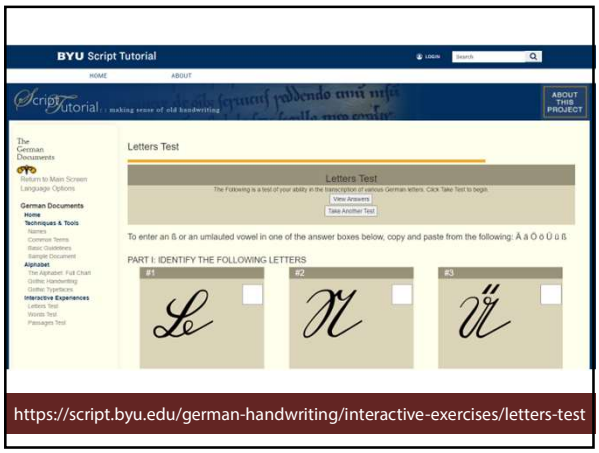
kurrent-lernen-muecke.de/lehrgang.php

45



https://script.byu.edu/german-handwriting/interactive-exercises/letters-test

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Tip:
Practice writing words in German script

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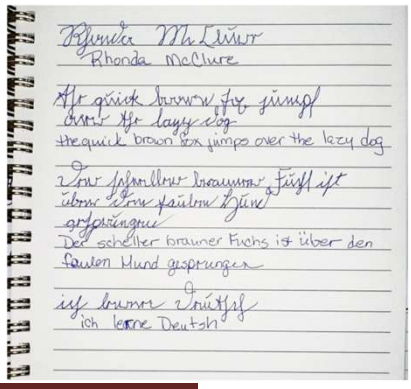

Handwriting practice page

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deutsche-handschrift.de/adsschreiben.php#schriftfeld

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Deciphering German Script

- Understanding key words and where they are likely to be mentioned in a record helps you catch on to an individual's specific handwriting style
- Become familiar with letters by studying known words like given names and town names, as you will then be more easily able to decipher unknown words

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Tip:
Practice, practice, practice!

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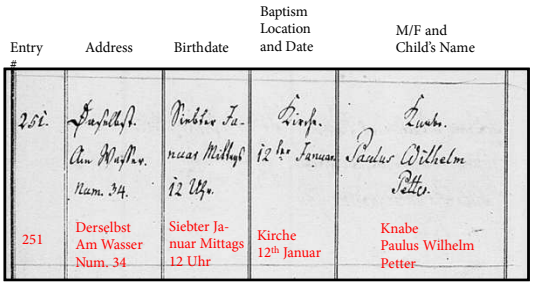

Entry #	Address	Birthdate	Baptism Location and Date	M/F and Child's Name
251	Derselbst Am Wasser Num. 34	Siebter Januar Mittags 12 Uhr	Kirche 12th Januar	Knabe Paulus Wilhelm Petter
	The same place Am Wasser #34	Seventh January 12:00 in the afternoon	Church 12th January	Boy Paulus Wilhelm Petter

Baptism, Paulus Wilhelm Petter, Fambach, 1839

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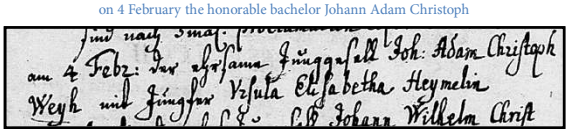

am 4 Febr. der ehrsame Junggesell Joh. Adam Christoph

on 4 February the honorable bachelor Johann Adam Christoph

Weyh mit Jungfer Ursula Elisabetha Heymelin

Weyh with maiden Ursula Elisabetha Heymelin

Marriage, Johann Adam Christoph Weyh and Ursula Elisabetha Heymelin, Fambach, 1739

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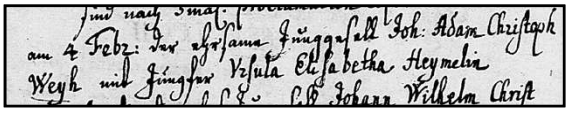

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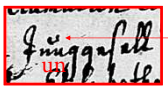

Marriage, Johann Adam Christoph Weyh and Ursula Elisabetha Heymelin, Fambach, 1739

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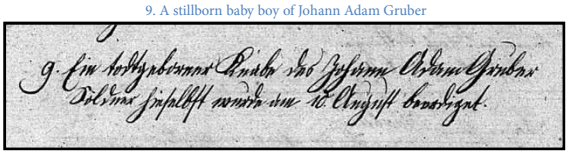
9. Ein todtgeborener Knabe der Johann Adam Gruber

9. A stillborn baby boy of Johann Adam Gruber



Söldner hieselbst wurde am 10. August beerdiget

mercenary soldier of this place was buried on the 10th of August

Burial, Unnamed Child, Möttingen, 1838

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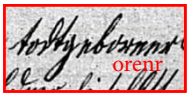

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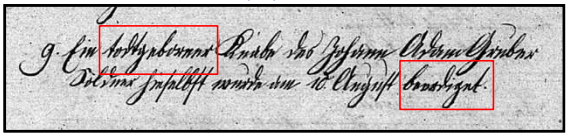

Söldner hieselbst wurde am 10. August beerdiget

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Burial, Unnamed Child, Möttingen, 1838

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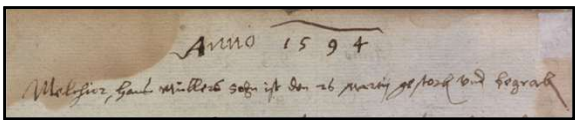
Anno 1594

Year 1594



Melchior, Hans Müllers Sohn ist den 26 Martÿ gestorb und begrab

Melchior, son of Hans Müller, died and was buried on March 26th

Burial, Melchior Müller, Alsenz, 1594

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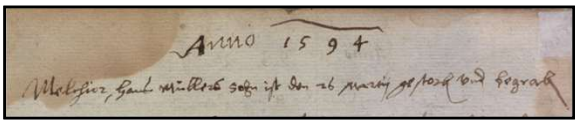
Anno 1594

Year 1594



Melchior, Hans Müllers Sohn ist den 26 Martÿ gestorb und begrab

Melchior, son of Hans Müller, died and was buried on March 26th

Burial, Melchior Müller, Alsenz, 1594

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Tip:

Even records written in German will include the occasional Latin word/phrase

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Use what you know to help you translate

- Look for clues
  - What letters or words do you recognize?
- Use approximate spellings to search for possible words in the word list or dictionary

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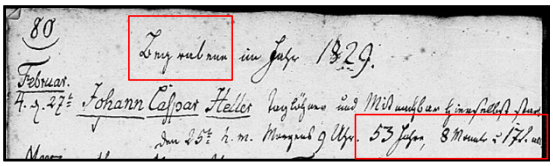
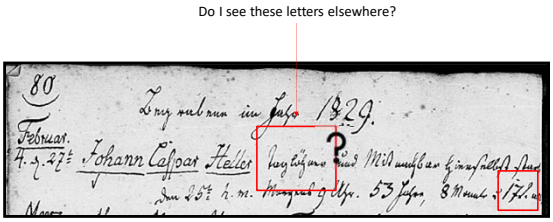


Burial, Johann Caspar Heller, Fambach, 1829

61



Do I see these letters elsewhere?

Years Months Days

Jahre Monate Tage

Burial, Johann Caspar Heller, Fambach, 1829

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German	English
T.d. = Tochter des, der	daughter of
T.v. = Tochter von	daughter of
Tabelle	index, table
Tag	day
Tagelöhner	day laborer
Tagner	day laborer
Tal, Thal	valley
Tante	aunt
Tapazier	(wall)paper hanger
Tapeten	wallpaper, hangings
Taufe	baptism
taufen	to baptize
Taufpaten	godparents
Taufschein	baptismal certificate
tausend	thousand
Testament	will
Tischler	cabinetmaker, furniture maker
Tochter	daughter
Töchterchen	young daughter
Töchterlein	young daughter
Tochtermann	son-in-law
Tod	death
Todesart	manner of death
Töpfer	potter
tot	dead
Totengräber	grave digger

familysearch.org/wiki/en/German_Genealogical_Word_List#T

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Tip:
Most men will have their occupation near their name.

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Fraktur and German Gothic Print

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Gothic Print

- Standard text style in Germany from about the 9th century up to 1941
  - A style of handwriting before moveable type was invented
  - Also common in the Czech Republic and Scandinavia
- Also known as "blackletter" or *Fraktur*
- A few variations

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Gothic Print for Genealogists

- Where to find it?
  - Headings in church books and military records
  - Newspapers, books, gazetteers, printed material before about 1941
  - Gravestones

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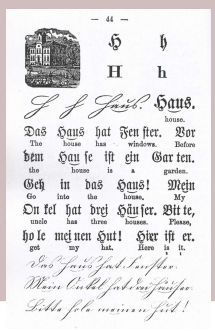
Gothic Print/Fraktur - Guides

- Handwriting Guide – German Gothic
  - https://feefhs.org/sites/default/files/guide/german-gothic.pdf
- Deciphering Death Notices in German Newspapers (pp. 2-9)
  - https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/01-2010.pdf



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The Alphabet in Fraktur

*plus letters with umlauts!

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Easily Confused Letters

Lowercase Letters

- F and K
- F and S
- R and X
- SZ and ß

Capital Letters

- A and U
- B and V
- F and J
- I and J

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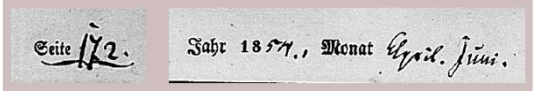
Heading Examples



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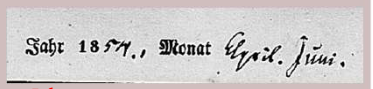
Heading Examples

Seite

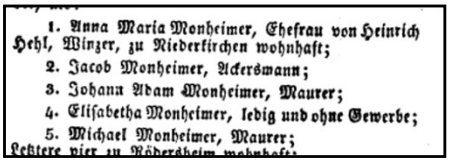


Jahr Monat

Männlich

Weiblich

73



1. Anna Maria Monheimer, Ehefrau von Heinrich Hehl, Winzer, zu Niederkirchen wohnhaft;
2. Jacob Monheimer, Ackersmann;
3. Johann Adam Monheimer, Maurer;
4. Elisabetha Monheimer, ledig und ohne Gewerbe;
5. Michael Monheimer, Maurer;

Letztere vier zu Röderheim wohnhaft;

List of heirs from estate auction notice, *Amts- und Intelligenzblatt des Königlich Bayerischen Rheinkreises*, 1837

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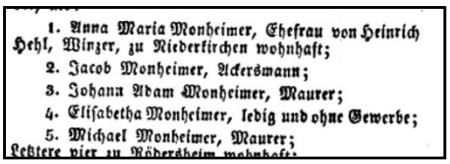

1. Anna Maria Monheimer, Ehefrau von Heinrich Hehl, Winzer, zu Niederkirchen wohnhaft;
2. Jacob Monheimer, Ackersmann;
3. Johann Adam Monheimer, Maurer;
4. Elisabetha Monheimer, ledig und ohne Gewerbe;
5. Michael Monheimer, Maurer;

Letztere vier zu Röderheim wohnhaft;

1. Anna Maria Monheimer, Ehefrau von Heinrich Hehl, Winzer, zu Niederkirchen wohnhaft;
2. Jacob Monheimer, Ackersmann;
3. Johann Adam Monheimer, Maurer;
4. Elisabetha Monheimer, ledig und ohne Gewerbe;
5. Michael Monheimer, Maurer;

1. Anna Maria Monheimer, wife of Heinrich Hehl, vintner, resident of Niederkirchen;
2. Jacob Monheimer, plowman;
3. Johann Adam Monheimer, bricklayer;
4. Elisabetha Monheimer, single and unemployed;
5. Michael Monheimer, bricklayer;

List of heirs from estate auction notice, *Amts- und Intelligenzblatt des Königlich Bayerischen Rheinkreises*, 1837

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Gravestone, 1843, New Hanover, PA

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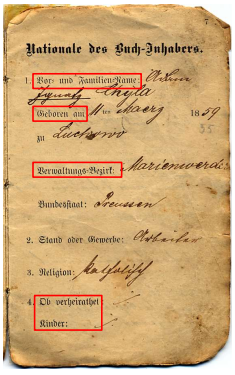

Military pass book page with questions regarding the identity of the service member

Military Pass Book, Adam Ignatz Chyla, 1879

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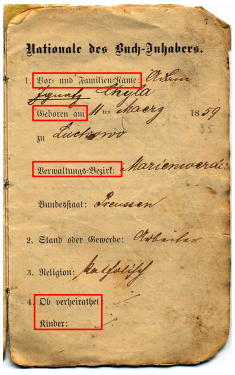

Vor- und Familien-Name: First and family name:

Geboren am Born on

Verwaltungs-Bezirk: Administration district:

Ob verheiratet Whether married

Kinder: Children:

Military Pass Book, Adam Ignatz Chyla, 1879

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Numbers and Abbreviations

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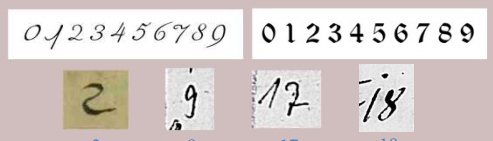
Numerals

- Arabic numerals are used in both *Kurrent* and *Fraktur*
- Some variations in how these numerals are written



2 9 17 18

80

Dates

- German (and most European) dates are written DAY/MONTH/YEAR
- Starting with 21, German numbers are formed as "ones place" + "tens place"
  - *Einundzwanzig* = one and twenty = 21
  - *Neunzehnhundert sechsundzwanzig* = nineteen hundred twenty-six = 1926
- The *–ten* ending in German is equivalent to *–th* ending in English
  - Some irregular numbers, e.g. *eins* (one) becomes *erst* (first)
  - Seven → seventh, as in "on the seventh of April"
  - *Sieben* → *siebten*, as in "*am Siebten April*"
  - A period after the numeral is the abbreviation for this ending → "*7. April*"
- Sometimes Roman numerals are used in headers

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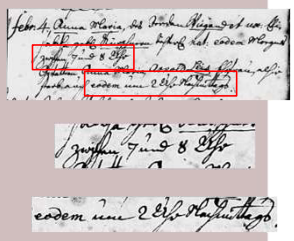
Time

- Many church records include exact time of birth, baptism, death, or burial (and to a lesser extent, marriage)
- The word *Uhr* (hour) is used to also mean "o'clock"
  - *7 Uhr Morgens* = 7:00 am
  - *gegen, um* (about)
  - *zwischen* (between)



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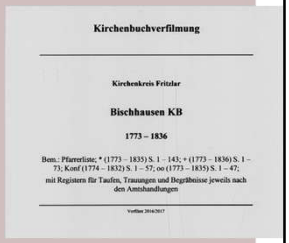
Common Abbreviations

- * birth
- ~ baptism
- oo, ∞ marriage
- + death
- *geb.* = *geboren* (born), nee (maiden name)
- *et. ux.* (Latin) = and wife
- *ehel.* = *ehelich* (legitimate)


Kirchenbuchverfilmung

Kirchenkreis Fritzlar

Bischhausen KB

1773 – 1836

Bem.: Pfarrerliste; * (1773 – 1835) S. 1 – 143; + (1773 – 1836) S. 1 – 73; Konf (1774 – 1832) S. 1 – 57; oo (1773 – 1835) S. 1 – 47; mit Registern für Taufen, Trauungen und Begräbnisse jeweils nach den Amtshandlungen

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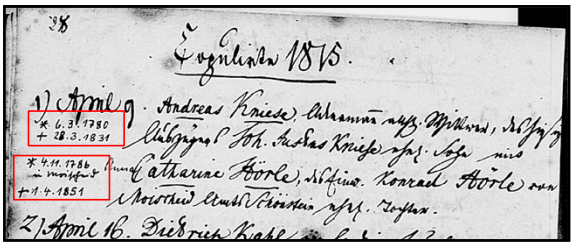

Andreas Kniese
b. 6 March 1780
m. 9 April 1815
d. 28 March 1831

Anna Catharine Hörle
b. 4 Nov 1786 in Moischeid
m. 9 April 1815
d. 1 April 1851

Marriage, Andreas Kniese and Anna Catharine Hörle, Bischhausen, 1815

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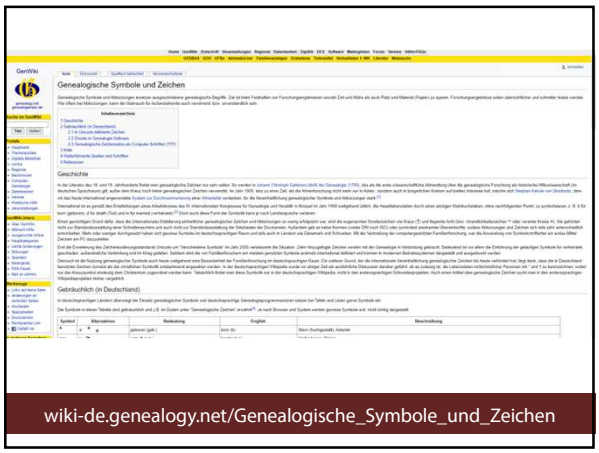

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Tip:
Install a translator extension to your web browser

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Review

- Original records can provide more details than transcriptions/translations
- Utilize all tools that you need to feel comfortable using the records – keep one or all handy:
  - German dictionary
  - Copy of the alphabet in *Kurrent* and *Fraktur*
  - Genealogical word list
  - Examples of translated records
- Practice, practice, practice!

Vielen Dank!

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Events
Join/Renew
Give
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JOIN THE LIVE BROADCAST
https://www.americanancestors.org/researching-german-ancestors-2025

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