

Germans in the Revolution: Hessians and Patriots

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Historical Context

At the time of the American Revolution (1775–1783), there was no unified Germany. The territory of present-day Germany was made up of hundreds of small sovereign or mostly-sovereign principalities, duchies, and independent free cities which were part of the declining Holy Roman Empire. As early as 1608, immigrants from these lands made their way to the American colonies. Their numbers increased in the 1700s, as minor religious groups left Europe for the promise of religious freedom [such as Anabaptist groups and Moravians] and as the British crown aided Palatine refugees in resettling in the colonies.

Germans made up the largest group of non-English speakers in the colonies before the Revolution. Most settled in the Mid-Atlantic, primarily in Pennsylvania. Aside from religious freedom, push factors for these immigrants included poor land, heavy taxation, aftereffects of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), inheritance law, and increasing urbanization. Pull factors included availability of land, employment opportunities, and advertising or word-of-mouth campaigns.

Germans were established in the colonies before the Revolution began and like their Anglo counterparts, had to choose a side to support. Some were Loyalists, siding with the British crown, many were Patriots, siding with the fledgling United States.

As fighting took off, the British turned to a standard European practice to bolster their fighting forces: hiring auxiliary troops. Many of the troops came from Hesse-Kassel, thus earning these soldiers the moniker of “The Hessians.” However, soldiers were also hired from Anhalt-Zerbst, Anspach-Beyreuth, Braunschweig (Brunswick), Hannover, Hesse-Hanau, and Waldeck. After the war, some of these soldiers remained in North America or returned home.

Finding Your Revolutionary War Ancestor

Clues that you have a Revolutionary War soldier, either a Patriot or a “Hessian” may be found in:

- Family stories
- Cemetery records or gravestones
- Lineage society memberships
- Local history books

Additionally, males born between 1715 and 1767 are good candidates for soldiers during the period of the American Revolution.

You might have a German/German-American Patriot ancestor if:

- You have a German surname with presence in the U.S. back to or before the Revolution
- You have colonial ancestors in Pennsylvania or the Mid-Atlantic, where most Germans settled

You might have a “Hessian” soldier ancestor if:

- You have a German surname with presence in the U.S. or Canada back to the Revolution, but not before
- You have 19th- or 20th-century immigrant ancestors from Anhalt-Zerbst, Anspach-Beyreuth, Braunschweig (Brunswick), Hannover, Hesse-Hanau, Hesse-Kassel, or Waldeck

Tips for German Research

Spelling was not standardized, so names may have variant spellings, particularly after an immigrant arrived in North America.

- Think phonetics and not exact spelling—e.g. Weihrauch and Weyhrauch, Reinhard and Reinhardt, Heimbach and Heinbach
- Surnames may have been Anglicized—Schmidt to Smith, Shuhmacher to Shoemaker, Stolzfuß to Proudfoot, Lymbach to Limbaugh
- Umlauts may disappear in North America—ä to ae, ö to oe, ü to ue

Germans were often baptized with two given names. In many communities, the second name was used on a day-to-day basis.

- Johann Wilhelm would go by Wilhelm, Georg Andreas would go by Andreas
- Because of this practice, it was not uncommon for brothers to have the same first name: Johann Wilhelm, Johann Georg, Johann Andreas
- Sometimes these names were flipped after immigration to North America: Johann Wilhelm, called Wilhelm in Germany, became William John in North America

For additional information and resources, see:

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Naming_Customs

<https://vitabrevis.americanancestors.org/on-surname-changes>

As German borders have changed, it is important to see the historic location of a town, not just the present-day location. Use a historic gazetteer like Meyers Gazetteer to see what state/duchy/principality it belonged to previously.

Historical Context Resources

“Building a New Nation,” The Library of Congress,

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/german/building-a-new-nation/>

Farley Grubb, *German Immigration and Servitude in America, 1709–1920*, (London: Routledge, 2011)

“German Settlement in Pennsylvania: An Overview,” The Historical Society of Pennsylvania,

https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/germanstudentreading.pdf

“Germany and the American Revolution,” Museum of the American Revolution,

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/germany-and-the-american-revolution>

John Joseph Stoudt, “The German Press in Pennsylvania in the American Revolution,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 59 no. 1 (1935):74–90

German Patriot Resources

Charles Francis Stein, “The German Battalion of the American Revolution,” *Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland* no. 36, (1975): 26–50 [Available at FamilySearch.org]

“Clues of Service: Determining the Military Service of Your Ancestors,” AmericanAncestors,

<https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/clues-service-determining-military-service-your-ancestors>

Daughters of the American Revolution Ancestor Search,

https://services.dar.org/Public/DAR_Research/search/?Tab_ID=1

David Allen Lambert, “Strategies for Tracing Revolutionary War Ancestors,” *American Ancestors Magazine* 11 no. 3 (Summer 2010):21–24 [available at AmericanAncestors.org]

“Finding Your Revolutionary War Ancestor,” FamilySearch Wiki,

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Finding_Your_Revolutionary_War_Ancessor

Fold3 [American military records including Rev War service records and pension files],

<https://www.fold3.com/collection/us-revolutionary-war-us>

Jean Nudd, “Using Revolutionary War Pension Files to Find Family Information,” *Prologue* 47 no. 2

(Summer 2015), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2015/summer/rev-war-pensions.html>

Pennsylvania Archives Series [Second series, vol. 10–11, 13–15, Third series, vol. 5–7, 23],

<https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=paarchives>

“Revolutionary War Pension Files: Tips and a Guide for the Curious,” National Park Service,
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/what-might-you-find-in-the-revolutionary-war-pension-files.htm>

“Revolutionary War Pension Records and Bounty Land Warrants,” FamilySearch Wiki,
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Revolutionary_War_Pension_Records_and_Bounty_Land_Warrants

“Revolutionary War Service Records,” FamilySearch Wiki,
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Revolutionary_War_Service_Records

Sons of the American Revolution Patriot Research System, <https://sarpatriots.sar.org/>

Southern Campaigns Revolutionary War Pension Statements & Rosters, <https://revwarapps.org/>

Hessian Resources

AmRev Hessian Mailing List [contains personal data files for soldiers researched by John Merz],
<https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~amrevhessians/military/a/amhessians.htm>

Association of Professional Genealogists Directory,
https://members.apgen.org/members/directory/search_APG.php?org_id=APG

Archion [contains field church books for Braunschweig and Hesse-Kassel], archion.de

Clifford Neal Smith, *German-American Genealogical Research Monographs* [no. 1, 2, 3, 5, 19, 28, 30, with indexes to nos. 1–21, check WorldCat.org for a library near you]

Friederike Baer, *Hessians: German Soldiers in the American Revolutionary War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022) [See <https://friederikebaer.com/> for short articles by the author]

German Auxiliaries Muster Rolls, 1776–1786 (bulk 1781-1783),
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/g/germanaux/browse/#series1>

“Hessian Soldiers,” FamilySearch Wiki, https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Hessian_Soldiers

Hessian Troops in America (HETRINA), <https://www.lagis-hessen.de/en/subjects/index/sn/hetrina>

The Hessians: Journal of the Johannes Schwalm Historical Association [search WorldCat.org for a library near you, check Facebook for association updates: <https://www.facebook.com/HessianDescendant/>]

Johannes Schwalm Historical Association, Military and Naval Microfilm Archive at Kutztown University,
<https://research.library.kutztown.edu/schwalm/>

Meyers Gazetteer, <https://www.meyersgaz.org/>