

# Germans in the Revolution

## *Hessians and Patriots*

Hallie Kirchner, 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



Hallie Kirchner  
Senior Genealogist

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## OVERVIEW

- **Presentation** (50 mins.)
  - Early German immigration
  - German participation in the American Revolution
  - Research resources
- **Q&A** (10 mins.)

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# Historical Context

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**German Immigration**

- Began as early as 1608 with the arrival of several German glassmakers and carpenters to Jamestown, VA
- In New Amsterdam as early as 1626
- 13 German Mennonite families arrived in PA in 1683
- Influx of Germans in the early 1700s, mostly religious groups, mostly to PA
- Palatine refugees sent to NY by the British crown in 1710
- The largest group of non-English speakers in America before the Revolution



Vischer map, 1690

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**German Immigration**

- Push factors
  - Poor land
  - Heavy taxation
  - Aftereffects of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648)
  - Inheritance laws
  - Increasing urbanization aided emigration
  - Religious intolerance
- Pull factors
  - Religious freedom
  - Available land
  - Employment opportunities
  - Advertising campaigns/word-of-mouth

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**Religious Groups**

- German-speaking regions predominantly Lutheran or Catholic, but several smaller Christian sects came out of the Reformation and immigrated seeking religious freedom
  - Mennonite
  - Amish
  - Moravian

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### Inheritance Law

- Often prohibited the division of property and heavily favored the eldest son

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### Advertising/Word-of-Mouth

- 1725 Diary of Charles Hector of Berleburg: *“There came letters from Pennsylvania [...] it was like an earthly paradise. The man reported that one could by a considerable piece of land for 200 or 300 Reichstaler, from which one could comfortably have his living [...] there was complete freedom.”*

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### German Immigration (1790 data)

Table 1.1 Percentage distribution of the white population of the United States by nationality and state from the 1790 census (%)

State	English	Scottish	Irish	German	Other*
Maine	60.0	4.5	11.7	1.3	22.5
New Hampshire	61.0	6.2	7.5	0.4	24.9
Vermont	76.0	5.1	5.1	0.2	13.6
Massachusetts	82.0	4.4	3.9	0.3	9.4
Rhode Island	71.0	5.8	2.8	0.5	19.9
Connecticut	67.0	2.2	2.9	0.3	27.6
New York	53.0	7.0	8.1	8.2	23.7
New Jersey	47.0	7.7	9.5	9.2	26.6
Pennsylvania	35.3	8.6	14.5	33.3	8.3
Delaware	60.0	8.0	11.7	1.1	19.2
Maryland	64.5	7.6	12.3	11.7	3.9
Virginia	68.5	10.2	11.7	6.3	3.3
North Carolina	66.0	14.8	11.1	4.7	3.4
South Carolina	60.2	15.1	12.8	5.0	6.9
Georgia	57.4	15.5	15.3	7.6	4.2
U.S. average	66.9	8.3	9.7	8.7	12.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1973: 1168).

Grubb, *German Immigration and Servitude*, p. 2.

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### German Patriots

- Germans/German-Americans on both sides: Loyalists and Patriots
- German-Americans served in the Continental army and local militias
- Congress authorized the creation of the “German Battalion,” made up of eight companies from PA and MD

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### German Patriots: von Steuben

- Prussian military officer out of work at the end of the Seven Years War in 1763
- Went to work for the Prince of Hollenzollern-Hechingen
- Around 1775, started looking for military employment again but could find none in Europe



Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, Yale University

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### German Patriots: von Steuben

- “His administrative brilliance in organizing, training, and preparing the Continental Army for battle will ensure his legacy in the cause of American independence.” - NPS
- Met with the ambassadors to France who could not promise him employment
- Arrived in Philadelphia in Feb. 1778 and offered his services to Congress, who arranged to pay him after the war
- Appointed Inspector General by Washington and set about standardizing drills, maneuvers, and regulations
- Later instructor and supply officer



Baron von Steuben Drilling Troops, PA State Capitol

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**German Patriots**

- Major General Johann de Kalb
- John Rose, Continental Army surgeon
- Captain David Ziegler
- Frederick II, King of Prussia, predicted American success and interfered with British recruitment in neighboring German states

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**German Patriots**

*“...the Germans who compose a large part of the inhabitants of this province are all on our side; the sweets of liberty little known in their own country are here enjoyed by them...” –Joseph Hewes, 1774*

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**The “Hessians”**

- German soldiers hired by the British starting in 1776; auxiliary troops
- Most were from Hesse-Kassel, but others came from Anhalt-Zerbst, Anspach-Beyreuth, Braunschweig (Brunswick), Hannover, Hesse-Hanau, and Waldeck
- Individual soldiers had no choice; they were employed by their prince and the prince hired out his army
- 34,000 soldiers hired (about half from Hesse-Kassel)

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### The "Hessians"

- Led by German officers who were subordinate to a British commander
- Fought in major and minor battles and skirmishes
- After the war, 25-40% stayed in America



Hessian cap plate, Museum of the American Revolution

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### Hessian Soldiers in Canada

- Some of the auxiliary troops sent to North America were stationed in Canada to protect the frontier
- As with auxiliary troops in the 13 colonies, some deserted, some chose to stay, some escaped from POW camps and joined the British army




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### Finding Your Rev War Ancestor



- Family stories
- Gravestones
- Lineage society memberships
- Local history books
- Males born between 1715-1767

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### Your German Patriot Ancestor

- 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 PA, NY, or another mid-Atlantic state



NYPL collection

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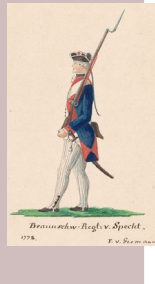
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### Your Hessian Soldier Ancestor

- 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 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> immigrant ancestors from Hesse-Kassel, Anhalt-Zerbst, Anspach-Beyreuth, Braunschweig (Brunswick), Hannover, Hesse-Hanau, and Waldeck



NYPL collection

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### Tips for German Research

- Spelling is flexible—think phonetics and not exact spelling
  - Weihrauch/Weyhrauch
  - Reinhard/Reinhardt
- Surnames may have changed or been Anglicized
  - Ö→oe, ß→ss
  - Schmidt→Smith, Schuhmacher→Shoemaker
  - Stolzfuß→Proudfoot
  - Lymbach→Limbaugh

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### Tips for German Research

- If there are two given names, it is more likely that the second given name will be the one used frequently
  - Johann Adam→Adam
  - Wilhelm Georg→Georg
  - Because of this you might have siblings “Johann Adam” and “Johann Peter,” i.e. Adam and Peter
- If there are two given names, the positions of the names may be switched in American records
  - Wilhelm Georg→George William

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### Tips for German Research

- German borders have changed since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century
- Check Meyers Gazetteer or another historic gazetteer to see what state/duchy/principality a town belonged to in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, not just where it is today

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## Research Resources: Patriots

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## Resources for Rev War Service

### Secondary Sources

- Daughters of the American Revolution
  - DAR Patriots also provided support in non-military roles, such as providing supplies or taking oaths of allegiance
- Sons of the American Revolution
- RevWarApps.org
- State publications
  - Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors
  - PA Archives series

### Primary Sources

- Muster rolls
- Pension records

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services.dar.org/Public/DAR\_Research/search/?Tab\_ID=1

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DAR Ancestor Search Results

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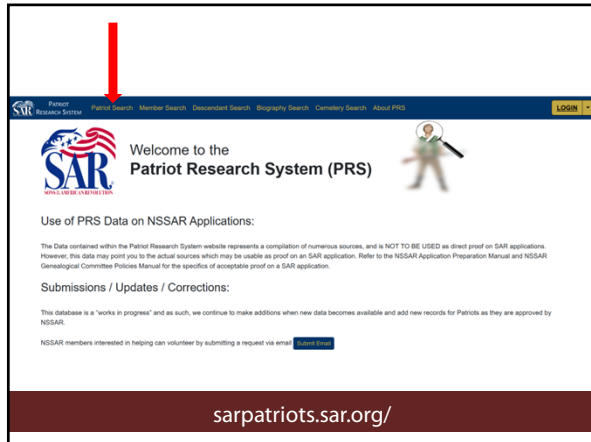
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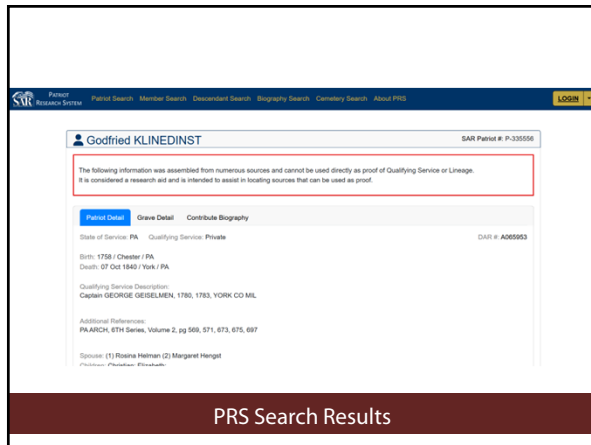
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PRS Search Results

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**RevWarApps.org**

- Southern Campaigns Revolutionary War Pension Statements & Rosters
- Mostly VA, NC, SC, GA, with some additional records
- Transcriptions of pension applications and bounty land warrants
- Search by name or browse name list

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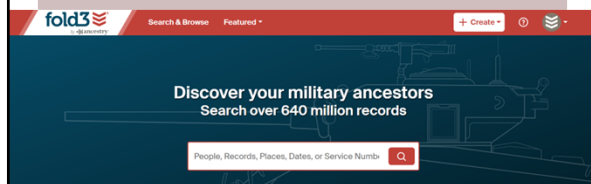
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**Fold3.com**

- Partner site with Ancestry.com, focus is military records
- Searchable and browsable
- Contains service records and pension records



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**Additional Resources**

- Free American Ancestors webinar: "Clues of Service: Determining the Military Service of Your Ancestors"
- FamilySearch Wiki: "Revolutionary War Service Records"
- FamilySearch Wiki: "Revolutionary War Pension Records and Bounty Land Warrants"

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**German Patriot  
Research Example**

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**Christian Sterner**

- 1790: Long Swamp, Berks, PA, age over 16
- 1800: Long Swamp, Berks, PA, age 26-44
- 1810: Manheim, Berks, PA, age over 45
- Pension roll of 1835: Schuylkill County, PA, age 74

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Handwritten church record from St. John's Lutheran Church, Friedensburg, PA. The document lists names and dates, including a red star next to Christian Sterner. The text is written in cursive and includes names like Christian Sterner, Gips Fischer, and others, along with dates such as 1761, 1790, and 1835.

St. John's Lutheran Church, Friedensburg, PA

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Pension Index card for Christian Sterner, Schuylkill County, PA. The card is numbered 23010 and has a name field filled with "Sterner, Christian L. 23010". The card is part of a larger index with multiple rows and columns.

Pension Index

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The screenshot shows the Fold3 search interface. The search criteria are set to "Sterner" and "US Revolutionary War". The results show two documents: "Sterner, Christian" (US, Revolutionary War Pensions, 1800-1900) and "Page 4" (US, Pennsylvania Veterans Card Files, 1775-1921). The "Sterner, Christian" document includes details such as State: Pennsylvania, Service: Penn., Pension Number: 5, 23,010, and a list of related records including "Christian Sterner" (1071 Christian Sterner Adm 6 mos Private) and "e case of Christian Sterner County of Schuylk".

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### Christian Sterner's Service

- Three 2-month periods in 1777-1778
- Saw little action, but engaged in a skirmish during his first period of service
- Third period of service he was drafted and was camped at "Minnicks Mill"

A small image of a handwritten document snippet, likely a military record or pension application, showing cursive handwriting on aged paper.

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The screenshot shows the SAR Patriot Research System profile for Christian STERNER (SAR Patriot #: P-297114). A red box highlights a disclaimer: "The following information was assembled from numerous sources and cannot be used directly as proof of Qualifying Service or Lineage. It is considered a research aid and is intended to assist in locating sources that can be used as proof." The profile includes details such as State of Service: PA, Qualifying Service: Private, Birth: 14 Jan 1761 Maxatawny / Berks / PA, Death: 06 Apr 1838 Friedensburg / Schuylkill / PA, and Qualifying Service Description: Served under Captain Sebastian Lertz, Pennsylvania Militia. Additional references include Pension File 523010. Spouse: Anna Elizabeth, Children: Benjamin. Members Who Share This Ancestor are listed below.

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**DAR** Ancestor Member Descendants GRC Rev War Bibles Resources

**STERNER, VALENTINE** Ancestor # A206466

Service: PENNSYLVANIA Rank(s): PATRIOTIC SERVICE  
 Birth: CIRCA 1735  
 Death: ANTE 1-7-1797 LONGSWAMP TWP BERKS CO PENNSYLVANIA  
 Service Source: PA ARCH, 3RD SER, VOL 18, PP 380, 383  
 Service Description: 1) PAID SUPPLY TAX, 1780

**RESIDENCE**  
 1) City: MAXATAMNY TWP - County: BERKS CO - State: PENNSYLVANIA

**SPOUSE**  
 Number Name

Beginning March 16, 2026, record copies will be \$15

Become a Member!

DAR Ancestor Search

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**Research Resources:  
 Auxiliary Troops**

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**Auxiliary Troops/Hessian Soldiers**

<b>Secondary Sources</b>	<b>Primary Sources</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AmRev Hessian Mailing List website</li> <li>• John Merz publications (Canada)</li> <li>• HETRINA                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Hesse-Kassel, Hesse-Hanu, Waldeck</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Clifford Neal Smith monographs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• German Auxiliaries Muster Rolls, 1776-1786 (bulk 1781-1783) [UMich]</li> <li>• Johannes Schwalm Historical Association at Kutztown</li> <li>• Originals at Staatsarchiv Marburg</li> </ul>

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### Clifford Neal Smith Monographs

- German-American genealogical research monographs by Clifford Neal Smith, with separate published indexes to nos. 1-12 and 21-25
- no. 1. *Brunswick deserter-immigrants*
- no. 2. *Mercenaries from Ansbach and Bayreuth*
- no. 3. *Muster rolls and prisoner-of-war lists*
- no. 5. *Mercenaries from Hessen-Hanau*
- no. 19. *Mercenary troops from Anhalt-Zerbst*
- no. 28. *Notes on Hessian Soldiers*
- no. 30. *Annotated Hessian chaplaincy record of the American Revolution, 1776-1783; christenings, marriages, deaths*

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### Primary Sources Online

- German Auxiliaries Muster Rolls, 1776-1786 (bulk 1781-1783), University of Michigan [browse-only]
- Dragoon Regiment Prinz Friedrich, Kutztown University [browse-only]
- Monthly reports of the auxiliary units, Kutztown University [browse-only]

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### Camp Followers

- “Camp followers” were women and children who followed troops as they fought in the war
- Some wives from Britain and Germany traveled abroad to be with their husbands
- Births and marriages recorded in *Feldkirchenbücher* (field parish registers)
  - Records from Braunschweig (Brunswick) and Hesse-Kassel available on Archion.de

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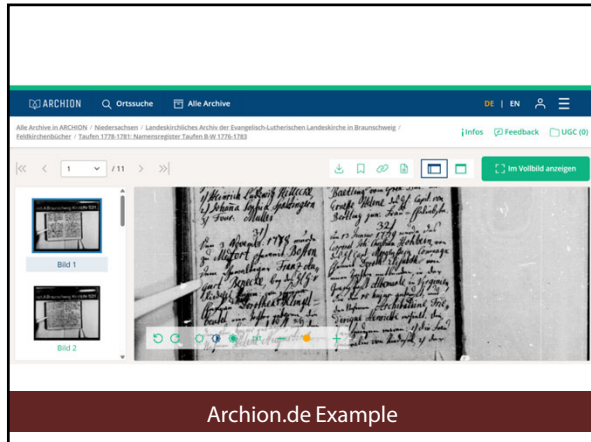
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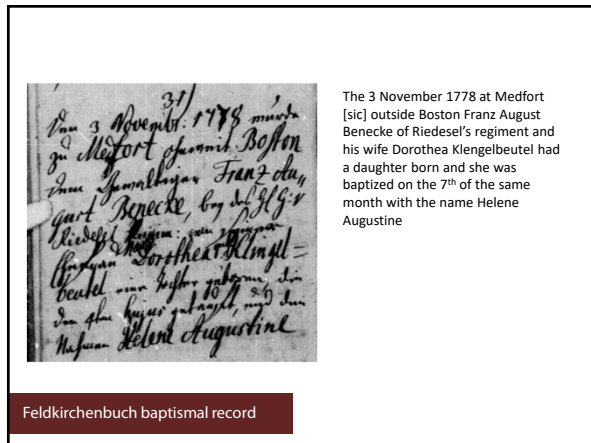
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The 3 November 1778 at Medfort [sic] outside Boston Franz August Benecke of Riedesel's regiment and his wife Dorothea Klengelbeutel had a daughter born and she was baptized on the 7<sup>th</sup> of the same month with the name Helene Augustine

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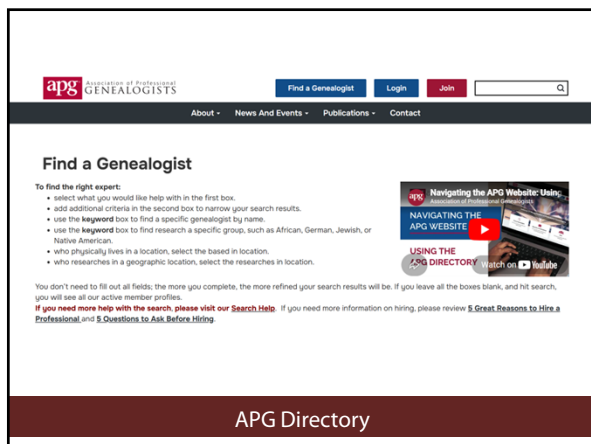
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The screenshot shows the HETRINA website interface. On the left, there is a navigation menu with options like 'Discover', 'Description', 'Emigrants', 'WW Primary Sources', 'HNWV Questionnaire', 'Hessian Vital Records', and 'Jewish History'. The main content area displays search results for 'von Linsingen Grenadier Battalion'. A red star icon is placed next to the 'Discover' link in the menu. Below the search results, there is a 'History' section with a paragraph of text.

**HETRINA: Discover**

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The image shows a historical document titled 'Feb 1776 Muster Roll'. It is a handwritten list of names and military details, organized in columns. A red star is placed on the left side of the document, highlighting a specific entry. The text is written in a cursive script.

**Feb 1776 Muster Roll**

Staatsarchiv Marburg

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The image shows a historical document titled '1805 Burial, Fambach'. It is a handwritten record of a burial, with a red box highlighting a specific section of the text. The text is written in a cursive script.

**1805 Burial, Fambach**

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**Key Takeaways**

- Germans served on both sides of the Revolution
- German names may have changed after arriving in North America
- Borders of German states have changed
- Secondary sources/databases and published materials can be used to verify service
- Primary sources tell a fuller picture

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**QUESTIONS?**

**Schedule a consultation**  
*consultations@nehgs.org*

**Hire Research Services**  
*research@nehgs.org*

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*Upcoming Events*



**IN-PERSON RESEARCH TOUR**  
**Research Getaway at American Ancestors, Boston, MA**  
June 4-6, 2026, 4:00 – 5:00 PM ET



**ONLINE BENEFIT**  
**From Revolution to Remembrance: Patriots of Color and Their Descendants**  
Featuring a conversation between Ken Burns and Dr. Vincent Brown  
June 18, 2026, 6:00 – 7:15 PM ET



**IN-PERSON CONCERT**  
**From Plimoth to Yorktown: A Concert of Early American Music**  
June 20, 2026, 4:00 – 5:00 PM ET



**ONGOING IN-PERSON EXHIBIT**  
**Patriots of Color**  
April 23–December 31, 2026

[AmericanAncestors.org/Events](https://AmericanAncestors.org/Events)

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