

German Family History Made Eas(ier)

Richard Lynn Walker, LL.M, ZG

Research Manager

FamilySearch – Frankfurt Germany Office

Several studies have shown that Germans comprise the largest ethnic group in the United States. Many Americans are interested in tracing their German ancestor(s) but lack knowledge on how to proceed. German research is easier than most people think and can be a lot of fun.

- Start with what you already know (and can verify)
 - Before searching in Europe, it is crucial to begin with solid, verifiable data concerning your ancestor(s) in North America
 - If your ancestor did not leave a paper trail consider the following:
 - Family Naming Patterns
 - Researching their neighbors places of origin
 - Searching old newspapers near where your ancestors lived
 - Local and County historical books
- Passenger lists of people coming into the United States will often provide information regarding their origins:
 - Ellis Island online records
 - Ancestry.com

- Passenger lists of people departing Germany provide researcher “with a second bite of the apple” and many times will indicate the exact point of origin in a particular province or kingdom.
 - Ancestry.com (available online)
 - Family History Library (on microfilm)
- Emigration records in Germany
 - Because there were expensive fees involved, not everyone registered with the local authorities before leaving Germany but at least 30% of the population did so it is worth checking.
- Immigration and Naturalization records in the United States
 - In the United States becoming a citizen was a two-step process: first an application of intent to become a US citizen was filed, and then later, the actual papers of naturalization were filed. These records were typically kept at the nearest county courthouse.
- United States Federal Census Records
 - US Federal Census Records were taken every ten years and after 1850 persons were required to give their exact place of birth. Just because this information is missing in one set of census records does not preclude the possibility of it being listed before or afterwards in another census.
- Once you have pinpointed where your ancestor came from in Germany, it is time to consult Meyer’s Ortslexikon (1913 edition).
 - Meyers will show you all of the localities with the same name and will tell you where the local civil and church records for each particular locality were kept.
 - Meyers is available online at Ancestry.com and in book form in some libraries

- In addition to Meyer's which covered most of former Germany at its largest size, Regional German gazetteers also exist.
 - The regional gazetteers cover even more localities than Meyers so it is the next resource to check. They also list where the church records were kept for each entry.
- Stoeppel (<http://christoph.stoepe.net/geogen/v3/>) lists all persons with a public telephone number. It will show concentrations of any given surname by county throughout all of present day Germany which will provide clues as to where your ancestor came from- especially when it is an unusual surname.
- German Civil Records kept at the nearest "Standesamt" is my favorite place to begin. Depending on the part of Germany, these records begin as early as 1800 or at the latest in 1876. They list births, marriages, and deaths and cover everyone regardless of religious affiliation.
 - These records are accessible to anyone who can prove that they are descendants of the person being sought after. Typically the fees involved in looking and receiving a copy are no more than 15 US Dollars.
 - The Standesämter are mostly listed in the Internet with address, telephone number, fax and even e-mail address.
- Before 1875 the next best source of research are parish registers known as "Kirchenbücher".
 - Although many Kirchenbücher were destroyed during the 30 Years War (1618-1648) most localities will have church records going back at least as far back as 1650.
 - The Kirchenbücher will contain christenings, confirmations (age 14), Family Records, marriages, deaths, Excommunications and Penitence Records as well as

deaths and sometimes funeral sermons containing biological information.

- Approximately half of the Kirchenbücher are available on microfilm in the Family History Library. Archeon (the Lutheran Church in Saxony) is beginning to place their Kirchenbücher online for the price of a subscription
- Using current telephone books, I have had much success in writing letters to persons bearing the same surname as my German ancestors in small towns.
 - Germans are often quite curious to learn about their long lost distant American cousins and will cooperate by sharing whatever they know about their family origins.
- Since the 1920's many towns in Germany have been hard at work compiling "Ortsfamilienbücher" These books organize families in various small towns and link them together to the other families and by using both civil and church records are often able to fill in gaps and work to clear up discrepancies.
 - Ortsfamilienbücher/Ortssippenbücher are available in book form and sometimes for free online at GenWiki under OFB. In addition the Family History Library has some of the Ortsfamilienbücher on its shelves. More importantly new ones continue to be produced
- Various online websites also exist which are helpful to German researchers.
 - GenWiki is a particularly good research. It has its own gazetteer and links to many websites.
 - Another important site for receiving personal help (including translation into English) is the Central European Website on Facebook managed by the LDS Family History Department.
- Conclusion

- Throughout history the internal and external political and ecclesiastical borders of Germany have been subject to change but the Internet makes research easier by consulting historical maps, gazetteers, and the web sites of even very small towns no longer belonging to Germany
- Old German Gothic Script poses a challenge but the FamilySearch Wiki provides some excellent tutorials- not to mention some other books and websites available. Fortunately the handwriting is usually consistent once you get used to reading it and can compare the formation of the lettering on any given page of a text. Better yet, there are still people who can read it quite well.
- The German language may seem complicated at first glance but is very consistent. In most documents, you will encounter the same text over and over again- the only thing changing are the names and dates of the persons involved. There are word lists at FamilySearch.org which will provide the English equivalent of the most commonly used terminologies. In addition, nowadays there are various online translation services available free of cost.
- Most Germans are willing and even eager to help Americans and other foreigners if they ask for help. Most Germans under 60 years of age in West Germany and under 40 years of age in East Germany have had English instruction in school and can communicate with you- provided you use simple- straightforward language and speak slowly. If they don't, they most certainly have a neighbor or a close relative who is quite comfortable with English.

- Despite much warfare, many records have survived up to the present day and it is becoming increasingly easy to begin.