



Dallas Genealogical Society
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Pushes, Pulls and the Records:
A Brief Review of the Various Waves of German Immigrants to the United States

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The First Wave, 1683 - 1820

Push: This emigration was largely caused by religious persecutions following the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), and by economic hardship, including heavy taxation and overpopulation. The severe winter of 1709-1710 was also a factor.

Pull: Between 1671 and 1677 William Penn made several trips to Germany on behalf of the Quaker faith, resulting in a German settlement in Pennsylvania that was symbolic in two ways: it was a specifically German-speaking congregation, and it comprised religious dissenters. Due to a labor shortage landowners in the American Colonies were seeking workers to work their lands, produce naval stores, mine silver and iron, and serve as a buffer between the colonists and the Native Americans.

Who: Poor Protestant families and single men, primarily from around the Rhine River and its tributaries. Because some came from the Palatinate, the generic term "Palatines" was applied to most German immigrants up to the Revolutionary War. Many could not afford the cost of the voyage and became "Redemptioners," working for three to seven years after arrival to pay for their passage. By the mid-eighteenth century, Pennsylvania's approximately 50,000 German immigrants made up about 40 percent of the colony's entire population. The Pennsylvania Dutch (Deutsch) included Amish, Hutterites, Brethren and Mennonites from southwestern Germany (*i.e.*, Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg), Bohemia, Moravia and Switzerland. Pennsylvania, and later Georgia, also became homes for many Lutheran refugees from Catholic provinces (*e.g.*, Salzburg, Austria in 1734), and German Catholics who had been discriminated against in their home country. At the end of the Revolutionary War nearly 5,000 "Hessian" soldiers chose to make their home in the United States.

Records: Many of these immigrants have been documented in books (*e.g.*, those by Henry Z. Jones and Annette Kunselman Burgert) and Web sites for the various related historical associations (*e.g.*, The Germanna Foundation, The German-Acadian Coast Historical and Genealogical Society). Records of Redemptioners are available in civil court records and Quaker monthly meeting records. NOTE: only non-German harbors, in particular Rotterdam and Amsterdam, permitted this manner of passage. Shippers in Hamburg and Bremen demanded cash payment. If your ancestors emigrated via Bremen or Hamburg, they were likely not Redemptioners.



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Since the German immigrants were not British subjects, all males over sixteen years of age were obliged to take Oath of Allegiance to the crown of Great Britain, as soon as after arrival as possible. They typically took the oath at the Courthouse, although some were qualified at the official residence of the magistrate. Some of those records survive.

Emigrants were often required to pay a tax in their home country for their release from serfdom and feudal obligations. This manumission fee generally amounted to ten percent of the value of the emigrant's property. Werner Hacker indexed these records for many of the provinces of southern Germany (see References below).

The Second Wave, 1820 – 1871

Push: The collapse of the old agricultural society and the dawn of the modern industrial age. Peasants were displaced from agriculture and artisans were made jobless by the industrial revolution. Overpopulation, due to an increase in agricultural production and a lower death rate due to improved medical care, was also a factor.

The first major wave of German immigration occurred from the 1840's when Germany, like many other European countries, suffered from serious crop failures including the potato blight (1845-1849). While most German emigrants went eastward, nearly one million fled to a new life in America.

Pull: The promise of religious and civil freedom, political security, upward social mobility and economic opportunity. Some immigrants received "American Letters" that encouraged friends and relatives to join them in America. The development of clipper ships and railroads speeded travel and lowered the cost of the fare to America. Steamship, railroad and land companies actively recruited immigrants as customers.

Who: The U.S. population nearly quadrupled during this period, including 7,500,000 German immigrants. They were Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Jewish. Many came from Prussia, Pomerania, Posen, Bavaria, and Saxony. These immigrants became involved in almost every labor-intensive endeavor in the country, such as building canals, and later, railroads. In the years before the Civil War, German newcomers tended to be independent craftsmen or farmers and their families. Unlike the Irish, the Germans had enough money to journey to the Midwest in search of farmland and work. Many who were craftsmen who settled in cities such as Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati ("The German Triangle"). They also dominated the American brewing industry. After the revolution of 1848 political oppression at home encouraged idealistic and utopian plans for a free colony of Germans in the United States. For example, the Adelsverein induced about 6,000 immigrants from the region around Mainz, Germany, to settle in Texas looking for a new life and opportunities. These new immigrants were often better educated and more politically minded than their predecessors.



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Records: Although a number of ship passenger lists have survived from the colonial period through the early part of the nineteenth century, it was not until 1819 that Congress passed a law requiring the submission of ships' passenger lists upon arrival.

The book series "Germans to America," compiled and edited by Ira A. Glazier and P. William Filby, is a good starting point for those arriving between 1840 and 1897, as are the records recorded by the Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild.

The German Emigration Database at the Historisches Museum Bremerhaven is a collection of information on people who left Europe starting in 1820 via primarily German ports to the United States.

Starting in 1850, police in Hamburg, Germany, recorded information about departing European emigrants. Every emigrant from every country who left from Hamburg between 1850 and 1934 should be on those passenger lists. Most importantly, these lists show each passenger's hometown, and the lists are indexed.

From 1850 to 1891, 41% of German and east European emigrants left via the port of Bremen (Germany), 30% via Hamburg (Germany), 16% via Le Havre (France), 8% via Antwerp (Belgium), and 5% via several ports in the Netherlands.

A French genealogical society has discovered a 100-year-old card file of 45,000 passengers, 25,000 sailors, and 5,000 retirees at Le Havre from 1780 to 1840. The source of the index is uncertain and it is difficult to determine how comprehensive it is. It does not correspond to the unindexed lists mentioned above. The passenger cards usually show name, maiden surname of the spouse (including cross references), birth date or age, birthplace, parents, date and place of embarkation and debarkation, and, for French ships, the vessel's name. Researchers may send written inquiries to learn if a relative is indexed. (*See References for details.*)

Since many immigrants settled in urban areas, check local city directories for them, since they list the names, addresses, professions, and in some cases ethnicity, of people in a particular town or city.

The Third Wave 1871-1920

Push: The process of industrialization in rural northeastern Germany had just begun and the jobs of many skilled craftsmen had been taken over by machines. With few rights and often no land, there was little to tie them to their homeland. Prussia introduced compulsory military service in 1867. In Russia, the century-old privileges granted to German farmers settled there were revoked in 1872 by the Tsarist government, causing thousands of the farmers to emigrate. **the rigidity of the social class structure in the authoritarian German states**



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Pull: The Homestead Act of 1864 made expansive tracts of land available. The Germans from Russia (~120,000) were a people in search of land, freedom, and isolation. After the American Civil War, the rapid growth of industry in America and the advent of the more convenient and affordable steamships enticed many to immigrate.

Who: The population of the USA increased from 38 million in 1870 to 106 million in 1920, as immigration hit its peak. Nearly 1.5 million Germans left their country in the 1880s to settle in the United States. The vast majority were day laborers who had no families and no special skills. Many came from rural northeastern Germany: Mecklenburg and the Prussian provinces of East and West Prussia, Pomerania, Posen, and Brandenburg. The German-Russian families settled in the Great Plains (Oklahoma to Canada), typically in ethnically-exclusive communities: Volga Lutheran, Volga Catholics, Black Sea Lutherans or Black Sea Catholics. Starting in 1874 numerous German Mennonites from Russia settled in Kansas, bring their hard winter wheat seed with them. The 1882 Immigration Act restricted immigrants from Europe and imposed a 'head tax' of 50 cents on all immigrants landing at US ports. The 1891 Immigration Act further regulated immigration, introducing the inspection and deportation of immigrants. Families often immigrated together during this era, although young men frequently came first to find work. Some of these then sent for their wives, children, and siblings (chain migration); others returned to their families in Europe with their saved wages. Bismarck's "Kulturkampf" (1872-1878) power struggle with Catholicism over control of education, civil marriage, and church appointments-motivated Catholic emigration.

Records: Passenger Lists – With 75% of immigrants coming through the Port of New York, the old state immigration center, Castle Garden, was overwhelmed. This led to the construction of the first federal immigration center, Ellis Island, which served as the main port of entry for American immigration from 1898 to 1924.

Church Records – Many churches recorded baptisms, marriages and burials (e.g., FindMyPast's Catholic Heritage Collection). Some also recorded the arrival and departure of congregants.

Naturalization Records – Prior to the creation of the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization in 1906, one could file in either a local or federal court; after 1906, one had to file in a federal court.

City Directories – Since many immigrants settled in urban areas, check local city directories.

Homestead application papers are good sources of genealogical and family history information.

Application papers often mention family members or neighbors, and previous residence as shown in dozens of papers which may include land application forms, citizenship applications, family Bible pages, marriage or death certificates, newspaper clippings, and affidavits. A researcher can obtain applications and related papers from the National Archives if he can provide a legal description of the land for which the homesteader applied (whether the homestead was eventually granted or not). (*See References for more information.*)



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The Fourth Wave, 1920 – 2000

Push: The Quota Laws of 1921 and the National Origins Act of 1924 imposed immigration restrictions based on a percentage of ethnic groups living in the United States as per the 1890 and 1910 Census. entry to 2% of the total number of people of each nationality in America as of the 1890 national census—a system that favored immigrants from Western Europe—and prohibited immigrants from Asia. These laws caused a dramatic decline in immigration to America. Whereas 22.3 million people immigrated to America between 1891 and 1930, only 4.1 million immigrated between 1930 and 1960.

After the National Socialist German Workers' Party came to power in Germany in 1933, the persecution of the Jews and complete suppression of all opposition began.

After WW II, many parts of Germany were destroyed, the economy fell ill and overpopulation was threatened by the influx of refugees from the east. Food shortages and the loss of large agricultural areas also led to a push factor

Pull: America did not suffer any destruction during either war, large areas of land offered themselves to the people and the need for skilled workers, especially in industry, prompted many people to emigrate.

During World War I, US citizenship laws allowed foreign-born wives to become American citizens by marriage, and those “War brides” and their children could move to the United States once the paperwork to secure the bride’s government-sponsored transport to America was completed.

In 1946 and 1949 two “War bride” laws made it possible for about 20,000 German women (and a few men) and their children to immigrate above and beyond the quota system.

The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 and its update of 1950 permitted the immigration of over 400,000 Europeans in fulfillment of past or future immigrant quotas.

In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which did away with quotas based on nationality and allowed Americans to sponsor relatives from their countries of origin.

Who: Even though the quota system reduced German emigration to the U.S. significantly, it did not stop entirely. Emigrants included political dissenters, Jews, and others who were uncomfortable with post World War I developments. German immigration exceeded 300,000 in every decade until 1930. From 1923 to 1963 the number of German arrivals to America outnumbered those from any other country.

Prior to September 1922, women could not become U.S. citizens in their own right, with some special exceptions, usually requiring Congressional intervention. However, foreign-born women and children



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automatically became citizens when they married a native-born U.S. citizen or when he became a naturalized citizen. Minor children of these native born or naturalized fathers also received derived citizenship. Because these wives and minor children of a U.S. citizen had derivative citizenship, they could present themselves at the nearest U.S. Consular Post and apply for an Emergency Passport for themselves and their minor children. In 1919, the New York Times reported that at least 10,000 WWI soldiers had married in Europe.

In 1946 and 1949 two “War bride” laws made it possible for about 20,000 German women (and a few men) and their children to immigrate above and beyond the quota system to join their spouses.

The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 and its update of 1950 permitted until 1952 made general provisions for the immigration of displaced persons in Eastern Europe, including ethnic Germans, to the United States.

In this era, for the first time in US history, more women than men entered the country. They were reuniting with their families, joining their GI husbands, taking part in the post war economic boom.

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The German Emigration Database at the Historisches Museum Bremerhaven is a research project on European emigration to the United States. The database collects information on people who left Europe in the period 1820 to 1897, 1904 and sometimes 1907 via primarily German ports to the United States. <https://www.deutsche-auswanderer-datenbank.de/>

Search passenger manifests for Ellis Island and other ports in the years following World War I for American men returning with foreign-born wives. Manifests are on Ancestry.com; some are at the free Family-Search.org. In addition, before moving to the United States, war brides received emergency passports valid for six months. Search [U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925](#) on Ancestry.com; NARA has them on microfilm.

Professional genealogist Kathleen Brand recommends looking for correspondence and other information in an unindexed NARA collection titled War Brides-General, covering 1917 to 1934. It's located at the NARA facility in College Park, Md.

Visa Files are the official arrival records of immigrants admitted for permanent residence between July 1, 1924, and March 31, 1944. The photograph, large amounts of biographical information, and attached vital records make Visa Files among the most valuable immigration records for genealogical research.



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