

G-SIG FORUM #102

From the German Special Interest Group: G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society (www.stlgs.org) & the German American Heritage Society (www.facebook.com/groups/gahs.stlouis/). *G-SIG FORUM* contains genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German culture & ancestry. Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.) compiler-coordinator.

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The castle at historic Torgau, which became part of Prussia early in its growth.

The BIG Question!

By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.)

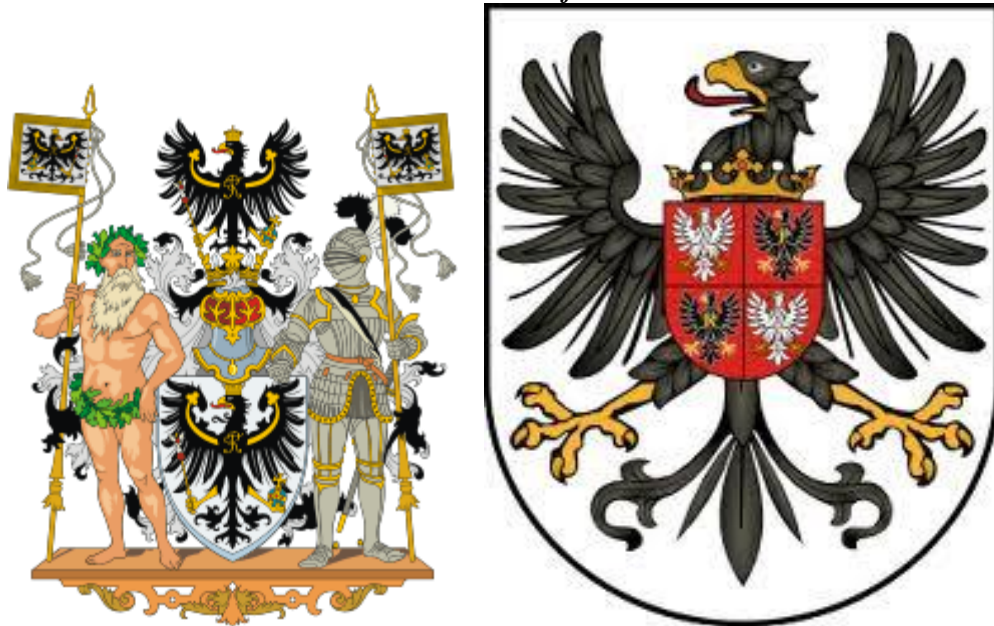
Nearly every researcher of German ancestry wrestles with the question: **What/where is my family's home town in Germany?** The question may seem complicated when some researchers emphasize that their roots are in Prussia, not Germany.

Given the era being researched, we can simplify the matter. From 1870 and up to the early years of the 20th century, Prussia practically equates to Germany. But earlier it wasn't even German territory.

Original Prussians were a group of tribal people who lived around the Baltic area, which included what is now Poland. As Germans advanced their territory eastward due to overpopulation and desire for land, large sections of the Prussian area were absorbed. A high degree of this was due to the energetic expansionistic approach of the Teutonic Knights, the last of the three great military-religious orders of the Germans. Some historians theorize that the Teutonic Knights wanted to start their own crusade since they formed too late to grab much glory in the waning years of the Great Crusades to the Holy Land. The Prussians were not Christians in early years, which added to the impetus for the Order since the Pope and other church officials did not stand in the way of the advance against a non-Christian population. When conversion took hold, it was too late for many Knights to stop their encroachment due at least in part to political and military momentum.

The Knights set up castles and other strongholds in Poland, extending into Latvia and Estonia especially. To this day there are still remnant evidences of that incursion.

Prussian Coats of Arms



As for the ancient Prussians, the tribes were absorbed or moved or otherwise disbanded. The name Prussia transferred to the Duchy around Koenigsburg, an earlier name for Berlin, even though the ancient Prussians seemingly had evaporated from history. Thus the name was applied to Germans who were not Prussian by lineage, only associated to that history by living on the old Prussian land. (Although we will concede that it is likely some of the ancient Prussians blood entered some German families.) In 1618 the idea of a Germanic Prussia was firmly fixed due to the Duchy of Prussia and the Brandenburg holdings joining together. In 1701 the whole territory was proclaimed as the Kingdom of Prussia.

What ensued was a monstrous trade union that eventually augmented the incorporation of other lands into Prussia. Two major holdouts were Bavaria and the Hessen lands east of the Rhein River. Eventually, they, too became part of unified Germany and thus joined with Prussia.

In America, immigration officials in the 1800s regularly entered the word Prussia as the country from which Germans had departed. Occasionally the name of a territory was given, especially if the immigrant's former homeland was not absorbed yet into the Prussian Union. This can cause confusion among researchers today, but the big point is to know facts about the ancestral era under study and how that area fit into the whole of Prussia, if at all.

When examining old documents and entries, look for more than Prussia. Occasionally, the surname may lead you toward a certain area of Prussia or Germany as a whole. Search online for surname distribution maps at: <http://christoph.stoepel.net/geogen/en/Default.aspx>, <http://www.verwandt.de/karten/>, and <http://www.gen-evolu.de/>. (By the way, if you want, go to https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Surname_Distribution_Maps to search for surnames in other countries.)

If you do not use online sources, ask someone who does and maybe they will do a favor. You can return that favor some other way when they need help with their research.

The use of the word Prussia faded in 1932 and was eliminated officially in 1947. But today it still challenges researchers who dig into past records.

The loss of the word Prussia as an active locator is probably good. The term had come to equate with aggressive militarism even during the Second World War. Yet, many will attest to its virtues in pulling the German people together as unified regions.

Otto von Bismarck wore many "suits" of honor in forming Germany in the 1870s.



Karl Daubel of G-SIG adds, "Do not lose hope about finding that place. It may just take a while. Also, if a direct straight-back search is not working go around the brick wall by using

relatives. In some cases of group emigration it is possible that others who settled in a small American town came from the same area (in Germany). Try some of their surnames.”

Good point, Karl! When in doubt, “go laterally,” I say. Up to 1900, Germans usually did not come alone to America. It’s good to look for other relatives being entered at the same time in the ship manifest or an immigration record. Those listed next to or near your ancestor’s entry may be relatives from the same town. Equally good to note are the ages of the people coming here. Groups of friends with similar ages may have been from the same town.

Taking that a step farther, some of those people may come from a different village near your ancestor. That may provide evidence that your REAL ancestral village may NOT have been the one from which your ancestor departed for America. It could be that your ancestor moved from the ORIGINAL ancestral town. So...if you didn’t think about that in your earlier research, you may want to re-open the subject for further investigation!

Karl further suggests checking <http://rwguide.rootsweb.ancestry.com/lesson15.htm>. Also try for the point of origin by using the Hamburg Passenger Lists. To do that, go to this site: <https://familysearch.org/blog/en/finding-your-ancestors-place-of-origin-using-the-hamburg-passenger-lists/>.

Realize that human error can enter into your research at EVERY point. The initial entry may have been in error or incomplete. Example: German record books often indicate when a person left the community. However, sometimes data is missing or seems not to have been properly recorded. Perhaps the recorder was ill, out of town, or otherwise simply goofed. Any of those reasons may have been seen as neglect, and the person may have been penalized, if someone checked the records when they were freshly entered. But that did not happen often. Occasionally missing data was due to the person leaving the town without full permission. Hence, they technically did not leave, or a later entry indicated they did, but not with the fully recorded facts of that departure since it was somewhat clandestine. When “debt-dodging” was a factor and Germans wanted to leave before paying-up, you can imagine why information is missing. That was illegal, for sure, but even some of the notables in history used debt-dodging to leave quickly—among them was John A. Sutter on whose land the Gold Rush of 1848-50 began.

There also could be errors in entries made by ship personnel or officials registering arrivals. Likewise, census records at times were hastily gathered and curtailed in information. Add to this the fact that some records were lost, destroyed, or otherwise obliterated (missing pages, stained entries from spilled ink, insect infestation, rat nibbles, etc.). Finally, errors among recent and current researchers means more points of human error could enter the process. Semi-careful researchers may make unfounded conclusions that result in wrongful information appearing in print as if substantiated truth.

All this leads to VERIFICATION whenever possible through at least two reliable and diverse sources. That may shake up some researchers, perhaps even you. Does this mean you need to start over to verify as much as you can? That’s not a bad idea, but it really isn’t “starting over.” It’s a conscientious effort to “certify” what you found.

Sometimes we make a brick wall all our own by having made a judgment call in some of the information we gathered, concluding a point beyond verification. If we build on assumptions and premature conclusions, we may be winging far from the good direction of reliable research.

Have you checked printed sources?

There is a significant list of resources in the Chicago area. To find out what may be available to help in your research, go to: http://ssghs.org/german_research.htm. This is courtesy of the South Suburban Genealogical and Historical Society, Hazel Crest, Illinois.

There are many helps available at <https://www.stlgs.org/> which is the website for the St. Louis Genealogical Society. Membership in this organization is a positive move. So is participation in G-SIG, so maximize your options!

If you have not made contact with a genealogical society or historical society in Germany, then see what you can find at this site suggested by Karl:

[http://wiki-genealogy.net/Deutsche_Arbeitsgemeinschaft_genealogischer_Verb%C3%A4nde_e.V._\(DAGV\)/DAGV/Guide](http://wiki-genealogy.net/Deutsche_Arbeitsgemeinschaft_genealogischer_Verb%C3%A4nde_e.V._(DAGV)/DAGV/Guide)

To make the most of your research, choose your path:

- + **You can gather only certain bits of information relating to your current questions; or**
- + **You can glean and accumulate ALL the information you can; or**
- + **You can dig for specific information but be flexible enough to dig in a different direction as the opportunity arises.**

I prefer the LAST option.

Why? It make sense. The first choice is very restrictive, and as you research you may easily bypass something of importance that will be usable in your future research. Once passed, you may never find it again! The second choice is OK, but you will be tempted to use all your precious research time accumulating, then feel burdened by the mass of information. The third choice is just right: stay on track but be open to taking advantage of other options that arise. Jot or copy the information and keep it on file until needed.

If you follow the third choice just don't lose focus of your initial search. Return to it as soon as possible.

Should you have the opportunity to research in Germany, and if you find a multitude of documents to investigate, and if language is a challenge (especially older documents from pre-1800 that show signs of older language usage), then you may employ a helper and take the advice of the second choice. Gather up all you feel is helpful. Take digital pictures or make photocopies of original documents. Label/identify what the documents are. Ask for your German helper to translate and record the comments for later retrieval. Or have a hand-written or printed translation made.

If your family held administrative positions in the ancestral community or owned land and paid taxes, you may find an abundance of information. If it seems too overwhelming and your time is limited, then take a sampling over the years.

Such gathering of data may be a special benefit in future research!

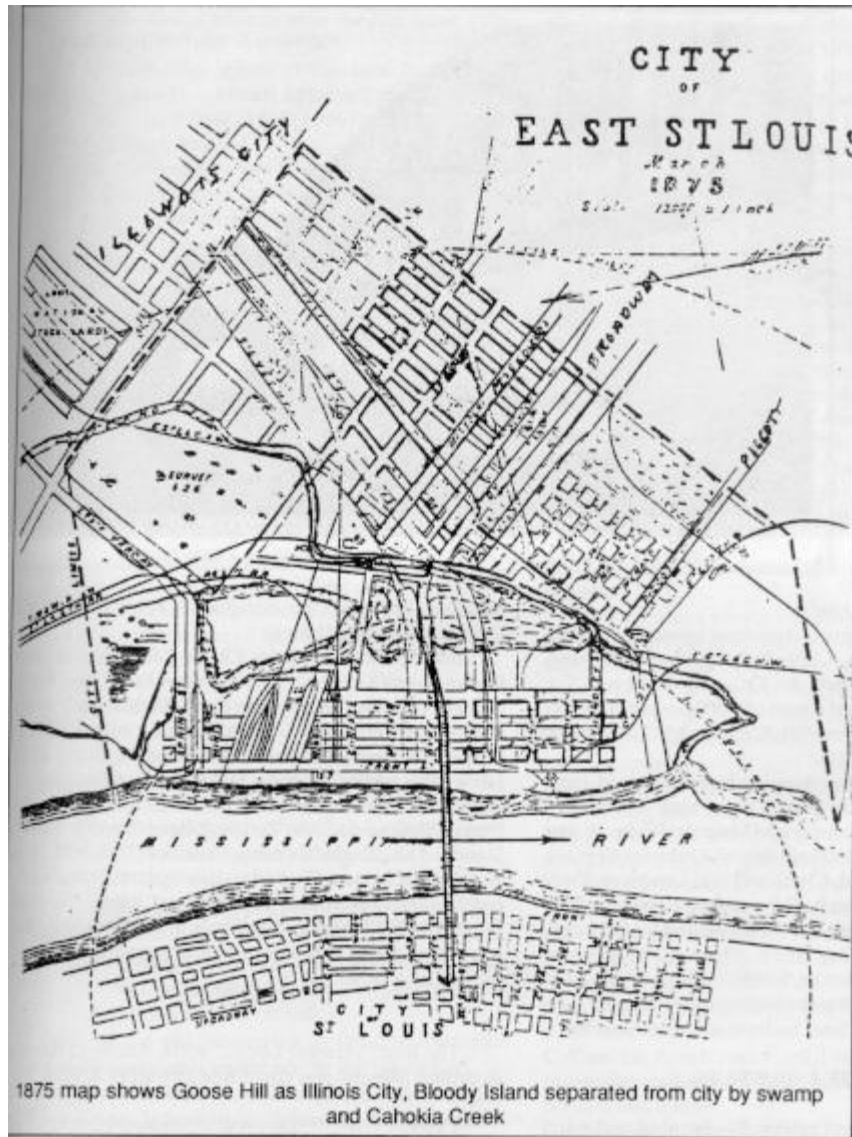
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Find it On the Map

When you have the inclination to explore your favorite genealogical/historical subject relating to American locations, block out a nice amount of item and use it two ways:

- a. At a well-equipped library, or b. Play around with sites and word searches online.**

In the 1870s and into the 1930s, various county atlases were produce as part of a trend to document the property ownership of individuals. It also must have been a potential profit maker for the printing companies who sold the atlases "by subscription." Since these were limited edition books, large numbers may not exist. In select cases copies were scanned electronically or duplicated in printed form. Usually major research libraries in reasonably sized towns and cities



have hard copies of such atlases or electronic versions. Rural areas often were divided into parcels showing actual land ownership by surname. In some cases a recent death resulted in the wording “estate of (name)...” which tells us the approximate period of death (realizing the printing time needed for the atlas means the person may have died within a couple months).

If you chose “b,” then do it in the comfort of your favorite chair or study area. Several G-SIG participants have suggested exploring this site, for its maps:

<http://www.digital.wustl.edu/d/dir/>

The site directs users to places where maps are available showing St. Louis neighborhoods in the late 1800s & early 1900s. What this can do is provide a spatial feel for the area of your ancestors. There are probably websites for other large cities, so spend time at your keyboard and browse the sites. A little electronic digging should bring them to light. GP

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