

G-SIG FORUM #51

...from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society (www.stlgs.org/) and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis, Mo. (www.gahs-stlouis.org).

This forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

You may submit a notice or request for information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). *EXCHANGE!* notices run only once, but you may resubmit, within reason. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to persch3@hotmail.com.

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STRASBOURG! *by Gerald Perschbacher*

Few Germanic cities have such a storied past as Strasbourg. Situated immediately west of the Rhine River, it was one of the major crossing points to what we now know as Germany. Its massive bridge was the target of armies over the centuries. Its wealth as a city was coveted by emperors, kings, and nobles. It became a center for trade and commerce. Its burghers (prominent city leaders and “shakers”) made an impact on whichever country claimed it.

Today, Strasbourg is in France. Seated along the eastern edge of Alsace, Strasbourg was a bargaining chip many times in the last 500 years. Authorities argued over it. Negotiations and challenges abounded for hundreds of years. Strasbourg was often self-administered, sometimes under German control, other times under the French. Even the Spanish looked at it longingly on their march to The Netherlands in the 1600s. The city’s citizens became shrewd toward and wary of whichever side claimed the city or moved troops nearby.

German leaders said it was the bastion of a safe future for the western edge of their land. The French wanted it for their defense. German officials saw the city as a funneling point for French armies ready to attract through the flatlands and rolling hills to the east.

Some sources say the name means “City of Roads.” That’s a bit off from the actual meaning, which is “Road Fortress.” It’s the difference between “—berg” and “—burg” (also written as “—bourg”). While “berg” means a town or city, “burg” (“bourg”) means a fortification or castle.

Certain sources say the city was first named *Argentorate*, a center for the Celts who had lived in the lower portion of Alsace (“lower” by reason of the Rhine River’s flow). The Romans made it their own city in 12 B.C.

Even by that time, the city was a cultural site and boomed commercially, according to archaeological discoveries. Trade up and down the river has been a hallmark of city history, connecting commerce from Italy to Holland.

As German tribes settled in the area and the Roman Empire became a memory in the fifth century A.D., the river and canals that were constructed not only made commerce more advantageous on the waterways, but even the canals proved defensive. Armies found it difficult to march easily into a city that clung to such a system.

Vineyards abounded on the limestone hills of the Vosges Mountains. In early Germanic history, wine proved a good commodity that could make men and women rich! It was also one of the safest drinks before the advent of clean water systems for large cities.

Strasbourg was third among German centers in population as early as 1444 with 16,000 dwellers, according to the oldest census that exists. Only Cologne and Nuremberg were larger. Strasbourg was granted status as an Imperial City or *Reichstadt*, which meant it generally controlled its present and future, as long as it paid homage to the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire or the king of France (whichever power controlled it at the time).

Determining the city’s course through history for many years was a Council of Thirteen with a larger body comprised of guild members and other prominent citizens. These groups appointed other officials for daily management of local affairs.

Early in the 1400s, Strasbourg became a printing center thanks to Jean Gensfleisch of Mainz. The man, commonly known as Gutenberg, spent a good portion of his life in Strasbourg. By 1530, Strasbourg had

become a major printing area for documents of the Reformation. It also was a city that prided itself on education. In 1538 Johann Sturm started the *Scola Argentinensis*, which became the forerunner of the University of Strasbourg. Reformers, among them John (Jean) Calvin and Caspar Hedio, taught at the institution. Hedio was prolific in writing books on Reformation themes and proudly saw them being printed in Strasbourg.

Strasbourg was not alone. It owned a string of fiefs from which it obtained taxes. These bailiwicks were west of the city and slightly to the north and south. The holdings had come to the city as small patches here and there, as history dealt the hand. The other large landowner in the northern stretches of Alsace was the Count of Hanau-Lichtenberg, who likewise held profitable Hessian territory east of Darmstadt. There were other cities and properties beyond the scope of the count and Strasbourg, but their influence was not as pronounced.

Interestingly, Strasbourg had the Count of Hanau-Lichtenberg as its “overseer,” meaning he made sure the city paid its dues to the emperor and that it remained a vital part of the Empire.

In the southern reaches of Alsace, the main landowner was the House of Hapsburg. After the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1848), the king of France forced his hand militarily and gained control of Alsace, including Strasbourg. The Hapsburgs seemed eager to make the deal and expand their holdings elsewhere. In the 1697 the king demanded allegiance and paid a visit to the great city, but Strasbourg nearly went to war. In the closing hours of diplomacy as a French military force headed their way, city Burghers settled for peace and bowed to French intervention.

The French immediately went to work to make Strasbourg one of the strongest fortified cities on the continent.

Exactly what did others think of the city? In 1696, Ludwig Wilhelm, Margrave of Baden, wrote: “For Germany, this city would serve as nothing but a permanent insurance of peace. For France, however, it is an open gateway for war, through which (that nation), whenever it chooses, can break loose its power into the open country.”

One French military adviser noted at that time, “To surrender a Rhine crossing and location of Strasbourg’s size and strength, worth more than all the rest of Alsace, would mean relinquishing to the Germans the finest and

most secure arsenal in Europe.”

Another military expert noted in 1696 that “I perceive no power in Europe capable of surrounding it....The excellence of its fortifications make it practically invincible, assuming defense by a garrison of two to twelve thousand men, well-supplied and commanded by people of common intelligence.”

Back and forth the city went...to the German empire in the east...then back to the French kingdom in the west. All the while, the citizens of Strasbourg were determined to be as self-sufficient as possible.

As late as the First World War, Alsace and Strasbourg were sore points of negotiation. France secured the territory after that war, and it has remained there. But countless visitors remark that it is perhaps the most “German” city in all of France.

I tell you this because it is good to learn the history of the areas where your ancestors had lived. If they dwelled near this area of the Rhine, you can imagine the tension they faced as wars and rumors of wars abounded. That might have given just cause for them to head to America. If you know the history of your ancestral area, you may understand a bit of the way your ancestors thought and how they viewed life. Perhaps those traits have carried down to you...without even knowing it!

The eastern edge of Germany had its own challenges. So did the north, the south, and the central regions. There were cultural differences, too, so while you’re studying a village or town, also study the larger territory, its changes in noble ownership, its commerce, and more. By so doing, you will get a slice of the past to help in your studies!

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LET YOUR FRIENDS KNOW...!

If you have friends who travel, ask them if they have been to Germany. Bring it up gently, then (if they say “yes”), tell them of your interest in “things Germanic” and how you are researching your heritage and lineage.

In the conversation, ask if they happen to have any books or maps of Germany you may borrow. Chances are good that they will. Travel

guides and booklets on select sites (such as cities or regions) often are available only at or near that location, so you may be stumbling onto a wealth of information that does not appear elsewhere.

Maybe your friends are willing to give you the items. But if their stuff is only on loan, borrow them, read them, scan sections into your personal computer for reference, or photocopy the pages you want. File the material under the name of the book and its date of publication. And one day, that little folder may provide valuable insights into your ongoing research!
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BUILDING ON THAT IDEA...

...glean what you can online! Web searches can be fun and informative. They also can provide unconfirmed statements, so don't take everything as pure fact. Run copies of pertinent pages of information suitable to your research. Or copy-and-paste paragraphs and sections into your own electronic document (attributing the sources), and build a healthy folder on the topic you are studying.
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SEEKING...ALWAYS SEEKING...

Discover GermanSpecialinterest@yahoogroups.com and it might solve your problems -- or at least put you on a better track for answers.

Case in point: Carol asked our G-SIG Yahoo group about surmounting a brick wall relating to her family's paternal grandfather. "I am looking for the town of origin for my 2-great-grandfather, Jakob Gebhardt (married in Minden on the 14th of February, 1819, to Marie Dorothee Christine Voelkening). Carol said, "He is listed on the marriage record as being 'aus Maienfeld bei Magdeburg.' My limited experience with German records suggests that the first name is a smaller town and is associated with the second, which is larger." After searching for several years, Carol sent this matter to our Yahoo group.

G-SIG participant Cindy responded: "I checked the Meyers-Orts this morning and there were 12 'Marienfeld' places in German when it was published (roughly 1912) . Additionally there were 16 'Marienfelde' and a couple of other variations (Marienfelder) . None refer to being near

Magdeburg distinctly, but I think some additional work could be put into finding it....”

Dave added his observations: “There is a Marienfeld which is closer to Minden than it is to Magdeburg (much further to the east).

http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&source=s_q&hl=en&geocode=&q=marienfeld,+germany&ll=37.0625,-95.677068&sspn=32.527387,56.513672&ie=UTF8&hq=&hnear=Marienfeld+Harsewinkel,+G%C3%BCtersloh,+North+Rhine-Westphalia,+Germany&z=13

I mention this because there's a good chance ‘Maienfeld’ was either misspelled or misunderstood by the author of the record. If Magdeburg was correct, then you may be looking for a smaller place (Maienfeld) that no longer exists and was absorbed by another town, perhaps Magdeburg....”

Kathy jumped in: “I agree with Dave. If the town was near Magdeburg, it may have been absorbed. That is what my friend from Germany thinks, also. I asked him about your question, and he could not find a Marienfeld, either. He suggests you check with some of the historical/genealogy societies in Magdeburg and ask them.” Kathy offered the name of a group: Arbeitsgemeinschaft Genealogie, Thiemstr. 7 (Literaturhaus), 39104 Magdeburg (e-mail: Horst.Koetz@t-online.de). She encouraged Carol to check <http://gvmu.robertbergner.com/pages/verein/vorstand.php>.

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EXCHANGE! G-SIG comments, ideas, & requests:

+ If you want to learn more about the city featured in this edition, look for the book, *Strasbourg in Transition, 1648-1789*, by Franklin L. Ford (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.; 1958). You can also check other sources online by doing a search.

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Want a printed copy of *G-SIG FORUM* by mail? Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: St. Louis Genealogical Society, Attn. Ed Schmidt; #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140; St. Louis, MO 63143. Not yet on the e-mail list for the G-SIG FORUM? Write to germansig@stlgs.org. (Note: All copyright privileges for this *FORUM* are reserved by the compiler; no item is to be duplicated or distributed without permission.)

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Have great ideas for the *G-SIG FORUM*? Submit your material to persch3@hotmail.com or mail it to: StLGS, Attn: G-SIG, #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140, St. Louis, MO 63143.