

G-SIG FORUM #83

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. (check the site at www.gahs-stlouis.org). This forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

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Four Doctors in a Row! by Gerald Perschbacher

On my fourth research trip to Germany in 2012, I discovered an intriguing fact: Four of my ancestors held earned doctoral degrees in law in the 1600s and 1700s. Even more interesting, this happened in three consecutive generations.

Details surfaced when I made advance contact with a researcher and archivist on the staff of the main archives in Frankfurt-on-the-Main. Upon my arrival, he presented 11 pages full of textual information which he gleaned and itemized from a wide range of official sources. He panned ledgers, lists, property and tax files, legal entries, plus special news items relating to Frankfurt. I cannot imagine the amount of hours he spent in the process.

He confessed that a great deal of information was discovered on the history of Frankfurt -- things the researchers had never uncovered previously. Due to this, the "cost factor" was kindly adjusted in my favor.

I poured over the pages, starting with this entry:

Johann Wilhelm Persbecher von Babenhausen, Apotheker Zum Engel (+ 1666)

Heiratsbuch 4 (1635-1657), fol. 263r:

1.2.1648 (Di): Herr Johann Wilhelm Perßbecher von Babenhausen, des Ehrwürdig(en) vndt Wohlgelehrt(en) Herrn Johannis Perßbechers, Evangelisch(en) Predigers daselbst(en) Ehelicher Sohn, vndt Fr(au) Catharina, weylandt Herr Johann Grasers, Burgers vndt gewesenen Apothekers alhier S. hind(er)pliebene Wittib geb. Pfleger.¹

[Randvermerk: + 1666 5. Sept.]

Let me clue you in on the highpoints of this first entry. My ancestor who first settled in Frankfurt in the last year of the Thirty Years' War (1648) came from Babenhausen, the main city and home of the Count of Hanau-Lichtenberg. That ancestor was an apothecary (pharmacist or medicinal specialist). He died in 1666. In the *Heiratsbuch* (marriage book for the community) it declares that he was the son of "Johannis Perssbechers, Evangelical (Protestant) preacher..." Through previous study, I had discovered that *Pfarrer* (Pastor) Johannes had graduated from

the University of Wittenberg around 1607, and that his father had graduated from the same institution around 1570. Educated men, indeed!

How did I absorb this new information? I realized that J. Wilhelm and his family could hardly risk his travel across unfriendly territories during 30 years of war (1618-1648) so he broke the tradition of being educated as a Lutheran pastor. However, he obtained his higher education elsewhere and, according to at least one reference, spent some time in the more stable area of Strasbourg in Alsace (Elsass). That large, Imperial city (with special rights conferred by the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the Germans was a protectorate of the Count of Hanau-Lichtenberg whom Pfarrer Perschbacher served as head pastor for the territory.

In 1653 J. Wilhelm had a son: Wilhelm (1653-1706). At this point in the 11 page document, a lengthy amount of detailed information was revealed. Young Wilhelm became orphaned when he was 14 years old. Two men of high status took over his upbringing and arranged for his education at the University of Giessen. He traveled to the cities of "Lyon, Turin, Genua, Lucca, Pisa, Florenz und Siena (to) Rome." Evidently he ended up visiting the Pope twice! He became a special envoy for Prince Carl of Hessen-Rheinfels and continued his trips. Now let's realize this was the late 1600s when Central Europe was rebuilding itself after 30 years of war. He went to Paris, Naples, many Italian places, locations in the German Empire ("Venedig, Tirol, Bayern, Schwaben, Franken...Innsbruck, Augsburg, Nuernberg" and even Munich). He visited The Netherlands, Holland, and England, too! All this, and he was still in his 20s.

Then he married into the patrician Frauenstein "family" of Frankfurt, which was similar to a Professional Guild of politicians, businessmen, and leaders. Their main competition came from the Limpurg "family." Wilhelm evidently was an envoy in many ways, promoting the virtues of the business and culture of Frankfurt, one of the greatest trade centers of Europe. He may have carried secret trade documents and legal agreements for Imperial Frankfurt.

Sadly, when I researched those two "families," I was becoming frustrated. That's when my contact said that the old files on those "families" had been destroyed during the Second World War. Very little existed to shed light on the functions and membership. So I realized that these entries on this one ancestor were bringing all sorts of facts to new light for our current generation of researchers!

Wilhelm, with a doctorate in law, suffered a stroke but still lived for several years. His son Philipp Wilhelm (born 1695) followed in the educated steps of his father. Philipp worked on his doctorate in law at the University of Altdorf and

became a legal expert for important matters relating to Frankfurt. Like his father, he became a community leader and "advocate," who was a lawyer with political clout. He officially associated with Graf Ludwig Moritz of Loewenstein-Wertheim, too. Dr. jur. Philipp Wilhelm Perschbecher died in 1746.

Next came Dr. jur. Christoph Wilhelm Perschbecher, who obtained his higher education at Marburg and Rinteln (now in Lower Saxony). He, too, became prominent in Frankfurt leadership already by 1748 upon completion of his university dissertation.

Rounding off the foursome of legal experts was Johann Jacob Perschbecher, possibly a younger brother of Christoph (and son of Philipp). J. Jacob was very active in Frankfurt politics and functions by 1760 and well into the 1770s.

I never knew what to expect when I made e-mail contact with the archives in Frankfurt. What they discovered amazed them, too! There is no reason your research cannot uncover significant facts in local or regional history, here in America or in Germany.

It is interesting how history flows. About four months after my 2012 trip, I received official notice that Concordia University in Chicago was awarding an honorary *Doctor of Laws* degree to me for accomplishments and achievements over the past 35 years. *Doctor of Laws...?* Maybe it's in my ancestral blood!

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CHIPPING AWAY? Are you trying to chip into history but need to make contact with an archives in Germany? First, go online and search for the archives you think may have information you seek. If possible, go to the list of that archives' officials/employees/researchers. Select someone of less-than-highest rank (such as an assistant chief archivist) or write to the head. Then draft your simple, short request via e-mail. Use a free online translation service (such as Google Translate), highlight your English message then copy, save, and paste it for the translating service to convert it to German. Copy the translated version and paste it into your original e-mail message. Send the English AND German message in the same e-mail, directed to the official of your choice. That way, if they are not fluent in English, they have it in German. BE SURE to keep your comments crisp and short and do not ask more than a question or two in your first e-mail. If there is a response, you can ease into more questions as a relationship builds.

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Spelling Issues in German Research by Fred Held

Fred Held (fhheld@netzero.net) is librarian at the St. Louis North Family History Center in Hazelwood.

At a G-SIG event we had a great deal of levity about the fact that many were researching families by the same name: **Meyer**. One person was concerned about how their Meyer family spelled their name.

Keep in mind that “correct” spelling is a 20th century phenomenon. Prior to that the spelling is whatever the scribe thought they heard that day. In Edna Bentz’ handbook, *If I Can You Can Decipher Germanic Records* she makes note that surnames will be spelled the way the preacher spelled the name. It is possible: new preacher, new spelling. If the family moved it may be spelled in a different way in another village. Most of our ancestors were illiterate. They could neither read nor write and relied on a local scribe, usually the pastor, to write their name.

Coincidentally, one person said that in her Bavarian family she found **Meyer** also spelled **Meier, Mayer, and Meÿer** in four consecutive generations. However, there are other possibilities, such as **Maier, Mejer, Majer, Meijer, and Maijer** and maybe even **Maher**. (Please note: the letter “j” is pronounced as a “y” in German.) In my own home region of western Pennsylvania all the Meyer families changed the spelling to **Myers**.

I’ve had a similar experience with my grandmother’s family name of **Riggle**. It is spelled **Reigle, Riegle, Reigel, Riegel, and Riegell**. Even in the church records in The Pfalz it was spelled **Reihell**.

My wife’s family name is **Dreistadt**, and we’ve had a similar experience: **Dreystadt, Dreistatt, and Dreystatt**, among others. In addition, in the village very near the French border where we’ve been able trace the family, there was an Anton Troisville. Anton turns out to be the brother of **Paul Dreistadt** in the same village. **Troisville is French for “three villages/cities,” the same meaning as Dreistadt**. To further confuse the modern genealogists, one branch of the **Dreistadt** family immigrated to the New Orleans area, and there they changed their surname to be **Threeton**.

In research I did for a friend, the German name **Durrang** was spelled **Dorang** in America. But one of the son’s Civil War records has the surname **Dorn**. Another son took the surname **Doran**, and still another **Durrant**.

The fact is that many of our Germany ancestors changed their surname by either simply Anglicizing it (**Schneider to Snyder**) or by translating it (**Schneider to Tailor**). The amateur genealogist must always have an open mind about the spelling of their family's name

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TIP FOR RESEARCH!

You may have heard this before, but it deserves re-consideration. Stephen Mayfield (mayfish@bellsouth.net) has an idea!

He says, "I am descended from ancestors that immigrated from the Bergkirchen, Westfalen, area, near Minden. I have found a website on the immigrants from Westfalen to America. They are trying to find what happened to their relatives, usually not ancestors, when they went to America and elsewhere."

Steve suggests interested parties check this site: www.amerikanetz.de.

Play around the site and you'll see:  [auswanderer-kreis-herford-liste-list.pdf](#) 2.7 M

Here is one of the entries:

Abker, Anna Margarethe Ilsabein

Westerenger

***12.11.1839**

ausgewandert: 1860 in die USA

befindet sich in der Anstalt Benninghausen

die Gemeinde will die Überfahrtkosten tragen

There are numerous entries to examine, and it is helpful to see the date of birth and the years the people traveled to America. Communities are also mentioned. This is only one idea of how research can progress online, and you may find other sites that are equally helpful. If you do, let us know about them!

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Tools for German Research by Fred Held

The LDS FamilySearch website contains many indexed databases of documentable data. As part of the process of indexing these data was the subdividing the information into batches. Each such group of data is assigned a Batch Number. A batch may be only a small part of the records for a particular group of records, usually one book. Most data in the "Records" portion of

FamilySearch have both the Batch Number and the Source Document (FHL microfilm) number given.

Batch Numbers usually start with a letter, such as C, M, or D (for Christening, marriage, and death, respectively). But, it may also start with J and K where the male and female Christenings have been separated. At times other letters, such as I and P are used. The letter is followed by five numeric digits that usually indicate a particular set of village records. This is followed by a dash and number to indicate the subgroup.

Batch Numbers for your ancestral village can also be found on an online catalog. There are a couple websites that have the numbers cataloged. For Germany the most complete one is http://www.igi-index.de/?page_id=65. (There is a similar site for the UK.)

Batch Numbers can be a powerful tool to aid in your research, because it can be used to limit your searches to one era in one village. The search can be activated in two ways. Either click on the Batch Number on a individual hit from a FamilySearch search or look up you village in the catalog above.

This allows you to find all of those in that restrictive group in that village. You can now restrict the search further to only those that have a particular surname. If the surname has been spelled various ways, it may be used to isolate those who had specific parents by only entering only the given names of the parents (no surname), and maybe entering a time range. If you know you ancestor was born in that village and the standard given-surname search does not give you a hit, try entering only the given name and a narrow time range. This will usually show how the name was indexed.

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G-SIG is "multi-tiered" to maximize your progress and enjoyment in "the search." G-SIG FORUM is one tier. Bimonthly Gatherings is another (special speakers are featured). And the third tier is Clusters that usually center on a specific area of Germany, but could also specialize in German food, music, and other cultural endeavors. Come to a Gathering to discover how it all fits together!

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