

G-SIG FORUM #1

Greetings! This is the first of a “FORUM” series of communications from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is a collaborative effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society and the German American Heritage Society, both based in the St. Louis area.

The purpose of this communication is to provide a forum for educational , historical and genealogical information with fresh insights and ideas to help your research or enjoyment of German traditions and ancestry. Your G-SIG group leader, Gerald Perschbacher, will initially serve as “FORUM” compiler and coordinator.

If you would like to include a notice or request for help, please submit your information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section which will appear in the future at the end (limit 50 words). For example, if you are seeking information on a certain town or area of Germany, you might say: **“LEIPZIG—I’m interested in visiting the area, churches and citizens of Leipzig, and learning who came to America in the late 1800s. Can anybody help? Joe Schmidlap, joey@germiny.com.”** Of course, this is a fictitious address, but you get the idea. Or: **“TRANSLATOR NEEDED to help with some documents from my great-grandparents. Just need to get the basics. Am willing to compensate or will trade a free German book...”** (Then add your name, address, phone, or e-mail). *EXCHANGE!* notices are to run only once, but you may freshen the notice and resubmit. If the number of submissions is high, then officials will make the necessary judgment as to what will “fit” and be fair within time and space constraints.

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NO GERMAN IS TRULY A PRUSSIAN

by Gerald Perschbacher

Many people say their ancestors were German Prussians, but the statement should be properly understood. These were Prussians only by reason of the territory in which lived.

The word Prussia denotes the land along the Baltic in northeastern Germany and even into what is now Poland. It also included part of southern Lithuania and Russia.

How did the area obtain its name? It was tribal. The Prussians were a group of people with ties to Lithuanians. The Slavic-Baltic Prussians dominated the area. After the Crusades were concluded in the Middle East, there was a new series of Crusades into the area of Prussia. The Teutonic Knights were invited by Conrad of Mazovia to stabilize the eastern boarder around the year 1226. The tribal Prussians were killed, migrated elsewhere, or were melded into other tribes and peoples. From what we know, they no longer exist as a separate group.

Several knightly orders, but mainly the Teutonic Knights, mustered forces from all over the Germanic portions of the Holy Roman Empire to foray in the Prussian area on a seasonal basis. The idea of eastward expansion was similar (in a certain degree) to the desire for westward expansion of the United States in the 1800s. The Teutonic Knights established control and built numerous castles and enclaves, which resulted in a buffer state including much of what is now Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, plus part of northern Poland.

Early expansion was under the banner of bringing the Christian faith to nonbelievers. However, by 1466, Christianity had become well established and the Kingdom of Poland became a powerful force. The waning influence of the Teutonic Knights was based on maintaining long-held territories rather than spreading their faith.

In 1525 the master of the order turned Protestant. He was instrumental in converting part of the order's territories into what was called the Duchy of Prussia. Historians call this the first Protestant State.

Prussia became a very large territory and independent state from 1701 until the unification of Germany in 1871. Its army was more renowned with the advance of time. Some historians have said that Prussia was an army in search of a country, and the result was a unified Germany. Until 1945, Prussia was known as the largest single land unit in Germany.

But none of the Germans were Prussian by lineage. No German tribe carried the name. It was applied to Germans merely as a location.

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MORE THAN JUST HIGH AND LOW GERMAN

Got an old document in German? The first reaction by many people is that there are two types of German: High and Low. : Simply put, Low basically refers to the plains or low areas of northern Germany. High refers to the higher elevations to the south, such as Bavaria. But there is an area in between.

What some call “Mit-Deutsch” or Middle German was prevalent in the border areas between the high and low lands. Hessians (really known in German as Hessens) were mainly of the middle German persuasion. How did this develop?

Some scholars believe that middle German is perhaps the oldest form of the language. Others believe it is a territorial version. The language has been used in the area where Germany developed in its early stages. Since the development of the Kingdom of the Franks began around 500 A.D. in the area now containing the low countries and the borderlands of German and France, and since this was the first significant German

empire that made any notable and long lasting impact on European history, Middle German may have its roots in the oldest form of the German language.

But let's pause for a moment. Until the codification of the German language in print with the popularization of Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, German language variations were numerous. Territorial slang and usage prevailed.

You won't find many documents written in German prior to the 1500s, since Latin was the scholarly language in which important matters were recorded.

Middle German appears to be close to High German, and thus has been claimed by some experts as a derivation. Yet, Middle German has many subtle differences in usage and pronunciation.

If you need to have some old documents translated, be aware of the High and Low designations. It could make a difference !

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FROM THE RECENT SURVEY...

...it became clear that most G-SIG participants want to "jump the pond" and make contact with ancestral sites in Germany. Well, it is a valiant and worthwhile effort, but be wary of your own self-made pitfalls.

Let's say you know the German village from which your family came. You would like to make contact, but do not know where to start. Some people take tours to Germany and purposely anticipate a visit to their ancestral town. They make no contact with the inhabitants before their visit. When they arrive in the town and have a little spare time to find some answers, they practically demand to get all they can in a matter of minutes.

Those demands usually are made at the Rathaus (city hall) or in the main church. Both sites usually maintain an archives or have access to old files. However, in some cases, the files have been consolidated in a regional collection and are not in or near the town.

Germans are skeptical of Americans who try to find their lineage on a "fast-food, drive-in" basis. Mainly, Germans are not comfortable with strangers trying to secure the use of old files and record books.

More than that, there are customs. In parts of Germany, if you want to obtain information from old files in the church, then you may be expected to make a donation to the person who gathers the facts. That's mainly because churches receive financial assistance from the government. Therefore, if you want to use the files that are maintained at government expense, it is proper to donate to the local church to assist in the effort of preservation and retrieval.

There may be a cost for photocopying documents, too, although historians and researchers are less prone to photocopy and more prone to typing out the information on a single sheet. That one page list of information may contain hours of work. If you benefit from such labor, simply ask if there is a donation amount that is suggested.

In some archives, only a few people are allowed access. That's for the good of the community in order to preserve what exists. Imagine if numerous hands and fingers from a countless host of visitors paged through books from the 1600, 1700s, or 1800s. Damage would be likely. Pages might even be "taken."

If you plan to make contact with your ancestral village, be cordial. A high number of Germans can understand simple English. If you know a little German, using some of their familiar words could help. Be understanding. Be kind. Be patient. And be pleasantly persistent.

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MORE GEMS BASED ON SURVEY RESULTS...

Here are a few gems of information from the G-SIG Survey that concluded in October:

Respondents noted their greatest interest was in Germanic History, 1700s & 1800s and Migration & its Impact. Next comes Cultural, Family Life & Customs.

Do you want to share some insights or story material relating to these subjects? Have you found an item of primary importance in your research on these topics? Then share your insights with G-SIG. Here is an example to whet your appetite:

For many years, Germany was adversely affected by the results of the Thirty Year's War. (*Dreißigjähriger Krieg*, 1618-1648). It was a war that was based on territorial and religious lines and involved the powerful army of Gustavus Adolphus, king of the Swedes. Germany's territories became the battleground. Entire populations in small villages were wiped out or forced to move for safety. Large villages were dramatically reduced in population. Protective walls around cities and castles were destroyed. Churches were burned. Large cities were put to the torch.

Soldiers came from various countries. Many were mercenaries, fighting in order to secure booty and wealth. Spanish soldiers entered German areas under the banner of Catholic leadership. So did Bavarian troops. Of the two, it has been mentioned in old documents that the Spanish were "more civilized." That may be taken to mean that they were mainly professionals who had been trained for military action and tended not to alienate conquered citizens.

The plagues ravaged the countryside in the wake of war. Yes, this even involved instances of the Bubonic Plague, which resurfaced for centuries after it first entered German lands in the 1300s.

After 30 years of warfare, it took several generations before German territories returned to their former levels of population and importance.

In the 1700s, as Germany territories recovered, France was becoming less and less interested in its monarchy. Once the American Revolution succeeded, it wasn't long for the French to foment rebellion. Indeed, there was civil discontent in much of Europe.

If your ancestors came to America in the 1700s and 1800s, study the political and social situation of the times. You will find one name stands high above the others as a significant influence on the future of Germans: Napoleon.

Dominating German territories, setting up his relatives and friends into key positions, and conquering or scaring armies into submission, Napoleon bested the Rhineland and took command of Prussia. When he aimed for Russia, German troops made up a huge percentage of his army. It was German troops, brought up from the rear, who also fought to protect the retreating French army as it departed Russia during the onset of one of Europe's worst winters.

Perhaps one of your ancestors marched into Russia with Napoleon! One way to find out is to check with regional or local authorities in Germany and search for references to the death of your ancestors. If someone died in a military hospital (*Lazaret*) during the time of French engagement, then there is a possibility. Perhaps your ancestors fought in the Battle of Nations in 1813, against Napoleon.

Animosity between French and German forces continued well into the 1800s, resulting in the formation of Germany. In the 1900s, more animosity surfaced, especially in two world wars.

Obtain an understanding of the cultural, economic, military, and social situations prevalent in Germany at the time your family left for America. It may help you understand why they saw America as the Land of Opportunity.

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READY TO FORM A CLUSTER?

Do you have a special interest in Bavaria? What about the Rhineland or Palatinate? Interested in Prussia?

Then let's consider forming a Cluster for each within G-SIG.

The subject of “Germany” and German lineage or heritage is massive. There are territories to study, social settings to learn, even dialect differences. What can maximize our fun and discovery is to form Clusters that center on special areas of common interest.

How can it work? Let’s say you and 9 others in G-SIG are interested in Bavaria. You form a Cluster. Maybe you meet at someone’s home or a restaurant. Perhaps you simply sit together at a G-SIG meeting and talk before the activity begins. Maybe you muster your abilities and make a presentation on Bavaria. It could be that you merely communicate regularly by e-mail or phone, sharing questions or insights.

The Cluster is a support circle of common interest, giving insights and energy to discovery and research. Now multiply this idea to include a Cluster on several other areas of what is now Germany, and you get the picture.

Like the idea? If so, it would work best if you get involved with only 1 or 2 Clusters, and then in a year or so, if you so desire, change to 1 or 2 others. This will focus your interest on a select are of discovery rather than taking on too many subjects or topics at once. To start, let’s see what type of interest there is for the following Clusters:

- + Prussian Cluster
- + Rhineland Cluster (includes the Palatinate & Hessian territories)
- + Bavarian Cluster
- + Saxon Cluster

If you are interested in being involved in a Cluster, contact one of the following by e-mail: John Wittenberg at jwittenberg@rain.com or Hermann Eisele at heisele@weissandassoc.com . Or drop a note to Gerald Perschbacher at 8868 Rock Forest Dr., St. Louis, MO 63123-1116.

Just say, “I’d like to be involved in the _____ Cluster.” Provide your **name, address, phone number, and e-mail address (if possible)**. If you would **like to help** coordinate the Cluster in its initial formation, please indicate. **Add a comment** you might have about your expectations from being involved in the Cluster.

As we see it, one great purpose for G-SIG is to foster and coordinate specialized study in the subject of Germany, and this is a great way to start!

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Hope you enjoyed this first G-SIG FORUM!

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Future installments of G-SIG FORUM will be sent by e-mail to all on the G-SIG list. 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 . (All copyright privileges for this FORUM are reserved by the compiler; no item is to be duplicated or distributed without permission.)