

# *Germanic Insights*

**...for your edification and research in the never-ending hunt for the ancestral past.  
By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (all rights reserved; not to be duplicated without permission).**

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*Bremerhaven (the port for Bremen) in the mid-1800s.*

## *Getting to North America & Back*

*By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher, LL.D.*

Emigrating to America wasn't easy in the 1800s. Basically, people had to renounce their allegiance and any rights that appertained, often including inheritance rights of land. They were released from military service, and along with that release came the need to defend themselves in the future. They were relieved of obligations to lords and officials, which may sound good but was scary for some people who NEVER had to fend for themselves since overseers and officials were available. Freedom has its benefits, but when Germanic people from Western Europe and points north disavowed their original homeland, they disavowed any support socially and communally. Today, this would be tantamount to leaving an area where your family has lived for centuries, and severing the tie of insurance, Social Security, and potential loan options from relatives. Your new support group was the travelers who came with you.

European communities struggled with overcrowding which meant jobs were regulated, paid little, and offered no hope to rise above that level of income. Service to the "state" in which you lived was mandatory at the whim and call of officials. Those leaders tended to call citizens into service on work projects or military

security at times when crops needed very little attention since food was precious and the health of economies relied on predictable income from yields. With overcrowding came the danger of plagues, the spread of disease, and the increase of unsanitary surroundings. The need for water was critical at times, and even that option was regulated when adverse circumstances dictated. Numerous restrictions and regulations existed in Germanic lands.



***Above: Companies and ship owners advertised for passengers. Papers for passage were among the most precious items for people emigrating from Europe in the 1800s.***

Countless books and articles, so it seems, have been written on these subjects. More new ones pop up on occasion. If you want to know what your ancestors faced when they left the confines of Europe, then seek out two or three good sources on the subject and “be educated.” A search online can bring some of those sources to light. A visit to a bookstore or library may serve likewise. If you know of a “used-book sale” coming up soon, consider that as a place to visit.

What should you seek? Once you know the area and the era of your ancestral departure, look for books and articles (including maps) that deal with the history of that area. Similarly, discover what the area of settlement was like during that time. In the late 1800s and early 1900s there were numerous communities across the United States that produced county histories which may shed tremendous light on pioneer living, the arrival of immigrants, where people settled and why, and even families are given by name. If your ancestors came at a time of important historical events (such as the American Civil War or the Industrial Revolution of 1760-1840)), then check sources on that subject pertaining to the area of settlement. If your family left Germany during a period of European rebellion (such as the late 1830s, 1840s, even 1850s) discover what you can from that period.

Much of what I say in this opening article may apply to planning a trip to your ancestral town. Thus, the information serves to lead toward the next article.



*Above: The distance from Bremen to its port site of Bremerhaven is depicted here.*

## ***Think you ‘Can’t do it’? Think again! Preparing for Your Trip Overseas***

Here is a list of things to do if planning for a visit to your ancestral site.

**How should you PREPARE to visit those ancestral sites?** Gain a basic grasp of regional history and of the language. At least learn key words so you can communicate. There are regional “slang” words and favorite phrases to understand. If you can, contact people overseas and find if they can help you become familiar with the area well in advance of your trip. Or perhaps they can host you for a time while you are there; they become guides to your past!

**Decide WHERE to go, WHAT to look for, and HOW LONG you can stay.** Some visits to archives or special collections of documents require making an appointment days or weeks in advance. Be prepared to visit an archive in the morning, look at a list of documents you want, then order those from the “stacks.” You may be asked to return in the afternoon to see the documents. If possible before your trip, know the rules for copying/photographing. Even better, ask a historian or language expert to tag along with you to maximize your gleaning of facts. There are challenges involved. For example, many old entries in books were hand written. Deciphering the letters, words, and sentences can be an exercise in free-flowing creativity and a lot of “what-ifs” on unusual ways in which letters are written. There also is the element of entries that are “creative” such as one I came across recently. It listed passengers aboard a ship in the 1840s. The name of the hometown was written by hand and was for a particular person coming to America. The town name was “Handorfer,” which might lead

you to believe that was THE name for the ancestral site -- HAND DORFER (a dorf is a small village). The word is common to Münster, but more careful thinking led me to realize this was a unique layman's spelling of Hannover!

Your research time is limited. You are there to glean and save what could be interesting or valued information. So, make a copy of important documents (marriage certificates, registration lists, etc.) and indicate WHAT those are, WHICH individuals were involved by name and relationship (if possible), WHEN the entries were made, and the degree of their importance.

English is widely known in much of Western and Northern Europe. If you are walking from site to site, secure English booklets and fliers. Visitor booths are common, so ask for English copies whenever you can. Personally, I like to obtain both versions which helps strengthen my language skills in German. When it comes to being understood, consider a simple truth: tourists sites and educational locations (including major archives) will usually have at least one worker or volunteer with whom you can converse in English. Keep your choice of words simple and your sentences short, speak distinctly, and you probably will make progress.

**How can you MAKE CONTACT WITH sources in Germany?** I'm speaking about doing that well in advance, at least a few months and up to a year before your trip. Here is a suggestion. If you know of some genealogical researchers in America who have contacts overseas, ask for their advice. Then initiate a contact by mail or email (possibly by phone, if special rates are available). Perhaps even a friend or relative can suggest the names of potential helpers. When sharing questions, keep those SHORT, CONCISE, and FEW in number. Keep your words simple. These factors cannot be restated too frequently! Establish a rapport, then increase the frequency and depth of your questions; if using email/the Postal Service, save comments and establish an ongoing file. By all means, maintain momentum!

**Do you need to SET A SCHEDULE IN ADVANCE?** Probably. Some archives have restricted hours or are ONLY by appointment. Private archives can be VERY helpful, so make sure the owner is available. I have found fabulous information through the cordial invitation of the caretaker of a private archive. One expert even invited me to a special room in his abode, where metal racks with books were kept. He then indicated he sold the books online. I saw three of immediate interest, and we bartered on the spot. Following that trip, he indicated there were several more he had found in that set of books. For the same price (he picked up postage) he sent them right to my door. No fiddling for room in my luggage! I paid him in Euros, and we'll get to more on that point in just a bit. When researching through the help of others, ELECTRONICALLY RECORD what is said about each document, event, factor, etc., or at least take good notes.

The reason for setting your schedule is clear once you get there. Time flies, and since travel time between sites in the same city may be necessary, add an extra 30 minutes to an hour just to get from point A to B. There may be some waiting in between, due to the other person, road repairs, and a lunch or rest stop. Do not expect to visit more than TWO Locations per day. That evening, sift through your findings and add any pertinent info that was not noted. If you don't do that on the day of the visit, you may become confused and forgetful on what you found that day.

**What should you EXPECT?** I don't believe a trip to Europe should be taken as your first step. But if you are starting from "Square One," just about ANYTHING will advance your knowledge. You have everything to gain! But if you prepare before the trip and have some basic information in order when you head to the Continent, you will truly maximize your potential and increase the "per dollar" return when you calculate overall trip costs versus results.

So, to emphasize, MAXIMIZE your discoveries by doing all the BASIC information gathering beforehand, then concentrate on harder-to-find details or clarifications when you arrive. If visiting an ancestral village, make

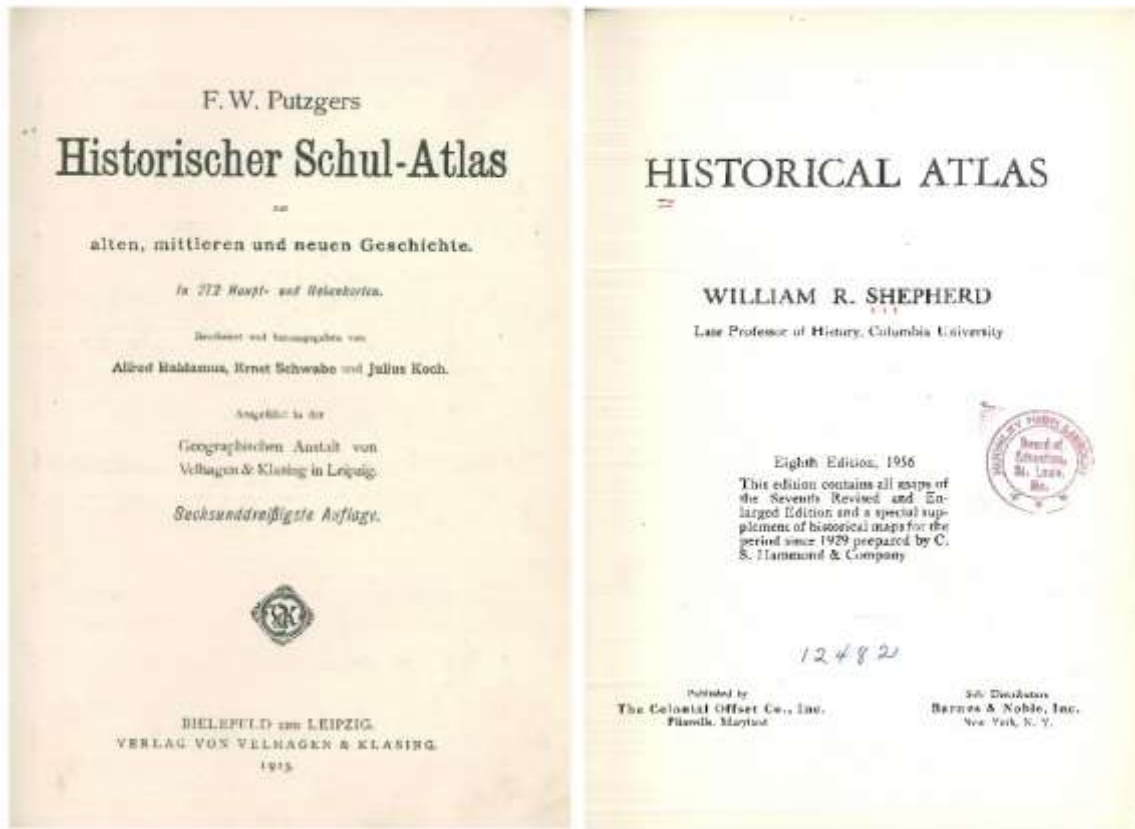
contact with family experts who may own documents, pictures, charts, and files NOT in an archive! You are there to GLEAN, so REAP as much as you can in the shortest time. Study it later!

**What should you TAKE and what should you BRING BACK?** Take as little as possible; provide your helpers with a few items of “thanks.” Obtain some Euros before you head overseas. These can be obtained through various sources, including possibly a bank in your area. The going rate of exchange with U.S. currency will be the main factor along with a slight premium for the exchange. But this will help you avoid an exchange in an airport (where costs often run higher) and gives you the potential of hitting the ground running when you arrive. Prior to your trip, it is wise to secure at least \$100 in Euros, perhaps more if that is your inclination. If you know someone in Germany (for example) has money in a local bank, that person may be willing to make the exchange on your behalf if your amount is not big. .

Go equipped to take good, high-definition photos; make photocopies; scan pages – but be SURE to have PERMISSION at each site, since rules may vary. Have SPACE to bring back books and documents (or pack and ship them from Germany).

I like to visit book stores with USED BOOKS (atlases especially) and books from my ancestral eras (who knows? SOME of those books may have been THEIRS!). BUY relatively NEW books about the region or town, even if in German. You may LEARN the language well enough to READ it later! Or have someone translate important sections. BUY hiking or biking maps that are EXTREMELY DETAILED, right down to walking trails and tree types!

In conclusion— PREPARE in advance, SCHEDULE in advance, and MAXIMIZE your effort while in Germany.



## ***Five “Ifs” and You!***

If travel to Europe is too costly for you, or if time and health constraints make it impossible, there are other alternatives to “going over.” Webinars and internet connections can broaden your scope. Television programs, radio broadcasts, and seminars can help. Books and DVDs may offer insights on the culture and eras of your research.

If you establish a connection with a genealogist in Europe, that person could be a major blessing in results. But establish your limit on costs. Much like a free market on pricing versus demand, researchers can vary widely on their fees. They probably will add the cost of copying and other potential expenses beyond their fees. When possible, ask others what they have experienced in this regard before you make a commitment

If you establish a friendly relationship with a volunteer researcher, you may be able to trade information instead of paying much (if at all) to your contact. Should your contact send a book he or she feels you need, and without charge, then reciprocate in some way by sending an item of equal interest to them.

If you only want some basic information to round off your family chart, then online searching and accompanying “memberships” or costs for usage are in order. Major libraries may offer access to special search sites without passing costs along to you. Check your options and choose times when the demand for computer time is low. If you head to a local library here in the U.S.A., have at least one flash drive handy, download all you wish (per guidelines at the library), and absorb the importance of what you find when you return to the confines of your home. There you can think through your results in a leisurely manner.

If these ideas sound grand to you, then the next thought shows my appreciation for trees. Judiciously choose what you must have in paper form, print it out, and catalog or organize it in such a manner that it can be easily tapped.



***Above: on a research trip in Germany, Dr. Gerald Perschbacher took this picture as a reminder of the archives in Marburg and those who assisted in research – from left, son Philip Perschbacher, Eicke Meyer (host-traveler-historian), and the on-duty archivist that day.***



## ***What Maps Do & Don't Tell***

Maps can tell you WHERE you are going and WHERE you came from. Apply that to your family history.

Examining an old map such as the one above can tell researchers WHERE their ancestors lived and the POINT FROM WHICH some of them left in order to come to North America. But researchers first must know WHERE those ancestors were in the first place.

The paper trail has become broader with each passing year since the advent of the internet. Searches that could have taken years now can be completed in a matter of days, even hours. Ancestral aids and experts augment that effort. Some folks are making livelihoods from the work. It's much easier now to backtrack through parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. Genealogical societies make the lighter and more enjoyable as friendships develop and deepen. Many novices a few years ago now border on professional status in what they CAN and DO find. That might happen to you, also. It comes through success derived from effort and time spent. But a person will only find what's "out there." If an ancestor's name was waylaid, entered incorrectly, or torn out of a ledger, a key entry may be forever lost – an incomplete file.

All this leads us to conclude that precious documents need to be preserved, protected, and respected. Insightful comments and notations by researchers could be affixed to or written on things like the map above. Too often people do not identify places and the relationships ancestors had to those locations. A map will tell much about the area, the terrain, about streams and borders, plus additional stuff such as exact ancestral town, the stream which brought water to the growing family, and roads that stretched beyond (on which ancestors spent hours in far travel or even from home to fields, then back at day's end), and all of that adds meat to the bones of history. But it is meat that must be added – by YOU.

Write down your findings, concisely, for your own option of recall and in order for future generations to avoid duplicating the work you carefully completed. That will allow knowledge and documentation to grow faster by avoiding the rediscovery of the past you already achieved. In one respect, you could say you are adding on to the “roads” of the past and helping others in your family search to avoid “dead ends.”



*Above: A Saxon church that turned Lutheran during the Protestant Reformation.*

## ***Churches Were a Vital Part of Your Family's Past***

Since the entry of Christianity into Germanic circles, it has been the religious choice and cornerstone for familial actions and civil actions. Granted, there are ups and down in that track record, especially some huge distortions and chasms witnessed during the eventually truncated Third Reich. As history would have it, that initial Christianity came to Germanic tribes around 719 A.D., according to documentation. That's not to say there were not inroads of the religion made in Germanic lands earlier, but with the actions of Winfrid (later named Boniface and eventually acclaimed to sainthood), perhaps the leading missionary to the Saxon people, earning the phrase, "Apostle of the Germans." He met martyrdom by the same, a group of Germans gone awry with wild axes chopping away at the mortal stature of Boniface and also at his books of religious content which, by some marvelous reasons, exist today as a sign of that sacrifice.

Roman Catholicism dominated Western Europe as the main religion up to the 1540s. As the protestant Reformation began in 1517 and gained impetus, institutions such as monasteries slipped in the number of brothers. Churches suffered neglect or damage. Riots broke out along the Rhein and at select spots elsewhere.



Even so, going to church and communing with other believers were important factors in Germanic schedules. Religious festivals speckled the months and days. Even Frankfurt's Messe Fair for books was recognized as a prime event. The word "Messa" relates to Holy Communion, and through various civic events Messa was applied as a unifying element of comradery beyond the bonding of Christians. Also, even for the big Frankfurt-am-Main book fair, there usually was an opening event of worship at which Holy Communion was offered.

Yes, most Germanic people were religious as Christians. Even before the arrival of Boniface, Germanic people were religious, only not Christian. They worshiped tribal deities, Norse gods, and fabled creatures. To gain a stronger grip on your ancestral past, explore the religious features of your ancestors, by era and by common worship. Germanic worshippers may have picked up snippets of Latin, the universal language for much of Europe over the centuries.

Do not hesitate to visit churches and huge cathedrals. Between some of those walls stood your ancestors, worshipping, chanting, responding with words of confession and grace.



*Above: Saxon worshippers appreciated ornate carvings as they stood to listen.*

*Below: Main cathedral in Mainz.*



*Visuals came from the following sources: Dr. Gerald Perschbacher and [www.freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com](http://www.freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com),*

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