



German Steamship SS Patricia, 1906, Photograph by Edwin Levick

Knowing where your German ancestors lived prior to emigrating from Germany is key to conducting successful German Family History research!

With nearly 50 million Americans identified as having German ancestry, German family history research is booming.

Setting aside the language barrier, the key roadblock that prevents the novice German family history researcher from uncovering his/her family's journey is not knowing the exact town or city where an ancestor resided prior to emigrating to America!

If you find yourself in this position as you begin your research, I highly recommend that rather than jumping right away into online research for German records and hoping for the best, start by combing through your ancestors' American documents... especially marriage and death records.

Remember, it is essential that you identify the town or city of residence prior to emigration... especially if your ancestor emigrated before German unification in 1871.

For example, while conducting research for a client this past spring, there were a number of assumptions that were made about his German ancestors... the family may have lived in Hanover, probably Catholic, and the records showed that the family likely emigrated to America in 1851. But what did the family mean by Hanover? The Kingdom of Hanover, the city of Hanover, or the region?

After reviewing all documents associated with his earliest German ancestors, I decided to conduct extensive research on their children, and I was fortunate enough to uncover an obituary for their oldest daughter. The biographical information identified in the obituary not only correlated with information found in the ship's manifest and other family records, but her place of birth in "Germany" was identified as well – *Gersten, Lengerich, Hanover*.

It was the golden key that opened the door to his German family's story.

It is important to reiterate that Germany unified as a nation in 1871. Prior to that, "Germany" consisted of numerous principalities and territories such as the Kingdom of Hanover. Except for a brief period during the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th Century and prior to 1876, Germany did not maintain population records at the local level... challenge number two!

Since "Germany" did not maintain population records prior to 1876, significant family events such as births, baptisms, marriages, and burials were registered in local church record books. The good news is that besides being housed in State and Church archives throughout Germany, many but not all local church record books may be found online.



Of the big three, FamilySearch, My Heritage and Ancestry, I recommend beginning your research journey by visiting FamilySearch German Genealogy Wiki - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Genealogy. The website offers an extensive German ancestry database where you will have the chance to search for German birth, marriage, and death records... a mix of indexes and images.

If you are interested in enhancing your German family history research skills, visit their online learning center located under German Beginning Research: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Online_Learning. The learning center delivers a number of audio courses from discussions about German Census Records to gaining an understanding of old German script. It's a great place to get started with German family history research.

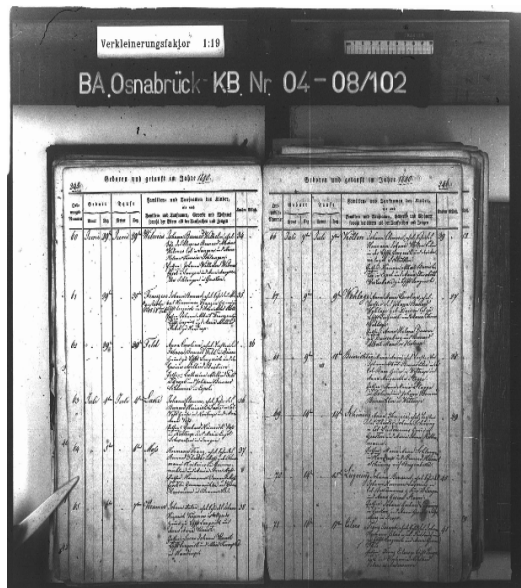
The FamilySearch German Genealogy Wiki pages also includes an expansive list of links that will allow the researcher to delve into emigration records such as Hamburg Passenger lists 1850 – 1934 and Bremen Passenger lists 1907 – 1939. https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Emigration_and_Immigration.

Lesser Know Websites That Can Provide Great Value

Researching German websites: Ancestry, My Heritage and FamilySearch are excellent repositories! However, to conduct more focused research, German websites such as **Matricula.de**, and **Archion.de** have many local church records online but you have to know exactly where and how to conduct research. The websites are in both German and English. Matricula is free but Archion requires a fee to access its database.

- **Matricula.de** (Catholic) <https://data.matricula-online.eu/en>
- **Archion.de** (Protestant denominations) <https://www.archion.de/en>

If found, the *church record books* can be a treasure trove of information for any family history researcher. The one limitation is that you will not be able to do a by-name search. A researcher must have an idea of dates of birth, marriage, and death... it is a line-by-line search.



To ensure that I conduct detailed research, I use the boxing technique of two years prior and two years after the approximate date of the event.

The record to the left was found on the Matricula website. As the record shows, St. Benedikt's Church records are housed at the Archdiocese in Osnabrück, Lower Saxony.

Since this is a baptismal record, it identifies the date of birth, date of baptism, family name, child's name, parents, place of residence, godparents, and witnesses. Can a family history researcher ask for more information than that?

If you find yourself having difficulty in locating your German ancestor on a passenger list, *The German Emigrant Databank from the Historical Museum of Bremerhaven* is a wonderful place to search although to download records, there is a 15 Euro fee. The advantage in using this website is that you are able to do a by-name search for your ancestor. <https://www.deutsche-auswanderer-datenbank.de/informationen-dad-engl>.

From an **Immigration** standpoint, if you would like to discover your ancestor's port of arrival in America, I recommend that you visit Steve Morse's website "One-Step Webpages by Stephen P. Morse". It is truly one-stop "searching" for all things associated with genealogical research and immigration. His website is self-explanatory and easy to use.

I've accessed this website while searching for when, where, and on what ship some of my ancestors arrived in America. Glance through his website... it will be well worth the trip: <https://stevemorse.org>.

In order to provide you with an overview of one of my German Family Research Reports, I included an abbreviated version of the report associated with the research mentioned at the beginning of the article.

In the name of Client Confidentiality, I removed the clients name and the surname of his ancestors. I hope that you find it informative.

“Sample” German Family Research Report

June 13, 2024

Research Goals: Conduct family history research in Germany for XXXX family members who likely resided in/or around “Hanover, Germany” in the first half of the 19th Century.

Known Information:

Based on information outlined in the family history sketch, *The Family History of Robert R. XXXX*, the XXXX family emigrated from the Port of Bremen in 1851. Information identified in the Ships Manifest confirmed that George XXXX and his family emigrated from the Port of Bremen to the United States and arrived in the port of New Orleans on XXXX 1851. While reviewing information in the German Emigrant Databank from the Historical Museum of Bremerhaven, I discovered documents associated with the XXXX family emigration in 1851 which also correlates with the XXXX Ship’s Manifest.

Research Questions:

- Who was George XXXX (aka Gerhard XXXX and at times, Henry XXXX) and where did he and his family reside prior to emigrating to the United States of America in 1851? On-hand documentation indicated Hanover, Germany but what did they mean by Hanover... the city or the region?
- What was George XXXX’ birth name and who was the wife of George XXXX?

Identifying the exact location of residence was key to discovering proof documents that would confirm the identity of the George XXXX listed on the Manifest and some of his family members.

Note:

- After researching online repositories such as Ancestry and FamilySearch for all family members who arrived in New Orleans in 1851, I was fortunate enough to discover an obituary in a local newspaper for the oldest child of George and Maria Anna. The birth information found in the obituary not only correlated with other documentation, but it was the first piece of evidence that identified a more precise place of birth rather than simply “Hanover”... Gersten, Lengerich, Hanover, Germany.
- Assuming that the family was Catholic, I began my research on Matricula.de, I discovered that there could have been only one church in the area that had records dating back to the early 19th Century - St. Benedikt, Catholic Church. A quick search led me to the baptismal record of Maria Theresa XXXX.

Biographical Sketch based on the findings outlined in the following report:

- *Gerhard Heinrich XXXX* b. circa 1811, son of *Johann Bernard XXXX* and *Elizabeth XXXX* marr. *Maria Anna XXXX* on 17 Feb 1835, St. Benedikt Church, Gersten, Lengerich, Emsland, Kingdom of Hannover. He married his second wife *Malia XXXX* on 14 Apr 1870 in XXXX . He died in MN on 16 Jul XXXX.
- *Maria Anna XXXX* b. circa 1811, dau. of *Johann Heinrich XXXX* and *Maria Catherine XXXX* marr. *Gerhard Heinrich XXXX* on 17 Feb XXXX, St. Benedikt Church, Gersten, Lengerich, Emsland, Kingdom of Hannover.

Executive Summary... challenges and limitations: One of the main challenges faced in this research project was the fact that although XXXX family members indicated that they were from “Hanover, Germany”, Germany as a nation did not exist in 1851. German unification did not take place until 1871. Prior to that, “Germany” consisted of 25-plus principalities with one of them being the Kingdom of Hannover.

Therefore, initial research was focused on utilizing US online repositories with an intent to possibly discover pieces of information that would lead to identifying either a town or community of birth or residence. Since the XXXX family both anglicized and tended to adjust the order of their Christian names, initial research revolved around using various spellings and alternate order of names to find documents that would provide more detail about the XXXX family’s life in “Hanover” prior to emigration.

Key facts that impacted on this research:

- Following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, The Kingdom of Hannover was created and remained that way until 1866.
- While under French control, registration of citizens took place in the Hannover area from 1811-1815. Official population records began in Germany on 01 Jan 1876.
- It was imperative to identify the exact town or community of residence as records such as birth, baptismal, marriage and death were maintained by the local church prior to 1876.
- It was also critical to confirm the family's religious faith as Church Record Books are retained in the region's archdiocese with many found online... **Archion.de** for Protestant denominations, and **Matricula.de** for members of the Catholic faith.

Methodology: The following online repositories were used in support of this research; Ancestry.com, Ancestry.de, FamilySearch.org, Archion.de, Matricula.de, and the deutsche-auswanderer-datenbank.de.

----Full report with proof docs and analysis of documentation included in the Research Report are left out due to Client privacy guidelines----

I hope you found this information useful... enjoy your research journey!

Philip R. Thieler

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