

Determining a Place of Origin in Germany

Guide

Introduction

The first permanent German settlement in America was Germantown, Pennsylvania, which was settled in 1683. Since that time Germany has been one of the leading countries in providing emigrants to the United States. To trace your ancestor in the German records, you must know his or her town of birth. If you do not know the location, several sources can help you discover it.

For more information on German immigrants to America, see Background.

What You Are Looking For

Records and sources that list a town of birth for your ancestor.

Steps

These 3 steps will guide you in finding your ancestor's place of birth in Germany.

Step 1. Select a record to search for the name of your ancestor.

Family Sources	<p>Check with local libraries and historical societies. Many family records were donated to their collections. Family sources include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Bibles and Letters. • Emigration Papers and Occupational Papers. • Church Certificates (christening, marriage, death, etc.).
Family Histories	<p>Your family records may provide an ancestor's place of birth. It may be in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Journals. • Diaries. • Family Histories
L.D.S. Church Indexes	<p>The L.D.S. Church has indexes that may be helpful. These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Genealogical Index. • Ancestral File. • Pedigree Ordinance Index.
Social Security Death Index	<p>The Social Security Death Index may provide the birth place of your ancestor.</p>
Vital Records	<p>Vital Records may include a birth place. You should search:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State Vital Records (marriage & death) • County Vital Records (marriage & death) • Church Records (christening, confirmation, marriage, burial, membership).

Newspapers and Periodicals	The <i>German-American Newspapers and Periodicals 1732-1955</i> lists many helpful sources for locating newspapers and periodicals that might list your ancestor's name.
Naturalization Records	Naturalization records were kept by counties before 1906. These include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application. • Declaration of Intention. • Petition.
Biographical Sketches	Biographical Sketches may provide date or place of birth and family information.
U.S. Census Records	The census may provide a place of origin but usually it gives only the name of the country, kingdom, province or duchy. After 1900, it also provides the year of arrival in the U.S.
U.S. Military Records	The place of origin may be listed in the following military records: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlistment. • Discharge. • Pension Records.
Locality Histories	Local histories sometimes provide a place of origin. City histories give the origin of prominent citizens, and county histories show where German settlers came from.
Hamburg Passenger Lists	The Hamburg Passenger Lists include the last foreign residence of people leaving from Hamburg. There are two lists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The <i>Direct Passenger List</i> (1850 to 1934) lists those who left Hamburg and went directly to their destination. • The <i>Indirect Passenger List</i> (1850 to 1910) shows those who left Hamburg, went to another port, and then on to their destination. After 1910 the indirect list is included with the Direct Passenger List.

Step 2. Check surname books and name indexes.

If the ancestor's surname is uncommon, it may be possible to find it listed in a German surname book. These books identify the earliest date, place, and person by that surname. The following are German surname books:

- Brechenmacher, Josef Karlmann. *Deutsche Sippennamen*.
- *Familiengeschichtliche Quellen*.
- *Quellenschau für Familienforscher*.

Step 3. Check passenger lists or port records.

German emigrants usually left in groups from the same area of Germany. Be aware of the following information when searching your ancestor's passenger list or port record:

- After finding your ancestor on a port record or passenger register, write down all the people on the same list.
- Check local census and other records to determine which people settled in the same area as your ancestor.
- Check for place of origin information on those who were on the same list.
- If your ancestor's surname is not unusual, but some of the others on the same list are, look those names up in the German surname books to determine where they originated.

Background

Germany is made up of different kingdoms, duchies, and Prussian provinces. Within these areas, emigration records were usually kept on a county seat or district level of government. To find your ancestor's emigration record you must first know the town he was from. Then the Meyers gazetteer will tell you the county seat or district the town was in. Usually, if you already know this, you don't need to search the emigration records.