

# G-SIG FORUM #38

...from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society ([www.stlgs.org/](http://www.stlgs.org/)) and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis, Mo. ([www.gahs-stlouis.org](http://www.gahs-stlouis.org)).

This communication is a forum for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher, Group Leader for G-SIG, serves as *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

If you would like to include a notice or request, please submit your information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). *Exchange!* notices run only once, but you may resubmit. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to [persch3@hotmail.com](mailto:persch3@hotmail.com).

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## How Old is 'Old' in Germany?

By Gerald Perschbacher

The U.S.A. is young in comparison to some nations. Germany, on the other hand, is quite old.

It's not easy to find an American city that has been continuously inhabited in its original area for 200 years, let alone 300 or more. In Germany, houses in a village may have been constructed 400 years ago, even 500 and beyond. While Germany was not unified as a nation in the mid 1800s and prior, it was comprised of a conglomerate of noble territories. Each carried a special history as reflected in towns, villages, and buildings.

So it is common to find structures (or substructures) dating back to the 1200s and earlier. Roman ruins have been protected and preserved. If you have the opportunity to visit Trier, which is the oldest city in Germany (supposedly founded around 15 B.C.), you will see a magnificent number of Roman structures, including those built for Constantine the Great around the year 300 A.D. That's

when Trier was the capital city of the Roman Empire after Rome had lost its importance, had been sacked several times, and had seen its population drop from more than a million to perhaps 20,000 or less.

The area west of the Rhine River, and in some cases the area west of the Main River, were heavily influenced by Roman culture. This was Europe's breadbasket until Germanic tribes swept in, especially from 400 to 600 A.D., and took over the cultivated land. Not many of them knew how to farm like the Romans. Some learned quickly, such as the large German tribe of the Franks. Others, including Goths, continued to migrate: sometimes encroaching into what is now Germany; more often than not simply passing around the territory in search of food and wealth found in established communities.

There are archaeological sites spotted all over the German landscape, but not all of them are easily seen. Officials like to keep them private until excavation is complete and artifacts have been recovered. Some can be spotted from an airplane. If you fly over Germany, look for shadows and lines in open fields that may represent the foundations and walls of ancient structures.

It is not unusual for a farmer to hit something in the ground while working the field, only to discover it is a clay jar with a hoard of ancient Roman coins inside. When this type of discovery is made, most of the coins are "coppers," a few are made from silver (usually a poor grade of silver content, especially in late Roman coins made after 200 A.D.), and perhaps one or two gold coins. However, a find was made within the past 20 years or so that must have been the secret stash of the keeper of the mint or the treasurer. He hid a large amount of coins but may have been killed after the area was overrun. With his passing, no one knew where the precious coins were buried. Centuries passed. Then, due to road construction, the container was found. Most of those coins (numbering in the hundreds) were GOLD! Happily, these were retained and protected by public officials and are now on display in a museum in Trier.

Your family's city or town of origin probably traced its roots at least 500 years in the past, even more likely 800 to 1,000 years ago. Here's how it happened.

The master of the land needed help in raising crops. He enticed people to live on his land, work the fields, and build modest homes with his permission to cut down select trees he deemed usable. He received most of the income, but they were allowed to keep or barter with a percentage of the crop. The same held true for livestock. Little communities formed. Roads connected one community to another. Children were born. When they came of age, they stayed and had more children. Families often had 5 to 8 children and it was common that a few of them would die before adulthood.

As a result, German towns and villages that have long histories may only have had a handful of families that dominated the community. In a town of 1,000 people today, perhaps four or five families are strongly represented. Others entered over the years and some old families died off, but many old lineages were continued through mothers or fathers.

I say this because you can have a great degree of success if you make contact with your ancestral town. Mention the surname in which you are interested and ask if anyone is “of that family.” You may be surprised. If you visit the site and Germans come to know you as “one of their own who returned,” then you might discover more hidden relatives who finally admit their kinship to you!

If you strike it right, you can “dig deeply” into the past, much like digging for ancient coins in old clay jugs. If you make contact with reliable individuals who know local history and want to help you find your ancestry, you might tap into all sorts of hidden information.

That’s the trick, isn’t it? But don’t think you’ll find a huge amount of “gold” when you first strike it right. Each little coin of information helps you advance farther and farther. It’s a gradual process at times, with a “EUREKA!” moment now and then. It’s exciting. It’s fulfilling. It’s fun.

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## How Far Back Can I Go?

By Gerald Perschbacher

If Germany goes back to ancient times, how far back can you expect to trace your lineage?

An interesting question, indeed.

Generally, once a person has “jumped the pond” across the Atlantic and has discovered the originating village or town, it is probable that there could be information dating at least back to the 1700s. There seems to be a hurdle in that century. Perhaps it is because France was on the rise and German states witnessed much infighting. Records were hidden, lost to fire, or confiscated.

If you jump that hurdle and records were not destroyed by a World War or other major land battle, then your next hurdle will be the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648). Here’s why.

In some areas of Germany, entire villages were abandoned or populations were decimated. I have heard of villages that had 200 inhabitants in 1618 but only claimed 3 at war’s end.

Land barons and counts had to replenish their populations. Enticements were offered for people in other European lands to settle in German territories. It

was necessary to make the land productive, from which the noble families made much of their wealth. Rulers needed live bodies to provide defense, otherwise a stronger noble neighbor could take their land.

The Flemish were settled in portions of the Rhineland. If you note non-German names appearing on tax roles shortly after the Thirty Year's War, that may be the reason. On the other hand, there may have been marriages between old families from that area and the newer resettled families; so some of those people of non-German surnames may still carry your family genes.

In rare cases, a family can be traced into the 1500s and earlier. This coincides with the rise of villages and "Burghers" who were leaders among the free people who clustered in towns, whether those places were small or large.

Frankfurt is one of Germany's most important cities today. It is considered the economic center of mainland Europe. As a city, it started modestly. It was a hunting stable for the early Germanic kings and was known as early as 800 A.D. A 1200-year-old city! It was important as a fjord for the Franks. This simple crossing place on the Main River became an attractive area for homes, shops, plus commerce. With a flow of Germanic people heading in several directions, it became a trading center. With successful trade comes more free time for education and leisure. Water was ample for drinking. The river provided a route for transportation.

Can you expect to find an abundance of ancient records in Frankfurt? Sadly, not as many as people hope. Frankfurt, being a large city, was on the hit list for just about every army that came marching nearby. With this came fires, theft, the spoils of conquest...need I say more? Who would risk their life to save an entry book of births, deaths, and marriages?

Some communities believed these to be precious books and protectively wrapped and placed them in a freshly dug hole, then covered it over with brush. But this happened in rural communities more than in large cities, from what experience has taught.

When aerial bombings marked progress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, large sections of German cities were razed in firestorms of immense magnitude. Darmstadt was one of those old cities heavily damaged and literally vaporized in many sectors. Don't expect church records to have survived in churches that were leveled. What might have survived the collapse of a building may not have survived rain, ice, and gnawing little animals that were about as hungry as the starving Germans caught in the midst of war.

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# Enter: Other Peoples

By Gerald Perschbacher

Successful German communities attracted settlers, including people from various cultures. This includes Jewish settlers.

Frankfurt had a booming Jewish sector during the 12th century, but it was not to last. When crops failed or difficulties threatened, a portion of the city turned against what they considered “intruders.” If people of other cultures clustered into residential areas and retained their practices, they easily became targets of aggression.

In 1241, many Jewish houses were demolished in Frankfurt. Hundreds of Jews were threatened. A couple hundred were killed. Since Frankfurt was an Imperial City, governed and protected by the Holy Roman Emperor; it had to have stability assured. Thus, Frederick II issued an order to cease hostilities.

When cultures are under stress, they may not record important matters for fear of exposing themselves and their loved ones in case documents fell into “the wrong hands.”

Don’t expect to make quick and easy finds if your ancestry is cross-cultural. Some of those important family dates might never have been recorded officially!

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## ***EXCHANGE!*** *G-SIG comments, ideas, & requests:*

+ **John Flentge** ([johnd701e@yahoo.com](mailto:johnd701e@yahoo.com)) says, “I hope you can help me with some of my family background. I am looking for a Theresa Loeffler born in Hanover, Germany, on 24 October 1839. When her mother died in the year 1844 her father (and Theresa) came to the United States. They first settled on a farm where Lafayette Avenue now is in St. Louis and later moved to Wayne County, Missouri. I am looking for where they lived in St. Louis. Could I find the area today? Seeking: Theresa’s father’s first name, the name of the ship they came from Germany, did he get married again if so when and where, ANY other information.

+ Daniel Carlins ([dcnanook@verizon.net](mailto:dcnanook@verizon.net)) says, “I am the great-grandson of George Knecht who immigrated to the United States; born in 1853 and arrived in 1874. Do you have any hints for me or can you guide me in the right direction.”

+ **Marlene Olson** says, “I love helping people learn to find their roots. My cup overflows with people who have helped me. I am amazed at records that have been revealed to me to help others.” She adds this encouragement:

“Larry O. Jensen gave an invitation to the participants who went to the St. Louis Genealogical Society’s Speaker Series on 11 October 2008: For \$25.00 he would send the PowerPoint ‘document’ that he used for his 4 lectures on ‘Finding Our German Ancestors.’ This offer was later extended to the general public. You may e-mail him at [jensenlo@burgoyne.com](mailto:jensenlo@burgoyne.com) . Send your name, address, city, state, and zip code. I sent a check by mail to Jensen Publications; P.O. Box 441; Pleasant Grove, UT 84062. This offer may be for a limited time only. He started mailing them out towards the last of November 2008.”

**G.P. Note: One must have PowerPoint capabilities on one’s computer in order to view the information contained in the “Finding Our German Ancestors” PowerPoint presentation.**

+ **G-SIG Clusters** are “where the action is”! Meet and communicate with others who have similar aims in research and information. Learn from them. Share your successes. For details on existing Clusters, or to explore the formation of a new Cluster, contact Lisa at [lmclaughlin@polsinelli.com](mailto:lmclaughlin@polsinelli.com)) or Kathy at [kathyinwashington@hotmail.com](mailto:kathyinwashington@hotmail.com)).

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**Have great ideas for the G-SIG FORUM?** Submit your material to [germansig@stlgs.org](mailto:germansig@stlgs.org) or mail it to: StLGS, Attn: G-SIG; #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140; St. Louis, MO 63143.