

Dodging Brick Walls

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Genealogists like to refer to a research impasse as a brick wall. This image implies that we have reached a dead end, when all we usually need is a smart strategy to scale the wall. To have a strategy, we need knowledge. To be effective with complex research, we also need to be well organized.

Organize your research

- Make a research plan and review this plan regularly
- Keep a research log
- Create a spreadsheet detailing evidence gathered from various sources
- Carefully evaluate the evidence to decide which data or data ranges to consider

Typical Brick Walls in German research

1. Finding the home town for your immigrant
2. Distinguishing between persons with similar data
3. Locating relevant German records
4. Understanding German records

1. Identifying a home town for your immigrant

Error: Looking for German records before US research is complete.

Solutions

- ☞ Study your immigrant as thoroughly as possible AFTER immigration. Clues to a place or origin are more likely to be found in US than in German records.
- ☞ The more detailed your knowledge of the immigrant, their family, their social circle, the better equipped you are to correctly identify them in German records.

Concentric Ring Research in the US

Inner circle: family records

- Letters, postcards, family heirlooms, photos with photographers' stamps, old books with publishing information – all can potentially hold clues.
- Reach out to other descendants who may have such items. Find cousins who are researching the same family and contact them, even if you don't personally know them.

Middle circle: local records

- Example of local records include newspapers, directories, church records, and local history.
- FAN research: Identify **F**amily members, **A**ssociates, and **N**eighbors with the same cultural heritage. Do the same thorough research on FAN who were born in Germany.

Outer circle: State records

- Don't limit your research to online records. If you find an index online but no original, order the original. Some original records – e.g. marriage or naturalization records - may need to be ordered from city or state archives.
- Look for migration history in the United States – are there different stations in the lives of your ancestors where records could exist? Can you identify FAN who migrated from and to the same stations?

2. Distinguishing between persons with similar data

Error: Accepting an apparent record match without careful consideration of context. Millions of records have been indexed. The sheer number of 19th-20th century German immigrants to America is astounding. There will be persons with similar names and dates.

Solutions

📄 Spellings of names and places

Always consider spelling variants that are similar in sound.

- There were no uniform spelling rules in 18th/19th century Germany.
- Record takers wrote what they heard.
- Many people would not have had a concept of a “correct” spelling of their name.
- Illiteracy was still widespread in some regions.

📄 Given Names

Gather as much information on the individuals as possible to distinguish between like-named persons.

- Historically, names did not serve to give a child a unique identity. Children were named after grandparents, godparents, biblical figures, or saints.
- If a child died young, their name might have been “reissued” with the next sibling born.
- It is common to see highly repetitive use of given names within communities and even within families.
- Even the record-keeping clergy sometimes got confused!

📄 Family

Critically examine the person in their environment.

- Do the names and dates of family members match what you know about your ancestor's family?
- Does the spacing of births in a family make sense?
- Do the children's births fall within the mother's expected years of fertility?
- Is there a record of the individual in question marrying or dying in Germany after the time of emigration, eliminating them as a possible match?
- Can you find other persons from your ancestor's post-emigration family or social circle, in the same place in Germany?
- Are matching occupations mentioned?

☞ Vital Dates

Always consider a range of a few years around a date found in US records.

- Birthdays did not carry the same significance as they do today. In Catholic areas, the name day (of the saint after whom one was named) was celebrated more than the birthday.
- In 18th century or earlier church records, usually only the date of baptism is recorded.
- Informants at later life events did not always have the correct information.

☞ Locations

Look up locations on modern and contemporary maps.

- What historical state did a village belong to? Does this match the evidence from US records?
- Some place names are common! Be sure you are looking in the correct historical region. You may need to consider more than one place.
- Use [Meyers Gazatteer](#) to search for a historical location. Click on the map to compare an old map to a modern one. This is particularly helpful in finding Polish place names for formerly German villages. Look up churches and civil registration offices in the vicinity of your village.
- Ancestry's use of modern designations in record indexing poses some challenges. For example, a village might be located in Baden-Württemberg today. However, Baden and Württemberg were historically two separate states. If your sources say your ancestor was from Baden, was the location historically in Baden?
- Many people accept Ancestry's automatic location hints without questioning. If you see "Pommern, Cochem-Zell" in a public tree, know that this is a tiny village in the Rhineland, and that there's a 99% chance the correct designation is the Eastern Prussian state of Pommern (Pomerania) instead.
- Differentiate between like names of cities and states. "Hannover" is a city as well as a state. Found in US census records, it will most likely refer to the state.
- Sometimes immigrants would indicate a large city as their place of birth because it was more recognizable than a small village. A person saying they were from "Berlin" might have been from a village nearby.

☞ Surnames

Be aware that some regions had very different naming traditions.

- Areas along the North Sea coastline used patronyms (just as in Scandinavia) until fixed surnames were required by the government beginning in 1811.
- In Westphalia and adjacent regions of Northwest Germany, farm names were common. A man marrying a woman who was the inheritor of a farm would have taken her name.
- Many surnames are typical of certain regions. To see where a surname was prevalent in 1890, use [this interactive map](#).

☞ Religion

Historically in Germany, religious faith was rarely a matter of choice. The (Christian) faith adhered to by communities was determined by the allegiances of rulers. There are

large regions of Germany that are predominantly Protestant/Lutheran, while others are almost exclusively Catholic. In some areas, both denominations coexisted.

- You must know your ancestor's religious faith to locate relevant German church records. Before the implementation of civil registration in 1875, church records are the most important resource in German research.
- An immigrant's faith can be a clue to their place of origin.
- While a change in religious affiliation after immigration is not unheard of, it is more likely to find an immigrant in the faith community and culture in which they were raised.

3. Locating relevant German records

Error: Relying on Ancestry and Familysearch only.

Solutions

- 📖 Learn about Germany's geopolitical history
Understanding the geopolitical landscape of our ancestors' lifetime is very important to our research. Likewise, knowing what state or country the historical locations belong to today can help us locate records.
 - Germany changed shape frequently over the course of history. Its current borders and states were established after World War II. Vast regions of what once were German territories are now in Poland, Russia, and to a smaller degree also the Czech Republic and France.
 - A unified Germany did not exist until 1871. We can think of Germany in the earlier 19th century as a region with diverse German-speaking cultures that was splintered into many smaller principalities. Political alliances were in constant flux.
 - Genealogical records are often found in regional archives that align with the historical states. For example, the Palatinate, part of the State of Rheinland-Pfalz today, was ruled by Bavaria in the 1800s. Therefore, the Bavarian State Archives in Munich have custody of military records of this area.
 - Many German records from Eastern Prussian states are in Polish archives today.
- 📖 Get research advice on from [Familysearch's Research Wiki](#).
Find well-devised research guidance, links to further resources, and more. This is THE go-to site for research guidance – not just for Germany.
- 📖 Check out additional databases
Listed here are the three crucial research sites. Consult [Research Wiki](#) for others specific to your area of research.
 - Some records on Familysearch have restricted access due to contractual obligations. Many are accessible at affiliate libraries, some only at the library In Salt Lake City.
 - [Archion](#) is the go-to database for Protestant/Lutheran church records. New digital materials are added regularly.
 - [Matricula](#) is the equivalent for Catholic records.

- Church records from areas that are now in Poland – if not on Archion or Familysearch – can oftentimes be found in Polish archives. Search for your location [here](#).
- Some regions still have no digitally available church records, including large parts of Bavaria and Saxony. Visiting in person or hiring a local researcher might be necessary.

4. Understanding German records

Error: Not using available resources

German records are in German, and usually in the old script not even modern-day Germans can read. There is no way around learning some basics. Even with indexed records, you should look at the original document wherever possible, for valuable information that is not indexed.

Solutions

📖 Study! Practice!

Use word lists, buy a book, attend webinars, join a genealogy group.

- Type *German Handwriting* into the search box on [Familysearch Wiki](#). A wide array of helpful information will come up, including handouts, tools, book suggestions, and seminar links.
- German vital and civil records generally follow a prescribed format. If you know what to expect in a record, it goes a long way towards understanding the content.
- Find help and learn on Facebook. There are some excellent groups that focus on the genealogy of specific states, where you can post questions to the community. My favorite group [is this one](#) for its exceptionally knowledgeable volunteer helpers.
- Your local or state genealogical society might also offer presentations or webinars on topics of German research – or you might suggest it.