

Breaking Through Brick Walls with the *German Immigrants in American Church Records Series*

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Overview: *The associate editor of Dr. Roger Minert's German Immigrants in American Church Records books will walk you through solutions to brick walls using these valuable tools for tracing German origins.*

German Immigration to America

- Ca. 43 million claim German heritage, more than any other ancestry group
- Germans began immigrating with English settlers in 1607
- In 1790 over 1/4 million German born Americans were living in the United States
- Nearly 6 million Germans immigrated between 1820 and 1920
- Settled mainly in the Midwest, in rural areas.
- Most made their living in agriculture.
- Often had their own churches and schools, speaking and writing in German, especially Protestants.
- In the 20th Century, German-Americans became more assimilated, speaking and writing in English.

Tracing Immigrant Origins

- German research requires determine the specific town of origin.
- Most American records, especially prior to the 20th Century, only say “Germany” or the name of a province, kingdom, duchy, etc. (e.g. “Hannover”) as the place of origin.
- When specific place names are given, spelling variants and incomplete place information make places harder to recognize.
- Especially in the 19th Century, church records have a higher probability of including the specific place of origin (60-70%) than other record types like passenger lists, naturalization records, state vital records, etc. (5-30%).
- German-American church records may provide the place of origin for immigrants in marriage, burial, confirmation, and membership records (for youth ca. age 14). These records, as well as birth records, may also include the place of origin for immigrant parents.

German Immigrants in American Church Records (GIACR) Project

- Dr. Roger P. Minert, Brigham Young University Professor, began the project in 2004 as experiential learning for students of German research.
- Students learn German paleography, historical geography, and research methods while building their publishing resume as co-authors.
- Researchers benefit from a resource that may be *the* key to connecting their immigrant ancestor to their German hometown.

- 40 volumes have been published so far: ¹
 - Vol. 1 Indiana Protestant
 - Vols. 2-5 Wisconsin Protestant
 - Vol. 6 Nebraska Protestant
 - Vols. 7-9 Iowa Protestant
 - Vols. 10-14 Illinois and Chicago Protestant
 - Vols. 15-17 Michigan and Detroit Protestant
 - Vol. 18 Minnesota and the Dakotas Protestant
 - Vols. 19-25 Missouri and St. Louis Protestant
 - Vols. 26-33 Ohio Protestant
 - Vols. 34-37 Kentucky
 - Vol. 38 Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee
 - Vol. 39-40 Texas
- Each volume includes abstracts of the original records, including the name and birth place of the immigrant, along with other information insofar as it is available, such as marriage and death/burial information, spouse name(s), parents names, and other information.
- Only persons clearly identifiable as immigrants are included. Immigrants are mainly from Germany, but also include Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and from the former Austrian states of Bohemia and Moravia.
- The immigrant information is organized by parish locality and includes reference information about where the information came from.
- Each volume includes a name index. There are also multi-volume indexes.²
- The project is non-profit. Proceeds from books sales go toward transcriber wages and other expenses related to the project. Other funding comes from sales of Dr. Minert's other works and donations.³

Sources of Records

Only original records are consulted (as digital or microfilm copies). No indexes, transcriptions, or translations are used as sources. These are accessed from a variety of repositories, including:

- FamilySearch microfilms at the FamilySearch Library or BYU Library or online digital images found in the FamilySearch Catalog.
- Records digitized by Ancestry.com in partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- Parish record offices, regional church archives, or other public and private repositories, by correspondence or traveling to capture images onsite.⁴

¹ Available from Family Roots Publishing (<https://familyrootspublishing.net/>) or ask at your library.

² You can obtain a PDF of the full index to all volumes in *The Collected Works of Roger P. Minert* along with other German reference resources by Dr. Minert from <https://rpmgrtpublications.wixsite.com/mysite>. All proceeds are used to fund the project.

³ If you would like to make a donation, contact Dr. Roger P. Minert at rogerpminert@gmail.com.

⁴ Images obtained for GIACR are only used for the work of transcription and are not shared with anyone.

Sample Entries

This is a mock entry showing the ultimate example of what an entry containing the maximum amount of information would look like:

Gerhardt Heinrich Meinert b. Schledehausen, Osnabrück, Hannover 14 Jul 1780 (calculated); bp. Bissendorf, Osnabrück, Hannover; son of Johann Hermann Meinert and Catharina Mertelsmann; m. New York City, New York Co., NY, **Catharina Wunderlich**; 2m. Vermillion Co., IN ca. 1828, Anna Engel Schnelle; d. Hamilton, Vermillion Co., IN 8 Mar 1838, age 57-7-22; bur. Hamilton 10 Mar 1838. He immigrated in Sep 1805. Aka Garrett Henry Minert. Veteran Pennsylvania Infantry, War of 1812. Ref: pp. 135, 290.

Here are some actual entries for immigrants abstracted in the GIACR series, showing more typical examples of the information contained:

Catharine Hacker b. Obernsees, Bayreuth, Bayern 6 Dec 1834; d. Dubois, IN 26 Aug 1896, age 61-8-20; bur. 27 Aug 1896; m. - - Schott, 2m. Johann Schiller. Ref. p. 210.

Catharina Lochmueller b. Schamelsberg, Bayreuth, Bayern 8 Aug 1830; d. Dubois, IN 1 Dec 1897; bur. Dubois 3 Dec 1897; m. **Adam Arnold**. Ref. p. 231.

Adam Arnold b. Bayern 6 Jan 1823; d. Dubois, IN 2 April 1901; bur. Dubois 4 April 1901; m. **Catharina Lochmueller**. Ref. p. 233.

Research Methods (U.S. Records)

- Use U.S. census and other records to determine the U.S. places of residence of the German immigrant.
- In your U.S. research, gather all the context you can about the immigrant and their family, including name spelling variations, names of other family members, religion, occupation, event dates and places, etc.
- Check the GIACR volumes for the state(s) where they lived. Check the indexes or check the table of contents for the parishes where they lived and browse the entries.
- Be mindful of possible spelling variations.
- Be aware that the immigrant may have also attended church in a neighboring location. Also, close relatives of the immigrant might have settled in the same place or in neighboring places or counties.
- When you find an immigrant, make note of all the information in the abstract. Also check for other entries for the same immigrant or for other family members.
- It is always best to look up the images of the original church records to verify the transcription and check for other information that may not be included in the abstract. Look for a heading at the beginning of the parish list giving the U.S. place name, county, and state, and the source, such as a FamilySearch microfilm number. The reference at the end of each entry provides a page number or other information to help you navigate to the right page.

Research Methods (German Records)

To find the birth record in Europe, once the European place of birth or marriage has been identified in the U.S. church record:

- Use gazetteers (e.g. Meyersgaz.org (Germany), genteam.at (Austria)) to determine the location of the parish (which may be different from the birthplace).
- Search for the original records for that parish, on microform or as digital images (on familysearch.org, Ancestry.com, archion.de (Protestant), matricula-online.eu (Catholic), etc.)
- Search the birth record by date. If not found, check several years before and after the reported (or estimated) date in case here is a date discrepancy.
- Search for the births of siblings and for other records of the family in the parish, such as the parents' marriage record, marriage and death records of other family members. Look for clues of possible other places of origin (other parishes) as you trace the family back.

Research Examples

The presentation will include multiple mini case study examples of solving “brick wall” problems to trace immigrants to America to their origins in Germany.

Related Resources

Beidler, James M. *The Family Tree Historical Atlas of Germany*. (Family Tree Books, 2019).

Center for Family History & Genealogy, *Script Tutorial*. <https://script.byu.edu>.

Hansen, Kevan. *Map Guide to German Parish Registers, Vols. 1-67*. (Family Roots Pub., 2022).

Minert, Roger P. and Joseph B. Everett, eds. *German Immigrants in American Church Records, Vols 1-38*. (Family Roots Pub., 2005-2022).

Minert, Roger P. *Spelling Variations in German Names*. (Family Roots Pub., 2000).

Minert, Roger P. *Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents*. (Family Roots Pub., 2013).

MeyersGaz.org, <https://www.meyersgaz.org> – Database version of Meyers Orts gazetteer of the German Empire. Includes wildcard search, maps, and info on parishes for most regions.

Minert, Roger P. *Germany Place Name Indexes (with Reverse Sort)*. (Family Roots Pub.).

Minert, Roger P. *The Collected Works of Dr. Roger P. Minert* (Provo: GMRT Publications, 2023). Available as digital download or flash drive from

<https://rpmgrtpublications.wixsite.com/mysite>.

Thode, Ernest. *German-English Genealogical Dictionary*, Genealogical , 2008.