

Immigration Sources and Strategies

Church Registers to the Rescue

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Photo courtesy of James A. Derhien, European Focus, Inc.

Although the previous column focused on records of the native country for identifying an immigrant's home town, the tried and true axiom is that research should generally exhaust sources in the new country first. Indeed, there are many such records that sometimes mention the ancestral home. However, sometimes is the issue here. Every immigrant origins researcher soon learns that there is no universally available record source we can count on to always, or even usually, mention the foreign home town.

There is, however, a "pecking order," a ranking of sources, which seem to provide this crucial information more often than not. Of course, that priority order changes with the time period of arrival in the new country, as well as the ethnic and religious groups of the immigrants.

Above: Decoration above the entrance to a church in Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany.

Right page: The vividly-painted ceiling in the Evangelical Lutheran church of Neersen, Niedersachsen, Germany

Below: A figure of Moses holds up the pulpit in the Evangelical Lutheran church of Clausthal, Niedersachsen, Germany



Photo courtesy of James A. Derhien, European Focus, Inc.

Family records (Bibles, letters, etc.) are high on that list, but are generally useful for immigrants within the last 100 to 130 years or so. Church (parish) registers, on the other hand, remain high on that list for all time periods, as well as all ethnic and religious groups.

Often overlooked by researchers, one of the most useful sources for immigrant origins are the records of the immigrants' churches. While not all immigrants were closely connected to a church in their new country, the vast majority of them were. They had come from a culture where the church was one of the focal points of society, and often the strongest glue that held local society together. It was a tradition in most of our immigrants' home countries to participate in the key sacraments of their religion, with this prac-



tice continuing in their new country. In part, their new church in their new country represented a connection to the old country, and in that way eased the transition to a new life in a new country. Even in America, ethnic churches represented a key part of an immigrant's society.

Why then are they so easily overlooked? That depends on the country, but in North America, as with most countries, church registers are private, not governmental records. Therefore, access is more limited for

origins researchers. However, those churches usually kept records of the sacraments they conducted for their parishioners. The records of these actions: baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and burials often contain significant information about those members. Our immigrants imported their churches, and their record keeping practices with them. In many European countries, church parishes had been keeping copious, detailed, and comprehensive records since the 1600s. This pattern

Therefore, the records are also often in that same language. Indeed, the minister was often trained in that foreign country, at least before acceptable theological schools were established in America. Over time, these ethnic churches became more "Americanized." As the new generation grew up not knowing the mother tongue, and the ethnic groups themselves became more American, the church services, and their records reflected that change. However, for the first one or two generations in every immigrant settlement, these churches were a close reflection of life and religion in the old country.

This evolution is important to consider, for it means that you will generally have more success finding a record of an immigrant's place of origin in a record created closer to his actual immigration. Also, churches that were still more tied to the "old" ways (in the old country), are more likely to record such information. During their first years in

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most researchers. Most are also not indexed, making it hard to know where to find the needed information. Then there's the issue of which church's records to search.

America was more religiously diverse than any country from which our ancestors immigrated. There were many more churches, and a wider variety of denominations in North America, than in their home land. Over time, the descendants of these immigrants affiliated with any number of different denominations. Sometimes changing churches when the pastor changed, or when the family moved to another locality. However, the ancestral religion was still a strongly felt conviction for most of the first generation immigrants. If it was at all possible, they generally affiliated with a local church representing both the denomination and ethnic group to which they had belonged in their ancestral home.

Immigrant Churches

Mere affiliation with an ethnic church in America would not be enough to interest us as immigrant

continued in America.

Often called "ethnic" churches, because they catered to members of a specific ethnic group (Dutch, Irish, Swedes, Greeks, etc.), these churches often held their services in the native language of that group.

A village church in Poland.



Photo courtesy of James A. Derhiem, European Focus, Inc.



A village church in Poland.

Photo courtesy of James A. Derhiem, European Focus, Inc.

America, many immigrants still identified themselves, in part, by the name of the town from where they came. This was a long standing tradition in the old country that dated back to before recorded history. Indeed, many surnames originally developed out of the tradition of taking on the name of one's former residence.

However, such practices took place much earlier than the nine-

teenth century. There are very few instances of post 1850 immigrants changing their names upon immigration to that of the town from whence they came. Rather, that town name becomes sort of an "extra identifier," used in the church records, on occasion, to describe the immigrant.

Any religious denomination to which immigrants belonged could be an immigrant church (or could have been, in earlier years). However, in the interest of space, we will cover only the major immigrant churches, or church groups in North America. We will begin with the two major denominations to which nineteenth century immigrants belonged, the Roman Catholic church, and the Lutheran churches. They are followed by a brief discussion of some key earlier churches.

Records with Immigrant Origins

But first, what kind of records is it we are seeking? We need to find

records that discuss virtually any and all members of the congregation, so the Deacon's minutes, or donation records will not usually be helpful for our current task. Rather, you want records that describe, for some reason, individual immigrants. Therefore, baptismal records are not as helpful.

Virtually all ethnic churches practiced infant baptism. Usually the only persons getting baptized were newborn children, and of course, they were not immigrants. Although their parents might have been immigrants, the records describe the child, and generally give no more than the parents' names. Of course, you shouldn't ignore the baptismal records. Birth places of parents have been known to be listed on their child's baptismal record, but don't plan on it. Of course these records have great value for other genealogical purposes, such as locating and documenting all the North American born children of an immigrant couple.

Figures representing one of the Stations of the Cross in a town in Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany.



Photo courtesy of James A. Derhiem, European Focus, Inc.

For your immigrant origins research, go after the following records, generally in the order discussed:

Burial

One genealogical event that occurred, in their new country, to virtually every immigrant, is their death. They were certainly born in

the ancestral country, and they may have married and raised their children there. However, if they immigrated, they likely died in North America (except for the very unlikely situation of someone who died on a rare visit home) where they were generally buried. Immigrants were usually buried by their church, as that is how it was

done in the old country. Therefore, the vast majority of immigrants will be recorded in the burial registers of their local church.

Wedding

Many immigrants arrived during their youth. After a few years in America (sometimes only months), they found a wife or husband and desired to be married. While most American counties required a bride and groom to obtain a license to marry, many marriages were actually performed by religious leaders. Among immigrants, this was by far the most preferred way to marry, for that is how it was done by their parents in the old country.

Usually the marriage license return, kept by the county, identifies the office of the person who married the couple. Obtain that record of marriage and take note of the officiator. If he was a Pastor, Reverend, Father, or listed as a minister of the gospel, then the couple almost surely had a church wedding. Determine what church that officiator was connected with, and you are on your way to finding the church record of the wedding.

Confirmation

Many immigrants brought young children with them. They desired that their children be raised in their faith, and generally had them participate in confirmation classes during the early teen, and pre-teen years. Many church's did not keep records of confirmation, or they consist only of a list of the children who were confirmed on a given day. However, on rare occasions, they provide more information about the children, such as their birth dates and parents' names. When this information is listed, the local pastor might also have noted their place of birth.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of a town in Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany.



Photo courtesy of James A. Derhiem, European Focus, Inc.

Remember, the immigrant couple usually had several children, not just your direct ancestor. If your ancestor was already past confirmation upon arrival, perhaps younger brothers or sisters were not. This is why it is so important to research the entire immigrant family. Since

the ancestral home then comparable German Reformed registers.

Experience has shown that birth places of immigrants tend to appear in burial registers more often than in wedding registers or confirmations. However, it is only wise to check all possible records.

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they all came from the same town in the old country, you don't need to limit yourself to a record about a direct ancestor. The origins of a sibling serve the same purpose, and may be the only record you will ever find, before you verify the family in the records of the old country.

Now, the real question is, how likely is it that a home town will be listed in one of these records? That answer varies widely, due to several circumstances. It really all comes down to local record keeping practices. Some ministers recorded birth information about immigrants, while others did not. In some registers, specific towns are given for some immigrants, while only the country is noted for others. In some cases, it depends on how recent the immigrant had arrived, while in other situations, it depends on how few (or how many) immigrants the local church served. Generally a church that served more immigrants recorded more information about their origins. As noted above, this pertains to how immigrant-oriented the church was at the time of the event.

The immigrant's ethnic group also seems to have some bearing on what was recorded. Catholic records for the Irish don't list home towns nearly as frequently as do Catholic records for, say, Germans or Poles. Early Dutch Reformed church registers are much better about naming

Roman Catholic Records

Records of Roman Catholic parishes may be, generally, the best of all American church records. This is also often reflected in the record of immigrants. However, there are few certainties in such research, for there appear to be no set way of keeping these records.

Certainly the Catholic Church is the largest in the world, and beginning with the mid-nineteenth century, it became the largest in America as well. The further forward one comes during the century, the larger percentage of immigrants were Catholic. As they settled in America, and as their numbers grew, the Catholic church created parishes specifically to meet the needs of different ethnic groups. Thus in a large city, such as New York or Detroit, you will find different Catholic parishes for Germans, Italians, Irish, Poles, French and others.

Each parish will have its own record keeping traditions. Experience has shown that English-speaking Catholics (such as Irish) tend to have less information in their parish registers than those serving continental Europeans. However, even this varies from city to city. Several German Catholic parishes in Chicago mention birth places in their burial registers, at least some of the time. Correspondence from a former

German Catholic parish secretary in Cincinnati included the comment that she "seldom saw birth information in these records."

Since Catholics tended to congregate in the larger cities, you will find several Catholic parishes in those cities. Often there may be several for each of the major ethnic groups. Use a city directory from the time period when the family lived there to determine which parishes served which ethnic groups. Then, locate your immigrant family on a map, and plot which of those parishes are the closest. Remember, they did not always go to the closest parish, so you may have to check several.

Fortunately, the parish usually kept the same name (usually named for a Catholic Saint), even if they no longer serve that ethnic group. Contact the current diocese to learn about where the records are. A useful book is *U.S. Catholic Sources: A Diocesan Research Guide*, compiled by Virginia Humling (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1995). Your local Catholic parish will have a copy of the *Catholic Directory*, which includes creation dates and addresses of each parish.

Lutheran Church Records

Lutheran church records are only slightly more uniform than Catholic church records, but that seems as much a function of the ethnic groups they serve, as any other factor. Lutherans tend to be either German or one of the Scandinavian countries, so there are fewer ethnic groups. Also, although it is also one of America's largest denominations, there are far fewer Lutherans in America than Catholics.

On the other hand, Lutherans are more splintered denominationally than are Catholics. While most Lutheran congregations today belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America (ELCA), it was not always such. Over the years there have been many different Lutheran synods, each with slightly different doctrinal approaches, but that has little effect on parish registers.

What it does effect is where you are likely to locate those registers. Some synods encouraged the centralization of older records into church archives, while others have left the records in the local parishes. It may also affect the name of the church. While church names have likely not changed much since your ancestor attended a Lutheran parish, a name change may have occurred. Also, the congregation may have moved, at which time the name may have changed. Fortunately, Lutheran churches tend to be in more rural

environments, so you can contact a Lutheran church in the area where the immigrant lived, and inquire about the early records. Certainly Lutheran churches are found in the large cities as well. In such cases, use the strategy explained above, under the Catholic discussion.

Reformed Churches

The vast majority of non-British immigrants to colonial North America were the Dutch of the 17th century and the Germans of the 18th century. Each of them brought their own culture with them, which included their churches. While many of the Germans were Lutherans, a significant number belonged to the German Reformed Church (now part of the United Church of Christ).

The first major German immigrant group was the 1709 refugees who were permitted to settle upstate New York. Here they established their churches, or intermixed with the local Dutch in their churches. The next wave of German immigration focused on Pennsylvania where they were granted much more liberality in establishing their own communities, and maintaining their culture.

Most of the Germans in Pennsylvania were either Lutheran or Reformed, sometimes even sharing the same church building (often termed a “union” church). Their record keeping practices were similar: they generally recorded the baptisms and marriages, but burials only infrequently.

A village church in Poland.



It appears that most German church records have been preserved in one form or another. Sometimes only transcripts exist, but even they can be quite comprehensive. Remember, many Germans arrived as families, so you will want to track the young immigrant sons. Don't restrict your searches to the father but remember when women are mentioned their home town is seldom provided. The best solution for seeking the origins of a German female immigrant is to try and locate the origins of her father or brothers.

An overall guide to German Reformed Church records is Florence M. Bricker's, *Church and Pastoral Records in the Archives of the United Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society* (Lancaster, Pa.: n.p., n.d.). The Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society (555 West James Street, Lancaster, PA 17603) holds the transcripts made by William J. Hinke and others of most of the colonial and early national German Reformed congregations.

For a list of most colonial Lutheran and Reformed congregations in Pennsylvania and reference to the years the records begin, see Charles H. Glatfelter's *Pastors and People, I, Congregations and Pastors* in "Publications of the Pennsylvania German Society," vol. 12 (Breinigsville, Pa.: Pennsylvania German Society, 1980).

The Dutch were actually the first settlers of what became New York, having established a Dutch colony known as New Netherlands, with the chief city, New Amsterdam (later New York City). The Dutch Reformed Church records are among the best sources for any kind of genealogical research during the 17th Century. Although some records have been lost, especially for Dutch churches in New Jersey,



A village church in Poland.

most have survived. Most have also been transcribed, or published, sometimes in two, three, or four versions. Early transcriptions are often incomplete and may not name places in Holland where the families originated, so seek more recent transcriptions. While original records are difficult to find, begin with the transcriptions, where the preface may identify the existence of the originals.

Remember, the Dutch stopped immigrating to New York after the British took over in 1664, and most Dutch had immigrated before 1650. Therefore, you will need to seek the earliest registers to find reference to immigrants. Watch especially for early marriage records, often within just a few years of arrival. Fortunately, the Dutch were more likely to refer to themselves by their home town. For some, it even became their surname. Where fami-

lies arrived, seek records for all family members, even the young girls, whose Dutch home is often mentioned in their marriage records.

Other German Churches

The smaller German Pietist groups, such as the Mennonites, Dunkards, Brethren, and Amish churches, as well as groups such as the Moravians, often kept excellent records which may provide specific places of origin for their members. Remember, immigration of such groups was often church-sponsored, so the church was literally a part of the immigration of their members.

Sometimes it is difficult to locate the parish registers of these smaller denominations, but sometimes even better than their church registers are the histories of such churches. Both denominational and congregational histories will mention their early immigrant members, often noting

their home town in Germany. For example, in its three volumes, *The Brethren Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia : Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983-1984) discusses many of the original immigrant families, often identifying their ancestral home.

Few U.S. religious groups have pursued genealogy and family history with greater zeal than the Mennonites. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Mennonites were a persecuted church. Given their "underground" status, it is difficult to find recorded evidence of the Mennonites in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German and Swiss records.

Mennonite records in Pennsylvania tend to be rather fragmentary as compared to those of the Lutheran and Reformed congregations. On the other hand, the Mennonites have published an impressive series of scholarly works concerning their particular history for the past sixty years. Often these histories identify not only the immigrant, but often his ancestors back two or three generations. An excellent bibliography of published Mennonite family histories is *Amish and Amish Mennonite Genealogies* (Hugh F. Gingerich and Rachel W. Kreider, Gordonville, Pa.: Pequea Publishers, 1986).

Friends (Quaker)

Another colonial denomination, known for their excellent records, is the Religious Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers. Quaker records are perhaps the most useful of any colonial churches having predominantly British membership. In addition to records of birth (not baptism) and marriage, Friends keep minutes of their administrative meetings wherein they dealt with matters of discipline and other aspects of their local society. Often found among those records are

letters, or certificates, of removal or admission which document the previous Monthly Meeting (local Quaker society) to which a member belonged.

Many immigrants were Friends in the Old World before arriving in the colonies. Therefore, they would often bring such letters with them, which naturally identify the former meeting to which they belonged. Many, but certainly not all, of these records have survived. Once you establish that an immigrant ancestor was a Quaker, try to learn which meeting he or she attended. Then locate the records of that meeting. Usually they have been transcribed (often in handwritten form), and often published (perhaps just as a typescript).

However, be cautious when using the transcripts because they often focus only on birth or marriage information. Additional information, such as removal notations, or disciplinary action, may not appear in the transcript or publication. This information may only survive in the original record, or complete copies.

Other Early Churches

Most other colonial churches were not as careful or consistent in recording the various events in their parishioners' lives. Where they did record the burial or marriage of an immigrant, they seldom ever included reference to their home in the old country. Two exceptions should be noted.

The Roman Catholic church was the preferred church in areas settled by the French, notably the area later known as Quebec. There were few colonial Catholics in the British colonies. Later in the colonial time period many English-speaking Catholics settled in Maryland. Where early Catholic records exist, they may provide the name of an ances-

tral home. This seems particularly the case with French Catholic parishes. There were virtually no German Catholics in North America before the Revolutionary War.

Huguenot (French Protestant) immigrants to the British colonies have been the subject of significant research over the past century and a half. This has resulted in many records being preserved, micro-filmed, and even published. The French origins of many Huguenot families have been determined and well documented. Among the hundreds of books on the subject, most researchers begin with Charles Washington Baird's *History of the Huguenot Emigration to America* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1885, reprinted by Genealogical Publishing Company of Baltimore in 1973).

Accessing the Records

After you have identified what church an immigrant family likely belonged to, contact that church. Keep in mind that times have changed, and that parish likely does not cater to immigrants any more. On one research trip to Jersey City, I wished to locate the records of the one-time German Catholic parish. Upon finding myself at the parish, I learned that the same parish now served the local Hispanic population. The young priest was willing to help, but knew very little about the early records. Further, they were in a language he could not read! Fortunately he left them in my hands and allowed me to search for the family of interest.

This, or similar scenes, plays itself out across America where researchers are seeking the older records of a congregation. Modern church activities, and record-keeping practices, are different than they were a hundred years ago when an immigrant's death was recorded.

It may be difficult for the local church workers to assist you. Consider yourself fortunate if they can even locate the records from that long ago. Indeed, often the records are no longer stored at the local church. Many Catholic records have been collected by the diocese. Lutheran records may be in a synodical archives.

The best way to begin is with the local congregation. Usually one of the workers will know about the early records, and where they are stored. They may even know of descendants of your family that still attend that church. If you cannot locate the local church, or they no longer exist, then turn to the appropriate diocese or synod. The results are worth the effort!

Conclusion

No, there are no guarantees. That's the way it is with immigrant origins

research. But, if there's a place to begin your search, it is with immigrant church records. Therefore, take the time to learn more about your immigrant ancestor's ethnic church and locate those records. While you don't know what you will find until you look at the record, the possible pay off is so great you shouldn't waste time. So, your first task is to find out what religion your immigrant ancestor was. Ask other relatives, or check family records for clues. Then, using a local history, learn about the ethnic churches in the areas where the family lived. After you determine the name of the church the family likely attended, write to the current church and inquire about the early records. Church workers are devoted souls who are always willing to help, but be sure to include a donation to their church, after all, you are asking them to do a favor for you. You'll be

surprised at how much information you may get back. ■



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