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GERMAN IMMIGRANTS TO PENNSYLVANIA
1683 - 1808
Survival of the Fittest

The early German immigrants to Pennsylvania, from 1683 to 1808, were predominantly from parts of SW Germany, known today as the states of Rhineland-Palatinate (*Rheinland- Pfaltz*) and Baden-Wuerttemberg. Others came from nearby German communities just over the border in Switzerland and in Alsace, France. Collectively they were all referred to as "Palatines" or "Palatinates" in the historical literature.

Motivation

The first significant number of Palatine immigrants arrived at Philadelphia in 1683 on the ship Concord, which has often been called the "German Mayflower". There were many reasons why this group of Germans left the Fatherland. Their incentive started with the missionary zeal of William Penn, who made many converts among the Palatines to the Quaker persuasion. Penn also secured a royal charter in 1681 for land in Pennsylvania and the terms for purchases were made reasonable. One of his converts, Franz Daniel Pastorius, became an agent for the Frankfurt Land Company in SW Germany that handled the land transactions. It was Pastorius, who organized and accompanied the group on board the Concord. After arriving in Philadelphia they settled in the area known as Germantown, which historically has been referred to as the "Pastorius Colony".

After the Concord voyage, Palatines poured into Pennsylvania by the thousands during the 1700s. Some had the wanderlust, others were attracted to the prospect of farming large tracts of land where the climate and alkaline soil were similar to that of the Palatinate. Many just wanted to leave an area that was plagued with wars, religious strife, and high taxes to support an army and a lavish monarchy.

Swiss and Alsatian Germans

If you believe that your ancestors were Swiss because they came from Switzerland or French because they were from Alsace, you might want to reconsider that notion. The Thirty Years War and the ruthless decimation of the Palatinate by the French King Louis XIV forced many Germans to flee across the border into Switzerland. Some returned later but others remained and eventually immigrated to Pennsylvania.

Alsace (and part of Lorraine) was historically inhabited by Germans from 700 to 1500 A. D. When France gained control in the 1500s, the German population suffered from the ruthless oppression of French rule. Consequently, when tracing one's ancestors, it is not uncommon to find records of early German families in Alsace with "French" surnames; much like the case of many German immigrants in Pennsylvania, who had their names "Anglicized" by English speaking officials.

Voyage to America

There were two ways for Palatines to pay for their voyage from Germany to Philadelphia. One could pay cash or one could agree to be an indentured servant in America for a range of two to eight years. A conservative estimate of the ship's passenger fare was the equivalent of \$176.00 dollars in cash; a considerable sum in the 1700s. The payment was due upon arrival at Philadelphia. If passengers lost their money along the way, they were forced to be indentured.

The usual route from SW Germany was a trip down the Rhine River to Rotterdam, Holland; passage by ship to a port in England; and from there across the Atlantic to Philadelphia. The route seems rather straightforward and gives the impression of continuous travel time. In reality this was not the case.

The trip down the Rhine River by Gottlieb Mittelberger, a native of Wuerttemberg, was held up so often by thirty or forty custom houses, not always conveniently open, that five to six weeks passed before he reached Rotterdam. In Holland he experienced another delay of five or six weeks before the ship was ready to sail.

Sailing time from Rotterdam to England ranged from eight to fourteen days or longer, depending on the weather. After arriving at a port in England, passengers had to wait a week to ten days, until the ship was ready to make Atlantic crossing.

Today, a flight by passenger jet from London to Philadelphia is about a seven-hour duration. In 1750 the same trip by ship lasted about two to three months, depending on how favorable the wind was.

From 1683 to 1727, no effort was made by British officials to record passenger lists. However, when altogether 50,000 Palatines entered the port of Philadelphia during the year 1727, the Provincial Council adopted a resolution that required colonists to swear allegiance to the Crown. Passenger lists were then required from all captains of ships. Usually these lists were limited to the names of male adults, who had to take the oath of allegiance. Occasionally, some passenger lists would include the names of all women and children aboard.

Survival of the Fittest

Because of the many delays experienced since they left the regions of the Rhineland, most passengers had used up their last bit of travel money and meager supply of food reserved for the long voyage by the time their ship set sail from England. The situation became even more desperate in overcrowded ships with inadequate supplies of food and water. In the 1700s the causes of diseases were unknown and people seldom bathed, even under more favorable circumstances. Soap was seldom used to cleanse the body; the toothbrush was unheard of and the flushing toilet was not yet invented. When 200 to 300 people are crowded together in a ship for a duration of two or three months, a hellish

environment emerges. Suffocating stench, dysentery, swarms of lice, scurvy, cold, dampness, hunger and thirst prevail.

Children, ages one to seven years, seldom survived the long voyage. Gottlieb Mittelberger reported seeing at least 32 bodies of children cast into the sea during his voyage.

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg wrote in his diary on August 30, 1742, that due to the severe shortage of water on board, passengers collected rain water using any kind of cloth or rags they could find, then wrung out the dirty water into tubes and barrels. The collected water, although "bitter to taste", was preferred over the foul remnant of drinking water on ship. Two weeks later all the water was gone. Someone thought of displaying a Spanish flag to attract an English war ship. The plan worked, the ship was stopped, and water was delivered.

One German newspaper reported how rats on board a ship survived the water shortages. Some of them gnawed out the stoppers of bottles of vinegar, dipped their tails down into the liquid, then drew their wet tails through their mouths. Others at night would lick the perspiration off the brows of people who were asleep.

By the time the passengers arrived at Philadelphia and walked down the gangplank (if they could walk at all), they must have looked like emaciated survivors of a concentration camp - no resemblance at all to the healthy robust immigrants we see in the Hollywood movies, stepping ashore lightly with a heavy trunk on their shoulder!

References

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Note: The Baltzer Meyer Historical Society library has reference books on German immigrants from Alsace, Rhineland, Baden-Wuerttemberg, and the Palatinate. Also available are passenger lists of immigrants who arrived at Philadelphia from 1727 to 1808.