

Early Germans in America and Why They Came

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The Mennonites who arrived aboard the Concord in 1683 were soon followed by many others of the same faith. [Strassburger, I: xv-xvi] This sect founded Germantown, the first town in Pennsylvania after Philadelphia. (Germantown is now a part of greater Philadelphia). As more Mennonites arrived, they spread into what became Montgomery and Lancaster counties and beyond, as did members of other Anabaptist sects, particularly the German Baptist Brethren, also known as Dunkers. By the mid-1700's, two distinctively different religious groups of Germans had arrived in Pennsylvania: 1) members of the various persecuted religious sects: Mennonites, Amish, Dunkards, Schwenkfelders, and Moravians, and 2) members of the sanctioned Reformed, Lutheran, and Catholic (very few Catholics) churches. Thus, Pennsylvania, more than any other colony, became a melting pot of diverse religious groups, but unlike European countries freedom to worship and practice their religious faiths was unhindered by the state.

In her comments about the Anabaptist sects, Bittner, [p.13] says, "These flourished mainly among the lower classes, those who had wished during the Reformation to abolish nobles and kings along with the priesthood, and these social and socialistic views naturally made them obnoxious to the authorities. They were persecuted ... until death by fire and sword and drowning in earlier times; then as civilization advanced, through imprisonment, harassment by the authorities, and forcible conversions; and finally, by all sorts of worrying attacks, such as spared life and limb but left little else. No wonder that as soon as asylum was provided them [in America] they flocked to it, one little company after another of the sectarians braving the dangers of the long, miserable voyage and hardships of the unknown wilderness to find the precious jewel of religious freedom." [Anabaptists (means to baptize again); they did not believe in infant baptism, but required adult baptism].

For the 1708-1720 period of German immigration to Pennsylvania, Rev. Henry Melchior Muehlenberg, the patriarch of the Lutheran Church in America, called attention to the great exodus from the German Palatinate to England which occurred during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714). The people of the Palatinate and the adjacent province of Wurttemberg had lived for generations in a land "with near constant wars, which made battlefields of villages, towns, and whole regions. Besides being at the mercy of invading armies, many of these unfortunate Germans were taxed unmercifully by whatever local Prince had jurisdiction over their particular geographic region, and by 1709 many poor Palatines were bled dry financially . . . But perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back was the devastating and bitterly-cold winter of the year 1709. Soldiers drove people from their homes in the depth of winter. Throughout southern Germany; Pastors abruptly stopped their normal recording of baptismal, marriage, and burial entries in order to mention the terrible weather conditions burdening their congregations." [Strassburger, I:xiv]

The Pastor at Berstadt wrote, 'In the year [1709] there has been a horrible, terrible cold, the like of which is not remembered by the oldest [parishioners] who are upward of 80 years old. As one reads in the newspapers, it spread not only through the entire country, but also through France, Italy, Spain,

England, Holland, Saxony, and Denmark, where many people and cattle have frozen to death. The mills in almost all villages around here are also frozen in, so that people must suffer from hunger. Most of the fruit trees are frozen too, as well as most of the grain." [Jones, I:ii-iii]

The emigration of 1709-1710 from the German Palatinate is without parallel in the history of emigrating people. Forced from their homes in the dead of winter by ravaging soldiers, the only hope of thousands was to escape down the Rhine river to Holland and reach England where they hoped to find shelter. That hope was based on their knowledge that Queen Ann of England was known to be tolerant of Protestants. As many as 15,000 Palatines were encamped at one time on the outskirts of London, dependent entirely upon the charity of the English. Some four thousand were sent to New York where many became disillusioned at the treatment received there and eventually many of them moved to Pennsylvania.

Muelhenberg laments that many Germans once they reached Pennsylvania, "separated from his church allowing their children and grandchildren to grow up without the necessary instructions, most of them going over to the Quakers, while others either joined other churches, or they did choose not to have anything more do with religion. At the end of the period. a large number of High Germans arrived, who were real Separatists. They brought along a deep-seated hatred of or disinclination to accept the doctrine or constitution of our church, or they were Baptists [Dunkers], Mennonites, Schwenkfelders, or similar kinds." [Strassburger, I:x-v]

For the period 1720-1730, Muehlenberg reported large increase in the number of members of the Lutheran and Reformed faiths arrived in Philadelphia from the Palatinate, Wurttemberg, Darmstadt, and from other American colonies, especially from New York. He reported German families had settled in all parts of the province, and called attention to the arrival of another "noteworthy Lutheran group headed by the Rev. Anthony Jacob Henckel," [my 7th gr. grandfather] Because the majority of Germans came from the Palatinate, the term "Palatine" came to be used in Pennsylvania as a synonym for "German." [Strassburger, I:xiii-xvii]

Germans continued to arrive in Philadelphia such that for 1680-1730 Muehlenberg was unable to even guess the number, pointing to the many divergent opinions on the number expressed by various writers. However, they are known to have numbered at least 20,000. Beginning in 1727, the law required in Philadelphia required the names of all immigrants to be recorded, and by 1775 an additional 68,872 German immigrants had . been registered. (Kuhns, p.57). All surviving lists of names are published in the three volume work of Strassburger.

At the time the Eller Family Association was formed in 1987, only the Eller immigrants listed by Strassburger were known to the Association. A project to identify all pre-1800 Eller immigrants to America from all published sources resulted in the publication of a total of twenty- six. [Eller et al, 1998].

In 1985, I discovered that my fifth great grandfather was a German Palatine immigrant - his name, Jacob Eller; a Lutheran whose place of birth was the German Palatinate; the name of his father, Casper Eller; the name of his wife, Maria Eva Gottge; and his immigrant brother was Melchior Eller, also confirmed in the New Hanover Lutheran Church in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania during the pastorate of Rev.

Henry Melchior Muehlenberg (the same person quoted above). Three other immigrants of the same period, apparently brothers (or close relatives), were, Henry Eller, baptized into the Dunker sect in Conestoga, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 1756, George Michael Eller believed also to be a member of the Dunker sect, and Christian Eller, a Lutheran.

Henry and George Michael Eller probably Lutherans at the time of arrival became Dunkers later. Jacob Eller of Botetourt County, Virginia, a possible son of George Michael Eller, or another immigrant, was a Dunker and progenitor of several generations of Dunker descendants including several ministers. Henry and George Michael Eller died in Frederick County, Maryland, while Jacob, Melchior, and Christian died in Rowan County, North Carolina.

No documented information from German records for any of these early Eller immigrants have been verified although some German information for these families exists in Salt Lake City, but these contain errors and unproven information. Linking the Eller immigrants mentioned above with their family and places of origin in Germany has yet to be accomplished. [Note: Various names, said to be the father of George Michael Eller have been reported by various sources, but without documentation].

While pursuing information on early Eller immigrants, I learned of three other German Palatine immigrant grandparents - Rev. Anthony Jacob Henckel, a Lutheran, who arrived in Philadelphia in 1717; Johann Paul Diiffel (Biffle), who arrived in 1738 with a family that included sons who had been baptized in the Catholic Church in Germany, (but apparently did not worship as such in America), and daughters who had been baptized in the Reformed Church in Germany; Johannes Gottge (Ketchey), a Lutheran, who arrived in 1751 with a family that included six children whose baptismal records are not known; however, his brother, Ludwig, arrived in 1754 with a family that included six children - 4 baptized in the Lutheran Church and two in the Reformed Church. The four Palatine families- Henckel, Duffel, Gottge, and Eller - were interconnected through intermarriages which occurred in either Pennsylvania or Rowan County, North Carolina. [Paul Duffel, John Goettge, Jacob, Melchior and Christian Eller died in Rowan County, North Carolina]. The linking of only the Buffet and Goettge families with their places of origin in Germany has been accomplished; details appear in various reports that are reviewed in past issues of the Eller Chronicles and in Eller, J.G. et al, 1998.

It seems apparent that my Palatine ancestors were primarily Lutherans, although some of their relatives joined the Dunker faith after reaching Pennsylvania, and others may have belonged to the Reformed church. Early Henckel descendants remained staunchly Lutheran, and produced many Lutheran ministers. Some descendants of the Buffet, Gottge and Eller lines left the Lutheran church at different times and places to join other Protestant churches, primarily Baptists and Methodists; one like joined the Mormons.

With the discovery of my early German ancestors, a question immediately sprang to my mind which continues to resonate with me - what motivated these Palatine German families to leave their homeland and subject themselves to such great danger and so much misery in order to reach America? This same question was pursued by Ann Hinkle Gable in her book on our mutual ancestor, Rev. Anthony Jacob Henckel. Her well-documented book covers the period from his birth to his arrival in Philadelphia in 1

717. In her search for answers, Gable correlated many German records of Rev. Henkel, especially for Hesse and the German Palatinate, where he had served as a Lutheran pastor, with general German history. She concluded that the three major for his emigration were: WAR! EXTREME POVERTY! and CONFLICT! [Gable, p. 22]. German history clearly shows that the last two were derivatives of the first and that the first sprang from the distorted concepts of the Christian religion that were practiced in Germany before and after the Reformation. [Cameron, 1991].

Records, cited by Gable, show that Rev. Henkel, throughout his years as a Lutheran pastor, was in almost constant conflict with the state authorities because of the oppressive actions taken against all Protestants by the Catholic Elector Johann Wilhelm, who had been preceded by several Electors tolerant toward Protestants. Thus, religious freedom of sorts had been enjoyed in the Palatinate for many years. However, this all changed in 1690-1716 during the reign of John William which coincided with most of the period of Rev. Henkel's service as a Pfarrer (pastor).

In 1698, John William ruled that any church of the three confessions (Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic) was to be open for use by any one of the three. Because at that time few Catholic churches existed in the Palatinate, the action was grossly unjust to the Protestants. In 1699 the ruling was extended against the Lutherans who were ordered to share not only their churches but their tithes with the Catholics. This was in direct conflict with the order of 1687 by the preceding Elector. Until his departure for America in 1717, Rev. Henckel and his congregation were in conflict with the authorities over the matter. Rev. Henckel fought hard for his Church but in the end gave up in despair and left for America where he continued in the service of the Lutheran Church until his death.

Note (JGE): An extended family history and genealogy of descendants of Rev. Anthony Jacob Henkel was published in the Eller Chronicles VIII: 1:38-53. Also, life history and genealogical data on all the immigrants mentioned here appear in J. Gerald Eller, et al, 1998.

Those of us who have early German immigrant ancestors in America, but no knowledge of earlier ancestors can only wonder how they managed to survive the harsh circumstances imposed upon them during the 17th and early 18th centuries, especially by the Thirty Years' War (1616-1648) during which they were forced to endure levels of destruction and suffering beyond any ever recorded for one group of people.

The competing armies during the several wars marched back and forth across the countryside leaving behind destroyed cities, towns, villages and farms [see Chronology in Part I]. All of Germany suffered unspeakable hardships, including murder which resulted in a state of total poverty. Moreover, the brunt of the devastating often fell most heavily upon the people of the Palatinate and adjacent provinces. This because their geographic position placed them adjacent to France and in the path of their invading and retreating armies. We need to remember that most pre-Revolutionary War German immigrants to America came from this region and it was their parents and grandparents of past generations who survived these many wars.

Prior to the Thirty Years' War, Germany had been blessed for many years by great prosperity. Productive farms with comfortable homes, large barns, many horses and cattle, and large crops were common.

Some families had acquired a few luxuries and had even saved some money, but during the this war they lost everything - horses, cattle and all livestock were carried away and houses, barns, and even crops, were burned. To learn the hiding places of valuables, family members were tortured in the most brutal fashion and many were murdered in cold blood. When armies approached, the only protection for people in towns, villages and on the farms was to rush into the forests or hide in the marshes and caves. After the danger subsided and they returned to their homes they found only ruins with little else left for their existence. Then, to add insult to injury, before they had managed to recover from the last raid they were often forced to flee again.

Kuhns cites documented figures concerning one Palatine county where over 75 per cent of the inhabitants were destroyed; 66 percent of the houses, 85 percent of the horses, over 83 percent of the goats, and over 82 percent of the cattle. More than three-quarters of the inhabitants and more than four-fifths of their worldly goods were destroyed. Comparable figures came from dozens of other localities. The desolation was so complete that it took two hundred years to restore farm production and general property to the pre-war level. This same pattern of destruction was repeated throughout much of Germany. But, as already mentioned, it was the Palatinate that received the harshest and most destructive treatment. Kuhns says about the Palatine people, they were, "among the best farmers in the world, in many districts having cultivated the soil for thirty generations. Situated as they are along the great water highway of Europe, they are said by those who know, to combine the best qualities of North and South, being distinguished for indomitable industry, keen wit, independence, and a high degree of intelligence.

One of the most atrocious acts in the Palatinate came in 1622 when General Tilly captured Heidelberg. Not only did the soldiers engage in their usual practice of burning and plundering every home and business establishment - they raped the young women, - they pierced the feet of citizens with nails, burned them with hot irons, and committed other unspeakable barbarities, including murder of civilians. The most despicable act was the destruction of the excellent library at the University of Heidelberg where hundreds of irreplaceable books of great value disappeared in the flames. Such was the legacy of these so-called Christian soldiers. This was the locale where my Henckel ancestors lived.

Kuhn writes, "So again in 1634 ... different bands of soldiers swept in their retreat over the Palatinate, utterly disregarding all law, mishandling persons and destroying property .. .In the years 1635-1638 famine and pestilence came to add to the suffering. The people tried to satisfy hunger with roots, grass, and leaves; even cannibalism became more or less frequent. The gallows and graveyards had to be guarded; the bodies of children were not safe from their mothers. So great was the desolation that where once were flourishing farms and vineyards, now whole bands of wolves roamed unmolested."

The Peace of Westphalia in 1649 brought an end to the Thirty Year's War and a settlement to the political map of Europe; also the settlement provided that the Reformed faith was added to Lutheranism and Catholicism as approved confessions. This did much to relieve religious tensions in many regions such as the Palatinate where the Reformed churches far outnumbered those of the Lutherans and Catholics. But the settlement left the Anabaptist sects without state approval and they continued to be forced to scramble from place to place in their effort to find sanctuary.

"As a result of the long Thirty Years' War Germany lay desolate and its strategic position was greatly weakened by the loss of territory to the Dutch, the Danes, the Swedes and the French. Between a third and a half of the people were dead. Whole cities stood in ruins. Whole districts lay stripped of their inhabitants, and their live stocks and supplies, trade had virtually ceased. A whole generation of pillage, famine, disease, and social disruption had wreaked such havoc that in the end the princes were forced to reinstate serfdom, to curtail municipal liberties, and to nullify the progress of the century. The many exploits of Spanish, Swedish, Italian, Croat, Flemish, and French soldiers had changed the racial composition of the people (by infusion of their genes by rape or consent). German culture was so traumatized that art and literature passed entirely under the spell of foreign, especially French, fashion." [Davies. p. 568]

Like the Civil War in America, the poverty generated by the Thirty Years' War lasted at least for the next hundred years. But many other conflicts were to follow before our Eller ancestors of the 1740-1750 period decided to leave their homeland and set out for America. We do not yet know precisely the place of origin in Germany for any of them; Among the five (Jacob, Melchior, George Michael, Henry and Christian Eller) we only know that Jacob was born in the Palatinate. Circumstantial evidence is strong that all of my ancestors mentioned above came from the German Rhineland. Descendants of these and other early German immigrants to America should not forget the suffering endured by them and their predecessors who lived through the many wars. Nor should we forget the courageous and bold action taken by those who sought a better life by coming to America. For this reason alone, I hope the Eller Family Association will continue its efforts to connect early Eller immigrants with their German families and places of origin.

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