Finding your German ancestors on Ancestry

More Americans today link themselves to German heritage than they do any other ethnicity. Not surprising, since the first wave of German immigration to the U.S. dates back to the 17th century.

Germans have influenced U.S. culture ever since, building their first settlement in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1683. Key social contributions included manufacturing expertise, the establishment of kindergartens, beer making and the pretzel.

WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

Like most ethnic groups arriving in the New World, key waves of immigration for Germans were spurred by undesirable conditions in their homeland. Included are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WAVE</th>
<th>CAUSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1683-1820</td>
<td>Religious persecution; wars; overall hardships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820-1871</td>
<td>War; conscription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871-1914</td>
<td>Religious persecution; political unrest; overpopulation; low wages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LIFE IN AMERICA

Germans settled throughout the U.S., with large concentrations remaining on the East Coast. Others migrated to the Midwest or traveled through the Port of Galveston and remained in Texas.

Germans held strong to their roots, often retaining their native language and the German spelling of their surnames post immigration. However, during WWI and WWII, anti-German sentiment was extremely high, leading some local governments to ban German in schools and public places. Additionally, German Americans often Americanized their German surnames at this time — names like Oches were changed to Oaks, Schwartz to Black and families of Mullers became Millers.

Tip: Not sure what an ethnicity listed by your ancestor indicates? A quick Internet search can help. You’ll discover terms like Prussian, Hessian, Palatine, Bavarian and Swabian, for example, point to German family heritage.
Steps to discovering your German family

**STEP 1: BEGIN WITH RECORDS CREATED BY THE FAMILY IN THE U.S.**

Start with the most recent records, including the 1930 and 1920 censuses, military draft registration cards, yearbooks, obituaries and other records at Ancestry.com.

How: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry.com to get started. Input the name of your ancestor who would have been living during the 20th century. Include other details including birth year, residence or birthplace, and the names of other relatives, if available.

What to look for: Click on the results returned and inspect the details. Family names, ages and relationships, birthplaces, occupations and addresses (scan horizontally across the page to see all of the information) can help you determine if you’ve found the correct family.

Where next: Use the information you discover to create more searches for the same family moving backwards in time. Census records are full of details — and 20th-century records include information about immigration and/or naturalization — so try to discover each one your family appears in. Be sure to pay attention to birthplaces. A birthplace of “Germany” will signify the family’s immigrant. But did he or she come to America alone?

Tip: Census records didn’t begin recording naturalization and/or immigration information until 1900, but earlier census records — back to 1850 — include birthplaces. A bonus for German researchers: 1860, 1870 and 1880 usually list the German sovereign state, rather than just “Germany.”

Save the records you find to your Ancestry.com family tree – Ancestry.com can use the details to help you discover even more.

**STEP 2: FIND THE IMMIGRANT IN THE IMMIGRATION AND TRAVEL COLLECTION AT ANCESTRY.COM**

Once you know who the immigrant was — and have his or her name, approximate birth year and other identifying details from census and other records — search for records directly related to his or her immigration.

How: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry.com. From the Special Collections list on the right side of the page, select Immigration and Travel to limit your search to records from this collection. Fill in the search-form with details you’ve discovered about your family’s immigrant — name, birth year, year of arrival — and search. Note that the form contains fields for names of other family members, locations in which your ancestor may have lived, where he or she arrived in America, and more. You can fill these in later if you’ve receive too many results, but be careful: immigration details reported years later on a census may not be entirely accurate.
Finding your German ancestors

**What to look for:** The Immigration and Travel collection includes passenger arrival lists, naturalization (citizenship) documents, passport applications and other records that link to a person's international travel. Then compare dates, family members and other details you find on an Immigration and Travel record to the information you've already collected about your ancestor to see if you've found a match.

**Where next:** Your goal is to find the location of the home in Germany so you can dive into records created there. Some passenger lists and naturalization documents include this information — but not all do. Search for details on death certificates, church records, military documents and wills and resources in your own attic (place names may be listed on the back of old photos and letters could point to family members who remained behind in Germany). Also look at immigration and travel records created by other immigrating family members, which may include the details even if your own ancestor’s record don’t.

**STEP 3: USE NAME, BIRTH DETAILS AND PLACE INFORMATION TO LOCATE YOUR ANCESTOR IN RECORDS CREATED IN GERMANY**

Just like in the U.S., many records were created locally in Germany. Knowing where your ancestor lived plus details about his or her family can help you pinpoint the right person when searching through German records.

**How:** Click on the Search tab at Ancestry.com and choose “Show Advanced.” Then fill in the search form with details you’ve learned about your ancestor. At the bottom of the form is a “Collection Priority” option. Select “German” as the priority and then choose “Show only records from this location” to search just German records. Be sure, however, to undo these settings before searching again through non-German records.

**Tip:** Discrepancies exist. Details in immigration records may not mirror what you’ve found elsewhere. Census immigration dates may be off by a few years and even first and last names may differ slightly (immigrants often Americanized their names AFTER arriving in America). Carefully analyze your finds and assess them against known facts to be sure you have the right person.

**Tip:** Be wary of searching with country names when searching for German ancestors. Limiting your search with a birthplace of “Germany” may not give you results for ancestors.

Not sure a record you found is linked to your family? Save it to your Ancestry.com Shoebox so you can review it later after you’ve had time to learn more about the family.
Finding your German ancestors

**What to look for:** Click on the results returned and inspect the details. Family names, ages and relationships, birthplaces, occupations and addresses (scan horizontally across the page to see all of the information) can help you determine if you’ve found the correct family.

**Where next:** Your ancestors likely left a long trail through German records but you may need assistance locating those records. Use resources at Ancestry.com including message boards to find other researchers who can help. You can also hire a professional to assist with some — or all — of the research. You’ll find details about professional research services at the “Hire an Expert” button.

**Key Resources at Ancestry.com for German research**

- **U.S. Federal Census Collection**
  - to help you discover more about your family’s life in the U.S. and to give you the clues you’ll need to find the all-important German home in other documents created in America.

- **Immigration and Travel Collection**
  - to discover the moment your ancestor arrived as well as details reported to obtain citizenship; note that women and children may not have naturalization records and may have been naturalized through a parent or spouse, depending on laws at the time.

- **Hamburg Passenger Lists**
  - to find a departing-Germany records; Hamburg was one of the top ports of departure for German and Eastern European immigrants to America and elsewhere.

- **German Phone Directories, Military Records and Census**
  - to get an idea of your ancestor’s life and the names of other family members in Germany.

- **Jewish Family History Collection**
  - to learn more about Jewish ancestors who lived in Germany; access all of the records in this collection directly through the Special Collections box on the right side of the Search screen. [image: may need to show this]

- **Message Boards**
  - to connect with other researchers who have experience researching German records.

- **Family Trees**
  - to link to other family members, possibly even previously unknown distant cousins, who are also researching the same family lines; one of them may have the details you’re searching for.

**Tip:** Always view the original image. While the typed search result you receive includes a lot of information, the original image may include even more — including clues to other relatives.
5 Tips for Tricky Names

Immigrant names can be hard to pinpoint, but the following tricks can help:

**Trick 1**
Use the Internet to help you determine ethnic equivalents, literal translations (ex: Schwartz may have been changed to Black) or alternate spellings of an ancestor’s name.

**Trick 2**
Lengthen and shorten names. And remember that more than one ancestor may have changed a surname. So Weisenberger may have become Weisenberg then Weisen and finally Wise.

**Trick 3**
Try a wildcard search in which you use asterisks to replace some of the letters in a name. For example, if the surname was Berlengauem, B*r*l*g*m* would produce it as well as Burlingame and other variants.

**Trick 4**
Search by criteria. Forego the surname and search using birthplace, age, gender, occupation and other details to find people who match the ancestor you’re seeking. Pay special attention to the names in your search results. Do any of them seem to reflect your family?

**Trick 5**
Check immigration records and passports carefully — at times they may include notations indicating a previous name change. Also try maiden names. Female ancestors may have traveled using them, even when married.

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### Helpful Information

#### Reading German

Don’t read German? No problem. The following terms can help you understand basic information on a document:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German Term</th>
<th>English Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zuname</td>
<td>Surname</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vorname</td>
<td>Given name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geschlecht</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Männlich</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weiblich</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alter (in Jahren)</td>
<td>Age (in Years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familienstand</td>
<td>Family status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verheiratet</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geschieden</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ledig</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verwitwet</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beruf</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stellung</td>
<td>Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staatsangehörigkeit</td>
<td>Citizenship, nationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisheriger Wohnort</td>
<td>Past residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziel der Umdwanderung</td>
<td>Destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ort und Staat</td>
<td>Place and State</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>