

RESEARCH GUIDE

Finding your German Ancestors on Ancestry®

Updated 4/30/2024

Search **German Records** on Ancestry® >

More Americans today link themselves to German heritage than they do to 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, lager beer and pretzels, and introducing physical education into public schools.

WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

Like most ethnic groups arriving in the American Colonies, key waves of immigration for Germans were spurred by difficult conditions in their homeland. These included the following:

WAVE	CAUSE
1683-1820	Religious persecution, wars, famine, overall hardships
1820-1871	War, political unrest, conscription
1871-1914	Religious persecution, political unrest, overpopulation, low wages

Life in North 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 fast to their roots, often retaining their language and the German spelling of their surnames after immigrating. 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 — a name like Ochse was changed to Oaks, Schwartz morphed to Black, and families of Mullers became Millers.



German heritage often hides in different place names — numerous sovereign states unified in 1871 to form the country of Germany.

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 1940 and 1950 censuses, military draft registration cards, yearbooks, obituaries, and other records at Ancestry.

How: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry to get started. Input the name of your ancestor who would have been living during the 20th century. Include other details, such as 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, working back 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 immigrants. 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 sovereign state, rather than just “Germany.”

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

STEP 2: Find the immigrant in the Immigration and Travel collection at Ancestry

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

How: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry. From the Special Collections list on the right side of the page, select Immigration & 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 where your ancestor may have lived, where they arrived, and more. You can fill these in later if you get too many results, but be careful: immigration details reported years later on a census may not be entirely accurate.

Special Collections

[+ CARD CATALOG](#)

Historical Records

Birth, Marriage & Death

Birth, Bapti

Marriage &

Death, Buri

Census & V

U.S. Federa

UK Census

Canadian C

More...

Immigration & Travel

Passenger Lists

Citizenship & Naturalization Records

Border Crossings & Passports

More...

Immigration & Travel

Passenger Lists

Citizenship & Naturalization Records

Kitchen	Samuel	Head	R	45	W	M	W	46	M	31	No	Yes	New York	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania
—	Louise	Wife	H			F	W	44	M	19	No	Yes	New York	Spain	Germany
—	Frank R	Son				M	W	18	S		No	Yes	Massachusetts	New York	New York
Sherman	Louise	Daughter				M	W	32	M	24	No	Yes	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Massachusetts
—	Grace	Daughter				F	W	28	M	20	No	Yes	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Massachusetts
—	June	Daughter				F	W	5	S		No		Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Massachusetts

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.

Family name	Given name	Yr.	Mo.
Ventura	Frank	71	W
—	Louise	71	W
—	Pottery	71	W
—	Theresa	71	W
—	Thomas	71	W
—	Charles	71	W

Census record with Teresa Ventura's family

Family name	Given name	Yr.	Mo.
Ventura	Teresa	33	
son	Francesco	16	
"	Luigi	13	
"	Paquale	10	

Passenger list with the right Teresa

Family name	Given name	Yr.	Mo.
Ventura	Teresa	25	2
son Verghetti	Giuseppe	4	2
daug.	Angelina	2	2
son	Geane	8	2

Passenger list with the wrong Teresa

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 Shoebox so you can review it later after you've learned more about the family.

What to look for: The Immigration & 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 or 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 doesn't.

STEP 3: Use name, birth details, and place information to locate your ancestor in records created in Germany

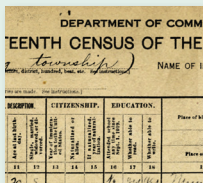
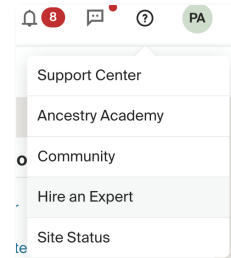
Just like in the U.S., many records were created locally in Germany. Knowing where your ancestor lived and details about their family can help you pinpoint the right person when searching through German records.

How: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry. Then fill in the search form with details you've learned about your ancestor. In the Collection Focus box, select "Germany" to focus on German records. Be sure to undo these settings before searching again through non-German records.

Key Resources at Ancestry for German Research

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, 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 can find details about professional research services via the [Hire an Expert link](#).



U.S. Federal Census Collection

Discover more about your family's life in the U.S. and clues you'll need to find their German home in other documents created in the U.S.



German Phone Directories, Military Records, and Censuses

Get an idea of your ancestor's life and the names of other family members in Germany.



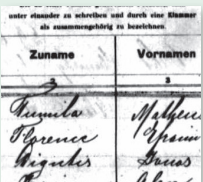
Immigration & Travel Collection

Discover the moment your ancestor arrived, as well as details reported to obtain citizenship. Note that women and children may have been naturalized through a parent or spouse and may not have naturalization records of their own, depending on laws at the time.



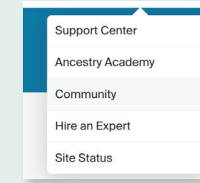
Jewish Family History Collection

Learn more about Jewish ancestors who lived in Germany. Access all of the records in this collection directly through the Jewish Family History link at the bottom of the Special Collections box on the right side of the Search page.



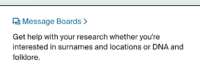
Hamburg Passenger Lists

Find departing-Germany records. Hamburg was one of the top ports of departure for German and Eastern European immigrants to America and elsewhere.



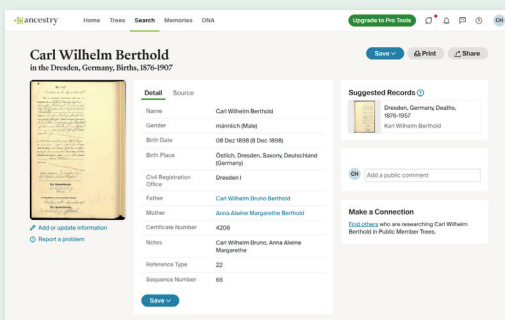
Message Boards

Connect with other researchers in the Ancestry community who have experience researching German records.

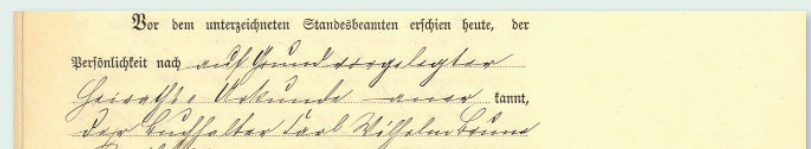


Family Trees

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. The typed search result you receive can include a lot of information, but the original image may provide even more. For example, the image of this German civil birth record lists the mother's maiden name and religion and father's occupation.



Annotated guide to German civil registration records:
<https://www.ancestrycdn.com/support/de/2016/11/germancivil.pdf>

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

Ort und Staat - Place and state

Amule	Spekies	1	85
Strence	Ypaim	1	18
Wegener	Seuss	1	27
Perino	Alx	1	69
E. L.	Marg ^a		18
	Wess	1	28
Kirkirk	Arbiter	1	20
Karak	Kugel	1	44
Kuch	Schilling	1	68
	Thob		9
Morgenthauer	Wilder	1	66
Abraham	Fanning	1	19
Waller	Clark		16
Randoinni	Wick	1	14
Randouyay	Kuchel		58
Lipschitz	Kuch	1	33
Loebst	Abraham		31
	Waller		4
Wiegeler	Wilder	1	25

5 Tips for Tricky Names

Trick 1

Trick 2

Trick 3

Trick 4

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.

1	Margaret	Dumas	1	17
4	Perine	Alex	1	19
5		Marg ^a	1	18
6	Egli	Ben	1	21
7	Pelkirk	Arthur	1	26