



**Institute of Genealogy & Historical Research
Course Proposal**

Instructions: Upon completion, send as an email attachment or print and mail to Della Darby.

DATE SUBMITTED: March 17, 2008

COURSE COORDINATOR: John Humphrey

COURSE TITLE: German Genealogical Research

LEVEL : Intermediate to Advanced

COURSE SUMMARY:

This course has been designed to assist genealogists in overcoming several difficult aspects of German research albeit language, handwriting and a limited knowledge of resources that can be used to uncover a German pedigree.

RATIONALE FOR COURSE CREATION (including the value to the field/need for the course; how this course differs from existing courses; the anticipated audience):

Many American genealogists do not know where or how to begin their search on their German ancestry once they have exhausted the traditional genealogical resources in the United States like deeds, the United States census, probate, military and passenger arrival records. Family historians aspiring to discover their German heritage frequently procrastinate because of perceived difficulties with language and handwriting. Equally important, genealogists are not familiar with German history and thus have no knowledge of record groups and resources available for uncovering a German pedigree in this country and in Germany.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

One of the objectives of this track is to explore issues that present difficulties in locating German ancestors in more traditional American sources like the United States census, probate, land and other records. Problems with German names are a good example, but related issues are transcriptions and translations of American records written in German.

Language is an issue but as this track will demonstrate it is not an insurmountable obstacle. Family historians do not have to be fluent in German in order to find information on German ancestors. The course will establish a foundation in German language and handwriting skills—skills that are basic for exploring sources in German research such as church registers. The track has also been designed to furnish background on the history of German-speaking people in Europe and in the United States. The exploration of resources published in Germany that are available in the United States is an additional objective. The course will conclude with a discussion of significant collections of German genealogical material in the United States and where and how some of those resources can be found.

COURSE PREREQUISITES:

Attendees should have a good understanding of sources used in the United States for finding information on ancestors like the U. S. census, church registers, and immigration and naturalization records. Knowledge of German and the Gothic alphabet are not prerequisites.

DETAILED COURSE SCHEDULE (session summaries identifying topics to be covered, scope, depth, and proposed lecturers):

Day One

1. Introduction to the Issues and the Course

This introduction to the German research track will lay out the overall objectives of the course and go on to describe how those objectives will be achieved.

The three primary obstacles to German research are issues with names, including first names and last names, as well as language and handwriting. Other problems genealogists face have surfaced because of German assimilation into the more dominant culture whose origins are British.

With respect to the three major obstacles—names, language and handwriting, the opening lecture will cover issues with names because names are fundamental to all genealogical research.

2. Background on Germans in this country—

The second presentation will explore German immigration and settlement patterns within the United States. German immigration to British North American and later the United States can be divided into four separate phases. Each phase can be defined by surges in immigration and locations within Germany where the immigrants had their origins. Thus this introduction will provide an overview of German immigration and settlement within the United States; it will serve as a vehicle to determine the research interest of the participants, and it will offer students the opportunity to place their ancestors in the overall context of German immigration into this country.

3. German language skills for the Genealogist

The third lecture will explore language with respect to some basics of German grammar. Nouns in German are easily identified because all nouns are capitalized; therefore it is relatively easy to discover the subject of a simple German sentence. Verbs in a German sentence have a set position offering the opportunity to determine where the action is in a simple sentence. Compound words in German can be a real issue because frequently compound words cannot be found online or in a published dictionary. The benefits of this brief and somewhat simplistic introduction to German will become apparent later in the course when church records and published sources are discussed.

4. A primer on German history

The contemporary perception and understanding of Germany in the United States would be the equivalent of saying everyone who came to this country from the British Isles was English as opposed to being Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and English. In Great Britain each of these groups are different and the same is true of Germany. Germans came to this country as Bavarians, Schwabians, Prussians, Hessians, Braunschweigers, and Saxons. Each group had their own traditions that included style of dress, food and manner of work. And each group spoke their own dialect. These differences are significant for genealogical research because these disparities determined among other things settlement patterns and the selection of marriage partners.

Day Two

5. German Church records—the “heart and soul” of German genealogy

Church records are invaluable for finding information on German ancestors in the United States and they are indispensable for finding ancestors in Germany. Generally, family historians working with these records will find church records maintained in Germany are more complete than church records maintained in this country and in Great Britain. For example a birth and baptismal record will include the names of the sponsors present at the baptism; those sponsors were frequently the extended family of the infant. Records maintained by ministers in Germany may also include the father's occupation and his legal standing within the community. Marriage records found in church registers in Germany frequently identify the fathers of both parties to the marriage. Equally important but often overlooked are death and burial records; genealogists searching for ancestors who immigrated from Germany to the United States need to track death and burial records closely, because of the commonality of names. If someone who shared an ancestor's name died in Germany, chances are he or she did not emigrate to the British colonies or later United States. In addition, family historians with German ancestors will also have available for their use confirmation records which can be used in a variety of ways.

6. and 7. German handwriting skills

Family historians wanting to work with church records maintained in the United States and in Germany need to have the ability to read Gothic script. Sessions six and seven will cover the fundamentals of German handwriting. Character recognition can be learned more quickly when students recognize the underlying word in a document written in Gothic script. Because most American genealogists have no or little knowledge of German the initial examples will use English vocabulary. Quite frankly this is a somewhat novel approach to presenting Gothic script but it is effective because students learn to recognize lettering more quickly. Handwritten documents using German vocabulary will be explored after the vocabulary, that is essential for working in German church records, is explained and or learned.

8. Reading and abstracting German church records

This session will build on what was taught in three previous sessions, namely German language and handwriting. Attendees will have the opportunity to work with digital images taken from church records. Thorough hands on experience they will learn the basics of transcribing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German church registers. Attendees will learn the key to understanding German church records lies in the structure of the record; registers recorded in German and written in Gothic script are easier to work with once the structure becomes apparent.

Day Three

9. Researching Eighteenth-Century Germans.

The search for information on German ancestors who arrived in the eighteenth-century differs significantly from methods used when looking ancestors who came from Germany in the nineteenth-century for the very simple fact as we move back in time the quantity of records that are available diminishes considerably. Other factors that need to be discussed are the economy and indentured servitude. Many Germans immigrants paid for their passage to Philadelphia or New York through indenture—a process that broke families apart creating a host of problems for genealogists.

10. Germans in other places—Germans in Virginia—18th century

Barbara Vines Little

11. Searching for ancestors in Germany

As is the case with American research the number of records available for researching German ancestors increases significantly in later time periods, but records kept in Germany do not duplicate records maintained in the United States. American genealogists are used to working with land records, a decennial enumeration, and or other records maintained by the national or local archives.

In Germany genealogists do not have access to land records, there is no census taken for the entire country every ten years and the German National Archives otherwise known as the *Bundesarchiv*, does not have records going back to 1776 for the very simple fact Germany was not unified politically until 1871. The absence of national unity prior to 1871 leads to inconsistencies within record groups and repositories throughout the country. A good example is civil registration—areas west of the Rhine River had civil records dating from 1792 while civil registration came to other parts of Germany in 1876.

Inconsistencies in record keeping within the country can be shown in other ways, for example starting in 1808, family registers were maintained in the Kingdom of Württemberg. Other nineteenth-century records to be explored include emigration records and permissions to leave the province and “burger books” and city directories.

12. Typefaces, published sources and German-language newspapers

All materials published in German prior 1941 both in the United States and in Germany were printed using a type-face that was called *Fraktur*. This session will introduce this typeface using German language newspapers printed in the United States and it will demonstrate technology in the form of the personal computer and a word processing program can go a long way in helping to learn how to read newspapers, forms printed in German, books and other types of publications including those found online through Ancestry.

Day Four

13. Researching German Ancestors on the Internet—computer lab.

The internet has revolutionized the way family historians go about finding information on their ancestors. Family historians can readily identify important sources of information through catalogue searches of significant collections of genealogical material in the United States and in Germany. Other sites offer family historians the opportunity to search databases created in Germany and in the United States. Some of those web sites listing emigrants others have information on entire populations of towns and villages. Web sites created in the United States have information on German arrivals, and sites created in Germany, have surprising details on ancestral towns or village

14. Gazetteers, Maps and Online Sources for locating villages

This presentation will begin with a discussion of German place names. A genealogist may find a document among family papers that references a location like Hesse-Darmstadt leading the researcher to think the ancestor came from the city of Darmstadt in the state of Hesse when in fact the record was referring to section of the current state of Hesse called Hesse-Darmstadt. Or another record may mention Alzey as a place of origin. In this instance Alzey can refer to the town of Alzey or “*Kreis*” / District of Alzey. Many towns in Germany share the same name causing additional problems for American researchers. For instance eight towns can be found in an index of towns with the name *Neubrück*. The methods Germans use to differentiate towns and village will be covered.

Myers Orts und Verkehrs Lexikon, available online through Ancestry, is an invaluable source that can be rather cumbersome to use for many reasons all of which will be covered in this session. Another very useful source for finding information on locations is a website that was created by the *Verein für Computergenealogie*.

15. Finding Places of Origin in Germany

Finding the place of origin for an immigrant ancestor is one of the more difficult aspects of German genealogy, but it is not impossible. Descendants of Germans in this country have demonstrated time and again the German “*heimat*” or ancestral hometown can be found. A variety of records are available that can assist with the search including military discharge papers, pension records, German-language newspapers, passports, memberships in German societies and church records maintained in the United States. In fact for nineteenth-century immigrant ancestors church records may be the most important source. Other sources of information are records maintained in Germany that furnish evidence of emigration, and when all else fails, searches for unique and unusual surnames can yield some surprising results.

16. Records on Germans at the National Archives

Germany’s 1930’s racial policies created a set of records useful to Americans of German descent. These records, which have limited availability in Germany, can be accessed at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. They include thousands of *Abnentafeln* for members of the German SS and some files have the original documentation that was submitted to the SS Genealogy Office in Berlin with the *Abnentafel*. Of note, these microfilms have information on Germans who lived in the provinces that were ceded to Poland at the end of the Second World War—East and West Prussia, Posen and Silesia as well as East Brandenburg. In fact for some families these may be the only records that exist.

The National Archives has microfilmed copies of other records confiscated at the end of World War II on Germans including records created during war between Prussia and Austria as well as records for the Prussian Foreign Office.

Day Five

17. *Ortssippenbuchern, Deutsches Familien Archiv, Geschlechterbuch*—published sources available in the United States

The *Ortssippenbuch* is a compilation based on church records. German genealogists and genealogical societies are using church registers as the basis of this expanding series of books. Compilers of these works are pulling together all births and baptisms, marriages, and death and burials as found in the church register for all of the families in the community.

Deutsches Familienarchiv comprises 153 volumes of genealogical material for middle class families. Genealogical information to be found in *Deutsches Familienarchiv* is presented in one of three distinct formats—ascending genealogies, descending genealogies and family histories.

Deutsches Geschlechterbuch, are descendant genealogies that include the location where the family has its origins, the progenitor of the family and several generations of his descendants as well as references to churches where information on the family was found. An overview furnishing the order of descent is furnished. For some families the author/compiler have incorporated some ascending genealogies as added information.

18. Researching Germans in American Repositories and Libraries

Because Germans played such significant role in the history of the United States, several libraries have significant collections of genealogical and other material published in Germany. The Library of Congress is home to North America's "largest and most diverse collection of German language materials," in fact the library boasts that it has the largest collection of German titles to be found outside the German-speaking world.

Other libraries in the United States have significant collections including the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, The New England Historic Genealogical Society, the New York City Public Library, the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and the Dallas Texas Public Library.

PROPOSED INSTRUCTOR NAME(S), TITLES, AND QUALIFICATIONS:

Award winning author, John T. Humphrey, is the current president of the Mid-Atlantic Germanic Society, and past vice president of the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania. Humphrey was the former Director of the National Genealogical Society, Learning Center in Arlington, Virginia. He is currently the Group Leader for the National Genealogical Society German Forum.

His principal genealogical publication is the sixteen-volume set of *Pennsylvania Births* listing more than 195,000 births in fifteen eastern Pennsylvania counties. He has written other books and numerous articles and lectures widely at national and local conferences. He has appeared on national television and public radio where he discussed various aspects of genealogy.

Humphrey specializes in German research at the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and record repositories in eastern Pennsylvania. Locations in Germany where he has conducted research include the Prussian State Library in Berlin, church archives in Boppard and Berlin and the *Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde* in Kaiserslautern.

He has been certified by the Board for Certification of Genealogists and is a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists. Mr. Humphrey's research specialties include eighteenth-century Palatines and Pennsylvania as well as nineteenth-century Germans. In 2001 he led an NGS research trip to Northern Germany.

PROPOSED TEXTS:

Suggested Texts

Edward R. Brandt, Kent Cuntkomp, Mary Sutter Bellingham, Kermit Frye, *Germanic Genealogy A Guide to Worldwide Sources and Migration Patterns*. St. Paul, MN: Germanic Genealogy Society. 2007.

John T. Humphrey, *Finding Your German Ancestors: A Practical Guide for Genealogists*. Washington, DC: Pennsylvania Genealogy Books, 2009.

TECHNOLOGY NEEDS:

The ability to search websites and or online databases.

EARLIEST ANTICIPATED YEAR: 2011