

10 Must-Knows When Starting German Genealogy

#1. ALWAYS LOOK AT CHURCH BOOK RECORDS (AT HOME AND ABROAD).

To learn to work with German church records, see *The Magic of German Church Records* (<https://germanologyunlocked.com/product/the-magic-of-german-church-records-finding-the-key-to-your-ancestors-past>) by Katherine Schober.

#2. THERE WAS NO NATIONAL CENSUS IN 18TH OR 19TH CENTURY IN GERMANY.

Germany was not a unified country until 1871, and they have no census like we know it. There are census records in a few places, but there is likely no indexed census to find where your ancestor lived. However, Ancestry.com does have a few censuses for Mecklenburg- Schwerin and Lübeck city.

#3. IF YOUR SURNAME HAS AN AE, OR, OR UE, IT COULD MEAN YOUR SURNAME HAD AN UMLAUT.

If your name is written *Mueller* in the U.S, it could be *Müller* in Germany. If your name is written *Droege* in the U.S., it could be *Dröge* in Germany. Search for both of these surname versions when looking for your ancestor.

#4. HAVE A LIST OF COMMONLY USED GERMAN WORDS USED IN CHURCH BOOKS AND THEIR TRANSLATIONS.

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German_Genealogical_Word_List

#5. HAVE A LIST OF COMMONLY USED LATIN WORDS USED IN CATHOLIC CHURCH BOOKS.

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Latin_Genealogical_Word_List

#6. DON'T EXPECT NAMES TO BE SPELLED THE SAME EVERYTIME – BE FLEXIBLE.

#7. ONLY KNOWING THE GERMAN STATE – SUCH AS PRUSSIA – IS NOT ENOUGH – YOU WILL NEED TO KEEP LOOKING FOR A MORE SPECIFIC AREA.

#8. YOU PROBABLY WON'T BE ABLE TO SEE YOUR GREAT-GREAT-GRANDPA'S GRAVE IN GERMANY. GRAVES ARE RECYCLED EVERY 20-30 YEARS.

#9. IF YOU HAVE A HOMETOWN NAME, YOU MUST ALSO KNOW THE STATE IT IS IN AND THEN FIND IT ON A MAP. THERE MAY BE MORE THAN ONE TOWN BY THE SAME NAME.

#10. EVERYTHING IS NOT ONLINE – YOU MUST USE BOOKS, MICROFILMS AND GAZETTEERS TOO.

This posting is an edited version of a guest blog post by Kathy Wurth on the Germanology Unlocked Blog by Katherine Schober.

Handy Tips

Welcome to membership in the Sacramento German Genealogy Society

1. The best sources for researching German family history are available in the United States, not in Germany.
2. A “gazetteer” is a dictionary or encyclopedia of geographic information (in German it’s an *Ortsverzeichnis*). Gazetteers are frequently helpful.
3. In German, *ie* is pronounced like “e” (as in “see”), and *ei* is pronounced like “i” (as in “fine”).
4. Of all the information you will need to do genealogical research, 98 percent of it is not on the internet.
5. The Family History Library in Salt Lake City has about 4,500 branches. One is located not far from you. From home you can use www.FamilySearch.org.
6. Once you know the name of your immigrant German ancestor, your number-one task is to find the name of his/her German hometown (known as the “place of origin”). After you discover it, you can switch from American research to German research – but not before.
7. “Spelling doesn’t count!” In our German ancestors’ times, the name of a person, a town, or other location was deemed correct if it was *pronounced* correctly. “Correct spelling” did not exist. (This is hard for beginners.)
8. Three vowels in the German alphabet can be umlauted – *ä*, *ö*, and *ü*. When umlauts (the two dots over the letter) are not used, those vowels look like this: *ae*, *oe*, and *ue*.
9. “Prussia” and “Russia” are in no way related. Prussia became part of the German Empire in 1871.
10. The “*Standesamt*” (pronounced “*SHTAHNT es ahmt*”) is the German civil registry office where vital statistics (births, marriages, and deaths) have been recorded since 1876 (but they were recorded west of the Rhine in the late 1700s and very early 1800s).
11. If you know the name of your ancestor’s German hometown, try googling this: www._____.de. Insert the town name (“place of origin”) in the blank space.
12. Learn the word “*Zeugen*” (witnesses). Witnesses’ names could become significant in your family research.
13. In the Second German Empire (1871-1918), northern areas were heavily Protestant, southern areas heavily Catholic.
14. Ellis Island did not open until 1892. It’s no use looking there for an ancestor’s entry to America before that date. (Castle Garden served as the immigration station from 1855 until 1890.)
15. Ancestors’ birthdates found in German records cannot be counted upon to be completely accurate.
16. Our German ancestors did not have “middle names.” One of the several christening names was the “*Rufname*” (the everyday name by which the child would be called).
17. The immigrant’s name, when found on a passenger list, is seldom accompanied by the German place of origin.
18. It is not at all uncommon for German birth records to show children born illegitimately.
19. Searching for an ancestor’s burial place in a German cemetery is futile unless the ancestor was a renowned citizen in the town (memorialized by a monument or statue). German graves are traditionally reused every 30 to 50 years.
20. When you find the stable-boy marrying the duke’s daughter, you know something’s wrong. Go back to work. Marriages remained within social classes.
21. Concentrate on “primary sources” (like civil and church records). Secondary sources (like birth and christening announcements, newspaper obituaries, and biographies) have no official value, but they can provide hints for further research.
22. Catholic church records were written in Latin (as prescribed by the 1563 Council of Trent) until the early 19th century. Almost all Protestant church records were written in German. Civil records west of the Rhine used French until about 1814.
23. Dates are found written European-style. For example, April 12, 1862 is written as “12-4-1862.”
24. “Family legends” may turn out to contain some shreds of truth, but usually they are hugely imagined stories.
25. Many records were destroyed during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648).
26. Germany (*Deutschland*) is a younger nation than the United States – almost 100 years younger. Germany dates from 1871.
27. Germany today is made up of sixteen states, many of them having been given new names following World War II.
28. Many bonuses come with SGGS membership – like information found in SGGS’ quarterly 48-page journal, *Der Blumenbaum*, and the research help offered in the “Members Only” segment of the SGGS website – www.sggs.us.

Some useful resources for new SGGS members

- Meyers Orts- und Verkehrs-Lexikon des deutschen Reichs (Meyers Gazetteer of Places and Commerce of the German Empire). Identification of place names in the German Empire. FHL Ref 943 E5mo, film 496,640 (A-K) and 496,641 (L-Z), and fiche 600000 -29
- Place Name Indexes. Roger P. Minert, Ph.D., A.G. Alphabetical and reverse-alphabetical indexes for German states, includes the entire German Empire. GRT Publications; www.grtpublications.com
- Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents: Analyzing German, Latin, and French in Historical Documents. (Second Edition). Roger P. Minert, Ph.D., A.G. Deals with records using the old German handwriting. GRT Publications; www.grtpublications.com
- The German Research Companion (Third Edition). Shirley J. Riemer, Roger P. Minert, and Jennifer A. Anderson. Reference work containing thousands of facts relating to German ancestor research. LoreleiPress@gmail.com, Lorelei Press, P.O. Box 1845, Provo, UT 84603
- German Immigrants in American Church Records. Roger P. Minert, Ph.D. A series of volumes of Protestant German immigrant records indexed by American states. Volumes completed: Indiana, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, and Illinois. Michigan and Minnesota now in preparation. www.grtpublications.com
- Lands of the German Empire and Before. Wendy K. Uncapher. Basic tool for understanding the background, history, and content of the German Empire's states. www.MaiasBooks.com.
- German Maps & Facts for Genealogy. Wendy K. Uncapher and Linda M. Herrick. More than 100 maps, information about wars, rivers, population, migrations, ports, and more. www.MaiasBooks.com.
- Gemeinde Lexikon für das Königreich Preußen auf Grund der Materialien der Volkserzählung von Dezember 1905 (Gazetteer for the Kingdom of Prussia based on data from the Census of 1905). Statistical data from the 1905 census listed by province, Kreis, and locality. Listed on several FHL microfilms listed on the Family History Library Catalog under the name of the Prussian political entity.
- German-English Genealogical Dictionary. Ernest Thode. A dictionary of German words and terms related to genealogical research (some French, Dutch, and Latin words as well). Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore.
- Family History Library Catalog. Catalog of resources available through the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. May be searched on the internet – www.familysearch.org – and at all Family History Centers.
- Spelling Variations in German Names: Solving Family History Problems Through Applications of German and English Phonetics. Roger P. Minert, Ph.D., A.G.. Approaches to the problems of variant spellings faced by researchers in German family history. GRT Publications. grtpublications@juno.com
- They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor's Arrival Record. John Phillip Colletta. A manual for directing the family researcher in the use of published and unpublished documents to find an immigrant in an old passenger list. FHL 973 W27c
- Germanic Genealogy: A Guide to Worldwide Sources and Migration Patterns. Edward R. Brandt et al. Second Edition. Overall information on a wide area of German influence, with emphasis on Eastern Europe. Many helpful historical maps at the back of the book. Germanic Genealogy Society, 1997.
- Germans to America: Lists of Passengers Arriving at U.S. Ports. (ed Ira A. Glazier and William P. Filby). A set of volumes offering indexed sources of German-immigrant surnames, listing information from original passenger lists. Entries for 1850 through 1855 cover only ships on which at least 80 percent of passengers had German names (Scholarly Resources, Wilmington, Del.)
- Researching in Germany: A Handbook for Your Visit to the Homeland of Your Ancestors (Second Edition). Roger P. Minert, Ph.D., A.G., and Shirley J Riemer. Extensively prepares the family historian for a research trip to Germany, complete with the preparations, matters of money and transportation, getting around in German, as well as the all-important business of the research itself. Working in archives in Germany and in other German-speaking areas is covered. (Lorelei Press, P.O. Box 1845, Provo, UT 84603-1845)
- Karte des deutschen Reiches (Maps of the German Empire), valuable for locating a specific ancestral locality within the Second German Empire (1871-1918). (FHL microfilm 068,814)
- The German Handshake Packet. Personalized letters of introduction in German (Polish also available), for the American traveler who does not speak German. www.sggs.us.
- Searching for Our German Ancestors. Laminated four-fold, eight-paneled "carry-along" helper containing basics needed when researching in libraries and other repositories for German ancestors. Sacramento German Genealogy Society, www.sggs.us.
- Familienkundliche Nachrichten ("FaNa") (Genealogical News) A query periodical sent to almost all German genealogical societies. Published four times a year, pages devoted entirely to queries for missing ancestors. Typical query costs about \$35. Payment by credit card possible. Address: Familienkundliche Nachrichten, Verlag Degener & Co., Am Brühl 9, 91610 Innsingen, Germany. Mail: degener@degener-verlag.com.

Church Records, Civil Records, Family Registers

A review

CHURCH RECORDS: Primary records most used in our German ancestor searches are those produced by the church since the sixteenth century, and civil records, beginning in some areas in the late eighteenth century.

Having hardly any genealogical purpose at the time they were written, these records produced by the church were intended purely as ecclesiastical necessities for recording baptisms, marriages and burials of persons living within a given parish.

Lutheran churches in general began requiring baptism, marriage, and burial records around 1540. Catholics began in 1563. By 1650, most Reformed parishes began keeping records.

Many church records were destroyed in the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Also, records for some parishes in the Pfalz and Rheinland were interrupted for several years when the French controlled those areas of Germany from 1792 to 1815 and introduced civil registration.

Until around 1800, only the date of an infant's baptism is given, but not the date of birth, although the individual minister might have chosen to include the birthdate.

Catholic church registers were written in Latin until the early nineteenth century, as required by the Council of Trent of 1563.

In 1817, Lutheran and Reformed churches were ordered to merge into the Evangelical Church in Prussia (and elsewhere about the same time). As of 1818, Protestant ("Evangelical") church registers were no longer separated into denominations.

Nearly all Protestant church registers were written in German. (In East Frisia and northern Schleswig, older

Church records are crucial for pre-1876 German research. Since civil authorities in several areas of Germany did not begin registering vital statistics until 1876, church records are often the only sources of family information before this date.

church registers were occasionally written in the Frisian or Danish languages respectively.)

Note as well –

- The registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths from different geographic areas vary considerably in the amount of information they provide. Each jurisdiction had its own record-keeping rules, and each recorder had his own style.

- Church records are excellent sources for reasonably accurate information on names, dates, places of birth/baptism, marriage, and death/burial. They are the most significant source of genealogical information for Germany before 1876. Most people who lived in Germany were recorded in a church record.

- Military churches in garrison towns and cities often kept their own records separate from other parishes.



CIVIL RECORDS: German terms for civil records (of births, marriages, and deaths) are kept by the civil registrar (*Standesbeamte*) at the civil registry office (*Standesamt*).

They are important sources because they cover about 98 percent of the population and often provide more information than church records

When France occupied German-language territories along the Rhine River beginning in the 1790s, administrative officials introduced in those regions the same system of civil registration that had been used in France since the French Revolution.

Civil records (*Standesregister*) were established and maintained in several large cities not in the Rhineland as well, such as Hanover and Bremen, but many closed

Civil registration records are records kept by the civil (government) registry office, of births, marriages, and deaths.

down as soon as the French forces had been driven from German territories. Therefore, researchers see in the Family History Library Catalog terms such as 1798-1813 for civil records.

Although the French system required that church officials cease the recording of vital events, the fact that

some clerics continued the practice in secret is of great importance to family history researchers.

After Napoleon's defeat in 1814, many areas suspended civil registration. In some areas, civil transcripts of church records replaced civil registration.

Civil registration in Prussia

In the new German Empire (1871-1918), Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck was successful in Prussia's adoption of the French civil registry system, as of 1874, and in the entire German Empire for 1876. The system is still in use.

A new law in Germany

Originally, only the principal in the record or his relatives and assigns had access to the civil records. However due to the revised law of January 1, 2009 (*Personenstandsgesetz*), access to older civil records is now more easily obtained. Birth records more than 110 years old, marriages more than 90 and deaths more than 30 must now be offered by the civil registrar to the local government archive, and anybody may study them. Records not yet that old are retained in the *Standesamt* and are subject to the original restrictions.

Prior to passing the law in 2009, it was difficult or impossible to obtain any post-1875 civil registration records of birth-, marriage-, or death records for non-direct-line relatives (such as a great-aunt or -uncle), even if they were already deceased. Now it is not only possible to obtain records that meet these time requirements, but these records are even starting to become available online.

Sources:-

Americans and Germans; Deutsche und Amerikaner, by Wolfgang Glaser, Verlag Moos&Partner, Gräfelting vor München, 1986.

"Privacy Law and the German Civil Registry: The Case of Col. Gen. Alfred Jodl," by Roger P. Minert. *German Genealogical Digest*, 21:2 (Fall 2005). n.p.

FamilySearch Wiki (<https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Germany>)



FAMILY REGISTERS: These records, more common in southern Germany, especially in Württemberg and Baden, exist following the order of King Friedrich of Württemberg that as of January 1, 1808, all Catholic and Protestant church ministers must establish a Family Register for use by the churches and the state. The desire to identify possible soldiers may have been one reason for the order.

A Family Register has a page for each family in the community, with the husband and wife listed at the top, together with their birth dates and marriage date. Under each of them is listed their parents, and usually their places of birth.

The bottom of the page lists all children of the couple, giving birthdate, confirmation, marriage, and death dates. The page in the Family Register where each child is listed as head-of-household is usually indicated.

CIVIL REGISTRATION BEGINNINGS

PRUSSIAN PROVINCES:

- Ostpreussen (East Prussia) 1874
- Westpreussen (West Prussia) 1874
- Posen 1874
- Schlesien (Silesia) 1874
- Pommern (Pomerania) 1874
- Brandenburg 1874
- Sachsen (Saony) 1874
- Schleswig-Holstein 1874
- Hannover (Hanover) 1809
- Westfalen (Westphalia) 1808
- Hessen-Nassau 1803
- Rheinland (Rhineland) 1792
- Hohenzollern 1874

OTHER AREAS OF GERMANY

- Sachsen (Saxony, Kingdom) 1876
- Thürigen (Thuringia) 1876
- Mecklenburg-Schwerin 1876
- Mecklenburg-Strelitz 1876
- Hessen (Hesse, duchy) 1803
- Bayern (Bavaria) 1876
- Württemberg 1876
- Baden (grandduchy) 1792
- Pfalz (Palatine) 1792
- Elsass-Lothringen (Alsace-Lorraine) 1792
- Lippe 1876
- Braunschweig (Brunswick) 1876
- Anhalt 1850
- Oldenburg 1811
- Hamburg (free city) 1866
- Lübeck (free city) 1811

Note: The date a particular state or province began civil registration is only a general guideline and does not always apply to every town within its borders.

Three generations on one page are a specialty of family registers. But watch out! These are not primary sources. The information in them needs to be confirmed.,

In some Family Registers, the parents' date of death is written in near the birthdate, even for emigrants, and the date of emigration may be listed as well.

The information in family registers was compiled from other church books or obtained from the head of the household, and it is subject to error. Whenever possible, confirm all information found in family registers with baptism, marriage, and burial records.

The Family Register (continued)

Volume number: Band IV

Record No.: 1225

“Birth: day, month and year” (Head of household): Fellbach, 14 Nov. 1840

“Woman of the house” (Hausmutter): Plüderhausen, 25 Jan. 1841

“Father” (of head of household) with occupation: 1000 1873 - Ackerer

“Father” (of woman of the house) with occupation: In Witte und Kautson auf Plüderhausen im A. Hegler 1873

“Mother” (of head of household), with birth name: Anna Gottlieb

“Mother” (of woman of the house), with birth name: Mathewina Hoffmann geb. Wittenberg

“Confirmation or first communion”

“Marriage”

“Death”

Names of children in order of birth:

№	Name	Geburt	Confirmation oder Erste Communion	Verheiratung	St. A.
1.	Konrad Gottlieb	14 Nov. 1866			
2.	Anna Gottlieb	22. Oktober 1867			
3.	Georg Gottlieb	21. April 1869			
4.	Paul Gottlieb	27. Aug. 1870			

The Family Register (*Familienregister*) is one of the most helpful aids for Württemberg research (sometimes for Baden too).

They exist because of an order of King Friedrich of Württemberg that as of January 1, 1808, all Catholic and Protestant church ministers must establish a Family Register for use by the churches and the state. (Some pastors went back into older parish records that had been previously recorded as single entries and entered the information into the Family Registers; thus some Family Registers may begin much earlier than 1808.)

The standard Family Register format presents three generations on one page, as illustrated above. The married couple's names are shown in the top area of the register; the parents of both the man and woman are listed below their names, in about the center of the page; and the couple's children are listed at the bottom of the page.

Württemberg parishes, begun around 1808, were useful at the time in identifying men who could become eligible for military service. Therefore, with a starting date for these *Familienregister* of 1808, ancestors born

well before that date may be found in these records.

A Family Register has a page for each family in the community, with the husband and wife listed at the top, together with their birth dates and marriage date. Under each of them is listed their parents, and usually their places of birth. The bottom half of the page lists all children of the couple, giving birthdate, confirmation, marriage, and death dates. The page in the Family Register where each child is listed as head-of-household is usually indicated.

These records are not primary sources; it is therefore important to be careful in using them. The parish clergy had to construct these records from the family members' baptism, marriage and funeral records. Errors in transcription surely would have occurred at least occasionally.

Therefore, all information found on these *Familienregister* must be checked against the original church records for accuracy.

This example of a Family Register comes from the research records of SGS member Joan Gunn.