

## German Settlement in Pennsylvania An Overview

In 1683, a group of Quakers and Mennonites from the Krefeld region of the Rhineland founded the city of Germantown, the first recorded German settlement in the English colonies. Mennonites were religious dissenters who believed in adult baptism and absolute pacifism. William Penn had proselytized among Rhine Valley dissenters and invited them to settle in his colony. By 1710, German immigration to Pennsylvania increased significantly. German immigrants founded Skippack in 1702 and Oley and Conestoga in 1709. Most early German immigrants came from the southwest region of Germany, the areas known as the Rhineland, Palatinate, Wurtemberg, Baden, and German Switzerland. Between 1727 and 1775, approximately 65,000 Germans landed in Philadelphia and settled in the region while some German immigrants landed in other ports and moved to Pennsylvania. The largest wave of German immigration to Pennsylvania occurred during the years 1749-1754 but tapered off during the French and Indian Wars and after the American Revolution. The wars in the colonies and Europe combined with rising land prices made it difficult to attract German immigrants, especially those with families.

There were many reasons why Germans left their homeland to make the treacherous journey across the Atlantic to America. Although much has been said about religious persecution, dissenters comprised a minority of German immigrants to Pennsylvania. Most were affiliated with Lutheran and Reformed churches, conservative religious groups. They left primarily because of the devastation of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the subsequent wars between the German principalities and France. For these immigrants, the colony of Pennsylvania must have seemed like a land of opportunity, despite accounts written by travelers such as Gottlieb Mittelberger who warned his fellow countrymen of the dangers they would encounter. Instead, most chose to believe letters from relatives such as Christopher Sauer who wrote of the generous land grants and political and religious freedom in the colony of Pennsylvania.

German immigrants tended to come in family units and were often tradesmen or artisans. One historian described the typical German immigrant as a poor farmer or artisan who arrived around 1750 with a wife and two children. They were most likely in debt for the passage across the Atlantic but had family or friends already settled in America. They were affiliated with the Lutheran or Reformed church but only loosely committed to an organized religion. Records indicate that they became prosperous members of the community. However, many were too poor to pay the transatlantic passage so as many as one-half to two-third of German immigrants came to Pennsylvania as indentured servants or redemptioners, as Germans called them. Immigrants would pay back the ship

owner for their passage and expenses by contracting their services to an employer for a set number of years, usually between two to seven years. When their term of service was completed, their indebtedness was "redeemed." Conditions varied for indentured servants and families could be separated for years.

By the time of the Revolutionary War, there were approximately 65,000 to 75,000 ethnically German residents in Pennsylvania. Some historians estimate the number as high as 100,000. Benjamin Franklin wrote that at least one-third of Pennsylvania's white population was German. Although there are no definite numbers, Pennsylvania certainly had the largest German population in the new United States. German immigration fell off significantly after the Revolution and did not pick up until after the 1820s when a famine set off a new wave of German immigration to North America. There were significant differences between these new German immigrants and those who are today known as the Pennsylvania Germans (those who came before the Revolution). The new German immigrants came from northern and eastern Germany whereas the Pennsylvania Germans tended to come from the southern German principalities. Also, many of the new immigrants were Catholic as opposed to Lutheran or Reformed. Although many fled Germany during the 1840s and 1850s, most German immigrants did not come to Pennsylvania because its farmland had become too expensive. Therefore, Germans tended to settle in New York and the lands opening in the Mid-West such as Illinois and Wisconsin. The term "Forty-eighter" refers to a particular class of German Americans who were participants in democratic revolutions in Germany and therefore left for political reasons. However, most German immigrants who came during the early to mid-nineteenth century were farmers and artisans and had no political affiliations as such.

Nineteenth-century German immigration to Pennsylvania never matched the levels from the pre-Revolutionary War era and generally declined after the Civil War. Immigration from Germany rose briefly during the 1920s when new immigration quotas favored old immigrants while severely restricting arrivals from southern and eastern Europe. Despite the decline in German immigration, Pennsylvania continued to have a large number of German immigrants. In 1850, Philadelphia had the fourth largest German-born population in the United States and from 1900 through 1950, the city consistently had the third largest German-born population after New York and Chicago.

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