

Finding Your German Ancestors

AT ANCESTRY.COM



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 since their 17th-century arrival, 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:

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



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

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 Ochse 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.

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

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."

Kitchener Samuel E.	Head	R 45	W 50	M	W	46	M	31	No	Yes	New York	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania
— Louise	Wife			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 Lawrence	Roomer			M	W	32	M	24	No	Yes	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Massachusetts
— Grace	Roomer			F	W	28	M	20	No	Yes	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Massachusetts
— June	Roomer			F	W	5	S		No	Yes	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Massachusetts
Kitchener George S.	Bother			M	W	44	S		No	Yes	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania

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 received 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, Baptism & Christening
 Marriage & Divorce
 Death, Burial, Cemetery & Obituaries

Census & Voter Lists
 U.S. Federal Census Collection
 UK Census Collection
 Canadian Census Collection
 More...

Immigration & Travel
 Passenger Lists
 Citizenship & Naturalization Records

Immigration & Travel

[Passenger Lists](#)

[Citizenship & Naturalization Records](#)

[Border Crossings & Passports](#)

[More...](#)

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.

Steps to Discovering Your German Family

STEP 2 CONTINUED

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.

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 that 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 you're seeking even if your own ancestor's records don't.

Name	Age	Sex	Mar.	Yr.	Mo.	Day
Teresa Ventura	22	F	U	11	18	22
Louis Brothers	20	M	U	11	18	20
Thomas Brothers	18	M	U	11	18	18
Thomas Brothers	16	M	U	11	18	16
Thomas Brothers	14	M	U	11	18	14
Thomas Brothers	12	M	U	11	18	12
Charles Brothers	10	M	U	11	18	10

Census record with Teresa Ventura's family

Family name	Given name	Yr.	Mo.	Day
Ventura	Teresa	18	11	22
Ventura	Francesco	18	11	20
Ventura	Luigi	18	11	18
Ventura	Esquale	18	11	16

Passenger list with the right Teresa shows the same family members and age ranges, but with ethnic-equivalent given names.

Family name	Given name	Yr.	Mo.	Day
Ventura	Teresa	18	11	22
son Verghetti	Giuseppe	18	11	20
daug.	Angelina	18	11	18
son	Osene	18	11	16

Passenger list for a different Teresa Ventura can be ruled out since children's names and ages don't match the later U.S. census record.

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.

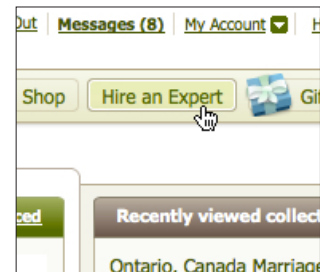
HOW: Click on the Search tab at Ancestry.com and choose "Show Advanced." Then fill in the search form with details you've learned about your ancestor. At the bottom of the form is a "Collection Priority" option. Select "German" as the priority and then choose "Show only records from this location" to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

Race/Nationality

Collection Priority

- All Collections
- All Collections
- Australian
- Canadian
- English
- French
- German
- Italian
- Irish
- Scottish

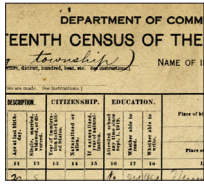
WHERE NEXT: Your ancestors likely left a long trail through German records but you may need assistance locating those records. Use resources at Ancestry.com including message boards to find other researchers who can help. You can also hire a professional to assist with some — or all — of the research.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



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.

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.

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.



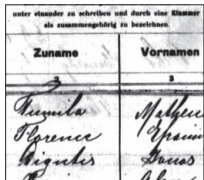
GERMAN PHONE DIRECTORIES, MILITARY RECORDS AND CENSUSES — to get an idea of your ancestor's life and the names of other family members in Germany.



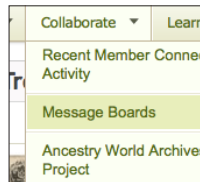
IMMIGRATION AND TRAVEL COLLECTION — to discover the moment your ancestor arrived as well as details reported to obtain citizenship; note that women and children may not have naturalization records and may have been naturalized through a parent or spouse, depending on laws at the time.



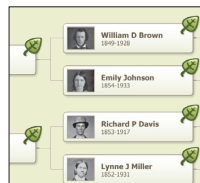
JEWISH FAMILY HISTORY COLLECTION — to learn more about Jewish ancestors who lived in Germany; access all of the records in this collection directly through the Special Collections box on the right side of the Search screen.



HAMBURG PASSENGER LISTS — to find a departing-Germany record; Hamburg was one of the top ports of departure for German and Eastern European immigrants to America and elsewhere.



MESSAGE BOARDS — to connect with other researchers who have experience researching German records.



FAMILY TREES — to link to other family members, possibly even distant cousins, who are also researching the same family lines; one of them may have the details you're searching for.

New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957 about Luigi Ventura

Name:	Luigi Ventura
Arrival Date:	8 Nov 1922
Birth Year:	abt 1909
Birth Location:	Italy
Birth Location Other:	corato
Age:	13
Gender:	Male
Ethnicity/Race-/Nationality:	Italian (South) (Italian)
Port of Departure:	Naples, Italy
Port of Arrival:	New York, New York
Ship Name:	Colombo
Search Ship:	Search the Colombo in the

[View Passenger List](#)

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.

Note the search result for Luigi provides his birthplace, arrival date and other details but page 2 (right) of the original passenger list record also states Luigi's destination in the U.S., health condition, physical description and more.

No.	Sex	Age	Mar.	Prof.	Rel.	Place of Birth	Whether ever before in the United States, and if so, when and where?	Whether going to join a relative or friend, and if so, what relative or friend, and his name and complete address.	Prison or army in United States	Height	Color of hair	Color of eyes	Color of skin	Build	Complexion	Scars or marks	Place of birth
1	male	13	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 8	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
2	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
3	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
4	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
5	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
6	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
7	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
8	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy
9	mother	35	no	no	no	Italy	no	no	no	5 4	brn	brn	brn	slender	clear	none	Italy

Helpful information

READING GERMAN

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

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

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*r1*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.

VI 5/7 1901. No

Verzeichnis

der mit dem *englischen* Dampfschiffe *Northenden* am *3. Juli* von *Hamburg*
direkt nach dem Hafen *Greenby* beförderten Auswanderer. etc

N	Die zu einer Familie gehörenden Personen sind untereinander zu schreiben und durch eine Klammer als zusammengehörig zu bezeichnen.		Geschlecht		Alter (in Jahren)	Familienstand (ledig u. s. w.)	Bisheriger Wohnort	Staatsangehörigkeit	Bezeichnung des bisherigen Berufs		Stellung in	Ziel der Auswanderung (Ort und Staat)	Davon sind:	
	Zuname	Vornamen	männlich	weiblich					Berufs	Berufs			Erwachsene Kinder unter 16 Jahr	Kinder unter 1 Jahr
1	<i>Kunzla</i>	<i>Mathias</i>	1		<i>45</i>		<i>Greenby</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Wirt</i>	<i>Greenby</i>		<i>1</i>		
2	<i>Florence</i>	<i>Emma</i>	1		<i>18</i>		<i>Greenby</i>		<i>Wirt</i>	<i>Greenby</i>		<i>1</i>		
3	<i>Wigbert</i>	<i>Anna</i>	1		<i>27</i>		<i>Greenby</i>		<i>Wirt</i>	<i>Greenby</i>		<i>1</i>		
4	<i>Perino</i>	<i>Alex</i>	1		<i>19</i>							<i>1</i>		
5		<i>Maria</i>		1	<i>13</i>							<i>1</i>		
6	<i>Egli</i>	<i>Paul</i>	1		<i>21</i>		<i>Greenby</i>	<i>Schweiz</i>	<i>Wirt</i>	<i>Greenby</i>		<i>1</i>		
7	<i>Selkirk</i>	<i>Arthur</i>	1		<i>16</i>		<i>Greenby</i>	<i>Engl.</i>	<i>Wirt</i>	<i>Greenby</i>		<i>1</i>		

Use our list of key terms (above) to help you understand the field names on German documents.