

GERMAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

AMERICA'S GERMAN HERITAGE

The German-Americans are the largest ethnic element in the U.S. At least twelve million Germans immigrated to the U.S., according to statistics of the U.S. Census Bureau. Today there are about 60 million Americans of German descent and the number of German-speaking Americans is eight million. No other ethnic group in America can equal these statistics.

In 1995 German-Americans can look back on 388 years of American life. They have participated in every major event in American history, have deeply influenced the U.S. and have produced many outstanding citizens. German-Americans have always been loyal to America, but also recalled their ancestral heritage. Through times of storm and stress the German-American has preserved his cultural legacy.

According to Germanic legend, the first German to set foot on American soil was Tyrker, the foster father of Leif Erickson, the Norse leader whose ships reached America in 1000 A.D. However, the first Germans, whose presence in America can be verified, arrived in 1607 at Jamestown, Virginia. These German-Americans were the first in America to manufacture tar, glass, pitch and soap.

These were very important products in frontier days and German-Americans provided the skill and craftsmanship that was necessary. In 1620 four millwrights from Hamburg erected the first sawmill in America in the state of Virginia. Germans established one of the earliest tobacco plantations there also. In 1653 some Heidelberg Germans introduced vineyards and wine making to the New World.

In 1626 Peter Minuit, the first famous German-American, purchased Manhattan Island from the Indians for \$24. He transformed the New York colony into a prosperous and thriving community. He was an early indication of the many German-Americans who would play key roles in the development of American commerce, industry and politics.

On October 6, 1683 thirteen German families, led by Franz Daniel Pastorius, established the first permanent German-American settlement in America. They called it Deutschstadt which became known as Germantown. Today it is part of the city of Philadelphia. 1683 is an important year for it marks the beginning of German-American history. Although Germans had been present in America since 1607, they were now established in a German-American settlement where their German heritage could be systematically preserved.

The impact of these first German-Americans was immediate. In 1688 they issued the first protest against the institution of slavery and it was published in the German language. In 1690 William Rittenhouse established the first papermill in America. With this paper the earliest books and newspapers were printed.

In 1690 the very first American congress was called by Jacob Leisler the lieutenant governor of New York, who was hanged for his protest against British tyranny. His first American congress was followed by a number of others which culminated in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In 1735 John Peter Zenger established the first independent American newspaper, and by his courageous stand against the British oppression established freedom of the press in America. He also printed the first arithmetic book in the colonies. The first Bible printed in America was published in the German language. Bibles were printed years later in English. One of the earliest announcements of the Declaration of Independence was published in the German language Philadelphia Staatsbote of Henry Miller on July 5, 1776.

German-Americans helped win the American Revolution and fought with outstanding distinction. On May 22, 1776 Congress ordered the creation of a German-American regiment consisting of four companies from Pennsylvania and Maryland, where many German-Americans lived. They fought at Trenton,

Princeton, Brandywine and spent the terrible winter of 1777-78 at Valley Forge with General Washington. The personal bodyguards of Washington were German-Americans under the command of Major von Heer, an officer of Frederick the Great of Prussia. Other great German-American generals and officers in the American Revolution were: Peter Muhlenberg, Baron DeKalb, Nicholas Herkimer, Gerhard von der Wieden, Heinrich Lutterloh, Johann Schott and many others. The Continental Army was organized by General Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. In 1778 he wrote the first army regulations manual for the United States. The role of the German-Americans was so vital in the Revolution that Washington's last letter before his resignation as commander in chief was addressed to Baron von Steuben in appreciation of his service to America.

German-Americans came to America for different reasons: religious, political, or economic. All of these twelve million German immigrants and their sixty million descendants became devoted citizens of the U.S. They helped build this nation into the mightiest land of the world and made noble contributions in every field of human endeavor. Hundreds of thousands of them died on the battlefield for American Independence, to preserve the Union and to protect American democratic institutions. Their devotion and loyalty to America, their common sense and sturdiness, their thrift, talent, business insight and their love of life have influenced American life.

It is but a mere understatement to characterize German-American contributions to the building of the American nation as significant, praiseworthy and unforgettable. These achievements and accomplishments were decisive and determinative in shaping the course of American history. But if we look over the works treating with the origin, history and achievements of the American nation, to ascertain what part the descendent's of the millions of German immigrants took in the development of the country, we rarely find more than a brief mention.

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