

GERMAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

German Immigration to Baltimore

Today, Baltimore is one of the largest seaports on the American East Coast. As the first man to sail into Chesapeake Bay in June 1608, Captain John Smith was confronted with almost virgin country, which he carefully documented in accurate maps. It took half a century before the first colonists settled in the area that now comprises the city of Baltimore. In addition to the predominant English, the major groups among the first settlers in Maryland consisted of Puritans fleeing Virginia, Swedes from Delaware and New Jersey, and Germans from Pennsylvania or the old country. Maryland was eventually granted to the second Lord Baltimore, Cecilius Calvert, by King Charles I in 1662. The settlement of 25 houses was named after the Lord and in 1729 was declared a "town".

The township grew rapidly and had almost 6000 inhabitants in 1775. By the time it was elevated to the status of a "city" in 1796, Baltimore was home to 20,000 residents of various ethnic stocks. It soon became the center for Maryland's tobacco trade, which was firmly controlled by Britain. The harbor also served as an intermediate commercial center for crude sugar, molasses, coffee, and citrus fruits from the West Indies before they were forwarded to European markets.

The early population of Baltimore was mainly English, but the number of Irish, Swedes, Frenchmen from Canada, and especially Germans quickly increased. Andreas Steiger, a butcher, was the first known German colonist. The brothers Leonard and Daniel Barnetz set up the city's first brewery in 1748. Even before an English Protestant church was established, there was a German one dating back to 1755. It not only provided German church services for the members of the congregation, but in 1769 also established a German language school for them.

After the Revolutionary War, Baltimore's tobacco trade was taken over by new settled merchants, mainly Dutchmen and Germans. To avoid having their ships make an unprofitable return crossing with nothing but ballast aboard, they took on immigrants as "freight": people who hoped to improve their lot in this new democratic, yet sparsely populated state on the other side of the Atlantic, unfettered by the vestiges of feudalism which still prevailed in much of Europe.

After the War of 1812, a noticeable wave of immigration to Baltimore commenced, bringing Germans from Hesse, from the Palatinate, from Bavaria and from Bohemia. They all brought their own religions with them, their own schools and social institutions plus German clubs, banks, insurance companies, and newspapers. In 1850 there were already 20,000 German-born Baltimoreans; by 1890 this number had doubled.

As in other American cities, German immigration to Baltimore declined at the turn of the century and after the two World Wars the Germans in Baltimore did not regain sufficient strength to leave a distinct mark on the city.

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