START WITH THE BASICS

Approach tracing your German ancestors the same way you would approach any other relative. Start with the same information, documents, and techniques you use in all genealogical research:

- Vital Records (birth, marriage, death)
- Federal and State Census
- Personal Records (family bible, wills, letters, etc.)
- Probate/Court Records
- Church Records
- Interview family members

Always start with yourself and work your way back to your earliest German ancestor in America, then use what you know about that ancestor to figure out how to continue your research with German records. You’ll need to know a fairly exact location, a name, & an estimated birth year. And it wouldn’t hurt to brush up on your German!

GERMANIC ANCESTRY

Roughly 1 in 4 Americans have at least one Germanic ancestor. “Germanic” ancestry is more than just “German” ancestry – it includes a sizeable chunk of Eastern Europe. Due to changing geography and sovereignty over time, this group includes Germany, Poland, Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg, parts of France and Denmark, and much more. This guide will focus specifically on genealogical research in Germany.

CASS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY
GENEALOGY BRANCH

400 EAST MECHANIC ST.
HARRISONVILLE, MISSOURI 64701
(816) 884-6285
askgenealogy@casscolibrary.org

Hours
Monday
10:00am — 6:00pm
(CLOSED 12-1)
Tuesday & Thursday
12:00pm — 6:00pm
Wednesday
12:00pm — 8:00pm
(CLOSED 5-6)
Friday - Saturday
10:00am — 5:00pm
(CLOSED 12-1)

Research Inquiries:
askgenealogy@casscolibrary.org

Connect with your family history!
The Genealogy Branch has tons of resources and experienced genealogists to help you research your family history!

Visit us on Facebook!
www.facebook.com/GenealogyCCPL

Cass County Public Library System
NOT REALLY GERMAN?

Depending on what period of history your ancestors left Germany, it might not have even been “Germany.” Germany was not unified until 1871, making it look more or less like the Germany we know today.

Prior to this, however, it was a loose confederation of German-speaking countries connected economically. And before that, the territory was part of the Holy Roman Empire. If your ancestor claimed Bavaria as their birthplace, they may be from the portion of Bavarian territory lost to Württemberg in the early 1800s. If they claimed to be from “Prussia,” it may not have been from a part of the Kingdom of Prussia’s territory that is included in present-day Germany.

This may affect where your ancestor’s records can be found, it’s important to be fairly certain of life event locations before looking for the associated records.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

If you don’t happen to speak German, it will be difficult to utilize many of the German record databases online. Unfortunately, while a good portion of records have been made available on the internet, most have not been translated into English. Try searching online for translation assistance or volunteers in German genealogy forums. Or go here:

German Genealogical Words Glossary
http://genealogy.about.com/od/germany/p/word_list.htm

BASIC RECORD TYPES

Church Records
- The Evangelical Church in Germany (E.K.D.) includes the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches and some Protestant. It is a community of 26 churches each with a headquarters responsible for a certain territory.
- The Catholic Church has 27 church archives that hold parish registers, confirmation & communion records, and also Family Books which started in 1614 and contain detailed accounts of each family belonging to the parish.

Civil Records
Universal civil registration did not start until 1875, but some areas started earlier. All birth, marriage, & death records are kept in Register Offices that can cover large districts and multiple towns.

ONLINE RESOURCES

FamilySearch
Doing a Catalog or Record Collection search for “Germany” will give you a list of all the German collections they have, both digitized and indexed. Also, check their Research Wiki:
www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Germany_Genealogy

Ancestry Library Edition
A Card Catalog search using the keyword “Germany” will pull up all of Ancestry's Germany-related record collections, such as the Hamburg Passenger Lists (1850-1934) or German WWI Casualty Lists, both in German.

TIPS FOR NAMES

In German names especially, there is a high frequency of spelling variations in records, either due to careless enumeration, a lack of literacy, or just because the name was simply misheard.

Don’t make the assumption that everyone with the same surname is related to you if you go back far enough. Occupation or location-related surnames were common among unrelated individuals. For example, Wilhelm the cook (Koch) — not all cooks are necessarily related, and neither are all Kochs.

It’s important to be aware that having a “von” in your family history does not automatically mean your ancestor was a nobleman either.

You may find that your family changed its surname abruptly. There could be multiple reasons for this. Most commonly, it was anglicized or shortened upon moving to a new country by the ancestor, so Schwartz might become Black. It is possible that your ancestors feared discrimination and were trying to avoid it. Also, a thick accent and phonetic spelling might have factored in.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Atlantic Bridge to Germany
10-volume series of genealogical atlas, each dedicated to a German state, covering immigration records, maps, & an indexed list of towns. Available at the Genealogy branch.

The German-American Genealogist Blog, Josiah Schmidt, Professional Genealogist
https://schmidtgen.com/wordpress