Ancestor's Religions in the U.S.

© Carol Wright Whitton, CG® whittoncarolyn514@gmail.com

I. **Review the European Situation.**
   A. Before the Reformation.
      1. BCE—Buddhism, Hinduism, other eastern religions, and Judaism.
      2. 325 Council of Nicaea; Christianity standardized.
      3. 600s Islam founded.
      4. 1054 Roman Catholic and Orthodox split.
      5. 1302 Papal decree—salvation only by submission to Rome.
      6. 1320s Wycliffe (England) rejects Pope as overlord; idea of separate Church.
      7. 1370–1415 Hus reforms Bohemian church; idea individual talks directly with God.
      8. 1419–36 Hussite wars; 1437 Hussites settle for recognition of two religions.
      9. c1450 Gutenberg invents moveable type. Printing increases communication, books.
      10. 1453 Constantinople falls to Islam; Orthodox still in Greece, Russia, East Europe.
      11. 1481 on, Spanish Inquisition; 1492 Jews expelled from Spain.
   B. Key Protestant figures of the Reformation which challenged the State Religion concept.
      1. Martin Luther, 1517, 95 theses, Germany (Lutheran).
      2. Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, 1519-30, France, Germany, and Switzerland (Reformed).
      3. Menno Simons, active 1530s in Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland (Anabaptist).
      4. Henry VIII, 1534-1540 didn't object to Catholicism, just decreed himself head of a separate Church of England (Anglican).
   C. Differences in Protestant and Catholic beliefs:
      1. Individual communication directly with God, instead of through priests.
      2. Saved by grace. Objected to Catholic practice of paying for indulgences to be saved.
      3. Two sacraments—Baptism and Communion—instead of seven.
   D. Resulting in five major Protestant Groups:
      1. Anglican/Episcopal.
      2. Lutheran.
      3. Reformed.
      4. Baptist or Anabaptist.
      5. More Protestant.
   E. Religious wars continued for about 150 years:
      1. 1521-29, 1536–44 Habsburg wars.
      2. 1545–47 Catholic Counter Reformation.
      3. 1562–98 French Wars of Religion.
      4. 1618–48 Thirty Years War.
      5. 1642–51 England Civil Wars.
   F. Europe continued State Religions
      1. France: 1534 persecution, 1598 restricted toleration; 1685 Catholic enforced.

2. Switzerland: 1526 persecuted Anabaptists, who went up Rhine River to Germany. Reformed in German Cantons; Catholic in French and Italian Cantons.
3. Netherlands: Reformed after 1581 independence from Catholic Hapsburgs.
4. England after Henry VIII:
   a. Mary I, 1553–58, Catholic restored.
   b. Elizabeth I, 1558–1603, organized Anglican Protestants.
   c. James I, 1603–25, Protestant. Stopped Catholic rebels. Sent colonists to U.S.
   d. Charles I, 1625–1649, married a Catholic. Protestants felt his views too Catholic. Ruled without parliament leading to Civil War and his beheading.
   e. Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector, lead Commonwealth 1653-58, Protestant.
5. German states united 1871; earlier, each an independent country; state religions only after 1817. Need ancestor's village of origin! See maps on Wikipedia's "Religion in Germany."
6. Austria (and Hungary): Initially tolerant of Reformed in Bohemia and Moravia and Unitarian in Transylvania. After 1648, Catholic enforced in Empire.
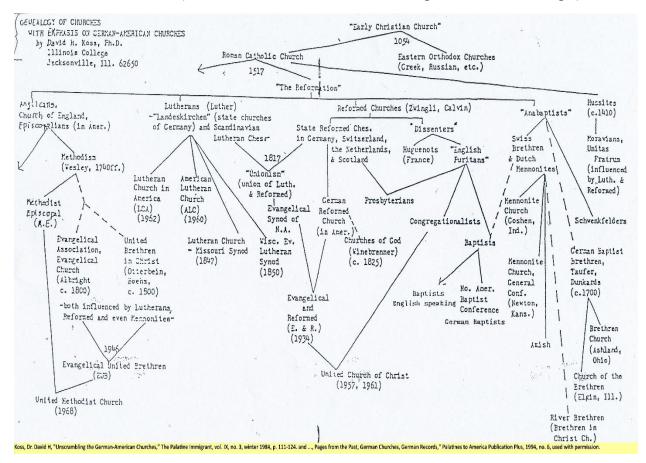
II. **Religions Come to the U.S.**
A. Colonies in 17th and 18th centuries started with "State Religion" concept.
   1. 1500s–1803 Catholics: SW U.S. Spanish; Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley French.
   2. 1607 Anglican Virginia: state religion, remove dissenters.
   3. 1620 Puritan, Congregational (Reformed) Massachusetts, Connecticut: state religion and removed dissenters. Excellent records.
   4. 1624 Dutch Reformed, New York, New Jersey: state religion until 1664 English rule.
   5. 1634 Catholic Maryland: initially state religion, but tolerant after Pennsylvania settlers of other religions spread southwest in the 1700s.
   6. 1638 limited Swedish Lutheran settlement in New Jersey, eventually spread into Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York.
   7. 1639 Baptists in Rhode Island spread widely in 18th century with revivals.
   8. 1650s Friends or Quakers first to Rhode Island, New York, North Carolina, then 1681 Pennsylvania founded as a Quaker colony. Tolerant of all religions. Excellent records.
   9. 1683-Revolutionary War Germans to Pennsylvania: Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, Moravian, Brethren, Baptists or Taufer/Dunkard, Mennonite, Amish, Schwenkfelder.
   10. 1707-Revolutionary War, Scots-Irish Presbyterians into Pennsylvania.
   11. 1720s-1730s large immigration into Pennsylvania pushed Presbyterian, German Lutheran and Reformed, Moravian, and Quaker on to frontier and down the Valley between the mountains into Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, forcing increased toleration on the frontiers of those colonies.
   12. 1735, 1760s on Methodists to Georgia, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina.
   13. Colonial Jewish settled in New York City, Newport Rhode Island, Charleston South Carolina, and Savannah Georgia.

B. Westward Movement 1780s-1803
1. Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina into Kentucky and Tennessee were mainly Presbyterians, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Methodist.
2. After 1795, New Englanders into Northwest Territory were Congregational.
3. Until 1803, everyone moving across the Mississippi River forced to "be" Catholic.
C. Increasing immigration into U.S. in 19th century changed religious picture
1. 1800, 4.4 million Irish Catholics sought jobs in Boston, New York, and elsewhere.
2. After 1817 German states in Europe created single state religion by uniting Evangelical (their name for the Reformed) and Lutheran into Evangelical-Lutheran. Objectors immigrated to U.S. as (1) Evangelical or (2) old Lutheran. Supporters came as (3) Evangelical-Lutheran. From 1820 on over 5.5 million Germans arrived seeking land mostly in triangle between Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee.
3. After 1830, c3.3 million Scandinavian Lutherans sought land across northern states.
4. c1890–1920, almost 13 million, mostly Catholic (also Orthodox and Reformed), Italians, Poles, East Europeans and Russians flooded to cities for jobs, causing the U.S. to institute immigration quotas in 1920.

III. A Good Starter Chart (Other Online Charts Each Have Strengths and Shortcomings.)

GENEALOGY OF CHURCHES WITH EMPHASIS ON GERMAN-AMERICAN CHURCHES by David H. Koss, Ph.D. Illinois College Jacksonville, Ill. 62650

Koss, Dr. David H, "Unscrambling the German-American Churches," The Palatine Immigrant, vol. IX, no. 3, winter 1984, p. 111-124. and ..., Pages from the Past, German Churches, German Records," Palatines to America Publication Plus, 1994, no. 6, used with permission.

A. Five main denominational groups expanded, split, re-unified, and still exist.
1. Anglican/Episcopal and Methodist retained the Bishop organization and decision-making structure of the Catholics.
2. Evangelical-Lutheran, plus two Missouri and Wisconsin old Lutheran Synods. Started with the Bishop organization; but some are now organized like Reformed.
3. Reformed religions now number two: United Church of Christ (UCC) (independent congregations) and Presbyterian (elect representatives to a decision-making hierarchy.) Other Reformed groups merged into these two include: Huguenot (also Camisards and Waldensians); Dutch, Swiss, and German Reformed (17th–18th century); German Evangelical; and Puritan, which became Congregational.
4. Baptist and Anabaptist groups are distinguished by belief in adult choice baptism when joining the church. Hence member records are kept, rather than baptism and confirmation. Group includes: Baptists, several Brethren churches, Mennonite, Amish, and Schwenkfelder. Add Christian, Church of Christ, and Disciples of Christ.
5. More Protestants, often with still other unique beliefs:
   a. (1400s) Hussite became Moravian (Unity of Brethren.) From Bohemia and Moravia to Saxony and Silesia.)
   b. Unitarian (1500s in Transylvania.)
   c. Friends or Quaker (1600s in England.)
   d. United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing or "Shakers" (1747 England; to U.S. 1774.)
   e. Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (1830.)
   f. Seventh-day Adventist (1863.)
   g. Jehovah's Witness (1870s.)
   h. Christian Science (1875.)
   i. Church of God (1886.) Some identify as Reformed, Baptist, Methodist.
   j. Pentecostal (c1900) or Apostolic or Full Gospel.
   k. Non-Denominational.
   l. Community Churches.

V. **Identify an Ancestor's Religion and Find the Records**
   A. Key to finding is identifying the correct complete congregation name and place. Ask where they came from and when they arrived?
   B. Distinguish several types with common names: Evangelical, Brethren, Church of God.
   C. All congregations have records of genealogical value, which typically include:
      1. Baptisms, confirmations, marriages, deaths, and member lists.
      2. Names of individuals; parents; witnesses who may be relatives, friends, associates, or neighbors; and clergy or JP.
      3. Dates—both of the event and of other information, such as birth date.
      4. The families' earliest U.S. religious record may name the full place of origin.
      5. BUT, U.S. records may initially be written in French, German, or other languages.

6. Learn church record vocabulary at Family Search's WIKI. For example, for German https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Church_Records#Reading_the_Records

D. Common genealogy methods for finding an ancestor's religion.
1. Later generation's records identify one or more religions. Work back from there. Use every possibly family member and friends, associates, and neighbors.
2. On an historical map of ancestor's neighborhood, identify all nearby congregations.
3. Civil marriages yield a clergy's name—except if by Justice of the Peace (JP.)
4. Civil death records or obituaries may name clergy, congregation, or cemetery.
5. Some cemeteries historically were associated with a denomination, even if not now.
6. Probate files have payment slips naming persons or organizations paid. Follow these to find a congregation.

E. Locating the sometimes excellent and sometimes sporadic religious records.
1. Start with ethnicity and history of ancestor's time and place.
2. Family Search online has many local U.S. congregation records. Prior to 1865, these also are important for identifying enslaved African-Americans.
3. Newspapers of the time report on congregations' activities.
4. Obtain the plot record from the cemetery office.
5. In city/county directories of the time seek clergy, congregation, or cemetery.
6. Consult State Archives, local libraries, and local genealogical or historical societies, which may hold some of the numerous WPA congregation inventories, as well as books on congregation history.
7. Find the denominational Archive in Family Search's Wiki on United States Church Records—https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Church_Records. Contact and request historical records or congregation and pastor lists.
8. Online, search four ways—by Denomination, State, County, and Town. Add the word "religion" to the search. Always examine the sources.
9. Broaden search. If your ancestor didn't name a congregation, his children, siblings, parents, friends, associates, or neighbors did. Seek their records too!

B. Conclusions
A. A multitude of Protestant Christian religious groups existed over time; many still exist.
B. Since the Reformation, each kept a record useful for genealogy research, except when persecuted.
C. Congregations had similar names! Examine documents carefully for the EXACT and COMPLETE name. Be aware of differences in Evangelical and Brethren; seek correct name.
D. Some congregation records may require more diligence to find and/or read.

Selected Sources

Ahlstrom, Sydney, *Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

Fischer, David, *Albion's Seed, Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Fogleman, Aaron S., *Hopeful Journeys, German Immigration, Settlement, and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717-1775* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

Gaustad, Ed, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America,* revised edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

Holl, Scott and staff, "German Churches St Louis 1830-1900" *PastPorts,* v.7, no.3 (St Louis: St. Louis County Library, 2015) p. 1-12.

Humphrey, John T, *Pennsylvania Births, X County,* 13 volumes (Baltimore, Washington D.C. : Gateway Press, 1991; Humphrey Publications, 1992-1998; Pennsylvania Genealogy Books, 2005-2006).

…, *Birth index; southeastern Pennsylvania, 1680-1800* ([S.l.]: Brøderbund, c1998).

Koss, David H, PhD., "Unscrambling the German-American Churches," *The Palatine Immigrant*, vol. IX, no. 3, winter 1984, pgs. 111-124.

…, *Pages of the Past, German Churches, German Records* (Columbus, Ohio: Palatines to America Publication Plus, 1994), no. 6, pgs. 10-23.

Minert, Roger P (ed), *German immigrants in American Church Records,* 16 vols. (Rockport, Maine: Picton Press, 2005-2015; Orting, Washington: Family Roots Publishing Co., 2016).

…, *Consolidated index to German Immigrants in American Church Records: volumes 1-14* (Picton Press, 2015).

Morton, Sunny Jane and Harold A. Henderson*, How to Find Your Family in U.S. Church Records: A Genealogist's Guide: With Specific Resources for Major Christian Denominations before 1900* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2019).

Selected Websites for Some Smaller Religions

Huguenot: "The Huguenot Society of America"
https://www.huguenotsocietyofamerica.org/history/huguenot-history/.

Mennonite and Amish: "Mennonite Historical Library"
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mennonite_Historical_Library.

"Mennonite Life" https://www.lmhs.org/.

"Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center"
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish_%26_Mennonite_Heritage_Center.

Moravian: "Moravian Archives" https://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/.

Schwenkfelder: "Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center"
http://www.schwenkfelder.com/aboutus.html.

"Society of the Descendants of Schwenkfeldian Exiles" https://schwenkfelderexilesociety.org/.