The Perils of German Immigration to Mid-Eighteenth Century Pennsylvania

By Melvern Evans, Jr.

*I*n tracing your family tree, some of you may have had the good fortune to discover a most elusive date . . . the year your ancestor came to America. A splendid find, to be sure, but were you aware of the hardships he probably encountered on his journey? The earlier he came, the more hardships he was likely to endure. Just how bad things really were makes quite a story, and that is the purpose of this article . . . to tell it as it was.

Why did they come? Briefly stated, lack of economic opportunities and rigid land-tenure systems, forced many of the immigrants to break ties with their Fatherland. Religious wars which laid waste to vast areas, also prompted their decision. The more ambitious came because of a promise of adventure and a chance to better themselves.[1] Another reason for early immigration can be attributed to William Penn, son of Admiral Penn of

the English Navy. He was granted a huge territory in America, west of New Jersey, by King Charles of England, and it was named "Pennsylvania," derived from the Latin and meaning the groves or woods of Penn. He published a description of this land and offered to rent or sell off parcels so cheaply that many were induced to accept, particularly since his "Frame of Government" (Body of Laws) by which he intended to regulate the colony, were so liberal. Penn and some 2,000 colonists came to America in 1682. He immediately selected a site for his Quaker Colony near the Delaware River, which he named "Philadelphia," meaning brotherly love. He layed out an architectural plan for this city with rectangular divisions bounded by broad, straight streets, a design which was later copied by other cities throughout the world. Here 80 houses were built the first year and by 1684 (before he returned to England) the new city already had 2,000 inhabitants.[2]

However, for the majority of the German travelers, the first leg of the journey involved a long frustrating trip down the Rhine River enroute to Rotterdam, Holland, at the mouth of the North Sea. This sailing took from 4-6 weeks with at least 26 toll stations along the way. Each toll stop meant additional delay and unexpected expense. The trip cost each adult 8 florins and 30 kreuzers. Converting early European money into present day worth is always a ticklish business, but if my calculations are near correct, the trip cost $10.20 not including the extra assessments at each toll stop. By today's standards this would probably buy 3 deluxe hamburgers at McDonalds, but 250 years ago it represented a considerable sum. In 1750, for example 60 kreuzers was equivalent to 40 cents and represented 3 days hard work from sunup to sunset. It soon became apparent that whatever spare money the traveler had tucked away for emergencies, would be used up before he even left the mainland.[3] After finally clearing Rotterdam, the ship would proceed to some port of embarkment in England. Dover, Deal and Portsmouth were all popular ports, but Cowes, on the south coast at the Isle of Wight, was the one used most often. Two more weeks would be wasted at one of these ports in clearing customs and awaiting favorable trade winds. When the ship finally weighed anchor for the last time, the real misery of the long ocean voyage was about to begin.[4]

Pennsylvania seemed to be the chief objective for many of the German travelers. It was often delightfully referred to as the "Faraway British Island of Pennsylvania."[5]

A typical vessel of the 1700's was approximately 140 feet long by 34 feet wide and weighed about 500 tons.[6] The sails were of canvas made from flax. During storms they were rolled up, a practice known as "furling," or they were partially rolled, which was called "reefing." A fully rigged ship had 3 or more square masts. The smaller types (brigs and brigantines)

had two masts.[7] The passenger's quarters below deck was dimly lit, poorly ventilated, and almost always extremely overcrowded. Firm bunks were provided for each whole freight (one adult) of 6 feet long by a foot and a half wide. Many ships had to ration their limited number of bunks to just one for an entire family, which meant sleeping in shifts. Some of the passengers were reduced to sleeping on bare deck, or on makeshift wooden pallets. Between themselves and the top berth, the immigrants had less than 3 feet head room so one can safely assume that there was little restful sleep during the entire voyage.

Children under 4 years of age sailed free, from 4-14 they paid half fare and all over 14 paid full fare of 7 and a half Doubloons, equivalent to $121.00[8] This fee varied according to the year and type of accomodations promised but not always provided. There is little information available on the subject of toilet facilities. It is known that a few vessels had semi-private "privies," but by and large, most ships were far too overcrowded to consider privacy or modesty, thus wooden pails were used for human wastes, and when dumping the contents overboard, it was indeed advantageous to have the wind at one's back! In some instances wooden grating or scaffolds were hung over the side and used for toilets by the male passengers.[JH] Segregation of the sexes was usually handled by the passengers themselves, as the captains were apparently concerned about more important matters.

Travelers packed for the journey according to their financial means. The wealthier brought along family heirlooms and other luxuries, the less fortunate packed only the bare necessities. Most everyone brought along dried prunes and a spot of brandy for medicinal purpose, and a Bible to lift up one's spirits.[9] Passenger quarters were supposed to be cleansed twice daily with vinegar and juniper berries to purify the air, but this practice was often postponed or neglected entirely.[10] Food was supplied to each family head who in turn was responsible for its preparation in the ship's galley, which was frequently unavailable. In bad weather no cooking fires were permitted so the travelers either ate their food cold, or did without. Here is what is referred to as a "typical week's ration," which I feel is entirely too generous for what most passengers actually received:

Sunday—one pound of beef and rice
Monday—barley and syrup
Tuesday—one pound of white wheat flour
Wednesday—one pound of bacon with dried peas
Thursday—same as Sunday
Friday—One pound of flour and one pound of butter
Saturday—one pound of bacon, one pound of cheese, and
6 pound of bread for the entire week.[10]

When rations were plentiful, a full freight was also supposed to receive a daily quart of beer as long as it didn't sour, and two quarts of water, which always became polluted. In 1731 a passenger recorded that the water given him was so black, thick, and full of worms, that even with the greatest thirst, he could not drink it. Vinegar was frequently added to the water supply to curtail the pollution, but this precaution never worked, and in short time one would be drinking more vinegar than water![JH] Quite often the food supply ran short or became too rancid to use, in which case many simply starved to death. John Jungmann, aboard the ship, "Norris," captained by Thomas Lloyd, mentioned in his autobiography that after 6 weeks of nothing at all to eat and only a pint of water daily, his bunk-mates became so desperate that they ate all the rats and mice they could catch.[11] There is no reason to believe that similiar incidents did not take place aboard other ships. Of the 156 passengers aboard the Norris, only 48 survived by revolting and seizing the captain. This ship docked near Rhode Island.

Travelers often ran the risk of losing their personal belongings, for unscrupulous captains sometimes purposely neglected to stow all of their gear on board and would later sell these unclaimed items at another port and pocket the sale. There was often extreme hatred between husband and wife, parents and children, each blaming the other for being placed in such an intolerable situation.

Sometimes the immigrants came over as a colony, in which case their leader's name appeared at the top of the ship's register, indicating authority and importance. Rev. G.M. Weis, a Reformed minister, was one of the leaders, as was the Lutheran pastor, John Casper Stoever, and also Alexander Mack, leader of the Dunkard Colony, to mention only a few.[12]

By 1727 the ship's Masters and Captains were required by law to keep accurate records of three things: the names of all passengers on board, their occupations, and where they were from. Most captains paid not the slightest heed to this edict and listed only the male adults. Because of this gross negligence it now became impossible to trace many of the women and children who were on board.[13] Early American Church records, however, sometimes helped to unravel this muddle. Some of the records included notations about the immigration of its parishioners; for example, some children were baptized with a footnote stating that they had been born on the high seas, and their parents were described as "newcomers," meaning recently arrived immigrants.[14] Another frustrating drawback was the fact that many of the passengers could not write their own name, so the ship's clerk would write down his version of how the name sounded. As a result

there are hundreds of names on the various passenger lists having such fantastic spelling that they are not recognizable.

Crossing the Atlantic took anywhere from 3-5 months depending upon adverse winds, favorable skies and the captain's navigation skill. Mid-ocean storms were common and often raged 2-3 days, during which time the ship would be tossed about by giant waves to such extent that passengers could not walk, sit or even lie. Those in their bunks would be tumbled over each other and panic would develop with everyone crying and praying most piteously in fear of drowning. Only the healthiest managed to survive. Children and the elderly were the first to die when dysentery, scurvy, typhoid or smallpox took over.[15] Death often became so commonplace that corpses were nonchalantly tossed overboard with little or no rites. Generally speaking, the fewer the dead, the better the chance of procuring a brief ceremony from the captain or a minister, if one was aboard. On the ship, "Love and Unity," Captain Lobb (reputed to be the worst of all the captains) refused to supply sand to ballast the naked corpses, so they floated about on the surface. No doubt the sharks welcomed this atrocity! This ship lost 100 of its 150 passengers before docking at Martha's Vineyard in Mass.[15] Not all of the captains were so calloused. In 1734 Christopher Schultze, aboard the ship, "Saint Andrews," stated that its captain, John Stedman, was very patient with his passengers, and kept strictly to his contract.[16] Thomas Arnot was probably the most experienced captain of the lot, with 24 years of service. He crossed the Atlantic 13 times from 1747 to 1771.[17] If a passenger died at sea after the ship had completed more than half of its journey, the surviving spouse was obligated to pay the fare. If both parents died the children were required to labor until they reached 21 years of age to pay off their parents' fare.

One of the most common ails confronting the passenger was the horrible stench in his quarters. Perspiration, urine, feces and vomit all combined to create a most powerful odor. Those who were able, would go top deck at every opportunity to avoid this repugnant smell. The fresh sea air and deck exercise no doubt helped the passenger's health and spirits, but did nothing to alleviate things when they returned below deck. During bad weather hatches were closed, which added to the problem.[18]

Ordinarily the ship's crews and the passengers did not mingle unless it was necessary. It was not uncommon, however, for crewmen to abuse and even rape the women. Male passengers were often forced to man the pumps or assist with the sails. If the crew was English, they made no pretense of hiding their contempt for the foreign passengers who could not speak their language.[JH]

Fortunately not all of the ocean voyages were disastrous. Johann Schlessmann, an immigrant from Nassig, on the ship, "Phoenix," out of

Portsmouth, arrived at Philadelphia on Nov. 2, 1752 and settled in Germantown, Pa. A year later he wrote a long letter to his brother in which he stated, "Concerning our long hard trip, thanks and praise be to God, we all got across the big water safe and sound, and had not the slightest difficulty—we had great wind and not a single storm."[19] The commander of the ship was John Spurrier, who had brought the Phoenix over on three other occasions, but the 1752 crossing was by far the best, taking only 9 weeks.

Ships sailing to Philadelphia left the Atlantic and entered Delaware Bay between Cape May on the Jersey shore and Cape Henelopen on the Delaware side, a distance of 12 miles across choppy water. They then proceeded up the Delaware River, passing Bombay Hook, New Castle, Wilmington, and Marcus Hook, where Blackbeard and other early pirates used to rendezvous. From here it was a short journey to the Philadelphia Naval Yards, where the river had dwindled down to one mile across. After the ships were cleared to dock, they could nestle up to any of the piers on Race, Vine, Dock, or Chestnut Streets.

Before clearance the ships dropped anchor some distance off the shoreline and patiently awaited a doctor to come aboard to check for contagious diseases. Those with suspicious signs were quarantined. So many passengers were ill upon arrival that the city deemed it important enough to purchase Fisher Island, at the juncture of the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, with plans to build a hospital there. This 342 acre site was renamed in 1743 to "Providence Island." How serious conditions were and how many of the sick died on Providence Island was indicated on the records of Jacob Shoemaker, an undertaker, who in 1754 presented his bill to City Council for the burial of 253 persons.[20] Despite such morbid statistics the hospital was still not built until 6 years later, even though a devastating epidemic had swept Philadelphia a few years earlier. Those passengers who were pronounced "fit" were taken to City Hall where they took oath of allegiance to Great Britian's king. Then, if they could pay their passage fare in full, they were released. The others were returned to the ship and "sold" for their passage, with the ship serving as the market place. Buyers would come aboard and bargain with them for length of service which often stretched out as long as 7 years. Quite often members of the same family had to serve under different masters from scattered counties and never saw each other again. Some parents not wishing to face this ordeal, traded off their children in return for passage fare.[21]

By the early 1800's conditions slowly began to improve, partly due to the lessons learned from past experiences, partly due to a new and better breed of captains, and partly due to the enactment of the British Passenger

Vessel Act of 1803, which limited the number of immigrants (particularly Irish) on a sailing vessel, to one passenger for each two tons burden, after deducting equal amounts for the captain and crew.[22] The main reason for the improvement, however, was the ingenious invention of the steam engine.

In 1808 immigration lists were discontinued, but were reinstated in 1819 when the record keeping passed from states into Federal control. From 1800-1808 only 65 ships crossed the Atlantic. This sudden decrease was undoubtedly due to the French continential blockade, the American Congress establishing their own blockade, and other events leading up to the War of 1812.

The steam boat was perfected and introduced by Robert Fulton, a Lancaster County native, born south of Quarryville on Nov. 14, 1765. At the early age of 14 he conducted his first experiment with paddle wheels on the Conestoga River, just below Rocky Ford. His steam boat, the "Clermont," made its first run up the Hudson River in New York on Aug. 11, 1807. After a successful trial run it made regularly scheduled trips between New York and Albany.[23]

The first steam boat to go up the Delaware River was the "Phoenix," on June 21, 1809. It was 100 feet long by 16 feet wide and weighed 114 tons. The trip was made on calm waters and without any cargo.[27]

The first steam boat to cross the Atlantic was the "Savannah," captained by Moses Rogers. It was a 350-ton, full rigged wooden vessel designed by Daniel Dod, and built in New York. It had one inclined direct acting low pressure engine of 90 horse power. This ship left Savannah, Georgia, on May 22, 1819 and arrived at Liverpool, England, on June 20th, a record crossing since its steam power was only used for 80 hours during the crossing. Although the ship had over two dozen staterooms, no passengers dared make the trip, and only a few crewmen were aboard.[24] As the steam engine became improved, the sailing vessels gradually disappeared. Professor J. Olney, in his 1836 History of the United States, related that the amount of tonnage in the U.S. reckoning the various kinds of shipping and boats, was probably not less than a million and a half tons, with steam boat tonnage estimated at 125,000 tons and increasing with astonishing rapidity.[25] There was little doubt that ocean crossing had now become speedier and far less hazardous. Moving ahead to the later 1800s we find that many immigrants were docking at New York's famous Ellis Island rather than the popular Philadelphia ports, but that era warrants a future story.

Now that the fortunate ones finally made it to the "City of Brotherly Love," what about those restless ones who decided to move on further west . . . perhaps even Lancaster? Up to 1770 there were no cleared roads

as we know them, or direct routes from Philadelphia to Lancaster, so the weary traveler made his way as best he could, often becoming hopelessly lost or delayed in the dense woodland. If he had made this same trip some 30 years later, he could have enjoyed the luxury of stage coach over hard stone road known as the "King's Highway," and had a choice of 60 tavern stops along the way. For this he would have paid 20 shillings ($4.00) coach fare, which did not include road charges at 9 toll bars.[26] But one way or another, he would have eventually reached our Lancaster Borough and probably would have been well pleased with what he found there. The question now arises, "Was immigration worth all the risks and hardships involved?" It appears certain that thousands of our German travelers would give an affirmative reply to this question.

Notes

1. Heritage of Lancaster—John W.W. Loose—page 1
2. History of U.S. (1836)—J. Olney—P. 98-99-100 and
   Story of America in Pictures—Allan Collings—P. 63, 64
3. Pa. German Immigrants—Don Yoder—P. 178,179
4. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1. P. XXXIII, XXXIV
5. Pa. German Immigrants—Yoder—P. 28
6. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1, P. XVI
7. Columbia Viking Encyclopedia—P. 865,866
8. Pa. German Immigrants—Yoder—P. 256
9. Pa. German Immigrants—Yoder—P. 182
10. Pa. German Immigrants—Yoder—P. 255
11. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1. P. 58
12. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1.—P. XXI, XLI
13. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol 1. PXXIII, Vol. 2. P. XX & XXI
14. Pa. German Church Records—Yoder—P. VIII
15. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1. P. XXXIV & P. 57
16. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1. P. XXXIII
17. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1. P. XXXII
18. Pa. German Immigrants—Yoder—P. 256
19. Pa. German Immigrants—Yoder—P. 258, 259
20. Pa. German Pioneers, Vol. 1. P. XXXVI
21. Pa. German Immigrants—Yoder—P. 185
22. Passengers at American Ports between 1811-1817, D. Schlegal, P. 5
23. History Lanc. County—Ellis & Evans—P. 860,861 and
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25. History of U.S. 1836, J. Olney—P. 246, 247
26. History Lanc. Co.—Ellis & Evans—P. 312 and
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27. Steamboat From Cape May, Robt. C. Alexander—P. 9,10,11,12

JH. Data from John Heisey, Genealogy teacher & lecturer, York, Pa. Also data from Maritime Museum, Baltimore, Consultant, Ferdinand E. Chatard.