

How Early German Immigration and the Establishment of Germantown Influenced Philadelphia

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Philadelphia, the sixth largest city in the United States, is a city forged from decades of immigration. The City of Brotherly Love's foundations rest on its immigrant communities that have developed over the past several centuries, including one of the most influential settlements in Philadelphia, established by early Germans who migrated to the New World in the seventeenth century. Germantown, along with the German migrants who founded it, influenced the Greater Philadelphia, not only with their founding of one of the oldest neighborhoods in America, but also through their religion, ideology, language, culture and industry.

For the purpose of clarity, "early" German immigration refers to the first arrival of Germans to Philadelphia in 1683 up until the onset of Revolutionary War, around approximately 1775, when German immigration to America was halted for a period of time.¹

Early German immigration to Philadelphia began in the second half of the seventeenth century, when German lawyer Francis Pastorius² purchased several thousand acres of land from William Penn to establish a settlement of German Lutherans and Quakers in a wooded area, located just outside of the city limits of Philadelphia. The settlement, known as Germantown, was officially founded by Pastorius in 1689, making it one of the oldest

neighborhoods in America as well as the first permanent German settlement in the United States. While Germans settled throughout Pennsylvania and other areas, approximately 75% of German-speaking immigrants came to America through the port at Philadelphia.³

Considering that a unified German state did not exist until 1871, migrants from the Palatinate who found their way across the Atlantic to Southeastern Pennsylvania shared a common language, but distinguished themselves by religion, which included mystics, Moravians, Mennonites, Quakers, Lutherans and members of the Reformed Church, as well as a few others.⁴

The religion of the Germans in itself was crucial to their immigration to Philadelphia because it was the pushing force, as many sought religious freedom and tolerance that they did not receive in Europe. The ideology of many Germans was also developed around their religious practice. For example, early German Quakers were one of the first promoters of religious tolerance in America, as well as other social justice issues such as the abolishment of slavery, voting rights for women, and prison reform. Pastorius, a former Pietist turned Quaker, even organized the first antislavery protest in 1688.⁵ These beliefs, considered radical for the period, formed from the foundation of Quakerism, the belief that God is everyone, which makes all people are equal.⁶

³ Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717-1775* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 70.

⁴ *Germantown and the Germans: An Exhibition of Manuscripts, Prints and Photographs from the Collections of the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, PA: the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1983).

⁵ Craig W. Horle et al., eds., *Lawmaking and legislators in Pennsylvania: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

⁶ Robert L. Davidson, *War Comes to Quaker Pennsylvania, 1682-1756* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1957).

¹ Marianne Wokeck. "The Flow and the Composition of German Immigration to Philadelphia, 1727-1775." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 105, No. 3 (1981): 249-278.

² Samuel Pennypacker, *The Settlement of Germantown and Pennsylvania and the Beginning of German Emigration to North America* (New York, NY: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1899), 54-57.

The settlement of Quakers in Germantown contributed to Philadelphia being known as the “Quaker City,” as well as the rise of abolitionism in the North and the establishment of almshouses to provide housing and food for the poor.⁷

Germans in Philadelphia also rose to action with the onset of the Revolutionary war in and the British occupation of Philadelphia. Once again, religion influenced ideology in wartime; for example, the Moravians pledged their support to King George III in the war because he enabled them to have religious freedom. On the other hand, groups such as the German Quakers opposed the war due to their pacifist beliefs. Despite their pacifism, German-Quaker influence extended in the Battle of Germantown with the use of the Wyck House, then occupied by the German Wister family, as a hospital for British soldiers.⁸

Like German Quaker immigrants, German Mennonites also established a stronghold within the Germantown area during the same time. The Mennonite Church bears a strong resemblance to the Society of Friends in terms of plain dress and speech, as well as fundamental beliefs. However, Mennonites exercised their influence differently than members of the Society of Friends. While Quakers provided agency to oppressed peoples through the promotion of social justice issues, Mennonites exercised their influence on Philadelphia from an economic standpoint, through the production of woven and knit fabrics by Mennonite artisans and weavers.⁹

In addition to religion, language also factored into German influence on Philadelphia, in both positive and negative ways. While the German

language linked Palatine migrants, it also prompted a sense of suspicion of Germans throughout the Anglo-centric colonists, who feared a takeover of Germanization.¹⁰

The influence and abundance of German-speaking immigrants was evident from the fear of Germanization that took hold in many English-speaking colonists. German-speakers struggled with acclimation into colonial society, clinging onto their native language by passing it down through their generations and operating German-speaking schools.¹¹ However, this was not the case for all Germans, including Pastorius. Very early in German migration to Philadelphia, Pastorius founded the first school in Germantown area that was conducted in English because of his belief that German children should learn English to aid with the assimilation process into American society. The school closed upon Pastorius’ death in 1701.¹² In the following years, more schools were opened by Germans in the Greater Philadelphia area, and all of them were German-speaking schools.

To combat the anti-assimilation tendencies of German migrants, in 1727 the Pennsylvania assembly made it a requirement that German-speaking immigrants take an oath of allegiance to the king.¹³ Anti-German sentiment in Philadelphia only continued to worsen in the coming years, as evident through Benjamin Franklin’s referral of Germans in Pennsylvania as “Palatine Boors.”¹⁴

The increase of fear of Germanization in not just Philadelphia, but also Pennsylvania, is a representation of the growing hold that German settlers maintained in the area. Consequently, the conflict escalated to the point of Reverend William

⁷ John Alexander, *Render Them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

⁸ Sara Pennell, “The Quaker Domestic Interior, Philadelphia 1780-1830: An Artifactual Investigation of ‘Quaker Esthetic’ at Wyck House, Philadelphia and Collen Brook Farm, Upper Darby, Pennsylvania.” (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1992).

⁹ Samuel Pennypacker, *The Settlement of Germantown and Pennsylvania and the Beginning of German Emigration to North America* (New York, NY: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1899), 10-11.

¹⁰ Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 41.

¹¹ *Germantown and the Germans: An Exhibition of Manuscripts, Prints and Photographs from the Collections of the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, PA: the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1983), 50.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

Smith, former provost of the University of Pennsylvania, attempting to Anglicize German-speakers by opening charity schools conducted in English. Despite his attempts, German speakers invoked their power and influence by strongly resisting the schools, which were shut down by 1763.¹⁵

While German language dominated within their own community enabling them to hold on to the culture of their homeland, the rejection of Americanization ousted Germans living in the Greater Philadelphia area as “the other” in some regards. Despite initial resistance from other colonists, the German language has persisted in America and continues to permeate American society, including Philadelphia. Streets throughout Germantown and other sections of the city still carry the names of prominent Germans-Americans such as Pastorius, Wistar and Rittenhouse.

German influence on Philadelphia was also present in the job industry, particularly in the fields of manufacturing and publishing. Germantown became a center of manufacturing, primarily because of its location near the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers as well as the travel route provided by Germantown Road. The proximity of flowing water routes coupled with a main road enabled Germantown to become a hub for producing raw materials by providing a “social and economic structure necessary for the growth and prosperity of these mills.”¹⁶

The first paper mill in America, opened in 1690 and situated just outside of Germantown, was founded and funded by German immigrants.¹⁷ William Rittenhouse opened the paper mill on the Wissahickon Creek, only two years after the first paper mill in England was built.¹⁸ Though the original mill was destroyed in 1701, Rittenhouse

rebuilt the mill and the paper mill industry grew exponentially. At one point, even Benjamin Franklin used the Rittenhouse mills to print his “Poor Richard’s Almanacs,” as well as other texts.¹⁹

Gristmills and textile mills were also opened and operated by Germans in the late seventeenth century. The establishment of these mills in the Germantown area, located between a port city and rural, southeastern Pennsylvania, promoted industry and contributed in boosting the local economy, therefore reflecting German influence on Philadelphia from an economic perspective.²⁰

Many German immigrants in the Greater Philadelphia area also took to the publishing business, using an imported German style of printing known as the “fraktur” type.²¹ Printed items typically included religious books and children’s books, including the first Bible in America printed in a European language, which was printed in German by Christopher Saur, who settled in Germantown in 1724.²² In addition to the publishing of a Bible in German, Saur also founded the first German newspaper in America.²³ His contribution to German publications in the New World was extremely prominent because it promoted the cultivation of German language and culture not only in Philadelphia, but also across America. Additionally, German culture in Philadelphia advanced through founding the German Society of Pennsylvania in 1764. This organization, the oldest of its kind in the United States, was established to provide relief services to new German immigrants.²⁴

While most Germans held onto the culture of their homeland, some eventually embraced American culture as well, especially in 1765, when over 2,600 German immigrants in Philadelphia became

¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶ *Germantown and the Germans: An Exhibition of Manuscripts, Prints and Photographs from the Collections of the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, PA: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1983), 54.

¹⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸ Harvey Whitten, “The Rittenhouse Paper Mill Circa 1690...the Beginning in America,” *PaperAge*, Nov. & Dec. 2009.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Germantown and the Germans: An Exhibition of Manuscripts, Prints and Photographs from the Collections of the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, PA: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1983), 55-62.

²¹ Ibid., 88.

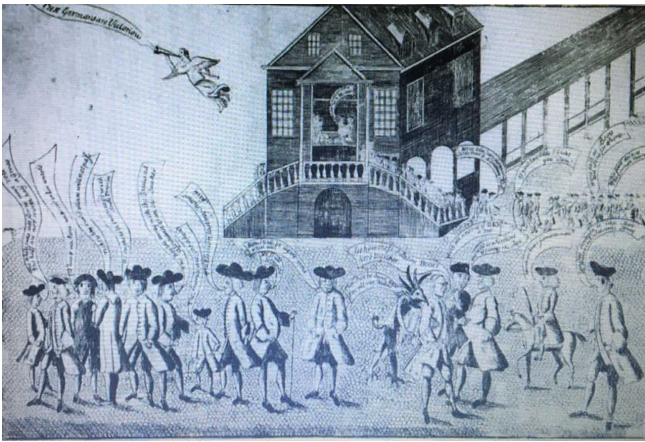
²² Ibid., 94.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

naturalized citizens.²⁵ The rush for German naturalization aligns with the beliefs of Horace Kallen, a Polish-born philosopher who stressed the importance of cultural pluralism, the idea that immigrants should assimilate themselves into American society, while still holding on to their native culture in their private lives.

The picture below is an anonymous political cartoon from 1765 that shows crowds of Germans waiting to become naturalized. In the background, there is a group of newly naturalized citizens in line to vote. At the top left corner of the cartoon, there is an angel with a banner that reads “the Germans are victorious.”²⁶



This cartoon coincides with the belief system of Kallen because it emphasizes the compatibility of maintaining one's ethnic identity, in this case German, and the assimilation into American society, which is depicted through these German immigrants becoming naturalized citizens and waiting to vote. However, it must also be noted that while this cartoon demonstrates Kallen's concept of cultural pluralism, it is also from 1765, when the colonists were still under British rule.

Consequently, "Americanization" in this sense does not align with how Kallen views it; nonetheless, the concept is still applicable.

In terms of future research on how German immigrants contributed to the shaping of Philadelphia, a closer look at individual figures such as Saur, Johannes Kelpius, Caspar Wistar, David Rittenhouse and other influential German-Americans will provide more insight on individual accomplishments and contributions of Germans in Philadelphia, rather than focusing on the group as a whole.

Future research could also examine other ways that Germans influenced Philadelphia, such as through politics, science, food, music, social clubs, etc. It must also be noted that, as a whole, Philadelphia is understudied in terms of immigration, so further research on immigration patterns to Philadelphia should also be conducted.

Early German immigration and the establishment of Germantown at the end of the seventeenth century have greatly influenced the city of Philadelphia through German language, religion, ideology and industry. While German immigration to the United States increased greatly in mid-nineteenth century, German migration from the founding of Germantown to the end of the Revolutionary planted the seeds German culture which still exist through institutions such as the German Society of Pennsylvania. Though the landscape of Germantown has changed, the influence on Philadelphia remains.

²⁵ Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717-1775* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 127.

²⁶ Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Hopeful Journeys: German Immigration, Settlement and Political Culture in Colonial America, 1717-1775* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 128.

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