

THE SAXONS WHO NEVER CAME TO VIRGINIA

By KLAUS WUST

When Herrmann Schuricht compiled materials for a history of the Germans in Virginia some ninety years ago, he still had access to two small books on Virginia which were published in the Saxon city of Meissen about the middle of last century. From his brief description it was evident that both publications were issued in connection with a scheme to bring a considerable number of Saxons to Virginia.¹ No copies of either booklet seem to have found their way into an American library. It was only after some effort by the Search Section of German Libraries in the GDR that both were located among the holdings of the *Sächsische Landesbibliothek* in Dresden.²

Geyer, Carl Andreas

Virginien, physiko-geographische und statistische Beschreibung desselben mit besonderer Rücksicht auf deutsche Auswanderung.
Meissen: Goed'sche Buchhandlung 1849. 34 p.

Mayo, Friedrich August

Vierzig Jahre in Virginien, oder Kommt nach West-Virginien.
Meissen: Klinkicht und Sohn 1850. 72 p.

These two items are of interest primarily because they are examples of the promotional literature with which prospective emigrants were flooded. Between 1845 and 1860 countless attempts were made to divert at least a part of the immigration heading west to southern states. It is well known that most of the southern projects for the settlement of European immigrant groups ended in failure. Even though organized colonies were established in Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas and other states and subsequently achieved a moderate success, the fact remains that immigrants, particularly Germans and Swiss, sought their new homes in the Midwest unless they remained in or around the port cities where they landed. Among the unsuccessful endeavors was the "Saxon Colonization Project" of 1849/50, aimed at attracting Saxon craftsmen and workers to Virginia. Saxony with its industrious but largely impoverished population was seized by immigration fever in the late 1840's, just prior to the uprisings of 1849. The authorities were torn between a desire to retain trained and capable workers, so indispensable for future industrial development, and the temptation to rid themselves of a proletariat that was rapidly and keenly becoming aware of its worth. While revolutionary activists agitated even in the smaller textile and mining towns for a radical change, the more sedate elements of the lower bourgeoisie thought of emigration as the solution for releasing the tremendous pressures which were building up in the populous kingdom. Emigration societies were organized in many towns.³ They eagerly sought contact with trustworthy correspondents in America who would offer advice. Often such societies were founded by men who had some knowledge of far-away lands and, as was to be expected, sought their own personal gain in emigration schemes. The Virginia Saxon Colonization Project

received its impetus from two men who would certainly be completely forgotten now were it not for two rather intriguing booklets which they produced in pursuit of their plan: Carl Andreas Geyer of Meissen and Friedrich August Mayo of Richmond.

Search in local sources in Virginia has not produced much to enlighten us about the two organizers and their supporting "societies" in Meissen and Richmond. The project was brought to the attention of the Virginia legislature during the 1848/49 session when Delegate Hugh Sheffey of Augusta County presented a letter from Charles Andrew Geyer, dated Meissen, November 20th, 1848, to Frederick A. Mayo of Richmond "relative to Eisenmenger possessions of land in the counties of Grayson, Monroe, Montgomery, Tazewell and Wythe." The emigration from Germany was to be made in 1849 and Geyer, as agent for the prospective emigrants, inquired about the above tract and about the chances for German immigrants in Virginia in general. The House of Delegates ordered the publication of the letter. 4,500 copies seem to have been printed and distributed as an addition to the Annual Report for 1848.⁴

The puzzling item in this document is the reference to "Eisenmenger possessions of land" which feature also in Geyer's and Mayo's books. A check in the records of some of the counties mentioned showed no entries for Eisenmenger. Some might have been mere options or mineral rights. Mayo was seemingly in possession of important papers left by the mysterious Eisenmenger whose death must have occurred quite a number of years before to judge by the use of obsolete county designations in Mayo's listings. The same is true in a full listing provided by one S. J. Shermerhorn of Albany, New York, who in turn claimed that the rights were transferred to him by Gray and Osborne in 1845. Moreover, Geyer admitted in his pamphlet that of a total of 272, 242 acres only some 80,000 acres had sure titles at best.⁵ Mayo claims to have traveled into the western country with Eisenmenger. Mayo was no doubt preoccupied with ore deposits because he cites his large mineral collection.⁶ There was, indeed, a Lewis Eisenmenger in Richmond who invented a gold washing machine back in 1830. According to the *Richmond Whig*, Lewis Eisenmenger died in January 1833 at the residence of Bernard Fauth in Portsmouth, Virginia, aged 63, a native of Wurtemberg who came to Virginia in 1825.⁷

Next, we have tried to identify the two authors. Carl Andreas Geyer (1809-1853) was the president of the Emigration Society in Meissen where he published for several years a horticultural magazine, *Chronik des Gartenwesens* for the local Natural History Society IRIS. He had previously spent twelve years in the United States, and in 1843/44 went as far as the Oregon Territory. While traveling in the Mississippi Valley, he had met F. A. Mayo. Geyer probably never visited Virginia. He died in Meissen in 1853 at the age of 44.⁸

Frederick August Majo or Mayo was born ca. 1784 in Oederan, a small Saxon town on the road from Chemnitz (now Karl-Marx-Stadt) to Freiberg, home of the famed mining academy. By 1808 he was established as a bookbinder in the Shenandoah Valley as evidenced by his advertisements in local newspapers. On his business card, recently found, he offered in English and German to "neatly execute all kinds of Blank Books." The record of Salem Lutheran Church at Mt. Sidney contains the birth and baptismal entry of a son, Carl Friedrich Majo. The regimental book of the Rockingham militia for 1813/14 was bound by Mayo in Staunton.⁹ He himself supplied this autobiographical note which contains, however, an inexplicable error in dating his arrival in Staunton: "I myself have had

my luck and misfortune here. There are events in life which can hit a man anywhere. All that I lost in America, I had gained here first. I had nothing when I arrived here in 1809 as a sailor from the African coast, poor and wounded. I began my business in 1810 in Staunton (in the western part) and in 1813 in Richmond. Every year from 1817 to 1840 I went to the western parts, partly for business, partly for health reasons. I hope to move there soon for the rest of my life in order to contemplate my earlier life with a certain satisfaction."¹⁰

From other information, scattered throughout his book, it is evident that he had been in the real estate business in Richmond since about 1834. While his home had been in Rocketts near Richmond since 1819, he maintained his *Land-Agentur und Intelligenz-Bureau* in the Exchange Hotel near the city post office. He advertised land sales, title search and transfer and all types of legal work. Rocketts was the landing point for German tobacco ships in the days of sailing vessels before the lucrative trade in Virginia leaf was diverted to Baltimore. Mayo himself also owned some land in the mountain counties, notably in Greenbrier.¹¹

Now we have established some sort of setting for the background of the "Saxon Colonization Project" in Virginia. Back in Saxony, there was Geyer, eager to return to America as the head of a colony of greenhorns. In Richmond, Mayo was hoping for a sizeable coup in real estate just in time before he would retire to western Virginia. A number of local people were willing to lend their names and prestige to the scheme. Two prominent German-born businessmen, A. W. Nölting, tobacco exporter and shipping agent for the Bremen firm of D. H. Wätjen, and a pharmacist, O. A. Strecker. The native-born prominence was represented by two local personalities, Robert A. Mayo (no relation to F. A. Mayo) and Robert H. Cabell, and two lawmakers from the western sections, Hugh Sheffey and William Kinney. Together they formed a committee which was to be the nucleus of the "Society for the Advice and Aid to Saxon Immigrants." Another Saxon in Richmond, Ernst Kurth, a designing engineer for railroads in Virginia, was to serve as liaison to the railroads which had a keen interest in immigrant traffic.¹²

Despite a constant lookout over the years for evidence of any considerable migration from Saxony to Virginia (including West Virginia) we have to agree with Schuricht's conclusion: "No visible traces . . . are left of any noteworthy results of this Saxon-Virginian colonization enterprise."¹³ Remain only the two extant booklets on which we have already drawn for some of the foregoing notes.

C. A. Geyer's *Physico-geographical and Statistical Description of Virginia* offers far less than its title promises. It was a hastily compiled product to provide a suitable vehicle for the publication of letters from interested parties throughout western Virginia. Offers for land and services had come in response to Geyer's inquiry which was circulated by the House of Delegates. Among those who came forward were mostly land owners and real estate promoters in what is now West Virginia: Lewis Ruffner and H. Brown of Kanawha County; William F. Deakings, Preston County; James Coleson, Nicollsville, Scott Co.; John B. Shrerer, Buchanan, Lewis Co.; D. D. Russel, Ripley, Jackson Co.; D. C. Miles, Preston Co.; Samuel Archbald, Doddridge Co.; John Sharff, Leetown, Berkeley Co. and C. W. Burwell of Salem, Roanoke Co. Of course, Nölting and Mayo in Richmond also added their comments and offers.¹⁴ While cheap land was promised by most letter writers, some gave sound and detailed advice. Several stressed the need for trained craftsmen, stonemasons, carpenters

and cabinetmakers in particular. The virtual absence of slavery in the western counties was generally emphasized, an important factor because the existence of slavery was one of the main deterrents to the immigration of European workers to the South. Mayo stressed another fact with which he was familiar through his earlier residence in the Shenandoah Valley: "I assume Saxon farmers have not been informed that the Valley of Virginia, from the Potomac to Tennessee, is filled with descendants of Germans who left their country in earlier times. The present generation of Germans are educated, intelligent and sturdy people."¹⁵

Almost half of Geyer's booklet is taken up by such letters and testimonials. The remainder consists of a largely reliable account of historic, geographic, economic and social information gathered by the author from various contemporary sources, notably Bromme, Schneider and Fleischmann.¹⁶ There are two outright misrepresentations. One concerns the number of Germans in Virginia which—at 193, 483—is vastly exaggerated. There is no statistical basis for such a figure. A rough estimate of the state's entire population of German descent (including the colonial stock) could not have arrived at such an exact number. According to the 1850 census Virginia had only 5,547 German-born inhabitants. The other error, willful or not, describes F. A. Mayo as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates.¹⁷ An important addition to the 30 page booklet is a good, tinted print of C. Crozet's new map of Virginia which was drawn on March 15, 1848.

F. A. Mayo's *Forty Years in Virginia, or Come to Western Virginia* is much more substantial and has a certain historic value on account of the personal observations by the author. Mayo finished the manuscript in December 1849. Geyer lost no time translating it into German by March 1850. The author explains that he was no longer able to write German fluently. The introductory chapter contrasts the eastern and western portions of the state and, after a few asides on Nölting's shipping interests, the good climate for Saxon sheep and Eisenmenger's land, Mayo gets down to a well organized presentation of Virginia. About every practical subject is touched upon—from the new state constitution to gun production. The reader is given a truthful and positive picture of Virginia with no exaggerations. Whenever he mentions Germans, his statements are measured and factual. He refers to the only German church in Richmond and cites the success of Pennsylvania-Dutch farmers who moved into western lands two decades earlier.

This statement on slaves must have come as a surprise to his readers in Germany: "There are many hundred Negro and Mulatto slaves here in Richmond who are not only well dressed but also live better than the working class in Germany."¹⁸ Agriculture and natural resources are described within various contexts. There is a human touch here and there, particularly when he speaks of the simple pastimes of the western farm folk. Apple pressing and applebutter boilings in autumn and other harvest activities are given as examples for communal spirit "when neighbors help one another, boys and girls, old and young get together and there are merry and happy evenings which end in feasting and dancing."¹⁹ Mayo singles out ginseng roots from among the wild plants as having a particular economic significance. Detailed revenue tables arranged by counties and other statistics conclude Mayo's personal and factual account.

Geyer appended a lengthy and belaboring "epilogue by the translator" which occupies pages 50 to 71. He sees Virginia's future as one largely shaped by the Germans. Some of his remarks are no doubt addressed

indirectly to Saxon authorities, especially when he extolls a planned (and subsidized) emigration as a solution to prevent "the breaking of damns under the floodwaters of the proletariat." Virginians would have taken a decidedly dim view of Geyer's enthusiasm for a belated Germanization of the Old Dominion in his appeal to prospective immigrants to Virginia: "Support generously German teachers in whose hands there as here lies the future of your race. Large German school and church communities will result in German legislators and lastly German laws and German judges."²⁰

¹ Hermann Schuricht, *History of the German Element in Virginia* (Baltimore, 1900) II, 53, 56.

² Special thanks are due to the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, GDR, and the Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dresden, GDR for assistance in correspondence and for furnishing microfilms.

³ An excellent review of Saxon emigration can be found in Hildegard Rosenthal, *Die Auswanderung aus Sachsen im 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1931). Saxon colonization in East Tennessee in the 1840's is described in *The Report, SHGM XXXI* (1963) 21-45.

⁴ *Journal of the Home of Delegates of Virginia, Session of 1848-49* (Richmond, 1849) 187, 204; Geyer's letter was designated as 'Document No. 49'; See Earl G. Swem, *A Bibliography of Virginia* (Richmond, 1917) 424.

⁵ Geyer, 30-1; Mayo, 7.

⁶ Mayo, 7, 10, 16.

⁷ *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* XLV (1937) 235; *Richmond Whig* 31 Jan. 1833.

⁸ Gathered from issues of the *Chronik des Gartenwesens* in the Library of Congress; Geyer, 31.

⁹ *Staunton Political Censor* 28 August 1808; Kirchenbuch, Salem Lutheran Church, p. 24; John W. Wayland, *Virginia Valley Records* (Strasburg, Va., 1980) 130.

¹⁰ Mayo, 36.

¹¹ Mayo, 13, 46-8, 72.

¹² Mayo, 3, 14.

¹³ Schuricht, 56.

¹⁴ Geyer, 21-32.

¹⁵ Geyer, 21.

¹⁶ Geyer's main sources were: Traugott Bromme, *Neustes vollständiges Hand- und Reisebuch für Auswanderer* (several editions); J. C. L. Fleischmann, *Plan für deutsche Auswanderung und Ansiedlung in den Vereinigten Staaten* (Stuttgart, 1848); Ernst Schneider's report in the *Allgemeine Auswanderungs-Zeitung* (Rudolstadt) No. 32 (1849).

¹⁷ Geyer, 7, 19, 31.

¹⁸ Mayo, 12.

¹⁹ Mayo, 32.

²⁰ Mayo, 71.