

THE  
FIRST GERMAN IMMIGRANTS  
TO  
NORTH AMERICA.



## The First German Immigrants to North America.

*By Louis P. Hennighausen.*

ON the thirteenth day of May in the year 1607 the first permanent English settlement in North America was founded by the landing of about 105 immigrants on the banks of the James River in Virginia. In the following year some German mechanics were sent to this settlement by the London Company, to manufacture glass, soap, tar and pitch. These were the first German immigrants to this country. More than a century passed before we hear again of a German immigration to Virginia.

We find them next among the Dutch in New Netherland, a colony of Holland, comprising the territory of the present States of New York, New Jersey, Delaware and a part of Pennsylvania. Holland was then still considered as one of the States belonging to the German empire; the political ties with the empire were at no time of a firm nature and at the peace of Westphalia in 1648 they were formally severed. The people of Germany, and especially of the Low-Lands, continued however to consider the Dutch as one of their own race and kin. They spoke the same dialect in Holland as in the adjoining German provinces, the Frisian being the most prevalent, and it was easier for a Low-German to understand a Hollander than to understand one of the High-German dialects. Low-German was then the official, pulpit and literary language of North Germany. The bible was translated and published in the Low-German language in the fifteenth century in Cologne, in 1494 in Lübeck and in 1522 in Halberstadt. The Dutch idiom developed as the literary language of the people of Holland in the sixteenth century, and the modern High-German has slowly advanced its victorious progress to the North. The Hollanders dwelling in the Delta of the river Rhine were in close commercial and social intercourse with the people living on the

upper banks of that river and its tributaries. From them they received the timber for the building of their ships, and to them they sold the colonial and tropical products brought home by daring adventurers from distant countries beyond the ocean. Holland was then the first maritime power of the world and it was but natural that a large number of the men for its commercial adventures and colonial enterprises should be drawn from the neighboring German States and from the upper valley of the Rhine. Another important factor, which in those days was a stronger bond than race and nationality, was the Protestant religion and church, which united Holland and Protestant Germany in sympathy and common action. The reader will by the foregoing relations of these countries understand, how it came that the Germans were largely represented in the colonisation of New Netherland.

The Hudson river had first been discovered in the year 1524 by Verazzano, a citizen of Florence, who sailed in commission of King Franz I. of France, to make discoveries. He anchored in the bay of New York and went up the river in a boat as far as where Tarrytown is now situated. In a letter dated July 8th, 1524, he gives a glowing description of the bay, river and country to his king. Nothing, however, was done by France in this discovery, and it was forgotten. In the year 1619 Hendrick Hudson, an Englishman in the Dutch service, seeking a Northwest passage to India, re-discovered the bay of New York and sailed up the river to where Albany is now situated. By virtue of this discovery, Holland, according to the curious maxim of international law then and even now prevailing, laid claim of ownership to all the territory of present New York and as far South as the South river (now Delaware). In 1614 they established a small factory on Manhattan Island, erected a small fort, called Fort Orange, on the present site of Albany, and a small fort, called Fort Nassau, on the South river, near where Philadelphia is now situated, and also several trading posts with the Indians. In 1621 Wilhelm Usselinx organized in Holland the Dutch West India Company, consisting of a number of rich capitalists and merchants. The Dutch government granted to this company a charter giving it the exclusive privilege of trade, the power to appoint

governors and officers, make laws, administer justice, and private ownership of land in all the Dutch possessions of North America. The company had also the right to conclude treaties and in many respects exercise the functions of a sovereign government.

In the year 1623 the first ship sent by the company landed on the Hudson thirty immigrant families. Most of these were Walloons, some from Luxemburg and other provinces. Eight of these families settled near Fort Orange, a few on Manhattan Island, others near Fort Nassau on the South river and the rest on Long Island, at the present site of the City of Brooklyn. With them came the first Governor or Director General for the colony, Cornelius Jacob May. The great honor, the emoluments and almost absolute power of his office as a Governor of a territory now comprising four States of the Union, had no charm for him and he left the next year for home again. His successor in office, Wilhelm Verhulst, who came in 1625, merely looked, at his new immense domains and immediately set sail again for Holland. About 200 immigrants arrived in 1625 and settled on Manhattan Island, these were the founders of New Amsterdam now New York city. The company had learned, that it took a man of a different stamp than the merchants and capitalists, May and Verhulst, to be the Governor of an infant colony in the wilderness of North America, and they selected Peter Minnewit, a native and citizen of the City of Wesel on the Rhine in Germany. He arrived at New Amsterdam on the fourth of May 1626. Of the earliest Governors of the colonies he appears to have been the most capable. He was full of energy but with all the moderation and circumspection required to deal with the aboriginal Indians on the one side and the poor immigrant settlers and intruders on the other. It was well that he was invested with the most extensive authority. One of his first acts was to acquire a legal title to Manhattan Island by purchase from the Indians. This was an act of justice, which could not fail to make a good impression on them. Heretofore in the English colonies the Indians had been ousted by rude force and no regard whatever had been paid to their prior rights of possession.

Minnewit paid for the Island of 22,000 acres the sum of sixty Dutch florins, about twenty four dollars. Having secured a title and satisfied the Indians, he proceeded to erect a strong stone fort, called Fort Amsterdam, on the Battery, for the better protection of the settlers. He then induced the scattered settlers to locate near his fort, encouraged the erection of substantial dwellings and furnished the poor settlers at the expense of the company with horses and cattle. This concentration of the population gave the colony strength and security and removed from the Indians the irritation as well as the lawlessness which are fostered by isolated habitations. In his dealing with the Indians he was just and firm, he gained their confidence and thereby extended the trade with them in furs. In consequence the export of furs, which in 1625 amounted to only 25,000 florins in value, increased to 56,000 florins in 1628, and in 1631 New Amsterdam recorded an import of 130,000 florins.

As early as 1631 they built in New Amsterdam the largest ship which sailed on the ocean at that time. It was named "New Amsterdam" and variously estimated at 600 to 800 tons burthen. Every year ships with immigrants arrived and among them a large number of Germans. Minnewit had been a Deacon of the reformed church in his native city of Wesel, and held the same position in the Dutch reformed church of New Amsterdam, together with his brother-in-law, Johann Hueck, also of Wesel, and superintendent of the ware-houses of the company in New Amsterdam. This church was first opened by Rev. Michaelis in 1623.

A change in the policy of the West India Company, by granting to its influential members large tracts of land, manors with feudal rights, was the cause of misunderstanding between Governor Minnewit and the company and in 1632 he was recalled. He considered himself dealt with wrongly and sailed for Holland seeking redress. He remained there for some years expecting his re-instalment in office. His claims were not heeded, and disappointed and chagrined at this unjust treatment, he entered the Swedish colonial Service at the solicitation of Wilhelm Usselin.

Wilhelm Usselin, who originated and organized the Dutch West India Company, had not received the reward for his services that he expected from the company. Feeling sore and disappointed, he left his native country in 1624 and went to Sweden with the intention and object to form an opposition company under the auspices of the Swedish Government, to invade the lands of the Dutch West India Company. Sweden was at that time under the reign of its glorious King Gustavus Adolphus and his wise Chancellor, Axel Oxenstiern, the leading Protestant power of Europe. Germany was since 1618 involved in the thirty years war. The King and his Chancellor were ambitious to found an empire and readily entered into the schemes of Usselin. A charter was granted to him to organize a company under the name of "The Swedish South Company." The privileges granted were even more liberal than those of the Dutch West India Company and extended to the four continents Asia, Africa, America and Australia. Its term was limited to twelve years from the first of May 1627, and the subscription was to be open to everybody until the first of May 1628. The King pledged four hundred thousand dollars from the royal treasury to the enterprise. The wealth and population of Sweden was however deemed insufficient for the gigantic and far reaching programme of this company and it was resolved to solicit the German people to join in the enterprise. The new doctrines of the Reformation had extended from Germany to Sweden, and Sweden had established the Lutheran church as the exclusive religion of the State. Thereby Protestant Germany had entered into close relation with Sweden and looked to it for support in its mighty and desperate struggle with the Catholic imperial power. In 1626 the first circular in the German language was printed by Christopher Rausner in Stockholm, inviting the German people to take part in the new enterprise. Other circulars were published and circulated in Protestant Germany, but the venture took no practical shape.

In 1629 the King of Sweden, with his army, was invited by the Protestant princes of Germany to assist them. He was placed at the head of the Protestant armies and began his victorious career. In 1632 he was in camp near the city

of Nuremburg and on the 16th of October again warmly recommended his colonial scheme to the people of Germany. A few days thereafter he fell in the battle of Lützen. His Chancellor, Oxenstiern, continued to carry out the policy of his dead King. In June 1634 he renewed the charter of the company and extended its benefits to Germany. The charter was soon confirmed by the deputies of the four upper circles at Frankfort. But the funds of the company had been expended in the war and years passed before the first expedition of the company was able to sail. A book in pamphlet form was published in Frankfort in 1633, giving information as to the terms, privileges and advantages of the company and of the country to be colonized. In it a strong appeal was made to the German people, who were suffering under the devastation of the terrible thirty years war, which was then in its fifteenth year; reference is made to the tyranny and pillage of the imperial and Spanish troops, and the ruin and destruction of the wealth of Germany.

It promised to the German people the same and even more favorable conditions than to the Swedes themselves and that the expeditions should be under the control and management of the former. It was however impossible in the midst of a war of such a horrible and destructive nature to carry out colonisation schemes. Germany, which, including the German provinces of Austria, now supports a population of more than sixty millions of people, was at the end of the thirty years war computed to have left no more than 5 to 6 millions of inhabitants. 2000 cities and towns are said to have been utterly destroyed and the destruction of men had been so immense, that to give protection to the large number of widows and single women, it was in some of the cities and towns ordered, that men who/were able, should take several women into their households as wives, which in the history of the Teutonic race stands without a parallel. Germany had been the great battlefield of Europe. Troops of every nation had trampled on its soil and lived off its fruit; how could it take an active part in the colonisation of distant countries, which then engaged the attention of the Western European States. Oxenstiern tenaciously clung to the plans of his dead King to found

a colonial empire as well as to extend the power of Sweden over a large part of Germany. He had taken formal possession of the bishopric of Bremen and of the province of Pomerania with the cities of Stettin and Stralsund. When therefore Peter Minnewit, the late Governor of New Netherland, proposed to him to fit out an expedition to seize a part of New Netherland and establish a Swedish colony he found willing ears. He represented the fertility and salubrity of the country on the Delaware Bay, and the weakness and inefficiency of the Dutch company. The Regency in Stockholm fitted out an expedition consisting of the ship "der Vogel Greif," with fifty colonists, under the escort of the man-of-war "der Schlüssel zu Colmar," to establish a colony on the Delaware under the leadership of Peter Minnewit.

Camparius, the earliest Swedish historian of New Sweden, informs us that Germans took part in this expedition. They left at the close of the year 1637 and arrived in the Spring of 1638 at Jamestown, Virginia.

The treasurer of Virginia (the Governor being absent) demanded a copy of the commission given by Queen Christina to the ships. This was refused unless the Governor would grant free trade in tobacco to the Swedes. The ships remained ten days, taking in fresh water and provisions. The commander told the Virginians that they intended to sail to the South River to lay off plantations for the raising of tobacco, beyond the boundaries of Virginia, like the Dutch had done on the Hudson River. The first act of Governor Minnewit on their arrival on the South River, was, as he had done on Manhattan Island, to purchase from the Indians a tract of land in exchange for goods and trinkets. The deed for this land was written in the Low-German, and was burned in the fire which destroyed the royal palace at Stockholm in 1697. He erected on this land, which is now a part of the city of Wilmington, Del., a small fort, which he called in honor of his young Queen "Fort Christina." The Dutch, who occupied Fort Nassau, fifteen miles further up the river, sent down to him to inquire what he was doing there. He gave them, an evasive answer. As soon as he was fortified he established his authority as Governor of a new colony under the protection of the government of

Sweden, and called it "New Sweden." The Dutch did not molest him, and Sweden was at the time too powerful in Europe for Holland to enter into a war with such a warlike nation for the possession of a distant insignificant colony.

Minnewit's experience in the Indian trade, acquired as Governor of New Netherland, and his superior energy, enabled him to return one of his ships in 1638, with a full cargo of furs of great value. This success, and the glowing description of the new country, caused such an excitement at home, that in the succeeding year several ships arrived with immigrants from the countries belonging at the time to the crown of Sweden. In 1639 more ships with immigrants from Sweden, Finland and Germany arrived, and also Peter Hollander, of Gothenburg, as Vice Governor of the colony. The affairs of the colony under the wise administration of Minnewit prospered and settlers took up land in the present States of New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania. Their intercourse with the Indians remained peaceful and friendly.

In 1641 Peter Minnewit died and was buried at Fort Christina. Some reports say he went back to Sweden. Johannes Printz, a native of Holstein, was appointed his successor; he was a German nobleman, whose full name, was "Edler von Buchau." The family belonged to the Roman Catholic Church; he had turned Protestant and had entered the Swedish service. He was of large stature, weighing more than 350 pounds, of brusque manner and jovial disposition. Among the military escort he brought with him were the following Germans: Hans Lüneberger, Jurgen Schneeweis, Peter Meiser, Constantin Grünberg and Isaac von Eysen. Printz arrived with two vessels, the „Fama" and „Storch," and fifty-four German families, mostly from Pomerania. In accordance with instructions, he erected on an island near the West shore of the South River the strong Fort "New Gothenburg," and also his residence, which he called "Prinzenburg." Printz became aggressive against the Netherlanders and had repeated controversies with them. The Dutch commissioner Hudde had bought land from the Indians at the site where the city of Philadelphia is now built, and raised the coat of arms of Holland on a post planted on the land. A Swedish officer tore it down and Governor

Printz sustained him. Governor Stuyvesant of New Netherland came to visit Printz with the object to adjust the difficulties; they had a most pleasant meeting, and parted under mutual pledges of becoming good neighbors and to assist each other.

Stuyvesant in the year 1651 had the small "Fort Nassau" demolished and erected a larger and stronger fort, named "Casimir," five miles from Fort Christina, where New Castle, Del., is now situated. By this the Dutch regained most of the trade with the Indians, which they had lost to the Swedes under Minnewit. Printz protested in vain. A change had taken place in Europe, the peace of Westphalia had been concluded. Sweden had retained the German province of Pomerania and Bremen, but it was utterly exhausted in money and men, and Holland had nothing to fear from it. There being no further reason for its continued subserviency to Sweden, the West India Company instructed its Governor of New Netherland to assert their right of authority over the Swedish settlements on the Delaware. Printz, finding his resources too limited to successfully cope with the populous New Netherland, and the Swedish government feeling its inability to maintain the distant colony, having transferred its affairs to the Board of Trade of Stockholm, he sent in his resignation. He was in such haste to return to Europe that he did not wait for the acceptance of his resignation, but sailed in a Dutch vessel, leaving the government of New Sweden in the hands of his son-in-law, a Mr. Papegoyo. The Board of Trade of Stockholm determined to make an effort to save the colony and appointed its secretary, Johann Risingh, a native of the city of Elbing in Pomerania, as the successor of Printz. There was a rumor that Risingh had been an officer in the Swedish army and at the siege of Chemnitz in Saxony had been cashiered for misconduct. He brought with him about 200 immigrants. His instructions were to preserve the peace and keep on the best of terms with the Netherlanders, as well as with the English, bordering on the South of the colony. No sooner however had he arrived in his colony, when he wantonly commenced hostilities, and in 1654 by stratagem and superior numbers overpowered the garrison of "Fort Casimir." Stuyvesant had at the time his hands too full with

affairs at New Amsterdam and could take no immediate measures for the recapture of the fort. He reported the matter to the company in Holland, who sent him two ships with troops and ordered him to subdue the Swedish colony. In the meantime a Swedish ship had come to New Amsterdam; it was seized by the authorities and Stuyvesant invited Governor Risingh to come to New Amsterdam with a view to adjust the difficulties Risingh discreetly declined the invitation. The temerity of Governor Risingh in his dealings with New Netherland had probably its origin in an overweening contempt which he must have felt for the supineness of the West India Company heretofore shown to the Swedish intruder.

The time for action however was near. The troops from Holland arrived and Governor Stuyvesant prepared for war. All the able bodied men of New Amsterdam were pressed in the military service for the campaign. Only the Jews were exempt on the payment of a monthly war tax of sixty-five "stiver" in commutation of military service. The Dutch ships in the harbor available for the purpose were seized for the expedition. On Sunday, the first of September 1655, after attending divine service with his army, he embarked on seven ships carrying from 6 to 700 men and sailed for "New Sweden." The weather was favorable, and in less than a week, on the following Saturday, "Fort Casimir" was again in the possession of the Dutch. The expedition then proceeded for Fort Christina. Governor Risingh was requested either to leave the country or acknowledge the sovereignty of New Netherland. He refused to do either. The Dutch then commenced hostilities by plundering the poor settlers. On the next day Risingh capitulated. The terms of surrender were humane and honorable to both parties, private property was respected, the settlers were not to be molested except that they were required to take the oath of allegiance to Holland, religious liberty was guaranteed, the Swedish garrison to leave with flying colors and to be transported by Dutch ships to an English or French harbor. After the surrender, Governor Stuyvesant in pursuance of instruction from his company, offered to return Fort Christina to the Swedes, if they would agree to reasonable and honorable conditions. Risingh preferred

to be sent to Europe. On the 6th of October he arrived with his small garrison in *New Amsterdam*, and there being a delay in the shipment of the party, he charged Stuyvesant with a breach of the terms of the surrender. Stuyvesant answered in an open letter in which he stated that Risingh and his soldiers were so dissolute and disorderly, that the captains of the ships declined to have them as passengers. Risingh answered in an open letter, written in the High-German language, wherein he charges the Dutch soldiers of having pillaged the settlers and stores at Fort Christina after the surrender. The letters of Dirk Smith, a Dutch official, are written in the Frisian Low-German. All these letters are preserved in the archives in Albany. The number of inhabitants at the Swedish settlement at the time of surrender is given as seven hundred. I believe that this only included the settlers near Fort Christina and not those who lived at some distance from it.

The settlers were not much grieved by a change of government, which could afford them better protection and did not interfere in their private affairs. Their connection with the Swedish Lutheran Church continued until the war of independence. The consistory at Upsala exercised the spiritual authority and continued to send learned ministers of the gospel to the colony to take charge of the Lutheran congregations. Most all of these ministers appear to have had full command of the German language; they not only assisted and preached to the Germans, but we frequently find them in charge of German congregations in the colonies. One of their early ministers, Rev. Jacob Fabricius, who officiated from 1669 to 1671 in the Dutch church of New York, was a German; he resided for a time at New Castle and in 1677 accepted the charge of the Swedish Church at Wicacoa, now a part of Philadelphia. Another German-Swedish minister was Rev. Justus Falkner at the same church. How many Germans were among the Swedish settlers cannot be stated. We have seen that three governors were Germans, and Löher in his "History of the Germans in America" (1846) states that he found a tradition among the descendants in Pennsylvania, that the proceedings in the Court of Justice in New Sweden were conducted in the German language. The Swedes being at the time in

possession of a part of Germany, and looked upon as the champions of the Lutheran Church, the difference in nationality was not so great, as it is at the present time. The pleasant association and close intercourse between the Swedes and Germans in this country continued until the war of independence. The Swedes erected the first Lutheran Church, which is still standing in the city of Wilmington, Del., in the year 1698. The Swede Rev. Dylander dedicated the first German Lutheran Church in Lancaster, Pa. The ministers, Gabriel Näsman, Acrelius, Unander, Parlin, Sandin, Wrangel, Lidenus and Nyberg, all sent here by the consistory of Sweden during the colonial times, were learned men of high christian character. They assisted the German immigrants, who were arriving in large numbers, in a true Christian spirit. Rev. Gabriel Näsman preached in many of the earliest German settlements in Pennsylvania, and Nyberg was the Pastor of the first church in the Monocacy settlement in Maryland.

For a time efforts were made to unite the Swedish and German Lutheran churches in America, and it came very near of being consummated. The English Episcopalians also made efforts to unite with the Swedish church, claiming greater affinity to it in its organization of bishoprics, than other churches, and when Rev. Andreas Goerenson of the Swedish church of South Philadelphia, in 1768, selected the Rev. Charles Lute of the English Episcopal church as his assistant, the Swedish church soon thereafter united with, or rather was absorbed by the English Episcopalians. A Rev. Peter Schäfer was widely known among the Swedish and German settlements in the latter part of the seventeenth century. He was a native of Abo, in Finland, and preached the gospel to the Germans, Swedes and Indians in Pennsylvania. He endured long fasts, had visions and claimed direct inspiration from the Almighty. He wandered through the colony for a number of years and was well known among the Indians. Some believed him to be a saint and others doubted his sanity. He returned to Finland, where he was locked up as a lunatic in the fortress of Gefle, where he died.

The authority of the Swedes in this country lasted but seventeen years; the Hollanders, who succeeded them, were

ousted by the English in October 1664, and the English in turn were ousted in 1776 by the only lawful authority, the people of this country.

About the year 1662 a number of Mennonites came from Holland and settled at the Hoorn Kill, on the Delaware, a short distance below Philadelphia. Their leader was Peter Cornelius Plockhoy, who published a tract in the city of Amsterdam *in* 1662, giving a description of the country on the South River, where he had lived for some time. The colony existed but about two years, for when the English had taken possession of *New York*, Robert Carr, the new Governor, sent a military expedition to the settlement, which destroyed it, as he says, "even to a nail." What became of Plockhoy for the next thirty years is not known. But in 1694, blind and destitute, he came with his wife to Germantown, where they raised a subscription for him, and built him a house, where he peacefully died after a few years.

