

THE GERMANS

Second of a Series of Three Talks on the Ethnic Origins Of the Peoples of Southwest Virginia

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In the fifty years before the American Revolution, 30,000 Germans poured into Pennsylvania. Indeed, Germans are the largest ethnic group in the United States. The reasons for their leaving Europe were twofold. The wars of the Reformation had consumed Europe for a century. Much more than religion was involved. It was a period of nation building when small petty principalities were joined together to become countries. This was equally driven by politics and by economics. All the countries of Europe adopted a state religion. The governing principle became the same in each country. The country must be characterized by “One people, one faith, one king”. The practical result of this standard was that if you were a member of a faith other than the established religion, you had the choice of either converting, of being horribly executed, or of leaving. Many chose to leave.

Pennsylvania especially welcomed German refugees. This was because England had recently become Protestant. The English royal family was especially intermarried with the royalty of the German protestant states. William Penn was of the English royal family, and his Quaker religion was closely associated with that of the German refugee protestants. Pennsylvania needed settlers. The Germans poured in.

A second problem was the weather in central Europe, which in the first half of the 18th century underwent one on its periodic cold spells. The Rhine River froze over, fruit trees died, and crops failed. Population and economic pressures became destabilizing, and thousands of German peasants were squeezed out of the economy. These economic refugees joined the religious ones in their migration to Pennsylvania. The groups were very diverse, but we will follow three of them, as they were the dominant German settlers of Virginia west of the Blue Ridge.

The earliest of the Germans in Virginia, and the least well documented, were the Pietists among the Picaroons of Tangier Island. Recall that they were there three quarters of a century before the English settled Jamestown. We referenced them in our first lecture on the Spanish settlers in the Southeastern United States. Their presence in Southwest Virginia is documented by three obscure references. The first is from an Oct. 16, 1745 entry by Col. John Buchanan in his Wood’s River Land Entry Book. Wood’s River is an old name for the New River. We will return to Col. Buchanan in our presentation on the Scots-Irish in Virginia. Referring to himself in the third person Buchanan stated “.... Buchanan road on to William Mack’s place at present Max Meadows. Buchanan found Mack dead in his cabin but with him several “Long Beards”

or Siebentangers from Ephrata Cloister, Lancaster, County, Pennsylvania. Newly arrived, they would build a settlement called Mahanaim.” Mack was probably from the noted Mach milling family in Schriesheim, Germany, whose father Alexander Yost Mach founded the German River Baptist, or Dunkard, faith. ‘Siebentanger’ is German and translates as ‘seven men from Tangier Island’. We will return shortly to the Dunkards.

A second reference to the Germans of Tangier Island is inferentially made from the German surname ‘Hungar’, which is Old High German for ‘starvation’. This dialect of German is older than the Middle High German spoken by the Germans of Pennsylvania. Its antiquity is not only documented by the old dialect of German from which it came, but also by two different geographic references. The first is from the Land Grants of Virginia maintained on line by the Library of Virginia. Wm. Cotton got a patent at the “horns of Hungar’s Creek 1637” in Northampton County. No one knows who the Hungars were, but the name stuck. Hungar’s Parish and Creek were again documented in Northampton Co., Va. in 1683. Hungar’s Parish is on the Eastern Shore just opposite from Tangier Island. The next reference to ‘Hungar’ is from Hungry Mother State Park, which is the oldest state park in Southwest Virginia, having been built north of Marion in the 1930’s. Its name is derived from the creek on which it sits, and which it has impounded into a recreational lake. The 7.5 minute United States Geologic Survey map of the area has the creek named “Hungry Mother Creek”. The origin of the name is to be found in the records of the land grants for the Commonwealth of Virginia, which are maintained on line by the Library of Virginia. This bottom land along the creek is referenced in four land grants for some of this land, including the land at its junction with the Holston River. These grants (Land Office 93-64, 94-454, 98-694, 100-226) all clearly identify the name of the creek in question as being Hungar’s Mother’s Creek”. There are no other existing references to this surname in Virginia today. It seems to the narrator that the most likely explanation of this record that ‘Hungar’s’ father migrated westward down the Valley from Hungar’s Parish and married an Indian woman who lived on the creek at Marion. An Indian woman was the only ethnic female who would have lived alone in this wilderness. The Cherokee and the Catawbas were matrilineal.

The third documentation of the passage westward along the Wilderness Road, or I-81, of the Germans of Tangier Island is a map showing the geographic location of all the cases of Tangier Disease that have been diagnosed. Due to intense inbreeding among the Picaroons of Tangier Island, they developed a genetic disease of children which is specific for their descendants. It kills the child, and can only be transmitted when both parents carry the recessive gene for this disease. This map demonstrates the migration of the descendants of the Picaroons down the Valley of Virginia, on into Kentucky, and only peters out in Missouri.

The second group of German settlers in Virginia we will discuss are those from Rockingham County, or Harrisonburg. Adam Mueller of Germany via way of Lancaster, Pennsylvania took up a claim here in 1727. Soon Mennonites and some portions of the Brethren from Pennsylvania came in about 1730. These denominations of refugees were more cohesive than others. The Mennonites and Amish, in particular, were tight self-help

societies, and provided mutual economic assistance in purchasing land. The settlement pattern was determined by the fact that it was impossible to go west directly from Pennsylvania due to the mountains to the west. The Great Warrior's Path ran down the Great Valley of Virginia bearing towards the southwest through the Shenandoah, and on to the Midwest via Cumberland Gap. The Valley and its Germans soon defined each other to the rest of the world. Harrisonburg is home of Eastern Mennonite University today, and the countryside of the county is still dotted with churches of the Mennonites and Brethren. These Germans migrated on down the Wilderness Road in the coming decades into Southwest Virginia and beyond.

The third group of Virginia Germans we will consider have even more specific ties to the current peoples of the portions of Virginia that lie between Tennessee and Kentucky. We will go back to our discussion of the Siebentanger Col. John Buchanan met at Max Meadows, and of their settlement of 'Mahanaim'. Going on back to the last of the Wars of the Reformation, the City of Schriesheim in Germany lost 70% of its civilian population in that war. The people of that city were so traumatized by these events that they decided that it must never happen again. They analyzed their recent history and decided that the root causes of their sufferings were established state religions, and militarism. Under the leadership of their most prominent citizen, Alexander Yost Mach, they founded a new religion based on the concepts of separation of church and state, and of pacifism. In Europe this new religion was known as the 'Fraternus Unitus', but in the United States they are called 'the Church of the Brethren'. They were hunted down like dogs, and burned at the stake or beheaded. They left for Pennsylvania where they built a commune outside of Philadelphia, which they named 'Ephrata Cloister'. It is a State Park today. The old communal barracks still exist. They got along well until Mach died, and they got into a succession fight. Some wanted to elect their leader, but some wanted a hereditary leadership. Some of them said that they had left Europe to get away from dissention, and left the commune "for the wilderness beyond Christian civilization". Their leader's son, Alexander Yost Mack (note the spelling change), Jr. led them the New River Valley. William Mack went with them, and settled along a variation of the Wilderness Road known as the 'Pepper's Ferry Road' at a site north of Fort Chiswell on I-81. The place was named after Mack, as Max's Meadows. It was here that Col. Buchanan found his corpse attended by the seven long bearded men from Tangier Island. No one knows how William was related to either of the Alexander Yost Macks. The second of the Alexander Yost Macks founded a new religious community in a bottom of the New River south of Radford, which they called 'Mahanaim'. The bridge on I-81 you cross over is on land whose grant specifies that it was part of Mahaniam. The main part of this settlement lies under Claytor Lake. Since these German Brethren baptized by total immersion, their neighbors called them by the Middle High German term 'Dunkards', and their community was referred to as Dunkard's Bottom. All these events occurred around 1745.

There was a German community at Radford proper before the coming of the Dunkards. There is no documentation of their coming. There are documentations involving at least two families, that of Adam, Valentine and their brother Jacob Hermann, who became known as Harmons, and who legally had gotten land in the 'horseshoe bend'

of the river where the Radford Arsenal is now located. They had been born in Germany about 1700, had lived for a while in the English Channel Islands, and then had come to Pennsylvania in 1726. The second family of known Germans at Radford at this time was that of Jacob Kassell (Cassell or Castle). Both these families used the New River Valley as a base of operations for their expeditions further into the interior to trade with the Indians. Castle's special trading site was in Russell County at the 'Mud Store' at a place now named 'Castlewood'. The main creek turning off of I-81 to the north at Abingdon toward US 19 is called 'Castle's Creek' to this day. It is unknown where the Harmons traded. One day when the Indians stole their trade goods, the Harmons accused Castle. The court ordered the Harmons to confiscated Castle's goods. At this point matters became obscure. The next event documented is that Adam and Valentine Harmon were in jail for stealing Castle's goods. But the end result was that Castle went to permanently live with the Indians at Castlewood. He took smallpox with him. There is the skull of a young Indian woman from Castlewood who died of smallpox about 1750 in a museum collection. Buchanan's 1745 trip westward down the Wilderness Trail is evidence of further German settlement that way, as he undertook his trip that had brought him to Max Meadows to contact these people and to tell them to get off of the land that belonged to either James Patton or to the Loyal Company. We will revisit these subjects at length in the presentation on the Scots-Irish. He took the Harmon brothers along as translators. Among these were Steven Holsteiner (Holston) who lived at the head spring of the river named after him in 1748. Samuel Stahlnacker, of the Dunkard's Bottom community, lived on Hutton's Creek between Chilhowie and Glade Spring when he was met by the expedition of Dr. Thomas Walker in 1750 on Reedy Creek between Bristol and Kingsport. Stahlnacker was also a trader with the Indians, trading with the Cherokee in their villages south of Knoxville and at the community of Trade located in a saddle of the Blue Ridge on the North Carolina – Tennessee border. Stahlnacker's home was at the forks of the trails leading to these two locations.

The French and Indian War of 1754-1763 broke out along the frontier from New York State to Tennessee. In 1755 the Shawnee Indians of Southern Ohio struck Draper's Meadows, the present Virginia Tech campus. James Patton was among those killed. His death would easily compete with that of General Armstrong Custer as that of the most prominent American of European ancestry to have been killed by the Indians. Draper's Meadow was just down the New River from Mahanaim. The Shawnee struck the Scots-Irish settlement on Kerr's (Carr's) Creek on the Calf Pasture River on I-64 just northwest of Lexington in 1759, 1763, and again in 1764. Many were killed. The German Pacifists of Dunkard's Bottom again fled rather than fight. Across the Blue Ridge Mountains to the south lay the Yadkin Valley, the most desirable part of North Carolina. Today it is the site of Winston-Salem and Raleigh-Durham. It had been the home of the Catawba Indians, who had just been totally wiped out by smallpox. This created a vacuum in the area of some of the best farmland in North Carolina, and even as the Cherokee began to move in, the German Moravians sent a missionary colony into the Yadkin, soon to be followed by a larger group of Moravians from Pennsylvania. Then came the various groups of the Brethren, specifically those from Dunkard's Bottom, less organized than the Moravians. Then came large numbers of Scots-Irish fleeing the Valley, who as Presbyterians, were theologically related to the German denominations already settled in

the Yadkin. These diverse peoples intermarried in the Yadkin. In the first presentation of this series we have already discussed whom the ‘Cherokee’ really were by this time. Stahlacker was abducted by the Shawnee in 1754, and was kept in protective custody until the end of the war.

In 1771 the settlers of the Yadkin Valley engaged in an armed insurrection against the colonial authorities, against whom they fought a pitched battle near Alamance Court House. Since the settlers wished to regulate the government, the insurrection is called “The Regulator Revolt”. The settlers ran out of ammunition, and lost the battle. The Red Coated soldiers of the Governor ran amok through the Yadkin, burning and hanging, and the settlers began the largest mass migration in colonial American history, as they ran for their lives back into Virginia through the passes of the Blue Ridge into the Valleys of the Holston, Watauga, and Clinch. Their Berber instincts took them to the heads of the darkest hollows in the mountains, where they settled often without benefit of legal title. The descendants of these people today will largely self identify as Scots-Irish, most of whom will also tell you that they have a ‘Cherokee’ great grandmother or two. It would be just as accurate to say that they were German, with some Scots-Irish, and a Berber great grandmother or two.

Probably the largest group of Germans in far Southwest Virginia came to Pennsylvania during the 1750’s. Most were indentured servants who had to work out a period of 10 to 20 year’s labor to pay for their passage from Germany. Many worked out their indentures and moved to Maryland for a few years where they worked as farm laborers for cash. These folks piled into the North Fork of the Holston Valley from Saltville to Kingsport about 1775. They mixed with the Regulators, and to a lesser extent with the Scots-Irish of the Middle and South Fork of the Holston.

The most famous of the Dunkards of Dunkards Bottom was Col. William Christian. As a pacifist he evacuated to North Carolina, but somewhere along the way the Indians cured him of his pacifism, and upon his return to Mahanaim he became the leader of the New River Militia. During the Great Cherokee War of 1776 the Cherokee had the Holston Militia holed up in their forts, unable to sally forth. Christian and the New River Militia came in, and ran the Cherokee out of the Holston Valley. The combined New River Militia and Holston Militia went to the Netherland Inn at Kingsport, and built a flotilla of rafts and dug out canoes, and sailed down the Tennessee River to the Cherokee towns around Chota and Chattanooga. They spent weeks laying waste to the Cherokee villages in what history has dubbed Christian’s Campaign.

These three different groups of Germans had originated in the Greater Rhine River Valley, and practiced different varieties of Antiestablishment Pietism. Earlier in the English American Colonies they had had different histories, but finally found themselves living and intermarrying together in Far Southwest Virginia. In the last of these three essays, we will find them intermarrying also with the Scots-Irish.

Bibliography:

Several previous essays were used as source material for this one. The specific bibliographies for each can be accessed at the following web sites:

A – “Fort Frederick and Dunkard’s Bottom” - <http://danielboonetrail.com/history-perspectives/fort-frederick/>

B – “Tangier Island etc.” - <http://danielboonetrail.com/history-perspectives/tangier-island-max-meadows-the-german-brethren-and-the-wilderness-road/>

C – “Hungry Mother” - <http://bigstonegappublishing.net/HungryMother.pdf>