



7 Genealogical Lessons for Researching Your Palatine Ancestors

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By guest blogger Henry Z (“Hank”) Jones



I started climbing the family tree at the age of eight when I discovered an old trunk in the basement of our home that had been brought to California in the gold rush. To an eight year old kid with an inquisitive mind, that ancient piece of history really needed exploring. Then one day, a miracle happened: my mother went shopping, and that was just the opportunity I needed to begin what is now a life-long addiction. I was blessed, because my family members were packrats! That trunk contained every important newspaper since Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, old tintypes and daguerreotypes, family Bibles and lively letters from my long-dead relatives, and best of all – a family tree made in 1882 by my grandmother that surprisingly was well-documented. From that day on, forget normal “kid-stuff” – I was hooked on genealogy!

But early on in my research, I discovered that I was connected to an interesting group of Germans who were on their way to colonial New York in 1709, but made it only as far as County Limerick, Ireland. As I wrote in my book *Psychic Roots: Serendipity & Intuition In Genealogy* (which along with my own story was dramatized later on NBC’s “*Unsolved Mysteries*” program),^[1] I soon dropped working on all my

other Danish and English lines and concentrated instead only on these emigrants who obsessed me: they were called “Palatines.”

What is a Palatine?

Probably the question I’m asked most frequently when I give one of my seminars around the country is, “What’s a Palatine? Is it a surname, an occupation, or what?” Basically here’s who they were: if you were a German-speaking immigrant heading for colonial America in the early- to mid-18th century, you would have been called a “Palatine.” It was sort of a generic term, the roots of which came from the word given to the area in southern Germany called “the Pfalz” or “Palatinate” where so many of these early settlers originated. Many American Palatines also came from other regions outside of the borders of today’s Palatinate, however: Isenburg, the Kraichgau, Hessen, the Westerwald, Württemberg, and Siegen, for example.

The first initial burst of emigration from Germany began in the 1680s and then reached full thrust in 1709/10 with large settlements in Ireland and colonial New York and North Carolina. Later groups went to Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and other colonies. But, sadly, the new arrivals in America weren’t simply known as “Palatines;” they were called “Poor Palatines,” which denoted their economic and social status in the Europe they had left behind. It was a derogatory term and, unfortunately, endured for a few decades.

However, upon their arrival, the Palatine immigrants to colonial America found a wilderness ready to be tamed and transformed into liveable communities by perseverance and hard work. Their story is a tribute to their fortitude and quality of character which enabled them to find the inner strength to meet the terrible difficulties they faced in their new life in a new land. They “took the risk” and succeeded![\[2\]](#)

In 1960 while still a student at Stanford University, I began collecting material on my 1709er Irish-Palatine Bergmann family and the County Limerick settlement and neighbors where they resided. My Bergmanns were a textbook example of how a surname can evolve: “Bergmann” means “man from the mountain or hill” in German and has a very guttural sound when spoken. In my family the surname became “Barrackman,” “Barkman,” “Bartman,” and then finally “Hillman!” In 1965, after amassing much documented material on this group, I published the first edition of my *The Palatine Families of Ireland*.[\[3\]](#)

My career first as a featured singer on ABC-TV’s *The Tennessee Ernie Ford Show*, a recording artist on RCA Records, and then as a character actor in many TV sit-coms and eight Disney movies left me lots of time “in between pictures” to follow my other passion in life: those emigrant Palatines that seemed to chase me.[\[4\]](#) In 1969, I began gathering documented information on those Germans who *did* finally make it to colonial New York in 1710, even though I was descended from none of them. My goal was to write the book that I would like to find on the shelf of a genealogical library: in other words, a volume I could absolutely trust as to accuracy that was documented with sources contemporary with the events therein.

I began this pre-computer days, so by 1980 when I started writing my first two-volume set on the subject, *The Palatine Families of New York – 1710*,[\[5\]](#) I used the 17,000 family group sheets I had *handwritten*, each sheet – front and back – documenting an 18th century Palatine couple, their lives and history. Happily I guess what I set out to accomplish seemed to turn out, as the books eventually won the prestigious Donald Lines Jacobus Award from the American Society of Genealogists, and I was honored to be elected as one of ASG’s fifty Fellows. Other books on these courageous Germans followed, including *More Palatine Families*,[\[6\]](#) the three volume *Even More Palatine Families* (with Lewis B. Rohrbach, CG),[\[7\]](#) and *Westerwald To America* (with Annette K. Burgert, FASG);[\[8\]](#) all are available via my website www.hankjones.com .

In the course of my fifty-plus-year Palatine project, certain genealogical lessons have been learned, and some old axioms validated and reinforced. I'd like to share some of them with you which hopefully might help you knock down some brick walls as you climb the family tree, Palatine or otherwise:

1. Study the Neighbors

One of my major goals in my initial Palatine project was to find where these settlers originated in Europe pre-emigration. Of the 847 families who arrived in New York in 1710, only 50 firm origins were known from surviving American sources, so I had 797 families still to discover overseas. The saving grace of my 50-plus year project can be boiled down into one phrase: "*They Came Together – They Stayed Together!*" So often our emigrant ancestors came together to the New World with relatives and friends from their hometown or village in Europe – and then continued to interact with those same families for generations after their arrival in America. Looking for *clusters* of families, not just one, and seeing how the same names reoccur over and over together in wills, deeds, census, tax and military lists, can lead to genealogical pay-dirt. By studying the juxtaposition of names on unalphabetized lists, patterns will emerge that engender genealogical successes.^[9] This lesson has enabled me to find over 600 of the 847 families who arrived from Germany in New York in 1710 in their ancestral European homes and well over 1,500 later-arrivals who came in the 2nd wave of emigration 1717-1776 – some of whom are especially fascinating, such as the preeminent New York printer Johann Peter¹ Zenger's family and Elvis Presley's ancestor, Valentin¹ Bresseler.

2. Study the Sponsors in Baptism Records

Those who have German (or Dutch) lines in their ancestry really are blessed in that sponsors are usually named along with parents in most 18th century baptisms. The importance of these names in the church books cannot be minimized, for being a Godparent in a German family was a great honor and responsibility. Sponsors were very often close relatives the child being baptized. The child usually was named for one of the sponsors at the baptism; if the baby's name is different from the sponsor's, this *sometimes* may reflect the Christian name of a dead or absent grandparent. Related sponsors can be especially crucial in sorting out families with common surnames; if a sponsor was not a relative, very often he or she was an old friend from same ancestral town or region overseas.

3. Use Original Sources, But Remember That They May Be Wrong

Whenever possible, look at the original record regarding your ancestor: even microfilmed records sometimes have their flaws, and taking just one entry about your ancestor from only one source may limit its reliability, as you often then are ignoring the important *context* in which the record appears. Well-intentioned genealogists of the past have copied many records where errors slipped through the cracks and then perpetuate. Two of my friends and fellow Fellows have written excellent books which address the complexities and subtleties of this subject in great and helpful detail which I heartily recommend: Robert Charles Anderson's *Elements of Genealogical Analysis: How To Maximize Your Research Using The Great Migration Study Project*; and Elizabeth Shown Mills' *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian*.

4. Study Naming and Spelling Patterns

Every ethnic group has certain unique customs in regard to naming and spelling, and nowhere is this fact more true than in the families of emigrant Germans. There was no one way to spell a Palatine name in the 18th century! It all depended how on the person writing down the name heard it. Sound-alike-consonants

contribute to the variety of spellings: “D” and “T” interchange (e.g. “Diel” can be “Thiel”); “C,” “G,” and “K” often have a similar sound (e.g. “Henrich¹ Clock” was known as “Klock,” and even “Glock”); “B” and “P” often transpose (e.g. “Ludwig¹ Batz” was known as “Ludwig Potts”); and letters “V” and “F” do the same (e.g. “Arnold¹ Falck” was also “Arnold Valk”).

Knowing the myriad Christian names can be helpful: if someone was baptized as “Anthonius,” he will be known as “Teunis/Tönges or Dönges;” “Conrad” as “Curt;” “Dieterich as “Richard;” “Friederich” as “Fritz;” “Georg” as “Jury;” “Gerhardt” as “Garret;” “Jacob” as “James;” “Johannes” as “Hans;” “Ludwig” as “Lewis;” and “Melchior” as “Michael.” My three favorites, however, are if a woman is baptized as “Gertraud” the name will often be anglicized to “Charity,” and if someone is baptized as “Theobald” he will be known as “David” (but NOT vice-versa). Meanwhile, if someone is baptized as “Adolf” he also will be “Adam,” (but again NOT vice-versa).

We must remember, too, the idiosyncrasies of the times. “Junior” in the 18th century did not necessarily mean that he was son of the same-named “Senior” who lived in the community. A couple can have two absolutely identically-named children – both of whom survive to have children; and the middle initial of a person in colonial New York in the 18th and early 19th centuries (e.g. “Johannes C. Müller”) usually can refer to the Christian name of the person’s father. In colonial Pennsylvania it often referred to the maiden name of the mother.

5. Use Family Traditions as Guides, Never Gospel

Family traditions, although well-intentioned (“Grandpa would *never* lie to me!”), can be misleading when accepted without reservation and should be scrutinized very carefully. For example, I would venture to say that upwards of 70% of the 847 1709er Palatine families have a tradition of Dutch (not German) ancestry. Much of this probably comes from a misunderstanding of the word “Deutsch.” However, there usually is a germ of truth in many family traditions, which often has been attached to the “wrong” ancestor. My books are full of such examples of erroneous traditions, such as my discovery that Jost¹ Hite, the “Baron of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia” actually was found to be the son of the local butcher of Bonfeld, Germany.[\[10\]](#)

6. Don’t Trust Anything Unless the Documentation Is There to Back It Up

Enough said! But maybe one caveat should be added along these lines: when I write my volumes, I often conditionalize the connectives I make between generations with what my daughter Amanda calls “Dad’s three ‘P’ words:” “perhaps,” “possibly,” and “probably.” So often people using my books post this same information, but completely eliminate these carefully-crafted conditionals when they do so. GRRR!

7. Follow Your Intuition as Well as Your Intellect

In all my years of climbing the family tree, I cannot tell you how many times following “a hunch” has led to all kinds of amazing discoveries. For those who are purely logical, all I’m saying is simply to follow your hunches and see if the facts back them up – they often do. Indeed so many strange things – almost “*Twilight Zone* experiences” – have happened to me genealogically over the years that they led me to write my two *Psychic Roots* books. They must have hit a familiar chord as they now are in their 9th printing and over 1,300 of our colleagues around the world have generously shared their similar stories with me. In fact, I understand now when something weird happens to a genealogist that they can’t explain, they sometimes say, “I’m having a Hank Jones Moment.” I’m honored to be an adjective.

I hope all this helps. Good hunting!



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[1] Henry Z Jones, Jr., *Psychic Roots: Serendipity & Intuition in Genealogy* (Baltimore, 1993), the sequel of which is Henry Z Jones, Jr., *More Psychic Roots: Further Adventures in Serendipity & Intuition in Genealogy* (Baltimore, 1997).

[2] Descendants of the Palatines who wish to network with others should investigate joining Palatines To America: German Genealogical Society (<https://www.palam.org>) and/or The Irish Palatine Association (<http://www.irishpalatines.org>).

[3] Revised and expanded as Henry Z Jones, Jr., FASG, *The Palatine Families of Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Camden, Maine, 1990). For additional discoveries see: “Newly Found German Origins of Some Irish Palatine Families,” *The Irish Palatine Association Journal* 20 (2013).

[4] For more on Hank Jones’s “Other Life,” read *Memories – The “Show-Biz” Part of my Life* (San Diego, California, 2006).

[5] Henry Z Jones, Jr., FASG, *The Palatine Families of New York: A Study of the German Immigrants Who Arrived in Colonial New York in 1710*, 2 vols. (Universal City, California, 1985). For additional discoveries see: “Some Newly-Discovered German Origins for the Palatine Families of New York – 1710,” *The American Genealogist* 85 (2011): 46-62.

[6] Henry Z Jones, Jr., FASG, *More Palatine Families, Some Immigrants to the Middle Colonies 1717 – 1776 and their European Origins, Plus New Discoveries on German Families Who Arrived in Colonial New York in 1710* (Rockport, Maine, 1991).

[7] Henry Z Jones, Jr., FASG, and Lewis Bunker Rohrbach, CG, *Even More Palatine Families: 18th Century Immigrants to the American Colonies and Their German, Swiss, and American Origins*, 3 vols. (Camden, Maine, 2002).

[8] Henry Z Jones, Jr., FASG, and Annette Kunselman Burgert, *Westerwald To America: Some 18th Century German Immigrants* (Rockport, Maine, 1990),

[9] For fuller examples of studies focusing on relationships of a group in a particular place and period including my own Palatine project, the late Marsha Hoffman Rising’s *Opening The Ozarks* books and Robert Charles Anderson’s seminal *The Great Migration* series, see Robert Charles Anderson’s “The Joys

of Prosopography: Collective Biography for Genealogists” in *American Ancestors* (Winter 2010) pp. 25 – 29.

[10] I was a consultant on the *Who Do You Think You Are?* episode featuring a descendant of Jost Hite, country music singer Tim McGraw.