

Researching German Heritage from Here to There^{©i}

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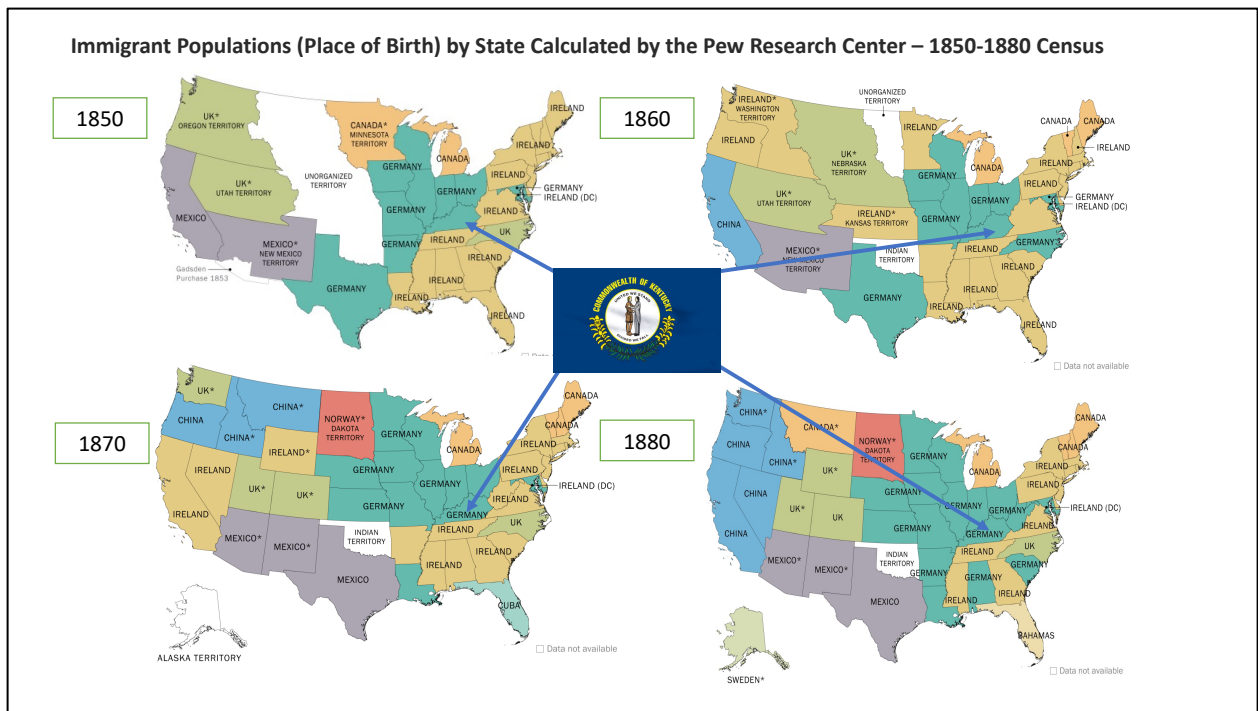
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HERE (AMERICA)

1. Germans to America (Overview)

- 1607: First German in America Dr. Johannes Fleischer (1582-1608), who was born in Breslau, Silesia, arrived with the first settlers to Jamestown Island.
- 1683: A group of Quakers and Mennonites from the Rhineland founded the city of Germantown (later part of Philadelphia), the first recorded German settlement in the English colonies.
- 1709: 4,000 Germans from Pfalz region arrived in NY Hudson Valley.
- Later in 1700's: German immigration was mainly into PA.
- 1800-1920: About five million German immigrants arrived.
- 1882: Peak year when over 250,000 million arrived in US.
- 1920: Second Boat Emigration ended.

2. Kentucky's German Population in Second Half of 19th Century



WHO WERE THEY

3. Locating the Name of a German Ancestor Immigrant
 - a. Start with your family memories and talk to the oldest people in your family, and look for family records: old letters, death cards, newspaper clippings, obituaries, bibles, marriage licenses, burial records, death certificates.
 - b. Check to see if family kept a decorative keepsake paper known as a *Fraktur*, marking a birth or baptism or both, a confirmation or a marriage. (May be found in local historical societies or in art books.)
4. German Naming Traditions
 - a. Forenames: German children were given two names and the second name, not the first, is what you will find in records. Outside of baptism records, a person's full name was almost never used again. Most often, German boys were baptized with the first name Johannes and German girls were baptized Maria, Anna, or Anna Maria. Consequently, a child was often known by his or her second name known as the *Rufname*.
 - b. Nicknames: A tradition involving nicknames often called *Kurzformen* differs from English traditions. In English most nickname are created by dropping the last syllable of the given name (*e.g.*, Christopher becomes Chris). Germans, however, often shorten a given name by dropping the first part of it (*e.g.*, Nicklaus becomes Klaus, Sebastian becomes Bastian, Christopher becomes Stophel).
5. German Naming Patterns
 - a. In German speaking areas, children were almost always named for one or more of their baptismal sponsors.
 - b. The most common pattern would be for sons to be named in this order: first born, for father's father; second born, mother's father; third born, father of the child; fourth born and on, uncles of the child. The same pattern applies to daughters but using the mothers' names (father's mother, mother's mother, mother of child, aunts).
 - c. Given names for children who died were reused by the family for children born after the death.
 - d. Certain surnames may be so common in a village or town that an extension would be added to keep them straight.

WHEN DID THEY ARRIVE

6. Locating the Date of Arrival (and maybe Foreign Community).
 - a. Check out the U.S. Census Records, in particular 1900-1930.
 - b. Check out Ship Manifests
 - i. Ship Passenger Lists and Manifests Before 1820
 1. General: the search for ship passenger lists and manifests before 1820 involves researching collections dedicated to certain groups or countries.
 2. German Emigration

- i. For early period, there are more records of German-speaking immigrants than any other ethnic group because British government did not require any sort of passenger lists for ships arriving in Colonial ports.
- ii. Notably, PA legislature became fearful of the influx of German immigrants and in 1727 mandated that ships keep lists of the foreign immigrants arriving in **Philadelphia** – a mandate that produced the only large body of passenger lists in Colonial America.
- iii. Three important compilations:

Daniel Rupp's Collection of Thirty Thousand Names, [https:// www.familysearch.org/library/books/viewer/ 293219](https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/viewer/293219)

Pennsylvania German Pioneers, compiled by Strassburger and Hinke, <https://archive.org/details/pennsylvaniagerm43stra/page/n13/mode/2up>

Henry Z. Jones:

- a. The Palatine Families of New York: A Study of the Germany Immigrants Who Arrived in Colonial New York in 1710 (1985).
- b. More Palatine Families: Some Immigrants to the Middle Colonies 1717-1776 (1991).
- c. Even More Palatine Families: 18th Century Immigrants to the American Colonies and Their German, Swiss and Austrian Origins (2002).

ii. Ship Passenger Lists and Manifests after 1820

1. Starting in 1820, the U.S. required arriving ships to turn over passenger lists to customs officials. These early lists vary by the port and have sparse information. Search with the birth name of the immigrant. Microfilmed lists are arranged by port, arrival date and ship name.
2. Starting in 1891, the U.S. government provided forms for passenger lists after assuming responsibility for immigrant processing. Passenger information on most lists span more than one page so check them all.
3. Online resources include **Ancestry.com** and **FamilySearch.org** which have a range of indexes and images. Find some records on www.ImmigrantsShips.net. New York records can also be found at <https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>.
4. Repositories include FamilySearch Library (FSL), National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C area and NARA regional offices.

c. Major Ports of Entry for German Emigrants from 1820 Forward

- i. New York : 1855-1891: New York's Castle Garden where 7.5-8 million immigrants entered the U.S; 1892-1924: Ellis Island where nearly 12 million immigrants arrived.
- ii. New Orleans: where the main wave of German immigration came in the 1840s and 1850s.
- iii. Baltimore: The establishment of the nation's first commercial steam railway, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, in 1828 opened the way to the West.

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM

7. Location of Heimat – Look for the Name In U.S. Records

- a. **Research in Germany requires finding the village, town, or city from which an ancestor hailed because Germany has a history of decentralization along with expansion and contraction.**
- b. Start with family records, including *Frakturen*, and other memorabilia, and check out U.S. Census records, obituaries, death certificates.
- c. Newspapers
 - i. More German-American newspapers were published than other nationality. By 1890, 1,000+ newspapers in the U.S. were in German.
 - ii. Newspapers, including for specifically German communities, can be found online, *e.g.*, ChromAm, Newspapers.com, UK Library. (See Attachment for information from Kopana Terry, Oral History Archivist and Curator of Newspapers at the University of Kentucky.)
- d. Naturalization Records
 - i. Until 1906, the listing of birthplaces was sporadic, as U.S. naturalization was handled by the courts on the state level.
 - ii. Starting in 1906, naturalization records include the date and place—often town—of birth. These records include the **declaration of intention and petition**—both more likely to contain the birthplace than the proof of naturalization.

8. Location of Heimat – Find Site on German Map

- a. Preliminary Consideration
 - i. On average a German place name is used for three separate villages in different parts of Germany.
 - ii. Look for a geographic suffix, *e.g.*, Rottenburg am Neckar and Rottenburg ob der Tauber.
 - iii. Differentiate based on the immigrant's religion.
 - iv. Watch out for large cities because possibly ancestor may have named the largest city in the area where he came from.
- b. Steps to Finding Site
 - i. Use Google Map or a Gazetteer (directories of place names and other details about geographical locations).
 - 1. *Meyers Orts-und Verkehrs-Lexikon des Deutschen Reichs* (Meyers Gazetteer or Meyers Orts)

- i. Originally compiled in 1912; includes all areas that were part of the pre-World War I (WWI) German Empire. That is, Germany at its largest.
 - ii. Gazetteers published after WWI may not include parts of the Empire that were lost to bordering countries. Overall, this gazetteer includes more than 210,000 cities, towns, hamlets, villages, etc.
 - i. See Ancestry at <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1074>.
 - ii. For a tutorial see: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/lessons/meyers-gazetteer-now-online-indexed-and-fully-searchable>.
 - iii. Electronic version is the best-known map-related resource for those seeking German ancestry, in part because it's an English-language website and has an easy-to-use interface. <https://www.meyersgaz.org>.
- 2. *Das Geschichtliche Ortsverzeichnis* (GOV)(Historical Place Directory)
 - i. Sponsored by a German genealogy society (see wiki.genealogy.net/GOV).
 - ii. More than 1.2 million entries across Europe (both modern German and places in other countries that were once populated by Germans).
 - iii. Special feature: Übergeordnete Objekte (chronology of jurisdictions to which the place belonged).
- ii. Line up the village/town/city to a modern map.

TRANSITIONING FROM HERE TO THERE

- 9. Navigational Guides
 - a. FamilySearch's ResearchWiki
(https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germany_Genealogy)
 - b. ACPL German & Germanic Guide
(https://www.acpl.lib.in.us/_files/ugd/407f3f_914f0ba852ae4bfea8c33ce8d4a3c086.pdf)
 - c. Family Tree Magazine's "Germany Cheat Sheet"
- 10. Language Challenges
 - a. Check out these online translation programs:
 - i. <https://translate.yandex.com/translator>
 - ii. <https://translate.google.com>.
 - b. For old handwriting styles, check out: <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Tips-for-Reading-Old-Handwriting>
 - c. Here are examples and translations of Old German handwriting styles:

MODERN GERMAN	FRAKTUR	SÜTTERLIN	KURRENT	ENGLISH SYMBOL/TRANSLATION
Abnennstafel	Abnennstafel	Abnennstafel	Abnennstafel	ancestor chart
Akte	Akte	Akte	Akte	record
Aufgebot	Aufgebot	Aufgebot	Aufgebot	(marriage) banns
Beerdigung	Beerdigung	Beerdigung	Beerdigung	☐ burial, interment
Begräbnis	Begräbnis	Begräbnis	Begräbnis	☐ burial
Copulation	Copulation	Copulation	Copulation	∞ marriage
Ehe, Eheschließung	Eheschließung	Eheschließung	Eheschließung	∞ marriage
Firmung	Firmung	Firmung	Firmung	(Catholic) confirm
Gatte	Gatte	Gatte	Gatte	♂ ∞ husband
Gattin	Gattin	Gattin	Gattin	♀ ∞ wife
geb. geboren	geboren	geboren	geboren	* born
Geburtschein	Geburtschein	Geburtschein	Geburtschein	* birth certificate
Geburtsurkunde	Geburtsurkunde	Geburtsurkunde	Geburtsurkunde	* birth record
gefallen	gefallen	gefallen	gefallen	X died in comb
geheiratet	geheiratet	geheiratet	geheiratet	∞ married
genannt	genannt	genannt	genannt	called, known as
gesch. geschieden	geschieden	geschieden	geschieden	o/o divorce
gest. gestorben	gestorben	gestorben	gestorben	† died
get. getauft	getauft	getauft	getauft	= baptized
getraut	getraut	getraut	getraut	∞ married
Hebamme	Hebamme	Hebamme	Hebamme	midwife
Heirat	Heirat	Heirat	Heirat	∞ marriage
hinterlassen	hinterlassen	hinterlassen	hinterlassen	surviving, left behind
Hochzeit	Hochzeit	Hochzeit	Hochzeit	∞ wedding
Junge	Junge	Junge	Junge	♂ ∞ boy
Jungfrau, Jungfer	Jungfrau	Jungfrau	Jungfrau	♀ ∞ maiden, virgin
Junggeselle	Junggeselle	Junggeselle	Junggeselle	♂ ∞ bachelor
Jüngling	Jüngling	Jüngling	Jüngling	♂ ∞ young man

From The
Family Tree
German
Genealogy
Guide by
James M.
Beidler,
2013

MODERN GERMAN	FRAKTUR	SÜTTERLIN	KURRENT	ENGLISH SYMBOL/TRANSLATION
Kommunikant	Kommunikant	Kommunikant	Kommunikant	communicant
Konfirmation	Konfirmation	Konfirmation	Konfirmation	confirmation
kopuliert	kopuliert	kopuliert	kopuliert	∞ joined in m
ledig	ledig	ledig	ledig	single
legitimiert	legitimiert	legitimiert	legitimiert	legitimized
Mädchen	Mädchen	Mädchen	Mädchen	♀ ∞ girl
männlich	männlich	männlich	männlich	♂ ∞ male
minderjährig	minderjährig	minderjährig	minderjährig	under age, min
lassen	lassen	lassen	lassen	of (legal) age
erkommen	erkommen	erkommen	erkommen	surviving
kunft	kunft	kunft	kunft	delivered, an

MONTHS	
German	English
Januar	January
Februar	February
März	March
April	April
Mai	May
Juni	June
Juli	July
August	August
September	September
Oktober	October
November	November
Dezember	December

Susan J. Court Researching German Heritage 2025©

THERE (GERMANY)

11. Finding Records in “Germany”: Important Historical Events
 - a. 17th Century: After Thirty Years War (1618-1648) German speaking area was fragmented into over 1,600 political entities in the Holy Roman Empire. France’s Louis XIV pushed his border to the Rhine.
 - b. 1804: Napoleon codified civil registration and introduced *Mediatisation*, joining of microstates and imperial free cities.
 - c. 1815: Congress of Vienna created a German Confederation consisting of about 40 states under the presidency of Austria. Did not include Prussen.
 - d. 1848: Revolutions starting in France spread to German states. Many left after revolutions squelched.
 - e. 1870-71: Franco-Prussian War: Alsace and part of Lorraine because part of new German empire. Prussen King Wilhelm was proclaimed German emperor.
 - f. 1876: Otto Von Bismarck mandated civil registration of births, marriages and deaths across all of Germany.
 - g. WWI: Germany returned Alsace-Lorraine to France, and a portion of Prussen was ceded to Poland.
12. Where Are the Records Located: German Archives
 - a. Bundesarchiv: There is no centralized system for record keeping in Germany. There is a Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv) in Koblenz with 23 specialized branches throughout Germany. About one-half of the archives’ holdings were destroyed in WWII. The Federal Archives determines whether documents are “worthy of

archiving”, *i.e.*, whether they are, among other things, of lasting value for researching and understanding the past and present.

- b. State and Church Archives: Each German state has at least one archive. Some of the “amalgamated” Lander have more than one. They go by different names: *Landesarchiv* (national archives); *Landeshauptarchiv* (state archives); *Generallandesarchiv* (general state archives). Major religious groups – Roman Catholic, Evangelisch (union of Lutheran and Reformed congregations in early 1800s), Old Lutheran, and Moravian – have archives.
- c. Local Archives and Repositories: City archives (*Stadtarchiv*); Onsite church records: Local historical society or museum; Civil Registration Office (*Standesamt*) where birth, marriage, and death records are kept. Note: There is no particular “retention schedule” before these records are passed on from the local level to the state level, so often the local office will have records that date all the way back to the initiation of the record keeping system.
- d. **RECOMMENDATION**: Write an Archive or Similar Repository such as a Church. Here are some suggestions for that purpose:
 - i. Compose in German using a translator app or program.
 - ii. Use email if possible.
 - iii. Be specific with your request, *i.e.*, don’t tell your entire family story.
 - iv. Aim to have the entire request fill no more than a few paragraphs.
 - v. Be precise with the name or names of the persons you are researching, and the document(s) you are seeking.
 - vi. Use polite language.
 - vii. Be prepared for a WONDERFUL response.

13. What Kind of Records Are Available (Civil)

- a. Civil Registration in Germany
 - i. Civil registrations of births, marriages and deaths mostly began in the 19th century.
 - ii. Generally, if the area being researched kept civil registers during the relevant time-period, they will be more helpful than parish registers because the latter may give only a baptismal and burial date whereas civil registers provide birth and death dates.
 - iii. Timing varied, and as a general matter, the farther west, the better chance of finding a record:
 - 1. Alsace and Lorraine (1792)
 - 2. Pfalz and Rheinland (1798)
 - 3. Baden (1810)
 - 4. Westfalen (1808)
 - 5. Hannover (1809)
 - 6. Oldenburg (1811-1814)
 - iv. 1792-1805: civil registration records were kept in the French language and used the French Republican Calendar, which Napoleon abolished in 1805.
- b. Privacy Laws and Blackout Periods
 - i. Civil Registration Reform Act of 2009 turned civil records into public records available to anyone after the expiration of various blackout periods. (Births: 110 years; Marriages: 80 years; Deaths: 30 years)

- ii. The Act also provided that records that are now considered public due to age will be moved to the appropriate archives (*Staatsarchiv* or *Kreiarchiv*).
- c. Other Civil Records
 - i. Census records: for the most part, statistical summaries, not like U.S. records.
 - ii. Probate records: lesser-used records created by German governments (until 1800's most Germans were still tied to the land in some form of serfdom); if exist, records would be in the local courts.
 - iii. Military records: most lost during Allied air raid in February 1945.
 - iv. Tax and manumission (release from serfdom) records: most collected and recorded locally in a registry generally called *Steuerbücher*.

14. What Kinds of Records Are Available (Non-Civil)

- a. Embarkation Records
 - i. Few records for First Boaters exist and records for Second Boaters are hard to find.
 - ii. Bremen was the Number One port of exit in 19th and early 20th Centuries, but few records exist because they were either thrown away because they took up too much room or were destroyed during WWII.
 - iii. Hamburg records still exist. Detailed lists of departing emigrants from 1850 to 1934 are indexed and preserved. Index can be found at Ancestry and on microfilm at FamilySearch Library.
- b. Church Records
 - i. General
 - 1. Probably the most valuable records to find heritage. The “**heart and soul**” of German genealogy.
 - 2. Most Germans belonged to Christian religious denominations that kept registers with genealogically significant information found in baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial records.
 - 3. Despite gaps created by wars and neglect, German penchant for record keeping has maintained a large percentage of these registers which date back centuries.
 - 4. Historically Roman Catholic records were kept in Latin, a tradition that followed by Catholic Germans in the U.S.
 - 5. German states that turned **Lutheran** were the first to mandate the keeping of church records for baptisms, marriages, and other events.
 - 6. Second largest Protestant group was known as the Reformed. Like the Lutherans, the Reformed kept records of baptisms, confirmations, marriages and burials.
 - 7. Most of the Protestant congregations today are called *Evangelisch* – stemming from the coerced “marriage” of the Lutheran and Reformed churches in Prussen in 1817
 - ii. Specific
 - 1. Baptism Records (*Taufschein*): Both Catholics and Lutherans baptized their children close to birth. Frequently the only records to include full name. Some records include information about the family and residences.

2. Marriages (*Trauung* or *Heiraten*): variety of information so “milk” every record for what you can learn. E.g., *Nachgel* (short for *Nachgelassene*) means “the late”, which would indicate a parent was deceased.
 3. Burials (*Tote* or *Gestorbenen*): sparser than marriage or baptism records.
 4. Confirmations (*Konfirmationen*): sparser than marriage or baptism; occurred when child was 13-16 years old so later information on individual and family.
 5. Family Registers (*Familienbücher*)(a gift that keeps on giving)
 - i. Primarily found in southern Germany, particularly Baden and Württemberg.
 - ii. Organize much of the information from the church records alphabetically by family.
 - iii. Typically, a single entry in a *Familienbücher* list three generations’ worth of information: The names of a husband and wife; birth information for both the husband and wife; information about the couple’s wedding; names and residence of the parents of the couple; names and birth information for the couple’s children
- iii. Accessing Church Records
1. <http://FamilySearch.org>
 2. <https://data.matricula-online.eu/en/deutschland> (European Catholic)
 3. <https://www.archion.de/en/discover-archion> (German Protestant)(headquartered in Stuttgart) (fee based)
(<https://familytreemagazine.com/heritage/german/archion-online-german-church-records>)
 4. Go to FamilySearch Research WIKI or a General Search Engine to find a website for a particular community or nation.
- iv. **Ortsfamilienbücher (OFBs) or village lineage book** – usually produced by well-qualified historians or genealogists from the area – alphabetically organized by family which is given a number to be used to move from generation to generation. Some go back into the 1500’s or before. An estimated 7,000 have been published. See <https://ofb.genealogy.net>; https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/img_auth.php/b/bf/1-Online_Ortsfamilienbücher-Instruction.pdf

Attachment

On July 14, 2025, Kopana Terry, Oral History Archivist and Curator of Newspapers at the University of Kentucky, spoke to the Kentucky Genealogical Society, and kindly shared the following information about German newspapers in Kentucky.

Omnibus, and its succeeding title *Beiwagen des Louisville Omnibus*, are available in Newspapers.com now. It will eventually be in Chronicling America.

Louisville Anzeiger is not yet in Chronicling America or Newspapers.com, but it has been digitized and will be in both databases pretty soon.

According to the U.S. Newspaper Database compiled by the Library of Congress, there were 17 German language titles in Louisville alone. You can see those titles here:

https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/results/?state=Kentucky&county=Jefferson&city=&year1=1690&year2=2025&terms=&frequency=&language=ðnicity=German&labor=&material_type=&lccn=&rows=20

There are additional German titles at "Camp Campbell" (Fort Campbell?), Camp Breckinridge, and Newport. There are also two titles listed as published in Cincinnati, but they include coverage in Louisville, Kentucky, and they were published in Louisville after a period. As a result, they show up in a list pulled for Kentucky, but the catalogue record lists Cincinnati as the city of publication.

In all, it appears there were at least 21 German titles in Kentucky. You can see these the full list here:

https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/results/?state=Kentucky&county=&city=&year1=1690&year2=2025&terms=&frequency=&language=ðnicity=German&labor=&material_type=&lccn=&rows=20

Thank you, Kopana!

ⁱ This presentation reflects in part James M. Beidler's *The Family Tree German Genealogy Guide, How to Trace Your Germanic Ancestry in Germany*, Cincinnati, OH: Family Tree Books, 2013. The Appendix to this Guide includes a phenomenal list of publications and websites.

ⁱⁱ Susan J. Court, M.A., J.D., is a genealogist and family historian, who currently serves as a Co-President of the Kentucky Genealogical Society, on behalf of which she has served, since March 2022, as project manager for the collaboration with FamilySearch.org to digitize Kentucky's genealogically significant records. Ms. Court is a frequent speaker at genealogy and history conferences (including RootsTech), a teacher of genealogy, and the author of 12 family histories and 21 genealogy and history articles. She is a member of several other genealogical or historical societies, the Jamestowne Society and the N.S.U.S.D 1812. Ms. Court grew up in Kenton County, Kentucky to which all branches of her family moved in the 1850's. In the Washington D.C. area since 1981, until her retirement in 2023, Ms. Court was an attorney and executive with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, a partner at Hogan Lovells, L.L.P., and a Federal energy policy consultant and expert witness.