

History of Germany

All of the Purfürst ancestors thus far identified lived the southern most areas of the adjacent present-day German states of Saxony and Thuringia, near their common boundary with the German state of Bavaria and the country of The Czech Republic.

In the area of present-day Germany there arose during the third and fourth centuries CE the great tribal confederations of Alamannai: Bavarians, Thuringans, Franks, Frisians and Saxons, which took the place of the numerous petty tribes with, their popular tribal form of government. With the exception of the Saxons, kings ruled all these confederations; the Saxons were divided into a number of independent bodies of different chiefs and, in time of war, they elected a duke. The Saxons were originally a small tribe living on the North Sea between the Elbe and the Eider Rivers in the area of the present German state of Holstein. Their name, derived from the weapon called the Sax, a stone knife, is first mentioned by the Roman author Claudius Ptolemaeus (about AD 130). Saxons were sea pirates who ravaged the coasts of Britain and France from their homes at the base of the peninsula of Denmark.

In the third and fourth centuries the Saxons fought their way victoriously toward the west, and their name was given to the great tribal confederation that stretched towards the west exactly to the former boundary of the Roman Empire, consequently almost to the Rhine. Only a small strip of land on the right bank of the Rhine remained to the Frankish tribe. To the south the Saxons stretched to the Harz Mountains and ultimately absorbed the greater part of Thuringia. To the east their power extended to the Elbe and Saale Rivers. The entire coast of the German Ocean belonged to the Saxons except that west of the Weser, which the Frisians retained.

Beginning about AD 450, in the company with the German tribe of Angles, a part of the Saxons settled on the Island of Britain from which the Romans had withdrawn. There, as Anglo-Saxons, after having accepted Christianity about 600, they laid the foundation for Anglo-Saxon civilization and the present Great Britain.

The Saxons came into violent conflict with the Franks living on the Rhine and for more than 100 years there was almost uninterrupted warfare. In 771 Charlemagne became the sole ruler of the Kingdom of the Franks and a year later launched what became a bloody thirty-year war (772-804). He was not only able to conquer the Saxons but was also able to win them to Christianity, the Saxons being the last German tribe that still held persistently to belief in the Germanic gods. By year 800 Charlemagne was the undisputed ruler of Western Europe. His vast realm covered present-day France, Switzerland, Belgium and The Netherlands, part of Austria and half of present-day Italy and Germany. By establishing a central government, Charlemagne restored much of the unity of the old Roman Empire and paved the way for the development of modern Europe. On Christmas Day in 800 Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor during a service at St Peter's Basilica, effectively establishing the foundation for the Holy Roman Empire and Charlemagne as its first Emperor. At his death in 814 governing was passed to a son whose weak rule soon brought on wars and revolts.

Under terms of the Treaty of Verdun in 843, Charlemagne's Frankish empire was divided, with the west part becoming France. The territory east of the Rhine became the East Frankish Kingdom from which the present Germany was developed. It was subsequently cut into five tribal duchies, of which Saxony was one. The first Duke of Saxony was Otto the Illustrious (880-912) who extended his control over Thuringia. His son Henry was elected King of Germany and justly the real founder of the German Empire.

Henry's son Otto I (936-973) was also, for the greater part of his reign, the Duke of Saxony. He divided the region he had acquired into several margravates (territories ruled by princes of the Holy Roman Empire). The most important being the North Mark (land held in common by a community) which in the course of time became the Kingdom of Prussia and also the Mark of Meissen which ultimately became the Kingdom of Saxony. Each Mark was divided into districts with a fortified castle established at the central point of each district. This old Duchy of Saxony, as it was called, became the center of the opposition of the German princes to the imperial power. As a result of Duke Henry the Lion's refusal to aid the emperor, the old Duchy was cut up into hundreds of smaller powers in 1181. Some cities became free cities.

The First German Empire was created by Saxon kings in the 10th Century. They brought together an area corresponding to the modern states of Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and parts of western Poland, eastern France and northern Italy. They called it the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations and established its capital in Wien (Vienna). It was made up of various kingdoms, principalities, duchies, imperial states and cities. The empire perceived itself as the successor of the Imperium Romanum (original Roman Empire) of ancient Rome which ended in AD 476 when the last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed. Its link to Rome for a long time was the Pope who considered the Empire to be a political arm of the church and claimed for himself the right to crown and approve the Caesars (Kaisers). This resulted in a power struggle between Pope and Kaiser about who was lord of whom. The Kaiser perceived himself also as head of the church and reserved for himself the right to approve appointments of Bishops and of the Pope.

By the middle of the 10th century the eastern kingdom of the empire was basically Germanic where the kings were Saxons. France and Spain became the most powerful kingdoms in Europe and were contending to control the entire continent. The weak and disunited German states were in no position to establish any kind of control. Charles IV, by agreement with Pope Clement V in 1355, refashioned the empire into the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

When the various factions could no longer agree on an emperor, Charles IV issued a proclamation in 1356, which was known as The Golden Bull. This document recognized seven electoral Princes called "Kurfursten" (which, interestingly, rhymes with our surname, Purfurst). When the need arose they were responsible for electing a new Emperor. It has been said that this political arrangement was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Any holiness came from claims of the popes in their attempts to assert religious control of Europe. It was Roman to the extent that it tried, without success, to be the political authority of the Roman Empire. There was no central government. After dissolution of the medieval, the name Saxony was first applied to a small part of the ancient duchy situated on the Elbe river around the city of Wittenberg. The Duchy of Saxe-Wittenberg was made one of those seven electors.

In 1422 Saxe-Wittenberg and the Margravates Thuringia and Meissen were united into one country, which gradually received the name of Saxony. Saxon-Thuringian retained an identity after a later division of Saxony in 1485. All but Thuringia was split away in 1547 and in 1672 Thuringia too began to be divided into separate principalities. From it arose two family lines: one was Weimar which ruled an area known as the Grand Duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach which was comprised of three non-contiguous parts: Weimar (678 sq miles); Eisenach (465); and Neustadt (254). The other family line was Gotha which was comprised of the Duchies of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Saxe-Meiningen and Saxe-Altenburg. Thus the term "Duchies of Saxony" pertained to German duchies within the area known as **Thuringia**. Its territories essentially constitute the present day German state of the same name. There were hundreds of independent cities and territories that were ruled by the various dukes who owned

huge areas divided into legal and sovereign entities called duchies. Weimar became the intellectual center of Germany by attracting the most famous Germans of the day

The Empire endured until the beginning of the 19th century but ceased to have influence over Italy and France in the 15th and 16th centuries. The independence of The Netherlands and Switzerland was recognized in 1648. From then until dissolution of the Empire in 1806 by Napoleon, the individual kingdoms and duchies that made up the Empire were fairly independent.

During the subsequent rule of Charles V in Germany, Martin Luther led the Reformation, a religious revolt against the Catholic Church. (see chapter on Martin Luther). The 16th century Reformation in the church further divided a weak empire. Germany was split into two religious camps and the emperor was little more than the head of a religious faction. The electors, the real heads of the German states, were entrenched by virtue of championing either Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism.

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As early as the year 1000, Emperor Otto II permitted lands on the eastern boundary of Thuringia to be administered by imperial *vogts*, or bailiffs, whence this area received the name of Vogtland. The area, on the western boundaries of the Kingdom of Saxony, was known as the *Reüssischen Herrschaften (Principality of Reuss)*. In 1244 the *vogt* Henry IV entered a Monastery. His sons divided his possessions with ruling seats established in Weide, Gera and Plauen. The Plauen line was subdivided about 1300 between a senior member, designated as *Reuss ältere Linie* (old line) and a junior branch designated as *Reuss jünere Linie* (young line). It was in these two Principalities that I found first record of our ancestors. (see chapter on history of Purfürst).

The historical definition of the Purfürst surname indicates its origin in the High German dialect areas of Germany south of an imaginary geographic line extending from the French border near Strasburg through the cities of Stuttgart and Nürnberg to the German city of Hof (in the state of Bavaria) near the Czech Republic (Bohemian) border. It is generally agreed that the ruling families in Bavaria preferred the Catholic teachings. The earliest of family records back to 1550 indicates the families were members of Lutheran churches. Since my research has found major presence of the family less than 10 kilometers north of that line I can only speculate that they fled the Catholic southern regions in search of religious freedom.

The last great struggle in Germany between Catholicism and the new wave of change was the 30 Years' War (1618-1648). It began when the Protestant nobility in Bohemia refused to recognize Ferdinand II, soon to be Holy Roman Emperor, as their king. This brought on a war involving the member states of the Holy Roman Empire. It started as a conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics, but soon became a struggle for political power ultimately involving much of Europe. German and Spanish forces defeated the Bohemians in 1620. Ferdinand, once he was crowned king, insisted that Protestantism be wiped out. This brought England, Holland and Denmark into the conflict. By 1629 they were finally driven out but when Ferdinand issued a decree requiring all Protestants to give up property, neutral Protestant rulers such as Sweden became involved. After a series of Swedish successes, France entered the war on the side of the Protestants in 1634, mainly for the purposes of taking an opportunity to defeat the Spanish and Austrian kingdoms. For the next 14 years the countries had conflict with each other until finally Ferdinand III, who succeeded his father, saw that further warfare was useless. The war reduced the population of Germany by more than half. Portions of the country dropped to one third of

the prewar figure. Education and agriculture were halted. There were not enough people left to rebuild and replant. Religious unity was not established. No emperor afterward ever tried to establish central authority. And France had laid the foundation for the French domination of Europe. That eventually came with Napoleon.

All attempts to give the Empire new life failed. Practically everywhere the dualistic state was abolished and the princes emerged as absolute rulers of which Saxony was one of the strongest. Thus the rise of absolutism was the chief political consequence of the Thirty Years War. The restoration of Germany's old population took only a century due to amazing fertility and thousands of immigrants from other kingdoms. The state placed coercive power behind rebuilding of church discipline. Luther's demand that everyone receive some schooling was translated into a practical program.

But cooperation among the dukes proved uneasy. In 1694 August II became ruler of Saxony. He immediately marched his army into Poland and made himself king. In 1702 Saxony and most all of the estates of the Empire declared war on France and during a decisive battle on the banks of the Danube River liberated all of Germany from French rule. Sweden, long a suppressed country, defeated the last of the Saxon-Polish army and Charles XII occupied Saxony in 1706 only to be later annihilated by Russian forces. Peace finally reigned in 1721. German soldiers had fought in continual wars between 1660 and 1720 but the empire played a small part in the peace settlements.

In the earliest period of European history, the name of Prussia was applied to lands along the southeast coast of the Baltic Sea. The earliest Prussia consisted of tribal lands inhabited by an Indo-European people. Over the centuries Prussian territories increased, mostly through conquest. While the rest of Europe was involved with the 30 Years' War, Prussia began its rise to power. Frederick The Great came to the throne in 1740. His first 23 years of reign were devoted to warfare. In an attempt to recapture Austrian lands seized by Frederick, Maria Theresa obtained the support of various countries including Saxony. Frederick, however, learned of the plans and before Austria and her allies could strike, Frederick moved into Saxony. This sparked a conflict known as the Seven Years' War. After taking Saxony, Frederick crushed the Austrians, French and the Swedes.

In 1800 the electors (Kurfürsten's) of the Kaiser were the Archbishops of Mainz, Cologne and Trier and four secular electors of Saxony, Rhine-Pfaltz, Brandenburg and Bohemia. Napoleon soon stretched his muscle, however, and defeated various armies of Russia, Austria, and Italy in his quest to restore the western empire of Charlemagne. Saxony was raised to a Kingdom and had its territory increased by Napoleon. In 1806 Napoleon Bonaparte conquered Europe and abolished the German empire and the title of Kaiser of Germany. The Kaiser of Weins became Kaiser of Austria with no power in the rest of Germany. The titles of Kurfürst (elector) became meaningless and were changed to the Kings of Bohemia, Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria, Wuerttemberg and Hannover by Napoleon's grace. Although he had Europe at his feet, Napoleon met with disaster in the Russian winter of 1812. For almost 20 years the war-weary people of Europe had watched the armies of France under Napoleon crush all resistance. Seeing their opportunity they all rose one by one to join Russia in defeating him in a decisive battle in Leipzig, in the heart of Saxony, during October 16-18, 1813. This was followed by the infamous battle of Waterloo in 1815, where Napoleon suffered his final defeat at the hands of a combined English and Prussian force.

At the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) peace came following the war, the several hundred German states were reduced to 39 and grouped in a loose German Confederation. The congress took from the Kingdom of Saxony 7800 square miles with about 850,000 inhabitants and gave it to Prussia. What Prussia obtained, with the addition of some old Prussian districts, was formed into the Province of Saxony.

The Congress redrew the map of Europe after Napoleon's rampages and established a balance of power. Thus in 1871 the Prussian king Bismarck was proclaimed emperor of the second German Empire. This included five grand duchies, 12 duchies and principalities and three free cities; the 5789 square miles and 1,500,000 inhabitants that remained of the Kingdom of Saxony. Its territories essentially constitute the present day German state of Saxony.

Fears haunting the established classes of Europe for over 30 years came true in 1848. Governments collapsed all over the continent. Revolutionaries milled in the streets, kings fled, republics were declared but never before or since has Europe seen so truly a universal upheaval as in 1848. The collapse of the existing German government in March of 1848 resulted in a self-appointed committee arranging for the election of an all-German gathering of delegates known as the Frankfurt Assembly. They were overwhelmingly professional people who wanted a self-governing unified and democratic Germany. They wanted no violence and instead attempted to bring a unified German state into being, one which should also be liberal and constitutional, assuring civil rights to its citizens and possessing a government responsive to popular will, free elections and open debate. In 1849 they completed a constitution and went in search of leadership, which was offered to Frederick William IV of Prussia who declined. The assembly concluded it was beaten and went home. Riots broke out in various places, such as Saxony, which were put down by the Prussian army. Thousands of disappointed German liberals and revolutionaries, who became known as the "Forty-eighters", migrated to America. They brought to the new world, besides a ripple of revolutionary agitation, a stream of men trained in science, medicine and music and highly skilled craftsmen like silversmiths and engravers

After the German defeat in the First World War, much of the eastern territories of Posen and West Prussia were awarded to Poland with other areas awarded to France, Denmark, Belgium, Lithuania and Czechoslovakia. The Weimar German Republic was established in 1919 and lasted until the Second World War when Austrian, Czech, Polish and other areas were again added to Germany, establishing briefly a third Empire during 1939-1945.

Following the Second World War, the occupational zones of Germany led to the development of separate East and West German States and the loss of extensive German territories in the east to Poland and Russia. The central German states of Saxony, the Thuringian duchies, Mecklenburg and the rest of Brandenburg and Pomerania were brought under communist control to form the (East) German Democratic Republic.

After 45 years, East and West Germany were reunited in 1990 to form the Federal Republic of Germany. Our ancestral homelands, once again, are located in present-day state of Thuringia.

