

German Nobility

Research of the Purfürst family who migrated to London revealed family lore indicating that the Purfürst surname evolved from the name Von Purfürsling.

The German system of nobility is quite different from the English system with which most Americans are familiar. The English have a peerage system where only the eldest son inherits the title and the rest are considered commoners even though they may bear courtesy titles. The German nobility is divided into two major divisions, that of the lower (niedriger Adel) and the high (hoher Adel). In Germany, all legitimate children of a nobleman become nobles themselves and most pass title onto all the children. The laws that concerned the nobility for some one thousand years before 1919 stated that hereditary could only be passed through legitimate biological descent from a noble father. When non-nobles were adopted the family name could be carried, but none of the noble designations such as the title or the “von”.

The hereditary and legal privileges of the nobility as the first class of the realm ended in August of 1919 when the German Constitution of the so-called Weimar Republic came into force. According to the German republican government, the nobility no longer exists as a legal entity. The titles and designations have not been abolished but are merely parts of the name and convey no status. For a child to use the inherited title upon the death of his father would involve a court petition for a name change which is not always granted. Those persons who claim nobility such as Zsa-Zsa Gabor’s husband, who uses a Saxon princely title, are not recognized as part of the historical nobility and are no more members of that class than anyone else claiming such status.

German law explicitly forbids anyone wearing a coat of arms which has not been given to the person or the person’s direct ancestors. In Germany a coat of arms has always been given to a specific family, never to a group of families with the same name. For the German coat of arms there is a register, the so-called “Wappenrolle” which shows all existing and registered coat of arms.

The basic designation of the nobility is the predicate “von”, which the vast majority nobles carry. In northern and eastern Germany there are a substantial number of families that use the “von” designation of the towns where they came from but have never been noble and make no pretense to be so.

Among the various ranks of the High Nobility is Kurfürst, or elector in English. Ranked with a Duke, the electors were originally the greatest lords of the Holy Roman Empire who elected the Emperor before the throne became hereditary. They later became sovereigns, no different from the rest. The last ruling elector lost his throne to Prussia in 1866. Also within the ranks of the High Nobility is the title of Fürst for which there is no good translation but confusingly called Prince. Children of dukes, kurfürsts and fürsts were all princes and princess. In the third generation their descendants sometimes became counts.

The highest rank of the Lower Nobility there is also a Fürst. This title, like Duke, was given only in the last centuries of the monarchy. Their children were rarely princes, but more usually counts or barons, depending upon the original title of the Fürst.

The Purfürst name is a “High German” variation of the original name Burgfürst. The term “High German” applies to dialects spoken in 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 on the Czechoslovakian border. I have thus far found 16 th century records of the family 10 kilometers north of that line.

The surname Burgfürst is known to have existed as early as the year 1321 and translates to “The First Man on The Castle”, usually a Knight serving a king or duke. I previously considered “Purfürst” to be an alternate spelling and therefore without an alternate meaning. However, the pronunciation in Saxony differs in relation to other German areas. Most significant is that there is no difference between b and p. In fact p (and k and t) seem to be completely ignored. The Saxons say that B is a “soft” B and that P is a “hard” B. During my research it was noted that, at various times both in America and in Germany, the surname spelling often began with a “B”. In German archive publications the Purfürst name was generally listed alphabetically under the letter “B”; some indexes did not even have a sub-division for the letter “P”. Therefore the surnames “Bur(g)furst” and “Purfurst” are effectively interchangeable. Therefore, the surname of Purfürst has as much application to the Knight servitude as does the surname Burfurst.

My research has revealed that family ancestral groups honored designated Kingdom boundaries for a number of centuries. (see chapter on History of Purfürst) That fact, coupled with a preponderance of village Mayoral assignments, leads me to believe there was some ancestral connection with ruling families along the way.