

## History of St Johannis Evangelical Church Neustad a/O, Germany

Many of the Purfürst family members who immigrated to America once lived in and around the Saxony village of Neustadt an der Orla, Grand Duchy Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach. The village is located in the present-day German state of Thuringia. All of those Neustadt family members attended the St Johns the Baptist Lutheran Church from whose baptism, marriage and burial registers, dating back to 1600, revealed considerable information on our ancestors.

The State Church of Saxony was Lutheran and, until 1818, was the only recognized Protestant group in the country. Citizenship implied membership in the State Church. In 1294 the Landgraf Albrecht von Thuringer (The Count Albrecht Thuringa) and his wife Elisabeth, the widowed Countess of Arnshaugh, built a chapel in Neustadt and dedicated it to John The Baptist. It was torn down in 1406 and replaced on the same spot by a new St. John's Chapel. On May 24, 1470 the cornerstone for a new chancel was laid, construction of which was completed in 1476. In the following year construction of the church tower was started. The three bronze bells were raised into place and consecrated in 1480 with the five sided top of the tower completed in 1483. The chancel received its arched ceiling in 1504.

In 1511 the City council traveled to Leipzig and in the workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder ordered an alter for the church. In June 1513 the alter pieces were delivered from Wittenberg and assembled in the church. Both the alter and its maker are significant. Lucas Cranach (1472-1553), a leading painter in Saxony, was one of the most important and influential artists in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century art. In 1505 he was appointed as court painter to elector Frederich the Wise of Saxony. He resided in the city of Wittenburg where he remained for 45 years, serving three different electors (Kurfursten). Dr Martin Luther was teaching at the University of Wittenburg at the time of the Protestant Reformation and the two became friends. Cranach's portraits of Luther helped form Luther's image and Lucas became the chief propagandist for the Protestant's cause. His alter pieces and paintings were sought after by Protestant and Catholic patrons alike and hundreds of pictures now in museums testify to his exceptional productivity. The Cranach alter in the Neustadt church is a tryptich-alter which means that the two side-pieces swing out to reveal more paintings on the inside. The wood carvings are almost life-size.

Expansion of the church for the addition of a nave began on August 1, 1518. In June 1520 the plague broke out in Neustadt which, over the course of the next two years, caused the loss of over 2,000 citizens resulting in the church expansion to halt. Lightning set fire to the top of the church tower on May 25, 1537. During the period 1538-1540 a new five-pointed Renaissance-dome was positioned atop the tower and with, completion of the new nave, the final building phase of St. John's Church was finished.

And the church, which was personally visited by the author, is said not to have changed since.

Many of our 17th and 18th century ancestors were baptized in this church. Due to space limitations cemetery plots were rented, not sold. The remains of the older burials were routinely dug up and placed, with reverence, in a Beinhaus (House for Bones). There is no trace of early ancestors in the present day church cemetery.



**St John the Baptist Lutheran Church – Interior  
Lucas Cranach Alter - 1513**



**St John the Baptist Lutheran Church - Exterior**