

Research Trip  
to  
Germany  
and  
Purfürst Research Area Maps

Author's Comment: The following summarizes my September 2001 research trip to Germany. It is provided here in hopes it may be of benefit to others who may be considering a similar venture. This article was previously published in the Spring 2002 edition of the (Minnesota Genealogical Society) *Germanic Genealogy Journal*.

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**Research in Saxony, Germany: My Search for the First Purfürst**

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A cousin once came to visit, bringing along one of those commercial genealogical books that professed to provide information on your family tree. It lacked detail but it did contain a listing of surnames obtained from various sources. That particular listing contained the names and addresses for 25 people with my surname, most of whom I did not know. So I wrote to all of them, inquiring about their ancestors.

Over two decades later I am still writing to people asking about their ancestors.

In 1985 I proudly announced to a family mailing list of 169 households that I had collected the names of over 450 family descendants. Later that same year 235 people attended our first family reunion. Little did I know that my mailing list would someday approach 500 and that my family tree would grow to over 33,000 people.

Eventually my interest turned to the foreign origin of my ancestors. I had no indication as to the place of birth for the family emigrant other than an early census record that referred to "Weimar". With that in hand, I made the obligatory trip to the LDS History Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. Utilizing the *Deutsches Geschlechterbücher* (German Lineage Books) I made note of the German cities in which my surname was mentioned. From those 183 volumes I simply chose the city most often repeated. With the help of an American subscriber to the RootsWeb Saxony Kingdom List who resided in Germany, a letter was sent to the Lutheran parish in Neustadt an der Orla, Germany. We hit it lucky on the first attempt. Within the two years that followed I would collect information from over two hundred baptism, marriage and birth records on 4 generations of family members. From this information I would determine that my Gx2 Grandparents and their five sons and two daughters had immigrated to America at various intervals between 1850-1860 and had taken up residence in the states of New Jersey, Minnesota and Indiana.

In the process of my research I began to encounter other families with like or surname variations. When I seemingly had identified all the American descendants of my own emigrant ancestor I began to investigate the variations. It was then I determined that the same Neustadt records revealed a 16th century relationship to a family member who eventually immigrated to Chicago in 1924 and adopted one surname variation. The Neustadt parish also had records for churches located in 3 other villages within its parish area of responsibility. One church, actually a chapel serving a nearby castle, identified four generations of ancestors for a Texas family whose ancestor immigrated in 1910 and also adopted another surname variation. From that point it was but a small step for me to believe that I could research all spelling variations. Thus was born my One-Name research and subsequent registration with that organization in London, England ([www.One-Name.org](http://www.One-Name.org)). My research had now spread across the world from Hawaii to such places as England, Netherlands and Italy.

Invariably each of these worldwide emigrants claimed a different German city as their home of origin thus this variety of Germany cities soon claimed my interest. For example the Neustadt parish records reflected two distinct family groups, with no identifiable direct family relationship, who had lived in different villages prior to moving to Neustadt in the 16th century. It was again no large step for me to believe that I could research the presence of my surname in all of these German cities and connect them all to one family tree. Soon I began to research all German cities where the surname had 17th century presence. That list quickly grew to 40 cities. But I now knew it was time to move my research operation directly onto German soil.

I had previously used the services of a German professional researcher, Karl-Heinz Steinbruch, for purposes of sending letters, on my behalf, to selected city parishes. When I indicated that I wanted to visit Germany he agreed to be my guide and translator. The first leg of my trip was via non-stop Lufthansa air service to Frankfurt, Germany from my home near Phoenix, Arizona USA. From there it was but a short one-hour interconnect flight to Hamburg where Karl met me on a Sunday morning. We then drove to his hometown of Schweirn. We spent the evening finalizing our plans after which Karl and his wife graciously put me up overnight in their apartment.

By virtue of prior discussions, Karl agreed to reserve and drive a rental car, the cost for which I would assume payment. The following Monday morning we picked up the car and we headed south. There is no speed limit on German major road systems and it does take a little time to get accustomed to being a passenger in an automobile traveling 100 miles an hour while someone passes you by! It wasn't until later that Karl told me he was born, and his mother still resided, in the vicinity of our destination. His familiarity with the area, therefore, certainly worked to our advantage due to the hectic schedule we maintained.

Our first stop was the *Deutsche Zentralstelle für Genealogie* (German Center For Genealogy) in the city of Leipzig. I felt that I just had to stop at this world-renown library, more accurately known as the *Sächsisches Statsarchive-Leipzig* (State Archive, Saxony). Contrary to opinions expressed by some in our genealogical community, the staff had no problem with a visitor being provided translation services by an accompanying individual. They cordially introduced us to their film system and open stack library and conducted a surname search of their closed stacks. I was disappointed, but not surprised, that they found little of interest. Of course they hold the infamous *Die Ahnenstammkartei des Deutschen Volkes* (Ancestor Lineage Card-File of the German People). Interestingly, they offer the microfilm version produced by LDS. In view of the film's very unique Soundex coding system it was at least comforting to know that I had read the film properly during a past visit to Salt Lake City because the Archive staff also failed to find my surname in their copy.

One word about researching in the State of Saxony: Karl was required to obtain a license to do so and to state that neither he nor I were members of the LDS church. Presentation of the license was requested at each church we ultimately visited. Saxony is obviously serious about not wanting their parish records copied. Prior to initiating this search I was always under the impression that I had a fairly rare surname. Upon the conclusion of the trip, with its significant success, I came to the conclusion that the absence of LDS filmed records only led me to think the surname was rare.

From Leipzig we continued on south. Our destination was the southern most areas of the adjoining German states of Saxony and Thuringia near the point where they have a common boundary with the German state of Bavaria and the Czech Republic.

I once did a genealogy mailing to names arbitrarily selected from the German telephone directory. One of the few responses I received was from a Purfürst family who operated a Pension (bed & breakfast) in their home. The farm, located in the “town” of Finkenmuehle, had been in the family for over 150 years and was strategically located central to our research area. Thus a two bedroom, two-bath apartment, with fully stocked kitchen, would be our home for the next three weeks. My host was but three months younger than myself and I would later prove a relationship, although we had to go back to the 15th century to find that common ancestor! It was here that I learned the correct pronunciation of the family surname is “Pohr-first”.

As previously stated, over the course of the two years preceding my trip I had obtained a complete search of the Neustadt parish records. The 1748 marriage record for my Gx4 Grandfather Johann Purfürst stated that he had been born in the nearby village of Weira and that his father's name was Jobst Purfürst. Prior to my trip I had also obtained a search of Weira's church records (held at the parish in Neunhofen). Those records had identified Johann's mother Martha Leithiger and his siblings; however, the pastor indicated that the Weira records dated back only to 1700 and thus he was not able to identify Jobst's parents or where he came “from”. I had hit my “brick wall”.

My plan during this research trip, therefore, was to search every church record in the vicinity of Weira and expand the area of my search until I again picked up the trail. My overall research had three objectives:

1. Identify my ancestors.
2. Identify ancestors of the other families in my One-Name research.
3. Connect all families of all cities to one family tree.

There is one indispensable reference manual for searches of this manner and magnitude. It is the latest edition of *Die Evangelifchen Kirchenbücher Thüringens*. (The Lutheran Church Handbook). It has a complete list of all churches in Thuringia and the name, address and telephone number for the pastor of each parish. We later came to determine that the most important piece of information was the reference to the records available at each church as well as the date that record keeping began in that particular church. Registers for more than one church in a geographical area have been consolidated in the offices of one pastor thus it is not a matter of knowing where the church is but more so where the parish records are kept. This handbook is not for sale to the public. Its distribution is supposedly limited to applicable church officials. But Karl had copies for the state of Thuringia (and also for the state of Saxony whose content-format was not as user-friendly).

Each day we would be calling pastors, scheduling research visits some three or four days out in front of our current schedule. Contrary to the “separation of church and state” policy that we have in America, the German pastors have classes in the public school system, aside from having pastoral responsibilities for more than one church in more than one city. They, therefore, are not available on a short notice. Different regions of Germany take their vacations at different times of the summer and, because of this teaching responsibility, the pastors tend to take their holiday when the schools take theirs. In other words, determine the pastor's schedule before you develop your research schedule.

We had an early stroke of luck.

Through the mail I had previously made the acquaintance of an individual who handled, on behalf of the pastor, the search of records for the churches in Dittersdorf and Plothen, (whose records would later prove to be most critical). On our first day in the area we stopped in to visit and schedule an appointment. In the course of our conversation he asked if we were aware of the church handbooks and showed us a photocopy of a 1934 edition. When the contents of this very early edition were compared with our current version we discovered that the current version was in error: in 1934 the church at Weira reported it had records dating back to 1600, not just to 1700 as the pastor had told us. A telephone call to the Neunhofen pastor confirmed indeed he “had some old Weira books and maybe they were what we were looking for.” As we had already filled our calendar for the first week, an appointment was made for the following Monday.

Within 10 minutes of arriving at our Monday appointment in Neunhofen we found the record we were looking for in the Weira records: a 1716 marriage record for my Gx5 Grandparents Jobst and Martha Purfürst; a record that not only identified his father, Michael Purfürst, but stated Jobst was “from” the village of Kolba, 2 kilometers back to the northwest. A quick check of our Pastor Handbook told us that the records were maintained in the village of Oppurg. An appointment was made for Wednesday.

The custom in early days was for the marriage ceremony to take place in the church of the bride with a record also being made in the church registers of the groom. On Wednesday the Kolba church registers provided a record of the 1680 marriage for my Gx6 Grandparents, Michael Purfürst and Margaretha Horn, because she was from Kolba; however, the record stated that Michael was from Dittersdorf, a village 10 kilometers to the south. As luck would have it, Dittersdorf (records at the Plothen parish) was already on our appointment calendar for that very afternoon. The Dittersdorf records become a gold mine. They not only had record of Michael's marriage but also a record for the two generations preceding him. In a space of ten days I had taken the family back to my Gx8 Grandparents, Benidictus and Catherine Purfürst.

The parish record keeping system itself was put into effect after the Reformation, ca 1550, but some records could be lost as a result of the subsequent 30 Year War (1618-1648). Parish registers reflect the pastoral responsibilities thus the dates are apt to be records of baptisms (*Taufes*) and burials (*Beerdigung*), not dates of births and deaths. The registers initiated prior to 1700 reflected a consolidation of pastoral events in the sequence in which they occurred and require a very adept ability to read faded and elaborate Gothic script. In later centuries there were often a separate *Traubuch* (marriage book), *Taufbuch* (baptism register) and *Totenbuch* (book of the dead); some of which had surname indexes.

I do not profess to have a command of the German language but I was quite adept in recognizing my ancestral surname in written form. Our “team” approach, therefore, was for Karl to read the early records while I would search the later registers, inserting bookmarks at the pages where the surname

appeared. Karl handled all transcriptions, which he entered directly upon standard Family Data Sheets. He would first build the family by starting a new page each time he encountered a marriage. Attempts were then made to match baptism and death information to those parents. By the time Karl had finished reading and extracting data from the early books, I was generally finished with all the later records, allowing him to move quickly through them with his transcription. For space conservation, surnames in the registers would sometimes be arbitrarily divided between two lines of text; not with the use of a hyphen but rather with a comma or “equal” sign. Careful reading, therefore, was necessary at all times. For bookmarks I simply tore notebook paper in one-inch strips but heavier weight bookmarks available at bookstores and libraries back home would have been better suited to the task.

Many times, on one record, there were clues that would help with another record such as notations referring to “youngest son of ...” or “deceased father of...”, etc. Especially helpful would be the godparent notations as they often times identified the spouse of another family member. Many times a date of death had been made along side the individual's entry in the baptism register. Early death records often stated the individual's age at the time of death, in terms of years, months and days which, of course, allowed for the calculation of birth events, sometimes far into the preceding century before initiation of the baptism registers. The same would be true with marriage records, with the assumption that the male had “come-of-age” at about 25 years old. It would have been convenient if I had in my possession a program loaded into a Palm unit, which would have instantly calculated the date of birth from the age at death. The early registers made extensive use of Roman numerals to separate the calendar years. To convert these was second nature to Karl but I required a quick re-education.

Parish records (and subsequent Archive records) had a wealth of information regarding family occupations and ancestral relationships. The *German-English Genealogical Dictionary*, Ernest Thode, 1992, Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, Maryland, was a very helpful tool because the contents were deliberately chosen for their connection to genealogy.

I would estimate that a typical parish register contained 75 years of activity. Typically there were 10 books per church and generally a parish location had books for more than one church. It was our experience that the records, on the average, began about 1600. Our research time at any one location averaged three hours but more than one location took as long as seven hours. Some pastors would give us books one at a time; others turned us loose with the cabinet full and left the room. We attempted to schedule three or more parishes a day; beginning at 9:AM and sometime working until 9:PM in the evening. Over the course of our three-week research effort we examined records for 62 churches.

Although the Pastors all appeared to have copy machines, there was only one occasion in which I asked for a copy of an old document from a register. Considering the age of the books I did not believe it good policy to subject them to the strong lighting associated with copy machines. Most churches had no fee system; some had a very complicated system, especially in the state of Saxony. In the absence of a stated fee I always gave a donation along with a personal card. I had always prepared these contributions in envelopes prior to the visits for presentation to the pastor at the time of our departure. Most pastors were indifferent to our research although one was openly critical of “genealogists” and another extremely ungracious in being disturbed. None, however, refused access, although it was necessary to be flexible to their personal schedules. We were fortunate to even find Pastors who would accommodate us on Saturdays. On Sundays we played tourist by visiting areas museums.

During the day our lunch would generally consist of a sandwich, which allowed us to hurry on to our next appointment. Normally we did not sit down to our evening dinner until after 8:30 PM. Europe at this time was under threat of the mad-cow and hoof and mouth diseases thus I found the menus to be

very restricted and repetitive. Upon return to our apartment each evening we would take time to review the forms completed that day to ensure I understood everything that had been transcribed. Karl would also take that opportunity to provide me a written translation of any document we had brought back that day.

This translation service was particularly timely. Prior to my trip I had corresponded with the *Stadarchiv Leipzig* (City Archive, Leipzig). They had informed me that they had 18 instances of my ancestral surname in their files. In response to my request for copies of all files relating to those individuals I was astonished to receive 160 pages in return! Since I had brought the documents along with me, Karl extracted and translated all of the genealogy-related information. Although the documents pertained to 19th century family residents in Leipzig, the family members invariably provided information indicating they were born or married elsewhere thus immediately contributing to the current research effort.

My traveling reference file was a 3-ring binder that contained family information, organized by known church (city) location. I would generally rise a couple hours before breakfast each day, inserting into the notebook the forms collected the previous day and making note of any connection between cities or families. Generally the new forms would identify a new city or two, indicating where family members came “from”. Thus, during the course of the day, a new round of appointments would be made with the appropriate pastors. I had brought along my laptop computer with all my records on a CD. I was prepared for the European electrical voltage and outlets but I never removed the computer from the bag. Due to the nature of my research there was continual referral to my paper forms, the quantity of which continued to multiply as research progressed. Over the course of the three weeks we used the services of a copy shop four times to replenish my stock of blank forms. Aside from the fact it was disruptive to locate a copy shop, it would have been considerably less expensive to have simply brought with me a larger supply. For that matter be sure to bring all office supplies, as well a 3-ring binder with twice the capacity that you think you might need!

For those moments in the evening when, at last, it was time to relax I was glad I had brought a 3-band portable radio. There are many music radio broadcasts and it was simply enjoyable to hear my native language occasionally. In the smaller populated areas of Germany there will be no English newspapers thus bring your own reading material. Eventually you want to read something without a pedigree!! Although our apartment had satellite television, the CNN International television broadcast is designed for foreign consumption, not for the American traveler. The same is true for the Voice of America radio broadcasts. You will probably not have e-mail access as well; no cyber-cafes on my route. It is conceivable that you will spend your entire research trip completely void of any news from home. I remember wondering if the world, as I knew it, would still be there when I get back.

In the middle ages, populated areas fell into two categories: villages and cities. The large property owners essentially owned villages with all occupants working for the betterment of the owner. “Cities”, on the other hand, had their own administrations, laws and taxes. Today most “cities” have an archive thus in between visits to parishes we made appointments to search out archive documents. At the time you call to schedule an appointment, inform archive personal as to your surname, or topic, of interest. They will initiate a search on your behalf and have documents book-marked upon your arrival. Anticipate paying a fee at all archives.

Old land records, closed out around the 1880's, are available for viewing, if existing. During a visit to the *Stadarchiv Neustadt* (City Archive, Neustadt) I had hoped to find evidence of an ancestral residence in Neustadt but the only reference to the family concerned an unoccupied “Purfürst home” that was torn

down in 1932 to accommodate expansion of the local school. Male occupants of the city, when they became of age, were required to pay a one-time citizen tax, the payment of which would be recorded in the *Bürgerbuch* (Book of Citizens). I located a July 21, 1827 record for my G x 3 David Ernest Purfürst who received his citizenship “after paying a fee of 6 Talers, 10 Groschens, handshake and citizen oath”. The *Stadarchiv Plauen* (City Archive, Plauen) had a similar May 24, 1697 record for tanner Georg Purfürst, son of Christoph from Kauschwitz, who paid 9 Taler and 2 *Eimer* (buckets). Tax records are one of the few research sources that pre-date parish records. The *Staatsarchiv Weimar* (archive for the State of Thüringen, in Weimar) had a 1542-tax list for the city of Posneck indicating the residence of a wife “Die Püffersen”. One of their more informative documents was a study conducted in 1944 by Karl Keller. He had examined hundreds of *Handelbüch* (Trade book) and *Lehnbüch* (heritable [fief] land records), dating back to 1553, from dozens of cities, and simply extracted the presence of surnames. This document steered me to other cities that had presence of my surname.

The church calendar is comprised of a series of religious celebrations known as Feast Days. Some events are fixed, in that the date for that event occurs on the same date each year. Other events are moveable and can vary by as much as 35 days, depending upon the year. Occurrences of movable Feast Days are keyed to Easter, an event that corresponds to the first Sunday after the date of the first full moon that occurs on or after March 21. All countries did not use the same feast days. Many feast days are known by different names. The Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582 to replace the Julian calendar; however the adoption did not take place at the same time in all countries or even in all states or provinces within a state. Because of these characteristics it is necessary to refer to a published Feast Day Calendar index if you wish to convert a Feast Day to a calendar date.

In the second week of our research we traveled to the city of Plauen, our first foray into a city well east of our research area up to that time. The parish in Plauen informed us that all of their pre-1800 records had been transcribed onto index cards and were available at the *Plauen City Archives*. It was in Plauen that we encountered our first set of records that incorporated, on the marriage register, the Feast Day names for the Proclamation Sundays and day of Copulation in lieu of an actual marriage date. Fortunately we were at the Archives, which had a copy of the Feast Day Calendar for our use. A good book to add to your personal library, therefore, would be *The Comprehensive Genealogical Feast Day Calendar*, Inger Bukke, Peer Kristensen and Finn Thomsen, 1983, Thomsen's Genealogical Center, Bountiful, Utah.

I previously described my research area as the southern areas of the states of Thuringia and Saxony. Those states, as we now know them, did not come into existence until 1918. In fact before 1871 the land we know as Germany did not even exist as a unified country. In the Middle Ages these political areas had a far different appearance. The then state of Thuringia was comprised of many independent principalities, cities and villages that were ruled by dukes who reported to Rome. 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.

In the process of our research I was initially working through church locations in a north-to-south direction from our starting point in Neustadt. When I began to examine the collected parish information in context with each other I found that Dittersdorf was the ancestral source for the tight group of churches in that area. When we moved eastward to Plauen and reviewed their first two hundred and fifty

years of records it became apparent that the city was the ancestral source for an entirely new group of descendant cities.

While visiting the Plauen City Archives I examined a 1757 map of Vogtland. Clearly the meandering western boundary indicated that all of the cities in which the Plauen descendants lived were located in the Reuss Principality of Plauen while the Dittersdorf descendants lived in the Reuss Principality of Gera. Christoph Purfürst (born circa 1560) was found as the earliest generation in the Plauen records. About the turn of the century a son Benedictus Purfürst (born circa 1584) would move to Dittersdorf and become the senior ancestor for that group while his brother Christoph Purfürst (born circa 1580) would become the senior ancestor in the Plauen group.

Despite the fact that subsequent generation of descendants in both groups moved from village to village, for next 250 years it would appear that these family groups and their descendants honored their respective sides of the Reuss boundaries. I completed my trip wondering what family heritage or local decree dictated such a division of lands. I can only speculate that our earliest ancestors were designated to reside, or granted properties within, specific Principalities. I had already noted in parish records, in both descendant groupings, where ancestors had held the position as mayor in a number of villages.

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 (in the state of Bavaria) near the Czechoslovakian (Bohemian) border. Upon conclusion of this research trip I found major presence of the family less than 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, the surname spelling often began with a “B”. In 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. That fact leads me to believe there is probably some connection with a ruling family back there somewhere in time but the absence of records prior to 1500 will prevent me from ever confirming that as fact.

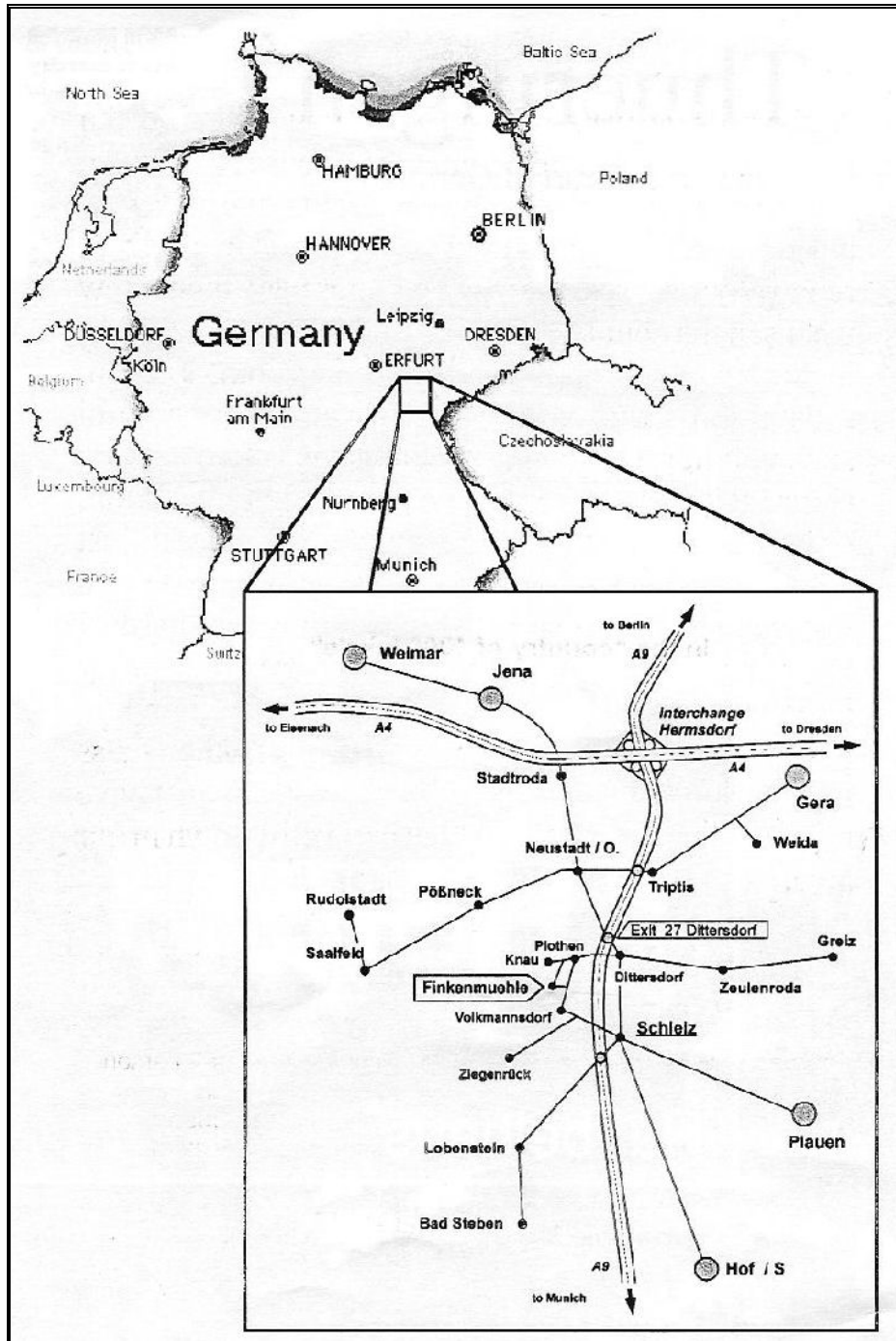
In conclusion, within three weeks I had accomplished all three of my original goals. In those three weeks we examined records for 62 churches, initiated 535 Family Data Sheets and made entries pertaining to over 2430 individuals. I determined that descendants from the Dittersdorf family group would be the ancestral source for Purfürst emigrants to Indiana, Minnesota, New Jersey, Texas, Hawaii, Illinois, Canada and one of two families who resided in London, England. Descendants from the Plauen family group would be the ancestral source for Purfürst emigrants to New Jersey, Wisconsin, The Netherlands and Sweden.

That left me with the yet unidentified German origin for the Purfürst family that resided in London in the 17th century but later moved to Brooklyn, New York. The lack of UK alien and immigration records has thus far hampered that effort.

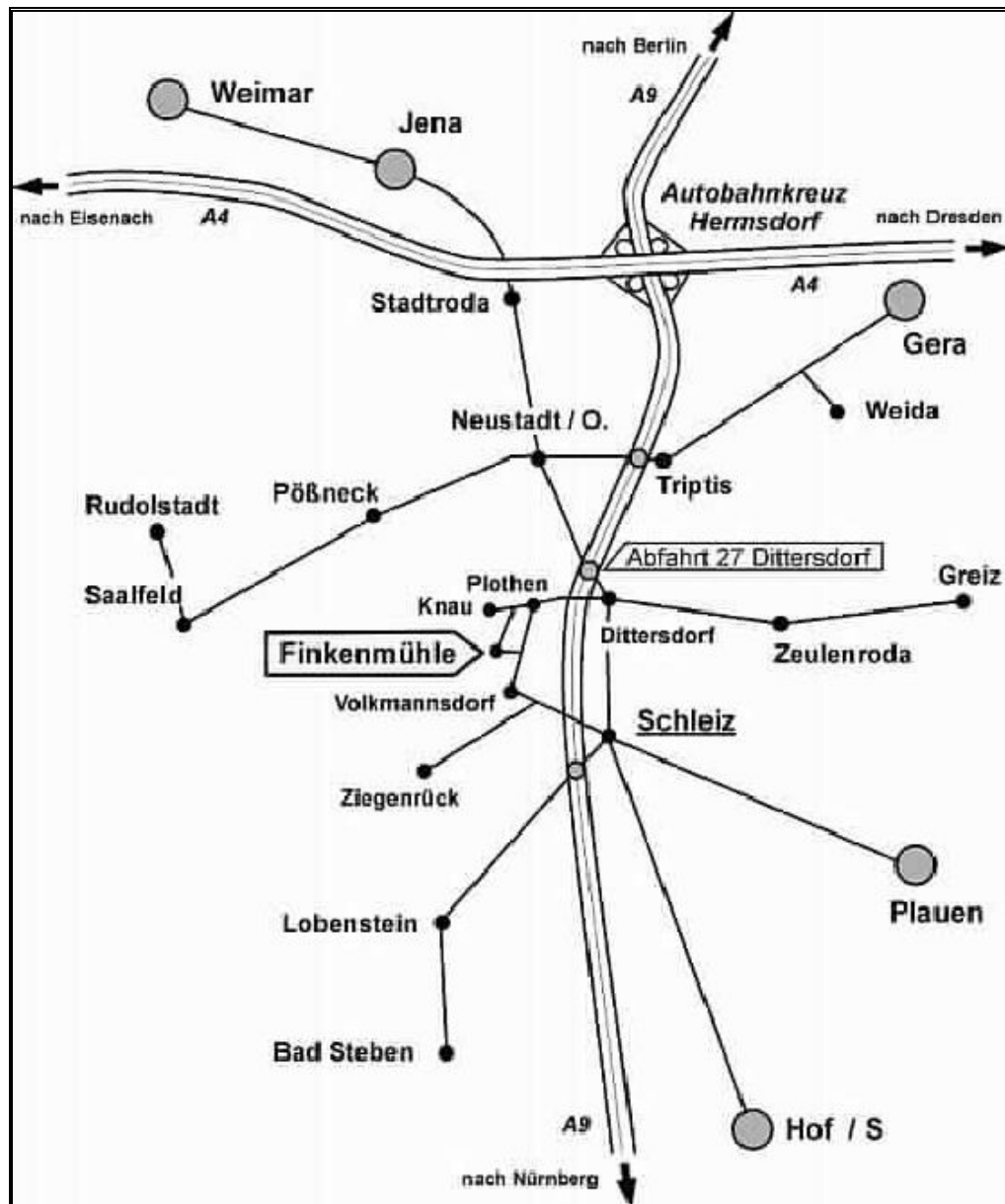
A few words about my escort, Karl-Heinz Steinbruch: Upon graduation from the Pottstown Technical School for Archives he worked at the Mecklenburg State Archives in his current hometown of Schwerin. Karl was a later graduate from the Humboldt University in Berlin with a Master of Arts in Archives and History. After the re-unification of Germany he chose to be self-employed. He is married with three children. His wife Gitta works in the Mecklenburg State archives. Her position there was helpful on more than one occasion when we were in need of an historical fact or telephone number. It was a joy to observe Karl at work. Assuredly he has mastered translation of the old writings. But it was like a picture of myself to see him exclaim with excitement each time he would discover a record he knew I was in search of. If you wish to use his services he can be contacted at < Mecklenburgica.Steinbruch@t-online.de >. I could not have successfully accomplished a research effort of this magnitude without him.



Germany – Present Day



Research Area, Thüringen, Germany - 2001



Purfürst Surname Research Area - 2001