

The First Germans in America

By Gary Carl Grassl

Revised edition with tour guide.
Eighty-one illustrations; most in full color.

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Grassl received the Bundesverdienstkreuz (*Federal Cross of Merit*) from the hands of German Ambassador Klaus Scharioth for his contribution to German-American history.

The first edition of *The First Germans in America* was presented to participants in a banquet for Ambassador Scharioth; this was held in Colonial Williamsburg, VA, in 2008 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Germans at Jamestown, Virginia. These copies were distributed under the auspices of the German Embassy.

The revised edition incorporates additional illustrations plus a guide to German artifacts and sites at Historic Jamestowne. These include the National Park Service Visitors Center, James Fort on Jamestown Island, the Achaearium of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities and the German Glasshouse. This book focuses mainly on the Germans at Jamestown—the first permanent English settlement in this country. They begin with Dr. Fleischer, who landed in 1607 with the first English settlers. However, the author reaches even further back in time. He raises such questions as, Was a German here with Leif Ericson in 1000? Were Pining and Pothorst here before Columbus?

In authenticating who was German Grassl relies on more than a German-sounding name, as some have done. All assertions are validated in more than 15 pages of endnotes. Where the author differs with some American historians on the identity and loyalty of a few Jamestown settlers, he presents both sides in detail. However, this is not only a bit of meticulously researched history but also a story full of adventure and intrigue.

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“The First Germans in America is a myth breaker. Because we speak English, we tend to assume that the English established and developed America. False, of course. Even as the Anglo-Saxon language came from Germany to England (Anglo-land) in 500 A.D., so German craftsmen and specialists came to the English colonies; for example, to Jamestown, Virginia, from 1607 on. Likewise, as the German map maker Martin Waldseemüller charted and named this continent, German settlers contributed to its development. In this book we find the truth.”

—Prof. LaVern J. Rippley, Ph. D., member of the board of The Society for German-American Studies.

Germans Were Present at the Creation of Our Nation

Students learn virtually nothing about the first German explorers and settlers of our country. If we want our young people to learn about early German contributions to our nation, a good introduction is the book *The First Germans in America*. It raises a host of questions:

Did the skippers Pining and Pothorst from Hildesheim really beat Christopher Columbus to America by 20 years?

Did Master Daniel the Saxon find silver for Queen Elizabeth I in North America in 1583?

Who were the German technologists who ran the first scientific tests in English America in 1585-86?

Our young people may have learned in school the thrilling story of “the Lost Colony.” It disappeared mysteriously in 1587 from Roanoke Island, NC. Did they also learn that Germans took part in the English settlement that preceded “the Lost Colony?”

The first physician in British America was born where in Germany?

The first German Lutheran was here how many years before the highly lauded Pilgrim Fathers set foot in Massachusetts?

How did Hessians make the first “industrial” product in English America?

Copper was gold for the Virginia Indians. The Jamestown settlers kept alive during the first crucial years by trading copper for food. Who made this copper?

In *The First Germans in America* we learn about Samuel, Adam and Franz and how they lived in the same village as Indian Princess Pocahontas. Here they helped build a European-style house for her father, Paramount Chief Powhatan. Did these Germans try to destroy the Jamestown settlement on behalf of the Spaniards, as Captain John Smith claimed? Or were they used as scapegoats by the captain to cover his own shortcomings?

About a million items unearthed by archaeologists at Jamestown have been catalogued. Less than 1 percent of these objects bear words. Most are in what language?

Who was the first white man to discover the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley?

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INTRODUCTION

Germany was a leading maritime power when trade was concentrated in the Baltic and North Sea. With the discovery of the New World, the focus shifted to the North Atlantic. Unlike Great Britain, Spain, Portugal and France, Germany was unfavorably situated in respect to North American colonies. If individual Germans wanted to participate in the discoveries and settlements, they would have to do so under the flags of the North Atlantic states. Despite these handicaps, a number of adventurous Germans took part in the discoveries and settlements by Great Britain and other nations. In the early years, these were mainly mineral specialists. Germany led the world in mining and metallurgy until it was devastated by the Thirty Years War beginning in 1618....

The United States is a nation of nations; it has received input from countries around the world like none before. Despite these many influences, two predominate:

First: We inherited the organizational genius of the English. Our democratic system, our political processes and our ability to compromise are gifts of the English. Not that we have made carbon copies of the British political and judicial systems. But the spirit is English.

Second: The ability to make things efficiently and well comes more from the Germans than anyone else. Our craftsmanship, farming techniques and industrial know-how are derived primarily

from Germans. We see this at work already at the first English colonies in this country. German craftsmen and specialists working under English political direction arrived with the first English explorers and settlers. Most were directly recruited by the English. This is their story.

EXCERPTS

Minus illustrations

German Mineral Experts Accompany English Explorers

MINERAL EXPERTS from Germany played an important role in helping to establish or modernize the English mineral and metals industry under Queen Elizabeth I. Several hailed from Saxony's Erzgebirge / Ore Mountains, which held rich deposits of silver and copper and a correspondingly highly developed mining and smelting industry. In 1577, Jonas Schütz, an assayer from Annaberg, Erzgebirge, and Gregor Bona, another German assayer, accompanied Sir Martin Frobisher, the seeker after the Northwest Passage to China. He mined ores off Baffin Island, which, however, proved to be worthless when brought back to England.

The mineral specialist Master Daniel the Saxon, also from the Erzgebirge, accompanied Sir Humphrey Gilbert to Newfoundland when he tried to establish the first English colony in the New World. When Gilbert set out in 1583 to "inhabit and possess Western Islands," according to his patent, the discovery of precious metals was high on their agenda....

German Mineral Experts at the First English Settlement

QUEEN ELIZABETH I formally established the German-run Society of the Mines Royal in 1564; this was the first company to produce copper in England. Daniel Höchstetter Jr. of Augsburg, Joachim Gans of Prague, Hans Wautter, Nicholas Swabber and other members of this Society took part in the first English settlement in what is today the United States. It was established in 1585 under Sir Walter Raleigh on Roanoke Island; this was in an area the settlers called Virginia and we know today as North Carolina....

A German Physician Arrives at Jamestown With the First English Settlers

JOHANNES FLEISCHER the Younger was the first physician and the first trained botanist in English America. Holding the degree of Doctor of Medicine from a major university, Fleischer was one of the most educated persons at Jamestown during the century it was the capital of Virginia. Although the Virginia Colony could boast of an unusual number of educated men, he was the only one to hold an actual doctor's degree of any kind. All but one of the 104 First Settlers who landed in May 1607 hailed from the British Isles. Johannes Fleischer was the only Continental European among the founding settlers of Jamestown, "the birthplace of the United States."...

After having been at sea for 5 months cramped into a tiny ship, Dr. Fleischer finally reached his much sought after field of activity. The first German to land at the first successful English settlement arrived 13½ years before the highly lauded Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts. However, the conditions he now faced were anything but conducive to his search for healing plants. Their camp was on a swampy island / peninsula of the James River, a location that proved unhealthy. Housing consisted of tents and holes in the ground. The natives attacked and killed settlers. They hurriedly erected a primitive palisade of logs....

By July 14, 1608, Fleischer had been at Jamestown for 14 months. Having outlived the majority of colonists, he was now one of the veterans....

By July, “all the hitherto healthy new arrivals from the *Phoenix* were now sick, and so were many who had been there longer.” [17] Men like Fleischer “must have felt the sting of failure as the reality of Virginia sank in and yet could never know that eventually all American political, judicial, and largely cultural identity springs from their own first efforts in Virginia.” [18] ...

With so much sickness, the medical services of Fleischer were, no doubt, in great demand. When Smith finally returned, “Many of the settlers were reported dead, and others sick, and supplies housed in the store had been spoiled by rain.” [19] Dr. Fleischer must have desperately tried to save the dying men. When his anguish had reached unbearable depths, he became sick himself. What would be his fate?...

Two Hessian Glassmakers Make the First “Industrial” Product in English America

GERMAN GLASSMAKERS also arrived in Jamestown about October 1, 1608, on the *Mary and Margaret*.... John Smith noted that on this ship came “eight Dutch men and Poles” to make glass, milles, pitch and tar, potashes and soap ashes. [30] These products were to be shipped back to London to be sold by the stock company that financed the settlement....

Smith complained that most of the settlers were unaccustomed to hard labor: They “never did know what a day's work was, except the Dutchmen and Poles, and some dozen other.” [32] The Germans and the Poles...went right to work producing commodities, including clapboard and wainscot, plus “a trial of glass” to be sent back with Newport's ship around December 1, 1608. [33]...

Immediately on landing at Jamestown around October 1, 1608, the master or *Meister* and his journeyman or *Geselle* experimented with glass smelting inside James Fort.... Their first task was to determine if the sand along the James River or Sandy Bay could be turned into glass... After successfully melting this sand, they sent samples of their work back to England with Captain Newport, who left around December 1. What they sent were not glass objects as such but simply glass ingots to show that the sand could be made to run.

After their successful trials within the Fort, the German glassmakers built a glasshouse early in 1609, no doubt with the help of other settlers. They located it on the mainland just beyond the isthmus that connected Jamestown Island with the mainland. This land is known today as Glasshouse Point. Like James Fort, the glasshouse faced the James River, which provided a ready supply of sand. It was situated “in the woods near a mile from James Town.” [45] Its isolation from the Fort left it vulnerable to Indian attacks, but there was no other choice. The Island did not grow enough trees to feed the ravenous furnaces, while the mainland forests could provide plenty of fuel to sustain the glass-making operation. The abundance of firewood in Virginia and its scarcity at home had persuaded the English to establish a glasshouse in their colony in the first place.

The glasshouse or *Glashütte* measured about 37 by 50 feet. It contained four ovens made of river boulders cemented with clay: A fritting oven for preheating the glass ingredients, the main or smelting furnace for melting the glass and for keeping it at a working temperature, and an annealing oven for slowly cooling the finished pieces. There was also a kiln to fire melting pots. [46]

It must be noted that the glassmakers of 1608-10 were more than that term implies today. The modern glassblowers at the Exhibition Glasshouse had their glass ovens ready made for them by people we would call engineers. However, the 17th century glassblowers had to build their own ovens before they could produce any glass. These men were not only glass blowers but, in a sense, also engineers. They built their own factory, small as it may have been....

The settlers faced “the now open hostility of the Indians. The heavy use of force and armed persuasion in dealing with them was bound to have its effect.” [51] The winter of 1609-10 has entered history as the “Starving Time” when a total of 155 settlers perished at Jamestown. This time of starvation was “a result of disease, sickness, Indian arrows, and malnutrition. It destroyed morale and reduced the men to scavengers stalking the forest, fields, and woods for anything that might be used as food.” [52]

The glassmakers were in an especially vulnerable position about 1 mile from the protection of the Fort. They had sent a “trial of glasse” to England prior to the onset of winter. However, glass making ceased during this terrible time of starvation and sickness. The colony’s secretary William Strachey described the glasshouse in 1610 as “a goodly house...with all offices and furnaces thereto belonging.” [53] However, he said nothing about glassmakers or glassmaking....

Three German Wainscot Sawyers Help Build a European-Style House for Chief Powhatan

THREE GERMAN wainscot cutters were among the eight foreigners who arrived about October 1, 1608, on the *Mary and Margaret*. Wainscot or *Wandtäfelung* made from oak was used by English gentlemen to panel the rooms of their residences. Since Germany’s Black Forest was England’s main source of wainscot, the three Germans—Samuel, Adam, and Francis / Franz—may have come from the

Schwarzwald. [56] The planks for the paneling were cut by the Germans and other settlers and shipped back to England in Newport's ship, which left about December 1, 1608....

The story of the Jamestown Colony's first years is one of incredible hardships, failures, dissension and premature death. It seems now almost a miracle that the settlement survived. The pioneer Germans were caught up in the same dire straits as their English companions, and they shared a similar fate. The Jamestown colonists were perennially short of food. Instead of first becoming self supportive, the immigrants were forced to spend time and energy searching for gold or producing products that might turn a profit for the home Company. These Londoners believed that the settlers could easily obtain food through trade with the Indians. This proved illusory.

The English did indeed trade copper, glass beads and casting counters for Indian corn. These reckoning pennies or *Rechenpfennige* found by archaeologists by the hundreds at Jamestown were made in Nürnberg, Germany. [58] Most of the copper, which was the natives' gold, came from the German-run and staffed Society of the Mines Royal headquartered in England's Lake District; it was the first producer of copper in England. [59]

The region of North America where the English had settled was ruled by Paramount Chief Powhatan.... After some initial trading, Chief Powhatan refused to release any more corn, because he was short himself. This was a time of an unusually severe draught. When Captain Smith insisted on more maize, Powhatan made impossible demands for guns and swords but also for an English-style house. Smith figured that he could accommodate the latter, especially since he lacked sufficient food to sustain the labor of his workers. "The President [Smith]... sent three Dutchmen and two English carpenters, having so small allowance [victuals], few were able to do anything to purpose: knowing there needed no better a Castle to effect this project..." [61] In other words, Smith wanted to use the substantial house they would build as his blockhouse for trapping and killing Powhatan, explained Conway Whittle Sams. [62] This plot was, however, in direct defiance of the orders of the parent Company to treat the natives kindly.

Samuel, Adam, and Franz were the "Dutchmen" Smith sent to Powhatan's headquarters of Werowocomoco early in December 1608....

Here the carpenters and the German wainscot sawyers began to construct a European-style house for the paramount chief. Smith had assigned Samuel the dual task of spying on Powhatan so that the captain could get the chief in his grasp. Meanwhile, on December 29, 1608, Smith himself set out for Werowocomoco with 46 armed men in three vessels. He, however, had to travel in a roundabout way down the James River (Powhatan flu) and then up the York (Pammunk flu)....

Capt. Smith arrived at Powhatan's village on January 12, 1609. After giving him food, the chief told Smith to leave his territory. Then Powhatan "secretly ran away," and the captain was unable to capture and kill him. Later Smith claimed that the Germans had revealed his plans to Powhatan. They were currying favors with the Indians, he claimed, because they didn't expect the English to survive both famine and the attack the Indians were preparing. Smith had "to come back to Jamestown and confess that despite all he said he was going to do to Powhatan, Powhatan still lived," noted Sams. "Of

course Smith claimed that his failure to kill Powhatan was not his fault. We all love to blame some one else for our failures; and so Smith blames the Dutchmen for his failure. They had told Powhatan his plans; and the trap which he was laying, in the house they were to build for Powhatan, did not work.” [67] Nevertheless, Smith left the German wood workers with Powhatan to complete his house.

Smith left for James Fort by the same roundabout route he had come. Meanwhile, Powhatan apparently realized that Samuel, Adam, and Franz were somehow distinct from the rest of the settlers; perhaps he concluded that they belonged to a separate tribe. Powhatan took advantage of this knowledge.

The chief forced Adam and Franz, “two stout Dutch-men,” to walk the 13 miles overland to James Fort before Smith could get back there with his ships. Powhatan ordered the two Germans to ask for another set of tools and weapons under the pretext that theirs were needed by Smith. “Samuel their other consort Powhatan kept for their pledge.” [68] In other words, Samuel, who was probably their master, was kept as hostage. The Germans could expect the Indians to slowly torture him to death in their accustomed way, if they didn’t comply. An Englishman captured by the Powhatans was treated as follows:

Under torture, later described to the colonists by his Powhatan captors, shells and sharp reeds were used to cut off the joints of his extremities, which were thrown, one by one, into a fire against which he was literally baking, and then the flesh was peeled off his head and face before he was disemboweled. It’s said that his dried remains were kept as a trophy for some time. [69]

What were Adam and Franz to do? If they told the truth, would the leaders at Jamestown hand over the embargoed tools and weapons? Not very likely! The survival of Samuel would not be uppermost in their minds. But the two could not abandon their master to such a painful death....

Westward From Jamestown:

A German Discovers the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Valley of Virginia

COMMON LORE had it that “the Sea of China and the Indies” were only a few days’ journey west of Jamestown. For example, George Sandys, resident treasurer of the Colony, believed that the “South Sea” was only a 4-day journey beyond the Falls of the James River. This notion was based on an ancient Spanish map that showed a coastal strip, a narrow range of mountains beginning at the Falls and the ocean at their feet. Extensive exploration of the territory west of the coastal settlements was first undertaken by Johannes Lederer. He was born near Hamburg in 1644 and studied medicine at the Hamburg Gymnasium. He arrived in Jamestown in 1669 at the age of 25 when Sir William Berkeley, Royal Governor of Virginia, commissioned him to explore the lands to the west....

Lederer concluded, “They are certainly in great error, who imagine that the Continent of North America is but eight or ten days journey over from the Atlantick to the Indian Ocean....”

Lederer moved to Maryland in 1671. His observations were translated from Latin to English by Sir William Talbot, the Secretary of the Maryland Province. In 1672, they were published in London

along with a map of his explorations. [111] In the same year he returned to Germany.

“John Lederer’s writings are an important source for the early history and mapping of [Virginia’s] Southwest.... He was an astute observer of Indian customs and beliefs. His book was the first scientific report on the western portion of Virginia....” Regarding the Indians he wrote that their “songs comprise the mysteries of their religion and the great deeds of their ancestors.”