

**Differentiating
Sommer Surnames
Arrival in Philadelphia from Germany
Pre-Revolution**

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Introduction

The research of every surname requires some context, which is what family history is all about. For several years, we have been researching the Sommer family as it pertains to our 5th great-grandfather, Ernst Menge, and his wife, our 5th great-grandmother, Maria Magdalena Summers. Research of this line has been difficult, mostly because the Menge name morphed into Mann in later generations, so it took awhile to realize the German surname of Menge.

One source which was discovered in 2011 has been instrumental in understanding the origin of Ernst Menge's family, and their life in Philadelphia after his arrival in 1754 aboard the ship Edinburgh. That source is:

18th century records of the German Lutheran Church of Philadelphia (St. Michael's and Zion)

authors: Hess, Robert L.

Wright, F. Edward (Frederick Edward), 1934-

German Lutheran Church (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

format: Books/Monographs

language: English

publication: Lewes, Delaware : Colonial Roots, 2004-2006

physical: 5 volumes

After studying these and other records, here is a summary of the key points which are relevant to the topic of the Sommer surname:

- Ernst Menge came to Philadelphia in 1754 from Sodel, Hessen, Germany with two of his brothers and possibly one or more sisters.
- Ernst Menge married first Catharina Klockner, who died in 1766. Ernst married second, Maria Magdalena Summers, the daughter of Johann Georg and Anna Barbara Sommer. Both marriages occurred in Philadelphia.
- Catharina Menge, a niece of Ernst Menge, married Johann Peter Sommer in Philadelphia in 1769. Peter and Catharina had three children and were divorced by the time of Peter's death in 1783.

The effort of sorting out the Sommer/Summers families has been no small challenge. Since both Maria Magdalena Summers and Peter Sommer were tied to the Menge family, the assumption has been that the two Sommer/Summers families must be connected. But after discovering new evidence recently, we are now reasonably certain that the two Sommer/Summers families are not immediately related. The following discussion will explain how they are differentiated.

Johann Georg Sommer from Freistett

The only clue we had about the origin of this Sommer family came from the death record of Maria Magdalena Summers' father, Johann Georg Summers who died in Oxford Twp, New Jersey in 1785. Georg Summers was long involved with the St. James Lutheran Church in New Jersey, also called The Straw Church. Here is the information found in his obituary:

1785, Aug. 8. John George Summer, born at Freystadt in Elsas, April 23, 1721. He was a member of our parish, forty-two years married, eleven children raised, he was eleven years with cataracts until he became blind, died Aug. 6th, lived 64 years, 3 months and 15 days.¹

Up to this point, the only Freystadt we could locate is in the middle of Germany (Bavaria) and nowhere near Alsace Lorraine, which is the place believed to be the reference to Elsas. Then we tried studying a map of the Alsace region, and the only German town we could locate near Alsace that might be a consideration is called Freiburg. But after talking to the German experts at FHL who are German-born, they explained that Freiburg could not be our town because it has always been Catholic and we didn't think it likely that our Sommer relation converted since he seemed heavily involved with the Lutheran church in America.

Finally, another FHL German expert remembered a small village just across the river from Strasbourg called Freistett, which is just northeast and most definitely Lutheran. The official location information they gave me for Freistett is that it is located in the parish Rheinbischofsheim in the state of Baden. This village was never part of Alsace, but we feel certain that the reference to Elsas in Georg Sommer's death record was meant to indicate proximity. Sadly there were no town genealogies to be found at the FHL, but there were church records.² Very quickly, we located a record for Johann Georg Sommer, born in Feb. 1722 to Matthias Sommer, an innkeeper, and his wife Anna Barbara. From there, we were able to find seven children born to Matthias and Barbara as well as the couple's marriage date. There is also a death record for Matthias Sommer on 9 Nov 1732 at 42 years, with the note that he ran the Hirssig Inn.

A careful study of the Freistett church records has lead us to the conclusion that Johann Georg Sommer, as well as his younger brothers, Johannes Sommer and Johann Martin Sommer, came to America from Freistett after their father Matthias's death, which occurred in 1732. The support for this reasoning is in the timing of the church records on both sides of the Atlantic:

- Freistett church records show that both Georg and Johannes married and had children before 1752, but there is no subsequent record of them in Freistett after 1752.
- A number of Philadelphia church records pertaining to Georg, Johannes, and Martin, start in 1753.

1 This translation from the German Church records was provided in Feb. 2014 by the Historical Committee at the St. James "Straw" Lutheran Church in Philipsburg, NJ.

2 Evangelische Kirche Freistett, *Kirchenbuch, 1621-1962*, Karlsruhe : Evangelische Landeskirche Baden, [197-]; Family History Library microfilms 1189673-1189679

In addition, there was one other Philadelphia church record that mentioned the town of Freystadt, and it was this:

21 Feb 1792, Johann Sommer from Freystadt in Germany; 1 child survives. Age 68 yrs.

The age given in this particular record matches exactly for Georg's younger brother, Johannes, who was born in Freistett in 1724 according to church records there. Once in America, John Sommer settled in Moreland, PA, and at the time of his death, had one surviving son named Jacob.

Hermann Sommer from Hoch-Weisel

Studying the Philadelphia church records also gave many clues about this line of Sommer:

- The death record of Herman Sommer said that he immigrated in 1754 with five sons.
- The death record of Herman Sommer says he was born in “Hohinreisel? in Hessen-Darmstadt” (the spelling and question mark comes from the published transcription of the church records).
- The death record of another son, Peter Sommer who married Catharina Menge, said that Peter was born in “Hochweissen.” The birth places of Peter and Herman seem quite similar.
- The marriage record of Philip Sommer to Salome Reibel specifically lists Philip as "son of Herman."
- The will of Peter Sommers explicitly lists his brothers as Philip, Martin, and Henry.

Using information found in the Philadelphia Church records, we once again approached the wise German experts at the FHL to inquire about the town mentioned in these records. They thought the town of origin being referred to was likely Hoch-Weisel in Hesse Darmstadt. It so happens that the FHL does carry the town genealogy for Hoch-Wiesel,³ and lo and behold, there is Hermann Sommer listed with six sons: Philip, Johannes, Martin, Heinrich, Mattaus, and Peter, all with birth dates that match what we know of the Summers who came to America. The Hoch-Weisel record shows that the son Johannes remained in Germany, and we've found no German church records telling what became of Hermann or his other five sons.

Based on combined information of the Hoch-Weisel Familienbuch and the Philadelphia Church records, we conclude that Hermann Sommer was the father of five sons who came to America, which is contrary to many other genealogies and histories that point to Hans George Summers as the progenitor of this line.

³ Gerd Becker, *Familienbuch Hoch-Weisel : mit Hausen Oes, Espa bis 1821, Weiperfelden bis 1825, Juden in Hoch Weisel, Butzbach*, Germany, 2010; family group 1126.

The Question of Arrival

In consulting two sources,⁴ here are the possible arrivals we have considered for our ancestor, George Summers, 1722-1785:

- Hans Georg Somer arrived on the ship St. Andrew in 1738. This arrival has been attributed to another Hans Georg Sommer who would later migrate to Virginia in 1766 (see remarks in the Conclusion section).
- Hans Georg Sommer arrived on the ship Brothers in September, 1752, along with others of Sommer surname who match the names of Georg's brothers.⁵
- J. Georg Sommer arrived on the Ship Windsor from Rotterdam, last from Cowes, and was qualified on 27 Sep 1753. This arrival is too late for a child born to our relation in August, 1753.

Given the combined evidence from Freistett and Philadelphia church records, we conclude that our ancestor, George Summers, arrived with his brothers in 1752.

As for Hermann Sommer, we found only one record of an arrival. He was listed on the ship Edinburgh that arrived 30 Sep 1754, which just happens to be the same ship carrying our Ernst Menge. The name of Philip Sommer also appears as having arrived on this same ship, though he was listed as one of sick. It's our theory that the other four brothers (Martin, Henry, Matthias, and Peter) arrived on the same ship at the same time, but they were all under 16 years old, and thus not named on the passenger list. (This premise is supported by the ages of the boys from the Hoch-Weisel Familienbuch.)

4 William Henry Egle, *Names of Foreigners who Took the Oath of Allegiance to the Province and State of Pennsylvania, 1727-1775*, originally published as Pennsylvania Archives, Vol XVII, Second Series, Harrisburg, 1890.

Daniel I. Rupp, *A collection of upwards of thirty thousand names of German, Swiss, Dutch, French and other immigrants in Pennsylvania from 1727 to 1776*, Philadelphia, 1898.

5 The appearance of the name of Joh. Martin Sommer on the list of passengers who arrived on the ship Brothers in Sept. 1752 varies – his name appears on one list, but not another. The reason for this would require more research, but might remain unknown.

Conclusion

The identification of the home village of each the two Sommer lines is, in our mind, the distinguishing factor between the two families. Our 6th great-grandfather, Johann Georg Sommer, came from the Alsace region - a distinction that he must have carried with him his entire life for it to be mentioned in his obituary. His daughter, Maria Magdalena, married our 5th great-grandfather, Ernst Menge. Meanwhile, Catharina Menge, the niece of Ernst Menge, married and divorced a Revolutionary Patriot, namely Peter Sommer, who hailed from Hoch-Weisel and arrived in America with his father Hermann and four other brothers. There is no evidence whatever that Maria and Peter were immediately related - only that they both married into the Menge family.

Furthermore, it's easy to see how historical lines have gotten blurred when considering these early genealogical sources:

- *Biographical annals of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania : containing genealogical records of representative families, including many of early settlers and biographical sketches of prominent citizens* by Ellwood Roberts. New York & Chicago: Lewis Pub. Co., 1904, p. 534.
- *History of Bucks county, Pennsylvania, from the discovery of the Delaware to the present time* by Davis, Ely, Jordan, 2nd edition, Vol. 3 Illustrated., Lewis Publishing, NY & Chicago, 1905, pp. 490-492.
- *A history of George Summers of Douglass and Lower Dublin townships, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania* by G. Byron Summers, privately published, 1918, 34 pages.
- *Montgomery County Pennsylvania, A History* by Clifton Hunsicker, Lewis Publishing, NY & Chicago, 1926, p. 684-690.

All of these undocumented sources name Hans George Summers as the progenitor who came to America from the Palatinate with five or more sons, namely John, Martin, George, Peter, and later Philip and Henry. We think it's possible, if not probable, that there has been some mixing up between the various family lines of those with the surname Sommer. In an effort to do away with the seemingly ongoing confusion, here is our summary understanding, at least as it stands today:

- ***Hermann Sommer (1699-1767)***, father of Peter Sommer who married Catharina Menge, arrived in Philadelphia in 1754. He was from Hoch-Weisel, Hesse-Darmstadt, Germany, and he came over to America with five of his six sons, namely Philip, Martin, Matthias, Henry, and Peter.
- ***Hans George Sommer (1713-1787)*** who married Maria Mentz(?) in Germany, emigrated with his wife and one son John possibly as early as 1738, and later migrated to Virginia in 1766 is not a relation of ours (that we know of). One thing that distinguishes this Hans George from ours is age, as this Hans George is older by 9 years.
- ***Johann Georg Sommer (1722-1785)***, our 6th great-grandfather, was from Freistett, Baden, Germany, and he arrived in Philadelphia in 1752. He likely arrived with his younger brothers, Johannes Sommer and Johann Martin Sommer. His daughter, Maria Magdalena Summers, was the second wife of our 5th great-grandfather, Ernst Menge.

We have uploaded the Sommer family trees for both the Freistett and Hoch-Weisel lines to Rootsweb. If you have any comments or questions, please contact us at genealojist@gmail.com.