

Menge Family Comes to America

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We now know with some degree of certainty that Earnest Man who died in Oxford township, New Jersey in 1813 was a German immigrant who was probably born with the full name Johann Ernst Menge. There are some recent discoveries which suggest who his parents were, but it will probably be awhile before I can find enough corroborating documentation to publish my finding. For that, stay tuned.

But for the life of this Earnest Man in America, the pieces are starting to come together. This essay will attempt to give some narration to all the facts that are being added to this family tree.

Ernst Menge arrived in Philadelphia in 1754 with his brother Johann. Whether they already knew other German immigrants, either family or friends, is still not certain, but the possibility does exist. Ernst and Johann had another brother Henrich in Philadelphia, and his arrival date is not known but it is thought to be in the same general time period. As for sisters, Ernst might have had one or two in Philadelphia at the same time, but I don't know enough about them yet to confirm.

In 1759, exactly 5 years after arrival, both brothers Ernst and Johann married widows. Johann married Euphronica (Veronica) Kress Reinhard, and she may have had at least four young children when she married Johann. Ernst married Catharina Klockner Ernst and she had perhaps as many young children when she remarried (we know she gave birth to at least 9 Ernst children, but at least half of them died very young).

One has to wonder why a young man would marry a widow with several young children not his own. After attending classes at my local genealogical society, I can tell you the answer is simply this: acquisition of property. Both widows married very quickly after the deaths of their husbands because, as I understand it, women were not allowed to own property out-right. And young German men would be looking for the quickest way to acquire property and start moving up the ladder of a better life (one that may have been freer of German inheritance patterns where only the first-born son would inherit the family property). Especially in those times, it was all about acquiring property.

I'm not sure (yet) what Johann Menge inherited because not much is known about Christian Reinhard who was the first husband of Euphronica. Some day soon I will probably start digging for probate and land records, but until then I don't know what property interests Johann might have inherited.

Our Ernst Menge, on the other hand, probably inherited a tavern since we know that George Ernst had been a tavern keeper in Northern Liberties. However, I'm not entirely clear what our Ernst Menge's occupation really was. In one tax list, he is listed as a stocking weaver, which appears to have been the life-long occupation of his brother Henry. However, when Ernst applied for a tavern license in New Jersey he claimed to have experience running a "house of

entertainment" in Philadelphia. Was that the tavern he inherited from his new wife? Or did he give the tavern to his brother, Johann, who clearly did operate an inn in Northern Liberties for the rest of his life. (It's curious to note that Johann was always referred to as an "innholder" and I suspect there might be some differentiation between "innholder" and "tavernkeeper".) Well, in any case, taverns were in some fashion a part of Ernst Menge's life in colonial Philadelphia.

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Now fast forward 10 years: 1766. That was a tough year for our Ernst Menge, I think. In January, his wife Catharina gave birth to a daughter, and then a few weeks later his wife died. So I try to imagine poor Ernst. He didn't just have a baby who was a few weeks old. He had at least one other and possibly more children from Catharina. AND he was a step-father to any/all ERNST children who had come along with Catharina from her first marriage. Ernst Menge had to remarry quickly, and he did. Before the year was over, he married Maria Magdalena Sommers. He and Maria (Mary) would go on to have 7-9 children more, but I can only imagine that in those first days/months/years, Maria had her hands full taking care of the children Ernst already had. I am not sure why Maria would marry a widower in such a position. Perhaps her father, George Sommers, felt that Ernst was a good investment. Or perhaps the Menge and Sommers families already knew each other. There is some evidence that might be true, but the connections so far are not as clear as I wish they were.

Nevertheless, here appears my 5th great grandmother in the story, Maria Magdalena Sommers. There is still so much to know about her, a woman who took on essentially three families in one consisting of Ernst step-children, Menge step-children, and her own children. And it seems to me that Earnest did truly care for her. His will refers to her several times as his "dear wife". I wish we knew when she died and where both she and Earnest are buried.

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Fast forward the next 10 years: 1776.

I am still researching this time period so this section will likely see updates. But here is what I know.

1. This is the year that Earnest applied for a tavern license in Oxford, New Jersey, a few short months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.
2. Later the same year, George Washington would cross the Delaware River and defeat the Hessian troops in Trenton. It should be noted here that there is some evidence that the Menge family originated from Hesse, Germany.
3. Recently found DAR documentation has shown that Earnest was considered a Patriot for a) serving on juries in sedition trials for those thought to be possible British sympathizers and b) providing supplies to Washington's army.
4. DAR documentation also reveals that Earnest's father-in-law, George Summers, was an Ensign in the Continental Army serving in New Jersey under the commands of Capt. Mackey and Col. West.
5. It appears that Ernst's brother Johann never left Northern Liberties. He operated an inn there until he died in 1790. This would mean that he still was living there when the British occupied Philadelphia in 1777 causing the American congress to have to relocate. Most patriotic citizens of Philadelphia left if they could; why didn't he? Or maybe he did and we just don't know it; maybe he left to stay with his brother Ernst and then came back after the British left?

All of these facts lead one to wonder why Earnest left Philadelphia and why Johann stayed. Earnest's wife's father went off to fight in the Revolution, so maybe Earnest was being asked to mind the family in New Jersey while George was away. From Oxford, Earnest seemingly did

what he could as a civilian to support the war effort. So maybe Earnest was responding to the needs of his New Jersey family, but maybe he also realized that staying in Philadelphia would not be safe for his own family.

And what about Johann Menge? I don't think we can assume that he was also a Patriot. He did live to see the end of the war, the adoption of the American Constitution, and the election of George Washington as the first president. How much I wish I knew what was going through Johann's mind and heart toward the end of his life and beginning of a new nation.

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To be continued.