

**Correcting
the Genealogy of
William Summers of
Conshohocken, PA**

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Disclosure

I am a genealogist and a descendant of Freistett Sommer families, which may or many not color the results of my research.

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Introduction

There were three Sommer families who arrived in Philadelphia from Germany around the same time:

- Hans George Sommer (1713-1787) married Maria Margaretha in Germany, and purportedly arrived in Philadelphia in 1738. This family attended the New Hanover Lutheran Church in Montgomery County, where several more of their children were born. In 1766, this George Sommer received a land grant in Shenandoah County, VA and he moved there. His will was written and probated there in 1787.¹
- Three brothers from Freistett, Baden, Germany (and potentially other relations), arrived on 22 Sep. 1752 on the ship Brothers. Their names were Georg, and Johannes, both already married and with small children, and Martin Sommer, who would later marry in Philadelphia.
- A father and five sons from Hoch-Weisel, Hessen, Germany, arrived on 30 Sep. 1754 on the ship Edinburgh. The father, a widower, was named Hermann Sommer, and the oldest son, Philip, was listed on the passenger list as having been sick. The other four sons, Martin, Henrich, Matthaus, and Peter, were all under 16 at the time of arrival, so their names were not included with those taking the oath of allegiance upon arrival.

Both of the two latter families attended St. Michael's and Zion Lutheran church in Philadelphia in the early years after arrival. The records from that church have been instrumental in determining that the two families were distinct and came from different regions of Germany.

I am related to the Freistett family, and slowly we have been in the process of determining what became of the descendants of each of the three brothers, George, John, and Martin. George moved to Sussex, New Jersey around 1775, but his oldest child, George Jr. who was also born in Germany, married in Pennsylvania and after serving in the Revolution, settled in Warrington, Bucks, PA where he wrote his will, and subsequently died in 1825. George Summers Jr., along with his wife and son, were buried at the Upper Dublin Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Now comes the trigger for this article:

[A History of Upper Dublin Evangelical Lutheran Church](#) by Rev. Marion Gilbert Richard, 1903.

From page 24:

“A memorial brass tablet to the Summers family, whose remains are buried here, was presented by a relative, Mr. William Summers, of Conshohocken, Pa, and placed in the Sunday school room.”

How curious is this? The memorial brass tablet is one thing, but who was William Summers of Conshohocken who presented this memorial around 1900? Up to this point in my research, I have no such person in my Freistett Sommer family tree.

¹ Melody Summers Hull, Sommer/Summers Genealogy, http://www.hullhome.com/summers_gen.htm, accessed 21 Oct 2015.

William Summers, 1833-1921, was, among several other things, an avid genealogist, and a member and later librarian for the Historical Society of Montgomery County. He personally erected a new gravestone for his ancestor Philip Summers at the St. John's Lutheran Churchyard. His account of his family history appears in several local histories, listed here in order of date of publication:

- *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.

But we need to be especially careful with ancestral information that appeared in county histories. Here is a good explanation as to why:

.....pertaining to county histories published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

"Virtually all these histories were commercial products, which were marketed by subscription. The history of the county was faithfully recounted, sometimes back to the Ice Age, followed by or interspersed with biographical sketches of "representative citizens." These local worthies had all subscribed to the history, and, keyed to the extent of their contribution, would find themselves enshrined in the form of biographical sketches and lithographic or (later) photographic portraits. Although a biographical sketch's assertions concerning distant ancestry may arouse legitimate skepticism, statements about birth, marriage, etc. for the subjects themselves, as well as such statements concerning their children and parents, have a much better chance of being proved right."²

So, starting with the first publication, *Biographical Annals of Montgomery County*, where we do indeed find a lithograph and signature of William Summers, we can assume that William subscribed to Lewis Publishing and gave them his family history account to publish. That same publishing company reproduced the information in 1905 and again in 1926. And certainly the same account was used as a basis for the private publication of G. Byron Summers in 1918.

2 David Thackery, "County Atlases", Ancestry magazine, Nov-Dec 1994, p. 20.

Given this preamble, the conflict to be resolved here is this:

- The published genealogy of William Summers claims his progenitor as Hans George Summers, and one of Hans George's sons, George Summers, as a relative who was buried at Upper Dublin Lutheran Church.
- I contend that the progenitor of the Sommer family of William Summers was Hermann Sommer of Hoch-Weisel, Germany who arrived in 1754. Hans George Sommer and his son George Jr., both from Freistett, Germany, were, neither one, related to the Hoch-Weisel family nor to William Summers.

Working Back

The death certificate for this William Summers says that his parents were Samuel Summers (1808-1881) and Elizabeth Whitby. It's easy enough to spot Samuel in the census' of Norristown: 1830-40-60-70-80. And if we follow the details in William's published genealogy, his grandfather was Martin Summers, 1764-1845. Sure enough, there is a will for Martin Summers of Norristown which names one of his children as Samuel. And because this Martin was still alive in William's lifetime, it's even likely that William had his own memories of his grandfather, if indeed, that grandfather was this Martin Summers.

This would be the only juncture where I can see a connection to the Freistett family might be possible. Martin Sommer of Freistett who arrived in 1752 had a son named Martin, 1770-1811. Because we know almost nothing of this line, and because there were several young males in the 1810 household of this Martin Sommer, it's possible this Martin had a son named Samuel born in 1808 who we have known nothing about before now. Indeed, there was another Samuel Summers in 1830 East Southwark and 1840 Northern Liberties who might have been the right age to have been William's father.

But I don't think so. This William Summers certainly would have known where his father grew up, and as mentioned might also have had memories of his grandfather. And after studying the rest of William's genealogy, his information looks to me generally correct until he gets to the progenitor, which is exactly the source of conflict being addressed in this article.

Reviewing Evidence

The following table shows the major points of conflict and the associated evidence for each.

a) One Side of Conflict	Evidence	b) Opposing Side of Conflict	Evidence
Hans Georg Sommer arrived in 1752 with sons Johannes, Martin, George, and Peter.	Evidence of arrival, but none that establishes relationship. ^{3 4} No evidence that Peter arrived in 1752.	Hans Georg Sommer arrived in 1752 with two of his brothers, Johannes and Martin, from Freistett, Germany.	Combined evidence of names, relationship as brothers, and place of origin. ^{5 6 7}
Johannes, Martin, George, Peter, Philip, Henry, & Marg. Els. were children of Hans George and Elizabeth Summers.	No corroborating evidence located.	Philip, Martin, Henry & Peter were sons of Hermann and Elisabeth Sommer of Hoch-Wiesel.	Corroborating direct evidence. ^{8 9}
George Summers who died in 1825 and was buried in Upper Dublin was a son of George and Elizabeth Summers.	No corroborating evidence located.	George Summers who died in 1825 and was buried in Upper Dublin was a son of George Summers of Sussex, NJ (previously of Philadelpha and Freistett before that).	Corroborating direct evidence. ^{10 11}

3 *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, p. 353; listed arriving 22 Sep 1752 on ship Brothers were these names: Hans George Sommer, Johannes Sommer, Hans Martin Sommer.

4 Daniel I. Rupp, *A Collection of upwards of Thirty-thousand Names of German, Swiss, Dutch, French, and other Immigrants in Pennsylvania From 1727-76*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: Leary, Stuart & Co., 1898, p. 274; listed arriving 22 Sep 1752 were these names: Hans George Sommer, Johannes Sommer (for whatever reason, Martin is missing from this transcription of the original records).

5 Evangelische Kirche Freistett, *Kirchenbuch, 1621-1962*, Karlsruhe : Evangelische Landeskirche Baden, [197-]; citing FHL film 1189673, items 8-10. Johann Joerg, born 1722, Johannes, born 1724, and Johann Martin, born 1729, all sons of Matthias and Anna Barbara Sommer.

6 St. James "Straw" Lutheran Church, Phillipsburg, NJ, *Burials*. The obituary for John George Summer in 1785 said that he was born in "Freystadt in Elsas".

7 Robert L. Hess and F. Edward Wright, *18th Century Church Records Records of the German Lutheran Church of Philadelphia (St. Michaels and Zion)*, Volumes 1-5 (1745-1800), Lewes, DE, 2008, vol 5, p. 1304. Burial record 1792 of Johannes Sommer said he was of "Freystadt in Germany". Johannes (John) was a brother of George.

8 Gerd Becker, *Familienbuch Hoch-Weisel : mit Hausen Oes, Espa bis 1821, Weiperfelden bis 1825, Juden in Hoch-Weisel*, Butzbach, Germany, 2010; family group 1126 shows Hermann as father of Philip, Johannes (did not emigrate) Martin, Henrich, Matthaus, and Peter.

9 Robert L. Hess and F. Edward Wright, *18th Century Church Records Records of the German Lutheran Church of Philadelphia (St. Michaels and Zion)*, Volumes 1-5 (1745-1800), Lewes, DE, 2008, p. 907. Marriage record 1764 Philip Sommer to Salome named Philip as son of Hermann.

10 Evangelische Kirche Freistett, *Kirchenbuch, 1621-1962*, Karlsruhe : Evangelische Landeskirche Baden, [197-]; citing FHL film 1189673, items 8-10. Johann Joerg Sommer, son of Hans Joerg and Anna Barbara Sommer, born 22 Apr 1747.

11 New Jersey Surrogate's Court (Sussex County), *Record of wills, 1753-1900; 1S - 5948S*; Salt Lake City, Utah : Genealogical Society of Utah, 1968, citing FHL film 565476, accessed 2011, FHL; packet 399S; George Summers of Oxford, Sussex, NJ named his eldest son, George.

Conclusion

The evidence supports the following conclusions:

Fact 1: William Summers was a descendant of the Hoch-Weisel Sommer family, and he was apparently unaware that Hermann Sommer was the progenitor of this Sommer line to America.

Fact 2: George Summers buried at Upper Dublin Lutheran Church belonged to the Freistett Sommer family, and was not related to William Summers.

Because of the mistaken identification of his family's progenitor, all the beginning claims in William Summers genealogy could rightly be ignored. However, those ancestry claims made by William Summers starting with Philip Sommer, can probably be corroborated for modern-day descendants of Philip. Additionally, beginning references in the William Summers genealogy to Martin and Peter (also sons of Hermann) are seemingly correct, but references to George and John (NOT sons of Hermann) are incorrect.

Finally, I want to pay due respects to William Summers. His efforts toward recording his family history were not only sincere, but completely conscientious. On the face of it, it seems hard to understand how knowledge of the progenitor of the Hoch-Weisel Sommer family got lost so quickly. But the intervening years between Hermann's death (1767) and William's birth (1833) were comprised of the American Revolution and the War of 1812 as highlights, not to mention things like the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia which killed as many as 5000 people. Life was chaotic at best. Added to that, I have the inkling that William didn't know about or have access to the St. Michael and Zion church records. That church is never mentioned in his narratives, and both churches were sold and the congregations were moving between 1868 and 1900 when William was probably compiling his family history. Who knows where the church records were during the transition time, but I have to think if William had seen those records, he might well have come to the conclusion that I have.

And as a side note, Peter Sommer of the Hoch-Weisel family married into my Mann family (aka Catherine Manchen), so I shall never be surprised when Hoch-Weisel-Sommer DNA does show up somewhere in my American family.

As for the memorial plaque that William Summers donated to the Upper Dublin Lutheran Church, it has yet to be located, but a search for it is in progress. In the mean time, here is what the plaque reportedly says:

To the memory of George Summers and his wife and John their son whose bodies lie beneath this tablet Died 1825-1829-1791 respectively George came from Germany in 1752, and was a drummer in the Revolutionary War 6th Penna Regt.

Curiously, all that memorial information is correct. William Summers simply did not realize there were two Sommer families both living in colonial Philadelphia, and that especially those with the name George were not his relations. But by the time William was publishing his family history, most of the Freistett Sommer family had migrated out of the area, and consequently there was nobody to set the record right. Until now.