

A German immigrant writes home

Letter from Christen Janzen to unnamed recipients, 30 April 1711. Transcribed and printed in Vincent H. Todd, ed., *Christoph von Graffenried's Account of the Founding of New Bern* (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/graffenried/menu.html>) (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 1920), pp. 317–320.

As you read...

THE PALATINE MIGRATION

Janzen mentions the Palatines, who were not Swiss but Germans from the region along the Rhine River. Thousands of Palatines migrated to British colonies in North America in the late 1600s and 1700s.

The Palatinate was part of the Holy Roman Empire that controlled most of central Europe, and it had been the site of the fiercest fighting in two major wars of the seventeenth century: the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–1697). Both wars pitted Europe's Protestant states and kingdoms against its Catholic ones. The Thirty Years' War, especially, devastated the German people. As much as a third of the population of the Holy Roman Empire died in battle or from hunger and disease, and part of the Protestant Palatinate came to be ruled by the Catholic Duke of Bavaria. In the 1690s, French armies again overran the Palatinate and burned dozens of German towns and villages to the ground.

Many Palatines emigrated to America during and after the War of the Grand Alliance, primarily to the new colony of Pennsylvania, where they became the ancestors of today's Pennsylvania Germans. Many more stayed behind, unable to afford passage to America or unwilling to work as indentured servants.

In 1709, a rumor arose that Queen Anne of Great Britain would give Palatines free passage and land in America, and as many as 30,000 people made their way to London. The rumors were false, and the Palatines were settled in refugee camps. The British government sent 3,000 Palatines to New York, and several hundred more were sent to the new Swiss settlement of New Bern, but more than half died during their voyage, and more died in the Tuscarora War a few years later. During the eighteenth century, more Palatines would migrate to North Carolina, making their way from Pennsylvania down the Great Wagon Road (page) into the backcountry.

ONE LETTER, MANY RECIPIENTS

Note that the letter is addressed not only to Janzen's parents but to his friends and neighbors in Germany. These general letters — which might remind you of the letters some people today include in their Christmas cards — were a common way for immigrants to let their friends and families back home know that they were well (or not well, as the case might be).

NOT QUITE AS ADVERTISED?

As you read, compare Janzen's letter to the advertisements written by Robert Horne (page) and John Lawson (page). What did Janzen see as the best and worst features of his new home? Did the colony live up to its advertising?

God greet you most beloved souls, father, mother, related friends, and neighbors, always with our thousandfold greetings and obedient service. I wish you at this time to learn of my health, and to know that I must make my writing as short as I can compose it. I hope that you have the letters that I wrote from Holland and England¹. The most essential contents are that we came the 10th of June to New Castle in England, but the 6th I became a very sad widower.

In New Castle we lay five weeks. The 17th of July went aboard the ship and lay eight days at anchor. After that we sailed, under the all-powerful protection of God, safely to land in Virginia. Also did not lose a person. A young son was born on the sea. His father's name is Benedict Kupferschmied. He worked a year for our dear brother, Christian Bürki. After that we went about a hundred hours by water and land, yet always guided and fed, and the people everywhere have done us much kindness and there is in this country no innkeeper. All go from one place to another for nothing and consider it an insult if one should wish to ask the price.

Brought here hale and hearty, the shoemaker Moritz did not die till he was on his farm. He was well on the whole journey. No one else of us Siebentaler² people has died, but of the others though, three Palatines. Of the people among whom we live, however, a good many have died.

Regarding the land in general. It is almost wholly forest, with indescribably beautiful cedar wood, poplars, oaks, beech, walnut and chestnut trees. But the walnuts are very hard and full of indentations and the chestnuts very small but good. There is sassafras also, and so many other fragrant trees that I cannot describe the hundredth part. Cedar is red like the most beautiful veined cherry and smells better than the finest juniper. They are, commonly, as well as the other trees, fifty to sixty feet below the limbs.

The land in general is almost everywhere black dirt and rich soil, and everyone can get as much as he will. There are five free years. After that one is to give for an acre, which is much greater than a Juchart³ with us, two pennies. Otherwise it is entirely free, one's own to use and to leave to his heirs as he wishes. But this place has been entirely uninhabited, for we have not seen any signs nor heard that anything else ever was here except the so-called wild and naked Indians. But they are not wild, for they come to us often and like to get clothes of us.⁴ This is done when they pay with wild meat and leather, bacon, beans, corn, which the women plant and the men hunt; and when they, as most frequently happens, guide the Christians through the forest and show new ways. They have huts of cedar bark. Some also can speak English well. They have an idol and hold festivals at certain times. But I am sorry to say, of the true God they do not want to know anything.

With regard to the rearing of cattle. It costs almost nothing for the raising, as the booklet printed at Frankfort⁵ says, for all stock pastures in the winter as well as in the

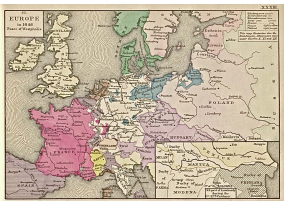


Figure 1. German-speaking people from both Switzerland and the Palatinate settled in New Bern. The Palatinate had been repeatedly overrun by French armies in the 1600s, and thousands of Palatines came to America in search of both religious freedom and economic opportunity.

summer. And I know of nothing to find fault with in the booklet mentioned regarding these two items, although it writes of South Carolina.

They butcher also no young animals, so one can conclude how quickly the number can increase. The cows give scarcely half so much as with you for the calves suck so long; until they are a year and a half old and in turn have young. We buy a cow with a calf for three pounds sterling or twelve thalers, a hog for one pound, with young or fat; a sheep also for as much. They have but few goats, but I have seen some. Squire Michel told me they wished to bring some here to us. Wild and unplanted tree-fruits are not to be found here so good as Kocherthal⁶ writes of South Carolina. I have seen no cherries yet. There are many grape-vines and many grapes on them, of which some are good to eat; and it can well be believed, if one had many together (they would do well). We are going to try to plant them for everything grows up very quickly and all fruit is of very good taste, but we do not enjoy them much yet.

We lie along a stream called Neuse. There six years ago the first (people), English, until two years ago (when) the Swiss people (came), began the cultivation. They are, as it seems to me, rather rich in cattle, all sorts of crops, the finest tree-fruit, and that, the whole year (except for) two months. From the nature of things we were behind in that regard, so that we do not have it yet; but we hope, through God's blessings to get it. We came shortly before Christmas and we have by God's blessing, Zioria, my son-in-law Peter Reutiger, and I, and others besides, much stronger houses than the English; have also cleared land in addition, and the most have put fences around.

It is to be hoped that now from the ground and the cattle we will get enough, through the grace of God who has always stretched out his hand helpfully and has brought us safely and unhindered through so many enemies, spiritual and worldly, and over the great sea. But one thing lies heavy on us which I cannot write without weeping, namely the lack of a true and zealous pastor. For we have indeed cause to complain with Asaph⁷, our sign we see no more, no prophet preaches to us any more, no teacher teaches us any more. We have, indeed, prayers in our houses every Sunday, but the zeal to cleanse away the canker of our old sins is so small that it is to be feared it will consume everything to the foundation, if the pitying God does not come to our help.

If it had pleased the good God to send some of our brethren and sisters or at least Christian Bürki as an instrument, as a physician of body and soul, I should have had good hopes that the light among us would not become an evil smelling lamp, for I do not believe there is a person here, either English, German, or French who would not have loved him heartily; I believe that his profession is especially good here and that he could have an estate according to his wish without doing work in the fields. For of good liquor and such medicine there is the greatest lack in this country, therefore I have a friendly request to make of you, dear brother; namely, as follows. I have married Christina Christeler, a widow of Sannen. I am her third husband. By the first she has four children. Two died in London. Her husband and one child upon the sea. But the eldest, a boy of thirteen, named Benedict Plösch, is at Mörigen in the baliwick Nidauw⁸, staying with his deceased father's clientage⁹. And he was alive four years ago. Her father was named Peter Christeler. Christen Walcker, who, with his wife died here in this country and left eight children, said to her that she has a rather large inheritance from her late father, left with her brother Moritz Christeler, for he has received a hundred pounds of it. When you go to Sannen to

ask about it, I hope Heinrich Perret will be able to help you; for they have been nearest neighbors. And if it is as Walcker says you can take it into your hands.

Because my wife understands brewing so well and has done it for years, and the drink is very scarce here and neither money nor brewing pots are to be obtained here, otherwise I would not think of such a thing for you to do. But the pot must have two pipes but no worm¹⁰; and if some reliable people should not be coming, would Mr. Ritter still be so good as to get it to me here; also four pounds worth of spice, such as ginger, pepper, saffron, nutmegs, galangale, cloves, each according to the proportion of the money? For here there is nothing but laurel¹¹. I have seen it on trees in the forest. But if there should be nothing to be got from the inheritance, I would most kindly beg you and my father, if he is still alive, to still help me somewhat from my own, for it is very important to me and especially to the women folks, who are very scarce here.

If only more people should wish to come, I advise that they take women with them if they want to have any, for here some of the very best men find no wives, because they are not here.

The journey is easily to be made if one can supply himself properly with old cheese, dried meat, and dried fruit, vinegar, wine, beer, and casks, butter, biscuits, in fine whatever is good to eat and feasible to transport, also a pan or kettle that is narrow at the top and broad below; for when the sea is violent the ship lies over on one side so that things are spilt. Yet I have never heard that a ship has sunk upon the high sea.

Whoever could provide himself with the things named above and should make an agreement with the ship captain that he give him liberty to cook and a good place to lie the voyage would not be hard. For we had young and old people, all are hale and hearty. Whatever one brings here in the way of wares is worth at least as much again. Linen cloth and glass would be especially needed, and is to be purchased very well in Holland.

Peter Röhrtiger and my two daughters greet you, for we live beside each other. Dichtli is still with me, and I am delivering the greeting of us all to our dear and faithful pastor, to the whole number of honored persons, especially Godfather Kilchmeyer Dreuthart, and Andreas Aescher, Christen Jantz.

I would have much to write. I must break off. Have patience with my bad writing, for whoever sees my hand and labor will believe that I have not written and studied much. Greet for us Christien Bürki and I should be glad if he could hear the contents of this letter.

I remain your well affectioned servant, and my parents' obedient son until death.

Greet for us Anna Drus, item Speismann's people, and your sister and relatives, also my father's sister, and first of all the school-master.

On the web

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including Germany, North Carolina, Palatines, colonial, colonization, farming, immigration, and livestock.

Notes

1. Immigrants from Switzerland and western Germany traveled up the Rhine River to the port of Rotterdam, in Holland. From Rotterdam, some traveled directly to America, while others went first to England.
2. The Siebentaler (or Siebentäler, or Siebentälerstadt) is a region of the Black Forest in southwestern Germany, just south of the Palatinate. It would seem that Janzen came from this region.
3. A unit of area, traditionally used in Germany and Switzerland, equal to 3600 square meters (about 0.89 acres).
4. You can see here that the Indians of North Carolina's coastal plain were already changing their culture and practices through contact with Europeans. Not only were they wearing European clothes, but Janzen says that they sometimes paid for clothes with bacon — presumably from pigs, which did not exist in America until Europeans arrived.
5. Books and pamphlets were printed not only in England but in Germany to advertise Britain's North American colonies to potential settlers. Pennsylvania was the most aggressive in advertising itself to Germans.
6. Joshua Kocherthal, a Lutheran pastor from Germany, published a pamphlet in 1706 encouraging Germans to settle in South Carolina.
7. Asaph was the author of several of the Psalms, and Janzen may be referring to him or to the themes of his psalms, which included communal lamentation or sorrow. But Janzen may also be referring to another person of that name.
8. Mörigen is a city in the district of Nidau in the canton of Bern in Switzerland. A *bailiwick* was a legal district under the authority of a bailiff, a particular kind of appointed official.
9. *Clientage* here refers to people (clients) who were dependent on someone, in the way that feudal vassals were dependent on their lords. (See "Land and Work in Colonial Carolina.")
10. Janzen is describing a brewpot for brewing beer. The *worm* is something that turns or twists, either a clamp or a coil.
11. The laurel tree is the source of bay leaves.

Image credits

More information about these images and higher-resolution files are linked from the original web version of this document.

Figure 1 (page 2)

From Robert H. Lobberton, *An Historical Atlas Containing a Chronological Series of One Hundred and Four Maps, at Successive Periods, from the Dawn of History to the Present Day*, sixth edition, 1884. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.