

INTRODUCTION

Today the differentiation between those who simply call themselves Americans and those who claim a hyphenated identity has profound political implications and produces interesting nuances in American nationalism. People who describe themselves as Americans without reference to African, European, Asian, Hispanic, or other immigrant ancestry silently point to their families' longtime residence in this country.¹ Some of them, especially members of colonial heritage societies such as the Sons of Colonial Wars, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Mayflower Society, stake out a kind of guardianship over how American history should be taught and ultimately attempt to limit the definition of who gets to be American.

Expressly hyphenated Americans, on the other hand, define themselves in terms of their immigrant past, even if that experience is actually two or more generations removed. This does not prevent them, however, from also claiming participation in the nation's past. Almost every ethnic group in the country today proudly points to ethnic brethren who were important actors in American history. Many Americans of German descent, while sometimes reluctant to admit to their German ancestry, are no exception. They, too, will tell anyone who listens that the Revolutionary War was saved by Baron von Steuben, that American Christmas traditions came from Germany, and that Grace Kelly's mother was German.

But German Americans are also different from many other hyphenated Americans. Despite the fact that up to 28 percent of Americans have some German ancestry, many Americans of German descent are reluctant to acknowledge their German heritage and prefer to emphasize their non-German background. The two World Wars of the past century are probably responsible for this development. With the Second World War more than sixty years in the past, there are still, or perhaps again, German Americans in this country whose ethnic background shapes their identity and influences the way they lead their lives—their choice of friends and leisure activities, sometimes even their choice of a mate and how they raise their children. Members of the German Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter GSP) fall into this category of people for whom ancestry is important. Or simply put, for many members ethnicity matters.

The society had its origins in the eighteenth century, before the American Revolution, when the meanings of ethnicity, nationhood, citizenship and immigration were vastly different from those of today. The GSP has survived into the twenty-first century to become the oldest German ethnic organization in the Western hemisphere. This work attempts to tell the story of how the GSP endured, who its members and leaders

were, and how the past fits into the larger context of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and American history.

Chapter One explains how and why the GSP was founded in Pennsylvania, a colony with the most heterogeneous population in British North America. The stories of a few individuals whom the society assisted in their quest to succeed in the New World illustrate some of the hardships and challenges eighteenth-century German-speakers encountered. After a period of decline in the early nineteenth century as a result of decreasing German immigration to the U.S., the GSP expanded its immigrant aid efforts in the mid-nineteenth century. Its library, established in 1817, became an important factor in the society's emergence as a cultural broker.

Chapter Two illustrates the heterogeneity of late nineteenth-century Germans in Philadelphia and examines how the GSP and other German-American organizations met the challenges posed by the First World War and the accompanying anti-German hysteria. Although investigated by the government, threatened by some overzealous American patriots, and suffering reduced membership numbers, the society emerged from the war not as badly injured as some have suggested. In part, the society's survival might be attributed to the fact that the organization had the support of its Women's Auxiliary, which had been founded in 1900. Chapter Three discusses the role of women in the society and tells the story of the Women's Auxiliary's charitable work. Especially during the Great Depression, Auxiliary members took over much of the poor relief the society had traditionally engaged in. The surviving records tell the stories of forgotten people whose lives were often made a little easier because of the assistance they received from the Women's Auxiliary.

Chapter Four addresses the period from the 1930s through the 1960s and the political context in which the GSP pursued its activities. Largely forgotten Nazi literature tucked away in a third-floor closet of the GSP building tells the story of some society members and leaders who were Nazi sympathizers. Although the GSP officially opposed Hitler's regime by early 1938 and engaged in carefully staged American patriotism during the Second World War, the organization still came under government scrutiny and lost its tax exempt status in 1944. Only when the GSP combined its charitable contributions with those of the Women's Auxiliary did the society regain its tax-exempt status in 1948. By then, German war refugees were arriving in Philadelphia, constituting new members and clients for the society. Because these newly arrived immigrants had to cope with their own experiences of hardship, they were reluctant to address Germany's atrocities or to investigate the GSP's fascist sympathies during the early 1930s. This failure on the part of the society and its

members to engage in any sort of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* shaped the organization for years to come.

The impact of the Second World War and its aftermath for the GSP was as important as the changing landscape of Philadelphia—the topic of Chapter Five. The society’s Spring Garden location became a central problem as Philadelphia experienced profound economic and social change in the postwar decades. When Philadelphia began its long recovery in the 1970s, the society was stigmatized by being situated next to a federal housing project. Starting in the late 1980s under the leadership of a few dedicated academics, the society managed to gain the financial support of several foundations and generous individuals and was able to embark on an ambitious \$3 million library and building renovation project. Between 1995 and 2000, the library’s collection was partially restored, cataloged, and made internet accessible. Funding difficulties, however, compelled the GSP to severely limit the library’s operations in 2001, in effect closing it to readers and researchers. It is to be hoped that the reopening of the library in 2006 will help spur much-needed financial support for its operations.

Researching and writing the 240-year history of the German Society of Pennsylvania in ten months proved to be an enormous challenge. Oswald Seidensticker and Max Heinrici’s nearly 90-year-old history of the society was a great starting point and provided much useful biographical information about early GSP members.² Still, the following pages do not claim to come even close to telling the entire story. Much has been left out for a variety of reasons—space and time being the most pressing. Some areas, such as society members’ involvement in the American Revolution and the extent to which eighteenth-century members owned slaves, need further research. Many sources available at the GSP archive are also still untapped. Among the most intriguing ones are the extensive records of the society’s employment agency, its poor relief books, and the nineteenth-century membership records of other Philadelphia organizations. Jewish members and involvement in the society from the colonial period until today are briefly touched upon in Chapter Four but require further research and analysis. German-American organizations in the Delaware Valley and the country at large deserve more attention. A thorough comparative study of ethnic organizations in Philadelphia and perhaps the nation would also add to our understanding of how ethnicity functioned in the past and what role it plays today.

Although researching and writing are largely solitary endeavors, the completion of this project is the result of help from many people and institutions. First and foremost, I would like to thank the German Historical Institute for the opportunity to write this book. Dirk Schumann, David Lazar, and Patricia Casey Sutcliffe were patient editors and their expertise has improved this project tremendously. The California State University, Los Angeles, allowed me to take a year off from my teaching responsibilities in the Department of History. Members and leaders of the GSP welcomed me with open arms, and many took time to share their recollections of the society with me. The current administration also gave me the opportunity to present some of my findings to GSP members on two separate occasions. Andrew Gatti, an undergraduate student of history at Widener University, volunteered to track down newspaper articles and to look up hard-to-find facts. The community of scholars at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania served as a sounding board for my thoughts about the society's history.

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Notes

¹ For Native Americans, the politics of hyphenation are beyond the scope of this project.

² Oswald Seidensticker and Max Heinrici, *Geschichte der Deutschen Gesellschaft von Pennsylvanien: 1764–1917* (Philadelphia, PA: Neudruck von Graf & Breuninger, 1917).