

# **Pennsylvania Dutch Are Of German Heritage, Not Dutch**

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Purpose: To aide genealogists and researchers not familiar with the origins of the people known as the Pennsylvania Dutch.

## **PA DUTCH GERMAN PENNSYLVANIA DEUTSCH HERITAGE ROOTS NAMES**

From the Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, the phrase Pennsylvania Dutch is defined as follows: "The descendants of the original German settlers in Pennsylvania."

The people known as the Pennsylvania Dutch, often falsely depicted in travel advertisements by the tourist industry with images of a little Holland Dutch girl with wooden shoes, are not Dutch, but are of German and German speaking heritage, They are the descendants of the early german speaking settlers of the inland counties of Pennsylvania who arrived in Pennsylvania prior to the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Large scale immigration to Pennsylvania and the other rebelling colonies was for the most part stopped by the British just prior to the start of the Revolutionary War and was much restricted after that war ended by continuing British interference in the new country's trade and affairs until after the War of 1812. By far, most were German. But if not specifically German, they were more likely to be German speaking Swiss or German speaking refugee French Huguenots, rather than Holland Dutch. These early German speaking settlers of Pennsylvania formed a culturally unique people and are more correctly described as the Pennsylvania Germans.

Thus, because of modern commercial distortions of their true heritage, some beginning genealogists when starting to research the Pennsylvania Dutch assume the term refers to a group of people who were natives of Holland. The purpose of this article is to aide beginning Pennsylvania genealogy researchers by clarifying the true heritage of most of the people described as the Pennsylvania Dutch.

How did this misnomer come about? There are several theories:

**1.** In the 15th and 16th centuries, the English referred to all people of germanic heritage as Dutch or Dutchmen regardless of whether they came from the Netherlands or from lands now known as Germany. If differentiated, however, they were referred to by the English as the Low Dutch (Low German) for the Netherlanders and the High Dutch (High German) for the Germans and German speaking Swiss, referring to the elevation of their native lands. However, after the United Provinces (the Netherlands) became an independent state, and competition and even wars developed between England and the Netherlands, the English language terms for these two people began to diverge such that by the 17th century the Netherlanders were referred to as the Dutch and the people from areas now in Germany where referred to as Germans. Thus, some theorize that the phrase Pennsylvania Dutch is a linguistic carry over from the earlier, broader usage of the word Dutch.

**2.** The German word for German is "Deutsch". Thus, if a person described themselves as a Pennsylvania "Deutschman", he meant Pennsylvania German. Thus, recent generations of English speaking people in the United States, corrupted the pronunciation and spelling to Pennsylvania "Dutchman".

**3.** The Dutch predominantly settled in New Amsterdam (now New York). The Germans predominantly settled in southeastern Pennsylvania, in the inland counties of Northampton, Berks, Lancaster, Lehigh,

Montgomery, Bucks, and others. Some very early Palatine German refugees were settled in New York by the British. However, most of these eventually migrated overland to Pennsylvania where William Penn offered religious freedom and better treatment. The languages sound similar to the untrained ear. Because of similarities in the sound of the language, some people theorize that the Pennsylvania Germans were called Pennsylvania Dutch by the English to differentiate them geographically from the similar sounding New York Dutch.

**4.** Most of the German immigrants sailed to Pennsylvania from Dutch ports, such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam in Holland, after coming down the Rhine River from Germany. Thus, English speaking people may have confused them as being Dutch because the ship lists reported they embarked for the new world from Dutch ports. Thus, some people may have incorrectly thought these Palatine Germans and other German speaking people were Dutch.

**5.** Dutch Reformed congregations in New York and Holland provided financial and spiritual assistance to the early German Reformed congregations in Pennsylvania due to their shared spiritual beliefs. Dutch ministers, who were also fluent in German, preached to the early PA German settlers in order to insure the Reformed faith was nurtured and grew in the early settlements until such time as the German Reformed Church was solidly established. With the Dutch church heavily involved with the early settlers, this could have further confused the true heritage of these early German speaking settlers as viewed by the English speaking settlers.

Whatever the exact reason for the improper identification of their true heritage, it took root, even among the descendants of the Pennsylvania Germans themselves. This was aided by the decline of the use of the German language by these people. It also gained more acceptance during the two world wars with Germany, when many Pennsylvania Germans did not discourage the confusion of their true ancestry because of the large public backlash against people of German sympathy and nationality, which occurred in this country during the wars. Many of the more recent Germans who arrived in the USA from the modern country of Germany in the late 1800's and early 1900's were openly sympathetic to German causes in the time periods just prior to both WWI and WWII. So the PA Germans, who by the 1900's had very, very deep roots in Pennsylvania, politically and socially wanted to distance themselves from these newly arrived nationalistic Germans who strongly identified with the political issues and positions of the "fatherland". So the PA Germans did not mind being called PA Dutch in those times. The PA Dutch moniker differentiated them from the more nationalistic recent Germans immigrants and thus it somewhat protected the PA Germans from the backlash against the recent nationalistic German immigrants which occurred when the wars started.

Today the tourist industry promotes the Pennsylvania Dutch and Pennsylvania Dutch Country as a tourist attraction because of the quaintness of the people, their architecture, their culture, and their crafts. The various Pennsylvania German heritage societies continue to try and counter and correct the commercialization of the corruption of the true heritage of these people, but it is almost like trying to fight the wind.

This article is posted to aide the inexperienced researcher of Pennsylvania names to recognize that most of the early settlers of the inland counties of southeastern Pennsylvania were German and/or German speaking and not Dutch.

Sorry, but I can neither speak nor translate the dialect. For more information on the PA German people contact one or both of the following organizations. They have people in their organizations who can speak, read, and write the dialect. Please tell them you were referred by me from this web page. Best wishes in your continued research.

For More Information About the PA Deutsch, aka PA Dutch Contact:

[Pennsylvania German Society](#)

P.O. Box 244

Kutztown PA 19530

Tel No: 484-646-4227

Fax No: 484-646-4228

[Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center](#)

Kutztown University

Kutztown PA 19530

Tel No: 610-683-1589 Review, and order on-line if desired, a book about the PA Dutch in association with Amazon.com.

[German and Swiss Settlements of Colonial Pennsylvania:](#)

[A Study of the So-Called Pennsylvania Dutch](#)

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