

MUNCHSTEINACH TO AMERICA: THE ORIGIN OF THE HAZELBAKER FAMILY



The Evangelische –luther Kirchengemeinde in Munchsteinach, Germany, where Peter Hazelbaker was baptized in 1759.

Photos and text by Mark Hazelbaker, based on information from Dr. Peter Hasselbacher, Jack White, Imogene Sawvell Davis and public sources

The Hazelbakers of Vermilion County, Illinois are just one branch of a large clan descended from one ancestor, Peter Hazelbaker (1759 – 1801). Our branch of the family is descended from Wilson Hazelbaker (1892 – 1971) and Elva Moore (1895 – 1971), parents of the nine children who, in turn, parented our generation. But our family story begins much further in the past. Events that occurred almost 500 years ago set in motion tremendous upheavals. The resulting changes affected many millions of people. Our family's origin and emigration to the United States is the direct result of these historic trends. Without them, we would still be farmers in Austria. These are the background of our story, and so, will be reviewed here.

The Reformation And Upheaval In Europe

On November 1, 1517, a Catholic monk named Martin Luther nailed a document containing 95 questions about the practices of the Catholic church of that era to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. Luther was, at that time, an obscure professor of theology at the University of Wittenburg, a position he had obtained through years of scholastic drudgery. His studies took him from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelations in the Bible, but also through all of Europe of his time. All around him, he saw a society apparently bereft of moral and spiritual guidance from the established church. On a visit to Rome in 1510-11, he saw a church gripped by corruption and nepotism, preoccupied by ritualistic ceremony and the symbols of earthly power. Precious little spirituality seemed to imbue the heart of



Martin Luther, 1543
(Portrait by Lucas
Cranach)

the Christian religion at that time.

Luther's disquiet gradually increased to the point where he could no longer restrain his conscience or pen. The result was bold and courageous questioning of the theological integrity of the church itself. Luther's questions were not the first occasion on which thoughtful people raised doubts about the Church's drift away from the spirit which had created it. But, where in earlier times reformers had been burned at the stake or ignored, Luther's challenge in the 16th Century was a seed that was finally sown on fertile ground.

Within a few years, Luther's theses inspired a fundamental challenge to the church or Rome, one which remains unhealed almost 500 years later. The Reformation divided Europe into ideological, theological and political camps. Luther had not sought either to leave the Church or split it. His teachings inevitably resulted in just that. Europe fractured on religious lines that remain even today. As Luther's teachings spread, in one nation after another, the Reformation either induced a

ruler to accept Lutheran teaching or to stand firm against the reformist tide.

Decades of wars of words over Luther's teachings ensued, soon followed by the breakout of a series of vicious military conflicts which extended through the first half of the next century, coming to be known as the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648). By the close of that unhappy period, sectarian divisions which had gone from heart to arms claimed the lives of millions of Europeans. Some estimate that 30 percent of the population of the Germany states were killed, and half of the males. Many villages and regions were burned and destroyed and their residents killed. The war left large areas of Germany uninhabited. Bitter feelings of division and resentment took hold. Whole populations changed allegiances, faiths and, in some cases, residences. The convulsions that we saw occur in our lifetime in Bosnia, Serbia,



The door of the Castle
Church in Wittenberg
Germany where Luther
nailed his 95 Theses
(Portrait by Lucas



The Castle Church,
Wittenburg, Germany

Kosovo, and other parts of former Yugoslavia are a faint echo of what went on between Lutherans and Catholics during the Thirty Years War.

One ripple of these convulsions flowed through the country now known as Austria in the late 17th Century. Luther's reformation was not a simple monolithic process. Once Luther successfully questioned Catholic doctrine, a host of different interpretations of the Gospel spread. And, where religious differences arose, conflict often followed.

It was such a conflict in Austria of the late 1600s which precipitated the abrupt departure of many tens of thousands of Lutheran adherents from a country in which they were no longer welcome. These people, collectively, were known as the "Exulanten." There is some question as to whether this word refers to these individuals being exalted, or whether it is a variation on the word exile. Either way, they wound up leaving their native Austria. One of them was a gentleman named Wolff Hasselbacher, who relocated to Franconia in what is now Bavaria, Germany in the late 17th Century.

Southern Germany was prime territory for relocating religious émigrés. At that time, Germany was under populated, having lost many people in recent wars. Religiously, it was hospitable to dissenters. And so, Wolff found it possible to start a new life in Bavaria for himself and his family. Among his children was Johannes Hasselbacher, born in 1644. Johannes, in turn, fathered Christoph Hasselbacher (1673), father of Johann George Hasselbacher (1710), who fathered Peter Hasselbacher, born in 1759.

Baptism records document that Peter was baptized shortly after his birth in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Munchsteinach. Peter, a legendary figure, is the father of all Hazelbakers because it was he who wound up in North America where he changed his name from Hasselbacher to Hazelbaker.

We do not know about Peter's early life, but we know that he was conscripted into the army of the Anspach-Bayreuth regiment of mercenaries who were sent by their respective princes to America to join the British army forces opposing the American Revolution. Peter was part of the army group soldiering under the command of Lord Cornwallis when the last major engagement of the Revolutionary War occurred at Yorktown. There, George Washington successfully maneuvered Cornwallis into a trap. Backed to the ocean by a superior American force, with retreat cut off by the French fleet, Cornwallis surrendered, effectively resulting in American independence.

At the close of the war, the "Hessian" mercenaries were supposed to be repatriated to their German homes. For reasons unknown, Peter decided to remain in North America. Legend has it that he hid in a barn while his regiment was being mustered to the boats. History tells us that Peter wound up in Allen Township in Washington County, Pennsylvania, where he lived the remainder of what was ultimately a rather short life, dying in 1800.

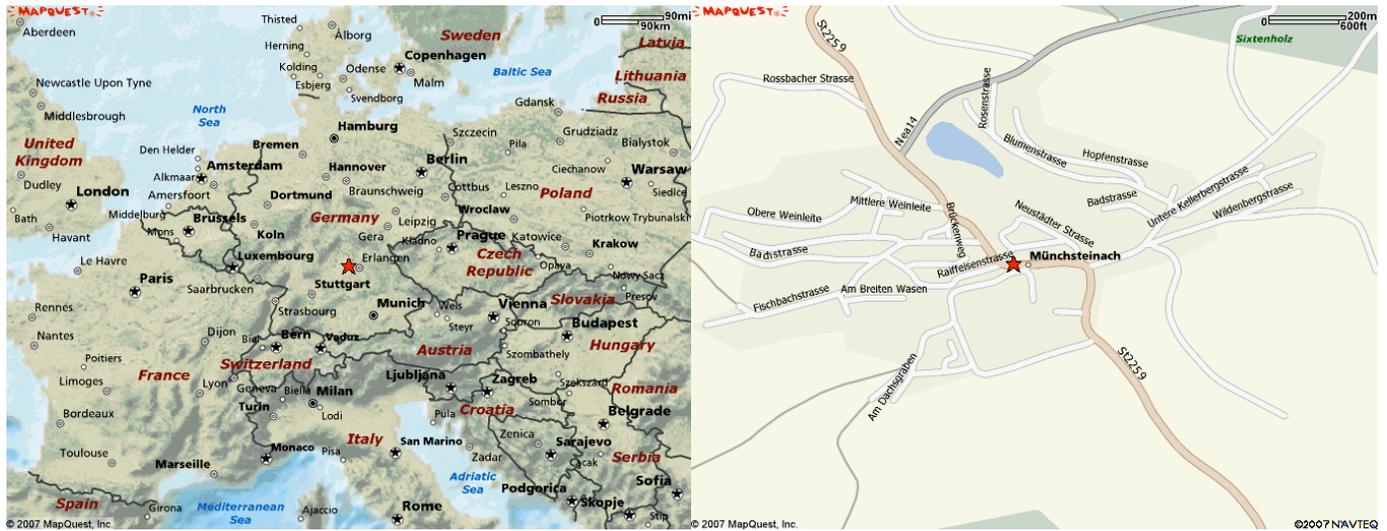
Thanks to genealogies, we now know where Peter came from and can visit what remains today of his ancestral home.

Munchsteinach, Bavaria

Munchsteinach is a small village located between Nuremberg and Wurzburg, about an hour's drive northwest of Nuremberg. Its population today is approximately 1400 people. As is the case with most small German villages, people live in houses that are hundreds of years old, in communities that look much like they did hundreds of years ago. Europeans tend to value preservation to the same degree that Americans chase after the new and improved.



Painting depicting Austrian exiles fleeing persecution



Munchsteinach in Europe, and a map of Munchsteinach as it is today.

Thus, a visit to Munchsteinach reveals that the Evangelical Lutheran Church, known as the Evangelische – luther Kirchengemeinde Munchsteinach still exists. The following pages are an album showing some pictures of the area taken in May 2007.



(Left) Typical street scenes in Munchsteinach today. Above, approaching the Village of Munchsteinach from the east.

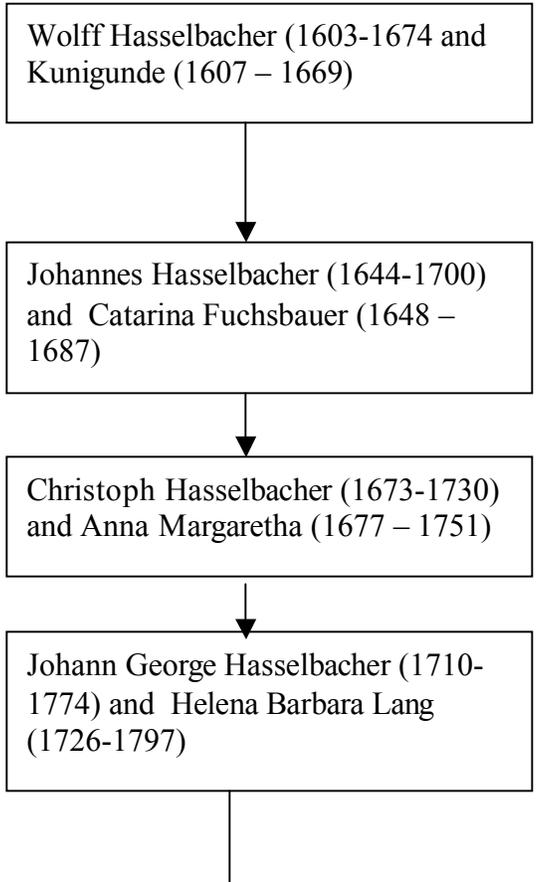


(Clockwise from top left) The area around Munchsteinach is farm country even today. The main entrance to the Ev-Luth. Church. Nik Hazelbaker in the baptismal chapel of the Church. Nik at the Brauereigasthof, where we ate and were greeted like family! The street leading to the Church entrance and parking lot goes through these houses under this arch.



THE VERMILION COUNTY HAZELBAKER FAMILY LINEAGE

[Credit and thanks to Dr. Peter Hasselbacher, Louisville, KY]



The Clan in 1955 at Elva's birthday

