Vechta (Oldenburg) - Cincinnati Genealogy

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Kreis Vechta is a predominantly Catholic county in northwest Germany that has had a significant effect on the history and culture of Cincinnati and southwestern Ohio. Beginning in the 1830's, thousands of immigrants from Vechta came to Cincinnati and settled predominantly in the Over-the-Rhine area.   The goal of this article is to help descendants of these immigrants understand why they came to Cincinnati and to help trace and document their genealogical search through resources available in Cincinnati and the USA, Church of the Latter Day Saints library centers, the internet and in Vechta itself.
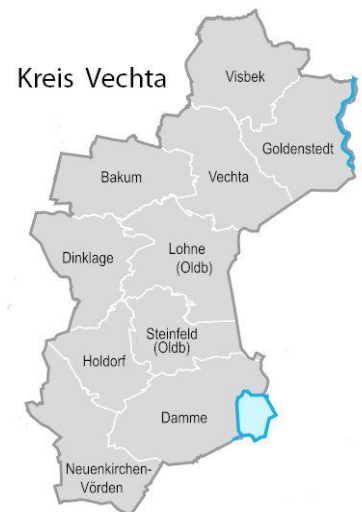
Vechta (pronounced feh'ta) is the name of a county (Kreis) in northwestern Germany as well as its largest city. Together with its neighboring county, Kreis Cloppenburg, they form the predominantly Catholic region known as Oldenburger Münsterland.   It forms the lower portion of Oldenburg in the state of Lower Saxony (Niedersachsen). It is about 75% the size of Hamilton County with a current population of 135,000.

The first immigrants from Vechta were attracted to Cincinnati by its early German heritage. Among these first Germans were Cincinnati's first Mayor, David Ziegler and prominent businessman Martin Baum whose home later became the Taft Museum. A major boost in the 1830's came from the writings of two Vechta natives, printer and publisher Josef Stallo and Rev. Joseph Ferneding, an early area missionary who founded several churches in the Cincinnati area and went on to become the vicar general or deputy bishop of the Archdiocese of Cin-cinnati.

Current Vechta Districts

As more emigrants from Vechta made the nearly 4500 mile trip to Cincinnati, they found a comfortable new home in the Over-the-Rhine area. Here they found themselves among friends that spoke the same language, Plattdüütsch or Low German, were of the same faith and attended the same churches, primarily Catholic, had similar social and cultural interests and on each street, they could find friends, neighbors and families from their hometown.

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Early Cincinnati German Settlers

Few people realize that German immigrants were among the first settlers in Cincinnati and the surrounding area. Cincinnati's first mayor in 1802, David Ziegler, was born in Germany. He was an officer with George Washington and later served in the Northwest Territory. Martin Baum, Cincinnati's third mayor in 1807, was the son of German immigrant parents. He was Cincinnati's first millionaire and through his many business interests, attracted a large number of German immigrants. His elegant home on Pike Street is now the Taft Museum.

In northern Kentucky, the first German settlers in 1785 were the Tanner family who established a trading post at what is now Florence, KY, three years before the first settlers in Cincinnati. Several Germans were among the first property owners in Newport, including the first tavern. Even earlier, in 1771, the first Germans in Kenton County were George Jaeger and Johannes Straeter who first explored the Licking River with Simon Kenton.

Around 1800, German immigrants were about 5% of Cincinnati's population. By the time of the Civil War, 1861-65, Germans comprised one-third of the population and by 1900, about 60% of Cincinnati's citizens were of German heritage.

Early Vechta Emigrants

Franz Joseph Stallo, who arrived in Cincinnati in 1831, was one of the early settlers from Kreis Vechta who was responsible for initiating a larger migration of settlers from Oldenburger Münsterland. He was born in Damme and was a teacher who also learned the trade of printing and bookbinding. In Cincinnati, he was employed in a print shop and became a friend of William McGuffey who later published school 'readers' in 1836. Stallo's access to a printing press enabled him to print articles and leaflets about the excellent opportunities in the Ohio area. These he sent back to his hometown of Damme and by 1832 large numbers of farmers, craftsmen and artisans began to arrive from Vechta.

Another pioneer with significant early German Catholic influence was Reverend Joseph H. Ferneding. He was born in 1802 into a family of fifteen children in the village of Holdorf in Kreis Vechta. He entered the seminary in Münster and, in 1832, near the end of his studies, he left for America.

He was ordained in 1833 in Bardstown, Kentucky, and became a missionary priest in the wilderness of the Midwest from 1833 to 1842, attending to the needs of German and Irish Catholics. He founded several churches and with a group of German emigrants from Cincinnati, he helped found the town of Oldenburg, Indiana, in 1836.

In 1842 Father Ferneding came to Cincinnati and became the first assistant pastor at the newly formed St. Mary's Church in the Over-the-Rhine area. In 1844 he helped establish nearby St. John the Baptist Church and in 1849 formed St. Paul's Church a few blocks to the east. By 1850, there were over forty thousand Catholics in Cincinnati. In 1844 he also became vicar general of the Diocese of Cincinnati, the highest church official under Archbishop John Purcell. Upon retirement in 1866, he became director of St. Aloysius Orphanage. On trips to Oldenburg and Rome, he was instrumental in recruiting several priests and seminarians, including his nephew, to return to Ohio with him.

Rev. Joseph Ferneding

St. Mary's Church on Thirteenth and Clay Streets in the Over-the-Rhine area was one of several churches built to help serve this rapidly growing population. Of the fifteen stained glass windows that exist in St. Mary's today, two-thirds were donated by emigrants from Kreis Vechta. Other German Catholic churches that are no longer active included Holy Trinity, St. John the Baptist, St. Joseph and St. Paul. The Over-the-Rhine area was also home to churches of multiple other German speaking faiths including Lutheran, Evangelical, Dutch, etc.

Another well known person of Oldenburg descent was Barney Kroger, whose father came from the Dinklage area in 1827 and became a merchant in the Over-the-Rhine.

Why they left Vechta

Emigrants from Vechta over the last several hundred years left their homeland for various reasons. Throughout this time, however, there has been one reason that has been constant. For over a thousand years, family farms, by law, were never divided.

Even today, Vechta is one of the most productive agricultural counties in all of Germany. Many farms have been in the same family for 500-800 years. Long ago it was realized that if a farm were to be divided among several children every generation, after many generations there would little land left in one piece to sustain the farm. Hereditary farm laws restricted farm inheritance to lineal descendants of the owner and rendered properties indivisible. The oldest son usually inherited the farm and the rest of the children could receive a share of household items or money. Other sons either had to work for the older brother, seek another respectable profession such as a teacher or priest, or perhaps seek their fortune in the new world.

Genealogical researchers should be aware of an unusual practice unique to northwestern Germany. If a man married a woman who had inherited a major farm, he was expected to take the name of the farm, usually his wife's maiden name, as his new surname.

One consequence of the land inheritance laws were the *Heuerleute*. Siblings who had not inherited any land could marry into a farm elsewhere but many simply had no place to go and stayed on at their brother's farm as hirelings. They could do their share of the work on the farm in return for a place to sleep and the use of a plot of land for their garden needs. Most *Heuerleute* worked other jobs wherever they could find them. It was this growing landless class that formed a large part of the emigrants who left for something better in America.

For Heuerleute, a typical church record might state:

"*Eltern: Gerd Heinrigh Kroger und Catharina Elizabeth geb. Stukenborg, Heuerleuten zur Zeit bey Siemer in Hagen*"

Parents: Gerd Heinrich Kroger and Catharina Elizabeth, maiden name Stukenborg, Heuerleute at this time at the Siemer (farm)in Hagen

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During the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), invading armies routinely burned everything to the ground and one third of the population died. It was not until the beginning of the 1800's that the population had recovered enough for emigration. Germans decided to make a new start in America after repeated crop failures in the 1830 - 1850's.

For many decades it had been common for people in the northwest counties of Germany to supplement their income by travelling seasonally to Holland for work such as cutting hay, textile work and whaling and fishing. In 1830 Holland forbad foreigners from continuing these practices.

There was also political and civil unrest in Germany. A failed revolution attempt in 1848, the Austro-Prussian war in 1866, avoidance of a six year military conscription, and economic changes fueled emigration.

During these times, three parishes in southern Vechta with a combined population of 10,000 saw 8,000 leave. Ninety-five percent of the emigrants went to the US with a major portion of these seeking a new life in Cincinnati.

Immigration Routes

Most early emigrants from Kreis Vechta left their homeland via Bremen or Holland. Vechta is just 50 miles from Bremen and about 30 miles from the Holland border. American ports included New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and New Orleans. During the early years, there was much trade from the southern American ports in tobacco, cotton and sugar bound for Bremen and Holland. Emigrants were a source of income for the ships on their return to the colonies.

In the 1830's, silting in the Weser River made it necessary to move the port of Bremen north to a new port at Bremerhaven. The Hunte River on the east side of Kreis Vechta flowed into the Weser and provided a water route for early commerce. Thus Bremerhaven became the major port of embarkation for the majority of emigrants to Cincinnati. Bremen began keeping passenger lists in the 1830's, but most of these have not survived except for the years 1921-1939. The City of Bremen and genealogy groups have worked to reconstruct emigration information from other sources.

Later emigrants would sometimes leave from Hamburg as it became the main port of embarkation in the late 1800's for ships to New York and the east coast. Hamburg passenger lists from 1850-1934 and passport applications are available at the LDS Library.
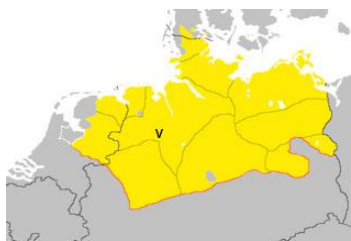
It was not until 1871 that Germany was unified as a country. Before that time, it was a collection of kingdoms, duchies, and cities. Some ships passenger lists contain only the name of the traveler and other passengers. For Country of Origin, Vechta emigrants would list Oldenburg, Hannover or Prussia depending on the ruling state at the time. Occasionally Kreis Vechta or the hometown would be listed. In later years the lists might include the mailing address of a relative in the hometown.

In the United States immigration records exist for several ports such as Baltimore (1820-1952), Philadelphia (1800-1948), and New Orleans 1820-1952). These are available through Ancestry.com.

In New York, records are available for Castle Garden Immigration Center from 1855-1892 and for Ellis Island from 1892-1924. These records are on the internet at no cost at http://www.castlegarden.org and at http://www.ellisisland.org. Not all passengers passed through these Immigration Centers. For First Class and Cabin Class passengers, immigration officials would often board the ships to check their passports and travelers would disembark in New York City and continue their journey.

Language - Plattdüütsch (Low German)

The Anglo Saxons who migrated from Saxony to England in the 5th Century spoke Low German and many of their words became incorporated into the English Language. For many centuries Plattdüütsch (Platt) (pronounced "plaaht") has been the language spoken in most of northern Germany.

Platt is still spoken in these areas
V = Location of Vechta

The term Low German refers to the language spoken in the low lands of Germany and Holland. It was the official language of the Hanseatic League in the 13th -17th centuries. Immigrants from Vechta came to Cincinnati speaking Platt in their daily conversations, writing and reading High German in its gothic script form, and able to already understand many English words. Even today, most older adults in Oldenburger Münsterland can still speak and understand this language. It is estimated that 5 million people still speak Platt in northern Germany, Holland, USA, Canada and South America.

Catholicism in Kreis Vechta

The history of the Catholic Church in Kreis Vechta dates back to 800 AD when the Bishop of Münster acquired forty farms in the area. A missionary center was established in Visbek in 819 AD and subsequently the entire area was converted with churches and chapels being built in most towns. During the Lutheran Reformation, the nobility in the area briefly accepted the Lutheran changes, 1543-1615, but thereafter the Oldenburger Münsterland reverted to the Bishop of Münster and has since been staunchly Catholic. When the clerical states of Germany were dissolved in 1803, during the Napoleonic occupation, Vechta was added to the southern part of Oldenburg, while clerically still belonging to Münster, hence the name Oldenburger Münsterland which includes Kreis Cloppenburg.

Church Records in Kreis Vechta

Church records (Kirchenbucher) are the most significant source of genealogical information for Germany before 1876. The practice of maintaining "Parochial Registers" came about from a decree of the Catholic church following the Council of Trent held in 1545 - 1563, after the Lutheran Reformation.

Almost all church records in Kreis Vechta and the Oldenburger-Münsterland area were destroyed in the Thirty Years War. As it was a religious war, church records were a target for destruction. Most existing church records in the individual parishes date back to about 1640 -1660's. Some earlier archives survived in church records in Münster, the seat of the Diocese or in the state archives in Oldenburg. Catholic church records were usually written in Latin and German records were usually written in Gothic script as late as the 1930's.

Some civil records exist from a brief French occupation at the time of Napoleon in 1803 -1815. Civil authorities in several areas of Germany did not begin registering vital statistics until 1876, and church records are often the only sources of family information before this date.

Catholic Church Archives in Vechta

Most original Catholic church records in Vechta are kept in the individual parishes. The adrenalin of genealogists and family researchers begins pumping when the parish priest emerges from the basement or church vault with several large parchment and leather parish registers that are hundreds of years old. Our experience has been that most parishes will make these records available to family researchers who travel to the church.

Because of the ever present threat of loss of records from wars, fire, insects, mold and deterioration over time, the Bishop of Münster long ago required that the individual churches periodically send copies of their records to the seat of the diocese in Münster. Since 1831 these duplicate records have been housed in the town of Vechta.

Records were kept for baptisms with birthdates, marriages, funerals, and some confirmations. In addition, in 1749 the Bishop of Münster ordered a 'Status Animarum", a census of all the parishioners in his diocese.

The 'Bishöflich Münstersche Offizialat in Vechta' is the local repository of duplicate Catholic church records for the 35 parishes in the Oldenburger Münsterland. This modern facility also houses a library of church books, some local genealogy and history books, newspaper records and photographs. Many of the parish records up to 1830 are typed and others are on microfilm or photographed. They have begun digitizing some of the records. Typed records may occasionally contain a rare error, however, they are immensely easier to read for researchers who are not as familiar with the old German gothic script. For privacy reasons, access to church records for the last 100 years is restricted. The facility is located at Karmeliterweg 4, 49377 Vechta, Germany, and is open Monday thru Friday and on the first and third Saturday mornings each month. There is a small admission fee and laptop computers are permitted.

Evangelical – Lutheran Records

During most of the 1700's to 1800's, Kreis Vechta was staunchly Catholic – nearly 95%. Neuenkirchen had a small Lutheran community since the 1600's. After Kreis Vechta and Kreis Cloppenburg became the southern part of the mostly Lutheran Duchy of Oldenburg in 1815, a few other Lutheran parishes were founded. From 1650-1850, Catholics and Lutherans celebrated their services in the same church based on a contract called "*Simultanteum mixtum*".

Parish	From	Record locations
Fladderlohausen	1827	Before 1827 in Catholic records of Damme, some in Lutheran parishes at Gehrde and Neuenkirchen
Goldenstedt	1820	Before 1827 in Goldenstedt Catholic
Neuenkirchen	1674	Neuenkirchen Lutheran
Vechta	1820	Before 1820 in Vechta Catholic
Wulfenau	1851	Before 1827 in Dinklage Catholic, some in Lutheran parishes of Badbergen and Quakenbruck

LDS Family History Centers

In 1972, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) sponsored the microfilming of the parish registers in almost all of the parishes in Vechta and Oldenburger Münsterland from their earliest available dates around 1640-1660 to 1875, then the limit of the 100 year restricted access. These films are available at the LDS Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. Local LDS Family History Centers, which are open to the public, are branch facilities of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City that provide access to most of the microfilms and microfiche in the Family History Library.

The Hamilton County area has five Family History Centers: Norwood, Montgomery, Fairfield, downtown at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and in Kenton County in Northern Kentucky. Microfilms can be requested and loaned to the Family History Centers. The Norwood Center has long been a center of German research and copies of almost all of the Vechta parish microfilms are available there on permanent loan.

LDS Family History Center - Cincinnati Ohio
5505 Bosworth Pl
Cincinnati, Ohio 45212
Phone: 513-531-5624
Hours: T-Th, Sat 10am-2pm; T-Th 6pm-9pm

The following is a list of the LDS films available for the fourteen Catholic parishes in Kreis Vechta. These films are not circulated to family history centers in Europe. Further information about the content of these microfilms is available on-line at the LDS Family Search website:

http://www.familysearch.org/eng/Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp

Parish	Church Name	Years	LDS Film #
Bakum	St. Johannes Baptist	1694-1875	920826 & 920827
Damme	St. Viktor	1650-1875	909909 to 909914
Dinklage	St. Catharina	1668-1875	909917 to 909921
Goldenstedt	St. Gregorius	1753-1875	920828, 896458, 911504
Holdorf	St. Peter & Paul	1790-1875	909915 & 909916 (part of Damme before 1827)
Langförden	St. Laurentius	1652-1875	911504 & 911505
Lohne	St. Gertrud	1683-1875	909922 to 909925
Lutten	St. Jakob	1674-1875	896457
Neuenkirchen	St. Bonifacia	1651-1875	909926 to 909929
Oythe	Beatae Mariae Virginis	1653-1875	896395
Steinfeld	St. Johannes Baptist	1652-1875	909930 to 909932, 998114
Vechta	St. Georg	1642-1875	909900 to 909902, 998114, 998736
Vestrup	St. Vitus	1692-1875	909903 & 909904
Visbek	St. Vitus	1651-1875	909905 to 909907,

Vechta's Original Genealogists

Every genealogist in Vechta is familiar with the works of some local genealogists of the last century - Prof. Clemens Pagenstert, Franz Ostendorf, Rev. Heinrich zu Hoene and Clemens Heitman. Some of their works include:

Die Bauerenhöfe im Amte Vechta (Farms in the County of Vechta) by Prof. Clemens Pagenstert, 1908. This 700 page book is considered the bible of resources for genealogical research in Vechta. Historical notes for each of the large farms include family name, size, names of the farmers often back to the 1200-1500, name variations over the years, tax information from old abbeys, monasteries, and historical notes. A majority of the original farms are still in existence today. The book has been digitized on-line at http://books.google.com and the entire text is searchable by name. The original text is in Fraktur typestyle but several websites have English lists of the farm names or partial English translations of the valuable historical information in the first chapters. (www.familie-bloemer.de/gene/).

Franz Ostendorf (1883-1953) - Genealogist and school principal in Langförden from 1927-1949. Franz Ostendorf spent much of his life assembling family genealogies from the Vechta area. The original handwritten notebooks are still in his family and many genealogical publications refer to his work.

Pastor Heinrich zu Höne und seine Familienforschung", primarily covered the towns of Carum, Dinklage, Damme, Haustette, Lüsche, Märschendorf and Vestrup.

Dinklager Familien (Dinklage Families) by Clemens Heitman, (3 vols.). Vol 1, published in 1977, contains genealogical charts of over 200 families, primarily farm owners, in the Dinklage parish. The text is typed and easily readable. Most date back to 1600-1700's.

Researching German Records

In German texts, many of the genealogical tables, charts and church records can be read by English researchers. Histories often have photos and maps. German text can be typed or copied/pasted into an on-line translator such as Google Translate. Thus information contained in these sources can be utilized by genealogists and historians without German language skills. Many of the following sources are available in U.S. libraries or on the internet.

Heimatbucher and Sippenbucher

Most of the towns in Vechta are over 1000 years old and many have published local histories (Heimatbucher) or genealogies (Sippenbucher). These are a small sample:

Chronik Langförden, 1990, 735pp, Langförden history

Chronik Visbek, 1990, 2 vol, 1400pp, Visbek history

Gemeindechronik Holdorf 1188-1988, Holdorf history

Lohner Familien (Lohne Families) Clemens Pagenstert

Oldenburger Münsterland, annual series of books of Vechta and Cloppenburg topics published since 1852.

Heimatverein

Local history groups exist for most of the larger towns in Kreis Vechta, often with sections in English. Search the internet for "Heimatverein + town name". The largest covering Oldenburg has English sections and an on-line store:

Oldenburgische Gesellschaft für Familienkund
 (Oldenburg Society for Family Research)
http://www.genealogienetz.de/vereine/OGF/

Additional Resources for Vechta researchers

Ancestry.com Digital images of US census records and passenger lists, also can search by Vechta or individual towns.

Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County Extensive history & genealogy collection, on-line Cincinnati city directories, maps, German books.

The Tracer Quarterly publication of the Hamilton County Genealogical Society for 33 years. Many articles on Vechta genealogy, immigration and communities. Available at Cincinnati Public Library and on CD containing 30 years and index. Available through HCGS website at www.hcgsohio.org.

Jeffrey G. Herbert has published several volumes of indexes of death and marriage notices appearing in Cincinnati German newspapers in the 1800's and early 1900's. The newspapers are on microfilm at the Cincinnati Public Library, with indexes also via LDS.

http://www.honkomp.de/ Primarily lower Vechta parishes with several English articles.

North Germany to North America, 19th Century Migration, R.L. Stockmann 2003 & 2010, 675 pp.
Covers history, farms, social life, local customs and traditions, emigration and U.S. settlements.