

Early German and Scots-Irish settlers in English America

The English settlement of America began in 1607, first in Virginia, and shortly after in Massachusetts. Although Massachusetts and other parts of New England were settled by English immigrants, Virginia was notably different.

The five dialect areas of 16th century England are Northern, Southern, Kent, West Midlands, and East Midlands. Many speakers from the East Midlands emigrated to New England. The speech of the East Midlands London-Oxford-Cambridge triangle eventually became the basis of standard British English, and we see a similarity between British English and New England English even today. However, many English from the Southern area emigrated to Virginia and other "Tidewater" parts of the American colonies. This difference in English migration, together with German and Scotch-Irish immigration, created today's standard American English dialect, with its well-known differences from standard British English.

Virginia settlement

The English immigrants William Randolph and his wife Mary Isham have been called the Adam and Eve of Virginia because of their numerous and illustrious progeny. Three of their sons established large plantations along the James River. The Bolling, Carter, Page, Fleming, Walker, Meriwether, Lewis, and Jefferson families all intermarried with the Randolphs and acquired large tracts. They moved up the James River to the Rivanna and then westward into a large area that became Albemarle County. William Randolph seems to have spent his formative years in Ireland before moving to Virginia sometime before 1672.

Alexander Spotswood and the Germans

The Rappahannock River valley above the falls was settled differently. Alexander Spotswood, the lieutenant governor of Virginia (who never left England), brought German miners to excavate iron ore found on his vast holdings in the Rappahannock River basin. In 1714 they founded Germanna. Spotsylvania County was organized in 1720, and by 1727 their settlement was approaching the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Many German immigrants were part of a vast migration of Protestants who sailed to Philadelphia seeking religious freedom. As the land around Philadelphia became more crowded, they moved southwest, into the "Amish" counties of Pennsylvania, into Maryland, and into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

Most Virginia Germans came from southwest Germany, arriving in families or even whole communities or congregations. One leader of the migration, Jost Hite, was granted 100,000 acres that he re-sold to other Germans, mostly in family-size farms of between 100 and 500 acres. German settlement was especially strong in the central part of the Shenandoah Valley between Strasburg and Harrisonburg, but many settled in the northern Piedmont. By 1790, nearly one fifth of white Virginians were German-speaking. During the 19th Century, the German language died out, but foods and other elements of this German culture remain even today.

According to Thomas Simbeck, the Germans were uncomfortable with slavery. To them, liberty meant that their churches, communities, and families should be left alone by government, which had traditionally oppressed them. They became strong supporters of Jeffersonian and then Jacksonian democracy, which defined good government as the least government. The Germans had to share the Shenandoah Valley with another immigrant group, which followed on their heels ten

years later: the Scotch-Irish. Freedom for the Scotch-Irish meant that each man is his own master. The Scotch-Irish families were strong, but community was much less important to them than it was to the Germans. The Scotch-Irish moved frequently, usually further west, and they exemplified the Indian-fighting pioneers.

The Scotch-Irish (Scots-Irish)

In the early 17th century, 200,000 Lowland Scots (mostly Presbyterian Protestants) emigrated to Ulster (i.e., northern Ireland). Approximately 2 million of the descendants of these Scots-Irish emigrated to America in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 1720s alone, some 50,000 Scots-Irish settled in America. By 1776, the year of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, an estimated half of the Ulster population had emigrated to America; one-seventh of the American Colonists were Scotch-Irish.

Philadelphia, the second largest English-speaking city in the world during the 18th century, was the main port of entry for the Scots-Irish into America. Benjamin Franklin estimated that the population of colonial Philadelphia was one-third English, one-third German, and one-third Scotch-Irish.

The Virginia Historical Society reports that perhaps 250,000 people from the northern parts of the British Isles came to British America between 1715 and 1775. Most were Scots-Irish (i.e., Scots who settled in northern Ireland after 1603), but there also were Irish as well as people on both sides of the Scottish-English border. They shared a heritage of living in disputed, unstable regions wracked by violence that bred warrior cultures. Not welcomed in the eastern, more urban, American settlements, they quickly moved west and began settling the Shenandoah Valley after 1740. The Scotch-Irish largely leapfrogged the Germans and concentrated in the southern part of the Shenandoah Valley. One leader was Colonel James Patten, an ancestor of General George Patton (who embodied much of this culture). In 1745, Colonel Patten obtained 100,000 acres on the New, Holston, and Clinch rivers, drawing Scotch-Irish settlements into southwest Virginia. They established the dominant culture of the Appalachian Mountain areas, partly because of their numbers, but mostly because Old World border culture was exceptionally well suited to New World frontier conditions.

As pioneers, the Scotch-Irish migrated westward through Pennsylvania's German-speaking counties to the Appalachian Mountains, where their direct descendants continue to live, from Pennsylvania southwest through Virginia to Georgia. From Pittsburgh, they established the pattern of seasonal migration down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. They also settled the Tennessee River valley and the Ozark Mountain areas. Much of what Americans today regard as frontier culture is really Scotch-Irish culture.

The dialect of English spoken by the Scotch-Irish became the basis of the American "Midlands" dialects, and it had an effect on Inland Northern too. Originally by riverboat, and then by railroad, the Northern Midlands dialect was spread from Pennsylvania to California, and it became the sound of "General American". Immigrants from Pennsylvania and New York to Ontario during the 1780s eventually spread the Northern Midlands and Inland Northern sound west through Canada. Southern Midlands, the sound of Nashville, St. Louis, and Dallas, has become more influential throughout the 20th century as the economic importance of "the Sunbelt" has grown. This is the English of truckers, cowboys, and, increasingly, soldiers.