

Sensebach Heritage

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and other variations of the name

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On the Origins of Sensebachs Friederich Sensebach and His Family

by Steven L. Sinsabaugh

The earliest roots of the Sensebachs in America, whether in the American colonies or Europe, have never been clearly defined and documented. Many Sensebach branches, with their various spellings, can be traced back to the Sensebachs that lived in the vicinity of the German Reformed Church in Montgomery, New York in the early 1700's, starting around 1728. The records from this church help us to reconstruct the families of what was probably the second generation in America; but evidence upon which a family structure for the earliest immigrant generation remains scant. Previous researchers, such as Frank Rathbun¹ and Henry Z. Jones Jr.² have proposed possible family structures of these early New York families and their ties back to the Palatinate, but all have knowingly contained speculation, filling in the gaps with 'educated guesses' where clear evidence had not yet been found.

The purpose of the present article is three-fold. First, review all of the available evidence on the German and New York Sensebachs of that era, no matter how trivial it may appear. Second, walk the reader through a rigorous process of deriving a family structure based on that data. Third, summarize what is known ("beyond a reasonable doubt"), what is probable (based on a "preponderance of evidence") and what is conjectural. The result is intended to be a documented framework of the early Sensebach family structure that will serve as a basis for future research to prove, disprove, or correct the various relationships.

The key difficulty in researching the immigrant Sensebach families is the scant amount of primary evidence available. The type of evidence we would like to find, that could tie the New York and German families together,

would include things like a tombstone with a birth date corresponding to a baptism in a German church book; will or estate records that list the children of Friederich Sensebach of New York; or specific mention in German church books of a Sensebach family migrating to the New World. But alas, the tombstones of that generation exist only as weather-worn brown stones with no markings;³ no Sensebach probate records for that early era have been found; and the badly faded old German handwritings in the churchbooks only grudgingly give up what ever secrets they held. So we are left with a modest amount of evidence with which to attempt to build a circumstantial case for the early family structure.

This article focuses on one group of Sensebachs in colonial New York. We should not forget that there were other Sensebachs, with various spellings,⁴ in New York and other colonies, including Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. These families may have ties to the New York settlers, or may have come over directly from Germany; in either case we plan to address them in future issues.

We know the 'came to'; What about the 'came from'?

The tracing of a family that migrated from one country to another in past centuries is almost always a genealogical puzzle. Based on the surname and early records, the Sensebachs were German;⁵ but it should be noted that at that time Germany was not a single country. Eager's history,⁶ written in 1846, on discussing Friederich Sinsabaugh, Jacob Bookstaver and Johannes Youngblood, states "These individuals were from Germany."

First we begin in New York, in Montgomery on the Wallkill. This area, now in Orange County, was part of Ulster County until 1798. Domine Georgius Wilhelmus Mancius, the pastor at Kingston, founded a German Reformed Church in Montgomery in 1732. This church, which later came to be known (after a third reconstruction used brick instead of timbers) as the Brick Church, has extensive early church records that contain many references to Sensebachs and others.⁷ But no extent records specify where the Sensebachs came from in the German regions of Europe. For that we must rely on other means.

Where Are There Sensebachs?

Where did they come from in the German regions of Europe? One admittedly imperfect but useful approach is to review the International Genealogical Index (IGI) for clusters of Sensebachs in the German areas of Europe during that era.

The IGI, a database of over 187 million names from around the world, provides a useful tool to learn where surnames are distributed. The entries are mostly births, baptisms and marriages. Entries include extracts

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