

## AMERICAN DESCENDANTS OF HESSIANS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By

KARL J. R. ARNDT

Clark University

Linguistic change is a force that seems to defy rational regulation. Within the past decade the word "gay" has acquired a new and special meaning which makes it necessary to be cautious about its use. The simple word "gift," in English, may mean a present or a special talent, while in German the same word means poison, unless it is used with the prefix "Mit", and then it means "dowery." "Hessian" to Americans may mean a native of the German state of Hessen, but more frequently it stands for "A mercenary or venal person," alluding to the Hessians who served with the British in the Revolutionary War. It also means "A coarse sacking of hemp and jute," "Andirons having uprights shaped to represent Hessians," "A kind of high boots introduced into England by the Hessians," and "A small two-winged fly, very destructive to wheat in America." Although many German states sent mercenaries to America who served the British in the American Revolution, the term "Hessian" has come to stand for all such German mercenaries, regardless of the German state from which they came. For the purpose of this communication we shall use the term in that general sense.

Of the some 30,000 German mercenaries who came to America to serve under British command, 6,000 or more deserted to the Americans and were then often found listed in the official records as "deserters". Because of this situation, descendants of such "deserters" became eager to escape the opprobrium attached to such records, even though the term was entirely out of place in the record. Instead of "deserter" the record should have stated "immigrant to America at the invitation of the American Government," because it was an

official policy of the American Government to encourage German mercenaries to lay down their arms and join the Americans. German broadsides were printed for that very purpose and distributed widely among the Germans, many of whom really should never be called "mercenaries" because they served under compulsion. The term "mercenary" should be limited to those who served as soldiers for mercenary purposes by their own free choice. It should not be applied to those who were forced into the Army by their government and then sold to the British by their sovereigns for the mercenary purposes of that sovereign. When German soldiers in the British Army read the German-American broadsides issued by the Americans, they, for the first time, had an opportunity to make a free choice, and the thousands who did were neither real mercenaries nor deserters, but individuals who were making use of their human rights.

What genealogical potential existed in each of the thousands of Hessian deserters, has been documented and illustrated by the book *Johannes Schwalm, The Hessian*, researched and published by the *Johannes Schwalm Historical Association*. This volume shows what a great progeny of fine Americans came from the seed of this one German "mercenary" who settled in America. It also points to the fact that here lies a vast, almost untouched field of genealogical research in America. The volume has attracted much attention here and in Germany and should provide a great incentive for Americans of German ancestry to search out their roots. To encourage such research, it has been proposed that an association of *Descendants of Hessians of the American Revolution* be formed to bring together such descendants and thus encourage the study of their own genealogical roots. The Johannes Schwalm Historical Association has shown the way, and the following letter from one of its members to a fellow member explores the plan of the A D H A R further. Persons interested are encouraged to communicate either with Mr. Mark A. Schwalm or Mr. Kenneth Schwalm Jones at the addresses shown in the letter below.

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Mr. Kenneth Schwalm Jones  
71-73 Chandler Street  
Worcester, Massachusetts 01623

Dear Ken:

October 3, 1977

I believe that the formation of a society of "Descendants of Hessians of the American Revolution" would be a worthwhile project. Aside from my own insatiable interest in the subject of Hessian soldiers who remained in America there is an increasing awareness with the average American that he has had ancestors and that he has a heritage. He has begun to ask questions about his family's history and genealogy. More of our citizens realize that they have not always been Americans — that somewhere in history an ancestor or two came to America — most likely from Europe.

During the American Revolution there came to our shores some 30,000 German officers and soldiers commonly called Hessians. Of the 6,000 or more who did not return to Germany after hostilities ceased, many married local women and raised families — to wit: Johannes Schwalm, Andreas Schwalm, Andreas Schmeltz, Nicholas Bahnert (Bohner), Justus Groh (Gray), and others. Judging from the descendants of these men, the 6,000 who remained were a tremendous force at the grass roots level of our agricultural development, the local political scene and the rural economy in general. This was true in just about all of the original 13 states. It then spilled over into Ohio and West Virginia, and to a lesser degree to Kentucky and Tennessee. In more recent generations, the descendants have permeated all 50 states and numerous professions. This same pattern of early development happened also in the eastern half of Canada, where large numbers of so-called Hessians settled. In subsequent years, many descendants of those German officers and soldiers who had returned to their native land in 1783, migrated to America, forming a new and broader base of Hessian descendants.

An organization or society of Descendants of Hessians of the American Revolution would serve:

1. *To function as a rallying point for descendants of Hessians living not only in America, but in Canada and Germany, or in any part of the world.*

2. *To provide a conduit through which people who believe they are descendants of Hessians can learn how to authenticate the claims or beliefs.*

3. *To provide the initiative and structure needed to identify the 6,000 Hessians (Germans) who remained after the War, where they settled and their contributions to the development of early America.*

4. *As a focal point where members and others can have their research evaluated and further disseminated.*

5. *By including Canadians and Germans, it will open doors to documents, records and other resources which might otherwise remain hidden or even might ultimately be destroyed. (As an example, the writer personally was able to secure a microfilm copy of the original diary of Jeremias Kappes, a soldier in the von Knyphausen Regiment who returned to his native Germany. This diary was still in the hands of the Kappes family in Hessen.)*

6. *As a result of the work that the Johannes Schwalm Historical Association has done over the years it is evident that in Germany there is a very real desire by the "average man on the street" to find a tie with Americans — something to which he can personally relate. Feature articles have been written in the Schwalm Jahrbuch about the part played by Hessians in the American Revolution. Our Association President, Dr. Leslie Schwalm, has made annual trips to Die Schwalm and has established close ties with distant cousins who, until our research came along, never realized they had distant relatives in America. Both Dr. Schwalm and I have been given newspaper interviews in Germany and our Association received considerable publicity. On my own visit this past summer I was given an audience by Helgar Börner, Minister President of Hessen, Herrn Regierungsdirektor Ochs and Bürgermeister of three municipalities. Our Association has received an invitation from Willi Croll, Bürgermeister of*

*Hofgeismar, host to the 1978 Hessentage, to participate in the huge parade and in other spots in the State Fair.*

*7. It is evident that other families with Hessian descendants doing research similar to ours could also establish German-American relations. An association of Descendants of Hessians of the American Revolution — hopefully working low-key — would promote ties on a person-to-person basis, providing for a rich exchange in culture and social events and ideas.*

Before a formal organization is attempted, it is necessary that the idea be publicized to generate interest in the project.

Sincerely,

M. A. SCHWALM  
Secretary

Johannes Schwalm  
Historical Association  
4983 S. Sedgewick Road  
Lyndhurst, Ohio 44124

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GERMAN TRANSLATION  
OF THE  
STAR SPANGLED BANNER

*By Eduard Leyh*  
(1840-1901)

O sprich, kannst du seh'n bei der schwindenden Nacht,  
Was wir freudig noch grüssten im Abendrotglanze:  
Unsre Streifen und Sterne, die während der Schlacht  
Im Winde geflattert, dort hoch auf der Schanze?  
Der Raketen Gesaus und der Bomben Gebraus,  
Verkünden durchs Dunkel: die Flagge hält aus!  
O sprich, weht das Banner im Morgenlichtschein  
Noch über den Helden, im Lande der Frei'n?

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