

COMING TO AMERIKA

Crossing the Atlantic



1853 Map Showing Major Emigration Routes from Europe to North America



For many Hommerding emigrants, their voyage probably started at Antwerp, Belgium

The Hommerdings were part of a historic population shift. The first great wave of immigration from Europe to the United States began in the early 1800's. From 1836 to 1914, over 30 million Europeans migrated to the United States. The map (above, left) shows the major U.S. ports where immigrants were landing in 1853. The first two Hommerding brothers to leave the Eifel departed from Antwerp, Belgium. (See map, above, right.) It must have been a tough overland trip just to get from the Eifel to Antwerp in the 1850's. There is no record of the embarkation ports for the later Hommerding emigrants, but the proximity of the Eifel region to Luxembourg and Belgium makes Antwerp a likely choice.

Timeline for the Hommerdings' Arrival in the U.S.

1853 - **Jacob Hommerding**, his wife Anna Maria Dauven, and his future second wife, Maria Anna Butzen, 20 years old, arrived in New York Dec. 5 on the sailing ship *Oregon* out of Antwerp. Jacob was 25 years old, Anna Maria was 30.

1855 - Jacob's older half-brother, **Mathias Hommerding No. 1**, at the advanced age of 51, arrived at New York City on June 22 on the sailing ship *Gaston*, out of Antwerp. With Mathias No.1 were his wife, Eva (Becker) 54, and their three sons. They were all steerage passengers.

1872 - Seventeen years passed before **Michael Hommerding**, a grandson of Johann Peter, arrived in 1872. According to the 1900 census, he was 24 years old. No one has yet found the ship Michael sailed on, or where it landed.

1875 - Three years later, Michael's brother, **William Hommerding**, age 20, arrived. Again, there is no information about how he got from Germany to the U.S. From census sheets we know that Michael and William settled near each other, and even married sisters.

1881 - Six years later **Mathias No. 2**, age 56, his wife, Susanna (Dockendorf), age 51, and their six children arrived. Mathias' arrival date (April 27) comes from one of the Hommerding researchers. Another researcher found Mathias & his family listed on a "ship census" titled *Ships in port in Lincolnshire 1881 Grimsby*. Grimsby is a seaport on the east coast of England. It would appear that Mathias' ship made a stop there. We don't know what port Mathias originally departed from, or where he arrived in the U.S.

1885 - The last of Johann Peter's sons to leave Germany, **Johann Hommerding**, arrived in New York City with his family in 1885. He would have been about 48 years old. No other information on his arrival in the U.S.

NOTE: One year (1856) after Mathias No. 1 left Germany for America, his brother [Cornelius Hommerding](#) (1811-??), sailed to Brazil with his wife, Maria Feltz (1820 - ??) and son Peter and daughter Margaretha. They settled in the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul. [See Chapter 10 "Brazil."](#)

Emigrant Ports and Vessels

This background on the emigrants' Atlantic crossings is excerpted from the [Beaumont Family website](#).

In the early 1830s, the first spike in emigration from Germany occurred, and these emigrants favored the Bremen-to-Baltimore route to America. It was a route established on tobacco trade. Ships would carry emigrants to Baltimore and return with American tobacco for the European markets. The journey, on sailing ships, took about six weeks, longer in bad weather, and living conditions aboard these ships were appalling.

Between 1844 and 1847, there was another spike in emigration. This time emigrants preferred to enter America through New Orleans. The next stop was usually St. Louis. Two-thirds of the Germans arriving in St. Louis from 1848 to 1855 had come by way of New Orleans, the rest via the East Coast.

The Civil War blockade dealt New Orleans a near-fatal blow as an immigrant port. Afterwards, New York attracted increasingly greater proportions of immigrants regardless of their final destination. By then, railroad construction was booming and a traveler in New York could choose from three railroads for a thirty-six hour trip to Chicago.

Also at this time, Hamburg, Germany grew in importance as an emigration port because Eastern Europeans were immigrating in large numbers.

Even though Bremen and Hamburg served as the primary German ports of embarkation throughout the nineteenth century, the French port of Le Havre and the Low Country ports **Antwerp** and Rotterdam were also major points of departure. Also, many German immigrants were routed through England, so none of these ports can be ignored by one seeking the immigration route of an ancestor.

As to the issue of the emigrant using a sailing or steam ship, the timeline is critical and, yet, there was a significant overlap in the middle of the 1800s when both vessels plied the Atlantic.

1819 *SS Savannah* makes the first transatlantic crossing by a steamship.

1840 British Cunard Line establishes reliable transatlantic steamship line between Liverpool and Boston.

1870 About 88% of passengers chose steamships, which reduced the voyage to 12 to 14 days.

1879 The last sailing ship left Hamburg.

For a more complete synopsis of the 19th century German emigration see this PDF Document, [GERMANY AND THE EMIGRATION 1816-1885](#)

The Voyage

No accounts of the Hommerding emigrant voyages have surfaced so far. Only Mathias No. 1 and his family have been documented as being steerage passengers on their 1855 voyage, but it seems likely that the others also sailed in the cheapest class on their ships. After reading several descriptions of crossing the Atlantic in steerage, it seems a miracle that all of the Hommerdings survived! Some of the Hommerding emigrants were in their fifties at the time they sailed for the U.S. Here is one graphic description of a steerage voyage:



"For those who could afford to travel first or even second class, an emigrant ship was not too bad, but steerage was horrible, with some ships taking 750 or more passengers. A child under eight was counted as half an adult, with half rations, and infants were not counted at all. The ships would be so crowded that people sometimes had to sleep in the gangways, and when this space filled, shacks were thrown up on the top deck where they were exposed to the elements. The ship's quarters below the upper deck was made of rough sawn lumber fastened together forming compartments, each one holding four people. One couldn't sit upright in the upper compartment, or berth, which was located at the sides, with trunks and baggage filling the center of the dark, windowless hold. One reached the upper deck by a steep ship's ladder. Many of the vessels were "plague" ships, quarantined because of cholera or yellow fever, and up to one in six Germans on such a ship died from the long voyage. It was not uncommon for immigrant ships to arrive with an entire ship full of ill, dying or dead passengers, or for the passengers to die while anchored in the harbor in quarantine. The odors aboard these immigrant ships were so foul that people on land claimed they could smell them coming."

--From [The Trip to a New Home](#)"

Getting Through Immigration

Whatever their hardships in coming to "Amerika" the Hommerding family members DID make it. The next crucial hurdle for the Hommerdings was to clear the immigration process. None of these arrivals would have gone through the Ellis Island Immigration Center--it did not open until 1892 while all of Johann Peter's sons and grandsons had arrived by 1885. And, none of these first Hommerding immigrants would have sailed past the Statue of Liberty! The statue was not dedicated until 1886.

For Jacob Hommerding, who arrived in 1853, the immigration process was relatively easy. The individual harbor offices were responsible for checking the passenger lists handed to them by the captain of the ships. Once they touched American soil, the immigrants were on their own. From 1855 to 1892, "Castle Garden" was established as the immigration station in New York. Now, newcomers had to show a minimum of financial means, or have a sponsor; they also had to be free of serious illnesses and physical handicaps. People with contagious illnesses were quarantined; others were turned away.

Apparently the rest of the Hommerdings cleared the hurdles at Castle Garden or their point of disembarkation and all of them headed west to their ultimate destination.

[Next--Settling In the United States](#)

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