

ORIGIN OF OUR BALTIC COAST ANCESTORS

by Gene Maas

As descendants of Pomeranians, I'm sure most of us have one thing in common – we are keenly interested in tracing our family lineage back as many generations as possible. Some of us only get back a few generations, others have been lucky enough to get back several hundred years. When I started researching my ancestry some 23 years ago, I knew nothing more than the names of my great grandparents who immigrated to the US in the late 1800's. There were no written documents and none of my living ancestors knew anything more than the names of the villages where they lived when they left Germany.

Tracing my Maass (Maaß) ancestry became an obsessive quest that has consumed an inestimable amount of time, research and resources. Despite periods of frustration, the quest has been incredibly rewarding and fun. I spent the first 10 years searching through LDS microfilms to no avail. While I documented over 750 Maasses in the Kreises of Naugard, Regenwalde and Saatzig, I couldn't connect my family with any of them. The church registers I needed, if they survived, were never microfilmed. I realized I would have to travel to Germany to continue my research. In 1999, my wife and I took our first trip to Europe to visit the archive in Greifswald, Germany where I finally learned the name of my 2nd great grandfather, David Maass. I also discovered that my great grandfather, Julius, was born in Ornhagen and that the birth was recorded in the church register of nearby Regenwalde (see map below). The next year I learned that these records were archived at the State Archive in Stettin (now *Szczecin*, Poland). That was exciting because it gave me hope that I might learn much more about my Maass ancestors. That hope was dashed in 2001 when I visited the archive and was told that the specific church register that I had traveled 6000 miles to see did not exist. Even though I knew another researcher had seen it there in August 2000, I couldn't convince the staff of that.



A 1939 map showing the boundaries and major towns of Pomerania

It wasn't until 2003, during our second trip to the archive in Stettin, that I got my hands on the elusive book and learned who my 3rd great grandfather was. Then the trail went cold again and I had no leads to follow.

In early 2000, I created a family history website, which turned out to be one of the most fruitful genealogical endeavors I could have undertaken. Quite unexpectedly, an unknown 3rd cousin in Germany contacted me in 2005 to say he had seen my website and that he believed we were related. Moreover, he knew the names of four of my 4th great grandparents and where they had lived. Without my website, I probably never would have learned about my German cousin and the family history he shared with me.

A key piece of information he provided was the names of the villages near Kolberg where my ancestors lived in the 1700's. This information was exactly what I needed to connect with previously published Maass lineage going back to 1540. At least three books have been invaluable to me in pursuing my family history:

1) Gädtke, Horst 1997. Pommersche Reminiszenzen. Teil II - Pommersche Dorfgeschichte - Lassehne, Timmenhagen, Strippow-Herst.: Druckerei Heinen, 53902 Bad Münstereifel. ISBN 3-924383-07-3 - Brosch.. 218 Seiten.

2) Maaß, Carl 1963. Deutsches Geschlechterbuch Band 134: 381-478. Fünfter Ostfriesenband Genealogisches Handbuch bürgerlicher Familien. Herausgeber: Regierungs-Vizepräsident a. D. Dr. jur. Edmund Sturtz. Verlag von C.A. Starke /Limburg an der Lahn. [Note: 218 volumes have been published since 1889. Each volume is indexed and there are cumulative surname indexes as well.]

3) Vollack, Manfred 1999. Das Kolberger Land. Seine Städte und Dörfer. Ein pommersches Heimatbuch. p. 280-304. [The Kolberg LandBook].

From Carl Maaß' chapter in the DG, I not only learned the lineage of Maasses who were living in Henkenhagen (7 miles northeast of Kolberg) as far back as 1540, but that they would have attended the church in Lassehne¹ where my 4th great grandparents lived in the 1700's. The Lassehne church was the mother church for Henkenhagen and is believed to have been founded in the second half of the 1200's or early 1300's. I was further astounded to learn that a farm on the outskirts of Henkenhagen had been in the Maass family for over 400 years, from the early 1500's until Emil Maass was expelled in 1945. The books by Horst Gädtke and Manfred Vollack provided a wealth of information about the history of these villages, including when our German ancestors first settled there, where they came from, and how they lived.

Prior to the 12th century, all the Pomeranian land east of Stettin was occupied by Slavic peoples with Slavic language, customs and laws. In about 995, Pomerania was conquered by Boleslaus I, the first King of Poland. However, wars between the Poles, Danes, and Germans for possession of the area were fought with varying results for more than a century. In 1122 the Poles were victorious over the pagan Wends and Duke Boleslaw III introduced Christianity to Pomerania. He also invited the first German settlers into the area who were sought for their skills and tools needed to clear the forests, drain the marshes, build dikes and roads, and farm the land.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, tens of thousands of immigrants from the Rhineland, Westfalen, Niedersachsen, Holstein, Mecklenburg and Holland colonized Pomerania in a process called *Ostsiedlung*,² literally "settlement in the east".

German settlement in the coastal region between Kolberg and Köslin didn't begin until the second half of the 13th century. According to Horst Gädtke, there were no German noble fiefdoms in the Kolberg region prior to 1260. By the middle of the 14th century the stream of German immigrants essentially stopped. The total population had increased five-fold by then and the most arable and promising regions were largely occupied. Also, between 1348 and 1350, Black Death, one of the deadliest pandemics in human history, was peaking in Europe and would have certainly curtailed travel.

From the 15th century onward, the population of Pomerania increased almost exclusively by procreation. As the German population increased, the Slavic population, called Wends by the Germans, either moved eastward, or was completely assimilated through intermarriage. Eventually, the German language and culture dominated the country.

Learning that the Kolberg area had been settled by colonists from Friesland and Lower Saxony really perked my curiosity, because I had always wondered if the origin of the surname, Maass, was the Maas River in the Netherlands. It was this curiosity that led to my search for evidence that could establish the origin of our Baltic Coast ancestors.



A map of northern Germany around the year 1000 (HZM Sachsen = Duchy of Saxony)

As a consequence of the *Ostsiedlung*, a number of notable advances in medieval West European agriculture were introduced in Pomerania. Most notably, Germans introduced the 3-field crop rotation system of farming, the moldboard plow, and land amelioration practices such as drainage and dike or levee construction. Wendish tribes had tended to settle in pockets, usually bordering a river, which were surrounded by vast unsettled woodlands and swamps separating one tribe from another. In the *Ostsiedlung* process, swamps were drained and many forests were cleared for farming.

The migration of Germanic people from what is now the Netherlands and western and central Germany into eastern Central Europe and Eastern Europe generally followed fairly straight routes from West to East. The Southeast was settled by South Germans (Bavarians, Swabians), the central regions by the Franks, and Pomerania by Saxons and the Dutch and Flemish people. Ludwig Biewer³ recognizes two migrations of colonists into Hinter Pomerania. The first group followed the coast line and settled the coastal lands from Cammin to Leba. The second group settled farther inland, around Stargard and to the east.

Evidence that the immigrants who settled the area around Kolberg and Köslin were predominately from Frisia and Lower Saxony is credible and convincing. It is based on their introduction of:

- the Saxon style of farm house
- the Friesian's way of stabling cattle
- a different type of village layout and allocation of field boundaries
- Lübeck laws and town charters
- the Low German or Low Saxon language.

1) Saxon Farmhouse

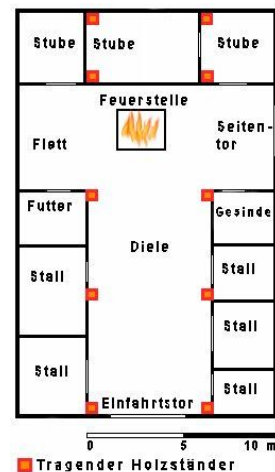


Rauchhaus in East Holstein built before 1650
(courtesy of the Heimat- und Verschönerungsverein
Malente-Gremsmühlen e. V. Germany)

The open hall-like structure was supported by two to four rows of internal posts and had a thatched gable roof. The living quarters were at the back of the farmhouse and consisted of an open kitchen and dining area, called the *Flett*, and closet-like chambers for sleeping. In the middle of the *Flett* was an open fireplace (*Feuerstelle*) ringed with fieldstones. There was no chimney; smoke simply escaped through a hole in the roof. Consequently,

these houses were also called a *Rauchhaus* (smoke house). The smoke helped to preserve fish, meat and sausages that were hung above the fireplace. Floors were made of tamped clay. There were no walls

The farmhouses built by the new settlers were timber-framed buildings in which the farmer and his livestock lived under one roof. This style of construction first emerged towards the end of the Middle Ages and was typical of houses found in northwestern Germany and the Netherlands. This style of farmhouse was commonly known as the *Niedersachsenhaus* (Lower Saxony house) or *Hallenhaus* because of its long hall-like structure. A few years ago, the framework of a *Hallenhaus* discovered in the Dutch province of Drenthe was dated to 1386.⁴

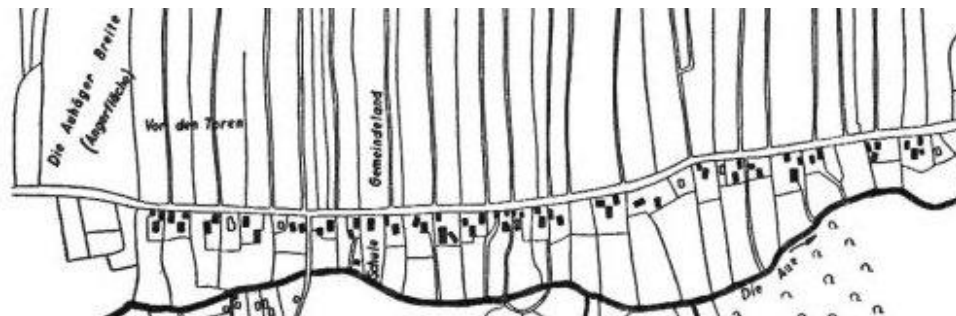


Typical floor plan of a two-post Saxon farmhouse.
Stube=Chamber; *Futter*=feed;
Seitentor=side door;
Gesinde=servants; *Tragender Holzständer*=load bearing wood posts

separating the living quarters from the stable. Cows, horses and other animals were stabled in stalls along both sides of a large center hall called a *Diele*. Pigs, because of their repulsive odor, were housed outside in separate sheds. The *Diele* provided space for threshing and other farm activities, particularly during inclement weather or in the winter. A large door at the gable end of the building, known as the *Einfahrtstor* or *Grote Dör*, faced the street to accommodate the entry of hay and grain wagons. Livestock could be taken directly to the street on their way to the village green or pastures. Crops and hay were dried and stored in the hayloft where the smoke provided protection from insects.
[Additional definitions Stube

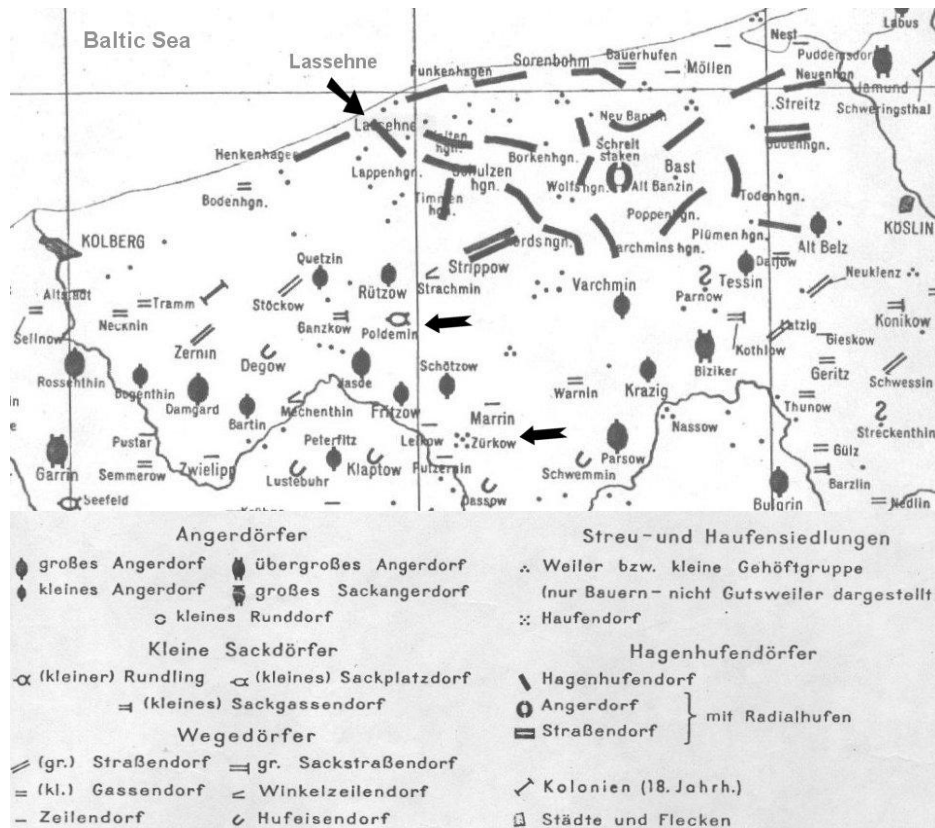
2) Village design & field boundaries

Before the *Ostsiedlung*, Slavic villages were of the *Haufendorf* type, i.e. a cluster of houses built close to each other without any obvious plan. If the village was built at the end of a dead-end road, it was called a *Sackdorf*. The Germans who settled the Kolberg region introduced new types of villages -- the *Hagenhufendorf* and the *Angerdorf* types. In a *Hagenhufendorf* settlement, houses were built along a main road, which often runs parallel to a creek or brook, on a sufficient amount of land (called a *Hufe*) to support a household. Most of them were established in newly cleared woodlands and were given German names.



One example of a *Hagenhufendorf* (adapted from the image d554977163_719.jpg found on the Historische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Schaumburg site)

Angerdorf villages have a main street which splits to enclose a large meadow in the village's center. The meadow (*Anger*) was where livestock was kept at night; but it also was where the church was built. A variation of these types, the *Straßendorf*, was introduced in a later stage of *Ostsiedlung*. These villages had houses built on both sides of a single, very long main street (*Straße*). On the 18th century map⁵ of the area between Kolberg and Köslin, we see a number of the different villages. Arrows point to two Slavic villages, Poldemin (a *Sackdorf*) and Zürkow, (a *Haufendorf*), but most are German-style villages. To the east of Henkenhagen and Lassehne, where the Maasses settled, we find a cluster of *Hagenhufendorfen*.



18th century map of historical villages and legend for the area between Kolberg and Köslin

The village boundaries were surveyed and the *Hufenverfassung* system was used to divide and classify the land. Farmland was divided into *Hufen*, much like English hides. The size of a *Hufe* differed between the village types: A *Hagenhufe*, used in the Hagenhufendorf villages, comprised 60 Pommern Morgen,⁶ about 100 acres. A *Landhufe*, used in the Angerdorf villages, comprised 30 Morgen. One farm would consist of an area of one Hagenhufe or two Landhufen, an amount of land sufficient to support a family. However, not all German settlers owned a full farm; some owned half farms and others small plots of land or gardens. Those, whose properties were too small to support their family, the *Kossäten*, *Kätner* and *Büdner*, were usually hired as workers by the full farmers (*Vollbauern*).⁷

The fields were oriented perpendicular to the road and were as wide as the residence but might extend several hundred meters behind the houses. Fields were divided into three parts which were rotated from year to year to grow two different crops while keeping one fallow.

3) Lübeck laws

The newly arriving German colonists were bound by different laws than the Slavs. Except for the nobles, the Slavs did not own the land they cultivated; whereas the German settlers did. The Germans modeled their town laws after medieval town laws that included the right to self-governance. Colonists who settled the coastal region were governed by Lübeck law, those farther inland by Magdeburger law.

Lübeck law was the constitution for a municipal form of government developed after Lübeck became a free city in Schleswig-Holstein in 1226. Eventually, Lübeck's form of government spread to about 100 other cities around the Baltic Sea. Kolberg adopted Lübeck laws in the year 1255; Köslin in 1266. The law granted the cities, towns and villages autonomy from local religious or secular rulers.

A new system of taxation was also introduced by the Germans. The Wends paid a fixed tax depending on village size; whereas the German's tithe was based on the actual crops produced. The higher productivity led to higher taxes being collected from settlers than from the Wends, even though the settlers were partly exempted from taxes in the first years after the settlement was established. This became a major reason local rulers continued to invite the German settlers.

4) Language

The new settlers spoke Middle Low German, a language that evolved from Old Saxon around the 13th century and which became the language now known as *Plattdeutsch*. Old Saxon was a West Germanic language spoken from the 9th to the 12th centuries by Saxon peoples in the Netherlands and along the north-west coast of Germany. Not surprisingly, *Plattdeutsch* is closely related to Dutch, Frisian, and English. It became the dominant language of the Hanseatic League, which was founded in the 13th century to provide economic and defensive protection of the trading interests of free northern German towns and other merchant communities surrounding the Baltic Sea. Although an important book of laws of the German Middle Ages (the *Sachsenspiegel*) and a bible were written in *Plattdeutsch*, it never became an official language of Prussia or Germany.

Although we have no direct evidence pinpointing the original homeland of the colonists who settled along the Baltic coast, their language, laws, farming methods, and way of life certainly point to Frisia and Lower Saxony. It has given me reason to believe that my Maass ancestors came from the Maas River region. It also lends credence to my belief that they took their name from the river. Since emigrants tended to follow their friends and neighbors to new lands, I suspect that many of the other colonists in the Kolberg-Köslin area also emigrated from what is now South Holland and other parts of the Netherlands.

Endnotes

¹ An earlier article on Lassehne was published by the author in *Die Pommerschen Leute* Vol. 31, Issue 1, p.6-8, 2008. Photos of the church and the *Rittergut* can be seen at http://www.genemaas.net/lassehne_photos.htm.

² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostsiedlung>

³ Biewer, Ludwig 1997. *Kleine Geschichte Pommerns* (Taschenbuch). Bund der Vertriebenen - Vereinigte Landsmannschaften und Landesverbände e.V. [An English translation titled "Short History of Pomerania" appears on Heinz Radde's site at: <http://grosstuchen.de/HistoryPomerania.html>

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low_German_house (no citation for the original source was given).

⁵ *Historischer Atlas von Pommern*, Karte 3, Karte der Historischen Dorfformen, 18 Jahrh., Vol. 3, 1963.

⁶ One Morgen was approximately the amount of land one man with an ox could plow during the morning hours of a day.

⁷ August Haxthausen and Alexander Padberg: *The Constitution of the rural provinces of East and West Prussia*. Königsberg 1839, S. Königsberg, 1839, p. 337. (or see Google translation of <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Büdner>)