

Early Lutheran History in the United States

While we as Missouri Synod Lutherans trace our history back to several hundred Germans that immigrated to America in 1838, there were Lutherans in what would become the United States of America long before us. Actually, Lutherans were in America for over 200 years prior to our LCMS forefathers landing in New Orleans and trekking up the Mississippi River to Missouri.

You may notice as you travel throughout our nation that some areas have more Lutherans than others. You also may sometimes notice a “pocket” of Lutheran congregations in an area you may not expect. Why is this? In summary, if you follow the immigration and migration patterns of Germans and Scandinavians you will usually have the answer. Where Germans and Scandinavians went, Lutheranism came with them.

A fairly detailed (375 pages) history of Lutherans in American can be found in the book *Lutherans in America: A New History* by Mark Granquist (2015, Fortress Press).

The Very First American Lutherans

The first Lutheran pastor to set foot in what would become the United States was Rasmus Jensen of Denmark who arrived in 1619 with a small band of Danish explorers who established a small colony on the Hudson Bay. This colony would later be absorbed by the Dutch as part of New Netherlands (later New York).

The first Lutheran pastor to serve as pastor on a longer-term basis was Reorus Torkillus of Sweden. In 1637 Swedes established the colony of New Sweden (later Delaware). A Lutheran community existed here until the British also took control of the colony and the Lutherans here were essentially absorbed by the Anglican Church.

Later Colonial Lutheran Churches

The highest concentration of Lutherans in Colonial America was found in *Pennsylvania*, the 12th of the 13 Colonies to be established in 1680. Founded by William Penn, a Quaker, this colony offered almost complete religious freedom and had no state church. As a result, people from a variety of countries immigrated there and it quickly become one of the largest colonies in terms of population and home to early Americans largest city, Philadelphia.

Huge numbers of Germans came to Pennsylvania. They became known as the “Pennsylvania Dutch” (a perversion of “Deutsch”). Not all of these German immigrants were Lutherans. There were Amish, Mennonites, Reformed, and Moravians. However, many of them were Lutherans. A towering figure in American Lutheranism is *Henry Muhlenberg* (1711-1787). He arrived in Pennsylvania from Germany in 1742. Muhlenberg worked to establish churches, organized the first Lutheran Synod in America, and prepared a hymnal. He traveled throughout Colonial America and had a large role in establishing Lutheran faith communities.

A prominent Lutheran community was, to the surprise of many, established in Georgia, the last of the 13 Colonies to be established (1733). The German-speaking Lutheran *Salzburgers* arrived with 46 souls in 1734. About 1,000 more would later arrive. They would establish a community named “New Ebenezer”, about 20 miles north of the Savannah. The church they built, Jerusalem Evangelical Lutheran Church, is the oldest still operating Lutheran Church in the U.S. to meet in its original location. The Salzburgers played a large role in early Georgia history, and the state’s first elected governor, John Adam Treutlen, was a Salzburger!

On to the Frontier

Americans began to migrate further into the frontier regions of the America in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Some of these settlers were Germans. German, and later Scandinavian, immigrants would arrive in large numbers. Many of these new Americans settled in what we call the Midwest today. They were often isolated on small farms or in small communities. Many of these settlers were Lutheran in heritage, but pastors and formal Christian education were rare. *Friedrich Wyneken* (1810-1876) arrived in the U.S. (Baltimore, Maryland) in 1838. This fiery preacher (known as the “thunder after the lightning”) later traveled much throughout the Midwest ministering to far-flung communities. He did strong work especially around Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, a Lutheran college would be established. Some of the frontier churches established became members of the LCMS when it was formed.