

COMMON BLOOD

Robert Alston Jones

COMMON BLOOD:

*The Life and Times of an Immigrant
Family in Charleston, South Carolina*

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*For my grandchildren
Lily, Loey, Mae, Piper, Walden, and Winnie
And theirs to come*

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I have lived with these ancestral family members so long that they have come, and are, alive to me. In their virtual presence, I acknowledge and thank them for everything they endured in establishing the ancestral lineages that I have written about in the chapters that follow, and which I confidently assert became part of the fabric of Charleston—that unique city on the South Carolina coast. I owe particular gratitude to those whose stories seemed eminently illustrative of the intersection of individual lives with the historical context of their times—my great-great-grandfathers Peter Weber and Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Struhs, my great-grandfathers Bernhard Heinrich Bequest and Seaborn Jones, my great-great-grandmother Jane Thompson—and not least, their spouses and their children who carried each ancestral heritage into a future that has now become the past.

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I

INTRODUCTION

I initially intended to write this family history for my children and their children—in the hope that at some point in their lives they would be interested in their cultural heritage. That interest, I appreciated, sometimes takes a while to develop: early maturity is too busy with life in the present to find time to think about life in the past. I was nonetheless firmly convinced that where and from what one has come often influences where one heads in the future: the lucky ones discover this perspective early enough to appreciate that a certain foundation marks their lives whether they wish to admit it or not. At some point, however, I thought the stories I had discovered were worthy of a wider audience—readers who appreciate that history does indeed repeat itself, and who find social, cultural, and political history fascinating in its ability to provide a vision of both the past and the future.

The particular cultural heritage that I delineate interweaves European and American strands of [primarily] nineteenth-century history by looking at an immigrant community that was in many ways unique and that has been largely overlooked. I was born in Charleston, South Carolina, a descendant of post-colonial English and German immigrants, and it is their story that I want to tell. Charleston by almost unanimous consent has always represented a unique cultural context, a city then and now characteristically not like any other on either coast or in the middle. Charlestonians have always talked differently, thought differently, and acted differently than the rest of the state, the region, and, for that matter, the entire country. The city's Lowcountry blend of elegance, arrogance, lethargy, mixed with its architecture, cuisine, and geography has forestalled any attempt to replicate it anywhere else. It is unto itself—ask anyone from Charleston!

Of course, Charleston was not always the beautiful city that is now a tourist destination. It is famous for its colonial heritage, and its current state of

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historical preservation is a twentieth-century phenomenon that imparts to its environs the character of an open-air museum. Between its colonial past and its current vitality lies a century or more of development that often was not pretty, not healthy, not admirable, nor forward-thinking. It was during that period from the early 1800s to the turn of the twentieth-century that an extended family of English and German immigrants evolved into Charlestonians of a slightly different character than those citizens who gained fame of one sort or another and whose names appear in the history books as Charleston notables. These immigrants were never the blue-bloods who populated the Charleston peninsula “below Broad”, although they may have lived in that area before it accrued its snob status. These were the European settlers who took up residence carrying lots of cultural baggage, and if light in worldly possessions and wherewithal, were laden with determination and backbone. They were the common blood that played a significant role in transforming a patriarchal planter society mired in itself into a southern culture that somehow managed to save itself.

The character of the immigrant community in Charleston is generally not well-known.¹ It is not that it wasn’t diverse—there were the English, the Irish, the Italians, the Germans, and the Jews—but it seems not to have been of sufficient interest or significance to anyone to warrant serious consideration. While Charleston was of major importance during Colonial and post-colonial times, it declined in importance as other cities expanded and as the original East Coast territory moved westward. In most cases, post-colonial English newcomers weren’t even thought of as *immigrants*, although they streamed in throughout the nineteenth century along with numerous others from continental Europe. For that matter, we rarely think of any colonial settlers as *immigrants*. From the pilgrims onward, however, those arriving on newly found shores were as much representatives of migration, emigration, and immigration as any who left Europe in the later century to establish themselves in a new land. In the nineteenth century, however, those who came and lived in Charleston were not in the mainstream. One can find numerous studies of ethnic immigrant communities in cities to the north and west—the Irish and Italians in the northeastern cities, the Germans in Missouri, Texas, and Wisconsin, the Scandinavians in the Upper Midwest. The immigrants in Charleston, although

¹ A recent work by Andrea Mehrländer, *The Germans of Charleston, Richmond, and New Orleans during the Civil War Period* (Berlin/New York: DeGruyter, 2011), cites a number of articles and monographs on the German immigrants in Charleston, but there are only eight items in her list, including one dissertation. Her study acknowledges that the relatively small percentage of immigrants who chose the states of what would become the Confederacy, compared to those who migrated to the northern states, represents in general a neglected ethnic population. None of the works she cites could be expected to have a wide readership.

I: INTRODUCTION

a significant percentage of the population,² failed to attract much attention. So as Charleston evolved from its somewhat singular beginnings into its peculiar Lowcountry, charming—if rather elitist—character, its immigrant community grew and established a solid middle class that based itself on its European roots and values, and which modified the character of the older city into what we know today.

My intent is to relate how typical my immigrant family's lives and experiences were relative to the nineteenth century cultural evolution of Charleston. The English and German stock of this extended family populate the period from about 1820 to the turn of the century. Although there are contemporary descendants of these families still living in Charleston, I have not created fictitious names to hide identities. These were real people who lived documented lives and who passed into and out of the historical record. In most cases, these persons are embodied through my interpretation of that historical record since there are precious few personal documents to give expression to the past and to actually record what went on in their lives. But there are few secrets to hide and very few remarkable feats to showcase. The family is of the most ordinary sort, and it is in their ordinariness that I find their significance. I try to explain who they were, where they came from, what they brought with them, how they managed to put down roots in the sandy soil of the South Carolina coast, how they were buffeted by all the winds of historical change that blew after their arrival, how they transformed themselves from immigrants to residents, what legacy they left behind as Charlestonians.

² Ira Berlin and Herbert Gutman state that “the peculiar pattern of European migration and settlement in the slave states gave immigrants importance far beyond their numbers and projected foreign-born workers into a place in the Southern working class that rivaled the role played by immigrants in the North. Although a comparatively small number of Europeans migrated to the South during the nineteenth century, those who did generally settled in cities. South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama had few immigrants, but Charleston, Savannah, and Mobile had many. At mid-century, the foreign-born population of these states reached 3 percent only in the case of South Carolina. But more than a fifth of Charleston's residents, more than a quarter of Savannah's, and almost a third of Mobile's had been born outside the United States” (Berlin and Gutman 1983, 1177-78).