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How Did You Come to America, John Vanderstay?

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Finding Passenger Records Using Friends, Associates and Neighbors

I suspect we all have “problem” ancestors. They are the ancestors that “play hard to get” and don’t give up their secrets so easily. John Vanderstay is one of my “problem” ancestors.

I have spent more than a decade attempting to nail down his immigration path. I knew he emigrated from Germany, or was it Holland? I was certain he first settled in Weston, Platte, Missouri, or did he settle somewhere on the east coast first? I was sure he arrived in 1857, but it could have been 1856 or 1858 maybe even 1855. Finally, I was absolutely confident that I had no idea through what port he entered or with whom he migrated. See what I mean? A “problem” ancestor.

The perplexing nature of this problem has been exacerbated by the sheer multitude of name spelling variations. I understand that spelling variations are one of the “givens” in the book of genealogy challenges. But in my experiences, the Vanderstays tilt the difficulty scale. Here is a sampling of the ways I’ve found it spelled: One, two and three word variations; Van vs. Von prefixes; Vanderstay or Vanderstag or staag or steng; Vanflustay; and the all-time winner – Vandermaaij!

Tackling the Genealogy Problem with FANs

From preeminent authorities down to us mere itinerant preachers of the Genealogy Gospel, genealogists have spoken of the wonders of researching not just an ancestor’s direct line but also of looking at the world in which they lived through the experiences of their “FANs” – friends, associates, and neighbors. Why? Because our ancestors lived in communities, traveled in communities, and died in communities of people. And where you find their marriage witnesses, their children’s baptism godparents, their next-door neighbors, their naturalization sponsors, their witnesses to deeds or probate, you find your ancestors. Look to your own life for evidence. In your life, were any of the above witnesses, sponsors, or neighbors your relatives?

Outline the Known Facts

After many years of “hit and miss” research, I decided to get serious and create a timeline of everything I knew about John Vanderstay and his immediate family. With a preponderance of research, I had a fairly rich description of his life – albeit without the critical immigration story. I knew when and where he was born, married, had children, lived, sat out the Civil War, and died. Yet nothing pointed to his immigration other than knowing which children were born in Germany and which were born in Missouri, which allowed me to frame the probable period of migration.

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John Vanderstay

Age	Year	Date	Event	Location	Source	Comments
0	1823	4-Jun	Birth/Baptism	Pfalzdorf, Rheinland, Preußen, Germany	6, 10	
29	1853	15-Apr	m. Gertrude Koenen	Pfalzdorf, Rheinland, Prussia	9	
31	1854	30-Sep	b. William	Pfalzdorf, Rheinland, Preußen, Germany	1, 2, 3, 4, 8	Pfalzdorf, Rheinland, Preußen, Germany Wilhelm Van Der Stay
33	1857	11-Mar	b. Peter	Platte, MO	1, 2, 3, 4	Weston
34	1857	6-Nov	land purchase	Platte, MO	7	Weston Lot 296, Block 22 \$350
35	1858	11-Sep	b. Theodore	Platte, MO	2	Weston
37	1860		Residence	Platte, MO	2	Weston laborer
38	1861	28-Aug	b. Elizabeth	Platte, MO	1, 3, 4	Weston
41	1864		b. Mary	Platte, MO	1, 3, 4	Weston
43	1866	4-Nov	b. Margaret/Martha	Platte, MO	1, 3, 4	Weston
47	1870		Residence	Platte, MO	1	Weston farmer
52	1875		Residence	Atchison, KS	4	Township of Walnut Value of Property \$600 farmer
57	1880		Residence	Atchison, KS	3	Atchison Milk man
72	1895		Residence	Atchison, KS	5	Atchison John & Gertrude
77	1900		Residence	Atchison, KS	11	Atchison John & William - naturalized 7 children; 5 living
48	1902	2-Jan	Death	Atchison, KS	6	Atchison Mount Calvary Cemetery
	1907	10-Apr	d. Gertrude	Atchison, KS	6	Atchison Mount Calvary Cemetery

Expand the Research to the Birth Family

John was one of five adult Vanderstay siblings who immigrated and settled in Weston, Platte, Missouri based on information found in church, land, and census records. They were Catherine Vanderstay Gerlings, Frank Vanderstay, Anna Maria Vanderstay Foelling/Felling, and Wilhemina Vanderstay Merwick. Because I had such difficulty finding John Vanderstay's immigration records, I turned to his family for immigration records – hoping I might have better luck. (If you can't find your keys under the well-lit lamppost grab a flashlight and look elsewhere, the saying goes.) I opted to begin my extended research with Frank Vanderstay because he, unlike his sisters, didn't change last names and complicate my research.

I outlined Frank Vanderstay's life just as I had created a timeline for John Vanderstay. This clarified when he most probably migrated to America. Then I looked for his passenger record or naturalization record – anything that would tell me his migration story. Maybe he migrated with John.

And as luck – and a good strategy – would have it, I came upon a passenger whom another researcher had identified as his great grandfather, Frank Vanderstay. The name, written on a torn and taped section of the record was transcribed “Frane Vandermaaij.” This seemed very promising. But we need to check these things out before adding the record to the tree. Frank's wife's name was Elizabeth on the passenger record. That was right. Frank's sisters, Wilhemina and Maria, were listed with their correct, yet approximate, ages. That's good compelling evidence. Finally, there were two persons (a man and a woman ages 59 and 60) clearly listed as part of this family. Although the handwriting was hard to decipher, I can speculate that they were Frank's parents. When the family members and ages correlated, I felt there was a case to be made that this indeed was the passenger record for Frank Vanderstay.

If this is correct, Frank came to America with his wife, parents, and two older sisters. Now I had a pool of FANs (friends, associates, and neighbors) on which to base further research.

Which Nationality: German or Dutch?

Frank Vanderstay's passenger record was in the database entitled Dutch Immigrants to America – New Orleans Passenger Records 1820 to 1945² on www.ancestry.com. Here Frank self-identifies as being from "Holland." I did not expect to find the Vanderstays in a database of Dutch Immigrants. Further, I was surprised at Frank saying he's from "Holland." All of my research to date pointed to the family origin being Pfalzdorf, Germany. So, why is he listing his place of origin as "Holland?"

I looked at a map³ in search of answers. Pfalzdorf is very, very close to Holland. I can easily see why he would be on a list of "Dutch" passengers, and why he may have listed himself as from Holland.



So Where's John Vanderstay?

Now I had a record group or database in which to focus my research having found Frank Vanderstay in the Dutch passenger list records. Hurriedly, I typed in "John Vanderstay" in this singular database, very eager to find my most elusive ancestor. And nothing. I tried every other spelling variation. Nothing. Surely, he must have migrated in the same or similar manner as his brother either before or after him but nothing was materializing in my searches. If my theory is correct, it may be the spelling that's tripping me up. But there's no telling what spelling was used. I was stuck.

Again, Remember the FANs

I took a deep breath and looked to John's extended birth family to search for another FAN in this database. I had accounted for the immigration of three siblings (Frank, Anna Maria, and Wilhelmina), but not that of Catherine. Catherine married John Gerling in Germany! Maybe they migrated together as husband and wife and under the Gerling name? Maybe she migrated with

² Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1820-1902; Series: M259; Roll #: 42. Ancestry.com. New Orleans, Passenger Lists, 1820-1945 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006.

³ Google Maps. Maps.google.com, Pfalzdorf, Germany

John and his wife, Gertrude? Gerling, I thought, was a more easily spelled last name than Vanderstay, and I might have a better chance of finding it, so I tried it.

And voila! Catherine (Vanderstay) Gerling, her husband, John, and their three children (Johann, Wilhelm, and Heinrich) are listed together on the passenger records⁴. And a few lines up, there it was plain as day, "Johann Von der Steny." Accompanying John were his wife, Gertrude, and son, Wilhelm. Finally, at the bottom of the same page, the Foellings – Gerhardt, his wife, children and parents. (Gerhard's brother, John, arrived in America previously on another ship, would marry Anna Maria Vanderstay shortly after her arrival.) The three families arrived in the Port of New Orleans on April 28, 1856 on the ship Fanny Fonsdick as citizens of "Prussia," mixed among other passengers from "Holland."

Lessons Learned

John Vanderstay and a dozen immediate and extended family members migrated to America and settled in Weston, Missouri. Then a year later, almost to the date, the remaining members of this triad of families (Frank, Wilhelmina, and Anna Maria Vanderstay and their parents) followed the family to America to complete the community.

If ever there was a testimony to the evidence of the power of FANs, I believe this to be it. I was up against a brick wall for a decade, having only researched my direct line ancestor, "John Vanderstay," and never finding his immigration story. However, it only took me a couple hours to break through the wall once I looked at his extended family – his FANs.

Source Table for John Vanderstay's Timeline

Source
1 Records Administration, n.d. 1870; Census Place: Weston, Platte, Missouri; Roll: M593_799; Page: 429B; Image: 267; Family History Library Film: 552298.
2 Records Administration, n.d. Year: 1860; Census Place: Weston, Platte, Missouri; Roll: M653_640; Page: 696; Image: 182; Family History Library Film: 803640.
3 Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C. 1880; Census Place: Atchison City, Atchison, Kansas; Roll: 372; Family History Film: 1254872; Page: 275C; Enumeration District: 002; Image: 0555.
4 1875 Kansas State Census. Microfilm reels K-1 – K-20. Kansas State Historical Society. Ancestry.com.. Kansas State Census Collection, 1855-1925 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations inc, 2009.
5 1895 Kansas State Census. Microfilm reels K-1 - K-169, Kansas State Historical Society. Ancestry.com. Kansas State Census Collection, 1855 - 1925 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations inc., 2009.
6 Mount Calvary Cemetery, Atchison, Kansas, record added June 28, 2010, Memorial #54228524, www.findagrave.com
7 Missouri, Platte County. Deed index B 1853-70. Office of the Register of Deeds, Platte City. Book N, p 235
8 "Germany, Births and Baptisms, 1558-1898," index, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/NH5C-BF7 : accessed 29 April 2012), Wilhelm Van Der Stay (1854).
9 "Germany, Marriages, 1558-1929," index, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/J4GV-ZYX : accessed 29 April 2012), Johann Van Der Stay (1853).
10 "Germany, Births and Baptisms, 1558-1898," index, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/NH5C-P9Y : accessed 29 April 2012), Johann Van De Stay (1823).
11 Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls. Year: 1900; Census Place: Atchison Ward 2, Atchison, Kansas; Roll: 470; Page: 9A; Enumeration District: 2; FHL microfilm: 1240470.

⁴ Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1820-1902; Series: M259; Roll #: 42. Ancestry.com. New Orleans, Passenger Lists, 1820-1945 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006.