

Early German Colonies

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On a holiday in the Southern Caribbean I was intrigued to find that, when it was first founded in 1529, the present day city of Maracaibo in Venezuela was named New Nuremberg. Looking further into this name revealed that several German states founded colonies – in South America and elsewhere - at a relatively early date. In the period in question of course (roughly 1500-1700) the term *Germany* referred not to a single nation, but to a collection of hundreds of political entities, most of which were part of the Holy Roman Empire

The first German colony, lasting from 1528-46 was indeed *Klein Venedig* ('Little Venice') in the northern part of modern Venezuela. This owed its origin to a coincidence of interests between Charles V of Spain - whose successful campaign to become Holy Roman Emperor had been greatly assisted by the Welser and Fugger banking families, based in Augsburg. Perhaps surprisingly, Augsburg is in Southern Germany and about as far from the sea as is anywhere in Western Europe. Anyway, Charles was having problems repaying his loans, while at the same time the bankers were interested in extending their reach outside Europe and in particular to South America. A deal was struck in 1528, whereby the bankers would be allowed rights there if they helped to develop a colony on Spanish territory (remember that at this time, Charles V was also King of Spain). This would offset part of Charles's loan whilst also finance the development of the area at no cost to him, for it was the bankers who were obliged to provide a fleet and construct forts and cities, in return for a share of the profits. The area chosen was thought to be close to the gold rich land of *El Dorado*, and so 150 German miners were sent out with the expeditionary force. In addition 4,000 slaves were brought from Africa to add to the numbers of locals to be employed in working the sugar plantations. Unfortunately, although profits were made, the German contingent was too rapacious for Charles's liking and he cancelled the contract in 1546.

It is worth noting, from the modern point of view, that in 1542 Charles V regulated the use of South American natives as slaves in Spain and her colonies – whilst continuing to allow the importation of negroes from Africa. It may be that his particular interest in *Klein Venedig* influenced both his decision on this matter and his subsequent action against the German colonists.

Over a hundred years passed before any other colonies were established, but when this happened, both the Caribbean and Africa were involved. Taking these in chronological order the history of these early modern Germanic colonies was as follows.

The Caribbean:

- (1) Starting in 1637 Duke Jacob Kettler of Courland (in modern day Latvia, at that time dominated by German aristocratic families) used his large trading fleet to establish a colony on Tobago in the West Indies. The attempt failed then and on several further occasions, mainly because of blockades maintained by the Spanish, who were the dominant power in the area. In 1654 a better fleet and more settlers were sent and the attempt had more success; but the venture was put under pressure by Dutch settlements nearby, which were larger and more successful. In the end (1660), Sweden occupied Courland during the Second Northern War and destroyed its merchant fleet; and the Tobagan colony was absorbed into the Dutch. For a short time (1651) Courland also had an outpost at the mouth of the Gambia river.
- (2) From 1685 the Brandenburg-African Society leased a trading post from the Danes in St. Thomas (now part of the U.S. Virgin Islands) to support the trade in slaves which it ran into the Caribbean and North America from its African colonies (see below). This replaced a former trading post on Tortola. At one time, St Thomas was the major slave trading centre in the region; but in 1720, the Danes took back the facility without compensation. It is worth noting that, although Brandenburg is landlocked, it was associated with Prussia and so had access to ports on the Baltic.
- (3) In 1689 the small (and landlocked) Duchy of Hanau signed a contract to lease a large area of modern Guyana from the Dutch West India Company. This was a speculative venture which needed to attract further funds, since Hanau was small and did not have either the people or the money to satisfy its part of the contract. Increasing losses forced abandonment of the project in 1693.

Africa:

- (4) Courland established a trading post at the mouth of the Gambia river in 1651 which lasted until 1664. At this date, the colony was ceded to Britain.
- (5) In 1682 the Brandenburg-African Society, encouraged by Friedrich Wilhelm I (Elector of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia) established Fort Gross Friedrichsburg in modern Ghana. There was some trading in raw materials, but the major activity was providing slaves for the West Indies. At first things went well and the Duke became full owner of the Society. From 1695 there were however signs of trouble. The society's fleet was small and vulnerable to attack. After Friedrich Wilhelm's death in 1701, his successor Friedrich I (now King of Prussia) was much less interested in the colonies. He largely left them alone, which led to their bankruptcy in 1711. The next King of Prussia lost interest altogether and sold Gross Friedrichsburg to Holland in 1718.

- (6) Arguin, a small island off the coast of modern Mauretania, changed hands several times and, following a period when it was abandoned, was newly colonised by the Brandenburg-African Society from 1685. Its aridity and poor anchorage always made it of marginal value and this too was sold to the Dutch, in 1721.
- (7) Whydah - modern Ouidah in Benin - was also used by the Brandenburg-African Society around 1700. It was a small territory but with a big slave trade and was jointly run with the British and Dutch.

In general, then, the German colonies in the period we have discussed were relatively small and did not last long. A major reason for this was that the German states lacked well-developed navies, especially ones designed for ocean voyages. In some cases, they were landlocked; but even when they had a coast on the North Sea or the Baltic, this was small and relatively unimportant, so that the West European powers – Spain, Portugal, England, France and Holland, all had a natural advantage when it came to global exploration.

In addition, in some cases, for example Hanau, the German state undertaking or underpinning the enterprise was relatively small, and lacked the resources to hold its own in the long run. Lack of sufficient financial resources should not have been a problem for Augsburg (which was funded by the Welsers and Fuggers), or for Courland, or Brandenburg-Prussia; but, even in these cases, there was a doubt as to how committed the Germans were, when faced with intense competition from larger maritime powers. In the case of *Klein Venedig*, the venture ended when the promoter Charles V cancelled the contract. In the case of Courland, the end came because of local European strife. In the case of the Brandenburg-African Society, one almost feels it was a matter of destiny, given what Prussia went on to become in the late 18th and 19th centuries.