

Pennsylvania Dutch Crafts and Culture

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Many people hold two common misperceptions about the Pennsylvania Dutch: first, that these people live exclusively in the state of Pennsylvania; second, that their ancestors came from Holland. Neither assumption is correct.

One can find large Pennsylvania Dutch communities in Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, the Carolinas, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, and smaller groups in other states. It might be better to term these people “Pennsylvania German,” since *Deutsch* means “German” in the German language. English settlers in America corrupted the term *Deutsch* to “Dutch.” The German immigrants of that time were not members of one formal country, since that region of Europe was a loose collection of principalities, cities, and protectorates. The nation of Germany came into being in 1848. The ancestors of today’s Pennsylvania Dutch came to America (mostly before 1800) from those areas of Europe where the German language was spoken—parts of today’s nations of Poland, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Russia, France, as well as Germany.

Pennsylvania Dutch Culture

Two distinct groups of German immigrants came to America in the years before 1848. The Fancy Germans, or Lutherans, brought their elaborate folk history with them, including the ornate customs of Christmas and Easter, the Yule tree and log, colorful decorations, baskets, and pictures of bunnies.¹

The other German group was the Plain or *Pietist* Germans. They included members of the Mennonite, Amish, Dunker, and Brethren denominations. The Plain Germans wore distinctive, plain clothes



and adhered to a rural life-style guided by their interpretation of the Bible, which stressed nonviolence in human affairs and simplicity in material things.

The fancy Dutch were assimilated into mainstream American culture. The Amish however, have tried to resist pressures to

modernize. One can find Amish family groups and communities in several states that have accepted parts of modern society in varying degrees, but still follow many of the old traditions.

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Family

The traditional Pennsylvania Dutch cherish the family and take pride in their homes. Each family member is important to the survival of a self-sustaining household. The father is the central figure in the family, making important decisions concerning the finances and education. Sons are apprenticed to their fathers, learning about farming, craftsmanship, and business. Girls are educated by their mothers in the arts of the housewife: making and mending clothes, doing housework, gardening, and cooking. Children enjoy homemade toys instead of store bought.

The home and the church are the center of culture, and young and old enjoyed a sense of belonging.²

Food

Food plays a large part in the lifestyles of the Pennsylvania Dutch. The cuisine is plain, wholesome, and hearty. Many “middle American” recipes trace their origins to traditional German cooking.³ Many tasty dishes were perfected by the Dutch housewives through a blending of the traditional cooking of their homelands and the particular ingredients available in their new country.

Certain foods are traditionally served at a specific season of the year. For example, on Shrove Tuesday, raised doughnuts, called *fastnachts* are served. Christmas is the season for baking innumerable sandtarts, butter cookies, nut kisses, and other fancy cookies.

Market House

The Pennsylvania Dutch market house presents an ever-changing picture of plenty. At many of the stalls, wives and daughters conduct the business, often wearing the dress of the “plain people.” Today, one can visit these markets and hear many of the stall-holders speaking Pennsylvania Dutch (a German dialect), among themselves as well as English.⁴

Arts and Crafts

Even during Colonial days, the Pennsylvania Dutch had a strong, imaginative feeling for color and design.



Creative decoration appeared on such earthy objects as barns, fences, wagons and weather-vanes.⁵ Even among many of the plain Dutch, the home became a temple to be made beautiful and colorful.⁶

Only the fancy Pennsylvania Dutch make hex signs (circular designs often painted or printed on a disk of wood). Both plain and fancy Dutch make *frakturs* (illuminated manuscripts) and *scherenschnitte* (pronounced sher-endshnit'-uh), paper cut with fine scissors into symmetrical designs or vignettes. Activities for elementary students that introduce these crafts are suggested on the following pages.

These craft activities were part of a larger lesson that also included making and eating some traditional Pennsylvania Dutch foods and playing traditional games.

Introducing students to Pennsylvania Dutch crafts can help them understand one of the many cultures within our diverse society. By creating handmade projects similar to the style of the traditional Pennsylvania Dutch artisans (hex signs, frakturs, and scherenschnitte), students can begin to appreciate some of the aesthetic contributions of the Pennsylvania Dutch as well as how arts and crafts can be an important part of their own recreation. 🎨

Notes

1. Pennsylvania-German Culture, www.horseshoe.cc.
2. William T. Parson, *The Pennsylvania Dutch: A Persistent Minority* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1976).
3. Lucy Hanley, ed., *Amish Cooking* (Gettysburg, PA: Americana Souvenirs and Gifts, 1987).
4. *Pennsylvania Dutch Cooking* (Gettysburg, PA: Conestoga Crafts, 1982).
5. Pennsylvania Dutch Arts, www.horseshoe.cc.
6. Pennsylvania Dutch Culture, www.horseshoe.cc.

Suggested Reading

- Aurand, Jr., A. M. *Popular Home Remedies and Superstitions of the Pennsylvania Germans*. Lancaster, PA: The Aurand Press, 2000.
- Day, J. C. *Pennsylvania Dutch Cut & Use Stencils*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998.
- Hanley, L. ed., *Amish Cooking*. Gettysburg, PA: Americana Souvenirs and Gifts, 1996.
- Mauer, W. *Hex Signs and Their Meanings*. Gettysburg, PA: Garden Spot Gifts, 1996.
- Schläpfer-Geiser, S. *Scherenschnitte*. Ashville, NC: Lark Books, 1996.
- Smith, E. S. *Hex Signs and Other Barn Decorations*. Lebanon, PA: Applied Arts Publishers, 1965.
- Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore*. Lebanon, PA: Applied Arts Publishers, 1960.

Suggested Videos

- “Calligraphy 1: Learning Art of Beautiful Writing.” Learn & Earn Video (1989), 29 minutes.
- “Wycinanki: Polish Papercutting.” Crizmac Art & Cultural Education Materials (2000), 13 minutes.
- “Expressions of Common Hands.” Time Warner Cable Productions (1998), 60 minutes.
- “The Amish: A People of Preservation” PBS Documentary. Heritage Productions (2000) 54 minutes.

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