

FRIEDRICH EILER, BUILDING IDENTITY FROM SCANT CLUES

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What does a genealogist do when an individual appears out of nowhere and briefly interacts with your ancestor? What if he then disappears? What if that individual married your great grandmother and you have little information about who he was and what became of him? Such was the situation with Friedrich Eiler, the second husband of my Ostfriesen great grandmother, Ida (van Hoorn) Berg.

When visiting the Freeport (IL) Public Library, I asked the librarian for all the marriage certificates associated with my Berg family. As expected, she handed over the certificates for the two daughters, but she also handed me a third—of a previously unknown second marriage of their mother and my ancestor. The certificate included four facts—two names, a date and a location.¹ That was it. Neither witnesses nor church was named. Who was Friedrich Eiler?

Not to worry—the marriage date was close to the 1860 census! Surely, he could be found! Nope. Nothing. Thus, began a frustrating multi-year search for the second husband of my ancestor.

Make a timeline of the known information about your ancestor of interest and compare that with the multiple candidates. This will show you the gaps and the overlaps. I compared Ida's and Friedrich's known data with that of all the candidates for Friedrich.

Knowing Ida was of the Reformed faith and lived in Freeport, the next stop was the German Reformed church (now St. John's Presbyterian) to see if they recorded any additional information not found on the state certificate. My search was rewarded with one additional fact—Friedrich was born in Ober Gleen, Alsfeld Kries, Hesse-Darmstadt, Germany, but still no indication of age.

Ida was 50 years old at the time of her marriage. Did Ida marry a younger man? Or, did she marry a much older man who needed someone to take care of him? Ida had six children, the youngest 3 years old. Her husband, a tailor, Siben Berg, had died a year and a half before. How desperate was she?

In November 1862, "Ida Eyler" gave permission for her minor daughter (age 15) to marry. This is odd. Ostfriesens marry late, in their 20s--even the females. Again, what was going on?

In December 1862 and now using the name of her first husband, "Ida Berg, widow" joined the Silver Creek Reformed Church (SCRC) in Stephenson County, Illinois, located 12 miles outside of Freeport. This was also odd. This Church is the "mother ship" of her faith. She hadn't joined SCRC earlier, because she lived in Freeport. Had she moved?

¹ Sources are listed in bibliographic form at the end of this syllabus.

No divorce of Friedrich and Ida was recorded in Stephenson County, Illinois. Neither was a death of Friedrich recorded. Things were getting “curiouser and curiouser.”²

Ida is well documented. In 1871, “Ida Berg” purchased land in Ackley, Hardin County, Iowa. She does not appear in the 1870 census for Stephenson or Hardin County, nor is she identifiable in the 1865 Illinois state “tick mark” census, but by following her children, her timeline is quite complete. Three obituaries announced the death of “Ida Berg” in 1889. There was no mention of Friedrich Eiler.

Numerous Fred/Friedrich Eilers/Eylers appear in US records, but no obvious candidates in Stephenson County. Each was recorded. In 1880, a Fred Eiler was confined in the Illinois Southern Penitentiary in Randolph County. In 1895 a Fred Eiler died in Cook County---all disparate bits of information with nothing to tie them together. Were these the same people or totally different individuals?

We were floundering with Fred!

Keep a running research report of your investigation of a single tough problem. Incorporate your research plan and your research log. I view these reports as my diary of findings and ideas for where else to look. Eventually, my research report on Friedrich was 37 pages long.

Work with the information you are given, even if the information you are given is international.

After searching futilely in US records and a bit desperate, I decided to check the records of Ober Gleen. Without his year of birth, if there were a lot of Friedrich Eilers in Ober Gleen, I would have few identifiers to differentiate him from other similarly named individuals. But the opposite was true—no Friedrich Eilers were born in Ober Gleen in a wide range of years!

Again, I had more questions than answers.

I broadened my search by looking at all of the records of Ober Gleen, and a single Friedrich Christian Eüler emerged. This Friedrich was married to Gertraud with six children, the last one born in 1859! There were no other individuals who were named linguistically similar to Friedrich Eiler in Ober Gleen. Was he even a candidate?

Of course, we have another fact---for this person to be our Friedrich Eiler, he had to immigrate after 1859, but before the marriage in October 1861, a very narrow range of years.

At this point, Friedrich Eiler of Illinois was still not tied to the Friedrich Christian Eüler of Ober Gleen, but he wasn’t eliminated either.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are some lessons learned when given scant clues.

² Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, originally published in 1865.

Don't forget to search for broad context so you can interpret the information contained within the records accurately and with deeper understanding. Become comfortable with the geographic area and the era. In this example, I asked more and better questions when I knew that Ida was Ostfriesen. This identified a daughter marrying too young, and the residence too far away from the mother church.

Compile all your evidence, scant as it might be into a single report. Record your genealogical journey for ONE problem in this research report. All false starts get recorded. It will look at times very messy—that's ok. Focus on a single research question and record only the evidence and your thoughts about this single problem in this report. Go slow. This system also works if you have too many same-named individuals.

Some of the adages we were taught about how to "do" genealogy may have to be abandoned. I spent an inordinate amount of time on trying to find Fred in the United States and would have been better off looking more quickly in the international records.

Collaboration was key to the success of this project. An Ancestry Public Tree connected Friedrich, but the information the collaborator had indicated he died in Germany in 1860. Nevertheless, he was still the only candidate so far. With some trepidation, I contacted the owner of the public tree and she became a willing and enthusiastic collaborator. We began working together.

Don't be afraid to ask a friend to listen to what you have and offer comments—sometimes a fresh mind gives fresh ideas.

Check out the Card Catalog of FamilySearch for your geographic area to identify image only record sets that are not accessible by a surname search.

Don't give up!

Each source found should be analyzed to determine if it indicates more records exist.

FamilySearch records were helpful but recently I have found that the Ober Gleen online index I had initial access to is no longer available! The lesson learned is-- if you find a source that is important to you make sure you document it immediately. The index led me to records held at the Family History Library where I reviewed the Ober Gleen originals on microfilm.

CONCLUSIONS

We now have Friedrich's "feet nailed to the ground" from his birth in 1823 to 1884. We suspect that he was the individual who died in 1895 at Cook County Infirmary in Dunning, Illinois. If the "Dunning Friedrich" is "our" Friedrich Eiler, then he was also the individual whose body was given to Hahnemann Medical College in Chicago for educational purposes.

Sometimes small spelling changes in a search field make a big difference in your results. Oyler was an alternative spelling that opened many other relevant "hits." "Eiler" and "Euler" resulted in very different hits

RESOURCES

Here are some of the resources we used to solve this identity dilemma of scant facts.

To solve an instance of scant clues, plan on using a large variety of sources, online and on site. "On site" does not mean that you have to physically visit. Asking for the records by email and phone obtained the newspaper articles, deeds and court records, which were not online.

- 1860 U.S. census, Stephenson County, Illinois, population schedule, Lancaster Township, p. 619, dwelling 4478, family 4335, Edith Baird (Ida Berg).
- 1870 U. S. census, Stephenson County, Illinois, population schedule, Kent Township, household 165, dwelling 167, p. 11, Frederick Sailor (Friedrich Eiler).
- 1880 U. S. census, Randolph County, Illinois, population schedule, Chester Precinct 7=7, Illinois Southern Penitentiary, ED 98, p. 86, line 35, Fred Eiler.(Friedrich Eiler)
- 1880 U. S. census, Stephenson County, Illinois, population schedule, Kent Township, ED 178, p. 20, household 174, dwelling 175, Gertrude Oyler (Gertrude Eiler).
- Berg & Bohning Family Bible, *Die Illustrirte Familien Bibel* (26 Süd Sievente Strasse, Philadelphia, Pa.: Wm. Flint & Co., 1872); present owner: C. Gordon, Plymouth, MN.
- Cook County, Illinois, death certificate no. 55, Fred Eiler (1895); digital image, *FamilySearch*.
- FindAGrave*, database (<https://www.findagrave.com> : accessed 28 December 2017), memorial page for Gertrude Euler (11 Oct 1816–13 Apr 1888), Find A Grave Memorial no. [182134222](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/182134222), citing Lena Burial Park, Lena, Stephenson County, Illinois, USA.
- "Fred Fired," *Freeport [Illinois] Daily Journal and Republican*, 28 May 1884, p. 4, col. 3.
- "Hamburg Passenger Lists, 1850-1934," SS *Humboldt*, Gertrud Euler and family (45, b. 1817, Ober Gleen, Hessen, married), departed 6 August 1862, destination New York. Arrival manifest does not exist.
- "Hamburg Passenger Lists, 1850-1934," SS *Louis Napoleon*, Friedrich Euler (35, b. 1825, Ober Gleen), departure 14 April 1860.
- Hardin County (IA) Deed Record, Book 25:439, Paul Bohning, grantor-Ida Berg, grantee (22 December 1871); County Clerk, Eldora.
- Hesse, Evangelische Kirche, Nieder-Wildungen, "*Kirchbüch*, 1820-1831," birth record, p. 46, entry 10, Friedrich Christian Euler (17 February 1823); digital image, *Archion.de* (<https://www.archion.de/en/>)
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- "Ida Berg," obituary, *Ackley (Iowa) Enterprise*, 18 January 1889, p. 4. Also, Shirley Milligan, *Ostfrieslanders in Iowa, vol. 23, Sieben Ubben van Bergen & Ida/Eda Eilerts van Ho(o)rn; self-published* (P.O. Box 1444, Banning, California, 92220, 2003), Chapter 1, p. 25, image, obituary of Ida Berg. Ms. Milligan cited the *Belmond Herald*, 16 January 1889. Also, Ida Berg, obituary, *Ostfriesische Nachrichten*, 1 February 1889, p. 3.
- Illinois Department of Corrections, "Alton State Penitentiary and Joliet/Stateville Correctional Center - Registers of Prisoners," Record Series 243.200, Illinois State Archives, image 208 of 303, Fred Eiler.
- , "Menard Correctional Center – Register of Prisoners," Record Series 243.001, Illinois State Archives, Vol 1, p. 2, Fred Eiler.
- Jennelt Evangelische Kirche (Jennelt, Ostfriesland, Germany), Taufen [Baptisms], Heiraten [Marriages] 1766-1824, 1811, no page number noted, Eda [Eilderts] [Ida (van Hoorn) Berg], baptism; FHL 1,418,068.

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Lin Strong, Forest Lake, Minnesota, [(E-ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE),] to Jill Morelli, e-mail, 31 August 2012, "G[erman] V[alley, Illinois] Book Request," Berg Research Digital File, privately held by Morelli, Seattle, Washington, 2017. Ms. Strong quotes the entry in the German Valley Reformed Church records.

Manslagt Evangelische Kirche, Taufen [Baptisms], Konf. [Confirmations], Heiraten [Marriages], Tote [Deaths] 1834-1852, 1838, p. 44, entry 4, Sieben Ubben van Bergin-Ida Eilerts van Hoorn; FHL 1,197,736

"New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957," SS *Louis Napoleon*, Fride Euler [Friedrich Eiler] (42, b. 1818, Ober Gleen), arrival 21 May 1860, destination Illinois.

"Notes from the Suburbs," *Freeport (Illinois) Weekly Democrat*," 20 April 1888, p. 4, col. 5.

Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897, bark *Copernicus*, May 1857, no page number, entries 15-21, Sievert [Simon] Berg, age 45.

"Record Book, Vol. 1-3, 1848-1904, St. John Church (Freeport, Illinois)," p. 119, entry 11, Eilers-Berg marriage, 8 October 1861.

Stephenson County, Illinois, marriage license & certificate no. m4-661, (1 November 1862), Andreas Von Bohning-Miss Sarah Berg; Freeport Public Library, Freeport.

Stephenson County, Illinois, marriage license & certificate no. 421, (8 October 1861), Fred Eiler-Eda Berg; Freeport Public Library, Freeport.

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