

Why Wiederholds Emigrated to the USA

I have been reading to learn why so many Wiederholds and their neighbors from the Eichsfeld region of Germany emigrated to the USA in the period from 1840 to 1870. The immediate reason was poverty, but the background is more complex.

The local population was mainly working out of their homes. spinning, weaving, producing cloth, both wool and later cotton, to supplement the food they could grow in a region with soil and weather not very conducive to agriculture. Wool could be obtained from nearby regions. Many Wiederhold relatives in US descend from Alsatian shepherds, using the name Wetterholt and Weatherholt in the US. Some of those may have emigrated in 1750ties when the wool from their sheep was displaced by cotton, to make cloth that was much cheaper and often more practical. Cotton was an import, coming from countries in the eastern Mediterranean, with the best quality coming from Egypt.

Why were the inhabitants of the Eichsfeld region losing their market for the cloth they were making?

The story starts a hundred years earlier. India had started exporting handwoven cotton cloth to the world. While not of great quality it started to compete with British exports of woolen cloth, made from their sheep. To protect their industry, around 1770, the British parliament passed laws restricting import of cotton cloth, in part by levying a 100% customs duty on cloth imports from India. But bales of cotton staple could still be imported.

The invention of steam power in England led to the Industrial revolution (1760-1840). By 1805 quality cotton thread could be mechanically produced. The mechanical loom was invented in 1784 needed good quality thread. Good quality thread required clean cotton, and the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney, in 1794, allowed production of such cotton in the Southern United States, replacing lower quality cotton from the Mediterranean and British colonies in the Caribbean. Between 1803 and 1833 the number of mechanical looms in England grew from 2,400 to 100,000. Mills employed over a third of the industrial workforce. In the United States slave labor made US cotton cheap, increasing its sales, profits of the plantation owners, and supported purchases of more negroes. The price of slaves rose three-fold from the 1802 to 1835, as the slave trade was being limited and disallowed by US law in 1807. Production improved in that interval and cotton became a major US export to Europe. The price of cloth became much lower, and cloth from England was exported world-wide, even replacing local manufacture in India.

Moral conflicts ensued in Great Britain, which had outlawed slavery, but where 20% of the population was involved in the production and world-wide merchandising of cloth that depended on cheap imports of cotton. Henry Ashworth, an English mill owner stated on a trip to New York in 1860, "... in this case the British people themselves were the greatest of moralists and the greatest of sinners!". New York businessmen did not care either. The situation motivated Karl Marx, who lived in England at the time, to call to end capitalism.

The steadily growing cotton business was severely interrupted by the US Civil war (1861-1865). The Union navy was successful in intercepting most exports of cotton from the Confederacy. In turn, their British-built war ships sank Union war and trading vessels. As Union soldiers occupied southern east coast harbors, and gained control of the Mississippi river around 1863, the Confederacy destroyed bales of cotton and told planters to burn their fields so that cotton would not fall into Union hands. Exports of cotton from the US became negligible. Some of the cotton that reached English harbors was sold again to Northern states in America at high markups, since their mills needed to make uniforms for Union soldiers.

The effect was that the price of cotton increased by a factor of 4 over the price in 1861, while the quality became worse. Spinning and weaving mills were improved to become more efficient, although the production of cloth in England went down by 57%. Many workers suffered, contributing to the Lancashire Cotton Famine in 1863. The situation affected workers in other European countries as well. By 1870 US cotton was again available in pre-war quantities and prices, and English cotton cloth exports doubled, usurping the markets the India had established.

The combination of all those factors meant that during the 1860ties the inhabitants of the Eichsfeld could not get cotton at feasible prices for producing cloth, while the market for wool cloth had already diminished. The more adventurous inhabitants emigrated to the US.

Much of data for this story is from the book: Jim Powell: *Losing the Thread, Cotton. Liverpool, and the American Civil War*; Liverpool University Press, 2021.

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