

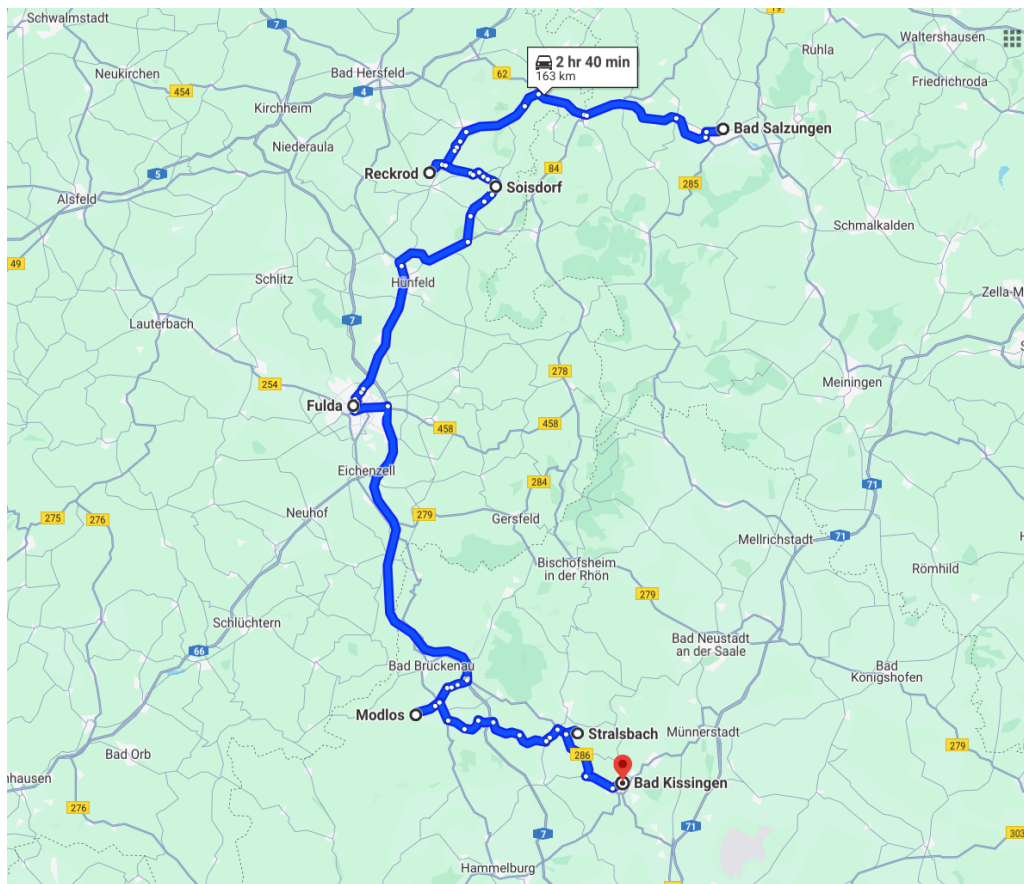
Hesse 1790-1866

Navigating Political Upheaval, Social Transformation, and Economic Strain in Pre-Industrial Germany

In the late 18th century, Hesse presented a complex political landscape, comprising small principalities, ecclesiastical territories, and free cities within the broader structure of the Holy Roman Empire. The lives of Hesse's inhabitants, and our ancestors from Burghaun, [Soisdorf](#), Reckrod and Eiterfeld, were deeply rooted in long-standing traditions, their days governed by agricultural rhythms and a rigid social hierarchy. As the century drew to a close, however, Europe-wide changes began to manifest in Hesse, heralding a period of significant transformation. The [Kester/Kister family](#) lived in the [Fulda region](#) of what is now Hessen Germany from the mid-1600s until their immigration to the United States in the 1840s. Other families from the immediate area, from the borderlands, followed in the 1860s - 1880s.

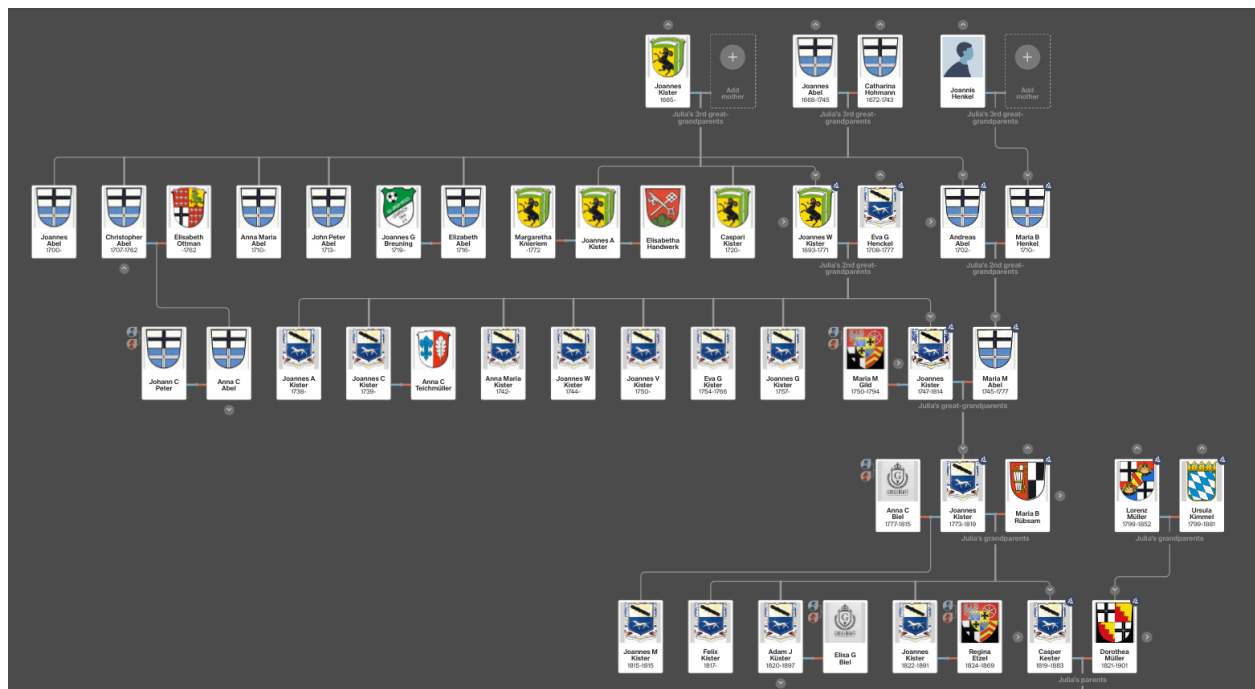
The rural villages of Hesse exemplified a social structure that had endured for generations. At the apex stood the landlords - nobles, church officials, or landgraves - while beneath them, the peasantry was stratified into various categories. The *Meiers*, who managed the estates of their lords, occupied the highest rung of the peasant hierarchy. Below them were holders of

Leibgüter, with heritable leases typically spanning two generations, and those with *Erbleihe*, a more secure form of heritable lease that had gained prevalence in the 18th century. Further down the social ladder were the *Hintersassen*, smaller landholders who performed various services for their lords, and at the bottom, the landless day laborers and renters, whose existence was often precarious. Our ancestors fell somewhere in the middle based on the information we have, some a little better off than others, but no one of significant wealth or status, mostly landowner farmers and tradespeople.



North-South spine of ancestor towns and villages
in the [borderlands](#) of Hesse-Bavaria and Thuringia

This social hierarchy was underpinned by the *Dreifelderwirtschaft*, or three-field system, which formed the backbone of the agricultural economy. Land was divided into three sections: one for winter crops like rye and wheat, another for summer crops such as oats and barley, and a third left fallow to regenerate. This rotation was strictly regulated to maintain uniformity across villages and ensure soil fertility. Complementing this system was the *Anerbensystem*, where typically the eldest son inherited the entire farm, a practice designed to prevent the fragmentation of agricultural holdings and maintain the economic viability of family farms.



We can see from the patterns of movement of our ancestors every other generation or so that they likely had heritable leases typically spanning two generations and once that was done with they moved to a different farm or village and the process started again. It seems that marriage played a role in the process and that is how land was transferred and passed along within a set of families.

The economic obligations of the peasantry were numerous and burdensome. They paid various taxes, including the *Grundzinse* and *Kontribution*, and performed *Fronendienste*, or labor services, for their lords. Perhaps the most onerous was the *Zehnte*, or tithe, which required them to give one-tenth of their produce to their lord or the church. This produce was often sold back to the peasants at a profit, further straining their resources. The concept of [company towns](#) and stores we saw a great deal of during the industrial revolution and beyond in the coal, steel, and textile regions of America wasn't a modern one.

Generally speaking, daily life for [the average Hessian peasant](#) prior to the mid-18th century was characterized by unremitting toil. Look to the 16th and 17th centuries and their lives were even more grim with war, destruction, disease and poverty all around them for well over two hundred years. The workday began at dawn and often extended well past dusk, especially during the crucial

planting and harvesting seasons. Their diet was simple and monotonous, consisting primarily of bread, potatoes, and vegetables, with meat being a rare luxury reserved for special occasions or the tables of the more prosperous.



The changes as a result of Reichsdeputationshauptschluss,
the Imperial Deputation Act, 1803

But, as the 19th century dawned, [this traditional way of life](#) faced unprecedented challenges. The Napoleonic Wars reshaped the political landscape of Europe, profoundly affecting Hesse. In 1803, as part of the broader territorial reorganization known as the *Reichsdeputations-*

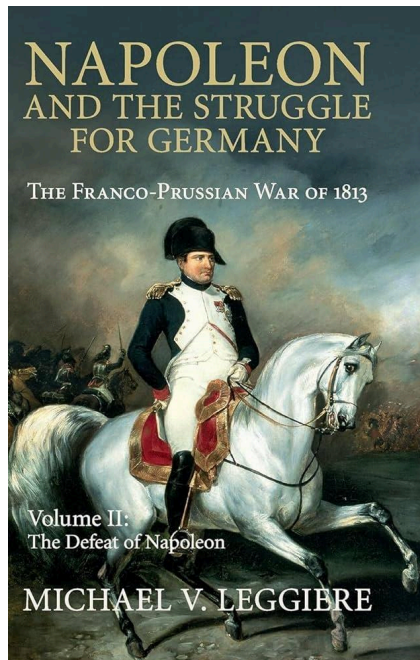
hauptschluss, Hesse-Kassel was elevated to the status of an Electorate. Simultaneously, the Prince-Abbacy of Fulda, a territory that had maintained its independence for centuries, was secularized and initially given to William V, Prince of Orange-Nassau, as compensation for territories lost to France.

The dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 marked a turning point for Hesse as well as for all of Europe. It's important to remember that the Holy Roman Empire had been in existence since the 10th century - this was the end of 800 years of the system of rule. And so, it was that Kurhessen (Electoral Hesse) was absorbed into the Kingdom of Westphalia, a French satellite state created by Napoleon. The Elector fled into exile, and the region found itself under French administration. This sudden change ushered in a wave of reforms based on the Napoleonic Code, introducing concepts such as equality before the law and the abolition of serfdom. For many Hessians, particularly those of the lower classes, these changes represented a radical departure from the feudal systems under which they had long lived.

Although brief, the Napoleonic era left an indelible mark on Hessian society. The introduction of civil marriages, religious tolerance, and the emancipation of Jews were revolutionary concepts in a land long governed

by traditional Christian principles. The abolition of internal customs barriers and guild restrictions held the promise of increased economic opportunity.

The restoration of Kurhessen as a sovereign state in 1813, followed by its incorporation into the German Confederation in 1815, did not simply revert the region to its pre-Napoleonic state. While Elector Wilhelm I attempted to restore the old order, the ideas and experiences of the Westphalian period had taken root. The acquisition of the former Prince-Abbacy of Fulda expanded Kurhessen's territory but also brought new challenges of integration and administration.



The years following 1815 were marked by economic hardship and social upheaval. A series of poor harvests, culminating in the "[Year Without a Summer](#)" in 1816-1817, led to widespread food shortages and rising prices. Compounding these difficulties was the decline of traditional cottage industries, particularly in [textile production](#), due to competition from mechanized British factories. These challenges were further exacerbated by

population growth, which put pressure on already scarce resources.



Competition from England in the 19th century led to German weavers receiving extremely low wages. In 1844, there was an uprising.

The impact of these economic difficulties was felt unevenly across Hesse. Upper Hesse (Oberhessen), with its less fertile soil and reliance on linen production, was particularly hard hit. The newly incorporated Fulda region, still adapting to its integration into Kurhessen, faced its own set of challenges. Lower Hesse (Niederhessen), blessed with more fertile land and better access to trade routes, fared somewhat better, as did the capital city of Kassel, buoyed by the presence of government institutions.

In response to these hardships, Hessians employed various survival strategies. Many, especially from the more affected regions, chose to migrate either to other German states or to America. Those who remained often sought to diversify their income sources, taking on additional work or producing new goods. Communities banded together, forming informal support networks to aid the most vulnerable. In the direst cases, individuals resorted to begging or became itinerant workers.

The government's response to these crises was often inadequate and sometimes counterproductive. Local communities bore the primary responsibility for poor relief, but their resources were frequently insufficient to meet the growing need. In an attempt to curb population growth, the government implemented policies restricting marriages among the poor, a measure that likely contributed to social tensions and further economic strain.

As Hesse entered the 1830s, the cumulative effect of these economic and social pressures began to manifest in political unrest. The constitutional revolution of 1830 led to the adoption of a liberal constitution in Kurhessen in 1831, marking a significant shift in the political landscape. This period of reform was short-lived, as conservative forces reasserted themselves in the following decades.



Entry of Prussian troops under Prince Radziwill into Fulda on 1 November 1850. Lee Radziwill's husband, Prince Stanislaw Albrecht Radziwill, was a descendant of this line

The constitutional conflicts of the 1850s brought Hesse to the brink of civil war. The reappointment of the conservative Ludwig Hassenpflug by Elector Frederick William I in 1850 led to a confrontation with the parliament, which refused to pass the budget. The subsequent declaration of a state of emergency and attempt to rule by decree sparked a crisis that drew in the broader German Confederation. The "Hessian Crisis" of 1850 saw Austrian and Bavarian troops intervene on

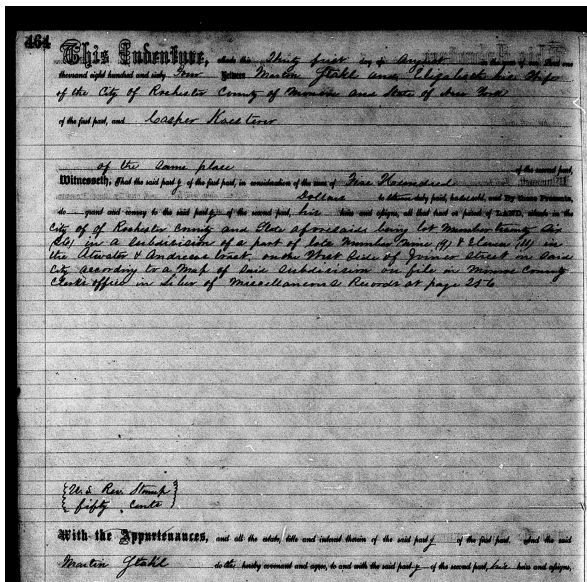
behalf of the Elector, while Prussia mobilized forces in support of constitutional rights.

This period of political instability coincided with ongoing economic challenges. The spinning industry in Kurhessen faced particular difficulties, contributing to unemployment and underemployment in both rural and urban areas. The gradual process of industrialization, while offering new opportunities, also disrupted traditional economic structures and social relationships.

The movement of troops during the Hessian Crisis of 1850 brought additional challenges to the region. An estimated 70,000 soldiers from Austrian, Bavarian, and Prussian forces moved through Hesse, straining local resources and disrupting daily life. While more disciplined than armies of earlier centuries, their presence still required significant requisitioning of food, fodder, and lodging from local communities. The atmosphere was tense, with civilians caught between opposing forces and uncertain of the outcome. In Bronzell, near Fulda, a minor skirmish on November 8, 1850, brought the reality of potential conflict close to home for many.

By the 1860s, the cumulative effect of these political, economic, and social changes had created an environment conducive to emigration. The first ancestors (Kester) from

the region around Eiterfeld who left for America in 1842 were likely motivated by a combination of factors and got out early: the lingering effects of economic hardship, frustration with political instability, and the promise of greater opportunities across the Atlantic. They were part of a larger trend of German emigration to the United States, often following established patterns of chain migration.¹



Caspar Kester, a blacksmith from Reckrod, Hesse arrived sometime in the 1840s, likely 1847, but he may have been preceded by others from his family or family network. A cooper of the same name arrived in 1842. We believe that our Caspar, our fourth great grandfather,

returned to Hesse in the 1850s to bring other family members over to the United States. After 20 years of hard work in 1867 he purchased land, as seen in the deed. He paid \$500 for a small tract of land in Rochester, NY.

This deed represents something profound and timeless. A man takes a look at the world around him and

¹ It should be noted here that with all these changes of government and administrations, civil record keeping becomes a nightmare to track. Many records from the Napoleonic era are in French, many were destroyed in wars, many are simply lost. Church records however are more intact and reliable, though most are available only in Germany in the local and regional archives.

decides it is time to take drastic action. He goes for it, and twenty years later he wins and has a piece of land again to start a new family line in a new country.

A skilled blacksmith in the mid-19th century typically earned between \$1.00 and \$1.50 per day, though only when work was available. Cash circulation was limited during the early 19th century, and most transactions were conducted through barter rather than cash payments. Accumulating \$500 in actual cash savings over a period of twenty years would have been a considerable challenge within this economic context. By 1867, \$500 had a purchasing power roughly equivalent to \$11,000 today.

Saving such an amount on a working-class wage, particularly in a largely barter-based economy, represents a significant financial achievement. This suggests that the Hessian Caspar Kester (1819– 1883) likely with the support of his Bavarian wife, Dorothea Müller (1821–1901), was not only a skilled and successful craftsman but also managed to live frugally in order to accumulate what was a relatively large sum for a laborer of that period. Such savings would have been beyond the reach of the average blacksmith of the time.



In the 19th century the blacksmith's shop was a central part of American life. A forge was kept busy mending and making the variety of tools and implements for home and garden, for workshop and industry, and tack and shoes for mules, horses and oxen.

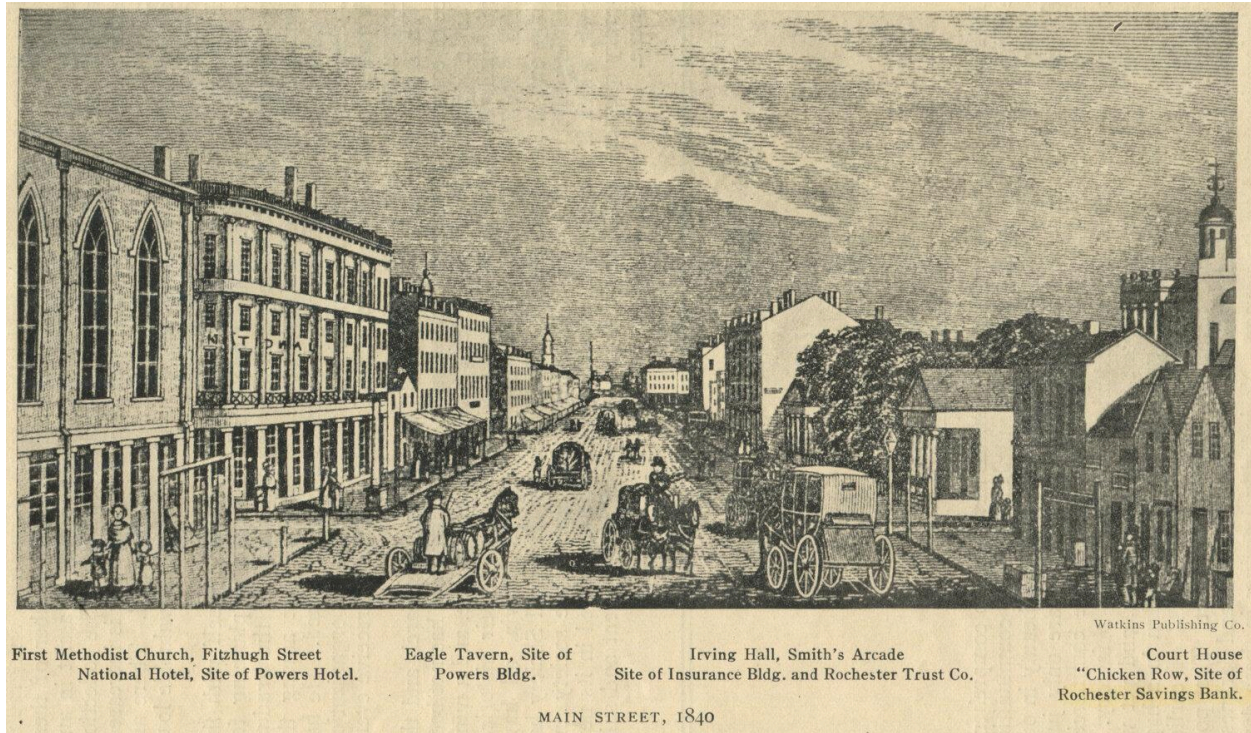
Witnesseth, that the said party of the first part in consideration of the sum of Five Hundred Dollars to them duly paid, have sold, and by these presents do grant and convey to the said party of the second part, his heirs and assigns, all that tract or parcel of land, situate in the City of Rochester, County and State aforesaid, being the number twenty-six (26) in a subdivision of a part of Lot number four (4) and eleven (11) of the Trowbridge and Cracken Tract, on the West Side of Junior Street, in said City.

Meanwhile back in Germany, the Prussian annexation of Kurhessen in 1866, following the Austro-Prussian War, marked the end of Hesse's independence and ushered in a new era of Prussian administration. For many Hessians, particularly those with deep roots in the region's traditions and autonomy, this change was the final impetus for emigration. The Hessian Franks, Homanns, and the Bavarian Trosts and Fells from just over the border, were among those who left for Upstate New York after this latest war. US census records their place of origin sometimes as “[Coorhessen](#)” and sometimes Prussia.

Now, almost 200 years later, his descendents acknowledge both his efforts and accomplishments, and those of all who took the chance, and made it work. This is the American Story, and it is the family history of millions upon millions of Americans today.

The story of Hesse from 1790 to 1866 is thus one of profound transformation. A society rooted in centuries-old feudal traditions was thrust into the modern era through a series of political upheavals, economic challenges, and social changes. The lives of ordinary Hessians—farmers, artisans, and merchants—were reshaped by forces far beyond their control, from Napoleonic conquests to industrial revolution. Their responses to these changes, whether adapting to new realities at home or seeking new

opportunities abroad, reflect the resilience and adaptability of a people navigating the currents of history.



As we reflect on this period, we find numerous parallels to our own time. The political instability, economic uncertainties, and social upheavals that characterized 19th century Hesse echo in our modern world. Just as the Hessians of that era grappled with rapid change and the erosion of traditional ways of life, we too face the challenges of globalization, technological disruption, and shifting geopolitical landscapes. The tensions between conservative and progressive forces, the struggles of rural communities in the face of economic transformation, and the allure of emigration as a solution

to local problems—all these themes resonate with contemporary issues.

The story of Hesse and our ancestors is also a model of human adaptability. In the face of daunting challenges, communities found ways to support one another, individuals sought out new opportunities, and a rich cultural heritage was preserved even as society evolved. The legacy of this period lives on, not just in the historical record, but in the descendants of those who lived through these tumultuous times, carrying forward the stories, traditions, and values of their Hessian ancestors.