

Stadt Blankenberg
By Molly Daniel

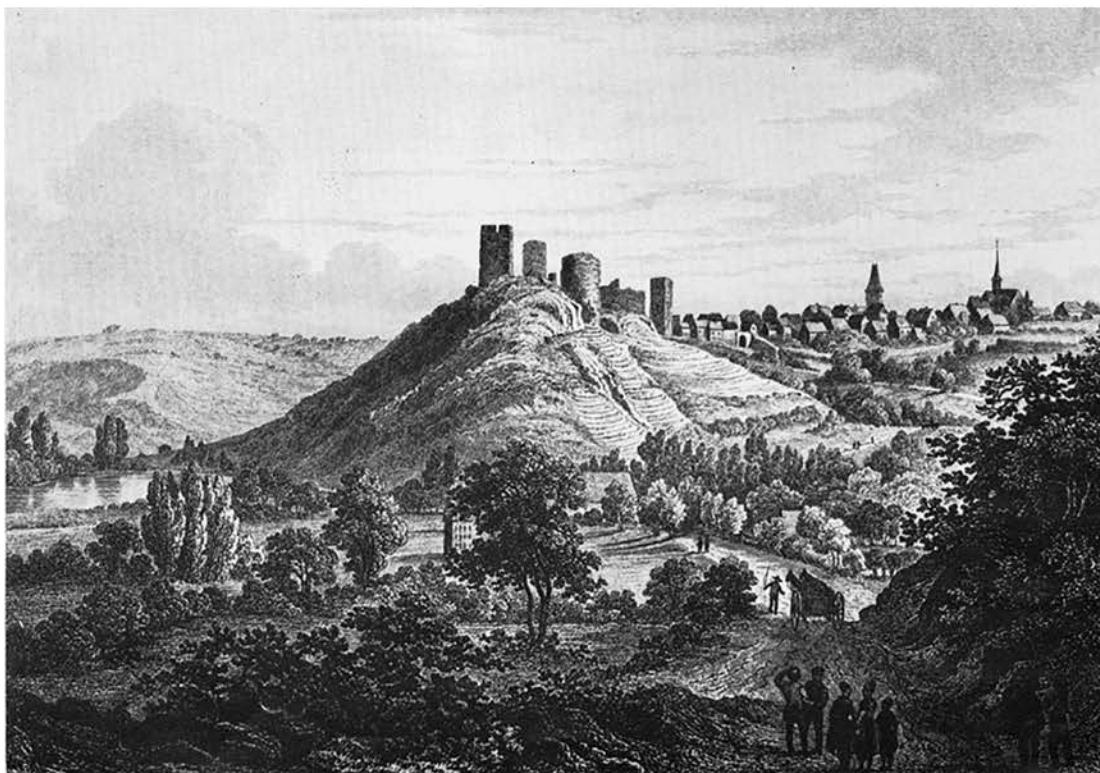
Stadt Blankenberg – the birthplace of the Arenz brothers – is a small medieval village twenty miles southeast of the city of Cologne, Germany. It is an exceptionally well preserved example of a medieval castle and village, including intact city walls with towers at the gates and charming homes of half-timbered construction. The oldest house in the village, Haus Hambitzer, has the date 1697 carved in the beam above its front door. But the place is centuries older than this, with its beginnings dating to the 12th century.



The first mention of Blankenberg in historic records is a reference to it made by the Archbishop of Cologne in 1171. Blankenberg began as a fortification (burg) in the Sieg River valley around 1150. The Counts of Sayn selected a bare mountain ridge ("blanken berg") upon which to build a fortification, even though they did not have rights to the land. At that time, the territory belonged to the Benedictine Siegburg Abbey (i.e., under the authority of the Archbishop of

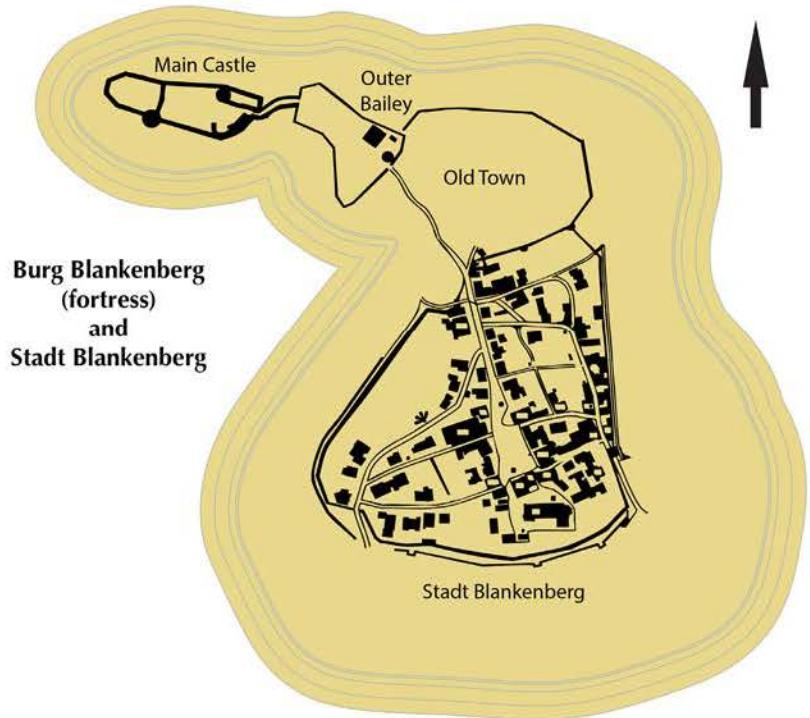
Cologne). Siegburg Abbey was located about 20 miles to the west. The archbishop and the counts quarreled over the rights to the land until the Vatican settled the dispute by requiring the Counts to compensate the diocese.

The location of the castle, Burg Blankenberg, was of strategic importance, being well situated with regard to the terrain, i.e., high ground above the Sieg river, with an extensive view to the west, in the direction of the Rhine River. With this location, the Counts of Sayn could control access to the Sieg valley as well as to the mountain ranges east of the Rhine (Westerwald, Siebengebirge, Bergisches Land). Eventually, a village sprang up alongside the castle, and the counts granted city rights to the settlement in 1245.



Burg Blankenberg (fortress ruins), with Stadt Blankenberg in the background, sketch from 1852.

In the 13th century, Blankenberg consisted of the fortified castle (Burg Blankenberg), and the walled city. The Counts of Sayn occupied Burg Blankenberg and administered the adjacent city until 1247, when Heinrich III of Sayn died childless, and the territory passed to another noble family, eventually falling under the authority of the Duchy of Berg (from 1363 to 1450). Blankenberg was briefly sold to the Archbishop of Cologne in 1450, but the sale was revoked a few years later in 1469.



Records in the city archives of Hennef, in the Rhine-Sieg district of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia contain a few clues regarding some members of the Arenz family who emigrated to America at the beginning of the 19th century. The U.S. federal census records and published biographies of Francis, Peter and John Arenz suggest that they were born in the Rhine Province of the Kingdom of Prussia. But determining the name of the province or nation at the time of their births is actually a more complicated matter. The decades of their births and emigration were a turbulent time in their homeland.

The line of succession of the ducal dynasty was complicated by various factors, and Blankenberg ultimately passed to the United Duchies of Jülich-Cleves-Berg. During the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the region was occupied by Swedish forces. The Napoleon Wars saw the territory occupied by the French, and in 1805 Napoleon stripped Blankenberg of its city rights.

In 1806, with the reorganization of German lands following the end of the Holy Roman Empire, the Duchy of Berg became the Grand Duchy of Berg under French rule – at least until Napoleon's defeat in 1813.

The 1815 Congress of Vienna allocated Berg to the Province of Jülich-Cleves-Berg in the Kingdom of Prussia, and in 1822, it was combined with the Grand Duchy of the Lower Rhine to form the Rhine Province of the Kingdom of Prussia.

In 1934, Blankenberg was unified with the city of Hennef, about three miles to the northwest of Blankenberg, as one of its several districts or villages. Hennef administers several of many small municipalities on its outskirts, and it is sometimes called “the city of a hundred villages.”

In 1946, the Rhine Province was divided to form the German states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate, with Blankenberg falling in the territory of the former. In 1954, Blankenberg’s name was officially changed to Stadt Blankenberg to recognize its former status as an independent city, though it is still considered a part of the city of Hennef. In 1987, Stadt Blankenberg was placed under “protected monument” status, and the restoration of its historic structures has been ongoing since then.



Haus Hambitzer in Stadt Blankenberg, the oldest house in the town. The year 1697 is carved in the wooden beam above the entrance. Photo by Molly Daniel, 2023.

The population of Stadt Blankenberg today (in 2024) is 665 residents. Despite its location close to one of Germany’s largest cities, the village has not grown much in recent decades. In 1855, just three decades after the emigration of the Arenz brothers to America, the city had 525 inhabitants, the vast majority (517) of whom are Catholic.



Aerial view of Stadt Blankenberg (Hennef) and Burg Blankenberg (top center of photo). Wiki Media Creative Commons, Wolkenkratzer, Hennef, Stadt Blankenberg, Aerial view of city wall. (2016) Use permitted by CC-BY SA 4.0 license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>