

Our Surnames: OBLINGER, OPLINGER, and UPLINGER

These three surnames have come to be used for descendants of one man, now known to us as Claus Oblinger or Oppliger. He arrived in America about 1726 with his wife and five children. They settled in what is now known as Harleysville, about 20 miles north of Philadelphia. He died there on his farm a short while later, in 1730. His descendants now number in the thousands.

My proof that Claus Oblinger was originally the Niclaus Oppliger born in 1683 in Wachseldorn, Switzerland is presented in a research paper, "Claus Oblinger, A Swiss Pioneer," accessible on this site. My attempt here is to present a more thorough explanation of how the surname changed first from Oppliger to Oblinger and later to Oplinger and Uplinger.

The Pronunciation of Claus' Surname

Interestingly, although Claus is now referred to as Claus "Oblinger," it is evident his surname was not spelled that way during his lifetime. It is important to know that Claus was not able to write his name. He marked his will with only an "O." Whoever wrote his name had to spell it as best he could according to the sound as Claus or members of his family said it. His surname appears as "Oblieger" in his will (3 August 1730) and on the Final Account of his estate (January, 1750). On the inventory of his estate (8 October 1730) it was spelled as "Ubliger." Even five years after his death in 1735, someone writing about the boundaries of Claus's property refers to him as Claus "Obliker."¹ (Note that none of these three spellings of his name include the ending "inger.")

These spellings indicate that when he said his name, it sounded more like the Swiss pronunciation of Oppliger than a German pronunciation of Oblinger! Keep in mind that in German and Swiss German, b's and p's sounded almost identical. Note also that -ing is common in German names but not in Swiss names (e.g. Kissinger, Schwinger, Ettlinger, etc.). Why is it that German immigrants here had trouble recognizing and spelling Claus' name when he first arrived if he had been born in Germany as an Oblinger? A well-known genealogist, Richard Warren Davis, found at least two families living in Germany around the same time that Niclaus lived, who were named Oblinger but had originally lived in Switzerland as Oppliger. By searching for the history of the Oblinger surname, I have found no answer as to where and when it was first used. Could it be that Oblinger first appeared when Swiss Oppligers moved from Switzerland into Germany? But there is indeed a convincing explanation for the birth of Oppliger as a surname.

The Village of Oppligen

Surnames came into use in the late Middle Ages, beginning roughly in the 11th century and completed by the end of the 16th century. There were many types of surnames that came into being. Some indicated one's profession such as Shoemaker or Fenstermacher (window maker).

¹ James Y. Heckler, *The History of Harleysville and Lower Salford County*, 1886, republished by Adams Apple Press, 1992, p.3.

Another type was habitational, which when first established, indicated the place where someone came from.

While researching where my forefather Claus might have been born, I discovered a small village named "Oppligen," which still exists, just a mile or so from Oberdiessbach, where Niclaus was baptized. By consulting the "Familiennamenbuch der Schweiz" (Register of Swiss Family Names)², I discovered that by 1850, a number of people named Oppliger lived in only five Swiss communities: Heimiswil, Röthenbach im Emmental, Signau, Sigriswil, and Sumiswald, all rather close together and near the village Oppligen. It became obvious that the surname Oppliger was a habitational one, derived from the village "Oppligen." The question which had puzzled me since childhood had finally been answered!

When consulting the "Dictionary of American Family Names" edited by Patrick Hanks and published in 2003 by Oxford University Press, however, I found it claimed the name Oplinger was derived from a place named Oblikon, near Zurich, Switzerland. I emailed Mr. Hanks to inquire what proof he had for that and received this reply:

Nov 19, 2015

Dear Mr. Oplinger,

Patrick Hanks, the editor of the Dictionary of American Family Names (2003), asked me to reply to your letter concerning your family name.

First of all, I would like to thank you for relating the results of your detailed research on the genealogy of your family and the likely changes and variations of the name Oplinger in Switzerland and in this country. There is indeed no proof that the name derives from Oblikon (near Zurich), obviously an assumption before Google gave us the opportunity to find the origin of surnames more easily and with more certainty. The origin of the name as a habitation name, derived from a place name Oppligen in the Berne Mittelland, is quite plausible, especially since the "Familiennamenbuch der Schweiz" lists all the regional villages you mentioned as origin for the bearers of the name Oppliger in present day Switzerland.

These findings also throw a different light on the history of the surname and its variations in this country. Thank you again for the valuable information and, with your permission, we will include it in the second revised edition of the "Dictionary" which is now in progress.

Sincerely,
Edda Gentry

To my knowledge, there still has not been a revised version of the "Dictionary" published. Ancestry and online sites still claim the surname Oblinger was derived from a place called Oblikon near Zurich.

² This book has become an essential standard reference for genealogists and historians. It offers a comprehensive alphabetical listing of all the families holding citizenship in a Swiss community during several time periods.

There are indications that a Bendict Oppliger lived in Röthenbach im Emmental as early as 1490. (See the proximity of Röthenbach to Oppligen on map below.) The first Oppliger in Claus' line with a verifying Röthenbach church record is Peter Oppliger who married in 1584. It is probable that Peter was descended from the Bendict Oppliger b. 1510, well known as an Anabaptist and possibly the son of the previously mentioned 1490 Bendict. Peter's descendants down to Niclaus Oppliger seem to have all been Anabaptists or later, Mennonites. They faced severe punishment for their religious beliefs and were forcibly driven from the country, with many migrating to Germany and some eventually to America.

Oppliger to Oblinger

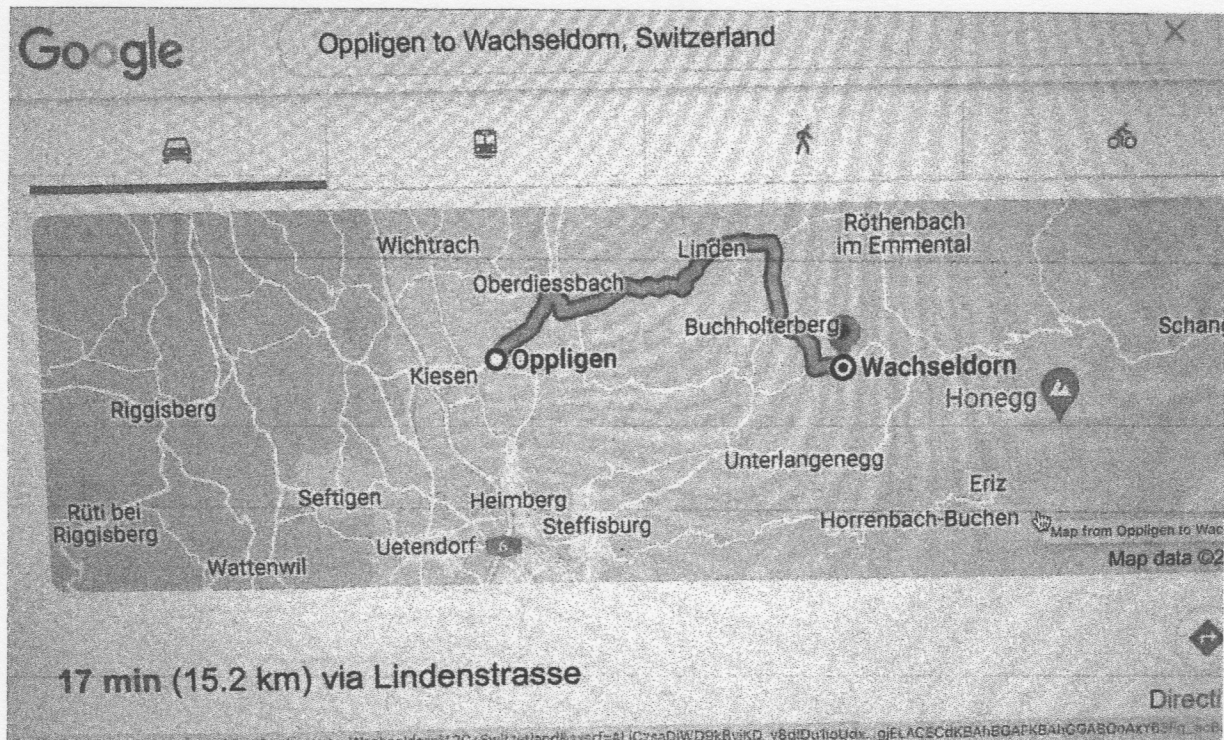
As I mentioned earlier, German immigrants unfamiliar with the Swiss surname Oppliger wrote Claus' name with various spellings, none of which was Oblinger.

It is true though that Claus' elder son, Nicholas, who apparently became quite literate,³ was soon known as Nicholas Oblinger although occasionally as Uplinger, and during the 1700s most of Claus' descendants were known as Oblingers as well. Many of them spread throughout Northampton County and it became the most common spelling for those who remained in eastern Pennsylvania. George Washington Oblinger, a fourth-generation descendant, moved in 1825 from Northampton to Luzerne County and was known there as Oplinger, as were his descendants. Somehow, in time, that became the most common spelling for others who remained in eastern Pennsylvania. Those who moved to the western part of the state such as Armstrong Jefferson counties, and then others, used the Uplinger variant. That seems to remain true today.

There have been a few other Oblingers who at later years have immigrated to the United States, but today by an overwhelming majority, all people in America with the name of Oblinger, Oplinger, or Uplinger are direct descendants of Claus, meaning they are at least distantly related to one another!

The following page contains a map of the small area where Niclaus Oppliger lived. It includes The villages of Oppligen, Oberdiessbach, Wachseldorn and Röthenbach im Emmental, the last one being where many of his ancestors lived.

³ A letter written on March 30, 1752 by Nicholas Oblinger was discovered in 1993 among a collection of much later papers that had been donated to the Mennonite Heritage Center in Harleysville, PA. Written in German, Nicholas is questioning his brother-in-law why his wife, Elizabeth, has not received the inheritance from her father's estate which had been promised to her. This letter indicates he had become quite literate.



This map shows the distance from Oppligen to Wachseldorn, Switzerland as 15.2 km., about 9 ½ miles. Distance “as the crow flies” is much less.

Oppligen to Oberdiessbach was a little more than 1 ½ mile.

Wachseldorn was where Niclaus Oppliger was born in 1683. His surname originally referred to someone from Oppligen.

Oberdiessbach (known as just Diessbach until 1870) was the largest of the three places and where Niclaus was baptized.

---Willard L. Oplinger