

# history of amish in america

The story of the Amish in America is a profound testament to faith, resilience, and a unique way of life that has persevered through centuries of change. From their origins in Europe to their establishment and growth across the United States, the Amish have maintained a distinct cultural and religious identity, characterized by a commitment to simplicity, community, and separation from the modern world. Understanding the history of the Amish in America offers a fascinating glimpse into a society that deliberately opts out of many conveniences and technologies that define contemporary American life. This article will delve into their European roots, their transatlantic journey, their establishment and expansion within America, and the core tenets that shape their enduring traditions.

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## The European Roots of the Amish Faith

The history of the Amish in America is inextricably linked to their European origins, specifically to the Anabaptist movement that emerged during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. The Anabaptists, meaning "re-baptizers," believed in adult baptism (believer's baptism) rather than infant baptism, a radical stance that led to persecution by both Catholic and Protestant authorities. They also advocated for a strict separation of church and state, pacifism, and a life of discipleship that often meant living apart from the broader society.

Within the broader Anabaptist tradition, which included groups like the

Mennonites, a distinct branch known as the Amish began to form. This separation was not a sudden event but a gradual divergence of thought and practice rooted in differing interpretations of biblical principles and the application of church discipline.

## **Jakob Ammann and the Schism**

The pivotal figure in the formation of the Amish church was Jakob Ammann, a Swiss Mennonite bishop who sought to reform and revitalize the faith in the late 17th century. Ammann was concerned about what he perceived as a decline in piety and a laxity in enforcing church discipline among the Mennonites. He believed in adhering more closely to the biblical injunctions for separation from the world and the importance of shunning (Meidung) as a means of maintaining the purity of the church.

Ammann's emphasis on stricter adherence to practices like the "closed communion" (only allowing baptized members of the same congregation to partake) and a more rigorous form of shunning for those who violated church rules created a division within the Mennonite communities of Alsace and Switzerland. Ammann's followers became known as the Amish, while those who did not adopt his more stringent interpretations continued as Mennonites.

Key points of contention that led to the schism included:

- The proper practice and extent of shunning excommunicated members.
- The frequency of communion services.
- The role of bishops in enforcing church discipline.
- The precise meaning of "separation from the world."

The disagreements, though seemingly focused on specific practices, represented a fundamental difference in how to live out their faith in a world perceived as increasingly corrupt and secular.

## **The Great Migration: Seeking Religious Freedom in America**

Facing ongoing persecution and economic hardship in Europe, many Anabaptists, including both Mennonites and Amish, began to look for new lands where they could practice their faith freely. The promise of religious tolerance and economic opportunity in the New World, particularly in the British colonies of North America, became increasingly attractive. The historical records indicate that the first significant wave of Amish immigration to America occurred in the early 18th century.

William Penn's "Holy Experiment" in Pennsylvania, founded on principles of religious freedom and tolerance, was a major draw for these early settlers. Penn actively encouraged immigration from various European religious groups,

and Pennsylvania offered a sanctuary for those fleeing religious persecution. The Amish were among the many German-speaking groups who sought refuge and a new beginning in this burgeoning colony.

The journey across the Atlantic was arduous and dangerous. Immigrants often endured cramped conditions, disease, and the uncertainty of establishing a new life in a foreign land. Despite these challenges, the desire for religious freedom and a peaceful existence motivated their transatlantic voyage.

## **Early Settlements and Community Building in Pennsylvania**

The initial Amish settlements were primarily concentrated in southeastern Pennsylvania, areas that would become known for their rich farmland and strong German-speaking communities. Lancaster County, in particular, emerged as a major hub for Amish settlement and continues to be one of the largest and most prominent Amish communities today. Other early settlements were established in areas like Berks, Chester, and Lebanon counties.

Upon arrival, the Amish sought to recreate the communal structures and support systems they had in Europe. They purchased farmland, often in contiguous blocks, to ensure that their communities remained close-knit and to facilitate mutual aid. Their agricultural lifestyle was central to their identity and their ability to maintain their distinct way of life.

Building a new community required immense cooperation and adherence to their *Ordnung*, the unwritten set of rules and guidelines that govern Amish life. The *Ordnung* covered a wide range of practices, from dress and speech to the use of technology and social interactions, all aimed at preserving their separation from the world and fostering spiritual growth.

## **Expansion and Diversification of Amish Communities**

As the Amish population grew, both through natural increase and continued immigration, they began to expand beyond their initial Pennsylvania settlements. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Amish communities spread to other states, following the availability of affordable farmland and seeking to establish new settlements that could maintain their traditions.

States like Ohio, Indiana, and New York became significant destinations for Amish settlers. Ohio, in particular, now boasts one of the largest Amish populations in the United States. This expansion was not always a smooth process. As communities grew, they sometimes encountered differing interpretations of the *Ordnung*, leading to further divisions and the formation of various affiliations within the broader Amish church.

These affiliations, often distinguished by their degree of adherence to tradition or their acceptance of certain modern technologies, led to a

diversification of Amish life across different regions. While the core beliefs remain consistent, the practical application of these beliefs can vary significantly from one community to another. This diversification is a natural outcome of a living tradition adapting to new environments and internal discussions about maintaining their distinctiveness.

## Theological Beliefs and Practices that Define the Amish Way of Life

The Amish way of life is deeply rooted in a set of theological beliefs that guide every aspect of their existence. At the core of their faith is a commitment to discipleship and obedience to God's word, as they understand it through the Bible and the traditions of the church.

Key theological tenets include:

- **Believer's Baptism:** As Anabaptists, the Amish practice baptism for adults who have made a personal commitment to Christ and the church.
- **Separation from the World (Gelassenheit):** This is a foundational concept, emphasizing humility, submission, and yielding to God's will and the community's discipline. It translates into a deliberate separation from worldly influences, including many forms of modern technology.
- **Nonresistance (Pacifism):** The Amish are committed pacifists and refuse to participate in military service or the use of violence.
- **Community and Mutual Aid:** Strong emphasis is placed on the community's well-being and mutual support, often manifested through barn raisings and assistance during times of hardship.
- **Shunning (Meidung):** This practice, though varying in intensity among different affiliations, involves social and economic separation from members who have been excommunicated for serious transgressions, with the aim of encouraging repentance.

The Ordnung is the practical expression of these beliefs, dictating everything from dress codes (simple, plain clothing) to vocational choices (often farming and skilled trades) and the use of technology.

## The Amish and Modernity: Navigating Technology and Outsiders

One of the most distinctive aspects of the Amish in America is their selective approach to technology. The decision to accept or reject technology is not arbitrary but is guided by the principle of Gelassenheit and the desire to preserve community bonds and spiritual focus.

Technologies that are generally rejected include:

- Public electricity and utility hookups.
- Automobiles (they typically use horse-drawn buggies for transportation).
- Television, radios, and personal computers.
- Most forms of social media and the internet.

However, the acceptance of certain technologies can vary between different Amish affiliations. Some communities may permit the use of generators for specific purposes, propane-powered appliances, or even battery-operated tools. The underlying principle is to avoid technologies that they believe could erode their community, create dependency on the outside world, or distract from their spiritual lives.

Interaction with the "English" (their term for non-Amish people) is managed carefully. While they engage in commerce and work alongside non-Amish individuals, their social and religious lives are largely kept separate to maintain their cultural and religious identity. They often rely on their own internal systems for education, healthcare, and social support.

## **Challenges and Resilience in the History of the Amish in America**

Throughout their history in America, the Amish have faced numerous challenges. The initial decades involved adapting to a new environment, establishing agricultural practices, and building communities from scratch. Later challenges included navigating a rapidly industrializing and modernizing society that often did not understand or accommodate their distinct way of life.

Legal battles, particularly concerning education and military conscription, have been a recurring theme. The landmark Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972) affirmed the Amish right to withdraw their children from public schools after the eighth grade, recognizing that mandatory high school attendance would interfere with their religious beliefs and way of life. This ruling was a significant victory in protecting their unique educational practices.

Despite these pressures, the Amish have demonstrated remarkable resilience. Their strong community ties, deep faith, and commitment to their traditions have allowed them to maintain their identity and way of life, even as the world around them has changed dramatically. Their focus on family, hard work, and spiritual discipline provides a strong foundation for weathering external pressures.

## **Preserving Identity: Education and Cultural Continuity**

Education is a critical component in the preservation of Amish identity.

Amish children typically attend one-room schoolhouses run by the Amish themselves, where they receive instruction in basic subjects and are taught the Amish values and traditions from an early age. The curriculum generally focuses on practical skills and prepares them for an agrarian or vocational life within their community.

The limited formal education beyond the eighth grade is a deliberate choice, stemming from the belief that higher education and exposure to secular knowledge could undermine their faith and cultural norms. This approach has, however, led to ongoing discussions and occasional legal challenges.

Cultural continuity is maintained through various means, including:

- The use of Pennsylvania Dutch (a German dialect) in daily conversation.
- The consistent practice of plain dress and grooming standards.
- The transmission of vocational skills through apprenticeships.
- Regular church services conducted in German.
- Strong family traditions and communal gatherings.

These practices ensure that the Amish heritage is passed down from one generation to the next, creating a strong sense of belonging and shared identity.

## **The Future of the Amish in America**

The Amish in America continue to thrive and adapt, though not without internal discussions and evolving approaches. The growing Amish population, coupled with land availability, has led to the establishment of new settlements in states further afield, such as Michigan, Iowa, and even some in Canada.

While the core tenets of their faith remain steadfast, the Amish are not static. They continuously evaluate how to best maintain their separation from the world while engaging with the economic realities of the 21st century. This might involve accepting certain technologies in limited ways, developing new vocational opportunities, or finding innovative solutions to land shortages.

The relationship between the Amish and the broader American society also continues to evolve. Increased tourism to Amish communities, the demand for Amish-made goods, and greater public awareness of their unique lifestyle all contribute to this dynamic. The Amish approach to these interactions is generally one of cautious engagement, prioritizing the preservation of their internal community life.

# **Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of the Amish in America**

The history of the Amish in America is a compelling narrative of faith, resilience, and cultural preservation. From their roots in the European Reformation to their established communities across the United States, the Amish have intentionally crafted a life that prioritizes spiritual devotion, communal harmony, and a separation from many aspects of modern life. Their journey reflects a deep commitment to their religious convictions, a willingness to endure hardship for the sake of their beliefs, and an enduring capacity to maintain a distinct identity in a rapidly changing world.

The Amish way of life, characterized by simplicity, hard work, and strong community bonds, continues to fascinate and inspire. Their selective engagement with technology, their commitment to nonresistance, and their unique social structures offer a different perspective on what it means to live a fulfilling life in contemporary society. The enduring legacy of the Amish in America lies in their ability to hold fast to their traditions while navigating the complexities of the modern age, demonstrating that a life of deep faith and commitment can indeed thrive across generations.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **When did the Amish first arrive in America?**

The first significant Amish migration to America began in the early 18th century, with most arriving between the 1720s and 1770s, primarily seeking religious freedom and economic opportunities.

### **Where did the early Amish settlers primarily establish communities?**

Early Amish settlements were concentrated in Pennsylvania, particularly in Lancaster County, which remains one of the largest and most well-known Amish communities today. Other early settlements were also found in Ohio, Indiana, and New York.

### **What are the core beliefs that differentiate the Amish from other Anabaptist groups?**

The Amish, stemming from the Anabaptist tradition, share beliefs like adult baptism, separation of church and state, and non-violence. They are particularly known for their emphasis on humility (Gelassenheit), separation from the world, and a simple lifestyle, often expressed through adherence to a 'book of Ordnung' (rules).

### **How has the Amish population changed and grown since their initial settlement?**

The Amish population has experienced significant growth due to high birth rates and a strong commitment to their faith, leading to retention of a large

percentage of their young people. This growth has resulted in the establishment of new settlements across the United States and Canada.

## **What are some common misconceptions about the Amish?**

Common misconceptions include the belief that all Amish reject all technology (they selectively adopt technology based on its impact on community and family), that they are a monolithic group (there are various affiliations with differing practices), and that they are technologically "backward" rather than intentionally selective.

## **How do the Amish maintain their distinct way of life in modern America?**

The Amish maintain their distinct way of life through a strong emphasis on community, adherence to their religious Ordnung, limited use of modern technology, separate schooling systems that often end at the eighth grade, and a commitment to preserving their German dialect and cultural traditions.

## **Additional Resources**

Here are 9 book titles related to the history of the Amish in America, with descriptions:

### **1. The Amish: A Pioneering People**

This comprehensive work delves into the origins of the Amish church in Europe and their subsequent migration to North America. It traces their early settlement patterns, their commitment to religious freedom, and the ways they adapted to the American landscape. The book highlights their unique cultural development and their ongoing efforts to maintain their traditions amidst societal change.

### **2. Plain People: The Amish and Their Life Today**

This title offers an insightful look into the contemporary lives of the Amish, exploring their adherence to the Ordnung (rules) that govern their communities. It examines their distinctive economic practices, educational systems, and their relationship with the outside world. The book provides a nuanced understanding of their enduring faith and their commitment to separation from modern influences.

### **3. Amish Society**

Authored by a prominent sociologist, this book provides a detailed analysis of the social structures, family life, and community organization within Amish settlements. It explores the dynamics of group cohesion, leadership roles, and the processes of social control. The text also addresses the challenges of maintaining cultural distinctiveness in an increasingly interconnected world.

### **4. The Amish Quilt: A Legacy of Faith and Art**

This beautifully illustrated book explores the rich history and cultural significance of Amish quilts. It traces the evolution of quilting styles and techniques, often reflecting regional differences and the artistic expressions of individual women. Beyond aesthetics, the book emphasizes how quilting has served as a vital form of communication, storytelling, and community bonding.

5. The Amish in America: Their Story, Their Culture, Their Beliefs

This accessible overview presents a broad historical narrative of the Amish presence in the United States. It covers their initial settlements, periods of growth and division, and the development of various affiliations within the broader Amish movement. The book also explains core Amish beliefs, such as adult baptism, nonresistance, and the importance of community living.

6. Plain Buggies: Amish Horses and Wagons

Focusing on a distinctive element of Amish material culture, this book examines the history and significance of the plain buggy. It details the craftsmanship, design variations, and the practical and symbolic roles these vehicles play in Amish daily life. The text illustrates how the buggy represents a conscious rejection of modern automotive technology and a commitment to a simpler way of life.

7. A Gathering of Branches: The Amish Communities of Pennsylvania

This title offers a focused historical and sociological exploration of the Amish communities primarily located in Pennsylvania. It examines the unique characteristics and development of these influential settlements, from their early days to their present-day diversity. The book highlights the interplay between historical events and the shaping of Pennsylvania Amish culture.

8. The Amish Frontier: Culture, Economy, and the Rural Ethos

This scholarly work analyzes the economic strategies and cultural adaptations of the Amish as they expanded onto new frontiers. It investigates their land use practices, their entrepreneurial spirit in traditional crafts and agriculture, and their resilience in carving out livelihoods. The book also considers the enduring rural ethos that underpins their societal structure.

9. Called to be Holy: The Amish Way of Life

This book delves deeply into the spiritual underpinnings of the Amish way of life, emphasizing their pursuit of holiness and separation from the world. It explores their understanding of discipleship, their devotional practices, and the theological concepts that guide their daily existence. The text illuminates how their faith shapes every aspect of their personal and communal lives.

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