

New immigrant Germans had Civil War impact

Region was a major
population center

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The Greater Cincinnati area, which includes Northern Kentucky, has been a destination for German immigrants since the late 1700s. As early as 1790, Kentucky's population was 14 percent German.

With the immigration boom of the 1800s, the region saw a steady stream of Germans. By the 1850s Cincinnati was considered a corner of the German Triangle, with the other two points at St. Louis and Milwaukee, which were also experiencing the influx. By the 1860s Cincinnati was the most German city in the United States with half the population being of German descent.

Although this growth is credited to a strong German presence which encouraged new arrivals to settle here, it also coincided with the end of political revolutions in Europe which left people looking for new horizons for political and economic reasons.

As Americans chose sides in the Civil War, these German-born immigrants seemed to align themselves with the Republican Party and the efforts of the North. In fact, it is estimated that one-third of the Union Army was German American.

"The Germans were strongly opposed to slavery and secession," said Don Heinrich Tolzmann, editor and translator of "The Cincinnati Germans in the Civil War," which was written by Gustav Tafel. "They did not want the United States to fall into disunity, as many German

states were in Europe.

"They were amazed that there was slavery here at all," he said. "The overwhelming majority wanted it to end immediately."

Tolzmann tells of the Germans who signed up to fight without hesitation.

"They were so enthusiastic and patriotic which is amazing because in the 1850s many faced anti-immigrant hostilities from Americans," he said. "But they were eager to show their loyalty."

These Germans, many who had military experience in their homeland, were a notoriously tough bunch. So tough, in fact, that the Confederacy referred to them as the Dutch Devils. Even General Robert E. Lee was quoted as saying "Take the Dutch (Deutsche) out of the Union Army and we could whip the Yankees easily."

Although there were countless German immigrants and descendents from the area who fought for the Union, two notable soldiers were Amos Shinkle, a Covington businessman and banker who became a colonel in the Home Guards of Covington. He later became the majority stockholder and driving force in the Covington and Cincinnati Bridge Company, which resulted in the building of the John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge. Another soldier with a tie to Covington, as well as the bridge, was Washington Roebling, son of John, who fought for the Union and then came back to Northern Kentucky to finish building the bridge which had been interrupted because of the war.