

FRIEDRICH GERSTÄCKER
AND
CINCINNATI
“THE ELDORADO OF THE GERMAN EMIGRANT”

Friedrich Gerstäcker (1816–1872) was an internationally known German travel author and novelist, many of whose works became bestsellers on both sides of the Atlantic. Then as now, few German authors can compare with his output or fame. Anyone interested in his work will welcome a new edition of his 1846 novel *The Arkansas Regulators*, which has been translated and edited by Charles Adams and Christoph Irmscher.¹

Born in Hamburg, Gerstäcker was motivated to travel by having read works such as Daniel Defoe’s *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and Charles Sealsfield’s *Transatlantische Reiseskizzen*, a two-volume travelogue.² So, he embarked from Bremerhaven, arriving in New York shortly before his twenty-first birthday on 10 May 1837, and then traveled widely throughout the United States. In 1843, he returned to Germany, settling down in Dresden, after having spent six years in the New World. According to Adams and Irmscher, Gerstäcker spent a total of two-and-a-half years in Arkansas. This included “two extended periods in 1839–40 and 1841–42.”³ This naturally raises the question as to where Gerstäcker was for the other three-and-a-half years.

Upon his return home, Gerstäcker was surprised to learn that he had become a widely recognized author of adventure stories about America. During his time there, he had sent letters home with descriptions of life in the New World, which his mother had forwarded, unbeknownst to him, to a journal which had published them. Thus began his career as a travel author and novelist. To say that he was prolific would be an understatement. His collected works consist of forty-four volumes: *Gesammelte Schriften* (Jena: Hermann Costenoble, 1872–1879). Since that time, many other editions have appeared, as well as translations of his works in various languages.

Gerstäcker traveled often and for lengthy periods of time. As Klauprecht reports, for “the rest of his life Gerstäcker followed a pattern of alternating periods of obsessive writing in Germany with extended journeys to faraway places.” Whenever home, “his heart and mind were permanently engaged elsewhere, roaming prairies, tropical rainforests, and South American pampas.”⁴

From 1849 to 1852, Gerstäcker visited North and South America, Polynesia, and Australia; in 1860 he traveled to South America; in 1862 he was in Egypt and Abyssinia; and from 1867 to 1868, he visited North and South America, and the West Indies. His extensive travels provided the basic material for his works, many of which could be described as a combination of fiction and non-fiction. Some clearly were autobiographical as well.

Several historians of Cincinnati's German-American heritage have mentioned Gerstäcker's visits to the city known as the "Queen City of the West," which raises the question as to what his relationship to the city was. In pursuit of an adequate answer to the question, I will seek here to identify the Cincinnati references to Gerstäcker and to glean information from them regarding his travel itinerary. Given that new information, I will propose a tentative conclusion as to the role the city played in Gerstäcker's travel plans.

CINCINNATI REFERENCES TO GERSTÄCKER

The first German-American historian in Cincinnati who mentions Gerstäcker is Emil Klauprecht (1815–1896), a Dreissiger, one of a number of liberal intellectuals who fled Europe to escape political repression in the wake of the failed revolutions of 1830. Klauprecht came to America after the 1832 "Hambacher Fest." In his history of the German element in the Ohio Valley, published in 1864, he writes that Gerstäcker was interviewed for a position as a German teacher in the newly established German-English public schools in Cincinnati. Although he does not mention the date, this must have been mid-1840, as the schools opened that fall. According to Klauprecht:

The schools filled so rapidly that it soon became necessary to hire more teachers. Among those candidates for a teaching position and who had passed an examination before a committee was a young man from Hamburg, whose intelligent appearance along with his garish clothes aroused attention. He wore a blue coarse striped jacket, fastened with a belt, into which were stuck a hunting knife and a tomahawk, wide trousers from the same material, and a weather-beaten, rolled-up straw hat."⁵

Klauprecht goes on to comment on Gerstäcker's arrival in Cincinnati and subsequent activities:

With a musket on his shoulder, he had hunted and hiked the entire distance from New York. During the years 1837–41, one after the other, he was a pharmacist’s helper, a silver smith, a fire stoker on a steamer, a keeper of horses, a speculator in Arkansas cane, and he was known as one of the first to help in case of a fire. His favorite haunt was among the prairie dogs, raccoons, porcupines and owls of a small private zoo, with whose aromas, its owner, a German optician by the name of Gerhard, had filled his workshop as well as the house of the lawyer Fox on 5th Street, where the zoo was located. That candidate for a teacher’s position in the local German free schools later became the famous travel writer and novelist, Friedrich Gerstäcker.⁶

The next Cincinnati reference to Gerstäcker comes from an article about him by Heinrich A. Rattermann (1832–1923), editor of the German-American historical journal *Der Deutsche Pionier*. Published in 1874, Rattermann’s article recounts a social get-together with Gerstäcker in Cincinnati on 21 August 1867, during which Rattermann got to know the author. Meeting with several others who must have known him as well, Gerstäcker remarked on how beautiful the Queen City of the West had become, and that had he not family in Germany, he might possibly succumb to the temptation of moving to Cincinnati.⁷

Even though Rattermann’s article is not mentioned, it likely provided the basis for a description of Gerstäcker which appeared in 1888 in a local history, *Cincinnati in Wort und Bild*, by Max Burgheim (1842–1893). Both provide some additional details not reported by Klauprecht, which are summarized below.⁸

Both Rattermann and Burgheim indicate that after Gerstäcker arrived in 1837, he often spent time at Jakob Schweizerhof’s tavern on Sixth Street, which was a gathering-place for the German notables of the area, including Emil Klauprecht. Social and political topics came under discussion, and Gerstäcker soon became a favorite due to his observational skills and satirical tongue.

Although he originally planned on taking up farming, he gave that up, and ventured out instead on hunting trips in Ohio, Indiana, and elsewhere in the Midwest. Hides and pelts were then sold in Cincinnati, but since sales did not cover expenses, he began manufacturing chocolate in the basement below the Backhaus Apothecary on the corner of Seventh and Main Street.

As chocolate making was not profitable, he next worked with Max Wocher on Walnut Street, between Fourth and Fifth streets, making surgical instruments. We are even informed that his lunch consisted of a few rolls and some cheese, which he obtained from Eiteljörg's bakery on Fifth Street.⁹

Influenced by Sealsfield's writings about the rich plantations along the Red River, Gerstäcker traveled south in 1837, returning to Cincinnati the following year. He again traveled south in May 1839, but this time with Peter Ruhl, a Berliner whom he had met in Cincinnati. By early 1840, he was back in Cincinnati.¹⁰ Upon his arrival, Wocher and other friends encouraged him to take the examination in application for a teaching position in the newly established German-English public schools of Cincinnati. Although he passed the examination, he did not apply for the position, but traveled down the Mississippi in summer 1840, returning in the fall with a load of cane.

In the meantime, he had his clothes made by the tailor Steinberg on Main Street, and also courted his daughter, later Frau Grönland. His need for new clothing was apparently due to comments about his disheveled appearance. In spring 1841, he traveled to Louisiana again, returning with a variety of snakes, scorpions, etc. , some live and some in bottles, which he gave to friends, and sold to local apothecaries. He then worked at Kinsey's silversmith shop on Fifth Street, and earned enough money to return to Louisiana the following year.

Gerstäcker returned to Europe in 1843 without visiting Cincinnati again after his trip to Louisiana in 1842. Altogether, he had made four trips to "Louisiana," which can be understood as a reference to the Louisiana Territory, which included areas which became the state of Arkansas in 1836.

GERSTÄCKER'S VISIT TO CINCINNATI IN 1867

Gerstäcker was again "on the road" in 1849–1852. He traveled to America in those years and may have visited Cincinnati, but there is no record of a possible visit there. However, he returned to America in 1867, and at that time he did visit Cincinnati. In spring 1867, Gerstäcker arrived in New York, his first stop in a two-year-long trip to North and South America.

On 20 August 1867, Gerstäcker arrived in Cincinnati for a visit that lasted into September. He stayed at Pfeiffer's Hotel at Ninth and Vine Street. The *Männerchor* held a special concert in his honor, and local poet Carl Backhaus presented a poem dedicated to him. In addition to contributing several articles to the *Cincinnati Sonntagsmorgen*, he held a reading from one of his works at the Mozart Hall.¹¹

In early September Gerstäcker made a trip to nearby Indianapolis to attend the fifteenth *Sängerfest* of the *Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund*. By the end of September he continued his travels, boarding a train headed for California. After completing what was to be his last major trip, Gerstäcker returned to Germany in 1868. An indication of the high regard in which he was held in Cincinnati was the fact that the newly formed German Pioneer Society of Cincinnati (est. 1868) named him as an honorary member.

Back home in Germany, Gerstäcker wrote several articles for *Die Gartenlaube*, and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* published some excerpts in translation. In an article entitled "Spirit of the German Press" the *Enquire* reported that "Frederick Gerstaecker, the famous traveler returned home from this country." It followed with a translation of one of his articles "Why Persons Abroad Send Discouraging Letters Home." Gerstäcker provided the following advice to parents:

Therefore, I would give all those who have sons or relatives abroad—and what family has now-a-days not a kinsman in some other part of the world—the well-meant advice, for God's sake not to trouble themselves when they receive such a sadness-tinged letter. There is no truth in the whole thing, and if they could only, at the time they read the letter, see the poor 'lonely one' in reality, they would soon discover that in truth they have not the slightest ground for anxiety.¹²

He also writes:

Through my frequent transactions from one part of the world to another, I have several times—not Infrequently [sic] in consequence of the earnest request of parents—met such unfortunates abroad of whom it was feared here that they were either afflicted with some dangerous malady, or were destitute. But in all these cases I found these anxieties not only unfounded, but the young gentlemen hale and hearty, with a large competence, and in the best of spirits." (13)

The fact that the paper would publish translations of Gerstäcker's articles would seem to reflect a local interest in the author. Upon his return to Germany, Gerstäcker published a two-volume work in 1868–1869 about his recent travels, *Neue Reisen durch die Vereinigten Staaten, Mexiko, Ecuador, Westindien und Venezuela*. This contains an interesting chapter about his visit in Cincinnati. (See the Appendix for information on this work). Gerstäcker was no doubt writing the chapters of this book during his travels, as it appeared shortly after his return to Germany.

CINCINNATI MOURNS THE DEATH OF GERSTÄCKER

The demise of a German author would not likely be reported in the English-language press, but Gerstäcker was an exception in Cincinnati. He died on 31 May 1872, and several months later two articles appeared about him in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. The first was entitled “Herr Gerstäcker.” The paper commented:

Herr Friedrich Gerstacker, the great traveler and novelist, to whose pen Germany is indebted for so many sketches of American scenery, life and manners, died last month. He had several warm friends in Cincinnati, and, had it not been for his recent illness and death, he would have returned to America this summer. His friends here expected him to arrive in Cincinnati in September at the latest. They were prepared to give him the warmest welcome, and we sympathize in their grief for the loss they, and, indeed, we ourselves have sustained.¹⁴

Another article appeared at the end of 1872, and referred to Gerstacker's passing as one of noteworthy events of the year. This certainly reflects the high regard in which he was held, as well as the fact that he had many friends in the area.

CINCINNATI'S ROLE IN GERSTÄCKER'S TRAVEL ITINERARY IN AMERICA

As noted earlier, Adams and Irmscher indicate that Gerstäcker was in Arkansas for two-and-a-half years including “two extended periods in 1839–40 and 1841–42.” The *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* provides further details about this, noting that Gerstäcker was in Arkansas for that amount of time for the following dates: May 1839–February 1840, August 1840, and for an eighteen-month stay in 1841–42.¹⁵ Matching these dates up with those mentioned by Cincinnati's German-American historians looks

difficult initially, but a closer examination of them indicates that they do dovetail.

Although Klauprecht is the only Cincinnati author who mentions Arkansas, the references to Louisiana can be taken as referring to the Louisiana Territory, which included what became that state. Granted that the Cincinnati accounts are rather sketchy, but they do fit with his stays in Arkansas, and also shed light on the zigzag course of Gerstäcker's frequent travels.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

What is noteworthy about Gerstäcker is that he appears to have returned to Cincinnati repeatedly. Several of his works also contain references to and descriptions of Cincinnati, and excerpts of his writing appeared in the English-language press of Cincinnati, which published expansive tributes to him when he died. All the leads to the tentative, but compelling assumption that Gerstäcker regarded Cincinnati initially as a home base for his travels, and that it continued to function as an important location for him throughout his time in America. This actually should not be too surprising, since he called it "the El Dorado of the German emigrant! Ask a German, who is traveling into the interior from one of the seaports, Where are you going? and the answer will invariably be—to Cincinnati."¹⁷



FRIEDRICH GERSTÄCKER
CA. 1870

APPENDIX:
GERSTÄCKER'S WRITINGS ABOUT CINCINNATI,
IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER, WITH ANNOTATIONS

- 1844: *Streif- und Jagdzüge durch die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika* (Jena: Hermann Costenoble, 1844). This autobiographical travelogue of Gerstäcker's first trip to America appeared in translation as: Frederick Gerstaecker, *Wild Sports in The Far West* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Company, 1860). It contains eight colorful crayon drawings, done in oils, from designs by Harrison Weir. Chapter V deals with "Cincinnati – A Farmer's Life in the Woods." It also contains the author's well-known description of Cincinnati as "the El Dorado of the German emigrant," p. 119.
- 1847: *Der deutschen Auswanderer Fahrten und Schicksale* (1847). This novel appeared in translation as: Frederick Gerstaecker, *Wanderings and Fortunes of Some German Emigrants* (London: David Bogue, 1848). It contains several references to Cincinnati, especially in chapter III "The Pilgrimage to the Settlement." Much of this work reads as if drawn directly out of Gerstäcker travels in America. It also contains a review of the book from the *Athenaeum* (London) that appears following the title page. It comments on the realistic nature of the novel as follows:

"The substance of this entertaining book—which relates the fortunes of a company of German adventurers bound for the land of promise, with the design of forming a colony there—is evidently no fiction. It is impossible to read many pages without perceiving that the author is telling what he must himself have seen, known, and suffered—so minute and circumstantial is the narrative; and as he is gifted with considerable powers of observing and describing, the reality of his work renders it extremely life-like and engaging.... We are glad, therefore, to meet with a writer who is evidently no stranger to this little known history; and who has not only had a personal share in the emigrant's lot and a close acquaintance with many features of that New World to which hope allures him, but a quick eye, as well, to read the characters of men and things, and ready masculine pen to record his observations."

For my commentary on this novel, see: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *German-Americana: Selected Essays*. (Milford, Ohio: Little

Miami Publishing Co., 2009), pp. 265–73. I noted there that Gerstäcker “is more like a reporter than a commentator—he provides the reader with a literary portrait of what he has seen and experienced,” and that this particular novel was “almost more in the order of a journalistic account.” (p. 269)

1849: *Amerikanische Wald- und Strombilder* (Dresden: Arnold, 1849).

This is a two-volume work, with the second volume containing a chapter on Cincinnati. It reads like a survey of life in American cities, with Gerstäcker citing examples drawn from his time in Cincinnati. It therefore lacks the level of detail found in his earlier work *Streif- und Jagdzüge durch die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika* (1844), as well as his later works on Cincinnati.

1855: *Nach Amerika! Ein Volksbuch* (Leipzig: Hermann Costenoble, 1855).

This novel consists of six small volumes nicely illustrated with lithographs, and might best be described as Gerstäcker’s magnum opus on the German immigrant experience. Volume four contains a fascinating chapter on the German element of Cincinnati entitled: “Die Deutschen in Cincinnati.” As with Gerstäcker’s other works, it provides an interesting blend of fiction and non-fiction that is drawn from the author’s own travel experiences.

Robert Spiller and Willard Thorp commented on this novel as follows: “His best known and in some respects his best work is *Nach Amerika* (1855), a realistic account of the fortunes of a shipload of German immigrants who land in New Orleans and make their way up the Mississippi.” See: Robert Spiller and Willard Thorp, “German-American Literature,” in: Tolzmann, ed., *German-American Literature*, p. 5.

1868–1869: *Neue Reisen durch die Vereinigten Staaten, Mexiko, Ecuador,*

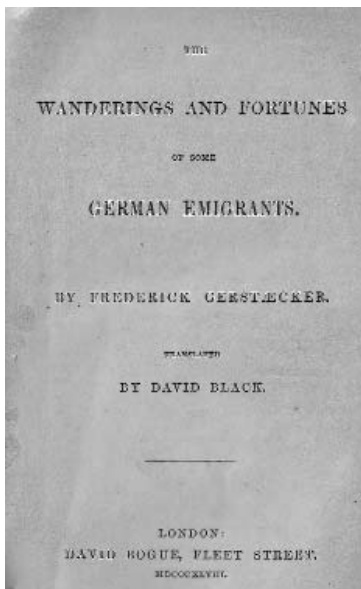
Westindien und Venezuela (Jena: Hermann Costenoble, 1868–69). This is a three-volume travelogue covering Gerstäcker’s last major trip to the New World. Volume I contains a chapter on the author’s 1867 visit to Cincinnati, in which he compares it to his previous visit twenty-seven years earlier. He discusses people and places throughout the area, including the German district (Over-the-Rhine), Roebling’s Suspension Bridge

on the Ohio River, Spring Grove Cemetery, and other points of interest. The fact that Gerstäcker could bring out this two volume work shortly after his return home reflects his amazing output as an author.

1878: *In Amerika: Amerikanisches Lebensbild aus neuerer Zeit, Im Anschluss an Nach Amerika* (Jena: Hermann Costenoble, 1878). This is a two-volume work that aims to follow up on the author's novel *Nach Amerika*. Chapter III of volume II contains a chapter on "Cincinnati," and it begins with a historical survey of the city, and concludes with a description of Roebling's Suspension Bridge on the Ohio River. Sandwiched between the beginning and end of the chapter is the continuation of the novel.

Note: The author of this article hopes to edit a collection of the aforementioned writings by Gerstäcker, translating those that have not yet appeared in English. The projected title for this work is: "The El Dorado of the German Emigrant," Friedrich Gerstäcker's Descriptions of Cincinnati in the Nineteenth Century.

— Don Heinrich Tolzmann
Cincinnati, OH



TITLE PAGE OF
GERSTÄCKER'S TRAVELOGUE
THE WILD SPORTS
IN
THE FAR WEST
(1860)



**TITLE PAGE OF THE FIRST VOLUME OF
GERSTÄCKER'S NOVEL
NACH AMERIKA! EIN VOLKSBUCH (1855)**

NOTES

This article is a revised and expanded version of one that appeared at the blog site of Christoph Irmscher (Indiana University-Bloomington).

See: www.christophirmscher.com (22 January 2019).

1. Friedrich Gerstäcker, *The Arkansas Regulators*, translated and edited by Charles Adams and Christoph Irmscher (New York: Berghahn, 2019). The original edition appeared as: *Die Regulatoren in Arkansas* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1846).
2. Defoe's work originally appeared as: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe ...* (London: William Taylor, 1719) and Sealsfield's as: *Transatlantische Reiseskizzen und Christophorus Bärenhäuter* (Zürich: Bei Orell, Füssli und Compagnie, 1834). For information on Sealsfield, see: Karl J.R. Arndt, "Recent Sealsfield Discoveries," in: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *German-American Literature* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 128–140. This contains eleven letters by Sealsfield (pseudonym for Carl Anton Postl, 1793–1864). Arndt notes: "In themselves they constitute a kind of autobiography of the author, touching important high spots of his various lives..." (p. 128)
3. Gerstäcker, *The Arkansas Regulators*, 1
4. *ibid.*, 2. For a selection of Gerstäcker's writings on Louisiana, see Irene S. Di Maio, ed., *Gerstäcker's Louisiana: Fiction and Travel Sketches from Antebellum Times through Reconstruction*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).
5. See Emil Klauprecht, *German Chronicle in the History of the Ohio Valley and its Capital City Cincinnati in Particular*, translated by Dale V. Lally, Jr. and edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1992), 176.
6. *ibid.*
7. H.A. Rattermann, "Zwei, verstorbene, ächte deutsch-amerikanische Pioniere: 2. Friedrich Gerstäcker," *Der Deutsche Pionier* 6 (1874), 42–53. A previous article dealt with Charles Sealsfield. Rattermann's article on Gerstäcker was reprinted in his collected works: H.A. Rattermann, *Gesammelte ausgewählte Werke* (Cincinnati: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1911), Vol. 12, 67–79.
8. Max Burgheim, *Cincinnati in Wort und Bild* (Cincinnati: M. & R. Burgheim, 1888), 82–84.
9. According to Klauprecht, August Eiteljörg was a baker who came to Cincinnati in 1829. See Klauprecht, *German Chronicle*, 171.
10. Gerstäcker refers to his travel companion elsewhere as Uhl, not Ruhl, and he writes that he was a Berliner he had met in Cincinnati. See Frederick Gerstaecker, *Wild Sports in the Far West* (Boston: Crosby, Nicholas and Company, 1860), 125. Note that Gerstäcker's name is spelled in English-language publications as "Frederick Gerstaecker".
11. See note 7 for the references regarding Gerstäcker's 1867 visit to Cincinnati. For the announcement of his

- lecture at Mozart Hall, see “Friedrich Gerstäcker’s Vorlesung,” *Westliche Blätter* (1 September 1867).
12. See “Spirit of the German Press,” *Cincinnati Enquirer* (12 October 1868).
 13. *ibid.*
 14. See: “Herr Friedrich Gerstacker,” *Cincinnati Enquirer* (11 July 1872). His death was also noted in another article: “The Closing Year: Brief Record of Important Events During 1872,” *Cincinnati Enquirer* (28 December 1872).
 15. See “Friedrich Wilhelm Christian Gerstäcker (1816–72),” in *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/media/friedrich-gerstaecker-319/>
 16. For an up-to-date “Selective Bibliography” of works by and about Gerstäcker, see Gerstäcker, *The Arkansas Regulators*, 409–410. See also “The Legacy of Friedrich Gerstäcker: Arkansas and the Wild West,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 73:1 (2014). This was a special issue of the journal containing a collection of articles on the topic. For a recent biography of Gerstäcker, see Thomas Ostwald, *Friedrich Gerstäcker, Leben und Werk: Biographie eines Ruhelosen*. (Braunschweig: Friedrich-Gerstäcker Gesellschaft, 2007). There is no full-length biography of Gerstäcker available in English, which is regrettable, since many of his works deal with America.
 17. See Gerstaecker, *Wild Sports*, 117–149. For a discussion of German authors who visited Cincinnati before Gerstäcker, and wrote about the city, see my essay: “The German Image of Cincinnati before 1830,” in Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Das Ohiotal—The Ohio Valley: The German Dimension* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 21–37. I noted there: “The German image of Cincinnati should be placed within the broader context of the German image of the Ohio Valley, which evolved from fictitious accounts written by authors who had never visited America, to detailed reports of Cincinnati by authors who had visited Cincinnati. A hierarchy of images developed from a general picture of the Ohio Valley, to a rather precise image and focus on Cincinnati.” (p. 21)

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