

## NOTABLE GERMAN-AMERICANS

**Wilhelm Nast (1807-1899),  
Patriarch of German Methodism in America**

**By Don Heinrich Tolzmann**

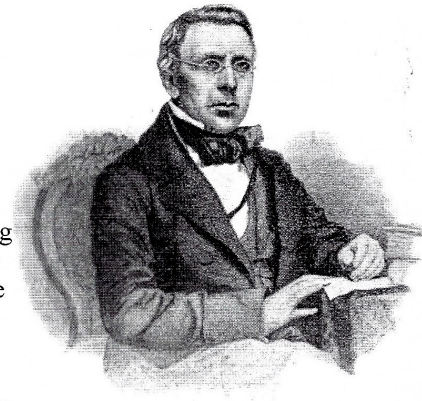
### Introduction

In his history of the German element in America (1880), Gustav Koerner described Wilhelm Nast “as a man of outstanding character, who has attained the respect of his fellow citizens in every aspect of life.” He was “a doctor of theology and learned theologian and philologist” who “acquired a great reputation in the religious circles of America, and accomplished a great deal for the preservation of the German heritage, especially the German language.” Considered the patriarch of German Methodism in America, Nast played an important role in the religious life of German-Americans across the country.

### Life in Germany

Born on 15 January 1807 in Stuttgart, the capital city of Württemberg, Wilhelm Nast came from a long line of ministers and scholars in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. His parents died while still a teenager; his father when he was 14, and his mother when he was 17. His sister, Elisabeth, and her husband, Dr. Süsskind, an influential theologian in the State Church of Württemberg, took on the responsibility of raising the youth. Both exerted great influence on him, and his course of studies, which aimed for him to become a Lutheran minister. He attended a seminary in Blaubeuren, where he studied Greek and Hebrew, and read from the Old and New Testaments in the original languages.

In 1825 he began study at the University of Tübingen at the age of 18. Given his Lutheran background, he was turned off by the rationalism and pantheism he encountered in lecture halls and among students. He wrote: “Instead of being nourished with the sincere milk of the Word, that I might grow up thereby to a man of Christ, I was nourished with the nectar and the ambrosia of classical paganism.” He claimed that his classmates did not aim to become “ambassadors for Christ, but heroes, poets, and philosophers.” He noted that he even “got lost in the labyrinth of Pantheism.” This and the prevalent rationalism caused him to conclude his studies after two years. Since his studies for the ministry had been paid by the state, he repaid the costs of his education at Tübingen, and returned home to Stuttgart.



Wilhelm Nast in 1844

As he was interested in the arts, he traveled to various cities such as Munich, Vienna and Dresden. Thinking that he might become a philosopher of art, he visited Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), a well-known German poet and author, to seek his advice. He recommended that he return to Tübingen and continue his studies towards the completion of a theological degree. Nast returned home to Stuttgart, but instead of returning to the university, he now had his mind on America. He wrote: "I heard much of the liberty of the United States, and was informed that there was a scarcity of classical teachers." So, he immigrated at the age of 21, and arrived in New York on 28 September, 1828.

#### Life in America

Nast found a position as a tutor in Millersburg, Pennsylvania, then one on Duncan's Island, near Harrisburg. There he taught two sons of a wealthy widow, a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and became acquainted with its teachings and itinerate preachers. In 1829, he became a librarian and teacher at West Point Military Academy, but did not like what he called "the godless atmosphere of the military academy." So, he decided to return to Duncan's Island, and on the way there, stopped in Gettysburg, where he was offered a position teaching ancient languages at the Gettysburg College. After attending a Methodist camp meeting at Duncan's Island, he wrote: "I had now found a home in the Methodist Church." So, he declined the position at the college, and instead joined a Methodist class to learn more about Methodism.

He also attended camp meetings in Pittsburgh, and visited the Harmony Society, a communal society, at Economy, Pennsylvania that was founded by Johann Georg Rapp (1757-1847). In the winter of 1833-34, he resided at the home of a Methodist farmer and met Adam Miller (1810-1901), a Methodist preacher who encouraged him to accompany him on his missionary travels. Thereafter, Nast translated the rules and articles of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) into German. He met

Rev. Charles P. McIlvaine (1799-1873), bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio and president of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, who offered him a teaching position.

In 1834-35, he taught German, Hebrew, and Greek at Kenyon College. In January 1835, he found time to attend a Methodist revival meeting in Danville, Ohio, and while there made the decision to convert to Methodism. He wrote that he felt "born again," and that he was filled "with joy unutterable and full of glory to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away." By September, he was formally admitted as a preacher into the Ohio Methodist Conference of the MEC. The teacher now had become a preacher at the age of 28.

By the time of Nast's conversion, Cincinnati was on the way to becoming an important destination of German immigrants, causing him to be appointed as: *Deutscher Missionar* (German missionary) in Cincinnati in 1835. In addition to missionary work there, he was a circuit rider in Ohio (300-mile circuit), and in 1839 expanded his outreach by founding and editing a German Methodist paper: *Der Christliche Apologete* (The Christian Apologist). By 1855, it had more than 6,000 subscribers, and by 1890 reached its zenith circulation of 19,150. It was filled with articles, stories, poems, reviews, and church news from German Methodist congregations across the country.

Nast felt there also was a need for an illustrated journal for the German Methodist home, so *Haus und Herd* (Home and Hearth) commenced publication in 1873 with Heinrich Liebhart (1832-95), a prolific German Methodist author, as editor. Other German Methodist journals included *Die Glocke* (The Bell), a Sunday school monthly; *Der Bibelforscher* (The Bible Researcher); and *Der Wegweiser zur Heiligung* (The Guide to Holiness). Additionally, a great number of books were published in the German language. All of these publications came off the press of the Methodist Book Concern in Cincinnati.

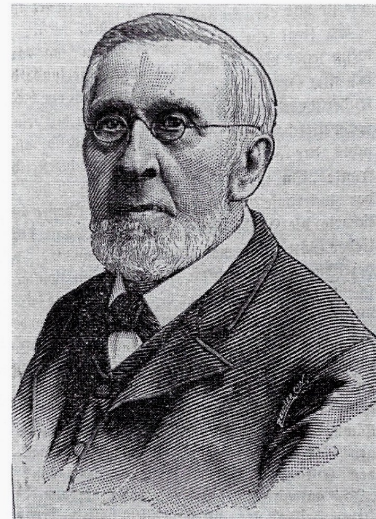


The growth of German Methodism caused Nast to focus on organizing regionally-based conferences within the MEC. The first was the Central German Conference (1864), which was responsible for the administration of churches in Ohio, northern Kentucky, western Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Indiana. Other conferences followed across the country. In 1844, Nast visited Germany, but felt that time was not right yet for missionary work there. However, in 1849 the first German Methodist missionary was sent, and a center established in Bremen. Other missionaries followed, and Methodist congregations were subsequently formed in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The Methodist churches in these countries today are descendants of congregations formed by the missionary work of German-American missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to editing *Der Christliche Apologete*, Nast published several New Testament commentaries, the last of which was published posthumously in 1908, the centennial of his birth. Several of his works, including his commentaries, are still available as reprint editions. He was also concerned about education, and in 1853, a German-English Seminary was opened in Quincy, Illinois. Two years later, discussions began regarding the founding of a German Methodist college, and in 1864 one was chartered in Berea, Ohio.

Since the building for the new college was donated by James Wallace, the college was named German Wallace College. Nast was elected president, but remained in Cincinnati, visiting Berea occasionally for meetings and programs. The curriculum had a biblical, theological, scientific, and classical orientation. By the end of the century, the college was reorganized, and academic departments established. The college shared the campus with Baldwin University, so in 1913 they merged to become Baldwin-Wallace College, subsequently renamed Baldwin-Wallace University.

On 16 May 1899, Nast passed away, and the funeral service took place at Trinity Methodist Church in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine district. He and his wife Margaret Elizabeth, and their children are buried at Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati. After World War I, which was a trying time for German Methodists, as it was for other German-American congregations, there were still ten German conferences with a total of 530 congregations.



**Wilhelm Nast in 1892**

Most of them (57%), however, now held their services predominantly in English, so the movement began to merge the German conferences into the MEC, and this process was completed from 1926 to 1933. However, the German Methodist paper still remained, and it reminded its readers on 16 August 1933 that they should not forget the journal: "It is the last bond which still united and holds into relationship the German Methodist family in America, Europe, and the world. Defend it, subscribe to it, otherwise it is consecrated to its demise." It did continue publication till 1941, when it ceased publication, although it still had 3,000 subscribers.



### An 1892 masthead

#### Legacy

The Nast Trinity Methodist church is located on Race Street in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine district, and is considered the mother church of German Methodism. It was constructed in 1880, and replaced an earlier structure built in 1842 for a German Methodist congregation organized by Nast in 1835. Now known as the Warehouse Church, it was designed by the well-known architect Samuel Hannaford (1835-1911) and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

Many of the formerly German Methodist churches still exist, and information about them can be found in a historical directory by Barbara Dixon: *A Forgotten Heritage: The German Methodist Church* (2011). Aside from the works listed below, additional sources can be found in the Nippert Collection of German Methodism at the Cincinnati History Library and Archives at Union Terminal in Cincinnati.

Although the German conferences and the German Methodist journal are long since gone, their heritage forms an integral and foundational element in the MEC of today, and all of this leads back to the missionary work of Wilhelm Nast, the patriarch of German Methodism in America.

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