

NOTABLE GERMAN-AMERICANS

Friedrich Muench (1799-1881), From German Emigration Proponent to Missouri German Patriarch

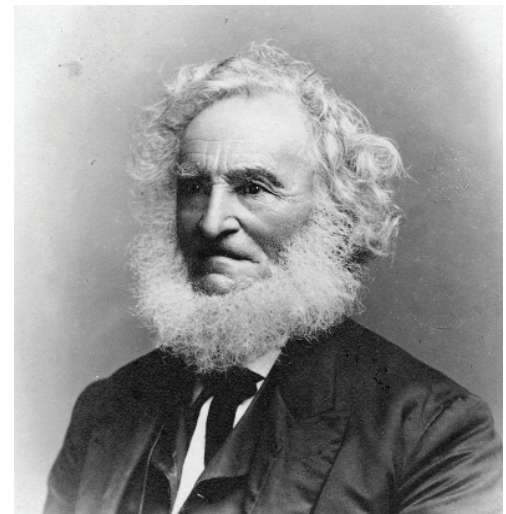
By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Introduction: In 1880, Gustav Koerner published a history of the German element, focusing on emigrants who came in the first half of the 19th century: *Das deutsche Element in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, 1818-1848*. (1) He paid particular attention to the *Dreissiger* (Thirtyers), a term referring to German emigrants of the 1830s who either had opposed, or were dissatisfied with the status quo in Germany. Koerner's history is arranged by state, providing biographical information on noteworthy individuals, many of whom he personally knew, as he also was a *Dreissiger*. In a chapter on the German element in Missouri he covered the life and work of Friedrich Muench. (2) He was a fellow *Dreissiger* who played an important role in the history of German emigration, subsequently becoming a well-known German pioneer in Missouri who was probably best known as "Far West," which was his pen-name. What follows is a biographical sketch of his life and work.

Life in Germany: Friedrich Gottlieb Christian Wilhelm Muench (originally: Münch) was born on 25 June 1799 in Nieder-Gemünden, a village in Upper Hesse. He was the son of Georg Münch (1753-1825), a Lutheran pastor, and Luise Christiane Welcker Muench (1766-1830). He was educated at home by his father and older brothers, and then attended the Gymnasium in Darmstadt. Thereafter, he went to the University of Giessen to study theology. It was a veritable hotbed of student protest against the repressive status quo, especially in the Grand Duchy of Hesse where the university was located. (3)

At the university Muench met Paul Follenius (1799-1844) and his brother Karl (Charles in the U.S.) Follen (1796-1840), two persons important in his life. Muench joined a student group led by Karl known as the *Giessener Schwarzen* (Giessen Blacks), so called as they wore black jackets. Follen drafted the statutes for the group, which was viewed as subversive by the authorities in the Grand Duchy, as it was dedicated to the cause of German unity and liberty, something that meant a substantial change in the status quo. It was one of many student groups known as *Burschenschaften*. The Blacks regarded themselves as German patriots and were imbued with a deep love of the German nation as a whole. They envisioned a unified Germany with a republican form of government.

Although the son of a Lutheran minister, Muench became a *Freidenker* (free-thinker). According to Koerner: "Under the influence of Karl Follen, he abandoned, at least in part, the orthodox philosophy taught by his none-too-stern father, and shaped his religious thinking in the manner of the then-prevalent rationalistic outlook." (4) Karl Follen was a dynamic and charismatic leader who deeply influenced his brother Paul and Muench. Although they shared his views, they had witnessed the futility of political agitation. Brother Karl got involved in what the authorities called "demagogic activities." As a result, he fled to Switzerland, but due to Prussian, Austrian, and Russian pressure for his extradition, immigrated to the U.S. Another brother August (1794-1855), was imprisoned for two years on charges of treasonous activities, and then moved to Switzerland. (5)



Friedrich Muench
(Courtesy of Find-a-Grave)

With their guru-like leader, Karl Follen, now gone, Muench completed his studies and was ordained a minister, serving as pastor in his hometown at his father's church. According to Koerner, he continued his studies of philosophy, especially Kant and Fichte, as well as the natural sciences. Aside from writing sermons, Koerner notes: "The muse of poetry also visited him, so that verse flowed from his pen." Ultimately, Muench and Paul Follenius would follow Karl to America, but not as involuntary emigrants. They opted for emigration, rather than revolution, thus taking a pragmatic approach to the political situation. According to Muench: "The thought of emigration came to me earlier than to him (Follenius); he hesitated, because he still believed in the possibility of being of service to the Fatherland, even if it might cost him his life." (6)

Follenius agreed with Muench on the emigration option, but insisted on plans for emigration on a large scale, whereas Muench favored one consisting of a few families. However, he yielded to Follenius' expanded vision. Here we note the contrast between the two: both were idealists, but Muench was more the pragmatist. As a result of their mutual interests, they organized the Giessen Emigration Society, described by Koerner as "perhaps the best organized in Germany. It was founded by intelligent, honest people, who were well known by many of its members." (7) The society came about as the result of the publication of a small book, the first edition of which appeared in March 1833, and the second in July.

Their book was titled: *Aufforderung und Erklärung in Betreff einer Auswanderung im Grossen aus Teutschland in die Nordamerikanischen Freistaaten* (Invitation and Explanation Regarding a Great Emigration from Germany to the North American Free States). Muench and Follenius were its co-authors, as well as organizers of the emigration society. Several thousand copies must have been printed, as the society's membership rapidly grew. According to Muench, the purpose of the society was to establish "a bit of Germany on American soil and to settle it with the best elements of the German population that was fed up with conditions in Europe - at that time a group extant in great numbers - as this would make possible the emergence of a German settlement that was fresh and free in America." According to Koerner, the goal was "to create a German free state, a rejuvenated Germany in North America." (8)

"The first emigrants were to be sent not to a state already organized, but rather to a territory not yet organized as a state." (9) Such a colony would then apply for admission into the U.S. as a state. In less than a year and a half of the initial publication of the book, the Giessen Emigration Society had been organized, and two groups had embarked for the U.S. under the direction of the book's authors. An estimated one thousand people had been interviewed, with five hundred finally being selected to make the journey to America. The impact of the book was no doubt due to the time period in which it appeared, and several factors are worth taking note of.

The Wartburg-Fest had taken place in 1817 to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, and also to protest the prevalent conditions in the German states. (10) And, Gottfried Duden's travel account, known as the *Bericht...*, appeared in 1829; now available in translation as: *Report on a Journey to the Western States of North America*. It awakened a great deal of interest in the idea of emigration, and especially in settling in Missouri where Duden had lived for several years. (11) However, it painted a glowing, overly positive picture of the realities of life in the New World for recently arrived emigrants.

Additionally, the July 1830 Revolution in France had taken place, followed by the Hambacher Fest of 1832, which like the Wartburg-Fest was a vehicle for public protest against the status quo. At this festival "nearly 30,000 people assembled and demanded a unified German republic. They vowed to use armed revolt if more peaceful means were unsuccessful." The German Confederation followed up by passing several oppressive measures: "These required every ruler to reject any petitions that weakened his sovereignty, ordered local diets to support state budgets, banned all public meetings, and increased the controls on political groups." (12).

These events led to the so-called Frankfurter Putsch in 1833, which aimed to spark a revolution in Germany by storming and taking over the Constables' Guard-House in Frankfurt, an attack that was swiftly crushed by the police and soldiers stationed there. As a result, a number of its participants fled and emigrated, including Gustav Koerner. (13) He commented: "Although Friedrich Muench refrained from active participation, there

was a yearning in him to withdraw from the unpleasant conditions in Germany, which seemed so utterly hopeless.” (14)

The cumulative effect of these events created fertile ground for the reception of the book by Muench and Follenius, especially those interested in emigration. However, such a book must have been well formulated to have led to the rather swift formation of the society, and the subsequent emigration of such a sizable group. This was entirely due to the work of the book’s two authors who had drawn up a well-structured emigration plan. It appeared to have covered every possible question that might be raised. However, it was a plan, and when put into action, it faltered and failed.

Life in America: In 1834, the immigrants (500) were divided in two groups, one led by Follenius and the other by Muench. However, after arrival in the U.S., the emigration society was dissolved. Muench wrote: “Our idea was to settle and live together as a German colony, in order to escape the feeling of being strangers in the land of our adoption; but this was found impracticable and we scattered.” (15) “Some of the members remained in St. Louis, others went to Illinois, and still others went to the other bank of the Missouri and settled some distance from St. Louis. Among them the Muench and Follenius families.” (16)

According to Gert Goebel, Editor of the *Hermanner Wochenblatt*, the Follenius family arrived before the Muench family: “Several weeks earlier, Paul Follenius, Muench’s brother-in-law, had already purchased what was then called ‘classic land’ in the vicinity of the old Duden farm in Warren County and our friend Muench followed him there.” (17) Shortly before emigrating, Muench married his second wife, Louise Fritz Muench (1812-87), and they had four children. His first wife, Marianne Fredericka Boberg, who he married in 1826, had died in 1830. Muench’s sister, Maria (?-1883) was married to Muench’s partner, Paul Follenius who perished (typhoid fever) ten years after coming to America. (18).

Muench worked hard at getting established: “Only a body as strong as steel and a will as firm as iron could succeed with unremitting toil to create a home in a hilly and, for the most part, timber-covered region, a new and pleasant home surrounded by orchards and vineyards. (19). According to Goebel: “He never failed to have the latest sort of grapevine that he considered worthy of adopting, as progress in every area was his motto and he remained true to this belief to his very end.” (20)

Aside from viticulture, Muench initially served as minister in the area: “In 1838, Friedrich Muench still functioned as an ordained pastor and held a position at a small, free, non-denominational congregation in Dutzow, where he preached in a log house, i.e. if you can call it a log house, which had been constructed for that purpose and was very well attended.” (21) Apparently, he kept preaching for the next decade, or so, which indicates that although his religious views may have been unorthodox, his pastoral service is not altogether surprising given his theological education and career as a minister in Germany.

Regarding life before the Civil War, Goebel writes: “Until the outbreak of the war, he lived quietly on his farm, but in constant activity in the area of writing and wine-making. (22) Writing occupied an important place in Muench’s life. His articles appeared in German-American papers such as the *Anzeiger des Westens* and the *Westliche Post*, both of which were in St. Louis, as well as journals elsewhere, including *Der Deutsche Pionier* in Cincinnati. Many of his articles appeared with his pen name “Far West,” and covered a wide variety of topics. He published more than a dozen books, most of them in German, but they appeared under his name. (23)

One of his most important and influential works was his guidebook on Missouri for prospective German emigrants that appeared in 1859: *Der Staat Missouri. Ein Handbuch für deutsche Auswanderer* (The State of Missouri. A Handbook for German Emigrants). Two expanded editions appeared in 1866 and 1873; the first edition was published simultaneously in New York and Bremen, and the latter two in Bremen. As that city was a major port for German emigrants, this work would have been particularly important in attracting them to come to Missouri. These works would be good candidates for translation to illuminate the kinds of information on Missouri that was available for German emigrants.

Given his focus on viticulture, it was probably to be expected that Muench published works on that topic. Two works of his appeared in German, one of them enjoying three editions. It also was popular enough to appear in English translation as: *School for American Grape Culture: Brief but Thorough and Practical Guide to the Laying Out of Vineyards* (1869). Other works by Muench dealt with philosophical and religious topics, one of which was an English translation of a German work: *A Treatise on Religion and Christianity, Orthodoxy and Rationalism* (1864).

A work published in 1873 dealt with Muench's life in Germany, and included his autobiography and biographical essays on his close friends: *Erinnerungen aus Deutschlands trübster Zeit. Dargestellt in den Lebensbildern von Karl Follen, Paul Follen und Friedr. Münch* (Recollections of Germany's Darkest Time. Portrayed in the Biographies of Karl Follen, Paul Follen and Friedr. Muench). (24) A posthumous collection of his writings appeared in 1902: *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Writings); although called "collected" writings, it actually was only a selection of his many publications. Writing was not his only outlet, there also was the world of politics.

Like many Germans, Muench was drawn to the Republican Party in the 1850s. In 1856, he campaigned for John C. Fremont for president, speaking in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, New York, and elsewhere. In 1860, he was a delegate at the Republican convention in Chicago that nominated Lincoln for president. In 1861, he was elected to the Missouri State Senate, and also served on the State Immigration Commission. When the Civil War broke out, two of his sons joined the Home Guard, and two other sons joined the Union Army, one of them perishing at the Battle of Wilson's Creek in September 1861. Muench had always been a staunch opponent of slavery.

After the Civil War, he withdrew from public life, devoting himself to his family, farm, and writing. During these years, a half dozen of his books were published, and he continued writing for various journals such as *Der Deutsche Pionier*, a German-American historical journal published in Cincinnati and edited by H.A. Rattermann (1832-1923). They had corresponded for many years, and in December 1874 Rattermann visited him at his farm. He described Muench as "a superb wine maker," and enjoyed several of his fine wines. He noted: "He is a skilled grape propagator. The excellent varieties he develops witness his industry and experience." (25) Rattermann writes: "One perceives immediately that the old man is no pessimist. His total temperament stamps him first and foremost as an optimist." They discussed a wide variety of topics, ranging from religion, politics to science. Of particular interest were their conversations on Muench's experiences in Germany and America.

Rattermann asked if he ever got homesick, causing Muench to reply: "No, indeed Sir! The circumstances in Germany, and especially in my homeland Hesse, were in my eyes too shameful that I could no longer endure them....After the uprising (1833), in which I took no part directly or indirectly except for my sympathies, I could no longer stand aside. The German form of government, the relationship of the people to the nobility and to the officials – all of this filled me with disgust. It drove me out, far away from the country that rewarded sycophancy and hypocrisy, where love of fatherland and attachment to the people were punished with prison and banishment. I accepted the inevitable fate. Whenever the isolation of the forest and the hardships of the backwoods life made me long for the Germany left behind, I solaced myself with my own self-determination. If my lot was difficult, I was satisfied. I had fifteen long years of struggling with hardship. Now these trials are over." (26)

On the other hand, Muench felt that the U.S. "still has a great future in spite of widespread corruption." And he commented: "The American people cannot be put down. Things always reform themselves." Rattermann also enjoyed visiting Muench's study, which was filled with books, periodicals, and correspondence. Pictures of Muench's father, Karl Follen and Follenius adorned the walls, as did engravings of Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt. (27) Muench discussed future contributions he might write for *Der Deutsche Pionier*, and Rattermann noted that he had admired the writings of Far West for more than a quarter century. He noted: "What I admired in Muench's writings was the clarity with which he spoke both for and to the people. There were no ponderous sentences, no showy phrases, no embellishments. Everything he wrote was simple and true." (28)

Conclusion: Muench died on 14 December 1881, and his wife Louise Fritz Muench on 29 November 1887. Both are buried at the Muench Family Cemetery in Dutzow, Warren County, Missouri. His pen name “Far West” was appropriate, as he had settled with family in what was then considered the American West. An obituary in the *Westliche Post*, a German paper in St. Louis, called him “the German-American Nestor and the pride of his countrymen in Missouri.” (29) The term “Nestor” comes from Greek mythology and refers to an elder statesman who is widely venerated, a depiction quite fitting for Muench. Rattermann also made use of the same term when writing about him. (30)

Koerner wrote of him: “He had an enormously positive influence on the German element, as well as on other settlers. His life was an open book, as a result of the various articles written about him that appeared in Germany and in the United States, the service he rendered as a legislator, and especially numerous and widely distributed publications dealing with religion, politics, agriculture, and viticulture. And his life story was a plainly written one, a book that no reader can lay aside without having been edified and encouraged.” (31)

An entry on him in Alexander Schem’s *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Conversations-Lexikon* credited him with having contributed to the intellectual development of the German element, and described him as a German pioneer who made a lasting contribution to Missouri by means of his zealous promotion of German immigration to the state, one that is well known to this day for its substantial German heritage. (32) Charles van Ravenswaay called him “the patriarch of his community, the philosopher and interpreter of the German migration, giving it the moral purpose and a dignity that the immigrants and their descendants needed to sustain their great effort.” (33)

Notes

1. Gustav Koerner, *Das deutsche Element in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, 1818-1848*. (Cincinnati: A.E. Wilde & Co., 1880).
2. For my translation of this chapter, see: Gustav Koerner, “German Immigration and Settlement,” in: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri’s German Heritage*. Second Edition. (Milford, Ohio: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2006), pp. 7-37.
3. Regarding conditions in the Grand Duchy of Hesse, especially with regard to the University of Giessen, see: E.L. Follen, *Life of Charles Follen*. (Boston: Thomas H. Webb and Company, 1844), pp. 13-68.
4. Koerner, “German Immigration and Settlement,” in: Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri’s German Heritage*, p. 11.
5. See my article: “A New Germany in America: The *Invitation and Explanation (1833)* of Paul Follenius and Friedrich Muench,” in: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *German Heritage Explorations*. (Indianapolis: NCSA Literatur, 2019), p. 41.
6. Friedrich Münch, *Gesammelte Schriften*. (St. Louis: Im Verlag von C. Witter, 1902), p. 98.
7. Koerner, “German Immigration and Settlement,” in: Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri’s German Heritage* p. 8.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Regarding the Wartburg-Fest, see the author’s article: “The 300th Anniversary of the Reformation (1817) and its Implications for German Immigration to America,” in: Tolzmann, *German Heritage Explorations*, pp. 73-78.
11. Regarding Duden’s report, see: Dorris Keeven-Franke, “Gottfried Duden: The Man Behind the Book,” in: Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri’s German Heritage*, pp. 85-95.
12. See: Eleanor L. Turk, *A History of Germany*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999).

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13. Koerner himself was involved in the so-called Putsch, which was also known as the Frankfurter Attentat (attack). See: Evarts B. Greene, "Gustav Koerner," in: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Illinois' German Heritage*. (Milford, Ohio: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2005), p. 96.
 14. Koerner, "German Immigration and Settlement," in: Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri's German Heritage*, p. 12.
 15. Frederick Munch, *A Treatise on Religion and Christianity, Orthodoxy and Rationalism*. (Boston: B.H. Greene, 1847), p. iv.
 16. Koerner, "German Immigration and Settlement," in: Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri's German Heritage*, p. 10.
 17. See my article: "Recollections of Friedrich 'Far West' Muench (1799-1881)," in: Tolzmann, *German Heritage Explorations*, p. 58.
 18. See my article: "A New Germany in America: The *Invitation and Explanation* (1833) of Paul Follenius and Friedrich Muench," in: Tolzmann, *German Heritage Explorations*, pp. 41-43.
 19. Koerner, "German Immigration and Settlement," in: Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri's German Heritage* p. 12.
 20. See my article: "Recollections of Friedrich 'Far West' Muench," in: Tolzmann, *German Heritage Explorations* p. 64.
 21. Ibid, p. 62.
 22. Ibid, p. 65.
 23. See my article: "The Writings of Friedrich Muench," in: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *German-Americana: Selected Essays*. (Milford, Ohio: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2009), pp. 113-23. Bibliographical date on Muench's works discussed can be found in this article.
 24. Rattermann made use of Muench's autobiography, and quoted extensively from it in his biographical essay: "Friedrich Münch: Der Nestor der Deutsch-amerikanischen Geistespieniere," in: H.A. Rattermann, *Gesammelte ausgewählte Werke*. (Cincinnati: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1911), vol. 11:147- 190. For a translation of the autobiography, see: Ralph Gregory, *The Autobiography of Friedrich Muench*. (Marthasville, Mo.: Three Pines Pub. Co., 2001).
 25. Siegmur Muehl, "A Visit with Friedrich Muench," in: Tolzmann, ed., *Missouri's German Heritage*, pp-101-102.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Ibid, pp. 101-03.
 28. Ibid, p. 99.
 29. See: Münch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 521.
 30. See footnote no. 24 for the reference to Rattermann's work.
 31. Koerner, "German Immigration and Settlement," in: Tolzmann, *Missouri's German Heritage*, p. 10.
 32. Alexander Schem, ed., *Deutsch-Amerikanisches Conversations-Lexikon*. (New York: E. Steiger, 1872), vol. 7: 598.
 33. Charles van Ravenswaay, *The Arts and Architecture of German Settlements in Missouri: A Survey of a Vanishing Culture*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977), p. 43.