

NOTABLE GERMAN-AMERICANS

Dr. Gustav Peter Philipp Koerner (1809-96), From German Revolutionary to Friend of Lincoln, Lieutenant Governor of Illinois, and Historian

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Introduction

He was a friend of Abraham Lincoln, Lieutenant Governor of Illinois, Civil War soldier, U.S. Ambassador to Spain, and author of a seminal work on the history of the German element in the U.S. Before that, however, Gustav Koerner was probably best known as a *Dreissiger* (Thirtyer), a term referring to German emigrants of the 1830s who either had opposed, or were dissatisfied with the status quo in Germany. After arrival in America, Koerner settled in Illinois, subsequently becoming one of the foremost German-American spokesmen and historians of his time.

Life in Germany

Koerner (originally spelled Körner) was born on 20 November 1809 in Frankfurt am Main, the son of Bernhard (1776-1829) and Maria Magdalena Koerner (1776-1847). His father was a publisher, book and art dealer, and his mother the daughter of a book dealer. After becoming a student of law at the University of Jena in 1828, he became a member of the Burschenschaft Germania, one of the many student groups dedicated to German unity and liberty.

In 1830 he continued his studies at the University of Munich, where he got involved in student altercations that caused his imprisonment for four months. Thereafter, he completed his studies at the University of Heidelberg, receiving a doctorate in law in 1832, while also becoming a member of the Burschenschaft Franconia Heidelberg. He was admitted to the practice of law, but was imbued with the revolutionary spirit of the time.

Prior to completion of his studies, he participated in 1831 in the Burschentag, a meeting of student groups, in Frankfurt, where Koerner actively promoted the cause of unity and freedom, and in 1832 he also participated in the Hambacher Fest that endorsed similar goals. Although non-political, it was viewed as subversive, and at best politically incorrect. Some of its participants were arrested,



Gustav Koerner in 1836

while others emigrated. The event had been called for by the *Vaterlandsverein zur Unterstützung der freien Presse* (Homeland society for the support of the free press). Koerner belonged to its Frankfurt section, which then went on to plan the so-called Frankfurter Putsch that took place on 3 April 1833.

This plan called for an attack on and takeover of the Constables Guard-House in Frankfurt. Political prisoners would be released, and it was hoped that the local citizenry would support the rebels, and that this would spark a German revolution. Koerner commanded a group that stormed the Guard-House, but the authorities had been forewarned, so that fifty soldiers had been stationed there. As a result, the attack quickly failed, and Koerner was wounded, causing him to flee to France with the help of his sister. In the meantime, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Dr. Gustav Peter Philipp Koerner.

The warrant indicated that he was twenty-five years old, five foot and two inches tall, and had blond hair. His apprehension and extradition to authorities was requested for his participation in the Putsch. However, Koerner had already made his way to Le Havre, and from there sailed to the U.S., arriving in New York in the summer of 1833. From Cleveland he took a canal boat to Portsmouth, Ohio, and from there a steamboat to St. Louis.

Life in the U.S.

In Le Havre Koerner had joined up with the Engelmann family from the Rhineland-Palatinate, and after arrival in Missouri, they moved across

the river to St. Clair County, Illinois due to their aversion of slavery. It became a destination of German emigrants, and its county seat Belleville an important German center. In 1836, Koerner married Sophie Engelmann, and together they raised a family of eight children. St. Clair County became known as a “Latin Settlement” due to its highly educated emigrants, many of whom were better equipped to read classical texts than handle a plow.

In 1829, Gottfried Duden published a glowing report about his stay in Missouri: *Bericht über eine Reise nach den westlichen Staaten Nordamerika's und einen mehrjährigen Aufenthalt am Missouri...* (Report of a Journey to the western states of North America, and a stay of several years along the Missouri). It was a highly influential book that caused many Germans to emigrate, and settle there and in southern Illinois.

To counter Duden's overly positive description Koerner published *Schilderung des gegenwärtigen Zustandes der westlichen Staaten Nord-Amerika's...* (Description of the current Condition of the Western States of North America...). It appeared in 1834 at the press of his brother Karl in Frankfurt, and was based on a series of articles he had sent his brother for publication in the German journal *Das Ausland*.

To perfect his knowledge of American law, he studied at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky (1834-35). In 1835, he was admitted to the bar, and opened a law office in Belleville. He also translated the statutes of the state of Illinois, and other documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, into German.

Continuing his interest in providing an accurate picture of life in America, he wrote articles for *Das Westland*, a journal published in 1837 in St. Louis, but only three issues appeared. In 1840, he published *Der Freiheitsbote in Illinois*, but that was also short-lived. Four years later, he founded the *Belleviller Beobachter*, but that had a similar fate. More successful was the *Belleviller Zeitung* that began publication in 1849. Although not an editor, Koerner wrote much of its contents.

In Belleville he helped establish a library that developed into the public library, and also a private school before public schools were in place. In 1845 he was appointed to fill a vacancy in the state supreme court, but declined a second term due to the meager salary. Although supportive of the 1848 Revolution, he took issue with the radical views of some of the 48ers.

This reflected the tensions between them and the *Dreissiger*, who were known as the “Greens” and the “Grays.” By the time of the Civil War, however, this generational conflict had subsided. From 1853 to 1857, he served as Lieutenant Governor of Illinois as a Democrat, but due to his anti-slavery and anti-nativist views, became an ardent supporter of the Republican Party.

As the foremost German-American community leader in Illinois he became a close friend of Abraham Lincoln (1809-65); both were the same age. Koerner actively worked for his nomination for President at the Republican national convention in 1860 in Chicago, and thereafter campaigned for his election. When the Civil War broke out, he helped organize the 43rd Illinois Voluntary Infantry Regiment, and was then assigned to serve as an aide to Gen. John C. Fremont (1813-90). However, due to ill health he resigned in April 1862.

He did not remain inactive for long, as in 1864, Lincoln appointed him to become U.S. Ambassador to Spain, a position whose predecessor was Carl Schurz (1829-1906). In 1870, he was elected as a representative to the state legislature, and in 1872 unsuccessfully ran for governor as the Liberal-Republican and Democratic candidate. Thereafter, Koerner retired from active involvement in political affairs, and focused on his law practice and writing articles for the press. He also completed work on a valuable history of the German element in America that was published in 1880.



Gustav Koerner in later life

In 1886, Koerner and his wife celebrated their golden wedding anniversary in Belleville, and Koerner's friend H.A. Rattermann (1832-1923), the well-known German-American historian from Cincinnati, joined the celebration and presented them with a play. It was performed for the occasion, and honored the couple for their event-filled marriage. Rattermann greatly admired Koerner and encouraged him to begin work on his autobiography, a two-volume work that was published posthumously in 1909 on the centennial of birth. Koerner died in 1896, his wife in 1888; both are buried at the Walnut Hill Cemetery in Belleville.

Koerner's German-American History

In 1880, Koerner's German-American history was published in Cincinnati: *Das Deutsche Element in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-Amerika, 1818-1848*. Although the dates refer to the first half of the 19th century, Koerner often covers the time period thereafter. I translated selections from his history for two works I edited: *The German Element in the Northeast* and *The German Element in the Ohio Valley* (see the Sources). The following quotations are drawn from them and provide information as to the goals of Koerner had in mind when writing his history.

Koerner makes it clear that his work is not a history of German immigration, as he does not begin in Europe, but in America and focuses on the German element. He writes:

The author of the present work does not plan on writing a general history of German immigration. This would be adverse to his way of thinking, and be of no interest to him. I certainly make reference to immigration, but only as a foundation for a history of the German element in the U.S. The purpose of my work is to show if and to what extent the German element has influenced American society.

He, therefore, is not interested in telling the story of German immigration and exploring its root causes in Europe, but rather wants to concentrate on the German element, and explore how it has influenced American society. He places his work within the framework of German-American history, but is most interested in concentrating on the German element of the early 19th century, especially those who came to America before the 1848 Revolution. He writes:

There are several reasons for closing this work off with the year 1848. To go further would have been a difficult and ambitious task. However, a major reason is that since the 1848 Revolution many individuals with writing abilities have found refuge in America, and there is absolutely no dearth of talent among them for those who want to take on the task of writing the history for the following years.

However, his history actually does not conclude with 1848 he is just indicating that his focus on immigrants who came to the U.S. before that date. His history, therefore basically concentrates on his generation. His approach is biographical, rather than topical or chronological. For each state he covers Koerner provides detailed biographical information about the people he discusses. He writes:

Although the following is not a history of German immigration and settlement, but rather a contribution to the history of German influence on America, it is not merely a chronological compilation of information relating to this topic. Rather it aims to present a series of biographies of those Germans, who in some way made contributions in this regard. These life histories at times naturally surpass the timeframe of the three decades covered, especially as this relates to their previous life in Europe. However, I believe that this manner of presenting history will interest the reader, and will attain the goal I have in mind.

Koerner provides in-depth information on those individuals who succeeded in adding a German dimension to American life in their particular field of endeavor, thus providing a rich biographical portrait of the German element. He emphasizes that the German cultural heritage should be preserved, and that it would be unnatural if it was not. He writes:

The love of German language and literature should of course be held sacred and transmitted to one's offspring. And, of course, the cherished German cultural heritage that we bear witness within us can never be lost. That would be ungrateful and foolish, since by preserving and defending this heritage, while at the same time declaring our loyalty to the land of

our choice, we honor ourselves in the best way possible, as well as the people we are descended from and for whom our hearts beat with never-ending love.

Legacy

Works by and about Koerner, in German and English, remain in print today, a testimony to Koerner's importance for German-American history, and the role that he played in it. Since 2004 his home in Belleville has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and is currently being restored by the Koerner House Restoration Committee. When completed, it will serve as a museum focusing on the life and work of Koerner. In 2009 the bicentennial of Koerner's birth was celebrated. This took place with the theme "Do right and fear no one," which Koerner described as the "religion" of his fellow Burschenschaftler, an admonition that seems to have been the hallmark of his life and work.

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Nachtrag – Addendum: Alsatian Immigration

My article on “New Alsace: An Alsatian Settlement in Southeastern Indiana,” appeared recently in *The Palatine Immigrant*. 47:3 (2022); 13-22, and engendered quite a bit of interest. I heard from readers who had ancestors who came from Alsace and settled in the Greater Cincinnati and surrounding Ohio Valley region.

As a result, I have now cataloged a list of villages, which were the homelands of German-speaking immigrants who settled in the aforementioned area. They came from the following 19 villages and towns: Battenheim, Brodelsheim, Ermingen, Fellering, Hagenau, Haspelscheidt, Markolsheim, Markweiler, Marlenheim, Molsheim, Mühlhausen, Selestat, Sickert, Steinberg, Strassburg, Surbourg, Tann, Wanzenau, and Weissenburg.

If readers know of other villages, please let me know, as I shall soon be speaking about New Alsace, Indiana and the Alsatian immigration to America, and would like to know if there are other villages that contributed German-speaking immigrants to the areas noted above.

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