

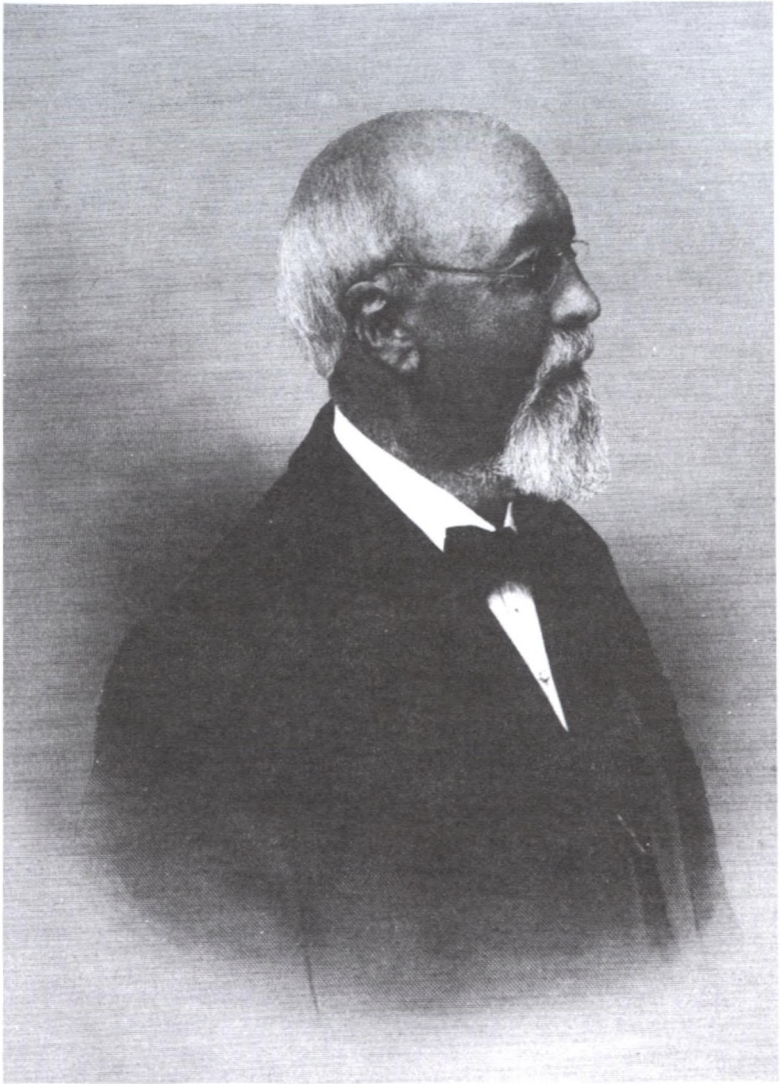
William Roba

Forgotten German-Iowan Alternatives

The cold winter morning of Saturday, 8 December 1894, had been eagerly anticipated by the school teachers of Scott County, in eastern Iowa. For decades, an annual conference was held by a voluntary association of both public and private educators. While there were comfortable subjects presented by local experts such as Dr. P. Radenhausen on "Science Below the High School," or the nationally recognized expert, William Reuter, on "Physical Culture," the highlight was a series of papers on views of public schools. Two were by business men who were outsiders and two by administrators as insiders.¹

The successful businessman Emil Geisler made some unforgettable remarks about schools and teaching methods that day. He argued for an interactive mode of teaching, and emphasized the usefulness of the Socratic Method by explaining that this had been introduced into teaching in northern Germany by Joachim Heinrich Campe, author of the famous *Ein Lesebuch für Kinder* and beloved teacher of Alexander and William von Humboldt. He argued that a community school such as the Free German School was an excellent place for teaching character. "Anyway, ethics and morals should be taught in the public school and not left to the Sunday school of the churches, which comparatively few children frequent and where generally religion prevails over ethics. The bible is surely not a proper textbook for children."² This may sound intemperate to modern readers, but for him, the reliance upon organized religion represented an intrusion into children's learning, and a reliance upon textbooks insured dullness and boredom. He concluded rhetorically with the imperative statement, "Do not allow the raising of hands!"³ It would seem that he was concerned by teachers who always taught on the basis of getting the right answer.

These remarks indicate a very different climate of opinion in late nineteenth century America, especially in the Midwest, center of German-American settlement. Emil Geisler (1828-1910) was regionally influential in the Upper Mississippi River Valley as a strong supporter of education, promoter of a powerful myth of ethnicity, and successful businessman. His career suggests certain possibilities for research into the networking of German-American individuals in the Midwest.



Emil Geisler (1828-1910)

Education permeated his earliest years, having been born in the village of Lunden in the *Nordfriesland* area (western edge) of the Duchy of Holstein on 11 April 1828. He was baptized on 1 June in the magnificent Lutheran church, still standing, which overlooks the *Englischer See* (North Sea) for kilometers. His parents were Detlef (from the Duchy of Schleswig) and Anna Geisler (from Wilster); nearby in the Northern Quarter of Lunden, lived a rich uncle, Johannes Matthias Geissler.⁴ He attended local schools, receiving preparatory academic training, before entering the University of Kiel, but his education was cut short by the political unrest of the late 1840s. He fought in the Schleswig-Holstein Army from 1848 until 1852, when he joined 25 other Holsteiners who migrated to America on the *Harriet Frances* sailing ship.⁵ Leaving Hamburg in May, Geisler arrived in New Orleans on 8 June 1852, and reached Davenport, Iowa, by steamboat a few weeks later.

He began working as a farm laborer, and then became a teacher during his first two years in Davenport.⁶ During the next twelve years, there were almost twenty former teachers from German duchies and kingdoms who lived in Davenport. There were six locally prominent school teachers: Mathias J. Rohlf (later head of the Iowa Emigration Office), Nicholas J. Rusch (later lieutenant governor), Henry J. True (eventually a newspaper editor), C. H. Jensen (businessman) and William Riepe; there were also three Lutheran ministers: Pastor J. G. Wiehle, Pastor F. Krueger and Pastor Freytag.⁷ As one might expect, there were many educational issues discussed, debated and denied in the club rooms and saloons, at *Stammtische*, and from the pulpits of "Davenport-am-Mississippi."

The first major division of opinion was over who should control the education of German-Iowan children: the community or the church. Matthias Rohlf was the first to attempt the creation of German-Iowan educational opportunities in 1848, but there were not enough students to make it financially feasible. By the summer of 1852, the northeast corner of a city block was purchased for \$300 after voluntary appeals for contributions proved successful. In September of that year, Henry True started his own community school on a city block corner six blocks away from the first one. By the next year, the estimated German-born population had tripled, however as the 1848er journalist, Theodor Gülich facetiously pointed out, "the hazlenut bushes are growing 3 feet high in the construction already begun."⁸ On 23 January 1853 the land was sold to H. H. Andresen after a vote by the newly elected officers.⁹ This move had been opposed by an embryonic "church party" among the Holsteiner settlers, and their leaders Mathias Rohlf and Hans Reimer Claussen. However, the lease for the rooms had been terminated when the Holstein Lutheran minister, Pastor William Helfer, left the church five months earlier.

Finally, a consensus appeared with the organization of the Free German School Society on 6 February 1853 with a capitalization of \$715, and additional monies from a benefit concert by the *Männerchor* on 31 March 1851.¹⁰ The bylaws specifically stated that the school was protected and there would be the "exclusion of all churchly influence"; the implicit understanding was that "free" meant that the school would be free from any organized churchly influence. Fees were charged for instruction in German parallel to the public schools. The private school of J. H. True became the Society's

school and on 8 October 1853, it opened in a new brick building on land donated by the wealthy businessman, Samuel Hirschl, a half mile north of True's "select" school.¹¹ A decade later, an increase in enrollment led to the hiring of a second teacher, Heinrich Hannecke, and by 1867, the school house doubled in size with the building of an addition next to the original.

This first "Free German School" lasted into the 1870s, when the Davenport Public Schools first introduced the teaching of German into the curriculum. Although the original emphasis upon formal German was no longer necessary, the school continued until the death of H. J. True (1820-76), although his daughter and son-in-law taught a few more years. After more than a decade, German-American community leaders in Davenport began to fear the loss of beliefs and cultural values in public education. There were a series of public meetings in 1890 leading to a reorganized charter, the *Freie Deutsche Schulgemeinde*; the first actual course offerings appeared in 1897, when Geisler joined the association. By the next year, a new school was built for \$6,500 in a German neighborhood on the west side of the city. From 1898 to 1904 the school society held monthly meetings, with Emil Geisler as the president for the entire period.

Geisler participated in community associations which encouraged life-long learning. One of the earliest voluntary scientific associations west of the Mississippi River was the Academy of Natural Sciences, started on 14 December 1867. Although there was a club-like atmosphere, educated Germans participated in the sponsored lectures and supported the publication of three volumes of published papers.¹² Geisler was a long-term member and supporter, although he remained in the background. The second community organization was the Davenport Turner society. This was founded on 3 August 1852 as the "Socialistic Turner Society," and had as its symbol, a red silk flag in 1854, indicative of the revolutionary sentiments of the membership.¹³ The membership enthusiastically supported *geistiges Turnen*, or intellectual events such as public lectures. Geisler believed in the "training of the mind," maintaining his membership for life on an inactive basis.

* * *

The "lost republic" of Schleswig-Holstein remained a constant force in Geisler's life. In the northernmost duchies of the German Confederation, an indigenous movement arose to create a free and independent republic, similar in size to the Kingdom of Belgium which had been formed in 1830. In order to implement this ideal, a provisional army was created which Geisler joined on 10 June 1848, becoming a non-commissioned officer in the 1st Company, 7th Infantry Battalion. He saw action in a number of skirmishes in 1849 and 1850. As a revolutionary movement, there were important political and social reasons for attempted independence, and two leaders, Hans Reimer Claussen and Theodor Olshausen, succeeded in developing the rationale for a Provisional Government.¹⁴ The Frankfurt Assembly debated the role of Schleswig but the Danish Army soon ended hope for a free and independent republic; the leaders soon found themselves systematically excluded from public life and migrated to the beckoning city of Davenport, Iowa.

Forever after the memory of a revolutionary, provisional government focused on the three leaders: Count Reventlow-Preetz, Prince Friedrich von Augustenburg, and Theodore Olshausen. Government representatives ordered a loosely organized army of hunters, students and Turners to leave Kiel on the night of 23 March and to attack the fortifications of Rendsburg. They were able to open the fortress doors the next morning, 24 March 1848, which became the embedded date of the republic's origins.

The first generation of migrating Holsteiners and Schleswigers who had moved to Iowa and received both recognition and political power from their involvement in the American Civil War, realized that they needed an organization to maintain the ideals of their youthful experience. Thirteen veterans of the "lost republic" met to plan the 25th Anniversary of failed revolution and by 15 September 1872 founded the Association of the Schleswig-Holstein Veterans of 1848-1850 (*Verein der Schleswig-Holstein Kampfgenossen, 1848-1850*). Perhaps aware of the change in public perception of the newly created German Empire, they chose to celebrate the "differentness" of the Schleswig-Holsteiners; different from the emerging stereotypes of the unified Germany and the new Kaiser William I. The first festival was celebrated on 24 March 1873 to commemorate the taking of the city of Rendsburg in 1848. Emil Geisler had been named recording secretary (*Schrifführer*), a position he held until 1905. As secretary, he also became an "Occasional Poet," creating poetry for various celebrations.¹⁵

In the area of language as cultural control, the Association proved to be a powerful force for the extension and texturing of the myth of a regional stereotype. Geisler, Claussen, and Olshausen were all educated men who had grown up in the associated duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. This area had remained an area of linguistic quicksand, where success sometimes relied upon tri-lingual mastery: Danish, *Plattdüütsch*, and Standard German skills. Friedrich Dahlmann described the northern Duchy of Schleswig as "a land where most spoke neither High German nor High Danish but rather various dialects merging gradually into one another."¹⁶ Moreover, another of the revolutionary leaders, Theodore Güllich, had argued in the 1840 Diet debates, "that German served Schleswig as the language of culture, the language of the urban educated and economic elite. What the rural masses may have spoken, or thought, did not matter nearly so much."¹⁷ The problem for Geisler was to create an Iowan version of the *Plattdüütsch* spoken in Schleswig-Holstein, and use it to reinforce the myth of homeland independence.

For many years the typical celebration in March, which nearly coincided with the Vernal Equinox, consisted of banquets, speeches and a formal ball. With greatest number of membership reaching 337, the annual meetings were well-attended, with the balls approaching 500 in participants. One assumes that both wives and lovers augmented the number of dancing couples! By 1888, the formal dance was discontinued and plans for the golden anniversary predominated during the next ten years. As an example of Ethnic Pageantry, the 50th anniversary in 1898 reflected many other Midwestern ethnic events of the 1890s. A huge parade was organized, with participants marching to Washington Square Park, the Westside, German-American public space. There, the entire group assembled sang the recently written Schleswig-Holstein song,

and the association president, the prominent attorney Bleik Peters, dedicated a monument in memory of the courageous comrades and their ideals.

The Schleswig-Holstein veterans had chosen a red granite stone from the Mississippi River shoreline, added a gilded inscription, and carved two symbolic oak branches, surrounding this simple statement in English:

The Schleswig-Holstein Comrades in Arms
1848 - '49 - '50
Erected
March 24, 1898.

Emil Geisler gave the major address, and first spoke in German about the higher meaning, then emphasizing how the granite slab and symbolic oaks represented the Schleswig-Holsteiner, "the true descendants of the Anglo-Saxons."¹⁸ He reiterated the aspect of transplanting political ideals to America by lifting the domination of Danish oppression, and then later defending American freedom in the American Civil War.

We landed here on the bank of that mighty stream, the Mississippi, in the youthful state of Iowa, which was just opening to civilization. Here we exchanged the weapons of war with those of peace and culture, the plow, the hammer and the saw. The virgin earth was broken and the flourishing farms of this county, the factories and businesses of the city, which German hands created, gave proof of their diligence and energy. When groups hostile to freedom threatened the free institutions of this country and scorned its laws, many of our comrades again took up arms to defend freedom and union; they helped to suppress the bloody rebellion. Hence, we Schleswig-Holsteiners may justly be counted among the best citizens of this country, outstanding with German virtues: intelligence, the spirit of work, of obedience to law, of love for freedom.¹⁹

Geisler then turned to the Davenport Park Commissioners, switched over to English and referred to the hope that "Germania and Columbia, like a pair of sisters, alike distinguished among the civilized nations of the world, always be united in their efforts for the welfare of their children and the distribution of the blessings of the civilization among all nations." The Park officials accepted the monument on behalf of the city, and the "Star Spangled Banner" closed the public part of the celebration.

The powerful parts of this public address reinforced the German-American stereotype of the Schleswig-Holsteiner as a unique and superior regional area within the German Empire. The first point was the public reference to a higher meaning or higher power as a non-Christian, or Free Thinker version of the spiritual.²⁰ This was symbolically reinforced with the oak branches, and the interesting connection to the Anglo-Saxons, which may have referred to the linguistic connections between *Plattdüütsch* and British English. Secondly, the transplantation overlay worked to suggest that Danish oppression was similar to the Confederate oppression over slaves; followed

by the combining of Germania and Columbia was a coded word play to remind the audience of the combination of Schleswig and Holstein, previously separated as duchies but now united in the German Empire. Thirdly, the switch over to English subtly signaled the successful version of the acculturated German-Americans assembled around the stone monument.

The most remarkable aspect of Geisler's influence upon this multi-generational myth appears in his life-long work as a poet. In 1902 he privately published *Stroblumen für Adele*. When compared with the notes and emendations from his hand written copy, it shows how he refined and modified his poetry from 1854-1902. The book consists of five sections for 111 poems. The first section includes "In ein Schnitzelbuch" and a medley of six other poems. The second section, "Album Sprüche," has a variety of 46 poems. The third section, "Grabschriften," contains 25 poems including several on Schleswig-Holstein, one on cremation, and "Gefallener Krieger." The fourth section, "Unsere Weine," is the most interesting section with 25 poems including one on "Probsteierin," another on the Odd Fellows Lodge in Davenport, another on the "Skatspieler," two poems from the late 1840s, one poem reacting to Bayard Taylor (famous itinerant public lecturer of the period) and one on the Bremen Rathskeller in 1895. The last section, "Charaden," has 8 poems. The 78 pages of poetry are a remarkable life-time compilation of occasional poems written for a particular occasion, and others which are philosophical, funny and appealing. Most importantly, they are written in a literary style which reflects the *Plattdüütsch*-influenced German spoken in eastern Iowa, appropriate for the myth maintenance.

Geisler's final opportunity to reinforce this myth publicly occurred when one of the English-language newspapers celebrated its semi-centennial. Geisler wrote a short article, "The Schleswig-Holsteiner, The Thrifty Migrants Who Helped Make Davenport." He described the origins of chain migration from various villages and towns in Schleswig-Holstein to the County of Scott where Davenport was located. He described the original group of migrating Holsteiners who came from the area southeast of the provincial capital, Kiel, as Probsteiers who wrote letters home, some of which were published in the Kiel newspapers. It seemed important to him to remind his readers that these letters came from the "highly educated men, in the prime of their life, who could handle the pen as well as the plow and the axe, and as they found hard earned success, sent glowing letters to the papers of the old country."²¹

* * *

American business success supported Geisler's community interests. When he arrived in eastern Iowa, he started out as a farm laborer, and then taught for the first two years in Davenport. By 1855 he became a shop assistant and joined the Odd Fellows, Scott Lodge No. 37. This may have been useful in making non-German business contacts. By 28 July 1856, he married Sophia D. Halkens; she had been born in 1835 in Melsdorf, Duchy of Holstein. It was a church wedding with the Rev. Johan Hartzell, Presbyterian minister presiding at the Disciples of Christ Church. Two years later he opened a grocery store and by the outbreak of the American Civil War, his

„Ut min Gaarn verlarn“

Strohblumen

Gepflückt am Lebenswege und den Freunden gewidmet

Gelegenheitsgedichtchen

... von ...

Emil N. J. Geisler

Title Page of Geisler's 1902 collection of poetry

AN MEINE LEYER.

Komm, Du liebe gute Leyer,
Singe dir dein eigen Lob,
Mir war nie ein Schatz so theuer,
Welchen ich auch sonst erhob,
Als du, die mir in Freud und Leid
Ein innig Mitgefühl stets beut.

Mag dein Ton auch nicht so rauschen,
Kräftig wie die Orgel schon.
Ladet er auch nicht zum Lauschen
Sanft wie Engels-Harfenton;
So stammt er doch durch Leid und Lust
Erregt, aus einer Menschenbrust.

Bist bescheiden; wirst nicht wagen
Lorbeerkränzen nachzugehn;
Wirst, ermattend, nicht mich tragen
Auf Parnassus steile Höh'n.
Doch fürcht'st du auch, so still und gut
Nicht grimmer Recensenten Wuth.

Drum, so töne, süsse Leyer,
Was mir still durchzieht das Herz,
Sei's der Freundschaft, Liebe Feuer,
Sei es Freude, sei es Schmerz,
Du tönest mir nur und dem Freund
Den Gleichgefühl mit mir vereint.

"To My Lyre" from Geisler's 1902 collection of poetry

personal property was modestly valued at \$100; at age 33, his household consisted of his wife (aged 25), his daughter Anna (aged 3), and his father-in-law (aged 61).²² He sold his grocery concern in 1863, and branched out into owning a vineyard and wine-tasting room, which proved popular to the war-time population.²³ His business enterprises prospered and in 1865 he built a brickyard, which he used in house building, and as a stable basis for income. He still remembered his own experiences, and with the end of the American Civil War, he helped create an Immigrant Aid Association in 1866 for the influx of Germans to Davenport after the end of the blockade of American ports.²⁴ By 1870 he had personal property valued at \$3,000 and real estate valued at \$12,000; his household consisted of his wife, his nephew, Louis Halkens (aged 9) and Sophia (aged 5).²⁵

By the early 1870s, Geisler moved away from mercantile activities, concentrating on house construction, and eventually a larger-scale neighborhood and town developer. He bought and sold houses, and built houses on speculation. With the capital amassed from these activities. He created a group of five investors in Scott County to create a planned community in western Iowa. In 1868, the Rock Island Lines with superb connections to Chicago and Davenport, Iowa, extended their tracks diagonally through Cass County, west of the larger town of Carroll, Iowa. Crossing Camp Creek, the tracks promised the possibility of growth and land sales. The six investors created the Marne Town Company (named after a Holstein village), which purchased a quarter section of 160 acres in 1875, platted a town site, and filed papers on 17 May 1875.²⁶ The company began to advertise their idealized Schleswig-Holstein town on the prairie and to sell lots. The selection of the name was designed to appeal to migrating Schleswig-Holsteiners.²⁷ The reality of purchasing the land from Thomas Meredith and planning for the perfect Iowa frontier community began in earnest within two years. Hans Simonson built a hotel, cleverly named the Marne House, in 1878 and the next year a German school opened on the upper floor of the hotel, thereby replicating the Davenport experience.²⁸ During the next decade, Marne grew quite slowly. From an analysis of twenty-five successful settlers (some with wives), the average age was 44 in 1890 (ages ranged from 19 - 57), when the town had a population of 381.²⁹ Twelve of these successful "pioneers" came from northern Germany: 4 from Denmark, 4 from Schleswig-Holstein, 3 from Germany, 1 from Holland and 1 from Prussia.³⁰ Thus the veneer of provincial identity was maintained for publicity purposes, not historical fact.

Closer to home, Geisler developed a German neighborhood on the edge of the bluffs in western Davenport. This compact hillside retreat for German families was almost mid-way between the huge estate of the German-speaking Hungarian 1848er, Count Nicholas Fejevary, and the popular *Schützen Park*. Owned by the local German-American shooting society, this amusement park had a trolley car turn-around, bandstand, music pavilion, club house, and tame herds of deer and elk. The earliest house (1868) was built for a wealthy manufacturer of pumps and foundry owner. Geisler's daughter and family grew up on a large estate in the neighborhood known as "Wild Acres." The regional connection was continued with his son-in-law, Otto Clausen

(1850-1905) migrating from Scharnhorst, in Schleswig-Holstein. Geisler lived below the bluffs, abutting the hillside neighborhood.³¹

The last few years of Geisler's life were bitter sweet; officially retired in 1885, He and his wife moved in 1904 to Coronado, California, because of her health. She died on 18 March 1908, less than a week before the annual event of remembering the collective memory of the "lost republic." He had one last adventure as he returned to the *Nordfriesland* coast of Schleswig-Holstein and Lunden, the village of his youth in 1909. Geisler died on 20 December 1910, with his body cremated, and the non-Christian memorial service conducted by Gustave Donald, the First Speaker of the Davenport Turners.

* * *

This narrative account of the life and times of Emil Geisler leads to some useful questions for future research. First, there needs to be much more investigation of the German-American communities of the Midwest in the early twentieth century with comparative studies to expand our understanding of individual cities. Second, the lifestyle of German-American schools requires more consistent analysis. Third, how did regional myths of ethnicity change over time? Were they recycled through the media, appear as civic pageantry or remain an antiquarian's agenda? Fourth, influential German-American businessmen need to be scrutinized from the perspective of "Entrepreneurial History," not hagiographical essays. Fifth, what are the elusive strands of individual personality which have an impact upon historical developments; has Geisler been forgotten and ignored because he resisted public life and remained fiercely dedicated to his family and home?

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Notes

¹ Davenport *Leader* (9 December 1894).

² Manuscript copy on file in the Scott Community College archives.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Lunden Church *Register* (1828) Number 28, p. 724; electronic-mail from Henning Peters, Jr. (6 January 2004), local historian at the Lunden Heimatsmuseum.

⁵ Glazier and Filby, 3:21.

⁶ *History of Scott County* (1882), 1063.

⁷ August Richter, *History of Scott County* (Chicago, 1917), 548

⁸ "In dem angenehmen Bau wuchern die Haselbüsche drei Fuss hoch!" *Der Demokrat* (8 January 1853), quoted by Richter, 549. Theodore Olshausen, *Der Staat Iowa* (Kiel, 1855), 117-18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 549-50.

¹⁰ Richter, 550.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² William Roba, *The River and the Prairie* (Davenport, IA: Hesperian Press, 1986), 86.

¹³ Richter, 532.

¹⁴ See Ernst-Erich Marhencke, *Hans Reimer Claussen* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 249-50. Olshausen's viewpoint comes through from two letters which he wrote from Rendsburg, 10/17 August 1848 in *Theodor Olshausen, 1802-1869: Briefe an den Bruder Justus*, ed. Ingo and Joachim Reppmann (Davenport, IA: Hesperian Press, 2003), 131-32.

¹⁵ Richter, chap. 50, *passim*.

¹⁶ Quoted by Brian Vick, *Defining Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁸ Richter, 614.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 616.

²⁰ The most recent analysis of the wide-spread acceptance of the *Freidenker* position appears in Katja Rampelmann, *Im Licht der Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003), 104-99, emphasizing the continuing influence of Milwaukee on intellectuals in other Midwestern cities.

²¹ Davenport *Democrat* (22 October 1905).

²² 1860 U. S. Census, p. 247.

²³ Davenport City Directory, 1864.

²⁴ Richter, *Democrat* (15 May 1921): p. 9.

²⁵ 1870 U. S. Census, p. 107.

²⁶ *History of Cass County* (Springfield, IL, 1884), 609.

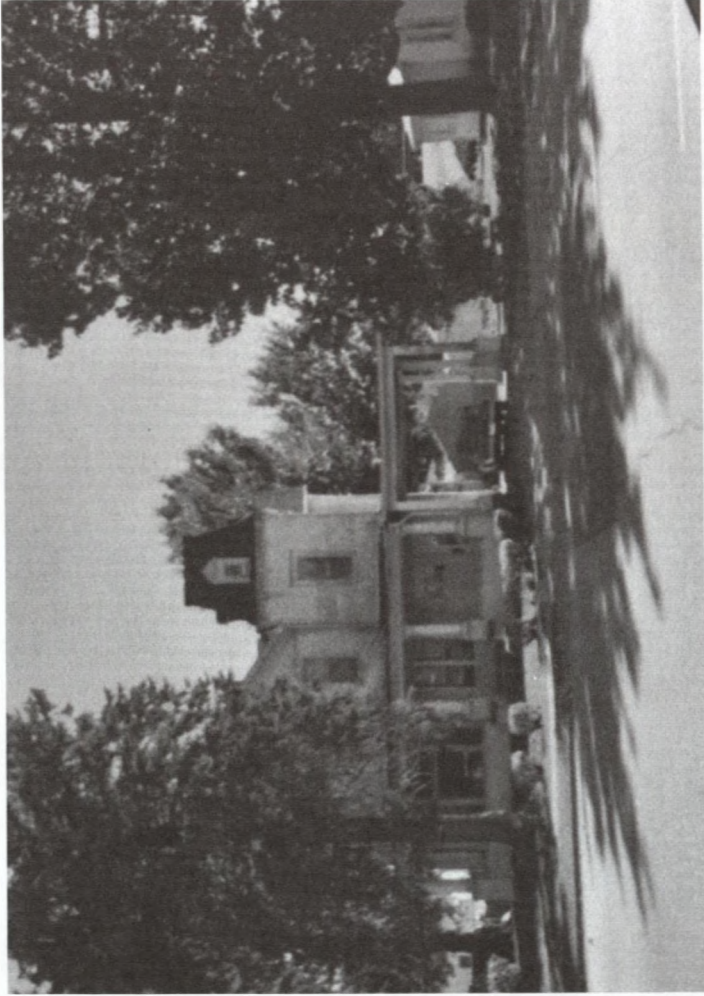
²⁷ Gerd Hagenah, *Die frühe schleswig-holsteinische Auswanderung in die USA, 1835-1860* (Bad Segeberg, 2002), 278.

²⁸ *History of Cass County*, 623.

²⁹ 1890 U. S. Census.

³⁰ *History of Cass County*, 611-16; *A History of Marne, Iowa* (1975), 17-41.

³¹ Genevieve Harms, "Auld Lang Syne – A German Neighborhood in West Davenport, Iowa." *Recurring Group Topics in German-American Studies* (Bettendorf: Scott Community College Honors Seminar, 2002), 1-10.



The Emil Geisler home in Davenport, Iowa

