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Celebrating the German Heritage¹

After two months at sea, thirteen German families arrived at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on October 6, 1683, the date which has become widely accepted as the beginning of German-American history. Under the leadership of Franz Daniel Pastorius, they established Germantown, which was incorporated in 1854 into the city of Philadelphia as the twenty-second ward. In 1683 Philadelphia consisted of a few poorly constructed dwellings, and the rest, according to Pastorius, "was woods and brushwood."² With respect to the new settlement he wrote "we called the place Germantown which to us signifies likewise the city of brothers."³

To the 2,750 acres of Germantown were soon added land of two other villages: Sommerhausen and Crefeld, both of which were named for the homes of the immigrants. In Germantown the main street was sixty feet wide and lined with peach trees. Each homestead had a three-acre plot of land. An open market place was located at the central crossing-point. The home of the scholarly lawyer, Pastorius, at first consisted of a hovel thirty by fifteen feet with paper soaked in oil for windows. The motto over his door read in Latin, "Small is my house, it welcomes the good man; let the godless one stay away."⁴ Thus began in these humble origins the history of America's largest ethnic group which today numbers about fifty million comprising 28.8% of the population.

In 1883 the bicentennial of the founding of Germantown was celebrated across the United States. The idea for it had been conceived by Oswald Seidensticker, the prolific historian and bibliographer and professor of German at the University of Pennsylvania. He, in cooperation with the *Deutscher Pionier-Verein* of Philadelphia, commenced preparations in 1882 for Germantown's bicentennial, which took place amid pomp and circumstance in a three-day festival, October 6-9, 1883. For the event, Seidensticker wrote a history of Germantown detailing the beginnings of the German immigrations.⁵ At this Philadelphia celebration, one of the main speakers was Seidensticker's colleague from

Cincinnati, Ohio: Heinrich A. Rattermann, editor of the finest nineteenth-century German-American historical journal, *Der Deutsche Pionier*.⁶ Rattermann also participated in the Cincinnati bicentennial celebrations which took place a week later, October 17, 1883. These celebrations were commonly referred to as Pastorius Day celebrations in commemoration of Germantown's founding father. Rattermann's address is noteworthy in that he directed his remarks not only to his immediate audience, but also to later generations as he stated rather exuberantly:

And now let me call out to the generations that will come after us, when they gather in a hundred years to honor their Pennsylvania German forefathers who came from the banks of the Rhine to the shores of the Delaware. And when they also think of their Ohio German forefathers who came from the banks of the Weser, the Elbe, the Weichsel, and the Blue Danube to settle the wilderness and transform it into blossoming villages and cities and farms, then let them not forget that their forefathers were Germans who shipped across the seas with great hardship and tribulation and traveled through the wilderness and mountains in order to establish a blessed, free and happy home for their children and descendants.⁷

The 1883 celebration exerted a deep influence on German-American life. At the academic level it greatly stimulated research in the field of German-American history. Friedrich Kapp notes in his 1884 history of the New York Germans that:

The 200th anniversary of the first German settlement in Pennsylvania has recently awakened a fresh interest among the German-speaking population of the U.S. for the history of the German immigration. It has caused the publication of new and quite worthwhile works in the field and has also brought older works, previously inaccessible, back into memory.⁸

It was in the decades after 1883 that this historical awareness continued to grow and expand so that the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of a number of historical societies, such as the German-American Historical Society, the German-American Historical Society of Illinois, the Pennsylvania German Society, and the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland. They all demonstrated an increased interest in the history, literature and culture of the German element. As Marcus Lee Hansen observed in his essay on the third-generation immigrant in America, "a breeze of historical interest stirred the German-American community."⁹

The "breeze" was indeed far-reaching. The founding of Germantown continued to be celebrated on an irregular basis in German-American communities, and the Pastorius Day Celebration came to be known simply as German Day. To place German Day on a permanent annual basis German societies formed and joined together for the first time in various central coordinating committees called German Day Societies. The phenomenal spread of these organizations led to larger regional groupings and statewide groups, such as the German-Ameri-

can Central Alliance of Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Alliance was led by the son of a forty-eighter, Charles Hexamer, a former student of Seidensticker at the University of Pennsylvania, and also a participant in the planning of Philadelphia's 1883 celebration. It was under Hexamer's leadership that the Central Alliance of Pennsylvania paved the way for the grouping together of the various similar state organizations. On German Day, October 6, 1901, in Philadelphia they established the National German-American Alliance, the largest and most influential German-American organization in the history of the United States. German Day and its first celebration in 1883 can therefore be said to have indirectly contributed to unity in the German-American community at the local, regional, and national levels.¹⁰

In 1908 the 225th anniversary of Germantown was celebrated with the central festivities taking place in Philadelphia under the direction of Hexamer, president of the National Alliance. Two special features of this celebration were the unveiling of a monument in Vernon Park commemorating the German immigrations and the publication of perhaps the outstanding and most comprehensive collection of historical essays on German-American history. It contained essays by Marion Dexter Learned, editor of the *German-American Annals*, Oswald Seidensticker, Rudolf Cronau, Albert Faust and other notable historians of the day.¹¹

German Day had by this time become an integral and central celebration in the calendar of the German-American community, as well as the common denominator which united the various social, economic, and religious elements. As a symbol and as a focal point of community unity, German Day brought together diverse groups from both urban and rural areas and provided German-Americans with a sense of their historical past, present and future. (It should be remembered that the history of American ethnic groups was not a subject taught in the public schools of that time.)¹²

Before World War I, German Day became at times an extravagant event with thousands of participants and noteworthy speakers, such as Carl Schurz. Local politicians, who had suddenly found a German ancestor in their family tree, proudly announced their discovery as they extolled the virtues of the German element. Some even attempted to flavor their speeches with a word or two of German. One of them closed his address at a 1913 Cincinnati German Day with the words:

And now, gentlemen, I have finished. I am glad that Franz Daniel Pastorius landed in America, and I am glad he did much more than land. Permit me to salute him and all his descendants with my one precious German word, "Gesundheit!"¹³

These amusing aspects of the celebrations should not distract from the central point that German Day attained a wider significance far beyond the confines of the German community. The event had become a popular folk festival celebrated by a representative cross-section of German-Americans, and was also well attended and patronized by others interested in the German-American community.

World War I, of course, brought an abruptly harsh end to this activity and obscured much of the valuable historical research that had been conducted; organizations such as the German-American Historical Society passed into the annals of German-American history. However, in spite of these casualties and the cessation of cultural activities and festivities for a number of years, German Day was again celebrated with regularity by the 1920s in German-American communities. And the next major celebration occurred in 1933 with the 250th anniversary of Germantown's establishment. Milwaukee celebrated with a German Month from October 2 to 23, 1933, but the most memorable celebration took place at the University of Cincinnati where Albert B. Faust, author of *The German Element in the United States*, presented the main address, subsequently published by the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation of Philadelphia. Faust exclaimed that:

Today we Americans of German stock look backward two hundred and fifty years at the early beginnings of our history in the American colonies . . . our ancestors were there in the 17th century at the very founding of settlements along the Atlantic coast, sporadic at first, but soon to come in great waves of immigration, generation after generation, to share the weal and woe of the American pioneer, to plow the land, build towns and industries, in peaceful labor or in desperate strife. Ever advancing the frontier line farther westward until the sun was seen setting in the Pacific Ocean . . . [they] have had their share of failure and success, of trial and triumph, of labor and honest effort in the building of the American nation. They are privileged to love and cherish America as rightful partners as owners in common with other great stocks that compose the American people.¹⁴

Faust also noted that although New England has its *Mayflower* and its Plymouth Colony, German-Americans have the good ship *Concord* and the settlement of Germantown.

Although *The American-German Review* featured articles on the founding of Germantown, the 275th anniversary in 1958 passed largely unnoticed. However, the preparations for the 1976 celebration of the American bicentennial saw a resurgence of interest in the contributions of German immigrants to the development of the United States. Those concerned with the German heritage and its preservation participated actively in the bicentennial celebrations. Conferences and symposia focusing on the role of the German element in American history were held. The bicentennial along with the recognition in the 1970s of ethnicity as a permanent factor in American life contributed to an appreciation and understanding of the various ethnic groups in America.

With respect to the 1983 tricentennial celebration, let us call to mind several of its significant aspects. The tricentennial signifies the celebration of the beginning of German-American history. Although Germans had been present as individuals scattered throughout the colonies since 1607, at Germantown, for the first time, families established an entirely German settlement in America. The founding of Germantown signifies the commencement of the mass migrations that brought well over eight-

and-a-half million people to America during the next three centuries from the German-speaking lands. The contributions and achievements of this first German-American settlement are symbolic: In 1688 the first formal protest in America against the institution of slavery was issued at Germantown; in 1690 the first paper mill in America was established; in 1695 beer was first brewed in Germantown; in 1702 a school was established; and the first Bible in a European language (German) printed in America came from a Germantown press in 1743. This sampling from Germantown's early history reflects in microcosm the contributions which Germans have made to America in the course of three centuries in every field of human endeavor—commercial, industrial, agricultural, religious, intellectual, artistic, scientific, political, journalistic, and educational. Let the tricentennial serve to enhance and engender a greater understanding and appreciation not only of German-American history, but also of all that embodies the German heritage in America. Let the tricentennial also contribute to the strengthening of cross-cultural relations between the United States and the German-speaking countries of Europe, which are bound to America not only by treaties and alliances, but also by millions of family ties and friendships.

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Notes

¹ This is based on a paper presented at the Fourth Annual Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies, University of Missouri-Columbia, April 1980.

² Albert B. Faust, *Francis Daniel Pastorius and the 250th Anniversary of the Founding of Germantown* (Philadelphia: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1934), p. 10.

³ Faust, p. 11.

⁴ Pastorius translated his motto into German as follows:

Klein ist mein Haus, doch Gute sieht es gern,
Wer gottlos ist, der bleibe fern.

See Faust, p. 11. For further bibliographical references regarding Pastorius and Germantown consult Emil Meynen, *Bibliography on German Settlements in Colonial North America* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1937); Henry A. Pochmann and Arthur R. Schultz, *Bibliography of German Culture in America to 1940* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1953); and Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *German-Americana. A Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Pr., 1975).

⁵ Oswald Seidensticker, *Die erste deutsche Einwanderung in Amerika und die Gründung von Germantown, im Jahre 1683. Festschrift zum deutsch-amerikanischen Pionier-Jubiläum am 6. October 1883* (Philadelphia: Globe Printing House, 1883).

⁶ With respect to the value and quality of *Der Deutsche Pionier* see Rainer Sell, "The German Language: Mirror of the German-American Struggle for Identity as Reflected in *Der Deutsche Pionier* (1869-1887) and the Activities of *Der Deutsche Pionier-Verein von Cincinnati*," *Journal of German-American Studies*, 11 (1976), 71-81 and Robert E. Ward, "Bibliographical and Genealogical Data in the Publications of the German Pioneer Society of Cincinnati," *Journal of German-American Studies*, 13 (1978), 113-16.

⁷ Translated in Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *America's German Heritage. Bicentennial Minutes* (Cleveland: German-American National Congress, 1976), p. 85. The original text of Rattermann's address is to be found in his *Gesammelte Werke* (Cincinnati: privately printed, 1912), XVI, 384.

⁸ Friedrich Kapp, *Die Deutschen im Staate New York während des 18. Jahrhunderts* (New York, 1884), p. ii.

⁹ Marcus Lee Hansen, "The Third Generation," in Oscar Handlin, ed., *Children of the Uprooted* (New York: Braziller, 1966), p. 262.

¹⁰ For a general overview of German-American history consult Albert B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, (New York: Steuben Society, 1927).

¹¹ Max Heinrici, *Das Buch der Deutschen in Amerika* (Philadelphia: National German-American Alliance, 1909).

¹² For a discussion of the role of the immigrant in American historiography see Edward N. Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants 1875-1925* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1948).

¹³ Stanly E. Bowdle, *The Influence of German Life and Thought on American Civilization. Address of Hon. Stanly E. Bowdle, of Ohio, Before the German-Americans of Cincinnati, Ohio, August 31, 1913, U.S. 63rd Cong., 1st sess., H. Doc. 244* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1913), p. 7.

¹⁴ Faust, *Francis Daniel Pastorius*, p. 5.