

The Milwaukee Germans

Early history in Milwaukee

To understand Milwaukee at all is to know something about the German presence here. The Germans began arriving in large numbers in the 1840s before Milwaukee was even a city. When Solomon Juneau became Milwaukee's first mayor in 1846, the inaugural address was printed in both English and German. As today, the Germans were remarkably diverse in cultural practices, social class, and religion.

Within a few years of their arrival, German development could be seen everywhere in Milwaukee. Most of the city's north side was settled by Germans and in time the city became known worldwide as the "German Athens." Let's take a walk through that era.

A literal walk through Milwaukee's German history

We will begin at the Pfister Hotel on the corner of Jefferson Street and Wisconsin Avenue. The beautiful Romanesque Revival building was built in 1893 by Guido Pfister, a German immigrant who also owned a tanning business.

Next, walk west two blocks to Broadway, turn right, and continue on for three more blocks. There you will find Old St. Mary's Church. The church was built in 1846 and was the central home of German Catholic immigrants.

You are at the corner of Kilbourn Avenue and Broadway. Walk north and you will be on the campus of the Milwaukee School of Engineering. The college was built in 1903 by the Germans who believed that Milwaukee needed a technical workforce. Stroll north through the lovely campus, taking in the view.

When you reach Highland Avenue (a pedestrian street), turn west and continue to 270 East Highland Avenue. Here you will find the Blatz Building. Today it houses condos but it was originally opened as the City Brewery in 1846 by Johann Braun and became the Valentin Blatz Brewery in 1889. It was one of the top German breweries in the city. A jingle well-known across the country in the middle of the twentieth century was "I'm from Milwaukee, and I ought to know; It's draft-brewed Blatz beer wherever you go."

"My grandfather was always so proud of the fact that by the time that he came to America to the time he retired, he never missed a day of work. There was never a day he didn't work. That was typical in the German community. Nobody wanted to miss a day of work."

"Historically, there was quite a distinction between the farmers and the crafts people. Most of the Germans were farmers and they settled throughout the state [of Wisconsin]. Then, in specific craft areas, you found [German] people very skilled in the brewing industry, very skilled in the tanning business . . . I might add also, the later waves of [German] immigration presented people in the printing and machine, tool and die business."

Quotes of German informants from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Blatz Building



Feeling a little of the German presence now? There's much more. On Highland Avenue, walk three blocks to North Water Street and turn south. Continue on for several blocks to Wells Street. You will pass the majestic City Hall, designed by Henry C. Koch in the Flemish Renaissance Revival style and completed in 1895. Turn west on Wells and you will run into the stunning Pabst Theater. It was commissioned in 1895 by Frederick Pabst,

City Hall



another beer baron and designed by architect Otto Strack to resemble the European opera houses, again in the Renaissance Revival style. It clearly represented the best in the German Athens tradition.

Next, walk west on Wells Street over the bridge and just past Plankinton Avenue to the eight-story Germania building. It was built in 1896 with the statue of Germania on a plinth over the door as the symbol of Germany. The building was home to a number of German publications. The name was changed to the

"We take plays and actually kind of translate them now into the American language, a little bit—if that's possible—and present them. They're mostly a comedy type thing. Because of the variety shows that are being put on here in Milwaukee, they have to be visual, they have to be funny, they have to be—whatever. Nobody sits through a Ludwig Toma play anymore. It's just all too serious, you know."

Quote of German informant from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Brumder Building in 1918 in response to anti-German sentiments in Milwaukee following World War One.

Next, continue about two blocks west on Wells Street until you reach Old World Third Street. Turn

north and walk three blocks. You will notice Usinger's Sausage, a major German enterprise in Milwaukee.

Check out the rest of the block. You will also notice the very ornate Mader's restaurant. Stop here to look inside and glance at the menu. Have you ever tried dishes named *Rheinischer Sauerbraten*, *Wiener Schinitzel*, *Kasseler Rippchen*, *Rouladen*, or *Ritter Schnitzel*?

Pabst Theater



Your final stop is Turner Hall, which is just around the corner on North Fourth Street between State Street and Highland Avenue. Constructed in 1882 by the same German architect who designed City Hall and the Pfister Hotel—Henry H. Koch—Turner Hall became home to the Milwaukee Turners.



Usinger's Sausage

The first Turner Societies in the United States were founded by German immigrants and exiles who left Europe during the failed revolutions of 1848. The refugees subsequently became known as the Forty Eighters.

Go inside Turner Hall and look around. Note the gymnasium. The Turner societies, following their German models, were mainly gymnastic clubs

that also promoted the right of free speech and clean government. Many of the Forty Eighters and Turner members would become active in liberal movements nationwide and even world-wide, such as the Socialists. The Socialist movement in Milwaukee began in the 1850s. The movement increased in momentum until it reached its peak among workers in the early twentieth century. During the century, three elected mayors and one congressman in Milwaukee were Socialists, as were scores of other political office holders across the county.




Turner Hall

Next, walk through the restaurant/beer hall on the first floor of Turner Hall. Look at the photographs and the wall plaques. Note the emphasis on a fully-lived life. The success of Socialism in Milwaukee had much to do with German practices here. According to German scholar, Don Heinrich Tolzman, in the *German American Experience*, Germans brought with them “a large capacity for the enjoyment of life.” Among the leisure time activities that Germans contributed in mass to US culture were music, theater, art, architecture, gymnastics, and a penchant for Sunday frolicking.

“The Germans have a history of being involved in healthy activities, with the nature walks and the gymnastics.”

“The only main difference between German and American healing practices that I can think of is the sauna culture. Germans believe strongly in the preventative and curative properties of both steam and of herbal concoctions. Sauna culture was adopted from the Scandinavian countries, and Germans *love* it, both as a healing practice and a social one. . . . The herbal interest extends in a large way to teas, from chamomile and fennel for belly aches to hibiscus and malt teas for bronchial issues. Healthcare takes place in the home as well as at hospitals.”

Quotes of German informants from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.



Now walk upstairs to the Turner Hall ballroom. Stroll about and experience more of the German fully-lived life. During the height of the Socialist influence locally, most of the voting population in Milwaukee also shared German roots and probably recognized cultural affinities with the Socialists—most of whom were Germans themselves. The Socialists were the only political party locally to oppose Prohibition early in the twentieth century, an issue that clearly united Germans in Milwaukee. In addition, Socialist community events such as bazaars, minstrel shows, plays, and picnics were well attended by members of the greater Milwaukee community.

(To learn more about the German influence on Milwaukee's Socialist past, go to Urban Anthropology's documentary, *The cultural roots of Milwaukee's Socialist Movement*).

Internal diversity of Milwaukee Germans

The Milwaukee German community has always been diverse, with groups from one region of German Europe often practicing different religions, folk, and food traditions. These include Bavarians, Swabians, Pomeranians, Palatines, Donauschwabens, and more. But the German group living in Milwaukee that may have had the most divergent history was the German Russians.

Seeking land and freedom from the German draft, the group that would become known as the German Russians left Germany for Russia in the late 1700s and settled along the Volga River and Black Sea. For about 150 years they had been allowed to keep their own language and traditions. But later Russification policies, and ultimately the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, resulted in collective departure of many from the area. Some ended up in Granville Township, an area that would later be largely annexed to the City of Milwaukee.

Between 1910 and 1920 the German Russians set up their own colony where most built farms south of Villard and east of the railroad tracks. They organized Grace Lutheran Church at 34th Street near Villard, just south of today's Havenwoods neighborhood. The group remained relatively isolated from their neighbors—both through choice and external prejudice. After the 1917 revolution and growing Communist paranoia in America, Milwaukeean began calling the German Russian colony "Red Town" even though most of the Germans loathed Communism.

"There are the strongest elements of the retention of the German culture to be found in German Catholicism and German Lutheran religions. The North Germans who were Calvinists have more or less become assimilated in the United Church of Christ. . . . Then there was the German free-thinking society of which there are a few remnants left in Milwaukee."

Quote of German informant from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

"They still practice this mystical healing. They have these shamans called *braucher*s. They still practice some sort of mystical healing in the Dakotas and the rural areas and so on. I know people who use this back in the day when their family doctor could not heal them."

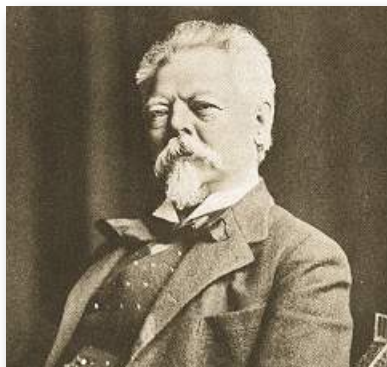
"We were in Russia before we came to the United States, but my great grandparents [in Russia], my grandparents, my parents, and me and my siblings kept the German language. But you know, it really must have changed. When we took a trip to Germany in 1993, it was hard to understand them and harder for them to understand us. I guess it was the way we had travelled all over and picked up little differences."

Quotes of German Russian informants from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Meet one of your past German neighbors

Frederick Pabst

One of the early German brewery barons was Johann Gottlieb Friedrich "Frederick" Pabst (see photo¹), founder of the Pabst Brewing Company. Pabst was born in 1836 in the Kingdom of Prussia. In 1848, he immigrated with his parents to the United States, settling in both Milwaukee and Chicago. The family was very poor. In Chicago, Frederick and his father worked as waiters and busboys. Frederick managed to get a job as a cabin-boy on a Lake Michigan steamer. He worked hard as a seaman until age 21, when he earned a pilot's license and became captain of one of the vessels. In this capacity, he met Phillip Best, the owner of a small brewery in Milwaukee. Pabst soon married Best's daughter, Maria.



Following a ship accident in 1863, Pabst changed careers and purchased half of Best's brewing company. By 1870, Frederick, Maria, and four children were settled in Milwaukee's 2nd Ward. Under Pabst's direction, the brewing company increased beer output dramatically. He became president of the corporation in 1873 and eventually the brewery's name was changed to the Pabst Brewing Company. By 1900, the growing Pabst family was living at an elaborate mansion at 2000 Grand Avenue—a house that is still open to the public today.

Recent history

World Wars One and Two took their toll on the German influence in Milwaukee. Fearing the post-war backlash, large numbers of Germans changed their names. Schmidts became Smiths; Brauns became Browns; Muellers became Millers. The German press nearly disappeared. Many ethnic Germans moved from the City of Milwaukee into the suburbs.

But not all German culture disappeared in Milwaukee County. Immigrants still arrive. Today, over 104,000 Milwaukee residents claim some German ancestry.



"The Nazi thing. Most people don't realize that probably 90 to 99 percent of the Germans that are here in the US came here before the word Nazi was invented. But you see this in TV shows with the person with the German accent always being portrayed as militaristic and a slave to order, like the Nazi image."

"[My mother] was a refugee from East Germany. The East German police pistol whipped her, broke her jaw and told her to come back in the evening, and everyone knows what that means."

Quotes of German informants from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

The traditions remain vibrant. Many German Milwaukeeans are learning the language. And in addition to German Fest held each summer on Milwaukee's lakefront, Oktoberfests are celebrated everywhere. One of the best places to participate in this festival is at the fabulous Old Heidelberg Park at 700 West Lexington Boulevard, Glendale.



"I teach the advanced German classes to adults. . . . In fact, in one class, there are five lawyers and two judges and they all know German. They are more or less fluent. Of course they make mistakes and they like to keep up with the German when they go to Germany and so on. I don't think anyone really needs it here [in the US]."

Quote of German informant from the 12-year ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Meet one of your current German neighbors

Petra Theurich

Unlike most Milwaukee Germans, Petra is not a native Milwaukeean. The daughter of Rolf & Gisela Theurich, she received her bachelor's degree from Indiana University that led to a career as a sales assistant for a German manufacturer of automotive components.

Not that long ago she moved to Milwaukee and very quickly rose to a leadership position in the city's German community. She continued following all things German, Austrian, and Swiss, and spending her leisure time hours travelling to various Oktoberfests, Maifests and lectures on Milwaukee German history. Ethnic bands and dance groups and even Karnaval societies fill her entertainment calendar.

"Upon moving to Milwaukee from Chicagoland in 1997," she stated, "I immediately noticed how many German clubs and events existed here in Milwaukee. One look at the historic Milwaukee City Hall and I thought I was back in Germany. With the help of the Milwaukee German-American Societies (about 30 clubs under its umbrella) and volunteering for Milwaukee German Fest (three-day event held the last full weekend in July), I made many friends and created my new 'home.'"

Petra attends as many German events as possible, thanks to the help of social media listings and other sources. “We are blessed here in Milwaukee to have a couple of German radio programs (AM 1340) on air Saturdays—‘Continental Showcase’ and the German segment of ‘Polka Parade.’”

Petra Theurich spends her days issuing press notices and connecting Germans to all the local ethnic events. Her crowning achievement, in her opinion, was having the opportunity to organize two major events--“Germany Under Glass” at the Mitchell Park Domes and German Fest Dachshund Derby.



ⁱ Photo attribution: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/Frederick_pabst.jpg