

The Milwaukee Luxembourgers

History in Southeastern Wisconsin

Most of the emigrants from Luxembourg in the 19th century came from an area that won independence from the Netherlands in 1867. Most left their homeland due to increasing population and agricultural crises at home in search of available land and higher wages in the United States.

Luxembourgers who settled early in Milwaukee played key roles in the development of several towns along Lake Michigan from Chicago through Milwaukee and northward through Ozaukee County and into Sturgeon Bay. The Milwaukee area's Luxembourger families may be best known for their role in the development of Port Washington and farming communities in Ozaukee County. Six families arriving in 1840 helped anchor the developing town of Port Washington that was a mere five years old at the time of their influx.

Luxembourgers also helped anchor the towns of Belgium, Holy Cross, Fredonia, Lake Church, and Waubeka in Ozaukee County, along

with Dacada, which straddles Ozaukee and Sheboygan County. In these towns, Luxembourgers founded a number of churches and schools, most of which were Catholic, including St. Mary's Parish in Port Washington in 1850. They also organized Fredonia's St. John's Lutheran Church. By the end of the 19th century,

more than 250 Luxembourger families lived in the Ozaukee County area.

The Luxembourg Brotherhood of America was formed in Chicago in 1887. Shortly after its founding, the LBA decided to form "sections" throughout the United States. A Grand Lodge was formed to oversee the function of the sections and the organization. One was developed in Milwaukee (see below).

"We are a very proud people. Some say that's because our homeland is so small that we have to make up for this in pride. We work very hard to hang on to our heritage."

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



Nearly 100 years later, in 1977, the Luxembourg Society of America was founded. Through this organization, Luxembourg Fest has been held annually since 1987 in the Town of Belgium.

In 2001, under the leadership of Kevin Wester (see his profile below), a group of volunteers came together to organize the Luxembourg American Cultural Society (LACS) and Cultural Center in Belgium, in partnership with Luxembourg's Minister of Culture and Services of Sites and Monuments. Today, the Center has rooms of exhibits on Luxembourg and Luxembourg American history and houses the largest center for Luxembourg studies and genealogy outside the Grand Duchy.

Luxembourg American Cultural Society & Center



But back in Milwaukee

An early arriving Luxembourger had a major impact on the Milwaukee landscape. The Gengler family settled in Granville Township (which was later annexed to Milwaukee) in the 1840s.

Catharine Gengler Klehr

Although the Gengler-Klehr couple never had children, they clearly left their mark on the Whispering Hills neighborhood in today's Milwaukee.

Catherine Gengler was born in Luxembourg in 1828, the daughter of Anna Catherine and Adam Gengler. The Genglers came to the United States in 1842 and located on 160 acres of land in the mainly German community of Granville.

In 1850 young Catharine married John P. Klehr ("Peter") a man three years her senior and a German immigrant. Soon after their marriage, Catherine's father died and the young couple took in her mother, five of her siblings, and one nephew. Some of the siblings helped Peter on the farm. Peter had also opened a saloon.

The Klehrs' altruism continued. In 1855 the couple donated part of their land to the community in order to build St. Catherine of Alexandria Parish. It was constructed under the guidance of Fr. Martin



"There are very few of us here. In my father's time, I believe there were more. But most of my family ended up around Belgium, Wisconsin."

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

Weiss, who at the time was pastor at St. Anthony, Fussville (Menomonee Falls), and became the first pastor of St. Catherine's. Some community members have speculated that the church was partially named after St. Catherine of Alexandria in honor of their benefactor, Catherine Gengler Klehr.

With no children, but always surrounded by extended family and community members, the Klehrs lived out their long lives in Granville. Catherine died in 1904 and Peter in 1907 (*see their gravestone from public records at Ancestry.com*). Predictably, they were buried at St. Catherine's cemetery.

St. Catherine of Alexandria grew to become arguably the most influential institution in Milwaukee's Whispering Hills and surrounding neighborhoods. The church not only served the German and Luxembourg Catholic communities but became one of the few area churches today where African Americans worship alongside of European Americans.

The year of Catherine Gengler Klehr's death marked another Luxembourg development. On October 17, 1904, at their Eighth Annual Convention of the Luxembourg Brotherhood of America's Grand Lodge in Aurora, Illinois, a new section of the LBA was approved for Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Section 13 was placed under the guidance of Frank Wagner. The section grew and by the 1933, the Milwaukee Brotherhood had its own meeting place in a tavern on Green Bay Avenue.



Officers of Section 13 of the Luxembourg Brotherhood of America (1937). Bottom row: T. Arend, J. Betz, President, L. Passon, N.J. Block. Top row: N. Weiss, J. Goham, P. Mangen.



Building, now abandoned, once housed the Arend Tavern where Section 13 met.

"My grandparents spoke Luxembourgish, French, and German. When we came here, they learned English quite quickly, I'm told."

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

The owner of the tavern, Theodor Arend, is profiled below.

Theodore Arend and Eliza Mangen Arend

Theodore Arend was born on May 15, 1869 in Beckerich, Redange, Diekirch, Luxembourg to parents John Baptiste Arend and Marie Risch. He arrived in the United States in 1898 and moved to Chicago. There he met and married Elizabeth (Eliza) Mangen. Eliza had been born on April 11, 1875 in Mensdorf, Grevenmacher, Grevenmacher, Luxembourg to parents Nicolas Mangen and Anne Elizabeth Weber. According to the 1900 census, Theodore and Eliza were living on Manitoba Avenue on the city's South Side where Theodore was working as a bartender. They had one son.

By 1910, the family had moved to the Third Ward, had a second son, and Theodore assumed another job as a bartender. Eliza took a job as a cook. The family moved again a few years later to Muskego in Waukesha County. This time they purchased a farm. According to the 1920 census, the Arends also took in a boarder named William Searles. This was the same year that Theodore became a naturalized US citizen.

Farming apparently did not work out well for the family. Perhaps it was lack of skill, loneliness, or the downturn in the economy after the stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression. By 1930, the Arends had returned to Milwaukee, living this time on Mitchell Street where Theodore took a job as a janitor in a hosiery factory. Apparently, the family was able to save some money because by 1933, they had purchased the tavern at 3762 N. Green Bay Avenue that also became the meeting house of Section 13 of the Luxembourg Brotherhood of America. This may have ended up being the most stable vocation for the family.

Below is a photoⁱ of the Arend couple with the family of son Peter, probably taken about the time they purchased the tavern.



Current history

While the Luxembourg population in Milwaukee has always been miniscule, there's been one major recent addition. His name is Kevin J. Wester.

Meet one of your current Luxembourg neighbors

Kevin J. Wester

It would be difficult to find an individual of his generation that has done more to advance the cause of Luxembourgish heritage than Kevin Wester. The author of numerous family history and local history books on Luxembourg American themes, Kevin was born in Port Washington and grew up in Belgium, Wisconsin. His ancestors emigrated from the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg between 1846 and 1865 and settled in Wisconsin.

Kevin graduated from Marian University in Fond du Lac with a BS in Music Education where he became the Student of the Year in 1984. He also received a Master of Divinity degree from St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. Later, having pursued service in the Catholic Church, he developed an interest in Luxembourg American research and family genealogy, which eventually took him in the direction of cultural celebration and brokering.

Kevin turned his efforts toward Luxembourg American history. Having served as the president of the Port Washington Historical Society, Kevin led the effort to organize the Luxembourg American Cultural Society (LACS) and Cultural Center in Belgium, Wisconsin. There he later served as Director of Development and the first full time Executive Director beginning in 2010. He helped develop the largest center for Luxembourg studies and genealogy outside the Grand Duchy and published many articles on Ozaukee County history and Luxembourg American topics. During his years at the LACS and Cultural Center, Kevin Wester was knighted as a Knight of the Oak Crown by Grand Duke Henri (2011), and received the Medallion of Honor from the Archdiocese of Luxembourg (2015)—both in recognition of his efforts to promote ongoing relations between Luxembourg and the United States.

In 2012, Kevin reclaimed his Luxembourg nationality and became a dual citizen of the United States and Luxembourg. At that



"When I tell someone that I'm a Luxembourg, the conversation usually ends there, because people in the United States have no idea what that is. Or they might say, 'Oh, how interesting.' No one wants to admit that they don't know what that means. Once someone said, 'Oh, that's where they make all the cheese.' I think they were thinking of Holland."

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

time, he developed a consultation process to assist Luxembourg Americans seeking reclamation of Luxembourg nationality—a service he continues to offer today. In addition to his consultation role, publishing, and work in the LACS, he developed the Luxembourg Adventure Tour Company which takes large groups of Americans to the Grand Duchy, Belgium, Germany, and France.

Having retired from his position of Executive Director of the LACS and Cultural Center, Kevin moved to the Brady Street neighborhood in Milwaukee in 2017. Together with his partner, Mahmut Acar, he enjoys traveling, genealogy, ethnic foods,

hosting Luxembourger friends and family, and continues with his research, touring company, and consultation services. He is now writing historic articles for Radio/Television in Luxembourg. In addition to his work in the LACS, Kevin Wester maintains membership in the Luxembourg Brotherhood of America, Luxembourg Heritage Society

of Southern Minnesota, Luxembourg/American Descendants Society of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and St. Donatus Luxembourg Heritage Society (Iowa).



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ⁱ Photo attribution, Stephanie Arend

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