

New Alsace, An Alsatian Settlement in Southeast Indiana

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Introduction

At one of my lectures on Cincinnati's German heritage I was asked about the German-speaking immigration from Alsace. I responded that Alsatians did come to Cincinnati, but were relatively few in number. So, traces of them are hard to come by, and no churches or societies were founded by them. They seem to have blended seamlessly into the German community, as did other strands of the German immigration to the area. (1) For many Alsatians Cincinnati served not as a destination, but rather as a way station on their journey elsewhere. A good number of them moved on to

southeastern Indiana, where they established a town appropriately named New Alsace.



Water Tower in New Alsace (author's photo)

St. Paul's congregation was organized in 1833 by the pioneering German Catholic priest Rev. Joseph Ferneding (1802-72) who was born in Ihorst in the district of Vechta in what is today Lower Saxony. So, it is interesting to see a northern German serving a congregation of Alsatians and southern Germans. St. Paul's Church was important, because it became the mother church of other German Catholic churches in southeast Indiana. Later on, Ferneding moved to Cincinnati where he served as pastor of Old St. Mary's Church and St. Paul's Church in Over-the-Rhine; altogether he organized ten

Today, New Alsace is a quaint town (unincorporated) in Dearborn County, about 35 miles west of Cincinnati. It is tiny – there is a Gothic-style church, a tavern, an American Legion Post, a park, and homes in and around the town. That's it, but it is charming and has a fascinating history. It was founded by German-speaking Alsatians in the 1830s, but other German immigrants settled there as well. This can readily be seen by a stroll through the cemetery of St. Paul's Catholic Church, where non-Alsatian gravesites show birthplaces in Baden and Bavaria.



St. Paul's Catholic Church in New Alsace (author's photo)



*Cemetery at St. Paul's Catholic Church in New Alsace
(author's photo)*

congregations in southeast Indiana and Cincinnati. (2)

The Civil War had an impact on New Alsace: While mass was being celebrated on 13 July 1863, General John Hunt Morgan and his Raiders swept into town, stole horses and ransacked a store. At Blettner's Tavern (now Klump's Tavern), Morgan took a 4-hour nap, but was well guarded by the Raiders, including two in his room, two at the door, and two in the hallway. Two hours after the Raiders left, Union horsemen arrived, hot on their trail. On Sundays after the war, local Union Army veterans gathered at the tavern and shared stories about their wartime experiences, and probably also talked about Morgan and the Raiders. (3)

New Alsace was founded as a Catholic community, and by the 1860s, it had a

population of 600, and its Catholic church more than a thousand members from the town and the surrounding area. (4) Before Prohibition, it had two breweries, which is more than might be expected for a small town, but perhaps not that surprising given its heritage. (5) New Alsatians subscribed to the *Wahrheitsfreund*, a German Catholic paper published in Cincinnati, which kept them informed on local and regional news. (6) Immigration from Alsace continued for some time, providing a good example of chain-migration.

According to Anthony Fette: "The immigration which had formed the community in the thirties continued during the succeeding years. Relations and friends who were left in Europe were invited or persuaded to come by the early settlers and New Alsace attracted some who had stopped in Cincinnati and other cities. Land was still available, the small industries were multiplying and thriving and the newcomers were assured by the availability of a church with a resident pastor and of a school. At the same time the movement of the people from New Alsace was comparatively small." (7)

Causes and Origins of Alsatian Immigration

An illustration from Goethe's *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten*



Refugees fleeing the French Revolution (from: Goethes Werke. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1882, Bd. 4.)

(Conversations of German Refugees), which was written in 1794-95, shows Alsatians fleeing their homes due to their fear of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. Goethe wrote: “In those unhappy days that brought such misfortune to Germany, to Europe, indeed to the whole world, when the Frankish army burst into our land through a breach in our defenses a noble family abandoned their property in the region and fled across the Rhine in order to escape the afflictions threatening everyone of distinction.” (8) Nobles and prominent landowners in particular feared the Reign of Terror, and there was good reason to flee. During the Reign of Terror, more than 17,000 were executed, and another 10,000 died in prison. (9) An inestimable number of Alsatians were no doubt among those who fled their homes at this time.

Alsace had increasingly come under the influence and control of France, thus fulfilling its desire for a border on the Rhine. However, it was the French Revolution that solidified its control. In addition to the flight of emigres, the church in Alsace was greatly affected. Churches in Alsace had been under the jurisdiction of German dioceses across the Rhine, and these connections were now banned. Church properties were also confiscated, and monasteries dissolved. The wars of Napoleonic France also took their toll, and almost 300,000 allied troops were stationed in Alsace at the close of these wars, bringing additional burdens to the area.

By this time, Alsace had undergone significant social, religious, and political changes, leaving it a different place than before the French Revolution. Historian Hajo Holborn writes of these changes: “Alsace was still German in its folklore, but the French Revolution and Napoleon had turned Alsatians into devoted French citizens. The bourgeoisie and peasants had sullenly watched the allied armies enter the country in 1814, full of fear that feudalism and dismemberment of the province might follow in their wake. It would be wrong to argue that if Alsace had gone back to Germany in 1815, the allegiance of its people might have shifted. For the Germany of the small states in the age of the Restoration could not have made national converts.” (10)

There actually was no viable alternative. The Holy Roman Empire was now gone, and had been succeeded by the German Confederation. To the north of Alsace was the Palatinate, which had now been absorbed by Bavaria, and Baden was across the Rhine to its east. The acquisition of Alsace by either Bavaria or Baden would not have been feasible politically anyway, as the French diplomat Talleyrand (1754-1838) successfully lobbied at the Congress of Vienna that it should remain under the administration of France.

The question of political allegiance, however, is different than the matter of language and self-identity. As Holborn notes, the folklore of Alsace remained German, and Alsatians certainly continued speaking their Alsatian German dialect, as well as High German. A prominent example of this would be Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) who was born in Kaysersberg in Alsace, and whose first language was Alsatian German. (11)

Given the profound socio-political changes that had taken place in Alsace during the Napoleonic era, it is not surprising that immigration increased in the early 19th century, resulting in towns like New Alsace, Indiana, and a sprinkling of Alsatians in the Cincinnati area as well.

Conclusion

Thus far, my preliminary survey of Alsatian immigration to New Alsace and the Greater Cincinnati area has identified the following places in Alsace that immigrants came from: Battenheim, Brodelsheim, Ermingen, Hagenau, Haspelscheidt, Markolsheim, Markweiler, Marlenheim,

Mühlhausen, Selestat, Steinberg, Strassburg, Tann, Wanzenau, Weissenburg. (12) Other locations will no doubt be found, as I continue to hear from descendants of Alsatian immigrants.

Although Alsations were relatively small in number in the Greater Cincinnati area, they clearly seem to have made New Alsace, Indiana their primary destination in the region. In terms of the German-speaking immigration the Alsatian dimension is certainly one worth further exploration as an integral part of the German heritage.

Notes

1. For the history of German immigration to the Cincinnati area, see: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *Cincinnati's Germans before World War I*. (Milford, Ohio: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2021).
2. For information on Ferneding, see: "General-Vicar Joseph Ferneding," *Der Deutsche Pionier*. 3 (1871): 353-62.
3. Regarding Morgan, see: David L. Mowery, *Morgan's Great Raid: The Remarkable Expedition from Kentucky to Ohio*. (Charleston, South Carolina: History Press, 2013)
4. For the history of the Catholic church in New Alsace, see: Anthony Fette, *History of New Alsace, Indiana*. (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1951).
5. Regarding breweries in New Alsace, see: Ibid, pp. 53-56.
6. Ibid, p. 97.
7. Ibid, p. 115.
8. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations of German Refugees*. Translated by Jan van Heurck in cooperation with Jane K. Brown. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 15.
9. Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Reign of Terror," from: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reign-of-Terror>.
10. Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany, 1648-1840* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 449.
11. For information on Schweitzer, see: Nils Ole Oermann, *Albert Schweitzer, A Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
12. Regarding place names in Alsace, see: Roger T. Minert, *Alsace-Lorraine Place Name Indexes: Identify Place Names Using Alphabetical and Reverse Alphabetical Indexes*. (Provo, Utah: GRT Publications, 2005).