THE EARLY GERMANS

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“In order to understand the age in which we live, it is important and necessary that we should carefully study the history of the past. The various and succeeding epochs of the world are not a number of disjointed parts rudely thrown together, which might as well have happened at some other time, but a successive course of events all occurring when the fullness of time was come.”

The fullness of time had come when the author of these words, Reverend G. D. Bernheim, arrived in Wilmington in 1858. Accompanying him was the Reverend Joseph A. Linn. This committee of two had been sent from Alamance County to inquire into the number of German and English Lutherans in the Wilmington and New Bern areas. Their report to the Synod was published in the Lutheran Observer in June of 1868:

“In visiting Wilmington we were surprised to find such a large number of Germans there, estimated to be between four and five hundred, a large portion of which are Lutherans manifesting a strong attachment to the church of their fathers, free from all destructive elements of Rationalism, possessed of much wealth and refinement and who also exhibit a spirit of enlarged Christian liberality.”

The first German of record to arrive in the Carolinas was John Lederer. By appointment of Sir William Berkley, Governor of the Virginia Colony, Lederer was commissioned to explore the areas west and south of the James River. During a two year period, he headed three expeditions into the Carolinas. His maps and journals record his travels through North Carolina and into South Carolina by way of the Santee River.

German immigrants began arriving in North Carolina around the middle of the 18th century. Generally, they followed the wagon trains of the English and Scotch from Pennsylvania down the Shenandoah Valley. Unlike the Scotch, the Germans represented three different branches of the Protestant Church—Lutheran, Moravian and the German Reformed. By 1790, there were around 8,000 Germans in the colony, located mainly in the west and the piedmont section. In the 1840’s and 1850’s, they began to settle in the east. Wilmington was the largest town and the commercial center of the colony because of its port. Thus the three distinct geographical areas of North Carolina—the mountains, the piedmont and the coast were influenced by the three religious branches of the Germans. In the west were the German Reformed, in the piedmont the Moravians and in the east the Lutherans.

Most of the Germans who came to America in the mid 1800’s arrived in New York, but there were many who came into Wilmington by way of Charleston. Since the beginning of the colony, the lack of a transportation system across the state had created an obstacle which prevented unity. The citizenry of the west was more familiar with Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina than North Carolina. The same held true with people living in the northeast section who felt nearer in politics and customs to Virginia, and in the south, Wilmington had a closer link with her sister port cities of Charleston and Savannah than Raleigh. That link between the Germans of the three coastal cities exists today.

In the coastal region, the main religion among the gentry was Episcopal. The impact of the Lutherans was evident in the 1820’s when the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina made overtures to the Evangelical Lutheran Church towards a union of the two. It was declined although they exchanged delegates in 1822. During the Great Revival which swept through the colonies after the Revolution, these two tended to withdraw from the camp meetings that were held and were skeptical of the emotional outpourings that characterized the gatherings.

Within a very few years of their arrival in Wilmington, there were enough Germans to organize a military company under the name “The German Volunteers”. Fifty-seven officers and men comprised the company. It was then that the Lutheran Synod of North Carolina decided if there were enough Germans in Wilmington to organize a military company, there surely must be enough Lutherans to organize a church.

The report to Synod by Reverend Bernheim and Reverend Linn continues: “After visiting two days among the Lutheran brethren, preaching in both the German and English languages, a meeting was appointed for Monday, May 31st, to organize a Lutheran Church, at

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which time a large number were assembled, and fifty-eight enrolled themselves as members of the church. We were informed that inasmuch as many members were absent at that season on a visit to Germany and a number of others in and about Wilmington whom we could not then see, the number of communion members of the newly organized church may very safely be estimated at eighty or more. So great was the interest which our brothers felt in the cause that they resolved to purchase at once a suitable lot, build a church and call a pastor as quickly as possible, promising to raise about $500 or $500 salary for the first year. The warmest thanks were tendered, through us, to the Synod for the interest manifested in their spiritual welfare and for our labor in their midst. Great pains were taken to make our stay amongst them pleasant and agreeable, so much so that our visit to Wilmington shall never be effaced from our memory.” The meeting was held in the old Front Street Presbyterian Church which was destroyed by fire in 1859.

Among the outstanding characteristics of the Germans was their loyalty to their native customs and language. It was with this in mind that the Missionary Society of the North Carolina Synod contacted a man who could conduct services in both German and English. He was the Reverend John H. Mengert of Evansville, Illinois. In the winter of 1859, John Mengert sent the following report to the President of the Missionary Society: “I have only time to state that at the first meeting of our vestry it was resolved to rent the session house of St. James Episcopal Church and fix it up for the regular service to be held in it. This has been done and preparations are in progress to enable us to occupy the house on next Sabbath. At the same meeting, the Trustees were instructed to look out for a suitable location to build on and to report to the vestry as soon as possible. Consequently, a second meeting was held on Tuesday, 15th instant, at which the Trustees recommended a certain lot on Market Street, near 6th, as the best and cheapest site for the church. The price asked for the lot was $3,000, but as it was large, we might sell part of it again, if it should be deemed desirable and necessary. They were then instructed to buy the lot, which they did that very evening, soliciting from the owner a subscription toward building a church, and obtained $500, so the lot cost us only $2,500.” Another characteristic of the Germans was thrift.

There were 72 members when the constitution of the congregation was adopted March 27, 1859. Of those original 72 signatures on the document, many names have survived: Eilers, Schulken, Polvogt, Rehder, VonGlahn, Bremer, Haar and Von der Leith.

Construction was begun at once, but before the church was completed, the Civil War began. The 1866-1867 Wilmington Directory records the Lutheran Church at 6th and Market Streets as “unfinished.” When the conflict broke out, the German Volunteers were among the first to volunteer in defense of the South. As Company “A” of the 18th North Carolina Regiment, they served with distinction and “bore a record of which one might be proud.”
The early Germans were mostly merchants—the Wilmington Directory of 1877-1878 lists 115 groceries in the town. Fifty-six were owned by Germans . . . Glaymeyer, Doscher, Bosch, Hutaff, Völlers, Wessell, Haar, Rehder, but there were also photographers, shoemakers, watchmakers, saloon keepers, bottlers and manufacturers of furniture according to the same directory. A few were ship brokers. Heide and Company, now a Division of Luckenbach Steam Ship Company, dates back to the 1860’s.

They had come to America from various parts of Germany—the province of Hanover, Hamburg and Bremen in the north, from Mannheim, Frankfurt and Heidelberg in the south and from Wiesbaden and Dusseldorf on the Rhine.

Johann Heinrich Rehder came to Wilmington by way of Charleston just prior to the Civil War. His wife, Johanna, brought a love and knowledge of flowers. It had been the custom in her home in the old country for friends and neighbors to gather in the family garden for cookies, coffee and conversation. She brought the custom with her, and as in the case in the little village of Vegasach, the friends and neighbors who enjoyed the informal get-togethers, were given flowers as they left.

As the garden grew larger to include flowers other than her famous red and white roses, the people who came insisted they pay for the flowers. Before long, it became evident that this could be a profitable business. The Rehders moved from North Second Street to 819 Red Cross Street, a location near the hospital where the trolley line ended, and close to the entrance of Oakdale. The entrance to the cemetery was then at the end of Campbell Street. A small wooden bridge covered McCumber’s Ditch which bordered the cemetery and on Sunday afternoons, it was the local custom to visit Oakdale, tidy up the graves sites and place fresh flowers on the family graves. Before the carriages and buggies rolled across the little bridge through the big iron gates, they stopped at Johanna Rehder’s to buy flowers.

In time, a son, Will, took over the business. Will Rehder, Florist, is North Carolina’s oldest florist because a young German bride brought to her new home a delightful custom from her former home in the old country.

Hanke, Luhr and Ludwig Völlers came to Wilmington by way of Charleston. The first two brothers went into the wholesale grocery business in Wilmington. The grocery business also included liquor. The other brother went to Point Caswell, the river boat town on the Black River, and opened the largest department store in Pender County.

When J. G. L. Gieschen left Bremen, he was 14 years old and on his way to America alone. The Brooklyn Bridge was being built over the East River when he landed in New York. He found work and his wages were $1.50 a week, but in time, he saved enough money to book passage on a steamer to Savannah. Cape Hatteras was stormy, he got sea sick and decided to get off at the first place the steamer made port—Wilmington.

The young man found a job with Eduard Ahrens, a wholesale druggist. He watched every penny and before long, he bought a saloon at the corner of Front and Dock Street. It was the Acme Saloon and the building still stands—Roudabush’s Seed Store. With his brother Henry, he built the Gieschen Brothers Hotel at the corner of Front and Red Cross and the hotel bar became famous for oysters on the half shell. The old hotel with its stained glass lights decorating the doors, was torn down a few years ago and the bricks were hauled to the river and dumped.

As the Germans were absorbed into the community, they assumed civic responsibilities. Eduard Peschau served as German Counsel as did J. G. L. Gieschen who was also a member of the Board of Directors of the Tidewater Company. Other members who served on that board were Jurgen Haar and Eduard Ahrens.

Fire was a constant threat in the early towns and one of Wilmington’s most efficient fire fighting organizations was the Howard Relief Company. Numerous inquiries have failed to uncover the reason of its name, for the Howard Relief Company was virtually one hundred percent German. A. Adrian was foreman, H. Hintze was 1st assistant and M. Rathgen was 2nd assistant. It was formed in 1857. Fire engine #1 was purchased by its members and various liberal minded citizens. The equipment was horse-drawn and water was pumped by hand until the 1870’s when a steam driven pump capable of sending a stream not less than 200 feet was acquired. Hardy Wessell, great grandson of A. Adrian has the fire horn, a red leather firefighter’s hat and a handsome tea service which was presented to his great grandfather by the members of the Howard Relief Company. In the spring of 1897, the Wilmington Fire Department became full paid and the Howard Relief Company, one of the four volunteer units that had performed fire fighting duties for 41 years, was disbanded. From its ranks came Charles Schnibben who was chief of the Wilmington Fire Department from 1897 until 1933 when he was killed in an accident enroute to a fire.

Early education was closely tied to religion. Many preachers were also the school teachers. In the fall of 1876, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church opened a parochial school in the parsonage. Some 80 pupils were enrolled. The school prospered and at one time as many as one hundred pupils attended. Its graduates were accepted by the colleges of the state and it existed to around the 1890’s when it became impractical to support it because the public schools of Wilmington had become well established and efficient.

During the time the school was active, it suffered serious damage by fire. The close friendship between the Germans and the Jews led the members of the Jewish Synagogue to offer the use of their basement as temporary quarters. In the cornerstone of St. Paul’s present parish house is a medal given to a Jewish mother in memory of her son. At her request, the medal was placed in the cornerstone for safe keeping. The association brought from the old country was a strong one culturally and socially, and intermarriages between members of St. Paul’s and the Jews kept the bond firm.

It was in the 1890’s when the Germania Club was organized. It was a social club and with the exception of one member, was composed entirely of Lutherans. The one exception was Catholic. The two story stone building stood on the northeast corner of Front and Orange Streets. It boasted no elaborate adornments architecturally, but the ballroom on the second floor was beautifully balanced in design and the handsome windows overlooked the river. Entertainments and dances were held at the Germania Club and there are those who remember the spritely tunes played by the German band. A game room and lounge were on the first floor. As World War I loomed, there was a feeling of distrust of the Germans in many places. Wilmington was no exception and
the Germania Club quietly disbanded. The building was sold and the proceeds from the sale were divided among its members. About 40 years ago, the building which had been the Germania Club was torn down.

In 1898, the Germans bought property on Carolina Beach and built a summer club house. Shortly after, a storm swept through which damaged the building extensively. They sold that property and purchased land at Wrightsville Beach. They chose a lot running from the sea to the sound and built a rambling three story club house with bedrooms on the third floor, a dining room and kitchen on the second and a bowling alley and bathhouses on the bottom floor.

The Hanover Seaside Club is still active and additional land has been purchased for future expansion. The membership is no longer entirely German. World War II completed this transition and Hurricane Hazel un-

tidily rearranged the bottom floor. It remains the only club on Wrightsville Beach with overnight facilities.

The four largest national groups to settle the New World were the English, the Scotch, the Irish and the Germans. Their reasons for leaving their homeland were as varied as the people themselves, but America was the land of promise, the land of opportunity, the land of freedom—it was a fresh page in life's notebook, a new beginning for them, their children and their children's children.

Some came alone. Some followed friends and relatives. Generally speaking, their possessions were meager, but they were rich with dreams and hopes. The ideas, the talents and the characteristics that were peculiarly their own influenced every section in which they settled. Their industry made America prosperous, their love of justice made it free and their religions made it "one Nation under God."

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