

# Germans OF Louisiana



German settlements and place names in Louisiana. *Map by Raymond Calvert.*

# Germans of Louisiana

By Ellen C. Merrill

Foreword by Don Heinrich Tolzmann



**PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY**  
Gretna 2005

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Merrill, Ellen C.

Germans of Louisiana / by Ellen C. Merrill ; foreword by Don  
Heinrich Tolzmann.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-58980-244-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. German Americans—Louisiana—History. 2. Immigrants—  
Louisiana—History. 3. German Americans—Louisiana—Social life  
and customs. 4. Louisiana—Ethnic relations. 5. Louisiana—  
Civilization. 6. Louisiana—Emigration and immigration. 7.  
Germany—Emigration and immigration. I. Title.

F380.G3M47 2004

976.3'00431—dc22

2004012615



Printed in the United States of America

Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.

1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

*This work is dedicated to all of the German immigrants who have passed through the port of New Orleans in hopes of finding a better life in the United States. We are, indeed, the richer for their coming.*



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## Foreword

As John Fredrick Nau observed, the Germans' part in building an important presence in the lower Mississippi valley has been overshadowed to a great extent by the work of the French and the Spanish. Indeed, in the 1950s, Nau observed that considerable surprise is often registered "when one ventures to suggest that other Europeans besides the French and Spanish have had a part in the forging of New Orleans life, among these, the immigrants from Germany." A second reason given by Nau for the lack of general awareness of Louisiana's German heritage can be found in the two world wars, which obscured the German dimension in American history. Nau noted that this was a problem not unique to the history of Louisiana but pertained to American history in general (*The German People of New Orleans, 1850-1900*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958). Reinhardt Kondert observed that "despite the recognized significance of the German element among Louisiana's colonial officials, historians of Louisiana have displayed an amazing ignorance of that fact." He also noted that only in the recent past "have scholars come to admit that the Germans played a crucial role in the development" of the state ("Germans in Louisiana, 1720-1803," *Yearbook of German-American Studies*, vol. 16, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1981).

This recent awareness of the role of the German heritage in American history is due to the ethnic heritage/roots revival of the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to the twenty states where German-Americans are the largest ethnic group, there are a number of other areas where the German heritage is especially strong, e.g., in Texas, California, and Florida. However, the one state that has usually been overlooked is Louisiana. Recent work dealing with Louisiana's German heritage has contributed greatly to rectifying this oversight and has also reestablished continuity with the valuable German-American historical publications completed before World War I.

Louisiana has a long history with regard to its German heritage, which reaches back to the early 1700s. Indeed, the first Germans

arrived in 1722. The German immigration became concentrated in an area near New Orleans that, at that time, became known as the German Coast. In 1803 the colonial prefect of Louisiana wrote that the German Coast was “the most industrious, the most populous, the most at ease, the most upright, the most respected part” of the French colony.

New Orleans is especially important for the history of German immigration to the United States, as it was one of the four major ports of entry, along with New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Although most immigrants moved north into the Mississippi River valley, or east along the Ohio River, many remained in Louisiana, particularly in and around New Orleans.

The first book in German dealing with Louisiana was a translation of Louis Hennepin’s work, entitled *Die Landschaft Louisiana* (Nürnberg: Andrea Otto, 1689). In the next century the early German settlements in Louisiana were not only well known in Germany but were providing the basis for literary works. Heinrich Zschokke published his novel, *Die Prinzessin von Wolfenbüttel*, based on the legend of a German princess who immigrated to Louisiana and supposedly established a German colony (see Paul C. Weber, *America in Imaginative German Literature in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Columbia University, 1926). Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Württemberg, visited New Orleans during his travels in the new world and described the city as “a gathering place of many nations,” which had “a cosmopolitan population similar to that of the large transatlantic seaports.” He also described his visits there with prominent German-Americans, such as Vincent Nolte, and mentioned the presence of German-American churches and institutions (*Reisen in Nordamerika, 1822-24 [Travels in North America, 1822-24]*, trans. W. R. Nitske, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1973). After Charles Sealsfield (Karl Postl), the famous German-American author, paid an extended visit to Louisiana, he noted that there were a great number of Germans in New Orleans, “either planters, farmers, merchants, or mechanics” (*Sämtliche Werke*, Hildesheim: Olms, 1972).

In the middle of the century Ludwig von Reizenstein published his notorious novel, *Die Geheimnisse von New Orleans* (trans. Steve Rowan, St. Louis: University of Missouri, 1998), which created interest in New Orleans and its German element. During this century another version of the fictional princess of Wolfenbüttel appeared (Gustav Brühl, *Charlotte: Eine Episode aus der Kolonialgeschichte Louisianas*, Cincinnati: Mecklenbourg and Rosenthal, 1883).

New Orleans had indeed developed a flourishing German-American community by the mid-nineteenth century. After 1840 German immigration increased substantially. Documentation sets the number of Germans arriving at the port of New Orleans at 250,000, while informed estimates place the total for the century at a third of a million. In 1847 the German Society of New Orleans was founded to assist the recently arrived immigrants. In 1860 there were 25,000 German-born residents in Louisiana, most of whom resided in and around New Orleans. During the Civil War the Louisiana Germans placed eleven military companies into the field. More than fifty German-language newspapers and journals were published in the state. By 1870 one-fifth of the population was German speaking. There were a large number of German-American religious congregations as well as numerous German-American societies and associations. All through the nineteenth century Germans who had arrived at Northern ports moved to Louisiana to take advantage of the favorable agricultural conditions. Because New Orleans was one of the major port cities for German immigration, many German-Americans living in the West and Midwest had immigrated through New Orleans and continued to maintain ties to the city. Clearly, New Orleans was the major German-American center in the South.

The presence of many fine German singing societies led to the sponsorship in New Orleans in 1890 of the national *Sängerfest* of the North American *Sängerbund*. This drew both national and international attention to New Orleans as a German-American cultural center. At the turn of the century, German immigrants were actively recruited by the state through German-language brochures advertising the advantages of Louisiana as a place to settle. By the early 1900s there were over 250 German-American societies in the state, mainly in New Orleans, with Germans making up about 12 percent of the state's population. In 1909 a state branch of the German-American National Alliance was formed, which united the German-American societies of Louisiana under one central organization. German-language schools were numerous, with German instruction being available in the public schools as well as in the private and parochial schools maintained by German-American secular and religious institutions.

These cultural associations were strengthened historically by the Mississippi River, which connected New Orleans with cities, towns, and settlements throughout its river valley and that of the Ohio River. All of these factors, together with the 1890 *Sängerfest* and the German-

American Alliance of Louisiana, contributed to making New Orleans a well-recognized German-American cultural center before World War I. Another important factor was the presence in New Orleans of one of the major German-American historians of the pre-world-war era, who was also one of the foremost spokesmen for the German element in America, Prof. J. Hanno Deiler (1849-1909).

In 1879 Deiler accepted a position as professor of German at Tulane University, a position he held for twenty-eight years. It was Deiler who not only organized the 1890 *Sängerfest* in New Orleans but also played an active role in the German-American communities of the state. In 1895 he became president of the German Society of New Orleans and, at the 1899 annual convention of the North American *Sängerbund* in Cincinnati, was elected national president. This honor was an indication of his reputation in the German-American communities of the nation. He was without question one of the most distinguished figures in the cultural life of his time and was well known for “his unbounded energy, his genial attitude toward students and his untiring enthusiasm” (Nau, op. cit., p. 133).

Following on the heels of this period was the tragedy of World War I. As such a large ethnic group, the Louisiana Germans could not escape becoming a target for the anti-German hysteria of the war. The severity of this hysteria in Louisiana was reflected in the laws passed in 1918 by the Louisiana state legislature. Teaching the German language in the public, parochial, and private schools, colleges, and other institutions in the state was prohibited, as was printing any material in German. Speaking the language, flying the German flag, and even selling or exhibiting German-made products also became illegal acts, punishable by fines and prison sentences up to sixty years. These draconian laws obviously struck a blow to the German heritage of Louisiana, as they eliminated German instruction in the educational institutions and forced German organizations, businesses, and religious congregations to disband, go underground, or assume an “American” identity. Fortunately these acts were repealed by the state legislature in 1921.

Nationally the decade of the 1920s was a time of recovery and rebuilding after the devastating years of the anti-German hysteria of World War I. An important occasion took place in 1927 for the Germans of New Orleans with the celebration of the eightieth anniversary of the German Society. To celebrate this occasion, Louis Voss, pastor of the First German Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, published his

*History of the German Society of New Orleans, with an Introduction Giving a Synopsis of the History of the Germans in the United States, with Special Reference to Those in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Sendker, 1927). The next year the Deutsches Haus was founded to bring the German-Americans of the city and their societies under one umbrella organization. A large building was purchased and renovated, which still today serves as a central point for the many German-related activities of the area.

In 1935 Karl J. R. Arndt accepted a position as professor of German at Louisiana State University. During his twelve-year tenure at L.S.U. Arndt began his research on the German-American press. This resulted in the publication in 1961 of a major work in the field of German-American studies, which listed state by state and city by city the German-American newspapers and journals that had been published from 1732 to 1955 (Karl Arndt and May Olson, *German-American Newspapers, 1732-1955: History and Bibliography*, Heidelberg: Quelle and Meyer, 1961). Not surprisingly Arndt became interested in Louisiana's fascinating German heritage and investigated several German communities in the state. He was especially interested in Germantown in northwestern Louisiana, a communitarian settlement similar to other German communities in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

When John Fredrick Nau wrote in the 1950s his *German People of New Orleans, 1850-1900*, he observed that the Germans of the city were still inspired by the same determination and loyalty that had motivated them to build their communities in the former century. He found this to be apparent in the continuation of their churches, schools, and singing and benevolent societies as well as in their businesses and industries, many of which are still in operation. He noted that "the influence of the Germans upon the city of New Orleans still lives, while German-American contributions to the building of New Orleans are visible on every hand." Nau commented that, in the research for his history of the New Orleans Germans, he repeatedly found that German-Americans "helped to make New Orleans a city of commerce, industry and business. They built New Orleans." He concluded, "To read the history of New Orleans and Louisiana aright, it is important to consider carefully the part played by the German element of the city in molding the culture and life of this city."

As elsewhere in the nation, interest in German heritage was again on the upswing by the late 1950s. In 1958 the national *Sängerfest* of the North American *Sängerbund* was held in New Orleans for the second

time. In the 1960s and 1970s the German heritage of the area was further recognized as part of the national revival of interest in America's ethnic roots. A recently published directory of German-American societies listed a variety of organizations in Louisiana, an indication of continued and growing interest in the German heritage (J. Richley, *Adressbuch deutsch-amerikanischer Vereine und Gesellschaften in den USA*, Chicago: Richley, 1989).

The annual *Volksfest* parade, abandoned after the Civil War, has been revived in New Orleans. On German-American Day, October 6, speeches and ceremonies are held by the major German heritage organizations of the area. *Oktoberfest* is celebrated by the Deutsches Haus during five public weekends of German food, music, dancing, and general revelry. The German Seamen's Mission holds a monthly German-language church service; the German Heritage Festival Association hosts an annual *Oktoberfest* parade and a gourmet Christmas dinner. Additionally the German American Cultural Center was opened in Gretna by the National Park Service. Recently the former German Society was revived, attracting 300 members in its first year. These and other German-oriented activities, too numerous to mention, attest to the continuing interest within this region in all things German.

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## Preface

Through funding supplied by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and the National Park Service I have had the opportunity to bring together a wealth of material on the German heritage of Louisiana. Because of the scope of the task I had not considered attempting it until these opportunities arose. In creating this work I concentrated on researching the resources covering the major periods of German immigration to the New Orleans region. The scholars in the field recognize three major eras, the *Colonial Period*; the *Period through the Civil War*, within which immigration peaked (1853); and the *Post-Civil War Period* of the gradual decline of this “Golden Age” of German culture. The end of the last wave of immigration to Louisiana coincided with improving conditions in Germany, which resulted from the 1871 unification of the various states into one nation. Even the two world wars within the twentieth century and the resulting displacement of large population groups did not produce a significant effect upon the cultural landscape of Louisiana. Although references to this period are included, the scope of this work primarily covers the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when there was a direct German impact on the cultural milieu of the lower Mississippi delta region of Louisiana. During these centuries the German influence could be objectively determined by examining the historical documents of the colonial period and records of the many German institutions, churches, schools, businesses, societies, etc., that flourished in the following century. The present-day interest in the German heritage of the state, which has arisen as a result of the national ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s, is evidence of the impact that German immigration and settlement had upon this region (see chapter 2).

I have consulted primary and secondary sources in public libraries, archives, and private collections, other public and private records such as city directories, newspapers, pamphlets, oral histories, etc.—in short, everything I could find that shed some light on the Germans of Louisiana. There are, no doubt, omissions, since an effort such as this

is never complete. First of all I want to thank my husband and research associate, Raymond Calvert, who not only worked with me throughout this project but also illustrated a number of the figures. I also wish to express my thanks to the following librarians and archivists, who provided me with assistance and access to fragile materials in special collections: Colin Hamer of the New Orleans Public Library; at Tulane University: Wilbur Meneray, university librarian for special collections, and his co-worker Courtney Page; Joan Caldwell of the Louisiana Collection, assisted by Carole Hampshire; Lee Miller, manuscripts librarian, and co-worker Mary LeBlanc; Robert Sherer, university archivist; and, finally, Gary Van Zante and his colleague Kevin Williams at Tulane's Southeastern Architectural Archive. At the Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, I would like to thank Faye Phillips, assistant dean of libraries for special collections; Charles Thomas, curator of the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collection; and Judy Bolten, in charge of public services in the reading room. Special thanks are due to Christina Riquelmy of the McIlhenny Collection at the Hill Library, who provided suggestions as well as a great amount of assistance. Thanks also go to John Magill of the Williams Research Center at the Historic New Orleans Collection and his assistants Sally Stassi, Siva Blake, and Mary Lou Eichhorn. Finally, thanks are due to Florence Jumonville, director of the Louisiana/Special Collections, and John Kelly, digital librarian, both at the Earl K. Long Library of the University of New Orleans.





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