

# Notes, Documents, and Queries

## America's First Turnverein: Commentary in Favor of Louisville, Kentucky

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Historians who have commented on the origin of the turnverein movement in the United States have persisted in the steadfast claim that America's first turnverein was established in Cincinnati, Ohio on the precise date of November 21, 1848. The accepted annals of turnverein history render the following account of the conditions surrounding the origin of the Cincinnati Turnverein. By the late summer of 1848, Forty-Eighters from Germany were known to have settled in Cincinnati, but no efforts were undertaken to organize a turnverein in the city until the arrival of Friedrich Hecker, popular patriot-hero of the defeated Republican uprisings in Baden, Germany earlier that same year.<sup>1</sup> Hecker, who arrived in Cincinnati in October 1848, had no intention of settling in that city. His mission in the West was to visit German-Americans in a quest to raise funds for support of renewed revolutionary activity in Germany-activity which he fully intended to support with his eventual return to the Fatherland. Hecker, an impetuous, energetic leader of men,<sup>2</sup> lost little time in attempting to energize local Cincinnati Forty-Eighters towards organizing a turnverein. The city's celebration of his arrival had hardly subsided when Hecker set about the task of drawing-up a constitution and set of by-laws for the perceived turnverein. With the help of a Cincinnati acquaintance, a Herr Kienzel, the project was finished on November 20, 1848 and the document was presented to a small group of prospective turnverein members for their approval.<sup>3</sup> The next day, November 21, 1848 the constitution was duly signed by twelve senior members (A. Krebs, C. Fettweis, C. Sproudl, J. Eiselen, R. Tafel, H. Gollmer, F. Hoffmeister, G. Tafel, A. Tafel, G. Wiese, and W. Pfaender) and two junior members (H. Tafel and R. Tafel).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Cincinnati Turnverein's origin was established.

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1. A. E. Zucker, ed. *The Forty-Eighters*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 92. See also, Heinrich Huhn, "Die Gruendung des nordamerikanischen Turnerbundes," *Kalender*, 1889, p. 32.

2. At the age of 50 Hecker volunteered for service in the Civil War. He enlisted in the Union Army as a private and rose rapidly to the rank of Colonel.

3. Carl Wittke. *Refugees of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952). pp. 148-149.

4. For an authentic copy of the list of the 14 original signers of the constitution. see: "One Hundred Years of American Turnetism and More." Cincinnati Central Turners. 1948. p 23. Curiously, neither Hecker's nor Kienzel's signature appears on the document.

A brief epilogue to the Cincinnati Turnverein origin experience tells us that the process of gymnastics commenced almost immediately—at first in an open lot surrounded by a high board fence and later in rented quarters occupied and dedicated on New Year's Day, 1850. The peripatetic Hecker left Cincinnati shortly after the acceptance of his constitutional document. By the end of November 1848 he appeared in New York where his organizational zeal and expertise was coupled with that of Gustav Struve in founding the New York Turnverein.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Hecker, a romantic and revered figure of the Forty-Eighter “cause” in Germany as well as in America, became enshrined in German-American literature as the founder and apostle of the turnverein movement in the United States. Few researchers have been interested in disturbing the flamboyance and ornamentation of such a legend. In recognition of the Cincinnati episode the United States Post Office Department printed a commemorative stamp issue in 1948 honoring one hundred years of turnverein history.<sup>6</sup> The gala ceremonies associated with the event were held on the commemorative anniversary date of November 20, in, of course Cincinnati. Perhaps instead, such historic ceremonies more properly should have occurred on July 25, 1948 in Louisville, Kentucky, a city some 100 miles southwest of Cincinnati.

If a case can be made for the Louisville Turnverein being the first such organization in America, it has to rest, in part, on the credibility of “literary reference” which might substantiate a date of origin occurring before the Cincinnati experience of November 21, 1848. Unfortunately, the earliest written and artifactual records of the turnverein movement, as it occurred in Louisville, were destroyed by a fire caused by an arsonist act of Know-Nothings on January 18, 1858.<sup>7</sup> However, an alternative source can be considered. That source is the German-language newspaper, the *Louisville Anzeiger* (*Louisville Advertiser*). The *Anzeiger*, initially a twice-weekly publication, printed its first edition on March 1, 1849. In its second publication on March 3, 1849 the following notice appeared:

The members of the Turnverein and such who intend to participate in gymnastics during the coming summer as well as friends are hereby requested to meet Sunday evening at 7 o'clock in Brunner's restaurant, Market Street, between 10th and 11th. Matters of importance for the society will be discussed. W. Vogt, Sec.; P. Brunner, Pres.<sup>8</sup>

5. Fred Eugene Leonard and George B. Affleck, *The History of Physical Education* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger Publishers, 1947), p. 294.

6. Program: *First Day of Issue of the Commemorative Damp Honoring the American Turners*, Printed by the Central Turners of Cincinnati, Ohio, November 20, 1948.

7. Leonard Koester, “These Were the Know-Nothings,” *Catholic Digest* June 1948. Koester attributes the cause of the fire to the Louisville Know-Nothing Order, a political entity constantly in confrontation with Louisville Turners throughout the decade of the 1850s. See also: Ludwig Stierlin, “The State of Kentucky and the City of Louisville: With Special Consideration of the German Element” Vol. I (English translation by John J. Weisert, 1976), (Unpublished Transcript, Louisville, Kentucky, 1873), p. 44 Stierlin, a Forty-Eighter refugee who arrived in Louisville in February 1851 and immediately accepted the position of editor of *The Louisville Anzeiger*, states that “all the minute books and documents of the Turners, which were kept in a cabinet in the hall, went up in flames ”

8. *Louisville Anzeiger* Vol. I, Number 2, March 3, 1849. The author owes a debt of gratitude to Dr. Leonard Koester, retired professor of history at the University of Louisville, for the reclamation, cataloging, and initial translation into English of *Anzeiger* material pertinent to this study.

The literary reference to "The members of the Turnverein," as well as the listing of two officers of the organization (Vogt and Brunner), substantiate that a turnverein organization was in existence before March 3, 1849. *Anzeiger* material published in the following two weeks (March 3 and March 7, 1849) commented on the place of gymnastics in mind and body development and reported plans for raising funds to provide a permanent turnverein location. On March 17, 1849 the *Anzeiger* reported further progress in turnverein reorganization:

Turners and Turner friends are requested to appear tomorrow, Sunday evening, 7 o'clock in Alberty's restaurant, Market Street, between Second and Third. A revision of statutes will be taken up and other important matters discussed, C. Franke, Sec.; J. Reutlinger, Pres.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly the statement "A revision of statutes" implies that a Louisville Turnverein constitution had previously been established and that a revision of it was about to take place. Obvious, too, is the fact that between March 3 and March 17, 1849 a new Turnverein secretary and president had been elected (Franke and Reutlinger) and that a new meeting place had been secured (Alberty's Restaurant). In the following three weeks the *Anzeiger* published notices of other meetings of the Turnverein to take place in Alberty's Restaurant. In reporting on some of the pertinent business undertaken at those meetings, the *Anzeiger* of April 11, 1849 revealed the first graphic clue that the Louisville Turnverein was, in fact, organized earlier than the Cincinnati Turnverein:

We have referred to the existence of a local Turnverein in these pages earlier and to the high value of Turner gymnastics for every age group. The society which was founded in August of last year (1848),<sup>10</sup> has reorganized in the meantime on the 18th of last month and started activities to the extent of having acquired a place and made it serviceable for gymnastics purposes, so that regular exercises will begin during the next few days.<sup>11</sup>

Such a notation would underscore the fact that Louisville's turnverein was apparently first organized in August, 1848, some three months before the Cincinnati Turnverein was founded. In the July 25, 1849 issue of the *Anzeiger* (the *Anzeiger* was by then printed daily), we learn of the exact date for the origin of the Louisville Turnverein and, at least as far as can be substantiated at this time, the first turnverein organized in America.

The members of the Turnverein are hereby requested to appear this evening at 8 o'clock in the restaurant of J. Brunner on lower Market. Several business matters should be dispatched and at the same time the 25th of July commemorated as the founding day of the society. The Committee.<sup>12</sup>

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9. *Louisville Anzeiger*, Vol. 1, Number 6, March 17, 1849

10. Parentheses mine.

11. *Louisville Anzeiger*, Vol. 1, Number 13, April 11, 1849

12. *Louisville Anzeiger*, Vol. 1, Number 82, July 25, 1849. The original German of this important passage is noted here: "Die Mitglieder des Turnvereins werden hierdurch ersucht sich heute Abend 8 Uhr im Lokale von J. Brunner am Untermarkt einzufinden. Es sollen mehrere Geschaefte erledigt und zugleich des 25 Juli als dem Gruendungstage des Vereins gedacht werden. Das Komitee."

There is no doubt that the *Anzeiger* passage stating “the 25th of July commemorated as the founding day of the society,” refers to July 25, 1848, and not July 25, 1849, the day on which the society members were summoned in order that the Louisville Turnverein’s first year of existence might be officially recognized. It was consistent practice for early Forty-Eighter Turners in America to use the word *dedication* in celebrating the establishment of a society, a set of statutes, or a new exercise hall. On the other hand, Turner literature consistently used the word *commemoration* in referring to an honored date or happening of the past. The word *commemoration* comes to us from the Latin *commemoratus*, meaning, quite simply, “to call to remembrance.”

Ludwig Stierlin, the patriarch historian of the German element in Louisville, states in his massive but undocumented work that a Turner club was established early in 1849, but that it had been dissolved by the end of that same year because of a lack of interest.<sup>13</sup> Stierlin states that the next attempt at organizing a turnverein occurred on September 2, 1850. The 1850 organization flourished throughout the decade of the 1850s. In preparing his manuscript, it is obvious that Stierlin’s reference to the Turner Club of 1849 was the organization mentioned by the *Anzeiger* articles quoted previously in this commentary. Stierlin offers no explanation pertinent to the 1848 organization. Apparently, he overlooked the *Anzeiger* statement: “Founded in August of last year,” and either overlooked or misinterpreted the connotation of July, 25, 1848.

At this time, 1984, the Louisville Turnverein serves as the national headquarters for the American Turner movement. Such a distinction is particularly apt in that the argument favoring the Louisville Turnverein as the first to be organized in America appears indisputable, at least until such time as subsequent findings might prove otherwise.

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13. Stierlin, IV, *op. cit.*, p. 39.