

Through Training, To Strength;  
Through Battle, to Light;  
The German-American  
Turnverein in the Upper South  
during the Antebellum and  
Civil War Periods -  
A Case Study of  
Louisville, Kentucky Turners

ROBERT KNIGHT BARNEY

The University of Western Ontario

During the Antebellum Period German Turners and turnvereins in America were faced with the dilemmas and issues that eventually gave rise to the Civil War. Conventional wisdom has held that German-American Turner moral and political thought and action were universally in accord with Northern principles. namely: 1) the abolition of slavery, and 2) preservation of the Union of the United States of America. Further. conventional wisdom

has held that German- American Turners: 1) gave universal support to the Republican Party and its political candidates. and 3) unanimously extended turnverein gymnastics training to military service in the Union Army during the Civil War. Reflections, in part, of such popular notion are the following statements made by two prominent investigators of German-American turnverein history:

The conventional wisdom noted above evolved from sources investigated in studies of Turners and turnvereins in the Northern United States during the Antebellum and Civil War Periods. In effect, what was held to be fact for the North, was purported also to be true for Turners and turnvereins in the American south during the Antebellum and Civil War Periods provides evidence for a direct challenge to be made to the “universality thesis” described above. Based on such a preliminary study, this author has argued that the socio-politico-economic environment of the American South during the Antebellum and Civil War Periods was, in effect, the decisive factor in determining Southern Turner and turnverein disposition towards National Turnerbund constitutional dictum on the issues of slavery, Union preservation, voting stance, and military service. Further, this author has argued that the socio-politico-economic of the Upper Southern and Lower Southern slave states differed in such a manner that Lower Southern Turners and turnvereins were forced to sacrifice National Turnerbund principles and support Southern stances on slavery, secession, presidential politics, and military service in the armies of the Confederacy, while Upper Southern Turners and turnvereins, even though occasionally “called to Task,” were not so enjoined.

The basic “challenge theory” posed by this author is noted in *Stadion IV*. This author is attempting to document the “challenge theory” beyond generalities by carrying out case studies related to large, active, and important turnvereins in the Upper and Lower South during the Antebellum and Civil War Periods. Thus, the Louisville, Kentucky Turngemeinde was chosen as a significant Upper Southern case study, while the New Orleans, Louisiana Turnverein was selected as a significant Lower Southern investigation. Appropriate for the proceedings of the 1984 12th Annual NASSH Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky, is the investigation of the Louisville Turngemeinde. The Louisville case serves as a model for understanding the Upper Southern socio-politico-economic environment in general, and its effect on Turners and turnverein disposition during the American Civil War.

In general, the study disclosed that Germans, including German Forty-Eighter Turners, established a reasonably secure economic base and strong social identity in Louisville during the Antebellum Period. The city depended on its German work force with respect to an economic environment based on: (1) river and railroad commerce with both North and South, (2) skilled labor in industries other than that related to black slave labor (agriculture), and (3) businesses catering to the greater Louisvilles population (food and hostelryes). Aside from their secure social and economic environment, however, Germans were of varying political persuasion. In effect, they adopted stances covering the entire spectrum of electoral choice, i.e., Northern Democratic, Southern Democratic, Republican. The key to German and Forty-Eighter Turner socio-politico-economic safety and security in Upper Southern cities, including Louisville, was linked inextricably to the fact that Louisville, indeed the Upper South in general, were fragmented in terms of political disposition. Such general fragmentation allowed Turners to espouse Lincoln, the Republican Party, and abolition of slavery and still fit comfortably in Upper Southern society. This was quite unlike Turner brethren in the Lower South, where solid Southern Democratic, slavery disposed political stances were universal, thus leading to German Turner abandonment of principle and eventual subservience to Southern cause. The case of Louisville (and that of the Upper and Lower South) is a legitimate example of how the forces of economic determinism are fundamental in the shaping of history.