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**THE ILLINOIS HISTORIC PRESERVATION AGENCY IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER.**

## A Naturalized Politician: The Life of Gustave Koerner

By Cynthia Fuener, Editor, *Historic Illinois*

Less well known than many of his political contemporaries, Gustave Koerner was a German immigrant who settled in Illinois in 1833. He chose to settle in Illinois because it was a free state, and Koerner was strongly opposed to slavery. This photo of Koerner appeared in *Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896*, published in 1909. Inset: Koerner's Belleville home was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and the city of Belleville is currently restoring the Greek Revival-style house. Once completed, the home will be reopened as a museum, where Koerner's life and political career will be interpreted. (Photo courtesy St. Clair County Historical Society)

In 1833, twenty-five years before Abraham Lincoln warned that “the Union cannot endure half slave and half free” in his famous House Divided speech at the Illinois Republican convention, a newly arrived German immigrant penned a strikingly prophetic thought in his diary as he witnessed slavery in action along the Kentucky-side banks of the Ohio River. En route to his new home in America, German immigrant Gustave Koerner wrote, “As long as the Southern States uphold the institution of slavery, so long shall I believe that this beautiful structure of the United States will break down, and so long will the liberty of the whites, in which they now rejoice, be only a half-deserved boon.”

Although new to America, Koerner was not unschooled in American democracy. A law student at universities in Jena, Munich, and Heidelberg, Germany, Koerner had studied and admired American constitutional law. In Germany, Koerner had fought for a free and united German republic against the repressive Central European government, headed by Prince Klemens von Metternich of Austria.

Koerner's education and politics, both of which offered the means for a bright future for him in Germany, instead prepared him to become one of the most valued political leaders in Illinois at a critical period in United States history. En route to Missouri to settle in a German community, it was the sight of slaves chained together on the banks of the Ohio River that quickly convinced Koerner that he could not settle in a slave state. He chose instead to light in another established German immigrant community on the east side of the Mississippi, in the free state of Illinois.

As remarkable as Koerner's life was, both in Germany and the United States, his story is not nearly as celebrated as those of his two more famous associates, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. Now, though, his fascinating life story—some of which reads like an adventure novel—will be getting more attention. His home in Belleville was recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places. And the owner of the house, the city of Belleville, is in the process of rehabilitating the home to reopen it as a museum, where his life can be interpreted.

Gustavus Koerner, born on November 20, 1809, in Frankfurt, Germany, was named for the Swedish king who refused to bow to the wishes of Napoleon Bonaparte. The Swedes eventually forced King Gustavus to abdicate—knowing that Napoleon would surely prevail against them—to spare the country utter devastation and bloodshed. Koerner's father detested Napoleon and admired the king's spirit and courage. The

young Koerner got more than just the name of the chivalrous monarch, he also “inherited” that same sense of loyalty to a cause.

Napoleon was long gone by the time Gustave Koerner reached late adolescence. Left in his wake, though, was a splintered Germany, and Koerner, as a college student, soon took up the cause for German unity. At Jena, Koerner joined the ten-year-old *Burschenschaft*, a student union devoted to reestablishing German unity. But the Metternich regime arrested hundreds of its members and ordered all chapters of the union dissolved. The *Burschenschaft* simply went underground, meeting clandestinely until, by the time Koerner joined in 1828, the fellowship existed as an “open secret.” Still, Koerner had hopes that real change could be implemented, and he believed that the fellowship could “by means of moral, intellectual and physical culture at the University . . . prepare the way for the establishment of a free and orderly instituted commonwealth founded in the unity of the people.” Koerner and his fellow students “prepared” by “reading political economy, English and American constitutional law, and . . . followed proceedings in the French parliament and the legislative activities in the southern German states of Bavaria, Wuerstenberg, and Baden.”

In 1830 Koerner left Jena to continue his law studies at Munich. While at Munich, Koerner accidentally became embroiled in a conflict that began as a traditional Christmas Eve, one filled ordinarily with late-night promenades, culminating in the celebration of Mass at midnight. Enjoying the evening, Koerner paraded with friends, and they decided to stop at the home of a colleague who was convalescing from a serious illness. The students reached their friend’s home located just outside the city gates and called to him to appear at the window. When he peered out, the reveling students cheered and shook noisemakers, raising a commotion similar to any number of activities taking place inside the city. A policeman appeared, and in his attempt to disperse the crowd, a scuffle broke out. Koerner presented his student badge to the officer, citing the law that students could not be arrested except in cases of high crime. But the fighting escalated, soldiers were called in, and Koerner was arrested. Koerner was imprisoned for four months in Munich as a threat to the state. He noted in his memoirs that during that idle time, he “learned more law during my confinement than I had in Jena for two years.”

Koerner completed his studies, and studied for his doctorate degree at the home of old friend Theodore Engelmann (where he courted Engelmann’s sister Sophie). But Koerner could not ignore the calls for revolution. Several liberal presses had been closed down, military maneuvers increased, and the public began to agitate in large meetings and rallies. Koerner smelled revolt, and he did not retreat from it. He joined a radical group of men whom he described as, “not willing to wait for an occasion on which they might show their Liberalism, but who were for making an occasion.” He was soon sent as a missionary to numerous cities, where he met with local chapters of the *Burschenschaft* to rally them for the upcoming revolution. Koerner returned to Frankfurt by mid-March in 1833, to assist in final plans for the revolt, which was scheduled for April 3. Just days before the ill-fated coup attempt began Theodore Engelmann appeared at the Koerner home. Koerner, shocked because the Engelmann family had been preparing to leave for America, must also have been deeply touched by Engelmann’s desire to participate in a cause he believed in wholeheartedly. At great risk, Engelmann traveled without a passport from Imsbach to Frankfurt. Perhaps he thought that if the revolution was

successful, his liberal-leaning family would no longer feel compelled to leave their homeland.

Whatever Engelmann's thinking, he had committed himself to this venture. And so, on the evening of April 3, the revolution began. But the revolution was over almost before it started. Someone had tipped off authorities. Koerner was injured when a soldier ran his bayonet into Koerner's arm; bleeding heavily, he was taken back to his home, where his family tended his wound, and then quickly devised a scheme to get him out of the city, and eventually, the country.

Against his wishes, his family decided that he would leave town disguised as a woman. His sister, Augusta, drove him in a carriage to his first destination, Darmstadt. The family also arranged a rendezvous en route with Engelmann, who was waiting roadside disguised as a country gentleman. Meeting up with Engelmann the two made their way out of Germany, into France (where they endured another harrowing narrow escape), and finally to the port city of Le Havre, where Engelmann's family awaited crossing to America.

Koerner did not plan to come to America. He had great reservations about leaving his family behind and leaving the country that he still hoped to liberate. But he boarded the ship in summer 1833, and three days into their voyage, Koerner proposed to Sophie.

Koerner might have quit politics in a country that offered many freedoms that his native Germany lacked. But he soon picked new causes, championing the concerns of Illinois citizens, particularly those recently arrived from Europe.

He and the Engelmanns settled in Belleville, where many Germans had already located. A year later he traveled to Lexington, Kentucky, to study law, and he sat for the Illinois state bar exam in 1835. Once established in the practice of law, he married Sophie in June 1836. Koerner teamed with Adam Snyder, a lawyer whose Democratic leanings may have influenced Koerner's party affiliation with the Democratic Party. The opposing Whig Party may also have been too conservative for the liberal-minded Koerner, who also favored the Democrat's friendly attitude toward immigrants. As a Democrat, Koerner soon acquainted himself with other rising Democrats, and in 1837 he was elected delegate to the Democratic State Convention. Koerner, also interested in journalism, began to write articles for Belleville's German language newspaper, a move that soon earned him the trust of his fellow German immigrants. Before long, Koerner's name appeared on the ballot for the state legislature, and he was elected in 1842. His career in Belleville skyrocketed; it did not hurt that he was surrounded by other prominent Belleville democrats, including John Reynolds (governor from 1830 to 1834), Lyman Trumbull (U.S. Senator from 1861 to 1873), James Shields (numerous state offices and U.S. senator from 1849 to 1855), and William Bissell (governor from 1857 to 1860).

There were plenty of causes for Koerner to fight. Voting restrictions in the new 1848 state constitution effectively disenfranchised all non-naturalized immigrants. Koerner fought hard, partly to change this provision and another that reduced the pay of Illinois Supreme Court Justices. Koerner, who had been appointed by Governor Thomas Ford to the Supreme Court in 1843, and later reelected to a full term, declined to run again for an office that would earn him a salary that had become much less than he made in private practice.

Koerner continued to contribute articles to newspapers, and some sources list him as editor of various English and German language newspapers. In his memoirs he discussed his journalistic endeavors—which were prolific—but he stated that he was “never . . . the ostensible editor of any paper.” He remained active in politics, eventually being elected lieutenant governor in 1852.

Koerner certainly seemed assured of a lifelong career in politics, firmly established as an up-and-comer in the Democratic Party. It was with great reluctance, then, that he turned his back on his longtime political allies in 1854. He had campaigned two years earlier with Stephen Douglas, the Illinois senator who had long had his eye on the presidency. Koerner recognized Douglas’s ambition, but he could not abide Douglas’s shameless bid for southern sympathies by sponsoring the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, a piece of legislation that effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Koerner weighed the consequences of leaving the Democrats: by “burning his bridges,” he thought he would effectively destroy any hopes of furthering his political career. More troubling, though, was that Douglas’s proposal allowed for the extension of slavery, an idea he could not support. He left the Democratic Party.

Koerner did not retreat from the field for long, though. He joined and rose quickly in the ranks of the newly formed Republican Party. Few today recognize his contributions at the Republican National Convention, where he and fellow delegates shrewdly and quietly lobbied for the nomination of Abraham Lincoln. Before the convention it appeared that William Seward of New York had the nomination wrapped up. But Koerner’s group worked tirelessly in Chicago to advance the Lincoln nomination, and their efforts succeeded. Although he never mentioned this brilliant coup as the high point of his career, surely he must have been aware of it. Lincoln recognized the contribution, and after he was elected, the Sixteenth President rewarded Koerner with an appointment as minister to Spain in 1862. He moved his family to Madrid, where he served until Lincoln’s reelection. He was at Belleville just a few months when Lincoln was assassinated. Koerner was one of twelve pall bearers who carried Lincoln’s casket from the Illinois capitol to Oak Ridge Cemetery.

After an extensive career in politics Koerner curtailed his heavy schedule and concentrated mainly on his law practice, filling occasional government appointments when asked. He did not slow down, though. He published his memoirs of life in Spain, continued to write for newspapers, and traveled extensively throughout the country. He maintained an active intellectual interest in politics both in America and in Europe, writing comments in his diary and sometimes in the newspaper. In Belleville, he celebrated his fiftieth wedding anniversary with Sophie, commenting in his memoirs on the lives of his children and grandchildren.

Koerner’s prodigious career ended with his death on April 9, 1896. Even though he had long retired from the political scene, he practiced law until his death, leaving a legacy that is arguably unparalleled in its breadth—revolutionary, journalist, lawyer, politician, and statesman. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about him is that his name is not better recognized.

Cynthia A. Fuener

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