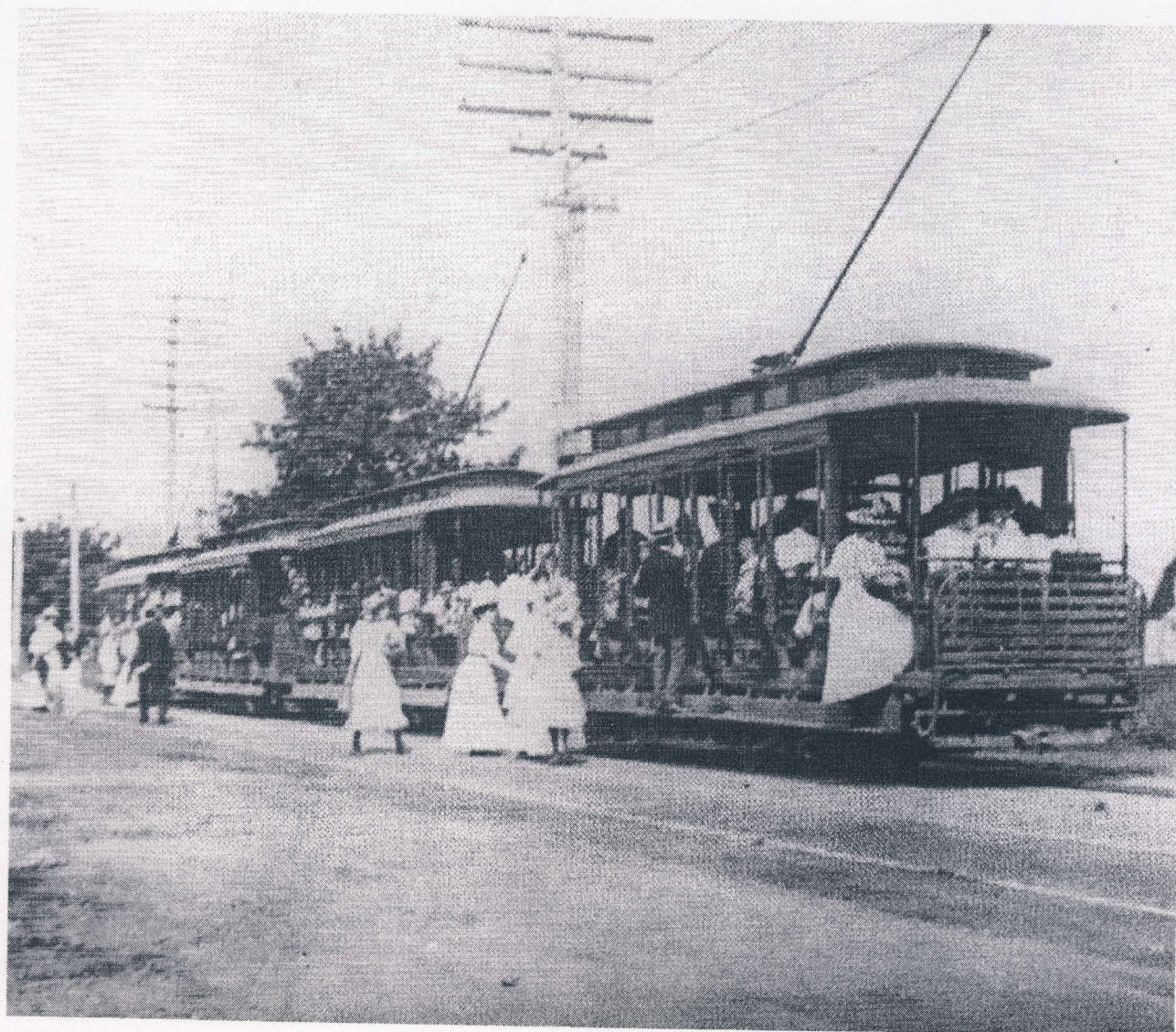


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Fosters Meadow

THE ORIGINS AND TRANSFORMATION OF A GERMAN FARMING COMMUNITY

By Paul W. Hoffman

German emigration to the United States began in the Colonial Period when thousands of German speakers disembarked in seacoast cities, especially Philadelphia. From here, they spread westward and southward, down the Great Valley through Maryland, Virginia and into North Carolina. The second great wave of German emigration began in the 1840's and ran strong until Germany was unified in 1870.

As was true of the other mass migrations from 19th century Europe, the Port of New York was also a primary place of entry. During this time, a large German-speaking neighborhood developed on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, below 14th

SECOND STREET BONIFACE CHURCH BUILDING
(1869-1968). CONVENT ON THE LEFT.
RECTORY ON THE RIGHT. C. EARLY 20TH CENTURY.

PAUL W. HOFFMAN

Street. The area was called *Kleindeutschland*, or Little Germany, and the newcomers built a society in which they were familiar and comfortable. Here, many an immigrant family made their first home in the New World. After seeking employment in the city and saving enough to buy land, many of these immigrants moved to the countryside. The story of German immigrants setting out to the West via wagon, stage-coach or boat and barge up the Hudson River to the Erie Canal

is well known. Many German farming communities in Indiana, Wisconsin and Minnesota got their start from those who passed through *Kleindeutschland*. What is less known is the story of those immigrants who took their stake and a similar dream and headed east to Long Island with a final destination within a one day wagon trip from Manhattan. One such destination was Fosters Meadow.

Fosters Meadow was an area in the western tail of the

Hempstead Plains. It encompassed the present day village of Elmont, with parts of North Valley Stream, Rosedale, Laurelton and Springfield, and included land in both the Towns of Hempstead and Jamaica. It had been a pastureland and farming community since the 17th century when two brothers, Thomas and Christopher Foster, purchased the large tract of land.¹ In 1850, families bearing well-established English and Dutch family names such as Hendrickson, Van Nostrand,



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Baylis and Wright were living there. At that time, there were few German born farmers in the area – only Joseph Roeckel on the Merrick & Jamaica Plank Road,² but over the next fifty years, Fosters Meadow became a community with a distinctly German flavor.

It is easy to understand why the area was attractive to farmers at that time. Turnpikes and toll roads called plank roads were laid out during the middle of the nineteenth century. Large planks of wood were laid on a graded roadbed in order to make travel faster and more efficient than on muddy and rutted dirt roads. The New York Legislature had passed a law in 1847 authorizing the construction of plank roads, and 1850 saw the beginning of construction of the Jamaica and Brooklyn Plank Road. The unofficial northern and southern boundary for Fosters Meadow were the Hempstead and Jamaica Plank Road and the Merrick and Jamaica Plank Road. These roads opened during the decade of the 1850's and provided access to the road to Brooklyn.³ By leaving his farm in the evening, stopping once to water the horses, a farmer with a sturdy market wagon and a strong team of horses could make the fifteen mile trip from Fosters Meadow to the produce markets at the foot of Fulton

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<u>DATE OF PURCHASE</u>	<u>PURCHASER</u>	<u>PREVIOUS RESIDENCE</u>
February 25, 1850	Friedrich Reisert	City & County of New York
August 12, 1852	Philipp Barb	Town of Newtown
January 1, 1853	Jacob Felten	Town of Newtown
February 1, 1853	Johann Seufert	City & County of New York
March 1, 1854	Johann Krug	Town of Newtown
July 28, 1854	Joseph Hoffman	City & County of New York
August 12, 1854	Simon Krummenacker	Bushwick, Kings County
August 17, 1854	Wilhelm Finn	City & County of New York
May 7, 1855	Johann Hauck	City & County of New York
November 22, 1856	Johann Hatt	City of Brooklyn, Kings County
September 18, 1860	Johann Marz	Town of Newtown ⁴

Street in the City of Brooklyn, arriving at the market before dawn in plenty of time to meet the buyers.

What made the area particularly attractive to the early German arrivals is more difficult to determine. By examining initial land purchases made between 1850 and 1860, we can see where this group had been prior to their settling in the Fosters Meadow area, which for purposes of this article will include Valley Stream and Franklin Square.

This table shows that Fosters Meadow was not an initial destination for immigrants, but was the second or third step in that process. Friedrich Reisert and Joseph Hoffmann had been butchers in *Kleindeutschland* for a number of years before moving their families to the area.⁵ Others had worked as gardeners and farm laborers in then more rural Kings and Queens Counties before settling here. The diversity of their previous residences indicates that these new arrivals were not moving as a group but may have independently chosen the location. These families and the families of Johann Hermann, Philipp Hoffner, Johan Peter Rath, Andreas Kraus, Nicklaus Kreischer,

Adam Reising and Martin Muller, who all arrived by 1860, are the core group who established the German social institutions that made the area attractive to later arrivals who were originally from German speaking lands. From that small start in 1850, there were over 250 German-born or children of German-born, living in the Fosters Meadow area by 1860.⁶

This is not to say that all the pioneer settlers were unknown to each other, since there is evidence of extended family groups among the initial settlers. Simon Krummenacker, a native of Alsace, arrived in the area with four unmarried sons ranging in age from 19 to 30. Within a year, his son Simon married Catharina, a daughter of Johann Hermann. Five years later, his brother Nicholas married Catharina's sister, Mary Ann. This signaled the beginning of the inter-marriage within this community which would continue for at least the next seventy-five years.

Johann Krug came to the area with his wife, Catharina Kreischer. In 1860, her mother was living with them and both of Catharina's brothers, Nicklaus and Georg Michael, and her half-brother Georg Philipp Hack, were living nearby. Gertrud



THE FARMER'S OLD SPOT, KALB HOTEL, FRANKLIN SQUARE, CIRCA 1900. FROM LEFT AUGUST KALB, JR., AUGUST KALB, MR. HOFFNER, NICKLAUS KREISCHER. ~~DAVID W. HOFFMAN~~ *Franklin Sq. Hist. Soc.*

Becker, wife of Nicklaus Kreischer, had both a brother and a sister who married and settled here. By the 1860's, there were six separate families living in the Fosters Meadow area that were related through the Kreischer/Becker marriage.⁷

The first wave of German immigration to the United States in the 19th century drew heavily from the southern and

western regions of German-speaking Europe which were primarily Catholic in religion.⁸ A review of church records in Fosters Meadow indicates that the Catholic population of its settlers was an even higher percentage and may have run as high as 80-90% of the total. Soon after their arrival, the German settlers established the social institutions with which

they were familiar. Among the first of these was the formation of a German Catholic parish. In August, 1854, the first Mass in Fosters Meadow took place in the farmhouse of Joseph Hoffmann where regular services were held until construction of a church building began later that year.⁹ This parish would eventually be called St. Boniface in honor of the patron saint of Germany. St. Boniface

parish would remain a central part of this German community for many years. It would be served by pastors born in Germany until 1921, and sermons at the Sunday High Mass were conducted in German well into the 20th century.

The Protestant minority of the German residents were not far behind in establishing their own church. Services were held at various private residences by Evangelical (Lutheran and Reformed) ministers beginning in 1859.¹⁰ In 1864, a parcel of land was obtained on Fosters Meadow Road, and the cornerstone was laid for St. Paul's German Evangelical Church. Like St. Boniface Catholic Church, which eventually moved to a location a few hundred feet south of its Protestant neighbor, St. Paul's was an important social and cultural addition to the community.

Attending church services was, however, only part of how German immigrants spent their Sundays. Their English and Dutch predecessors kept an austere Sabbath and were appalled by how the Germans moved from church to the beer halls and beer gardens where family and friend gathered together with music and merriment. Karl Theodor Griesinger spent the five years from 1852 to 1857 in the United States and commented on what he observed in the German neighborhoods of New York City.

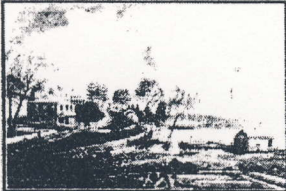
On Sunday the movement in the streets is like that in a dovecote. People go from the inn to the church and back to the inn again. Everybody wears his Sunday clothes and is in high spirits. In the afternoon, on days when the weather is good, almost everybody leaves town and goes on a picnic. On Sunday night there is still more merriment in *Kleindeutschland*.

The inns are crowded, even with women.

There is music, in spite of the laws against making noise on Sunday.¹¹

It is not known who offered his farmyard as the first beer garden in Fosters Meadow, but it is easy to imagine how it would have worked. The farmers took their market wagons brimming with fresh produce to the market in Brooklyn, only to return empty after the vegetables were sold. The empty wagon was quickly loaded with a barrel of fresh brewed beer wrapped in ice and burlap. In the second half of the 19th century, Brooklyn together with nearby Williamsburg and Bushwick, was the brewing capital of America.¹² Most of the breweries are long forgotten, but there are two that many New Yorkers still remember today: Liebmann's Rheingold Brewery and the F & M Schaefer Brewing Company. By the 1860's, professionals arrived in the area to provide German-flavored food and drink to residents and transients alike. In Franklin Square, Ludwig Schroeder and Anton Staatz operated hotels each bearing their name on either side of the Hempstead & Jamaica Plank Road. Now, the denizens of Fosters Meadow would have a proper place to spend their Sunday afternoons. Both hotels would change ownership and

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names (to the Hoffman Hotel and Kalb Hotel, respectively), but would remain important social gathering places until the 1920's.¹³ Over the years, other hotels would be established by descendants of the original settlers, most notably Herman's Hotel and the Hoeffner Hotel.

As more German-born immigrants arrived in the area, they set up the other establishments

necessary to support the farmers and their families. In 1858, Joseph Roeckel's son, Joseph, opened a grocery store to cater to the local needs.¹⁴ Carl Goeller arrived in Fosters Meadow in 1871 and opened a blacksmith shop. He eventually began manufacturing wagons and many of the market wagons used by local farmers were made by him.¹⁵ Key to Fosters Meadow securing its place as the local center

for German culture was the arrival of Friedrich Wilhelm Germs, the first headmaster of St. Boniface School. The school was opened in the basement of the church building in 1857 and the residents could have their children educated not only in church doctrine and the three R's, but also in German culture and language. Germs, who was also the local doctor, continued in that role for the next twenty-

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five years. In 1886, the Sisters of Saint Dominic arrived to take over responsibility for the school. They drew students not just from the immediate area, but took in weekly boarding students who lived too far away to commute daily.¹⁶

The German influence in Fosters Meadow continued to build during the latter part of

the 19th century. Not only was there an influx of recent immigrants drawn to the familiar lifestyle, but the children of the early arrivals married and started families and farms of their own. And, what prodigious families they were. John Hoffman and Eva Kreischer had seventeen children. Fredrick Reiser and Anna

Richter had the same number. Double-digit offspring were not exceptional among these farm families. Some felt that the most efficient way to obtain farm hands was to produce sons. Unfortunately, the high child mortality rate of the time worked against them.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Fosters Meadow changed from more of a German community to more of a German-American one. Hoffmann and Hermann dropped the last "n" from their names. Umlauts were replaced by an additional letter "e" or dropped altogether. Johann, Andreas and Wilhelm became John, Andrew and William. Some names changed totally: Johann Marz became John March, and Franz Becker became Frank Baker. Even the name of the village changed. In 1882, an application was made to the Post Office Department to establish an office in the newly renamed village of Elmont.¹⁷ However, the names Fosters Meadow and Elmont would be used interchangeably for the next twenty years. But the presence and influence of the German language, taught at St. Boniface School and used in the church services, remained strong. Uniquely German-American social traditions continued to flourish in the area. Robert Sappelt, a farmer in

Springfield, kept extensive diaries of both world and local events from 1870 to 1923. From 1881 through 1906, he noted the annual shooting contest of the Young Farmers Light Guard (in 1893, first prize was \$5 and a ton of fertilizer).¹⁸ Militia organizations were extremely popular in German-American neighborhoods at that time not so much for military readiness, but for the social aspects of shooting contests, drilling and wearing handsome uniforms. Certainly singing societies would have been popular at that time, as found in the *Hempstead Liederkrantz* description of a meeting at the Kalb Hotel in Franklin Square in 1909.¹⁹

Elmont reached its peak as a center of German-American cultural influence at the turn of the 20th century. The 1900 census noted over 800 German or German-American individuals in the enumeration district that included Elmont. Over 350 more were in Franklin Square.²⁰ Some children of the original settlers had already moved to surrounding villages such as Floral Park, Little Neck, Queens Village, New Hyde Park, and Cedarhurst in pursuit of open farmland, but St. Boniface would continue to pull them back for church and school. The grip of that influence would loosen with the establishment of nearby Catholic parishes with a significant number of German-Americans in New Hyde Park (1893), Queens Village (1896), Valley Stream (1902), and Franklin Square (1908). Elmont itself would retain its character until the 1950's and the sub-division of most of the remaining farms into residential neighborhoods. Today, it is difficult to find any remaining German influence in Elmont, other than in the churchyards of St. Boniface and St. Paul's, where the great grandchildren of the early settlers still come home to be buried.

Paul W. Hoffman lives in Jamesport. Eight of his great-great-grandparents, Joseph Hoffmann and Carolina Geiger, Johann Marz and Eva Geis, Nicklaus Kreischer and Gertrud Becker, Friedrich Reisert and Margaretha Knoblauch, were among the original German settlers of Fosters Meadow.

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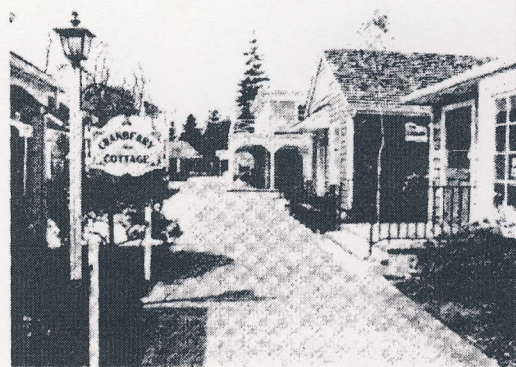
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