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Lincoln Visited By A German Delegation of Workingmen In Cincinnati, Ohio, February 12, 1861

Editor's Note: The editor is indebted to members of the Cincinnati Historical Society for the research assistance that made the publication of this article possible. R. G. M.

When Abraham Lincoln stopped in Cincinnati on February 12, 1861 (his fifty-second birthday), on his way to Washington to become the sixteenth President

way to Washington to become of the United States, he was visited by a delegation of Ger-man workingmen and the spokesman for the group read to him a message of support.

Lincoln's reply to the German delegation is well-known but there are some missing links, surrounding the event. What was Lincoln replying to, that evoked his particular response on this occasion? And who was the author of the message?

In Basler's The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (Vol. IV, pp. 201-203) there are two versions of what Lincoln said in reply to the Ger-man delegation. These two versions are newspaper accounts which appeared in the Cincinnati Gazette and in the Cincinnati Commercial. Basler printed both accounts because they contain considerable variations. The other two main English-language newspapers in Cincinnati then were the Times and the Enquirer. There are considerable variations, also, in all four newspapers about the exact details of Lincoln's visit to Cincinnati and his encounter with the German delegation. The reporter for the *Times* did not know the spokesman's name. But the other three newspapermen reporting the event did know his name. He was identified as Frederick H. Oberkline. The *Commercial* and the *Enquirer* spelled his name as "Oberkline," while the *Gazette* spelled it as "Oberkleine."

Researchers in the area of Lincolniana would be justi-Researchers in the area of Encommand would be just-fied in presuming that Frederick H. Oberkline was a leader among the Cincinnati Germans and that he was the author of the message. They would be wrong on both accounts. The first question that perplexes the researcher is: Who was Frederick H. Oberkline? The most learned German-American scholar today would be unable to supply the answer to this question. Histories of Cin-cinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio are numerous, in both English and German. These books contain scores of

biographical sketches of "representative citizens," but nowhere can a biography of Oberkline be found. His name appears in the Cincinnati city directories from 1860 to 1865 with the year 1863 minus his name. His name is not spelled consistently and he is variously listed

The name "F. H. Oberkline," appears as a member of the Ohio house of representatives

in the fifty-seventh Ohio gen-eral assembly which convened

at Columbus on Monday, Janu-ary 1, 1866, after the Civil War. A "Frederick Oberkline"

is listed as a member of the 9th Ohio Volunteer Infantry,

an all-German regiment from

Cincinnati. Presuming he is the same man who read the message to Lincoln, he is listed

as having been twenty-five years of age at the time of his enrollment and was promoted from sergeant of Co. F. to sec-ond lieutenant of Co. G. The

record further shows that he resigned on May 8, 1863, thus missing all the important battles in which the 9th Ohio

was engaged. In the regi-

mental history of the 9th Ohio

he is listed as having been

born in the town of Lotte, in

Prussia. The regimental history (written in German) spells his name as "Oberkline,"

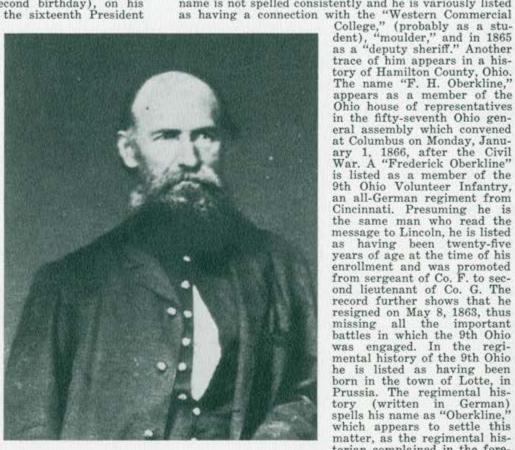
which appears to settle this matter, as the regimental historian complained in the fore-

word about the American en-

rolling officers misspelling the

German names. The historian

took pains to see that all the



AUGUST WILLICH

This photograph was taken at the studios of Porter's Gallery, 106 Fourth Street, Cincinnati, about 1860 when he was editor of the Cincinnati Republican.

German names were spelled correctly. But after 1865 Frederick H. Oberkline disappears and passes into obscurity. To compound the confusion surrounding the details of Lincoln's visit to Cincinnati the four Cincinnati newspapers give four different versions of the event. It is well-known that four different observers can produce four different descriptions of a single event. And this was the case with Lincoln's Cincinnati visit.

All four newspapers agreed that he arrived in Cin-cinnati from Indianapolis on Tuesday afternoon February 12, 1861, that he was met at the railroad depot and that a parade followed as he was escorted to the Burnet House. The commander of the militia companies in the



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parade was Major General William Haines Lytle, commanding general of the first division of the Ohio militia. (Lytle was later a brigadier general in the Union army and was killed at the battle of Chickamauga on Sept. 20, 1863.) The newspapers agreed that Miles Greenwood, prominent Cincin-nati manufacturer, was the grand marshal of the parade and that the mayor of Cincinnati, Richard M. Bishop, was on hand to greet the President-elect.

Three of the four newspapers stated that Lincoln's train arrived at the Indianapolis and Cincinnati railroad depot. But the Enquirer reported that he arrived at the Ohio and Mississippi depot. The fact is that Lincoln arrived from Indianapolis on the Indianapolis and Cincinnati railroad. The Ohio and Mississippi railroad ran from Cincinnati to St. Louis and did not run through Indianapolis. This was not a serious error on the part of the Enquirer reporter as both rail-roads used the same depot in downtown Cincinnati. But then the En-quirer man did commit a rather serious error. He wrote that after an initial message of greeting was read to Lincoln at the railroad depot he was then visited by the German dele-gation. He wrote, "Then came Mr. Frederick Oberkline, upon behalf of the Workingmen's Association, who delivered a very brief address, which however, elicited no response, and a lane being formed by the police, Mr. Lincoln was taken under the protec-tion of Mayor Bishop . . . " (Cin-cinnati Enquirer, Feb. 13, 1861, p. 2, col. 5).

But the reporters for the other three newspapers disagreed with the reporter for the Enquirer. They wrote that the German delegation visited Lincoln at his hotel, the Burnet House, that night, and not during the after-noon at the railroad depot. And they reported that Lincoln did respond to the message. The time of the visit seems to have been some time between eight and eight-thirty o'clock. The re-porter for the Times wrote, "About eight o'clock down came a party of

German workingmen from over the Rhine carrying pitched flambeaux. They formed on Third street and sent in a committee to call out the President-elect. He came. He was inflicted with another speech. He replied with another speech. He replied briefly, and in the course of his re-marks said a first-rate thing. The addresser took particular pains to notify Mr. Lincoln that the torch bearers were foreign-born citizens. He said he didn't like foreign-born citizens any better than those born in this country. The remark was hugely cheered from the balcony. Cincin-nati Times, Feb. 13, 1861, p. 3, col. 4.) The reporter for the Times did not know the name of the spokesman.

However, the Gazette and the Commercial reported the visit of the German delegation in greater detail. They reported that the delegation visited Lincoln at the Burnet House that evening and that a message was read to him by Frederick H. Oberkline. Both newspapers printed what was purported to be Lincoln's verbatim reply, (See Basler, IV, pp. 201-203) but, as already noted, there were variations. However, both newspapers printed the message that Oberkline read without a single comma or period out of place. This is a strange thing indeed. How could the reporters for the Gazette and the Commercial, relying on hand-written notes, and in a day before duplicating and recording devices existed, give the exact text of Oberkline's message, yet give different versions of what Lincoln of said in reply to the message?

Diligent research discloses the answer. All the four English-language newspapers printed reports on Lincoln's visit on February 13, 1861, the day after the event. But on the morning of February 12, 1861 while Lincoln was en route to Cincinnati from Indianapolis there appeared on the editorial page of the German-lan-guage daily newspaper, the Cincinnati *Republikaner*, or the Cincinnati *Re-publican*, the exact message that Oberkline read to Lincoln. Therefore, it was a small matter for the Commercial and the Gazette to reproduce the message of the German delegation. because they already had a printed copy in hand,

The message was written in German and in English in the same column just below it. This is the message that Oberkline read to Lin-coln and that the Commercial and the Gazette copied:

TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN, PRES-IDENT ELECT OF THE UNITED STATES Sir,-We, the German free workingmen of Cincinnati avail ourselves of this opportunity to assure you, our chosen chief magistrate, of our sincere and heartfelt regard. You earned our votes as the Champion of free labor and free homesteads. Our vanguished opponents have, in recent times, made frequent use of the terms, "workingmen," and "workingmen's meetings," in order to create an impression, as if the mass of working-men were in favor of Compromises between the interests of free labor and slave labor, by which the vic-tory just won would be turned into a

defeat. This is a despicable device of dishonest men. We spurn such Com-promises. We firmly adhere to the principles, which directed our votes in your favor. We trust, that you the selfreliant because selfmade man, will uphold the Constitution and the laws against secret treachery and avowed treason. If to this end you should be in need of men, the German free workingmen, with others, will rise as one man at your Call, ready to risk their lives in the effort to maintain the victory already won by freedom over Slavery."

Lincoln's reply to this message was almost evasive, and he sought to dampen the militancy of the message. He said, "In so far as there is an illusion to our present national difficulties . . . I beg you to excuse me from entering particularly upon it." Lincoln had not yet been inaugurated as President and it would have been impolitic for him to accept volunteers for a civil war before it had started. At the time of his arrival in Cin-cinnati, seven states, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Geor-gia, Louisiana and Texas had seceded from the Union. This defiance of central authority aroused more indignation among the Germans of Cincin-nati than it did among the native-born. This fact is underscored by Henry Howe in his *Historical Collec-*tions (Oki (Vid) 1 a 765) Howe tions of Ohio (Vol. 1, p. 765). Howe, who lived during this period, related that "Cincinnati up to the outbreak of the rebellion largely sympathized with the slave-holders . . . On April 5th (1861) three cannon from Baltimore were allowed to pass through the city en route for Jackson, Missis-sippi marked for the 'Southern Con-federacy'" According to Howe the bombardment of Fort Sumter "was a surprise to multitudes. Up to that very moment they had believed that the South was not in earnest. It was all bluster; there would be no war. What is noteworthy, the large German population of the city believed differently. Among them were many old soldiers who had been engaged in the German revolution of 1848, and they felt war 'in the air.'" Thus the Germans of Cincinnati, but not the native-born, were prepared for a civil war before it started.

But more important still, who was the author of the message that Oberkline read to Lincoln?

It seems certain that the author was the editor of the Cincinnati Republican, August Willich. The space in which the message appears was the area reserved for comments by the editor of the paper. And, too, the message was written in Willich's style. Earlier in his newspaper, Willich had described Lincoln as "a self-made man." Willich, then 50 years old, was a talented philosopher and writer, who had received a classical education. He was fluent in German, English, French, Italian, Latin and probably classical Greek. He had been graduated from the cadet houses in Potsdam and Berlin and had served as an officer in the Prussian army for nineteen years. He resigned from the army and became one of the principal leaders of the German re-

REPLY OF MR. LINCOLN.

MR. CHARRMAN: I thank you and those whom you represent, for the compliment you have paid me, by tendering me this address. In so far as there is an allusion to our present national difficulties, which expresses, as you have said, the views of the gratlemen present, I shall have to beg partion for not entering fully upon the questions, which the address you have now read, suggests.

you have now read, suggests. I deem it my duty-a duty which I owe to my constituents-to you, gentlemen, that I should wait until the last moment, for a development of the present national difficulties, before I express myself decidedly what course I shall pursue. I hope, then, not to be false to anything that you have to expect of me.

velopment of the present national difficulties, before I express myself decidedly what course I shall pursue. I hope, then, not to be false to anything that you have to expect of me. I agree with you, Mr. Chairman, that the working men are the basis of all governments, for the plain reason that they are the most numerous, and as you added that those were the sentiments of the geatlemen present, representing not only the working class, but citizens of other callings than those of the mechanic, I am happy to concer with you in these sentiments, not only of the native born citizens, but also of the Germans and foreigners from other countries.

Mr. Chairman: I hold that while man exists, it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating mankind: and therefore, without entering upon the details of the question, I will simply say, that I sm for those means which will give the greatest good to the greatest number. In regard to the Homestead Law, I have to

In regard to the Homestead Law, I have to say that in so far as the Government lands can be disposed of, I am in favor of cutting up the wild lands into parcels, so that every poor man may have a home.

In regard to the Germans and foreigners, I esteem them no better than other people, nor any worse. (Criss of good.) It is not my nature, when I see a people borne down by the weight of their shackles—the oppression of tyranny—to mske their life. more bitter by heaping upon them greater burdens; but rather would I do all in my power to raise the yoke, than to add anything that would tend to crush them.

Inasmuch as our country is extensive and new, and the countries of Europe are densely populated, if there are any abroad who desire to make this the land of their adoption, it is not in my heart to throw aught in their way, to prevent them from coming to the United States.

Mr. Chairman, and Gentlemen, J will bid you an affectionate farewell.

Cincinnati Commercial, Feb. 13, 1861

publican revolutions of 1848 and 1849. He was the commanding general of a force known as "Willich's Free Corps," in the three months' war in Baden that constituted the German revolution of 1849. Sentenced to death *in absentia* by the monarchial courts for his leadership in the revolution he lived in exile in London, then came to the United States in March 1853. He came to Cincinnati in late 1858 for the express purpose of becoming editor of a German-language newspaper that would give political and intellectual guidance to the growing German population of Cincinnati, most of whom were scantily educated workingmen. The newspaper, the Cincinnati *Republican*, was inaugurated and was published by the "Social Workingmen's Club."

For two and one-half years before Lincoln's 1861 visit to Cincinnati, Willich was the most influential moulder of German opinion in the city. As one of the main leaders of the revolutions of 1848 and 1849 his name was a household word to nineteenth century German-Americans and to Republican sympathizers in Europe. His views, as expressed in the columns of his newspaper, were designed to wean away German immigrant votes from the Democratic party and to channel these votes into support of the newly-formed Republican party. After the execution of John Brown, Willich wrote in his newspaper (Cincinnati Republican, Jan. 5, 1860) that the Germans should rally round the Republican party. "Wise and upright men of this party." Willich wrote, "inspired by men like John Brown will encourage the slaves to fight for their freedom." Then he added, "If we are called upon to put down a slaveholder's rebellion we will come to put down the cause of the insurrection, slavery itself."

Willich had supported John C. Fremont and Cassius M. Clay for the Republican nominations but after Lincoln's nomination he urged his readers to support Lincoln. He wrote: "Still we can go to battle for Lincoln, do our duty as soldiers of freedom and must hold together in unbroken opposition against slavery. (Cincinnati Republican, May 19, 1860). Willich further noted that Lincoln was a selfmade man, and that he was free of any tendency to favor slavery and had never shown any nativisitic tendencies.

The Germans of Cincinnati, and the old Northwest, expressed themselves in military terms. They were urged by Willich and others, to do their "duty as soldiers of freedom" and "go to battle for Lincoln." Thus the inevitability of a civil war, or a "slaveholder's rebellion," had been part of the daily newspaper diet of Cincinnati Germans for at least two years before Lincoln's visit.

It being seemingly certain that Willich was the author of the message read to Lincoln on Feb. 12, 1861, why was such an obscure man as the twenty-five year old Oberkline, desig-nated as the spokesman for the group? Oberkline's birth can be placed at about 1836, therefore, he would have been only twelve years old at the time of the revolution of 1848 and could not have been a participant. Hence he would have had none of the prestige as would the veterans of that revolution, who were regarded as heroes of magnificent stature by nineteenth century German-Americans. Willich and Judge J. B. Stallo, both living in Cincinnati then, were among the four or five "leading Germans, living in the United States at the time. The expression "leading Ger-mans," was a favorite one among German writers of the day. It means the "leading Germans" were the bestknown, best-educated and most in-fluential men among the Germans. Judge Stallo, eminent jurist, mathematician, physicist, philosopher and writer, or Willich would have been more appropriate spokesmen for the German delegation. Then (again) why did the obscure Oberkline head the delegation? The answer lies in the probability that the visit of the German delegation was a spontaneous affair. Carried away by their enthusiasm for Lincoln's presence in the city this group of young men (probably) organized a torchlight parade, after the custom of the day, Oberkline tucked a copy of Willich's Cincinnati *Republican* in his coat pocket, after he was elected spokesman for the group, and they proceeded to the Burnet House. Willich and Judge Stallo, more highly educated, would have been more conscious of protocol. Certain ceremonial functions had been planned by the Cincinnati city officials, and these two men would not have taken part unless they were invited.

Lincoln left Cincinnati for Columbus, Ohio, the next day (February 13, 1861) and continued his "journey to greatness," the Civil War came, the Germans of Cincinnati did "rise as one man," at Lincoln's call for volunteers, and August Willich, served with distinction as a Union brigadier general of volunteers in the Army of the Cumberland.

MR. LINCOLN'S RESPONSE.

Mr. Chairman: I thank you and those you represent, for the compliment paid me by the tender of this address. In so far as there is an allusion to our present national difficulties, and the suggestion of the views of the gentlemen who present this address, I beg you will excuse me from entering particularly upon it. I deem it due to myself and the whole country in the present extraordinary condition of the country and of public opinion, that I should wait and see the last development of public opinion before I give my views or exmess myself at the time of the inauguration. Cheers.] I hope at that time to be false to mothing you have been taught to expect of me. [Cheers.]

I agree with you, Mr. Chairmon, and with the address of your constituents, in the declaration that working nen are the basis of all governments. That remark is due to these more than to any other class, for the reason that there are more of them than of any other class. And as your address is presented to me not only on behalf of workingmen, but expecially of Germans, I may say a word as to classes. I hold the value of life is to improve one's condition. Whatever is calculated to advance the condition of the honest, struggling laboring man, so far as my judgment will cuable no to judge of a correct thing, I em for that thing. An allusion has been made to the Homestead

An allusion has been made to the Homestead Law. I think it worthy of consideration, and that the wild lands of the country should be distributed so that every man should have the means and opportunity of benefitting his condition. [Cheers.] I have said I do not desire to enter into details, nor will I.

In regard to Germans and foreigners, I esteem foreigners no better than other people, nor any worse. [Longhter and encers.] They are all of the great family of men, and if there is one shackle upon any of them, it would be far better to lift the load from them than to pile additional loads upon them. [Cheers.] And innemeth as the continent of America is comparatively a new country, and the other countries of the world are old countries, there is more room here, comparatively speaking, than there is there; and if they can better their condition by leaving their old homes, there is nothing in my heart to forbid them coming; and I bid them all God speed. [Cheers.]

them all God speed. [Cheers.] Again, gentlemen, thanking you fer your address, I bid you good night.

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Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Arnold Gates, 289 Hyde Park Road, Garden City, New York; Carl Haverlin, 8619 Louis Avenue, Northridge, California; E. B. Long, 708 Kenilworth Ave., Oak Park, III.; Ralph Newman, 18 E. Chestnut Street, Chicago, III.; Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, Booton University, Boston, Mass.; James T. Hickey, Illinois State Historical Library, Centennial Bidg., Springfield, III.; Hon, Fred Schwengel, 636 Union Arende, Davenport, Iowa; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 8211/9 S. Fifth Street, Springfield, III. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above addresses or to the Lincoln National Life Foundation. Foundation.

CROCKER, LIONEL

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1968-31

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A. Lincoin's Letter/to Fanny McCullough [Cover title] (Copyright 1968 by Ralph Geoffrey Newman, Inc.) Portfolio, flexible boards, 20% 'x 16". Contains facsimile of Lincoln's letter to Fanny McCullough, and broadside of letter in print, on loose sheets. Story of letter printed on reverse of cover, autographed by Carl Haverlin. No. 14 of 126 copies of portfolio, facsimile and broad-side printed for Ralph Geoffrey Newman, Inc. by Lynton Kistler of Los Angeles. Price, \$25.00.

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LINCOLN-HERNDON BUILDING

The Lincoln-Herndon Building/Law Offices-Federal Court—Post Office/(Picture of building)/Sixth at Adams —Springfield, Illinois [Caption title] Folder, paper, 914" x 4", (4) pp., illus. (map of Springfield showing Lincoln restorations).

1968-46