

“WE MUST MAKE
THEM UNDERSTAND
LINCOLN IS OUR MAN”

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YOUNG EMIGRE ON THE RUN

Gustave Koerner came to America from Germany in April 1833, after he was part of a failed attempt to overthrow the municipal government of his hometown, Frankfort-on-Main. Koerner, a law school graduate, and other university students, members of the *Burchenschaft*, tried to liberalize the oppressive government but were forced to flee or face jail time. He was able to rendezvous with fellow Frankfort residents, the Theodore Engelmann family, as they were leaving France bound for America.

The Engelmann group came to St. Louis via the Mississippi River and stayed for a time in St. Louis while Theodore Engelmann assessed life in the pro-slavery state of Missouri versus the free state of Illinois. Theodore Engelmann purchased a farm at Shiloh, Illinois. It became the nexus for emigrating Germans who would become known as “Latin Farmers”; university- educated men who achieved their dream of owning farmland. Gustave would marry Sophia Engelmann, Theodore’s daughter, in 1836.



Gustave and Sophia (Engelmann) Koerner in 1836, about the time of their marriage.

LAW AND POLITICS IN 1840'S BELLEVILLE

Koerner worked in the law office of Belleville Democrat politician A. W. Snyder. Koerner was elected State Representative, the first German native elected to an Illinois office. Gustave would earn a reputation as one of the most influential leaders of German native immigrants.

On April 11, 1840, Koerner walked from his law office in the northwest corner of the public square to the courthouse steps to hear Whig leader Abraham Lincoln speak in support of presidential candidate William Henry Harrison. The rally started at 10:30 a.m. and lasted until dusk. The Belleville Advocate newspaper, an anti-Whig paper, dismissed Lincoln's remarks as "weak, puerile and feeble."

Koerner recorded his impression of Lincoln that day: "In point of melody of voice and graceful delivery, though not in argument, most all other speakers surpassed him. His exceedingly tall and very angular form made his movements rather awkward. Nor were his features, when he was not animated, pleasant, owing to his high cheek bones. His complexion had no roseate hue of health, but was rather bilious, and when not speaking, his face seemed to be overshadowed by melancholy. I observed him closely, thought I saw a good deal of intellect in him, while his looks were genial and kind."

Dr. John Snyder, son of Koerner's law partner, recorded: "When the exercises were over on the day Lincoln spoke, he and Joseph Gillespie boldly invaded the enemy's camp. That is, they called on Colonel Snyder at his home. Lincoln and Snyder were together as captains in the Black Hawk war, and Judge Gillespie was a private in Capt. Snyder's company. Their visit was exceedingly pleasant to all. After a little jocular allusion to the existing political situation [Lincoln was a Whig; Snyder a Democrat], their conversation was altogether reminiscent, and in the spirit of cordial familiar friendship."

KOERNER APPOINTED TO THE STATE SUPREME COURT

While serving as an Illinois Supreme court judge in the mid-1840's, Koerner heard Lincoln argue cases. Koerner summarized the court's view of Lincoln: "We always admired his extreme fairness in stating his adversary's case as well as his own, and the often quaint and droll language used by him."



Koerner would hear Lincoln argue 50 cases while on the high court; Koerner wrote opinions in 9 of the cases.

Lincoln asked for Koerner's opinion as to whether Lincoln had billed for too high a fee when he charged the Illinois Central Railroad \$5,000 in a case that lowered the road's annual taxes by hundreds of thousands of dollars. "He wrote me a letter, stating that as I knew all about the case, and had been present when it was argued, he would be obliged to me to give him my opinion whether his demand was reasonable or not. I advised him that his charge was very unreasonable, and that he ought to have charged at least \$10,000." Ten years later, Koerner and Lincoln worked together on several lawsuits involving railroads.

Koerner was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1852 on the Democrat ticket. Lincoln had served several terms as a State Representative and one term in congress in the 1840's, then spent the early 1850's developing his law practice. The possible expansion of slavery drew Lincoln back to the political arena.

In 1854, their professional relationship became a political

alliance as both men fought to defeat the Kansas-Nebraska Act, promoted by Democrat Senator Stephen A. Douglas. The act allowed voters in the Kansas and Nebraska territories to decide for themselves whether or not to expand slavery within their borders. Koerner wrote: "I always hated slavery, and while constitutionally I saw no way of abolishing it, I could not prevail on myself to favor it in any way whatever, or extend it into any territory heretofore declared to be free." Koerner and Lincoln would help establish the Republican Party in Illinois as a result of the threatened expansion of slavery.

LINCOLN VISITS BELLEVILLE TO STUMP FOR JOHN C. FRÉMONT 1856

The newly formed Republican Party nominated John C. Frémont as their presidential candidate to oppose Democrat James Buchanan. On October 16, 1856, Lincoln came to Belleville to campaign for Frémont. Koerner remembered:

He stopped at John Scheel's [Koerner's brother-in-law]. I took him around in the morning to many of the Republican families. Towards evening he spoke at the place where the city hall and Market House are now [Presently East "A" between North High and North Illinois Streets]. He was even at that time not much known in that part of the state. His great reputation as an extraordinary speaker he acquired two years later in his contest for the senate against Douglas. Still, he had a large and highly intelligent audience. A great many ladies, a novelty thus far at a political meeting in this region, had turned out, and we had provided for them long benches in front of the speaker. He spoke in an almost conversational tone, but with such earnestness and such deep feeling upon the question of the day that he struck the hearts of all his hearers. Referring to the fact that here, as well as in other places where he had spoken, he had found the Germans more enthusiastic for the cause of freedom than all other nationalities, he, almost with tears in his eyes, broke out in the words: 'God bless the Dutch.' Everybody felt that he said this in the simplicity of his heart, using the familiar name of Dutch

as the Americans do when amongst themselves. A smart politician would not have failed to say 'Germans.' But no one took offense. I had the pleasure of introducing him to the assemblage.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN VERSUS STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS

Koerner was one of the leading Democrats to leave his party and join the Republicans to fight slavery's expansion. When newspaper publisher Horace Greeley suggested Illinois Republicans back Democrat Stephen A. Douglas in the 1858 US Senate election instead of fielding their own candidate, Koerner, Illinois Republican State Chairman, replied, "We must make them understand Lincoln is our man." The state party convention unanimously approved Lincoln as their candidate. Koerner's support at this juncture was important to Lincoln's re-emergence into the slavery debate, a fact born out through the series of debates between Lincoln and Douglas.

Douglas spoke on July 13, 1858 in Chicago. Lincoln spoke the next day. Koerner remembered:

Lincoln, awkward in his posture and leaning a little forward, stood calm and collected, addressing his hearers in a somewhat familiar, yet very earnest way, with a clear, distinct and far-reaching voice, generally well modulated, but sometimes rather shrill. When unmoved, his features seemed overshadowed by an expression of sadness, though at times he could assume a most humorous look. But, when aroused, he appeared like a prophet of old. There came from Lincoln occasionally flashes of genius and burning words, revelations as it were from the unknown, that will live as long as the English language lives. Lincoln was deeply read in the Bible and Shakespeare. He did not quote from them, but his style showed plainly his close intimacy with the Scripture and the great bard...Douglas spoke for himself and Lincoln for his cause.

Koerner joined Lincoln on the debate platform at Alton.

“Lincoln, although sunburnt, was as fresh as if he had just entered the campaign, and as cool and collected as ever. Without any apparent effort he stated his propositions clearly and tersely, and his whole speech was weighted with noble and deep thoughts. There were no appeals to passion and prejudice,” Koerner wrote.

Koerner worked hard to elect Lincoln, adding: “I need not say that I was in the midst of this fight. I believe I spoke in every large city in the state, usually twice a day, and, towards the last, in every election precinct of St. Clair County.”

Lincoln lost the election but won new recognition as a spokesman for his party as the 1860 presidential election came into focus.

MR. LINCOLN MAKES A SURPRISE APPOINTMENT

Koerner did not plan to attend the 1860 Republican National Convention; instead, he was scheduled to try cases at the Monroe County Courthouse in Waterloo. “While sitting one morning in the courthouse, Judge Underwood came in with a St. Louis newspaper and asked me whether I knew I had been appointed delegate-at-large to the national convention in Chicago. It was a surprise to me, as I had not communicated any wish for this or any other appointment. I had also been made a member of the Republican State Central Committee. I learned afterwards that it was left to Mr. Lincoln to name the delegates-at-large,” Koerner wrote.



The Wigwam was a building especially constructed for the Republican National Convention in Chicago.

“DON’T COME HERE”

The 1860 Republican National Committee agreed to meet in Chicago, a strategic move engineered by Lincoln’s backers to pack the convention hall with his supporters. “We had made

arrangements that the hall should at the earliest opening every morning be filled with Illinoisans. We had provided them with tickets before tickets were distributed to others,” Koerner recalled. Koerner and others close to Lincoln agreed to keep him in the background while four other candidates fought for the presidential nomination. His friends sent telegrams to Lincoln advising him to stay home. Koerner’s telegram simply read, “Don’t come here.” Koerner is credited with persuading members of the Indiana and Pennsylvania delegations to vote for Lincoln. Koerner said: “I’m pretty certain that had the convention been held at any other place, Lincoln would not have been nominated.”

MARY, MARY, QUITE CONTRARY

Koerner and other Republican National Committee members called on Abe and Mary Lincoln at their Springfield home to formally deliver the presidential nomination. Mary had a servant set out cakes and sandwiches along with brandy and champagne for the visitors. Koerner recalled the scene:

We told her at once that this would hardly do. This meeting of the committee would be a somewhat solemn business. Several, perhaps, of the Eastern men were strictly temperance people, and they might think treating the committee would not be the proper thing. She remonstrated in her very lively manner, but we insisted on dispensing with this hospitality, which we appreciated ourselves, but which might be misconstrued. I finally told the servant bluntly to take the things into the back room, which he did. But, Mrs. Lincoln still argued with us. Lincoln, being in the parlor right opposite, came in, and hearing of the trouble, said, ‘Perhaps, Mary, these gentlemen are right. After all is over, we may see about it, and some may stay and have a good time.



Koerner first met Mary Todd Lincoln when she was a single woman and he was studying law in 1835 at Transylvania University in Kentucky.

“WIDE AWAKE” FOR LINCOLN

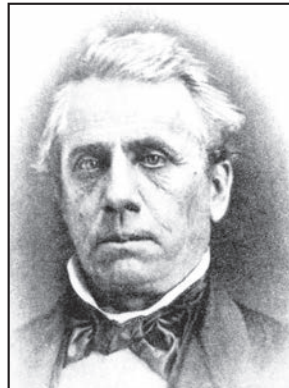
Lincoln supporters formed “Wide Awake” clubs across the county. Koerner explained their purpose: “They embodied nearly all the young men of the party, a semi-military organization without arms, who wore glazed caps and capes and at night carried torch-lights, and nearly at all times ready for work; turning out at political meetings, escorting speakers to and from places of speaking, singing political songs, circulating documents and canvassing votes.”

Koerner got caught up in the excitement of the campaign and described his involvement: “I succeeded in getting up a company of Wide Awakes so that in Belleville alone they numbered 300...They were indeed a very valuable auxiliary and by their very presence, fights and riots, which, as the Democrats were desperately engaged, would have been too common.”

1860 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Koerner said: “It would fill several pages were I to name all the meetings I attended and enumerate all the speeches I heard or made myself.” A large rally was held in Belleville in July. “The meeting took place in a beautiful grove in Cabanne’s Addition [area near North Charles and East “D” Streets]. The procession started in West Belleville [West Main and 10th Streets] and contained 900 wagons in line and as many country people on horseback,” Koerner wrote.

Lincoln defeated the fractured Democrats in November, 1860.



Gustave Koerner as he appeared at the height of his career, the 1860 presidential campaign.

LINCOLN AWAITS THE STORM

Before Lincoln’s inauguration, he spent time meeting with advisers. Koerner was called to Springfield to help newly-elected Governor Richard Yates. Lincoln spent much time at the governor’s office. “I had an excellent opportunity of studying the character of the president-elect. To be sure, we had been before on very friendly terms, but more in a social and professional way than a political one,” Koerner noted. Southern states were seceding from the union. Koerner said: “As I was one of the few who took part in the various discussions of these startling events, I was brought nearer to Lincoln than ever before. I cannot say there was any warm friendship between us. Lincoln, though one of the most just, kind and indulgent of men, who intentionally I believe never did an unkind thing to anyone, was not in my opinion, as also in the opinion of others who knew him well, really capable of what might be called warm-hearted friendship. But I can say in truth that I enjoyed his confidence to a very great extent.”

KOERNER AT LINCOLN’S SIDE DURING INAUGURAL SPEECH

Koerner attended the president’s speech and swearing-in, standing close to Lincoln’s chair. “While the weather was fine, it was nevertheless quite cold on that platform. Douglas had no overcoat, and I saw he was shivering. I had not only a big overcoat on but also a thick traveling shawl, which I flung over him to make him comfortable. At several passages of Lincoln’s inaugural, Douglas pressed my arm, saying, ‘Good, good.’ Yet only a few days afterwards he commented very severely on the speech, called it a declaration of war, and placed himself and all his friends in congress in opposition to the administration,” Koerner recorded.

THE LINCOLN ADMINISTRATION

Koerner was appointed to the rank of Colonel and aide-de-camp to General John C. Fremont’s staff in Missouri. Ger-

man soldiers became upset when one of their favorite generals was threatened with removal. Lincoln wrote a letter to Major General Henry Halleck and asked Koerner to deliver it. Lincoln wrote:

The Germans are true and patriotic, and so far as they have got cross in Missouri it is upon mistake and misunderstanding. Without a knowledge of its contents Governor Koerner, of Illinois, will hand you this letter. He is an educated and talented German gentleman, as true a man as lives. With his assistance you can set everything right with the Germans. I write this without his knowledge, asking him at the same time, by letter, to deliver it. My clear judgment is that, with reference to the German element in your command, you should have Governor Koerner with you; and if agreeable to you and him, I will make him a brigadier-general, so that he can afford to give his time. He does not wish to command in the field, though he has more military knowledge than many who do. If he goes into the place he will simply be an efficient, zealous, and unselfish assistant to you. I say all this upon intimate personal acquaintance with Governor Koerner.

Koerner helped mediate the German situation and served until an eye ailment forced him to return to Belleville for treatment.

KOERNER'S 43RD ILLINOIS INFANTRY UNIT

Germans were eager to join the fight and wished to be in a unit with their fellow immigrants. Koerner appealed to President Lincoln to approve an all-German unit. The early months of the war were chaotic in organizing the army. Lincoln wrote to Koerner, August 8, 1861: "Without occupying our standpoint you cannot conceive how this subject embarrasses us. We have promises out to more than 400 regiments, which, if they all come, are more than we want. If they all come, we cannot take yours; if they do not all come, we shall want yours. And yet we have no possible means of knowing whether they

will all come or not. I hope you will make due allowance for the embarrassment thus produced."

A few weeks later, Illinois Governor Richard Yates approved formation of the Illinois 43rd. It became known as the Koerner Regiment.

ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY AND MINISTER PLENIPOTENTIARY OF THE UNITED STATES AT THE COURT OF HER CATHOLIC MAJESTY, THE QUEEN OF SPAIN

Koerner had expressed interest in being appointed Ambassador to Germany, but that position had been filled. In June, 1862, Lincoln appointed Koerner Minister to Spain and he served in that role until August of 1864, when Lincoln's second presidential campaign was underway. In September of 1864, Koerner wrote Lincoln "I find everything here in Illinois very favorable. Our soldiers will almost to a man vote for you, when at home, and although they cannot exercise that privilege in the field, yet they bring great influence to bear on their friends and relatives in the state."

Koerner met with Lincoln in November, 1864. "The president, when I last saw him in November, was in the best of spirits. He saw daylight, he said; told me more amusing anecdotes than he had ever done before when I was with him; alluded, however, in feeling terms to some of the gloomy and harassing periods he had passed through, and which had almost broke his heart," Koerner wrote.

LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION

Lincoln's death shocked Gustave and Sophie, as Gustave remembered:

On the 15th of April, the day after Good Friday, I left my house for my office about 8 o'clock in the morning.

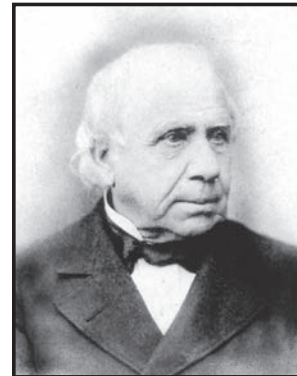
When I reached Main Street, I was surprised that the people were closing their stores and that the Union flag, which after the surrender at Appomattox, had been hoisted on all public buildings and many private ones, hung at half-mast. Some houses were already draped with black crepe. 'Lincoln is dead,' 'Lincoln has been assassinated,' was heard through the streets. I hurried to the telegraph office. The last dispatch announced his death at 7 o'clock in the morning. I went home at once, hardly able to keep on my feet to tell the sad news. When Sophie heard it, she grew pale, trembled and exclaimed: 'That was the shot we heard last night.' I now recollected the circumstance she had referred to. We were sitting in our back parlor around the center-table, some reading, others doing needle-work, when we heard the report of a gun between 9 and 10 o'clock. It was so loud that we supposed the gun had been fired on our back-porch, which runs along the west side of the south wing of the house. Our room had a window looking out on the porch and I immediately rose, raised the window, but could see no person nor any smoke. I then went out on the porch and the lawn around our house. Nothing was to be seen. But as there was a close board fence some 6 feet high between the lawn and the street west of the house, I could not see whether there was any person in the street. At that time the street was only partly built up, and although the house was in the city limits, it was still in a retired part of town. It was nothing at all unusual at that time for people to fire off pistols or guns, and we paid no further attention to it and went back to our room. Of course there existed no connection between this incident and the terrible scene at Washington. I had tried to reason with Sophie who was the least superstitious and the most courageous of women; but I only half convinced her of the unreasonableness of her belief. And, even in later years when the subject of Lincoln's assassination came up, she would still insist that it was at least a very remarkable coincidence.

KOERNER SELECTED A PALLBEARER

Koerner served as a pallbearer at Lincoln's funeral. He wrote: "Somewhat to my surprise I learnt by the papers that I had been appointed pallbearer. I say surprise, because of the 12 gentlemen selected I was the only one not from Springfield. The others had all been for many years his fellow townsmen and had been his strong political friends in old Whig times when I of course was in decided opposition to Mr. Lincoln and his principles. Our personal relations during that time of political difference had been very friendly, however, and for some reason or other Mr. Lincoln had treated me with particular kindness and attention."

KOERNER'S EVALUATION OF LINCOLN'S CHARACTER

"To analyze such a highly complex character as that of Mr. Lincoln, and to give it a correct portraiture, is a task which many have undertaken, but in which few, if any, have succeeded. I knew him well enough to have been able to detect certain weaknesses and defects in his character. The great and good, however, largely preponderated. Mr. Seward [US Secretary of State] had said of Mr. Lincoln that he was the best man he ever knew. I should rather say he was the justest man I ever knew," Koerner wrote.



Gustave Koerner retired from public service in the 1880's to return to the practice of law in Belleville. He also continued to be a prolific writer in his later years. During his lifetime, he authored numerous articles, editorial columns, three books and his two-volume *Memoirs*.

Koerner's final thoughts on Lincoln's ability to preserve the Union while waging war: "It required just such a complex and anomalous character. His success in saving the Union without overstepping the constitution to a fatal extent has made him the idol of the people."

RESTORATION OF THE GUSTAVE KOERNER HOME

Gustave and Sophie Koerner built their Greek-Revival home at 200 Abend Street in 1849. The family resided there until a fire in 1854, which destroyed the home. It was rebuilt and occupied in 1855. Italianate exterior detailing was added in the 1870's.

In 2003, Koerner's home was purchased for the city of Belleville with funding obtained from the State of Illinois. The city of Belleville, St. Clair County Historical Society and Gustave Koerner House Restoration Committee have placed the property on the National Register of Historic Places. An Historic Structures Report prepared by Fever River Research of Springfield provides a plan for restoration of the home. The committee raises funds through the Belleville Heritage Society for restoring the home and a proposed education center at 127 Mascoutah Avenue. Donations to the committee are fully tax-deductible and should be made out to Koerner House Restoration Committee c/o Belleville Heritage Society, P.O. Box 8072, Belleville, IL 62222. For further information, visit www.gustavekoerner.org.



The Koerners celebrated their 50th anniversary in 1886. An estimated 600 guests filled the yards of the Koerner home and his son's home, which adjoined at the rear. Sophie died in 1890; Gustave died in 1896.

REFERENCES

All of the direct quotes of Gustave Koerner are taken from "Memoirs of Gustave Koerner, 1809-96, Life Sketches written at the suggestion of his children", Volumes I and II, Thomas J. McCormack, Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1909

"We must make them understand Lincoln is our man," is taken from "Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's," Page 63, by Don Fehrenbacher, Stanford University Press, 1962.

Quotes from John Francis Snyder are taken from "John Francis Snyder: Selected Writings, Part II, p. 175, Illinois State Historical Society, Springfield, Illinois, 1962.



The Koerner House and 127 Mascoutah Avenue are owned by the City of Belleville. Recognition of Belleville's cultural heritage through ownership of these properties is significant.