

# Texas German Gravemarkers: Lateiner, Freethinkers, and Other Intellectuals<sup>i</sup>

## By Scott Baird

I brake for old graveyards. I am constantly searching for ethnic gravemarkers; and have been for over two decades. That search started in Texas, but has stretched now to Hawaii, California, Toronto, Illinois, Alabama, Missouri, Louisiana, Georgia, North Carolina - and overseas to Oxford and to Amsterdam. Fellow academic colleagues have joined that search in Germany, Greece, Russia, and the Czech Republic. Our quest, an applied linguistic one, addresses the assimilation process that brings ethnic communities from their native languages into their host languages.

At present I am concentrating on Texas German gravemarkers – especially those memorializing the “Lateiner” that are associated with any of the “Latin settlements. “ These terms are well explained in an article by Don Lawrence in the Handbook of Texas Online:

The “Latin Settlements” were five communities in Texas where most of the settlers were highly educated immigrants from Germany. The name came about because in the German culture of the time the knowledge of Latin was considered to be both a prerequisite for higher learning and a sign of educational attainment. Established during the late 1840s, the Latin Settlements included Millheim in Austin County, Latium in Washington County, Bettina in Llano County, and Sisterdale and Tusculum in Kendall County. Many of the residents of these settlements, who were sometimes referred to as *Lateiner* (“Latin ones”), were political refugees who had fled Germany in the wake of the abortive 1848 revolution. A number of them later attained prominence in medicine, education, law, journalism, and politics.<sup>ii</sup>

This *Latin Settlement/Lateiner* information sent me on a quest to see if any of Latin language had been inscribed on gravemarkers. Such gravemarkers would add uniqueness to the patterns already established on bilingual markers.

Gravemarkers, however, just don’t “happen.” Almost always crafted by the family and friends of the deceased, the gravemarkers are created under emotional distress. The deceased may have been a Lateiner, but that does not mean that his/her family and friends were. And even if they were, would they use the Latin when in a state of mourning?

Unfortunately, Lawrence’s article poses major problems in determining the origin of these terms. “The name [Latin Settlements] *came about*,” Lawrence writes, “because in the German culture of the time the knowledge of Latin *was considered* to be both a prerequisite for higher learning and a sign of educational attainment.”

“Came about”? How did this name actually come about? “Was considered?” By whom was it considered?

“These German immigrants,” Lawrence wrote “were sometimes referred to as *Lateiner* (“Latin ones”)”?

Who did that “referring to”? Was that term used by the Latin Settlement members or about them? Was *Lateiner* a complimentary term or was it derogatory? Or was it both?

Think of our current term “intellectual.” It has a similar range of connotations, complimentary and derogatory. My friend Anne Stewart once told me that because I was a college professor at Trinity and not at St. Mary’s University or Texas A&M, people in Comfort could easily refer to me as an “intellectual” - and the term would not be complimentary.

The analogy has definite relevance. Annie Romberg, drawing upon family historical documents, discussed the taunting that took place between the Lateiner and other German immigrants: The Latins were proud of their culture, and they spoke of others whose interests were centered mainly in good farming and plenty of good bacon in the smokehouse as *Speck Bauern* (bacon farmers). When this expression reached the bacon farmers, they retorted by calling the Latins *Schwarten Bauern* (bacon rind farmers), this term being symbolical of very plain living, for, in spite of their university education, these intellectuals often found it difficult to adjust themselves to their new surroundings.”<sup>iii</sup>

Nor am I the only person to question the origin of these terms. My colleague, historian Terry Smart, responded to my original questions in this manner:

I have no idea where the term “Lateiner” originated. I do know it is in the literature without anyone making reference to its first use. . . . In Washington County there was an early settlement known as Latium which now is

nothing more than a few houses. It got the name because the first settlers were educated German immigrants known as “the Latin ones.” The name set them as university-educated apart from the other German farmers. They might have used Latin or Greek gravestone inscriptions ....”<sup>iv</sup>

Nonetheless, Texas German historians have repeatedly used the two terms, Lateiner and Latin Colonies. Lawrence lists three other scholars in his reference to the Latin Colonies: Biesele; Regenbrecht; Reinhardt; and Romberg. All four scholars, however, only refer to the term as did Lawrence: the term *Latin Colonies* “came about.”<sup>v</sup>

Edwin Scharf, another Freethinker sympathizer, wrote about the intellectuals settling Bettina, Castell, Cypress Hill, Tusculum, Sisterdale, and Luckenbach.

According to Scharf, “These intellectuals would frequently gather at the schoolhouse or one of their rustic frontier homes to contemplate the important issues in philosophy, science, literature, politics, and music. Their meetings were often conducted in Latin or Greek, mystifying their neighbors and creating the name *Latin Colonies* for their settlement areas.” (emphasis Scharf’s)<sup>vi</sup>

In his famous book on his pre-civil war wanderings through the South, Frederick Olmsted became enamored with the German intellectuals. He writes of Sisterdale: “... also known as the *Latin Settlement* due to the desire of residents in the community make Latin their official language.” [emphasis mine]<sup>vii</sup>

The editors of the Southwestern Historical Quarterly printed an article - written by Adalbert Regenbrecht in 1916. They referred to Regenbrecht as “...perhaps the last survivor in Austin County of *die Lateiner* [emphasis theirs], those cultured, genial spirits who found it much easier to cultivate music and song and literature than corn and cotton.”<sup>viii</sup>

The presence of these Lateiner still lingers in present-day San Antonio and Austin, settlements that attracted many of them as the cities became prominent cities in Texas up to the mid-nineteen twenties. The Lateiner’s descendants today still enjoy name-recognition and honor: Altgelt, Bergemann, Berger, Beyer, Boerner, Brandt, Bruns, Dieter, Douai, Dresel, Flach, Friedrich, Froebel, Giesecke, Groos, Hagedorn, Hanisch, Hasenkampe, Herbst, Herf, Hoerner, Kapp, Kendall, Kibling, Klepper, Meckel, Pfeiffer, Philips, Reinhardt, Rosenthal, Scherz, Schilling, Schleicher, Schmidt, Schulze, Schwarz, Seewald, Seidensticker, Shaeffer, Siemering, Vogt, Voigt, Von Behr, Von Herff, Weiss, Williams, Witte, Zink.

So prevalent is their presence that one would think that their early gravemarkers might have (non-Catholic) Latin language included in their inscriptions. A major drawback, however, lies in the collective aura of the names listed above: old-money, conservatism, class awareness, establishment. Attempts to approach these people (and they are indeed approachable) more often than not has led to incredulous denial. They have, mind you, no qualms about being descendants of Lateiner, of intellectuals. But the thought of “Freethinkers” in the family tree causes serious denial. Same name, perhaps, but certainly not my ancestors. The Freethinkers, many them Lateiners, immigrated to the United States to escape both political and religious authoritarianism. Their anti-slavery stance during the Civil War still causes discomfort among the descendants of families who embraced the Confederate cause.

A major reason for that distancing, I suspect is that today even scholars have difficulty separating Lateiners from Freethinkers. Try, for example reading pages of 40-43 of Glen Lich’s otherwise excellent introduction to present-day German culture in Texas. Lich unfathomably switches his topic from “a fraternity of communistic *freethinkers* in Germany (the Forty)” to “*the students*” to “*the Forty*” to “*professional men*” that were separate from “mechanics and laborers” (who did not understand much English) to “*rich German nobles*” to post-civil-war “German immigrants” - presumably uneducated - then back to a *Latin Colony* (Sisterdale) founded by another group of *intellectuals* (the Forty-Eighters) to more “*Latin Colonies*” to a farming settlement on Cypress Creek (later to become Comfort), which in turn attracted more “*intellectuals and freethinkers*,” whose children “did not get too learned” (quoting from Autobiographer Emma Murck Altgelt) to the coincidental arrival of “several ethnic minorities from German-Speaking Europe (Czechs, Wends, and Poles.)”<sup>ix</sup>

Another problem stems from any serious attempt to determine exactly which settlement really were Latin Colonies. Lawrence and Scharf agree that these intellectuals founded Bettina, Sisterdale, and Tusculum. Yet Lawrence adds Millheim and Latium to his list, while Scharf adds Castell, Cypress Hill, and Luckenbach to his list. I have read other accounts that list Schoenburg and Leiningen.

So even before initiating an enormous fieldwork expedition, serious genealogical research had to be undertaken. That research has, indeed, verified the Lateiner origins of the above-listed people. (Of biggest help has been the Sophienberg Museum staff, in New Braunfels.) That research has also uncovered other scholars interested in the same Latin-on-gravemarker inquiry. We all share the same desire to find at least one such marker; we all share an awareness of the enormity of the problem; we all share, unfortunately, the suspicion that the Lateiners were not particularly receptive of being called Lateiners.

## Request for Help

I have begun now a serious search for and documentation of the gravemarkers and/or gravesites of the original Lateiner. While the above list has been winnowed from numerous lists and is a conservative list, at best, I welcome additional input. I know that some of the gravemarkers/gravesites are either in Germany or in States other than Texas. And I have documented a few. The saddest photographs I have show the remains of the chimney on the original Bettina lodge and the remains of three wooden crosses erected over the burial sites of three Lateiner believed to have been buried there.<sup>x</sup>

Of higher scholastic importance, however, lurk the gravemarkers that, in addition to German and English, may have non-catholic catholic church inscription in Latin, Greek, or French. Many of those gravemarkers (if they exist) are now on private property, known only to the local residents (as was the case of the Bettina gravesite).

This second quest may or may not depend upon Lateiner or Freethinker affiliation. I have, indeed, found one gravemarker with non-catholic Latin. And, like the famous Purloined Letter, it was right out in the limelight: the gravemarker of John Meusebach, rescuer of the Adelsverein's Texas investments,<sup>xi</sup> and founder of the city of Fredericksburg. Meusebach was neither a Lateiner nor a Freethinker. However, in the words of historian Mary Ramos, "... Meusebach's education and experience were suited to the task at hand. He had studied mining engineering and forestry, political science and finance, jurisprudence and state economy. He read five languages and spoke English fluently."<sup>xii</sup>

Meusebach's 10' tall granite obelisk gravemarker reveals a linguist's delight. One unique feature is that, unlike most mixed-code German gravemarkers, Meusebach's marker is bilingual.<sup>xiii</sup> On one side his German nobility remains intact: title plus full German name (Freiherr Hans Otfried von Meusebach); on the other side the title disappears, *Hans* becomes *John*, and *Otfried* becomes the initial *O*. (John O. Meusebach).

The second unique feature is that at the top of the German-name side, a round, family crest has been engraved, with the English phrase "Texas Forever" circling the bottom half of the crest.

The third unique feature is that at the bottom of the English-name side, the Latin phrase "Tenax Propositi" is engraved. "Tenax Propositi" was the Meusebach family motto, which means "Firm of Purpose" in English.<sup>xiv</sup>

(Side One)  
[Texas Forever]

FREIHERR  
HANS  
OTFRIED  
VON  
MEUSEBACH  
1812 - 1857



(Side Two)  
[Texas Forever]

JOHN O.  
MEUSBACH  
MAY 26, 1812  
MAY 27, 1897

TENAX  
PROPOSITI

MEUSEBACH



BETTINA

One such gravemarker, however compelling, does not make a very strong case for the impact that historians have led us to believe existed (regarding the impact of Latin) upon the Latin colonies or upon the Lateiner and their families. Each additional gravemarker would help strengthen the argument that Texas German immigrants included an amazingly impressive group of people – including their intellectuals.

I welcome any and all input from those of you whose knowledge about this subject obviously exceeds my own. Contact me. I'll come as soon as possible. You'll recognize my little green truck – on the rear it has a bumper sticker that reads: "I brake for graveyards, Ass'n for Gravestone Studies."

<sup>i</sup> This article abbreviates material from two papers presented at annual meetings of the Cemeteries and Gravemarkers Area of the American Culture Association: *Texas German Intellectuals: How "Latin" were the Latin Colonies?* (San Francisco: 19- 22 March 2008) and *From Ghost Towns to San Antonio's Riverwalk: The Texas Freethinker's Linguistic Trail* (New Orleans: 9-12 April 2009). I am grateful to Trinity University for supporting the research for both papers. In addition to the 30 some participants in each of these two sessions, I have benefited from personal responses from John Bayne, Caroline Byrd, Rose Marie Cutting, Joe Edgette, Mark Hatlie, Richard Meyer, Susan Olsen, Cornelia Paraskeva, Jo Ly Puehse, Rich Sauer, Thomas Sebastian, Terry Smart, and Anne Stewart.

<sup>ii</sup> Don Lawrence. *Freethinkers in Texas: compiled from the Handbook of the Texas State Historical Association*. The Atheist 4:11, November 19, 2000. Pp. 2-3.

<sup>iii</sup> Annie Rombert. *A Texas Literary Society of Pioneer Days*. Southwestern Historical Quarterly 52 (1948), p. 61.

<sup>iv</sup> Terry Smart. Personal communication. January 12, 2009.

<sup>v</sup> R.L. Biesele, The History of the German Settlements in Texas, 1831-1861. Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones, 1930, reprinted 1964; Adalbert Regenbrecht. *The German settlers of Millheim before the Civil War*. Southwestern Historical Quarterly 20 (July 1916); Louis Reinhardt. *The Communistic Colony of Bettina*. Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association 3 (July 1899); and Annie Romberg, op cit.

<sup>vi</sup> Edwin E. Scharf. "Freethinkers" *Of the Early Texas Hill Country*. Freethought Today, April 1998.

<sup>vii</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted. A Journey through Texas, or, A Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier. New York: Dix, Edwards, & Co., 1857; reprinted Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.

<sup>viii</sup> Adalbert Regenbrecht. *German Settlers of Millheim Before the Civil War*. Southwestern Historical Quarterly Online 20:1. Accessed Mon Mar 17 15:36:12 CDT 2008. [http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/publications/journals/shq/online/v020/n1/contrib\\_DIVL596\\_print.html](http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/publications/journals/shq/online/v020/n1/contrib_DIVL596_print.html).

<sup>ix</sup> Glen E. Lich. The German Texans. (The University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio. 1996.

<sup>x</sup> The present owner of the ranch reluctantly let me photograph the site of the old lodge and of the burial site. The owner himself had never seen the burial site, but told me that his mother had told him that when she was a child she and her father had erected three wooden crosses where the original markers had deteriorated.

<sup>xi</sup> A German-based immigration association, whose goal was the settlement of lands in Texas.

<sup>xii</sup> Mary G. Ramos. *The German Settlements in Central Texas*. Texas Almanac 12/26/2008 <http://texasalmanac.com/history/highlights/german/> First published in the 1990-1992 Texas Almanac.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mixed code markers reveal their information in two languages, but do not repeat any of the information; bilingual markers also reveal their information in two languages, but some of the information is repeated.

<sup>xiv</sup> An interesting discussion about the English translation of "Tenax Propositi" can be found on the Roots Web (genealogy) site. On Monday, April 27, 1998, Andreas Sassmannshausen wrote: "Some weeks (or months) ago, the tombstone inscription TENAX PROPOSITI was discussing in the mailing list. I found this expression in an article written by the famous german scientist and author Johann Henrich Jung-Stilling. His feature was translated: English, Dutsch, Russian, ... The book/article was written in 1776/1779. The expression tenax propositi is a latin phrase used in common academic discussion in the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century. It means: to spend a strange/hard/great effort on something, a goal oriented acting and coping, or something like this. The german translation of tenax propositi is "zähe an einem Vorhaben festhalten." It appears very often in the articles written by Jung-Stilling. Best regards from Hilchenbach/Germany, the birthplace of Jung-Stilling (1740-1817). Andreas Sassmannshausen, Heinsberger Str. 7, 57271 Hilchenbach/Germany." [retrieved 1/8/2009 2:55 PM from <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/GERMAN-TEXAN/1998-04/0893711634>.

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