Ethnicity, Politics, and Society in the New South: Examining German Immigrant Communities in Early Twentieth-Century Charleston

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Machine politics and ethnic organization are two phenomena readily associated with the urban politics of Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but seldom are they considered in the context of Southern history. However, in the early twentieth century, machine politics and ethnicity actively influenced the social fabric and political dynamics of Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston’s large community of German immigrants played a significant role in the city’s politics and economic livelihood during this time period. An extensive network of German economic, religious, and charitable organizations united their voices and simultaneously facilitated the retention of German identity, while acculturating Germans into Charleston society.

Although Germans were present in Charleston society from the city’s founding in the seventeenth century, an increase in German immigration in the 1830s resulted in the development of a new type of German community in Charleston. In fact, as anthropologist Dee Dee Joyce’s research reveals, German immigrants composed approximately one-third of the middle class in antebellum Charleston. The immigrants worked primarily as grocers, tavern keepers, and druggists, and German merchants often lived above their corner stores, reflecting both their occupation and their social class. Through their businesses, Germans came into contact with other immigrants, free blacks, and native born whites on a daily basis.

Many aspects of Charleston society helped German immigrants assimilate into their new community. For example, Franz Adoph Melchers’ German language newspaper, Deutsche Zeitung, printed from 1853 to 1917, informed German immigrants about Charleston news and culture in their native language. Men like German Charlestonian John A. Wagener acted as “cultural brokers,” helping new immigrants find their niches inside the city and southern culture. Wagener established eight organizations (St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church, the German Fire Company, Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, German Colonization Society, Deutschescharf Schutzen Verein, and three Masonic lodges) which helped newcomers create contacts and alliances within the city between 1839 and 1855. All of these organizations served not only to strengthen German ties within the community, but also to acclimate German immigrants with the rest of Charleston society.

As a result of Deutsche Zeitung and Wagener’s cultural organizations, German Charlestonians in the antebellum South embraced the city’s institutions and demonstrated their loyalty to Charleston during the Civil War by sending six militia companies and an

3 Bell, 18.
artillery battalion to fight for the Confederacy.  Historian Michael Everette Bell describes their devotion to the city as both a way of defending “the German honor they brought with them” as well as displaying their acceptance of “Charlestonian cultural values.”  Through their loyalty to the South’s cause, German Charlestonians gained greater respect and status within the native Charleston community.

During Reconstruction, planters, businesses, and state governments all had vested economic interests in attracting immigrants to the South in order to fill the labor voids created by the northern migration of emancipated African-Americans.  In 1896, nativist sentiments were widespread throughout much of the country in response to a combination of high immigration and unemployment rates and poor economic conditions. These sentiments eventually led to the introduction of a bill in the United States Congress aimed at restricting immigration. Many Southern congressmen opposed the bill, claiming that Northerners inundated with immigrant workers did not understand the “labor stringency” facing the South.

Several Southern states developed new bureaucratic departments to recruit immigrant laborers.  In 1904, South Carolina established a Department of Agriculture, Commerce, and Immigration, and in 1905, the department developed a policy calling for the immigration of “white citizens of the United States, citizens of Ireland, Scotland, Switzerland, France and all other foreigners of Anglos Saxon Origin.”  Charleston was at the forefront of the state’s efforts to attract new immigrants, and in 1906, the steamship Wittekind brought 476 new German, Austrian, Belgian, and Dutch immigrants directly into the Charleston port. Thus, the Charleston German community not only continued to thrive during this period, but it was also enriched by the presence of new German immigrants.

The life of August William Wieters—in many ways a typical German Charlestonian—shows how Charleston’s German community was connected economically, politically, and socially during this period.  Wieters was born on August 23, 1868 in the small town of Weddewarden in the Hanover province of Prussia.  At the age of 15, he and four of his brothers came to the United States on the German steam liner, Copernicus.  Of the five Wieters boys who came to the United States, one returned to Germany immediately, while the other four all eventually settled in Charleston.  When asked why her father left his home, August’s daughter, Mildred Wieters, responded that many people in her father’s community were traveling and emigrating and that he, too,

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4 Bell, 17.
5 Ibid., 27.
6 Ibid.
7 Rowland T. Berthoff, “Southern Attitudes Towards Immigration, 1865-1914, The Journal of Southern History 17 (August 1951): 328.  The role of Germans in antebellum Charleston has been thoroughly researched, but there are large gaps in the historiography of the city’s German community after the antebellum period.  Recent scholarship suggests that German immigration to North America should not be studied as individual periods of migration, but rather as a continuous influx from 1607 through the early twentieth century.  Gunter Moltmann, “Migrations from Germany to North America: New Perspectives,” Reviews in American History 14 (December 1986): 581.
8 Ibid., 329.
10 Ibid, 126-130.
wanted to travel and see America. Once he arrived in the country, he was encouraged by the available economic opportunities and decided to stay. He did, however, maintain his contact with relatives on the other side of the Atlantic, where, to this day, the German descendants of the Wieters family live in Weddewarden.\(^\text{11}\)

Wieters docked in New York City and originally found odd jobs in Manhattan, working in grocery stores and delivering groceries for a starting salary of four dollars a month, plus room and board. However, Wieters did not see opportunities for advancement in New York, so when John Hurkamp, a large and prominent Charleston grocer, offered Wieters a job in 1887, Wieters did not hesitate to make the move.\(^\text{12}\) Several of Wieters’ distant cousins from Hanover had already settled in Charleston by the in the middle of the nineteenth century. Wieters worked as a clerk at “Hurkamps” for three years and began familiarizing himself with his adopted city and the English language. After establishing himself financially, Wieters bought a grocery store in 1890 from E.F.E. Wieters, a distant cousin. Unlike the German grocers who lived above their businesses, Wieters lived across the street from his corner store at 119 Calhoun Street. Wieters’ brother, Otto, also owned a grocery store about a mile north of August’s establishment. In interviews, both August Wieters’ daughter, Mildred, and his son, Raymond, recalled that many members of the German community continued to work as grocers and in other mercantile occupations during the early twentieth century.\(^\text{13}\)

The next chapter of Wieters’ life in Charleston is an excellent example of the close bonds maintained within the city’s German community. In 1899, Wieters established an ice company in the city. At that time, ice was scarce and sold at high prices. Wieters decided to venture into a business that, if successful, would provide ice to the city’s citizens and businesses at a more reasonable price than was offered by the city’s other ice vendors.\(^\text{14}\) To secure the capital necessary to start the business, Wieters turned to members of the German community. On June 6, 1899, a lined paper agreement proclaimed, “Whereas it is proposed to…organize a corporation for the purpose of buying, manufacturing, selling, and dealing in ice, ice machinery, and refrigeration substances,” with a capital stock of $6,000 to be divided into 240 shares of twenty-five dollars each.\(^\text{15}\) Beneath this heading are the signatures of 214 shareholders, many of whom were of German descent. Thus, with the help of many German Charlestonians, the Consumer Ice Company opened in 1899 at R.R. Crossing on Woolfe Street with August Wieters serving as the president and treasurer, J.H. Heinson as the vice president, and A.J.W. Gorse as the secretary. A 1910 article in a municipal publication promoting the city’s business prospects refers to the company’s officers as “very efficient men” who stand for a “‘square deal’ and are highly respected in the community.”\(^\text{16}\)

The Consumers Ice Company prospered, and in 1901, Wieters sold his grocery

\(^\text{11}\) Information obtained through interview with Mildred and Lucille Wieters and their collection of their father’s papers.
\(^\text{13}\) Raymond and Mildred Wieters, interview by author, 7 December 2004.
\(^\text{14}\) *Charleston, South Carolina: The Queen City of the South Atlantic: Illustrated Charleston: Its Commercial and Industrial Advantages in 1910.*
\(^\text{15}\) “Agreement for Formation of Consumers Ice Co.,” June 6, 1899, Papers of August Wieters- property of Mildred Wieters.
\(^\text{16}\) *Illustrated Charleston.*
store to concentrate his full efforts on the ice business. Three artesian wells functioned as the company’s water supply, and Wieters used horse-drawn wagons to deliver 150 tons of ice to customers each day. The company served the Charleston community until 1924 when it was sold to a larger regional corporation, the Southern Ice Company. Newspaper advertisements for Consumers Ice boast that it was the only ice plant in the city that manufactured distilled water ice. Furthermore, in the summer of 1919 when ice shortages were widespread in the South, the company was successful in keeping its customers supplied with ice. The story of the ice company represents not only the mutual interest and efforts of German Charlestonians towards the pursuit of economic interests, but also demonstrates the value of services provided by German immigrants to the Charleston economy as a whole.

The German community in early twentieth century Charleston also combined its resources and unified to strengthen its voice politically. The political scene in Charleston at the turn of the century was unfriendly to outsiders. Like the politics of many other urban areas during the period, bloc voting and corruption characterized Charleston politics. The presence of a one-party system and a partisan police force further contributed to unjust electoral practices in the city. Yet, the German-American citizens in Charleston managed to break into the city’s politics through the organization of John P. Grace, a Charlestonian of Irish descent and mayor of the city from 1911 to 1915 and again from 1919 to 1923. Until the time of Grace, blue bloods or bourbons, referring to the city’s elite aristocratic element, dominated Charleston politics. Grace attacked the clean image of Charleston government and charged that “no man who holds high office can truthfully say he did not know that fraud was being practiced to accomplish his election.” He wanted the citizens of Charleston to know that “the vote of the little man counts just as much as the vote of the banker on Broad Street.”

From 1902, when Grace ran his first underdog campaign for the state senate, to 1911, when Grace was elected the mayor of Charleston, he built his own political machine. Grace relied heavily on support from the city’s Irish and German voters, who were attracted to Grace’s platform of improving conditions for the workingman. Each man in Grace’s machine was responsible for recruiting five additional men to join the organization at the level under him. The Grace machine worked to mobilize voters and secure votes. By the time elections were actually held, most voters had publicly declared their allegiance to one party or the other as a result of this system.

From the beginning of Grace’s political career, he enjoyed overwhelming support in Ward 5, an upper eastside ward composed of working class Charleston natives, immigrants, and African-Americans. When Grace was elected mayor in 1911, August

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17 Advertisement, The Charleston American, 5 July 1919.
18 Ibid.
19 Advertisement, The Charleston American, 5 July 1919.
20 Article, The Charleston American, 19 July 1919.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 27.
Wieters was elected alderman of Ward 5, a parallel indicating Wieters’ role as a critical member of the Grace machine. From 1912 to 1916, Wieters served on two of the Board of Alderman’s most important committees: the Ways and Means Committee and the Sanitary Committee, of which Wieters was the chairman.\(^{25}\) Additionally, Wieters, like Grace, was a member of the Hibernian society which hosted many of Grace’s political rallies.\(^{26}\) Not only were they political allies working towards similar agendas, but also close friends, to the point that Wieters named one of his sons John, after the mayor.

Grace retired from the public sphere to practice law after a younger and more dynamic candidate, Thomas P. Stoney, ousted him from the mayoral office in 1923. However, Grace maintained ties with Charleston’s German community. Three years later, he resumed his political involvement as a member of the State Highway Commission from 1926 to 1933. The German Friendly Society tracked and supported many of Grace’s state highway projects.\(^{27}\) Grace’s ability to mobilize German and Irish voters in Charleston underscored his political successes. As a testament to the importance of immigrant populations in Charleston politics, German-Americans influenced the city’s traditionally aristocratic politics in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The population of Charleston’s German community was large enough to allow immigrants to maintain their ethnic ties; however, many German immigrants were determined to assimilate into the culture of their new home. As Mildred and Raymond Wieters recalled, their father never spoke German around his children—he was determined that “they were in America and would be Americans.”\(^{28}\)

When the United States aligned itself with Britain and the Allies of World War I, German Charlestonians found themselves in a dilemma. Balancing a proud German heritage with loyalty and patriotism to the United States became a nearly impossible task. The scrutiny of native Charlestonians towards their German neighbors intensified on January 31, 1917, when a German vessel, the *Liebenfels*, was sunk in the Cooper River. The ship had attempted to block the Navy Yard channel, and nine of its crewmembers were sentenced to a year in the Atlanta penitentiary for blockading a navigable stream.\(^{29}\)

The German community responded to this war through support of the military, just as they had done during the Civil War. For example, St. Matthew’s German Lutheran Church, where Wieters served on the Church Council, maintained a ladies’ sewing room in the Sunday school building. Eighty-three of the church’s young men enlisted to fight in the war; five of them, paying the ultimate price of loyalty to their country, were killed in battle.\(^{30}\)

Many German organizations implemented changes reflecting their American


\(^{27}\) Adolph Lesemann, Jr., *Two Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of American History Taken from the minutes and other records of the German Friendly Society of Charleston, South Carolina* (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, 1999): 217-219.

\(^{28}\) Raymond and Mildred Wieters.


\(^{30}\) Walter C. Davis, *100 Years of Christian Life and Service: St. Matthew’s Lutheran church* (Charleston, 1940).
patriotism. As August Wieters recorded in a paper found in his wallet after his death, the German Rifle Club changed its name to the Charleston Rifle Club and the German American Alliance was dissolved. Wieters additionally ceased to collect money for the German Red Cross, for which he had previously raised about two thousand dollars.\textsuperscript{31} The German Friendly Society supported war efforts by passing a resolution that freed members serving in the War of their debts and dues to the society.\textsuperscript{32} When the war concluded, the German Friendly Society held a victory celebration dinner featuring keynote addresses entitled “Our Country,” “Our State,” and “Our City.”\textsuperscript{33}

World War I represented a beginning of the end for a once self-conscious and proud German community in Charleston. Throughout World War I, German Charlestonians demonstrated that their identity as Americans took preeminence over any ethnic ties. The abandonment of the German language in newspapers, records, and church services and the removal of German titles from social organizations contributed simultaneously to an affirmation of American patriotism and a fracture with a German past. The Charleston community had always accepted the German community as part and parcel of its economic, political, and social life, and when German loyalties were called into question during World War I, German Charlestonians were resolute in their support of American actions. Today few visible references remain in Charleston to the large and vibrant German community that was an integral part of the city’s political, social, and economic spheres during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

\textsuperscript{31} August William Wieters, note. Personal property of Mildred Wieters. Charleston, S.C.
\textsuperscript{32} Lesemann, 214.
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