

From Wenigumstadt to America: The Knecht Family Journey of 1836

This week I have been thinking about Margaret Knecht who was born 201 years ago. I have been studying her face while thinking about what it might have been like for her at age 10 to leave her Bavaria home and move to Indiana









***John Adam Geis**, an old pioneer, died at his home, near St. Peters, Franklin county, Ind., Monday, March 7, at 9 o'clock p. m., at the age of 80 years, 11 months and 13 days. The deceased was born in ***Grosswaldstadt**, near Aschaffenburg, Bavaria, Germany, on the 24th of March, 1817. In 1832 his parents came to this country and settled in the wilderness near what is now St. Peters. He married Miss ***Margaret Knecht**, June 14th, 1845. They celebrated their golden wedding on the ***14th of June, 1895**. His wife preceded him in death in June, 1897. The deceased leaves four sons and one daughter, many grandchildren and several great grand-children to mourn his death. The funeral took place from the St. Peters Church Thursday morning at 9 o'clock, Rev. Jos. Fleischmann officiating. A large concourse of relatives and friends attended the funeral. May he rest in peace.

***Nieklaus Reidenbach** an old pio-



Wenigumstadt in 1836

Wenigumstadt, near Aschaffenburg in the Kingdom of Bavaria, was a small farming village of perhaps 500–700 people. Life revolved around the Catholic parish, family farms, orchards, livestock, and the rhythm of the seasons. Most homes were timber-framed, streets were unpaved, and neighbors knew one another well. Population growth, limited opportunities for younger families, taxes, and the hope of owning land in America encouraged many families to emigrate during the 1830s.

A Turning Point in 1836

1836 was a year of profound change for Johann Georg Knecht. His father had died in April 1832, leaving his mother to carry on for nearly three decades. Then, on 30 June 1836, his mother died at the age of 69. Only weeks later Johann Georg, his wife Mary, and their six young children departed Wenigumstadt for Bremen. Although no surviving document states that her death prompted the family's emigration, the timing is striking. With both

parents now gone, fewer family ties remained to keep the family in Bavaria. It is entirely possible that this loss marked the close of one chapter of Johann Georg's life and gave him the courage to begin another in America.

The Journey to Bremen

The family likely traveled by wagon and river boat to Bremen carrying only essential belongings. Leaving Wenigumstadt almost certainly meant saying goodbye forever to relatives, friends, and the familiar landscape of their childhood.

The Barque Leontine

The family crossed the Atlantic aboard the 331-ton Barque Leontine under Captain Gabriel Johansen. The original passenger manifest, sworn before customs officials at the Port of New York on 5 October 1836, identifies the vessel as the 'Barque Leontine' from Bremen. The crossing probably lasted six to eight weeks in crowded steerage accommodations.

Passenger Manifest Barque Leonide 5th October 1836

Johann age 36 (farmer... destination Cincinnati)

Mary age 36

Francis age 12

Margaretha age 10

Johann age 8

Elizabeth age 6

Kunigunde age 3 ½

Wilhelm age 1 ½

Hold by V. Minns & Co. 116 Water st. N. Y.

DISTRICT OF NEW-YORK—PORT OF NEW-YORK.

I, G. Johansen do solemnly, sincerely, and truly Swear that the following List or Manifest of Passengers, subscribed with my name, and now delivered by me to the Collector of the Customs for the District of New-York, contains, to the best of my knowledge and belief, a just and true account of all the Passengers received on board the Bremen Barque Leontine wharfed I am Master, from Bremen So help me God. G. Johansen

Sworn to, this 5th October 1836 Before me

LIST or MANIFEST of all the PASSENGERS taken on board the Barque Leontine whereof G. Johansen is Master, from Bremen burthen 331

Joh. G. Knecht	36	farmer	Dr.	Cincinnati		
Margaretha	36	his wife	"	"		
Frank	12	their son	"	"		
Margaretha	10	" daughter	"	"		
Johann	8	" son	"	"		
Elisabeth	6	" daughter	"	"		
Kunigunde	3 1/2	" do	"	"		
Wilhelm	1 1/4	" son	"	"		

A Family's Leap of Faith

Traveling with six young children, including a one-year-old infant, Johann Georg and Maria Knecht undertook an extraordinary act of faith. They appear to have intended to settle in Cincinnati, joining the growing German community there. The manifest also suggests that several neighboring families from Wenigumstadt made the voyage together, illustrating the chain migration that shaped German settlement in Ohio.

Reflection

By leaving Bavaria in the summer of 1836, shortly after the death of Johann Georg's mother, the Knecht family closed one chapter of their history and opened another. When the Leontine reached New York on 5 October 1836, a customs record became the first written page of their American story—a story their descendants can still trace nearly two centuries later.

If Johann Georg Knecht stood on a hill outside Wenigumstadt in the summer of **1836**, he would have looked across a landscape that had changed very little since the Middle Ages.

A thousand-year-old village

Wenigumstadt had already existed for more than **600 years**, first appearing in written records in **1229** as *villa Omestad minore*. Archaeological discoveries show that people had lived in the area for thousands of years before that, making it one of the oldest continuously occupied places in the Bachgau region.

The village lay beside the **Welzbach**, a small stream flowing through fertile farmland. Almost every family depended on agriculture.

The countryside was divided into:

- wheat and rye fields
- barley and oats

- hay meadows
- orchards of apples, pears, and cherries
- small vineyards on favorable slopes
- common grazing land

Most families also kept a few cows, pigs, chickens, and perhaps a horse.

What the village looked like

The center of Wenigumstadt consisted of perhaps **100–120 closely spaced houses**.

Many homes were:

- timber-framed (Fachwerk)
- white plaster between dark oak beams
- red clay tile roofs
- attached barns and stables
- manure piles behind the buildings

Narrow dirt lanes wound between the houses.

There were no sidewalks.

After rain the streets became muddy.

Children walked among wagons, geese, chickens, pigs, and cattle almost every day.

At night the only illumination came from:

- candles
- oil lamps
- moonlight

The church—the center of life

The church dominated every aspect of village life.

Every important event happened there:

- baptisms

- marriages
- funerals
- feast days
- Sunday Mass

It also served as the community's unofficial gathering place.

When Johann Georg's mother died on **30 June 1836**, her funeral almost certainly began with the tolling of the church bell before neighbors accompanied her to the parish cemetery.

Just weeks later, Johann Georg would leave that same church knowing he might never see it again.

A world without machines

In 1836 there were:

- no tractors
- no automobiles
- no telephones
- no electricity
- no indoor plumbing
- no railroads reaching the village

Harvesting was done with:

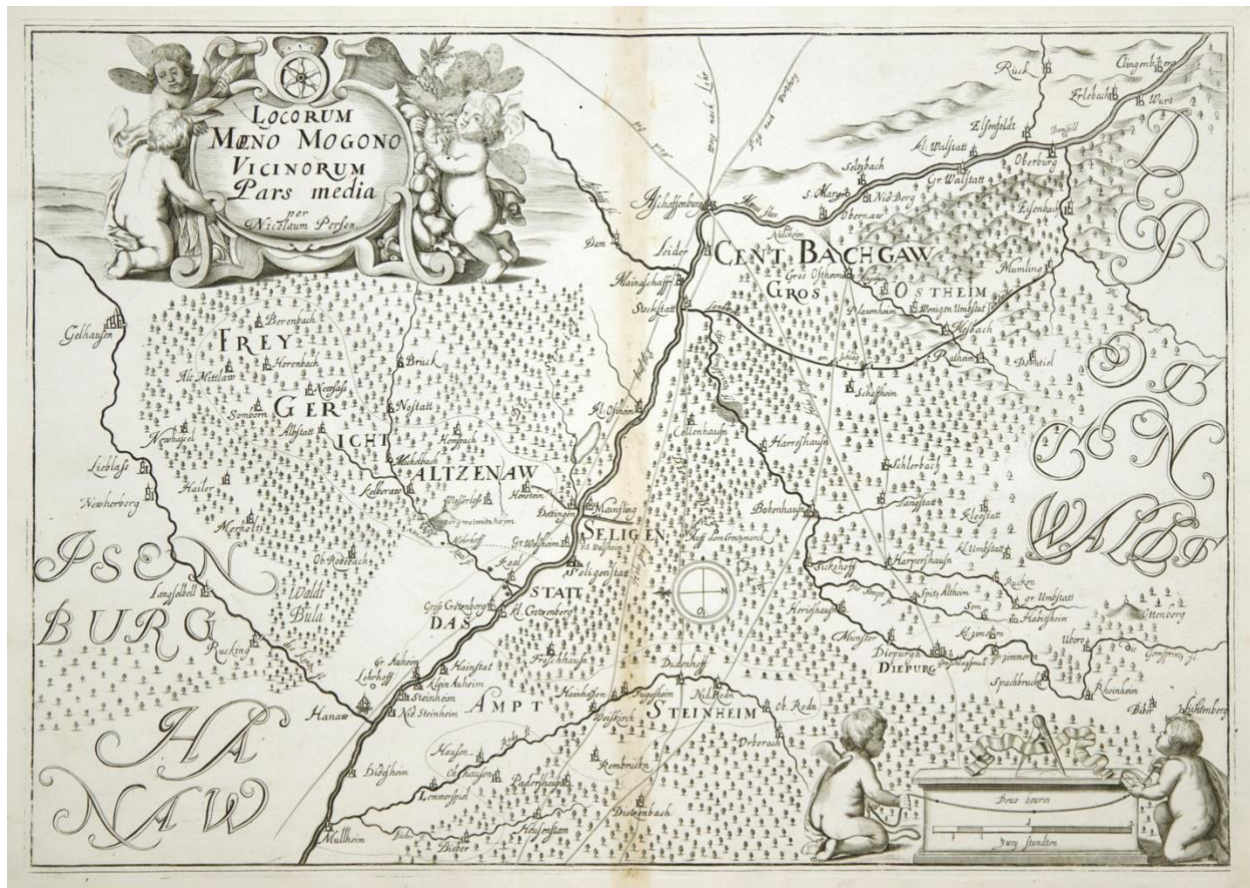
- sickles
- scythes
- horses
- oxen

Women spun, sewed, baked bread, preserved vegetables, and helped in the fields during harvest.

Winter evenings were spent around wood fires repairing tools and clothing.

The Bachgau

Wenigumstadt lies in the **Bachgau**, a gently rolling farming district between the Main River and the Odenwald hills.



Unlike the rugged Alps, this landscape is soft and open.

Travelers in the nineteenth century described it as:

- fertile
- prosperous in good harvest years
- dotted with orchards
- rich in church steeples
- connected by wagon roads linking village to village

Johann Georg would have known nearly every neighboring village:

- Großostheim
- Pflaumheim
- Mosbach
- Ringheim
- Schaafheim

Each was only a few miles away by foot or wagon.

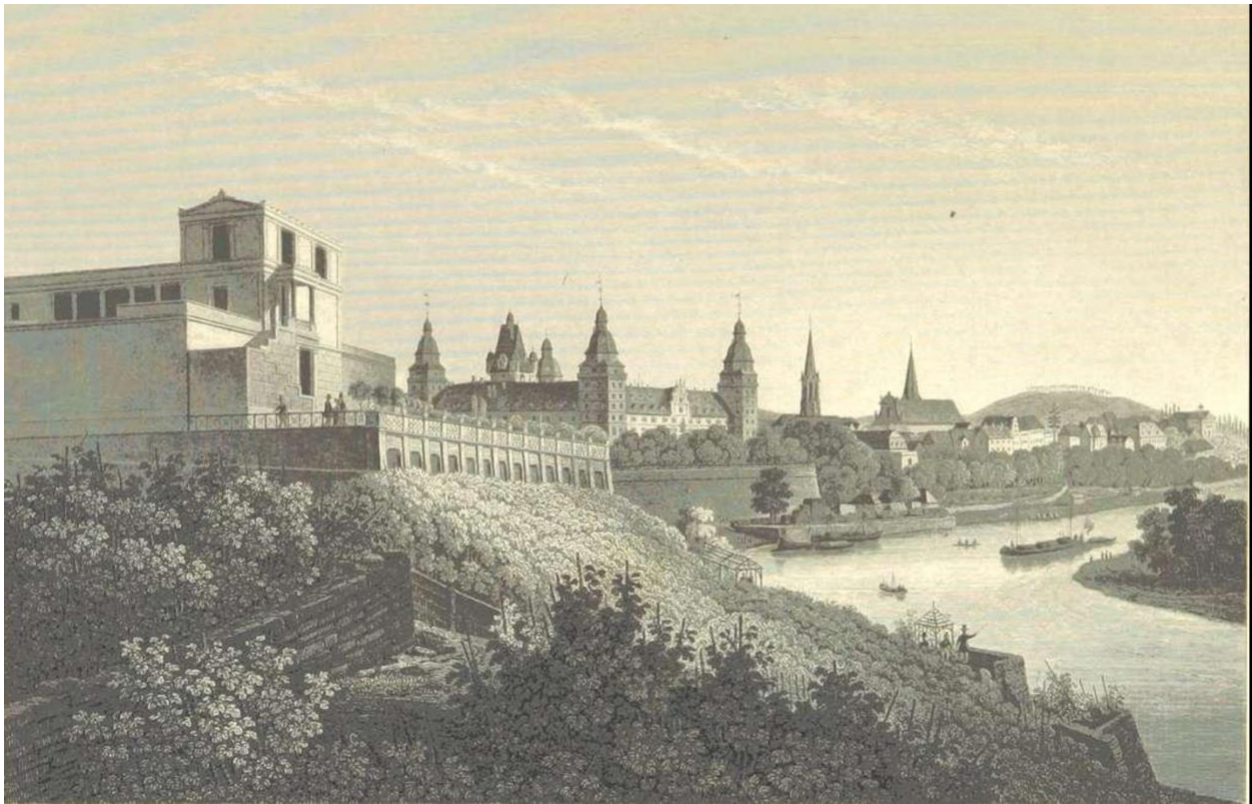
Aschaffenburg—the nearest city

Aschaffenburg, about ten miles away, was the region's principal town.

There Johann Georg would have found:

- markets
- craftsmen
- government offices
- merchants
- the magnificent Castle Johannisburg overlooking the Main River

For someone from Wenigumstadt, Aschaffenburg felt like a bustling city, though it had only about 8,000–10,000 inhabitants in the 1830s.



Bavaria after Napoleon

Johann Georg was born into a world that changed dramatically.

His parents had lived under the Archbishop-Electors of Mainz.

Then came:

- the French Revolutionary Wars,
- Napoleon,
- the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806,
- and finally incorporation into the **Kingdom of Bavaria**.

By 1836 the political turmoil had settled, but rural life remained economically difficult. Population growth, small inherited farms, and limited opportunities led many young families to seek a future in America. The Wenigumstadt historical society notes that, during the nineteenth century, poverty became severe enough that many families emigrated to the United States.

The summer of 1836

One can imagine the sequence.

On **30 June**, Johann Georg buried his mother.

July brought the hay harvest.

August became a season of decisions.

The family sold what they could not carry.

Neighbors stopped by to say goodbye.

Children played one last time in the village lanes.

Then the Knechts climbed into a wagon and headed north.

As the church tower disappeared behind them, Johann Georg must have realized something profound:

He was not merely leaving a village.

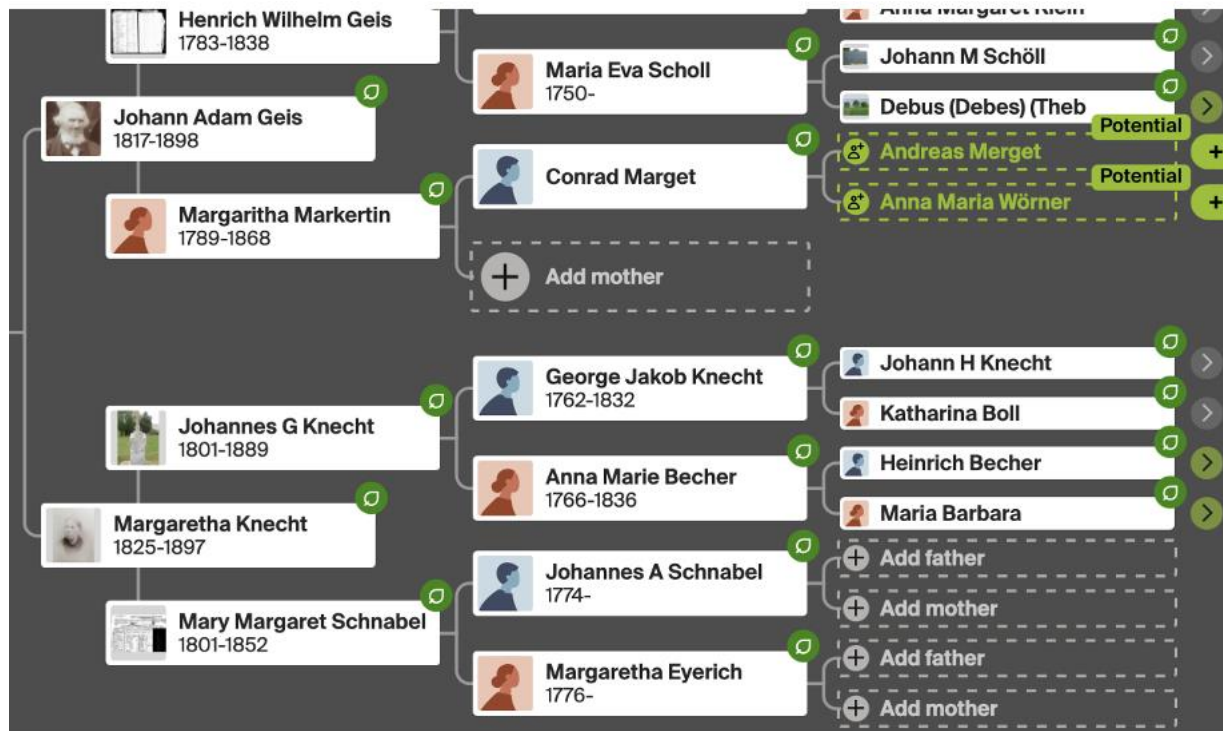
He was leaving more than six centuries of family history rooted in the soil of Wenigumstadt.



Yet because of that difficult decision, nearly two centuries later, his descendants can still point to that small Bavarian village and say:

"That is where our American story began."





The story of **St. Peter, Indiana**, is one of the most remarkable examples of **chain migration** in the Midwest. It was not founded by random settlers arriving one by one. Instead, it was established by groups of German Catholic families who deliberately left the same villages in Bavaria and settled together on newly available federal land.

Why Franklin County?

When your ancestors arrived in New York in October 1836, much of southeastern Indiana was still being opened for settlement.

Before 1830, most immigrants bypassed Franklin County. But beginning about **1831**, German immigrants who had first gathered in Cincinnati began exploring the southern and western parts of the county, where good farmland remained available. They often traveled in groups of families who had lived near one another in Germany.

This pattern explains why families from villages such as Wenigumstadt, Großostheim, and neighboring communities often reappeared together in Indiana.

Purchasing government land

Unlike much of Europe, where land had been owned by the same families for generations, Indiana's land belonged first to the **United States government**.

After the land had been surveyed into the familiar township-and-range grid, settlers could purchase parcels directly through federal land offices. Indiana was a "public domain" state, meaning nearly every acre outside older French settlements was first sold by the federal government.

A German immigrant arriving with modest savings could legally buy:

- 40 acres
- 80 acres
- 160 acres

depending on his financial resources.

For many families, this was the first realistic opportunity to own substantial farmland.

The first German purchases

One of the earliest documented land purchases occurred in **September 1833**, when brothers **Michael and Ignatz Ripperger** entered federal land in what became the St. Peter area. They are specifically identified as among the earliest German settlers adjoining the future town of St. Peter.

Those first purchases encouraged relatives and neighbors to follow.

Within only a few years, dozens of German Catholic families had established farms nearby.

Many of the surnames are still familiar today:

- Ripperger (Ripberger)
- Geis
- Bauer
- Fussner
- Weiler

Several of these founding names remain associated with St. Peter nearly two centuries later.

Clearing the wilderness

Buying land was only the beginning.

The first settlers encountered heavily forested land.

Their first priorities were:

- building a log cabin,
- digging a well,
- clearing enough trees for crops,
- planting corn before winter,
- constructing fences,
- establishing orchards.

Many families lived for years in one-room log homes while gradually improving their farms.

Neighbors depended upon one another.

Barn raisings, harvests, and road building were community events.

Why they settled together

The Germans did something Americans had seen repeatedly on the frontier.

Instead of scattering individually across Indiana, they recreated their old communities.

They shared:

- language,
- religion,
- customs,
- farming methods,
- family relationships.

A newcomer arriving from Bavaria could immediately find people speaking the same dialect and attending the same Catholic Mass.

That familiarity eased the transition to a new country.

The birth of St. Peter

By **1838**, only a few years after the first land purchases, the settlers had built a small log Catholic church.

The first bishop of the Diocese of Vincennes, the Servant of God Simon Bruté, blessed the church and dedicated it to **St. Peter**. Around that church grew the community that eventually became St. Peter, Indiana.

The town itself was formally laid out in **1853**, but the farming and church community had existed for years beforehand.

A connection to your own family

This history fits beautifully with what you've uncovered about the Knecht family.

Johann Georg and Maria Knecht arrived in New York aboard the **Barque *Leontine*** on **October 5, 1836** with six children. By then, German pioneers had already begun establishing Catholic farming communities in Franklin County. If the Knechts later settled near St. Peter, they would have joined a community whose earliest settlers had arrived only three years before—people who, like them, had left villages around Aschaffenburg and the Bachgau region seeking land, opportunity, and the freedom to preserve their language and faith.

One can imagine Johann Georg standing on his newly purchased acreage in Franklin County, looking across the dense Indiana forest. Unlike the small inherited fields of Wenigumstadt, this land could become his family's own. Every tree he felled and every field he cleared represented something that had been difficult or impossible to achieve in Bavaria: the chance to build a lasting family farm that could one day be passed to his children. That dream was shared by hundreds of German immigrant families and became the foundation of communities like St. Peter.

How did the US government acquire the land that they were selling in 1830's in Indiana?

It acquired the land primarily through treaties negotiated with Native American tribes after the American Revolution, although those treaties occurred under enormous pressure and are viewed very differently today than they were at the time.

Here's the sequence.

Before the United States

When your ancestors were living in Wenigumstadt, Indiana was not always American land.

It had been:

- Native American homeland for thousands of years
- claimed by France
- transferred to Britain after the French and Indian War in 1763

- ceded to the United States after the Revolutionary War in 1783

But on paper and on the ground were two different things.

The Native nations—including the Shawnee, Miami, Delaware (Lenape), Potawatomi, and others—still occupied and controlled much of the region.

The Northwest Territory

In **1787**, Congress created the Northwest Territory.

This included what would become:

- Ohio
- Indiana
- Illinois
- Michigan
- Wisconsin
- part of Minnesota

Congress promised that land would be surveyed before sale.

But first the United States had to extinguish Native title.

How the government acquired the land

The federal government generally followed three steps.

1. Survey the land

Government surveyors divided the land into the familiar grid:

- Townships six miles square
- 36 one-square-mile sections
- Each section containing 640 acres

That is why so much of Indiana still has perfectly straight roads.

2. Negotiate treaties

The government negotiated treaties with tribes.

Some included payments of:

- cash
- trade goods
- livestock
- annual annuities
- guarantees of hunting rights

Others occurred after military defeats or under intense political pressure.

Today historians generally recognize that many tribes had little realistic ability to refuse these agreements.

3. Sell the land

Once a treaty took effect, the land became part of the public domain.

Then it was offered for sale at federal land offices.

Settlers like Johann Georg Knecht could legally purchase farms directly from the federal government.

Southeastern Indiana

Franklin County became available because of a series of treaties, especially:

Treaty of Grouseland (1805)

Governor William Henry Harrison negotiated with representatives of the Delaware, Miami, Potawatomi, and Eel River peoples.

This opened additional southeastern Indiana for settlement.

Treaty of Fort Wayne (1809)

This treaty transferred over **2.5 million acres** in Indiana and Illinois.

It greatly expanded the area available for settlement.

It was highly controversial.

The Shawnee leader Tecumseh argued that no single tribe could sell land belonging to all Native nations.

His opposition helped lead to Tecumseh's War.

War of 1812

After Tecumseh's defeat in 1813, Native resistance weakened.

Additional treaties followed.

By the 1820s and 1830s, most of southeastern Indiana had been opened to American settlement.

This was precisely the period when German immigrants began arriving.

Why your ancestors came exactly then

Timing was everything.

Imagine the overlap.

In Bavaria

Johann Georg faced:

- tiny inherited farms
- little opportunity
- growing family
- death of his mother in June 1836

In Indiana

At exactly the same time:

- millions of acres had recently become available
- federal surveys were complete
- land offices were selling farms
- Cincinnati had become a gateway for German immigrants
- St. Peter was just beginning as a German Catholic settlement

The two histories met.

One family was looking for land.

One nation had just opened land for sale.

What would Johann Georg have purchased?

When Johann Georg bought land (assuming he settled in Franklin County), he probably received a **land patent**.

That document would bear the signature of the President of the United States and would state that the federal government conveyed ownership of a specified tract to him.

That piece of paper represented something almost unimaginable in Bavaria.

Instead of renting land or inheriting a tiny strip, he could own an entire farm.

The irony of the American Dream

There is also an important historical irony.

Johann Georg probably viewed America as a place where ordinary people could finally own land.

At the same time, Native American families were being displaced from lands they had occupied for generations.

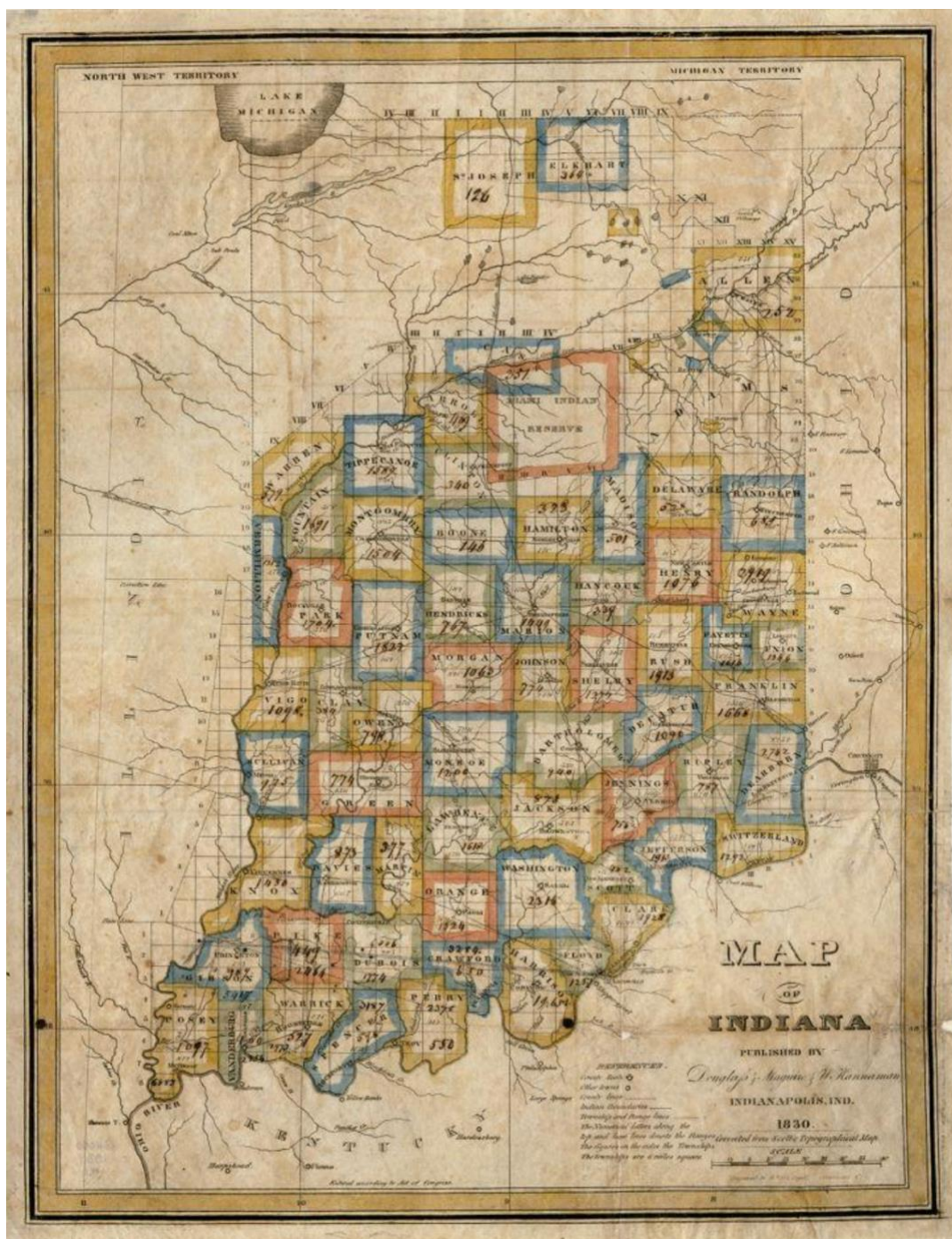
Both stories are true.

The opportunity that transformed one family's future existed because another people had been forced to surrender much of theirs through treaties, conflict, and removal. Understanding both perspectives gives a fuller picture of the era.

A connection to your family story

This makes the timing of the Knecht family's journey even more remarkable. They left Wenigumstadt just as the United States was making newly surveyed Indiana farmland available to private settlers. Within only a few years of their arrival, they could legally acquire land that had been surveyed into neat sections, recorded in federal land offices, and sold under the nation's public land system. That opportunity—unavailable to many rural families in Bavaria—helped lay the foundation for communities like St. Peter and for the generations of descendants who followed.

An 1830 map of Indiana





 artsmartindiana

ArtSmart: Indiana - Mote, Marcus The Hoosier's Nest, 1890

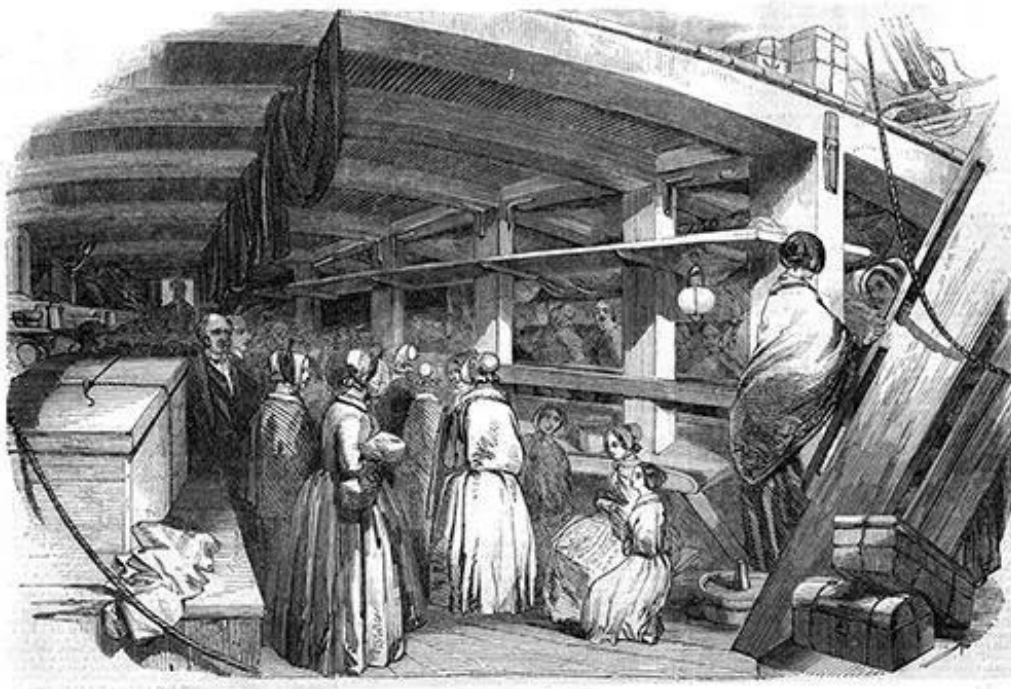


St Peter Church and Cemetery.



Johannes Knecht





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Unfortunately, **no authenticated photograph exists of the *Barque Leontine***. Photography was still in its infancy in 1836, and merchant sailing vessels were only occasionally painted or sketched. I have not found a verified portrait of the *Leontine* itself.

The images above are representative of the kind of **three-masted Bremen barque** that your ancestors sailed aboard. Based on the passenger manifest, we know the following about her:

- **Name:** *Leontine*
- **Rig:** Three-masted barque
- **Home port:** Bremen
- **Master:** Captain Gabriel Johansen
- **Burthen:** 331 tons
- **Arrival:** New York, 5 October 1836
- **Passengers:** Included emigrants from Wenigumstadt and neighboring Bavarian villages.

Captain Gabriel Johansen

The passenger manifest records the ship's master simply as **G. Johansen**, almost certainly **Gabriel Johansen**.

Although little biographical information has survived about him personally, the surviving shipping records tell us several important things.

Captain Johansen was an experienced North Atlantic master sailing from Bremen during one of the earliest great waves of German emigration. His name appears on more than one voyage of the *Leontine*, suggesting that he regularly commanded the vessel rather than making a single crossing.

A captain in the 1830s carried enormous responsibility. He was navigator, disciplinarian, businessman, and physician all at once. His duties included:

- navigating entirely by compass, sextant, and stars,
- keeping the crew and passengers alive,
- maintaining order aboard ship,
- supervising cargo,
- recording births or deaths during the voyage,
- and presenting the passenger manifest to U.S. Customs upon arrival.

When the *Leontine* reached New York Harbor on **5 October 1836**, Captain Johansen signed the official declaration swearing that the passenger list was complete and accurate. That signature is the reason your ancestors' names survive today.

Life aboard the *Leontine*

For the Knecht family, boarding the *Leontine* was unlike anything they had ever experienced.

Johann Georg and Maria arrived with **six children**, the youngest only **one year old**. Their home for the next six to eight weeks would be the cramped steerage deck beneath the cargo.

Their sleeping quarters consisted of rough wooden bunks, often little more than shelves built into the sides of the ship. Families hung blankets to create a little privacy, but dozens of people lived together in one crowded space.

The days quickly settled into a routine.

At sunrise, weather permitting, passengers came on deck for fresh air while sailors climbed the rigging hundreds of feet above them to adjust sails. Children stretched their legs in the narrow spaces available before everyone returned below when seas became rough.

Meals were simple:

- hard bread (ship's biscuit),

- oatmeal,
- dried peas,
- potatoes,
- salted pork or beef,
- cheese,
- and carefully rationed fresh water.

Cooking was done on a communal stove whenever weather allowed.

Storms transformed the voyage. The ship pitched violently, loose objects crashed across the deck, and frightened children clung to their parents. During calm weather the Atlantic could appear almost endless, with only sea and sky meeting at the horizon.

Passengers often passed the time by:

- singing hymns,
- reading from family Bibles,
- telling stories,
- teaching children,
- and discussing the lives they hoped to build in America.

For many, those conversations were their first opportunity to dream aloud about owning land, opening businesses, or giving their children opportunities they had never known in Bavaria.

The Last View of Germany

One can imagine Johann Georg standing on the deck of the *Leontine* as the coast of Europe slowly disappeared behind the ship.

Only a few weeks earlier he had buried his mother in Wenigumstadt. His father had died in 1808. Now, with Maria beside him and six young children below deck, he watched the homeland of generations fade into the distance.

He could not know whether he would ever see Germany again.

Everything ahead was uncertain.

Yet every generation of your family that followed traces back to that single decision—to step aboard the *Barque Leontine* in the late summer of 1836 and trust that the winds carrying them westward would also carry them toward a better future.
