

# A WELS Historical Profile

## Chronological Sketches of Our Synod's Past: 1800-1850

Arnold J. Koelpin

**A**T THE TURN of the 19th century, people in central Europe witnessed a series of events that, under God's providence, led to the founding of three German Lutheran Synods in the Northwest Territory of the United States. The three synods eventually merged into one, the present Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

The following chronological sketch traces three lines of development that affected the formation of the Wisconsin Synod:

1. The *political upheavals* during which the early German migrations to America took place (dates below: **bold**);
2. The formation of the *German mission societies* from whose institutions the founding fathers of our Wisconsin Synod came (dates below: *italics*);
3. The *settlement of the Germans* in the territories of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota among whom the first congregations were established (dates below: roman).

Much of the parallel history of Lutheranism in America in the East and Old West prior to the Civil War is not included in this initial survey.

The chronological lists are neither complete nor exhaustive. Their accuracy is mostly dependent on secondary sources. But they represent a beginning, a primary chronological ladder for others to scale for a glimpse into our Synod's past. The list may also serve those who wish to trace their roots across the waters to the "old country." Or they can serve just for the enjoyment of the casual reader of lists.

### A.D. 1800-1850

- 1780 *German Society* [of Honorable and Active Supporters of Pure Doctrine and True Piety] founded in Basle on the upper Rhine; generator of a network of similar societies throughout Germany. Background in the English S.P.C.K. (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, London, 1698; helped the Lutheran Salz-burgers on their freedom trek to British America, 1731).
- 1788 The German Society, headquartered in Basle, changes its name to the German Society [for the Promotion of Christian Truth and Piety], later simply known as the *German Society for Christen-dom*. The name change signaled a more general Protestant character based on the "pure Bible word" instead of "pure teaching."

- 1799 *Elberfeld Mission Society* founded in the lower Rhineland (Wuppertal), as an offshoot of the London Mission Society.
- 1800 *Barmen Mission Society* in the industrial lower Rhineland; connections with the English textile regions.
- 1803 *John Muehlhaeuser*, founder and first president of the Wisconsin Synod, born in Notzingen, Wuerttemberg, Germany.
- 1805 *Michigan* becomes a territory in the Northwest Territory of the United States.
- 1806 Napoleon dissolves the *Holy Roman Empire* and replaces it by the Confederation of the Rhine; Prussia and Austria being sovereign German states.
- 1806 *Berlin Mission School* founded by the Moravian, Father Jaenicke, at the urging of the German Society for Christendom.
- 1806 *Basel Bible Society* formed with support from the British and Foreign Bible Society.
- 1812-13 *Wars of Liberation* in Germany against Napoleon Bonaparte.
- 1815 *Basle Mission Society*, officially, the Protestant [Evangelical] Mission Society, founded by Christian Fredrick Spittler, secretary of the German Society for Christendom. The society's *Basle Mission House*, at first intended for heathen mission work, later answered the call to work among the Swabian Germans in Michigan. In 1840 Spittler also founded the *Pilgrim Mission of Christchona* (the Tradesmen's Mission in the German Church), in whose early efforts John Muehlhaeuser, a baker by trade, WELS first president, was enrolled.
- 1815 The *Congress of Vienna* remakes the map of Europe.
- 1817 *Prussian Union* proclaimed by King Fredrick William III on the 300th anniversary of the Reformation. The *Union Agenda* (liturgy) was devised to help shape a general Protestant [Evangelical] church in Prussia at the expense of the Lutheran and Reformed confessions. The unification attempt came at the height of German cultural nationalism for the renewal of the Fatherland.
- 1817 Father *C. F. Heyer*, associated with the beginnings of the Minnesota Synod, was sent by the Pennsylvania Synod into Kentucky and Indiana.
- 1817 *Claus Harms* fosters the *Lutheran Confessional Awakening* by publishing 95 Theses against the state of Lutheranism in Germany.
- 1818 *Barmen Mission Society* in the lower Rhineland becomes an arm of the *Basle Mission Society* in the upper Rhineland. In 1828 the *Basle/Barmen* connection was dissolved and led to an independent *Barmen Mission House* for training tradesmen in mission work.
- 1824 *Berlin Mission Society* formed as the Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Mission among the Heathen. In 1829 the society, founded by Lutherans of the Prussian Union, began its own seminary.

- 1825 The *Erie Canal* opens to provide a thoroughfare for settlers in the Upper Northwest Territory.
- 1826 The *United Rhenish Mission Society* formed: a union of the Elberfeld and Barmen Mission Societies with similar societies in Cologne and Wesel.
- 1826 The *Barmen Mission House* founded.
- 1826 The *Langenberg Mission Society* in the lower Rhineland formed as an adjunct to the newly formed United Rhenish Mission Society. Its special purpose: The Protestant Society for North America. Missionaries to Wisconsin were channeled through this society.
- 1830 Prussian King Fredrick William III authorizes legal enforcement of the Prussian Union Agenda at the Tricentennial of the Augsburg Confession. Its intent: to force all opposition into the Prussian Protestant Union, the Evangelical Church. Persecution of Lutheran opponents continued until 1840 when Fredrick William IV came to the throne. At that time Lutherans opposed to "unionism" were given rights for an independent church.
- 1830 Swabian Lutherans settle in southeastern Michigan, west and north of Detroit. They appeal to the Basle Mission Society to send pastors.
- 1830 *John Gottfried Scheibel* of the University of Breslau in Silesia defrocked for opposing the Prussian Union. His efforts led to the formation of the so-called Old Lutherans in Prussia and elsewhere, a movement to create a genuine Lutheran church independent of the state.
- 1832 The settlement of the Black Hawk War leads the way to Wisconsin becoming a territory four years later.
- 1833 *Fredrick Schmid*, a Basle graduate, comes to Michigan to serve thirty Wuerttemberg families near *Ann Arbor*; also served in *Detroit* and *Monroe*.
- 1834 The *Breslau Synod* of Old Lutherans in Prussia formed as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Prussia in defiance of the Prussian Union church. Lutherans throughout Germany aroused by the action.
- 1836 The *North German Missionary Society* founded as a union of six unionistic city societies. The *Leipzig Mission* in Saxony started as a distinctively Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society.
- 1836 *Wisconsin* becomes a territory in the Northwest Territory of the United States with a capitol at Belmont.
- 1836 The Pennsylvania Mission Society sends *C. F. Heyer* to do mission work in India; he later returned to help start the Minnesota Synod.
- 1837 *Michigan* becomes a state.
- 1837 First plans for a Michigan Synod discussed.
- 1837 The Langenburg Mission Society sends Candidates *Muehlhaeuser* and *Oertel* to North America. They serve in the New York Ministerium.



- 1837-39 *Old Lutherans* emigrate to America: Pomeranians under Baganz; Silesians under L. F. E. Krause, Captain Henry von Rohr, and Pastor J. A. A. Grabau. Von Rohr and Krause settle in Wisconsin; founding of *Freistadt*.
- 1838 A planned migration of Saxons led by *Martin Stephan* begin the Missouri Synod.
- 1840 Fredrick William IV, Prussian King, stops the persecution of the Old Lutherans.
- 1841 *Fredrick Wyneken* issues an appeal to Lutherans in Germany in a pamphlet: "The Need of the German Lutherans in North America." It stirs the conscience of many Lutherans in Germany.
- 1841 The Langenburg Society given a special royal charter to act as the *Evangelical Society for Protestant Germans in North America*.
- 1843 Old Lutherans from Stettin in Pomerania, led by Pastor Adolph Kindermann, settle in Wisconsin at *Kirchhayn*, *Town Lebanon*, and *Cedarburg*.
- 1843 *John Weinmann* from Wuerttemberg, cofounder of the Wisconsin Synod, enters the Barmen Mission House.
- 1844 Church at *Ixonnia*, Wisconsin, founded because of disagreements in *Town Lebanon*.
- 1844 The first *Michigan Synod* organized under Pastor F. Schmid; an early date of founding (1840) lists the Synod as the "Missionary Synod," since Indian mission work seemed to be its primary objective.

- 1845 The *Buffalo Synod* organized by J. A. A. Grabau as the Synod of Lutheran Immigrants from Prussia.
- 1845 Candidate *W. Wrede* from Magdeburg, cofounder of the Wisconsin Synod, ordained and commissioned by the Langenburg Mission Society.
- 1846 *Ehrenfried Seebach* from Town Oakwood near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, sends a letter to the Langenburg Mission requesting that a pastor be sent to serve the Germans there.
- 1846 *Weinmann* and *Wrede* leave for America; placed under Muehlhaeuser's care. Wrede stayed in New York City; Weinmann went with Muehlhaeuser to Rochester and then to Wisconsin.
- 1847 *Kirchhayn*, Wisconsin, congregation splits because of the controversy in the Buffalo Synod.
- 1848 The Barmen Mission Society comes under the influence and direction of *John Christian Wallmann*, a confessional Lutheran.
- 1848 *Wisconsin* becomes a state.
- 1848 John Muehlhaeuser arrives in *Milwaukee* on June 27. He makes a living as colporteur and provisionally starts an "evangelical" church.
- 1849 *Hermannsburg Ev. Lutheran Mission Society* founded by Pastor G. Louis Harms in north Germany, near the Lueneburg Heath.
- 1849 Muehlhaeuser organizes the German Ev. Lutheran Trinity Church, later to be called *Grace Church* in Milwaukee because of another Old Lutheran Trinity Church in the area.
- 1849 Pastor Weinmann, ordained by Pastor Schmid in Ann Arbor, Michigan, begins work at *Kilbourn Road*, south of Milwaukee; also at *Caledonia*, *Greenfield*, and *New Berlin*.
- 1849 Pastor Wrede from New York called to serve a United (Lutheran and Reformed) Church at *Granville*, Wisconsin.
- 1849 *Minnesota* becomes a territory in the Northwest Territory of the United States.
- 1849 The First Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin began organization at Grace Church in Milwaukee. President: Muehlhaeuser; Secretary: Weinmann; Treasurer: Wrede.
- 1850 *The German Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Wisconsin* constituted on May 26, 1850, at Granville, Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Synod was not the result of a planned migration. It was primarily a product of German mission societies. Its early history was marked by the conflict of confessions that was going on in the German homeland. It was a time of German national consciousness which stirred a similar confessional consciousness. This reawakening of faith came after a century of rationalism in the German church and the scourge of the French Revolution and Napoleon.

*Professor Koelpin teaches religion and history at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota and has completed his course work for a doctorate at Erlangen.*