The Last Freie Gemeinde

The Free Congregation of Sauk County

Why is there a freethinking congregation of German heritage in Sauk County?

and

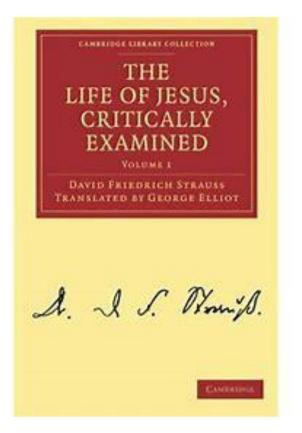
Why is it the last of its kind in the U.S.?

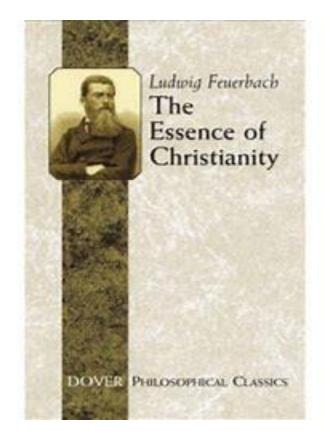
History in Germany in the mid-19th century

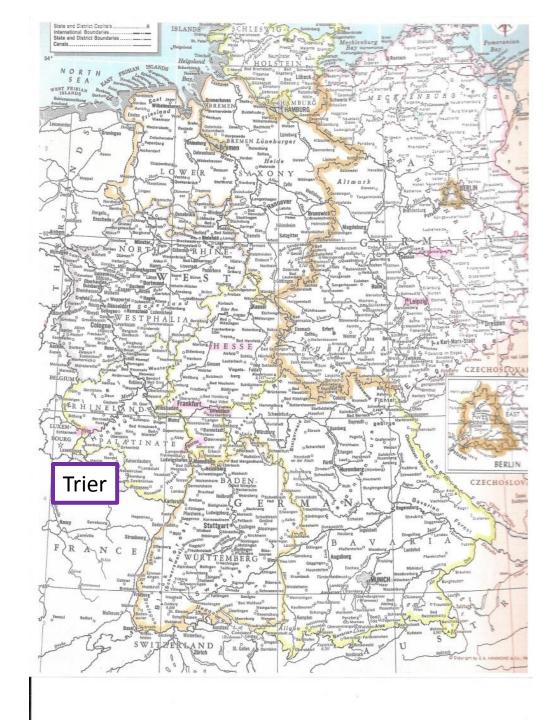
Central Europe after 1815



German Biblical Studies in the early 19th century



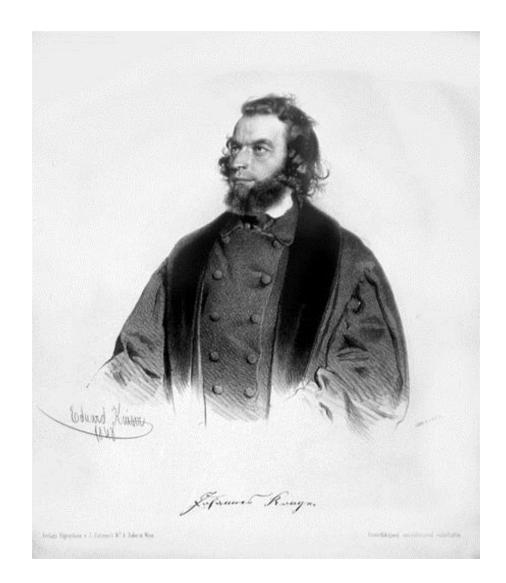




The Holy Cloak displayed for pilgrimage and donations in the Trier Cathedral in 1844



Johannes Ronge



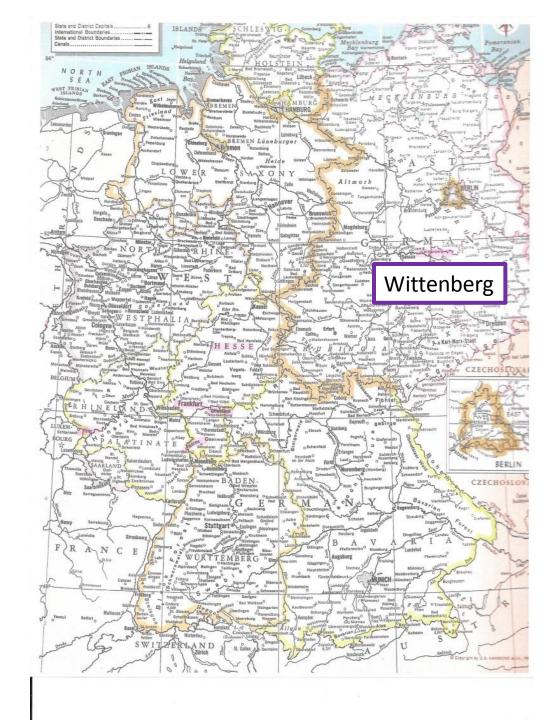
Martin Luther and the 95 Theses, 1517



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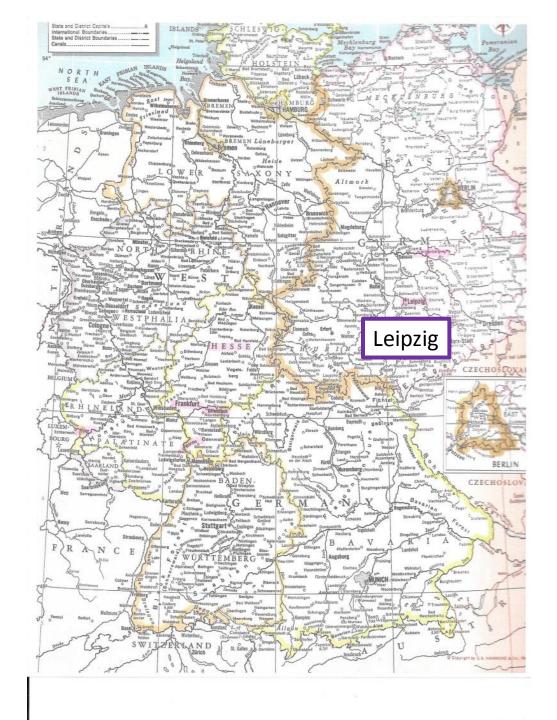
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Indulgences







→ Breslau, now Wroclaw In Poland

Statement issued by Leipzig convocation of congregations in 1846

The sole basis of Christian faith was to be the Bible, interpreted by each for himself in the light of reason and conscience.

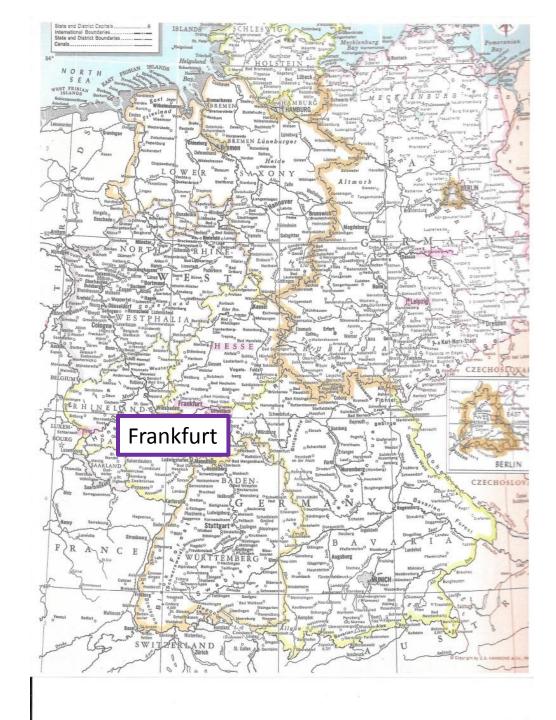
The primacy of the pope was rejected, along with oral confessions, the celibacy of the clergy, the worship of saints, indulgences, fasts, pilgrimages, anathemas, excommunications, and the adoration of relics and pictures.

Complete freedom of conscience was asserted along with complete freedom in the study and interpretation of scripture, unlimited by outside authority.

Tenets of the Freie Gemeinden

The Freie Gemeinden were congregations or societies that wanted to free religion from dogma and the authority of revealed truth. They sought to base a person's search for meaning in reason, critical thinking, the study of nature and world history, the inspiration of music and the arts, and the principles of democracy.

Frisch Die Gedanken sind frei Die Ge- dan-ken sind frei, wer Kann sie er lie-be den Wein, mein Mädchen vor Ich will ich auf immer den Sor-gen ab-Drum ra-ten? Sie fliehen vor - bei wie nächtli-che al-len, sie tut mir al- lein am besten gesa-gen und will mich auch nimmer mit Grillen mehr Schatten. Kein Mensch kann sie wis-sen, Kein Jä-ger erfal-len. Ich sitz nicht al - lei - ne bei mei-nem Glas plagen. Man Kann ja im Her-zen stets la-chen und schießen, es bleibet da - bei: die Ge- dan-ken sind frei! Weine, mein Mädchen da - bei : die Ge-dan-Ken sind frei! scherzen und denken da_ bei : die Ge dan-ken sind frei! Hessische Weise



The Revolution of 1848: Death on the Ramparts



Froebel blocks

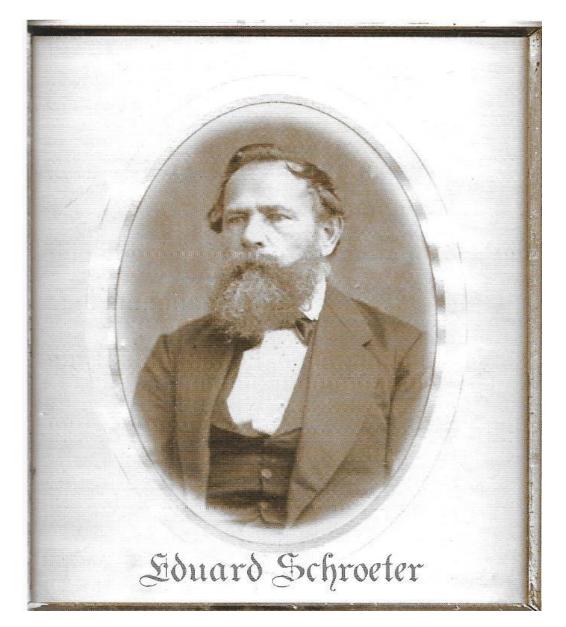


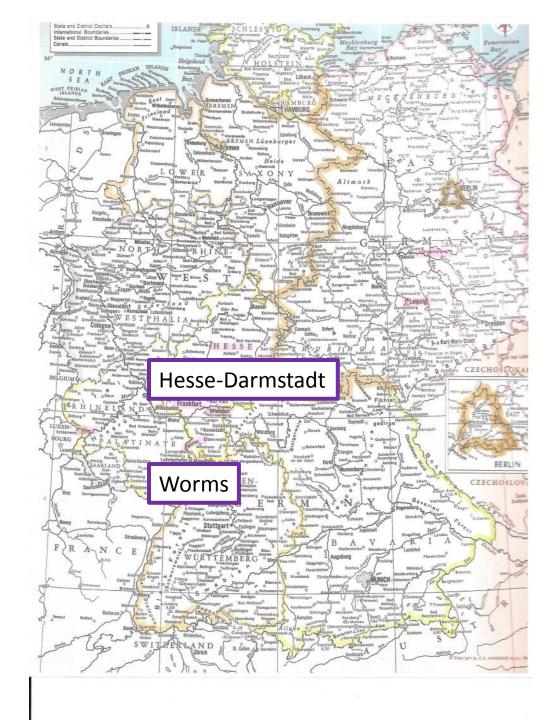
First Kindergarten in the U.S.



Establishment of the *Freie Gemeinde* in Sauk City

Eduard Schroeter





Schroeter's Fundamental Principles

We call our society the United Free German Congregation. Its purpose is to unite the foes of clericalism, official dishonesty, and hypocrisy, and to unite the friends of truth, uprightness, and honesty – all those holding the same views, but now found scattered among all religions, churches, and sects. By such a union of our strength we intend to erect a firm bulwark against the pernicious system of church, sect, and clerical domination. While making our first appeal to the Germans we do not wish to be understood as excluding other nationalities; rather we shall make it our business to enter into fraternal relations with others who are aiming at reforms similar to our own.

All authority rests in the congregation, and in it all its members, men and women alike, shall have equal rights. The foundation for the congregation shall be Reason, and the great teachings of Nature and History. The purpose of the congregation shall not be the subjection of human beings to an external authority, the respect for a person or a book, in order to secure their bliss by such unconditional obedience, but the exact opposite of this, their mental and moral freedom, their independence and individuality in thought, will, decision, and action. The means to this end, consequently, are not "supernatural and incomprehensible means of grace", but the natural and comprehensible means by which a human being influences and inspires the mind and heart of his fellows – through speech, song, and the mutual exchange of opinions.

We do not exclude certain rites and ceremonies, so long as they are not compulsory and are sensible and beautiful (i.e. in connection with birth, death, marriage, etc.). We have no dogmas or decrees, fixed for all time, but only fundamental principles and general views of the world which are subject to continual clarification. We seek to attain for ourselves an independent view of life and in accordance with it to shape our individual lives. We do not decree a theoretical atheism that denies or disbelieves the existence of a Supreme Being, but we acknowledge a practical atheism, by living so that we can interpret our Supreme Being as we desire and hold our own conception of immortality. We know of no priestly office as the sole bearer of the spirit and the truth, nor of a laity as mere empty vessels to be filled by it, as the Catholic and Protestant churches do, to a greater or lesser extent. But we do recognize a speaker or teacher, whom the congregation is free to select and appoint after it has satisfied itself of his [sic] vocation, qualification, and moral character. [translated from the German]

Wisconsin congregations in 1852

Burlington, Calumet, Cedarburg, Fond du Lac, Germantown, Hermann, Howel's Road, Jefferson, Koskonony, Kilbourn Road, Madison, Manitowoc, Mayville, Mequon River, Milwaukee, New Holstein, Oshkosh, Plymouth, Polktown, Racine, Schleisingerville, Sheboygan, Sheboygan Falls, Theresa, Town Rhine, Two Rivers, Watertown, Waterville, Waukesha, West Bend.

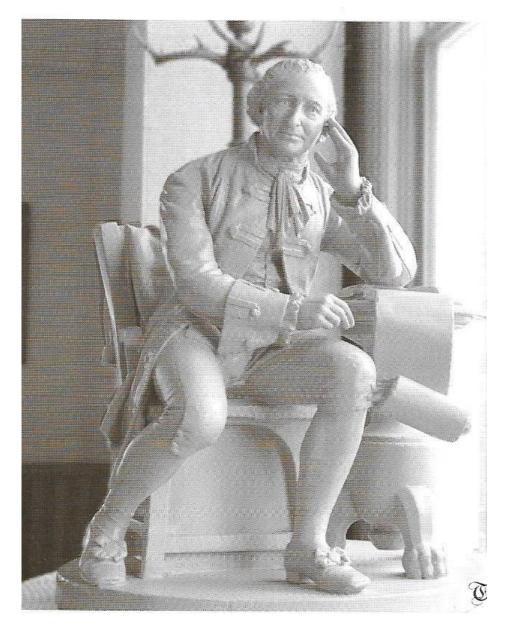
50th Anniversary Stiftungsfest (Founders' Day celebration) Oct. 24, 1902



Stiftungsfest (Founders' Day celebration) Oct. 17, 2021



Thomas Paine

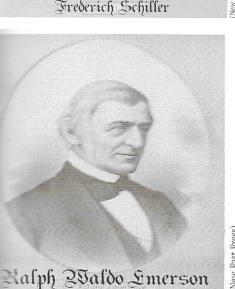


Goethe, Schiller, Copernicus, Emerson









(New Past Press)

History in Sauk County

FREE CONGREGATION OF SAUK COUNTY Organized in 1852 by German-American settlers, the Free **Congregation (Freie Gemeinde)** dominated the cultural, economic and intellectual life of Sauk City well into the twentieth century. This is one of two congregations surviving a once prominent free thought movement in Wisconsin. The present building was erected in 1884 and contains an outstanding free thought library. 0

Park Hall



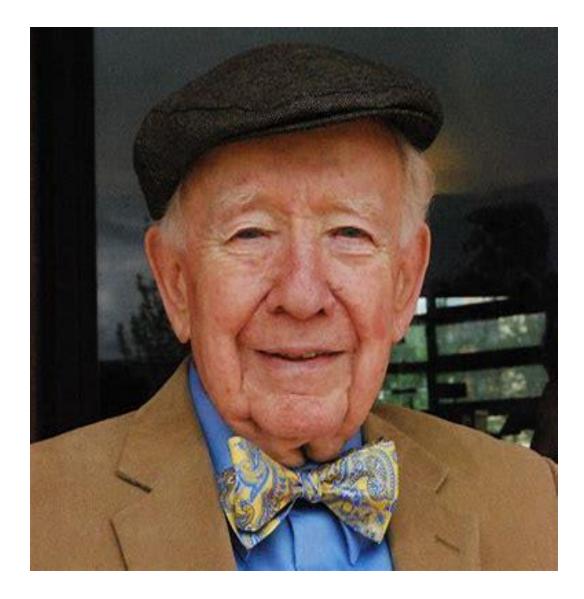


Current Statement of Purpose

We, the members of the Free Congregation of Sauk County, choosing not to be governed by a fixed creed or dogma, but rather to be guided by the principles of both our Free Thought founders and the Unitarian Universalists, come together as a religious community to help one another in strengthening the spiritual, ethical, and moral dimensions of our lives, and to be of service to our world.

The Free Congregation Today

Max Gaebler



Park Hall



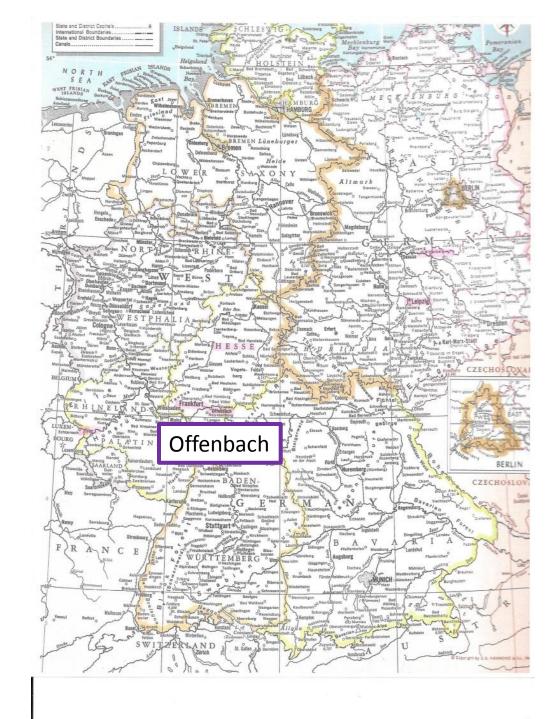
Park Hall interior



Pabst Mansion



Possibilities for the Future



The Frei-religiöse Gemeinde of Offenbach

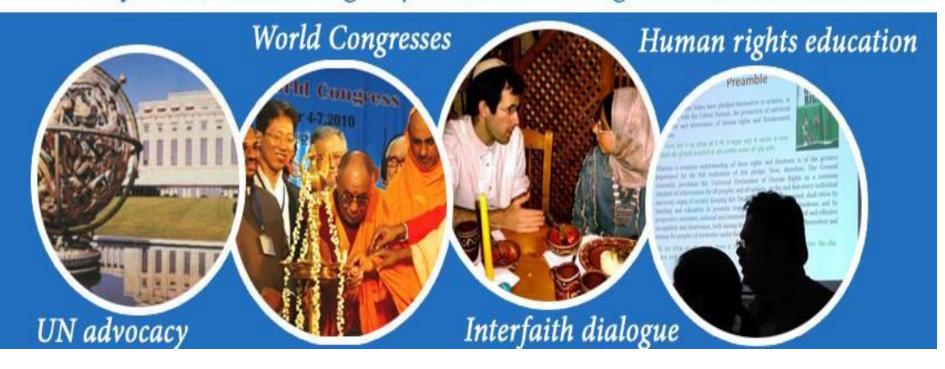


International Association for Religious Freedom



The IARF

The International Association for Religious Freedom 100 years, 70 member groups, 34 World Congresses, 30 countries



End of Presentation

Comments? Questions?