



German-American Cultural Center Newsletter

A publication of the Friends of the GACC
519 Huey P. Long Ave., Gretna, LA 70053

August 2020

‘Water, Water Everywhere’: 1891 Ames Crevasse Flooded Gretna

Water reached the top steps of porches. Boats were the only way to get around. This wasn't the result of hurricane flooding — it was the Ames Crevasse in 1891. Residents of Gretna had water at their front doors.

It all started in early March 1891, when history shows that a man needed to cut the Mississippi River levee on the plantation owned by the Ames brothers in present-day Westwego/Marrero, to insert a pipe. The high spring river water caused the cut to widen into a crevasse. By mid June, it was more than 1,000 feet wide. Flood waters reached Algiers and Gretna, spreading all the way to Vacherie and Bayou Lafouche.

The crevasse was directly across the river



Ames Crevasse in the Mississippi River, 1891. (William S. Howell Photo Collection, Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library)

from Audubon Park. It even drew curious onlookers in steamboats for Sunday excursions to the breach. Eventually it took 200 workers to build a bulwark behind the gap and seal the break. Levee breaks like this became history when the Corps of Engineers developed better ways to reinforce the river levees after the turn of the century.



Gretna families like the Fortmayers used boats to get around in 1891 floodwaters. They lived on Newton Street, between 5th and 6th Streets. On the porch were Edward and Annie Fortmayer. Members of the Fortmayer family belong to the GACC today. (Photo provided by Don Falcon)



Water surrounds the Anselm home at 635 Lafayette St. (Photo provided by Ken and Pam Boudreaux)

More on the 1891 Crevasse on Page 2

The New York Times covers the 1891 Crevasse!

A BREAK IN A LEVEE

MUCH DAMAGE DONE IN THE TOWN OF GREтна NEAR NEW-ORLEANS

NEW-ORLEANS, La., April 6—At 11 o'clock yesterday forenoon a break occurred in the rear levee, built to keep the water from the Ames Crevasse out of the town of Gretna opposite the central portion of this city. By 6 o'clock at night the break had almost closed, but the water in the meantime flooded nearly half the town.

At dark this evening, the situation is as follows: More than three-fourths the territory inside the protection levee is under water, and half the populated portion of the town is flooded. Cattle and poultry are roaming through the streets, which are blocked with piles of furniture and other household goods. About two hundred families are driven from their homes and are seeking shelter with their neighbors. Many are crossing to this side of the river.

The water is up to the Morgan railroad track, four blocks from the river. A levee which will be made from three to four feet high is being built alongside the track by the citizens and railroad people in order to save the front part of the town. This new stretch is about a half-mile long and will be completed, it is thought, in about thirty-six hours. The old levee has been abandoned.

The damage to real estate will amount to several thousand dollars, while the damage, through loss of the crops on truck farms behind the town, will be almost beyond estimate. In fact they are the main reliance of the New-Orleans market for garden produce.

Reprinted from the April 7, 1891, issue of

The New York Times



This 1891 photograph shows the work to repair the Ames Crevasse. (William S. Howell Photo Collection, Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library)

The Job to Repair the Levee was 'Full of Dread and Fear'

Louis Pfister of the Orleans Levee Board gave this report on the repair of the Ames Crevasse in *The Times Picayune*, May 16, 1891:

"The task of erecting this levee was a trying one and full of dread and fear, and only through the great exertions of our city engineer, B. M. Harrod, with the great assistance of Algiers' generous citizen, Manual Abascal, the Southern Pacific Company, through its general manager, Julius Kruttschnitt, and his able assistant, Mr. P. Maguire, and Master Mechanic Jas. D. Connell, did we finally succeed to battle against the rising waters. More than once did we think that our labor would prove fruitless, and to think of the undertaking now, (when we look back), **it would seem impossible to build a levee in a swamp out of earth soaked with water and liable to crumble at any moment.**"

Remembrance of the Crevasse That Flooded Gretna, by Frank Ehret

The late Frank John Ehret, Jr., the grandson of Gretna's first mayor, Frank Ehret, was a German-American preservationist, educator and founder of the GACC. This is his remembrance of the crevasse that flooded Gretna.



Frank Ehret Jr.

"My great-grandfather, Cassimere Ehret, and his wife, Margaret Goyer, came to Louisiana from Germany in 1848. At that time there was an influx of German immigrants to the United States; they call them "forty-eighters." . . . My father started, when he was a teenager, working for William Reverend Tish in Harvey. William Reverend Tish ran cattle at large at the Ames Plantation, which was the last plantation that was here. After a while, my father became a partner of William Reverend Tish and they ran cattle at large all along Ames Plantation; all the way down to Crown Point they had cattle. . . . In 1891 we had a crevasse. The Mississippi River broke and flooded all of Gretna and the West Bank. My father and Reverend Tish took a skiff from Gretna and they went to look for their cattle because everything was flooded up around the river and all of Gretna was flooded, too. This land my house is on now is where he and Reverend Tish found all of their cattle, high and dry here. The deer, the rabbits, all the wildlife and the cattle were right here. So when my father decided to buy land he could have bought what's now industrial land all along the river. But he wanted high land so he bought this land here." (An excerpt from "Germans in Louisiana" by Laura Westbrook, 2007)

These Colorful Steins Tell the Story of Lohengrin

The GACC owes the late Les and Carol Hopper much gratitude for their donation of 20 ornate German beer steins that are housed in two glass cases in the center’s museum. Not only are these steins colorful and beautiful — they also tell stories that are based on historic German folklore. To learn more about these wonderful steins, here’s the story behind three of the steins that tell the story of Lohengrin.

The three steins pictured at right all have the same design; they came in several sizes. They were designed by artist Karl Beuler and manufactured by the Girmscheid Company of Hoehr-Grenzhausen, Germany. The largest one is a two-liter pouring stein. The slightly smaller one is a half liter stein, and the smallest is a three-tenths of a liter companion drinking stein.



This closeup from one of the steins shows Elsa and Lohengrin, who has a silver swan crest on his head.

Lohengrin, which was first performed in Weimar, Germany, in 1850. The most popular and recognizable part of the opera is the “Bridal Chorus,” also known as “Here Comes the Bride,” usually played as a processional at weddings.

Based on German folklore, the story depicted on these steins is about Lohengrin, who was the son of the guardian of the Holy Grail, Parsifal. The steins show Lohengrin with Elsa, who lived in the stronghold at Cleves. After the death of Elsa’s father, the evil knight Telramund was appointed as her guardian. He insisted that she marry him, and he challenged all comers to fight him for Elsa’s hand.

On the day of the wedding, a challenger, Lohengrin, arrived in a boat drawn by a swan. Lohengrin defeated Telramund in combat and subsequently wed Elsa upon her promise never to ask about his background. Elsa later broke her promise, thus making it necessary for Lohengrin to leave her. The boat drawn by the swan arrived to take Lohengrin away.

The renowned German composer Richard Wagner took this legend and wrote the opera



This detail shows the swan pulling the boat of Lohengrin.



The lids to these steins are works of art themselves, as well as the thumblifts adorned with eagles.



Genealogy, Ukulele, French, Yoga and More: The People Program Offers Fun Online Learning

Have you ever wanted to learn a foreign language? Join a book club? Learn to read music? Study Italian culture? Try out chair yoga? Or learn to research your family history? If you're ready to try new things, think about joining the People Program.



For a membership fee of \$130, you can take as many online classes as you want in the People Program. Classes start September 14 and run 10 weeks, through November 20. It's going all digital this fall because of COVID-19, but a large list of classes are being offered by teachers who are passionate about their topics.

Among those teachers will be three

with ties to the GACC, and all three will be teaching courses on various aspects of genealogy — finding out the history of your family.

Pat Smith, who is frequently in the GACC research library working on genealogy issues, will teach “Beginning Genealogy” from 10 to 11:30 a.m. on Tuesdays. Rhonda Roederer will teach a series called “Family History Detective” on Mondays from noon to 12:50 p.m. Phyllis Cosentino will teach two intermediate level courses: “Genealogy Using Computers” on Tuesdays from 10 to 11:50 a.m. and “Genealogy DNA” on Wednesdays at that same hour.

The classes are designed to appeal to people age 50 and older, “but could involve anyone,” Smith said. The teachers all say they enjoy interacting with their students. “I think it’s a fantastic program,” Roederer said.

For information, call (504) 284-7678 or visit www.peopleprogram.org for the complete list of courses.



Pat Smith



Rhonda Roederer



Phyllis Cosentino

What Countries Have the Most German Speakers?

Did you know that 118 million people speak German in more than 45 countries across the globe? More than 50 million Americans claim German ancestry, and up until the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, over 10,000 German citizens were leaving Germany every year to live in the USA. An estimated 1.1 million people speak German in the United States today. Here are other countries where German is spoken.



German is the official national language in Austria, Liechtenstein and, of course, Germany. It is one of the four

official languages in Switzerland and one of three official languages in Luxembourg (most writing there is done in German).

In France, German is a minority language. The country's 1.2 million German speakers live in the German-French border area that includes Alsace, Champagne-Ardenne and Lorraine. German is the official minority language in Italy in South Tyrol. And in Spain, there are large German colonies on the Canary Islands, Mallorca and the Spain coast.

German is spoken and written in many towns of the Netherlands. There are also significant numbers of German speakers in Israel, South Africa, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay.

(Source: German Embassy in Washington)

Meet The Immigrants

A column spotlighting German families, part of research by genealogist Pat Smith

Joseph F. Gehring

Born in 1832 in Alsace, France
 Died in 1880 in Gretna
 (listed as Prussian in some records)
 1870 census lists him as a police officer

Veronica Trauth

Born in 1836 in Baden, Germany
 Arrived in New Orleans in 1855 by ship with family
 Died in 1913 in Gretna

Their children:

George, Caroline, Catherine, Josephine, Barbara, Louis Joseph (Ludwic) and Louise



The Gehring family tomb, above, is in Gretna's Hook and Ladder Cemetery. At left is Catherine Gehring Hartley, whose family owned grocery stores in Gretna.

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The **GACC Newsletter** is published monthly. Suggestions are welcome; email them to germanamerican@bellsouth.net, or call newsletter editor **Carol Schlueter**, 504-363-4202.

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Downtown Gretna has a new look. After months of work, Memorial Square has beautiful landscaping and bricked walkways, with a large mural of the city seal outside City Hall. The project is also designed to reduce the risk of flooding, with permeable pavers and underground stormwater storage modules. (Photo by Ira Hopkins)



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