

Germantown Historical Society **Newsletter**



INCORPORATED – 1974

MARCH, 2024

From the GHS President Jim Dix

In the year 2024 we will celebrate the Germantown Historical Society's 50th anniversary, and the 30th anniversary of Germantown's Oktoberfest held at Dheinsville Historical Park. But before we get ahead of ourselves let us look back at 2023.

Of course, the main event of last year was our Oktoberfest celebration. Once again, new record crowds came out and enjoyed the wonderful fall weather and experienced with old and new friends the overall good feeling of Oktoberfest.

A big thank you goes out to anyone who had anything to do with this great event. So, if you grilled a bratwurst, served some sauerkraut, prepared a potato pancake, served a German dessert, poured a pitcher of beer, helped guide cars to park, helped explain exhibits in the museum, supervised the silent auction, judged the Dachshund dog races, or financially sponsored an event, you all deserve a very big THANK YOU !!!

All these things, and much more, were happening simultaneously because over 150 people volunteered their time and services which allowed thousands of people to enjoy the Gemütlichkeit and all that the Oktoberfest event had to offer.

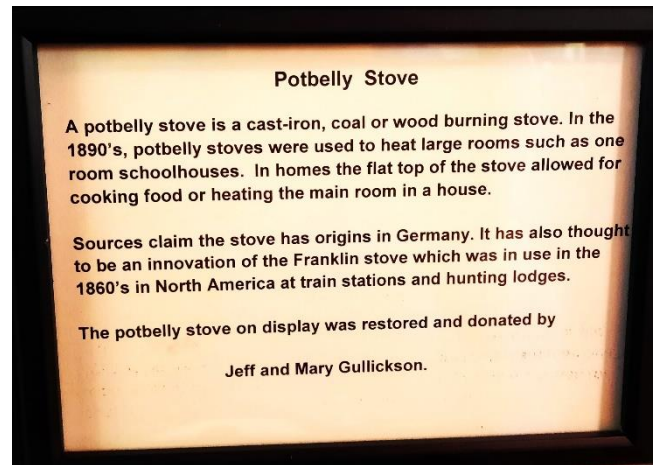
But the primary mission of the GHS is to preserve and promote the history of Germantown. During 2023 we did that in both small and big ways. Sometimes, just one person, or a family of 4, stopped into the Wolf Haus Resource Center to see if we could help them learn anything about their Germantown ancestors. Often, we were able to share with them the exact location of their ancestor's homestead or their family genealogy going back in time several hundred years. Sometimes, we guide larger groups of 10 to 20 people who have never seen our museums or Dheinsville Historical Park. During Oktoberfest literally hundreds of people learned about the history of Germantown for the very first time.

To be able to provide these services and experiences require the maintenance and improvement of the museums and their landscaping, as well as updating the exhibits and technology we work with. Some of last year's ongoing projects included a new Dheinsville Settlement sign, which was installed on the crossroads corner, and the perimeter landscaping around Christ Church. This work was done with help from volunteers Scott Barkow, Tyler Schleicher and his dad, John, along with our regular weekly volunteers.

Inside the church entry, a new Welcome sign was installed. It reflects the importance of religion to the first pioneer settlers. It reads “Welcome to Christ Church. Through these doors many of the first settlers came to find strength in their search for freedom”



Inside the church museum new exhibits and informational cards were added, like an 1890 potbelly stove.



In addition, inside the Bast Bell Museum, Mary Herrick created new displays of Germantown's first Police Chief and of the Sila Lydia Bast family. In the Wolf Haus Research Center, Judy Bast and Mary Bykowski are using the new state of the art digital scanning equipment to preserve many original records and photographs from the mid 1800's.



Oh, last but not least, we finally preserved the last two front stained-glass windows of Christ Church. This completed the overall preservation of the Church's 10 stained-glass windows at a total cost of \$35,600.

This building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the GHS has stepped up to fulfill its responsibility to maintain the building and the story it tells for many generations into the future.

Many good things happened in 2023, but we also had the passing of several longtime and influential members of the Germantown Historical Society.



Irene Blau passed away on Christmas Day, December 25, 2023. Irene's vision and leadership led to the creation of the Germantown Historical Society in 1974. She served as President for 35 years. Her enthusiasm for promoting the history of Germantown earned her the nickname of "The History Lady." To read further details about Irene's involvement in the history of the GHS see the following article about the History of the GHS.



Oliver "Ollie" Schowalter passed away on May 12, 2023. Oliver was a lifetime active member of the GHS and served as its Vice President. He faithfully attended the GHS board meetings and the Oktoberfest Committee meetings even when his health required the use of his electric scooter. He seemed to always have a smile on his face and shared his pleasant personality with all who shared a conversation with him.



Ethel Stephan passed away on January 15, 2023. She was still spunky and knowledgeable at the age of 100. Ethel and her husband Walter "Wally" were lifetime members of St. Boniface Catholic Church and were married there in 1945. Both were also longtime members of the GHS. For many years they took their Case tractor and other antique farm equipment to participate in Germantown and Richfield holiday parades. In her younger years Ethel was a member of Tony's Reveller's Polka Band. She loved to sing many popular classics like "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" as well as "Ave Maria."

Germantown history and genealogy....

By Mary Herrick, Volunteer Genealogist
and Jim Dix, President

THE HISTORY OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Beginning

2024 marks the 50th anniversary of the Germantown Historical Society.

In 1963 Irene Blau moved into a historic 1860 farmhouse in Germantown. This move was the beginning of her interest in Germantown's local history. She would sketch local historic buildings and interview residents to learn about their properties and the people who first lived there. Irene discovered that many of these existing buildings were the homes of the original pioneer settlers from the 1840's to 1860's.

Soon afterward Irene joined the local Germantown Jr. Women's Club. Irene and other club members would take small historic artifacts to the local schools and talk to the children about them. Often Irene was dressed in period costume, and eventually she became known as "The History Lady".

Christ Church

In 1974 this small group of ladies decided to create the Germantown Historical Society. Irene Blau became the charter president. During their first year they were challenged to accept a major project. The vacant historic 1862 Christ Church building was offered to them in a lease agreement for \$1 a year. The building belonged to Our Saviour's Church, but was only used for storage, and the building needed to be restored to be able to be occupied again.

Their vision was not only to preserve the church but to repurpose it as a museum of local history. This would require many volunteer hours of work and donations in order to hire professional assistance. The Germantown community responded. Irene reached out to the schools to involve the students in the project. She contacted the Germantown High School National Honor Society advisor and met William Gay. They worked together on the church cleanup project and also formed a bond collaborating for many years on Historical Society projects.



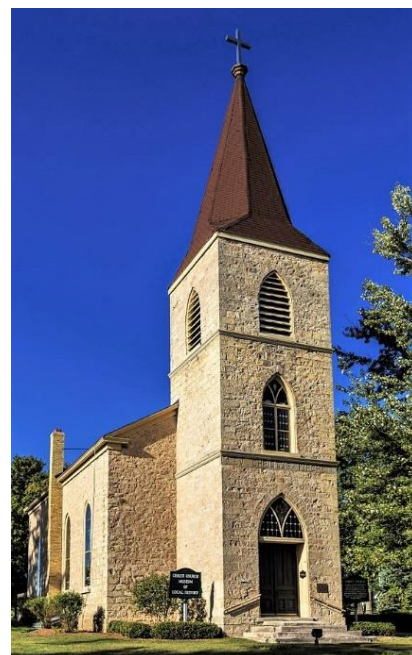
After many dedicated hours of work the museum was opened in the bicentennial year of 1976.

Pictured here is Irene Blau welcoming visitors to come inside for the first time. With her are (L) Gary Lemke, representing Our Saviour's United Church of Christ and William Wetterau, Germantown Village President

The church became known as Christ Church Museum of Local History. In 1983 Christ Church was placed on the NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORICAL PLACES. A sign was placed over the inside doorway of the church in 2023. It reads "Welcome to Christ Church, through these doors many of the first settlers came to find strength in their search for freedom".



Inside the museum, you will find many original artifacts which demonstrate how life was in the late 1800's to the early 1900's. The front area of the museum is the original altar, pulpit, and pews from an earlier renovation in 1901. The stained-glass windows were added in 1914 and the pump organ, dated 1903 was donated by the Bast family. The church museum was open to the public on weekends and hosted special events. As the society grew so did the activities, like the Sinter Clausen Christmas concerts, bake sales, American doll events and Pioneer Days. Those early tours were made possible by volunteers Millie Schuldt and Eileen Densow, Dorothy Naab, Bob and Elaine Kuhn.



Wolf Haus Family Property

In 1990 the property across the street became available for sale. Irene Blau had the idea to obtain the property for use as a historic park. The property was 9.5 acres with a house and old barn on it. She had a goal to use the house as a resource center for local history and genealogy research. Since the community had been contributing many artifacts, the two additional buildings also provided more display and storage space. About this time a small historical shed was offered to the Historical Society by Carlton Martin. The Hessischer Verein Club moved the shed from its original site and reassembled it near the apple orchard on the westside of the new park. They set it up to represent a blacksmith shop, one of the buildings from the original settlement that had been demolished.

Wolf Haus

The Historical Society turned its attention to the condition of the Wolf Haus. As the project began, the aluminum siding was removed, and they were surprised to discover it was a half-timber house. They decided to reach out to Alan Pape who was the historic building expert at Old World Wisconsin. Based on his findings they were amazed at the importance of the house.



It was built in the 1850's in the German Hunsruck Fachwerk style. The Wolf Haus was the home of the Valentine Wolf family. Valentine and Margarethe Klumb Wolf lived there with their twelve children. He was the local shoemaker.

It turned into a major project which required a large sum of money, \$160,000 to restore the house. The Society reached out to many organizations and individuals to assist in the endeavor. The Jefferies Family Foundation was interested in helping preserve this historical building. They offered a matching grant of \$80,000. So, plans began for the restoration of the Wolf Haus.

The Historical Society began negotiating with the Village of Germantown to create a new village park. With the help of a Village Board member, Mr. Wetterau, an agreement was reached. It was named Dheinsville Historical Park. The Dhein family were one of the first pioneer families to settle in Germantown. The park was dedicated in 1994.

With the creation of the new park the Historical Society sponsored their first Oktoberfest event. It allowed the public to experience authentic German heritage in music, dance, food, and fun known as Gemütlichkeit.



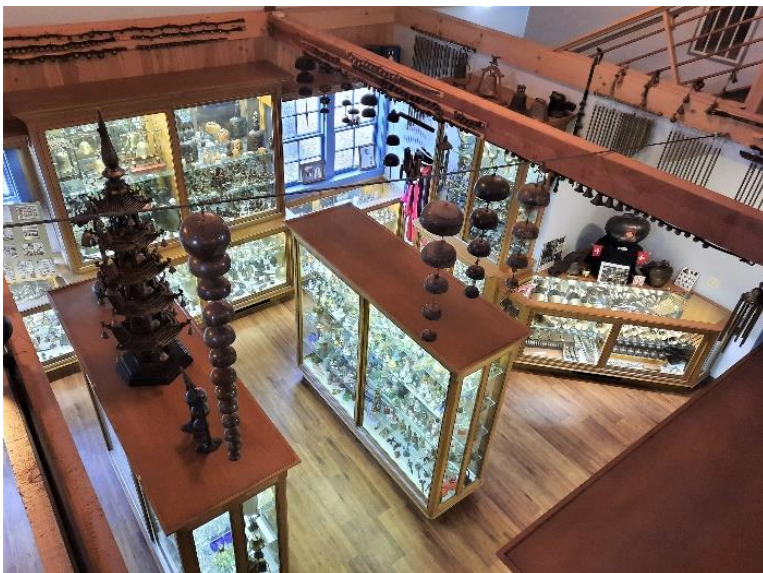
In 1998 the Wolf Haus restoration was completed and opened as a museum and research center. Families donated genealogies which are now available for research along with artifacts that were given to the Historical Society. Volunteer, Carol Barkow hand wrote names from genealogies onto index cards beginning in the 1980's. Eventually they numbered 65,000. Another volunteer, Bob Kohls assisted researchers to find information on their family's history.

Also, displayed inside are shoes and shoemaking forms from the 1860's and artifacts from that era.

The Barn

The next major project would be the restoration of the Wolf family barn.

The story of Sila Lydia Bast. When Sila Bast was a small child, she was walking through a field on her family's farm in Rockfield. She noticed an old bell laying on the ground. When she picked it up, this was the start of her lifelong passion of collecting bells. Her collection would cover her travels around the world and her family and friends would also bring her gifts of bells as they traveled.



The collection reached 5,000 bells. After Sila died her collection was passed on to her niece, Ernella Hunzinger who became the caretaker of the bells. After Ernella died her estate donated the bells to the Historical Society along with funds to create a display to house the bells. In 1999 the Wolf family barn restoration began. The executor of Ernella's estate, along with the Bast family would determine how the bells would be

displayed. They wanted the bells to be presented to the public in a beautiful and unique manner. The collection agreement included stipulations: no bells can be added or subtracted from the collection and the bells must be displayed for public viewing. The Sila Lydia Bast Museum was opened to the public in July, 2000 in the renovated Wolf family barn.

Calvary Church, in Germantown, was closed around the same time as the restoration of the Bell Museum. The church gave the large bell from the tower to the Orville Jake Klumb family who had originally donated the bell to the church. When the restoration of the Bell Museum was completed, Doris Klumb donated the bell to the Germantown Historical Society.

The silo of the Wolf Family barn is located at the entrance of the Bell Museum. Because of the restrictions in the Bast Bell Collection Agreement, the bell which was donated by the Klumb family was hung in the top of the silo of the barn. This area is not part of the main display area of the Bast bells. The single bell is rung at the conclusion of each museum tour. It has retained the melodious sound of a church bell.

As you enter the Bell Museum, located on the wall is a picture of Sila along with two of her brothers, Alvin George and Edwin Otto, which was taken in 1903. There is also a family portrait of the Bast family which is said to be the only picture with all members of the family. The beautiful frame is hand carved from a tree that grew on the Bast family farm.

Historical Room

The barn has a separate room which contains artifacts on loan from the Germantown Volunteer Fire Company, including a restored 1929 Seagrave fire truck. The truck is featured in the Germantown Fourth of July parade each year. Also, on display are Fire Company artifacts such as a hose wheel which was pulled by horses, vintage uniforms, and photos of prior fire chiefs. The room contains many large framed pictures showing firemen and their equipment which was used in the mid 1800's and early 1900's.



There is also a gambling wheel which has an interesting story which we relate to visitors during the tour of the building.

There are many other artifacts located around the room. On the desk is a unique 1913 Oliver #5 visible typewriter which was used to type reports. On the floor next to the desk is a spittoon from a bygone era.

In 2022 the Historical Society received a donation from the daughter of the first Germantown Police Chief, Frank Riemer. On display are his personal effects from the time he served as Police Chief including his badge from the Germantown Police Department, fingerprint kit, car roof red light, and cap.

The Park

There are several other structures located on the grounds. The Kraemer and Smithers Gazabo was built in 2003 as a sitting area for visitors to enjoy the park. The Kraemer and Smithers families along with other donors made this octagon shelter possible.

A German potato pancake haus was moved to the park in 2008. It formally had been used by the Hessischer Verein Club for parades and special events. In 2021 it was refurbished with structural repairs and a new coat of paint. It is used for food sales during events like Oktoberfest.

Special Events

In the year 2009, Irene Blau retired as president of the historical society after serving for 35 years.

A new era began with the first Dachshund Dog Race during Oktoberfest. The event has become the main draw for hundreds of people attending the event each year at Dheinsville Park.

There was talk for a long time about the need for the history of the community to be recorded in a comprehensive way. This brought about the publication of the first volume of the Germantown history books. The first book covers the early years of the settlement, 1838 to 1915. The book was written and pictures were selected by Irene Blau and William Gay. Since then, two additional books on the history of Germantown were written. They have become the signature of the Germantown Historical Society.

In 2012 the church interior was refurbished with a new coat of paint to closely resemble the original colors.

After many years of planning and fundraising under the direction of then Society President, Jeff Dhein, a Festhalle was constructed and dedicated in 2020. The sign located on the front of the building reads “The Muehl Family Festhalle”. The Muehl family had two daughters, Gladys and Inez, both were schoolteachers who taught in Germantown and West Bend. The last family member to pass away was Gladys. Since there were no heirs, \$100,000 was donated by Gladys’ estate for the naming rights of the Festhalle. The Festhalle is the center of the annual celebration of Oktoberfest.



In 2022 Rex Melius and the Cemeterians volunteers restored and preserved every old gravestone in the Christ Church Cemetery.

In 2023 a major project was finally completed. The ten Christ Church stained-glass windows were restored and preserved for future generations.

This year 2024 we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Germantown Historical Society. This article shows the development of the museums and the park over the last 50 years, and a little of the history behind how that all happened. This year there are plans in the works for a restoration and expansion of the current structure attached to the back of the church.

On Christmas Day, 2023 Irene Blau passed away, but Irene’s vision still lives on. The Germantown Historical Society continues to preserve the Germantown heritage for future generations by remembering our ancestors and their traditions.

DANKE IHNEN SEHR --- THANK YOU VERY MUCH

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SAVE THE DATE

**JOIN US FOR THE
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING – TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 2024 5:00 pm**

**We are planning an Annual Membership Meeting
at Fox & Hounds Restaurant & Tavern
Details included.**

SAVE ANOTHER IMPORTANT DATE

**THE GERMANTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
IS CELEBRATING ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY**

**We are having an informal gathering of GHS Members
And Friends for a day of family fun at Dheinsville Historic Park
Saturday, July 13, 2024 12-6 pm
Details included.**

EMAIL REQUEST

We are trying to upgrade our mailing list to include email addresses. You can receive your Newsletters or timely reminders of upcoming events via email. Also, our Newsletters have several pictures which are much clearer and in color on the internet version.

If you wish to receive Newsletters via your email, please send your email address to Jim Dix at ghsjdix@gmail.com so we can update your record. Thank you.

2024 Dates to Remember:

April 16 - Annual Meeting – Third Tuesday of April

June 5 - Wolf Haus Opens for the Season, Wednesdays 1-4 pm

June 5 - Bast Bell and Church Museums Open by Appointment; or dates to be determined

July 13 – 50th Anniversary – Germantown Historical Society

September 28 & 29 - 2024 Oktoberfest – 30th Anniversary

September 30 — Wolf Haus, Bast Bell and Church Museums Close for the Season

The Wolf Haus & Genealogy Research Center will be open on Wednesdays from 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm from June 5th thru September 30th

The Bast Bell Museum and Christ Church Museum of Local History can be toured during Wolf Haus Museum hours, inquire there. Also, groups are welcome to tour all three museums by appointment.

We Hope to See You

GERMANTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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262-628-3170