

# KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 641, Covington, Kentucky 41012

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## KCHS BOARD MEETING

November 10, 1998

at Kenton County Library  
5th & Scott



Pionier Joseph Hermes.

(Einer d. Gruender. Praes. in 1871 u. '92.)

## Bulletin

## November 1998

### THE THREE LIVES OF THE HERMES BUILDING

The property at 110-112 East Fourth Street (Fourth and Court) has led a stable but colorful life. First it was a saloon named The Covington and Newport Exchange, built and owned by Joseph Hermes, a native of Germany. Later it became a printing company, Wolff Standard Printing Works, owned by Alban Wolff, also a native of Germany. The Hermes building has just been renovated, and has opened again as a upscale saloon, Jack Quinn's Irish Ale House & Pub, owned by Jack Welles and Aidan C. Bowles, natives of Ireland.

Joseph Hermes was born in 1835. Newspaper accounts report that he had a 25th Anniversary party celebrating his immigration to the United States on June 4, 1853.<sup>1</sup> He was politically active in the community during his life in Covington as well as owner and operator of several different saloons in various parts of Covington.

Newspaper reports reveal, in their biased way, a man who was opinionated and vocal in local and state politics. In 1873, the Covington Journal reports that Mr. Hermes was a Democratic candidate for Legislature (although later he is described as a liberal Republican) and that he was the president of The German-American Mutual Protection Association of Covington, Kentucky nicknamed "The Saloon-Keepers Society." As the formal name hints, the main purpose of the organization was to abolish the Sunday Law.<sup>2</sup> In 1874, the Covington Journal reported that Joseph Hermes was "the sole Liberal Republican [characterized] as the 'Dead Sea Fruit of Greeleyism.'" The paper went on to say, "He has taken the high ground against prayer, the Bible and Temperance by voting against opening the House with prayer, against buying Bibles for the State Library and against the use of the hall for the convention of Good Templars (temperance)."<sup>3</sup> He was indicted by the Grand Jury for serving liquor to a minor. It ended with a hung jury.<sup>4</sup> He was snubbed at a political rally where he was scheduled to give a speech.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Hermes was active in German clubs and associations. He was called upon to give political speeches in German,<sup>6</sup> and in 1873, Mr. Hermes founded a German language newspaper called "Die Geganwelt." It lasted just one year.<sup>7</sup>

The first record of his business in the Covington Directory is in 1878 when he established a saloon at 321 Scott Street, also his residence. The November before the opening, newspapers announced that he issued printed invitations to a "Thanksgiving spread" in his new place, complete with an orchestra.<sup>8</sup> He soon made the business into a restaurant as well as a saloon, selling wine, beer and "old Rye and Bourbon whiskies."

In 1888, Mr. Hermes bought property at Fourth and Court Streets across the street from the Courthouse. He built a fine three-story building which would house The Covington and Newport Exchange, "a Fine Saloon and Restaurant." The Hermes family lived for a while on the second floor, and on the third floor was "the most elegant and comfortable hall in the city.....for balls, parties, and private assemblies..."<sup>9</sup>

In April 1899, the Hermes Building was used as a temporary City Hall.<sup>10</sup> Sources do not say if the saloon was closed during this period, but "a famous trial" was held there. A black man by the name of Bishop was accused of shooting McGreager, a police officer. After the trial, he was promptly taken down to the riverbank and was hanged.<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Hermes continued in politics until the turn of the century, and died in 1918.

In the early part of the 20th century, Alban Wolff, a native of Germany, moved to Covington. He owned a print shop where Dick's Liquor is now located. In 1926, he bought the Hermes Building across the street for his printing presses.

The print shop occupied the basement and the first floor. Four big, heavy presses were in one room running twelve hours a day. The floor would rock, but the 3 X 12 inch beams held up well. This building was, after all, built by a native of Germany.<sup>12</sup>

The second and third floors were made into three identical apartments. Alban Wolff divided the 3rd floor into two floors so that a fourth floor could be used for hanging laundry and a place where the children could play. The third floor windows are so large that both floors had windows available. The Wolff family occupied the 3rd floor where Phillip Wolff, grandson and most recent owner, was born.<sup>13</sup>

Phil Wolff has many stories about those years including the time a fire started in the basement. The independent German, Alban Wolff, didn't call the Covington Fire department. He ran across

the street to the American Legion Hall where a dance was being held. The men came to the rescue and put the fire out themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Many of Mr. Wolff's family worked in the printing company through the years including Aunt Tilley who worked until she was quite elderly. Always dressed in black, Aunt Tilley ran the place with an iron fist. She never married and had one room in the building filled with her dowry of silver, linens and accessories. Her dowry was still intact when she died at the age of ninety-nine.<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Wolff found many interesting things in his grandfather's desk years after his death. Detailed blueprints revealed a secret dream the grandfather had had to expand the printing company and build a book publishing company on the third of the block which he owned. The Depression came, and the dream was shoved into the back of the desk drawer. No one ever knew, not even Aunt Tilley.<sup>16</sup>

Copies of rent receipts from the apartments for \$18 a month were found. A ledger filled with records of loans to Covington citizens reveal that Mr. Wolff's grandfather was what was called a "backroom banker."

A murder also occurred in the Hermes Building. One of the tenants was Phil Wolff's babysitter, Beulah. She shot

her lover four or five times when she found him in her bed with another woman. The judge recommended that she plead "not guilty." She said she couldn't do that because she shot the man four or five times. She was given a light sentence under the "Heat of Passion Law."<sup>17</sup> (It is rumored that a ghost resides in the building. Just ask the manager of Jack Quinn's Irish Pub.)<sup>18</sup>

Mr. Wolff and his partner were planning to leave the Hermes Building to their sons. Tragedy struck both sons within a few years of each other. After seventy years in the same family, it seemed time to sell.<sup>19</sup>

In 1997, Jack Welles and Aidan Bowles bought the building to renovate into a beautiful Irish pub. They have restored much of the flavor of the place. Most of the wood floors are original. Historic Preservationists decreed that patches of new floor clearly show which parts are original. All of the woodwork is original. The third floor is being restored for the purpose of private parties and elegant balls....just like the old days. Although the food is Irish, not German, and the ales are Irish instead of German, the authenticity of another era has been restored.





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N.W. Cor. 4th and Court Av., COVINGTON, KY.  
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THE FINEST BRANDS OF  
IMPORTED and DOMESTIC WINES, LIQUORS and CIGARS.  
**JOSEPH HERMES, Proprietor.**

Kenton County Historical Society membership dues are \$10 per year: \$5 for students and Senior Citizens.

Subscriptions to Northern Kentucky Heritage Magazine, a semi-annual magazine of regional history covering ten counties, are \$12 a year for KCHS members: \$15 a year for non-members.

To subscribe to the magazine or become a member of KCHS, please mail check to KCHS, P. O. Box 641, Covington, KY 41012

#### Notes

- 1. Newport Local, June 4, 1878, p. 3.
2. Covington Journal, August 2, 1873, p. 2.
3. CJ, January 1, 1874, p. 1.
4. Ticket, November 22, 1876, p. 3.
5. Kentucky Post, September 18, 1899, p. 1.
6. NL, September 23, 1876, p. 2.
7. CJ, November 1, 1873, p. 3.
8. Daily Commonwealth, November 28, 1877, p.1.
9. Covington Directory
10. Cincinnati Enquirer, April 19, 1899, p. 8.
11. Interview, Phillip Wolff, September 20, 1998.
12. Ibid.
13. Interview, Phillip Wolff, October 26, 1998.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. Sept. 20.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Interview, Aidan Bowles, September 19, 1998.
19. Ibid. Sept. 20.

#### From the president.....

For those of you who are Northern Kentucky Heritage subscribers (and, thankfully, that is most of you), your next issue is to be mailed shortly. This will be the first issue of the sixth year of the publication! The subscription level is still just over 700. That is somewhat disappointing to me, as I am convinced there are many more Northern Kentuckians who are actively interested in their history enough to invest \$12 to \$15 in it. The magazine still struggles to pay its bills from issue to issue.

The Society has embarked on 1999 with two new members to the Board, Emily Bailey and Linda Carter. The Board will be meeting to deal with several problems and issues. Problem number one is the desperate need for a Program Chairperson. The job description calls for planning and coordinating monthly meetings.

The three volumes of "Collected Papers" now out of print, are being keyed on computer disc for editing and re-publishing in a more attractive and readable format with addition of illustrations and photos. This work will still be published by photocopy process due to cost considerations, although printing would be preferable.

The Society will be publishing the manuscript of Joseph Donnelly on the history of Newport Barracks. We hope to produce this more than 70-page work in cooperation with Campbell County's Society. A synopsis of his work will appear in this issue of the Northern Kentucky Heritage.

Grant applications continue to be addressed. An estimated \$3000 to \$4000 is needed for purchase of a copier-printer and a small photocopier. There is also a cost to put the Society "on line." The services of the Society would be more widely available if we were on the internet.

On the other hand, the Kenton County Library has offered their website to the Society until we can do it ourselves. KCHS has given them all necessary information. The site address is [www.Kenton.LIB.KY.US](http://www.Kenton.LIB.KY.US). Check out this site for information on KCHS.

Karl Lietzenmayer

Dedicated to preserving our heritage as the "Gateway to the South"

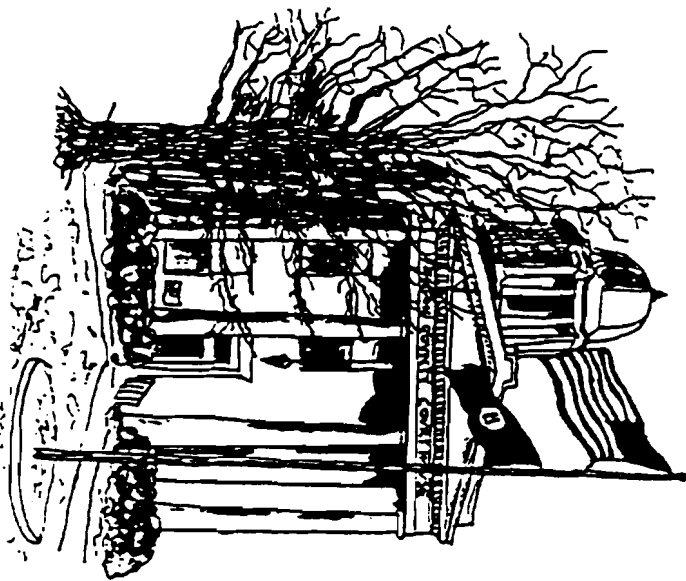
Kenton County Historical Society  
P. O. Box 641  
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**INSIDE:**

**The Three Lives of the Hermes Building**