

“The Founding of Johnsonville”

Scott Noegel

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They were fortunate. When Peter Mog and his brother-in-law, Friedrich Jacob Nohl, arrived to claim their “Congress Lands” on February 1, 1846, there had been no frost or snow that year. Sensing their timing was good, the two had left Milwaukee, where they had been living, and made their way entirely on foot to what later would become Johnsonville. Meanwhile, Maria Magdalena, Friedrich’s wife and Peter’s older sister, stayed behind. The trek was no easy task. From Milwaukee to Green Bay sprawled a primeval forest that had existed for tens of thousands of years. In 1812, the United States government had converted the prehistoric north south “Indian trail” into a military road, but it was barely wide enough for a wagon.

When they arrived they immediately began clearing timber to build a log cabin on Peter’s land on the hill just east of the Sheboygan River. In fact, they were the first settlers to fell a tree in the whole region. After completing the cabin, Peter and Friedrich returned to Milwaukee by foot and disposed of their properties. They then purchased a yoke of oxen, supplies to last a number of months, and a hand-made lumber wagon rigged with a cover, and set out with Maria for their new home. After several arduous weeks they finally arrived, only to encounter many sleepless nights, as descendants would recall.

Their first night in the wilderness, before they could sleep, they were obliged to build a fence. After this the men took turns staying up and keeping fires burning to protect the wild oxen from the wild beasts, such as wolves, bear, lynx, wild cats, and panthers, which infested the woods, until a barn could be built... After they provided for protection of the oxen, their next move was to blaze trails toward the Sheboygan River and other lowland such as marshes, which were burned over and were (*sic*) grass and hay grown (*sic*). Here the cattle were pastured. They also blazed trails to the nearest white settlers, about three or four miles away.¹

When they arrived to occupy their homestead they found unexpected neighbors. An Indian village of some fifty Winipyagohagi (i.e., “Winnebagos”) was encamped on the west side of the river. The tribe was eager to meet them, and they frequently “came across in their birch bark canoes called Tsche Mah; and visited with the white settlers...”² They proved incredibly helpful.

...down at the river the Indians had a friendly pow wow for the arrival of pale face settlers... The Indians were very friendly and showed them how they plant Indian corn, (ma-dam-a-na-bu), in each hole or hills they put in a chunk of sucker, which done remarkable well, also showed them planting potatoes and various vegetables.³

They were so close with the Native Americans that they and their children learned their languages and hunting customs. They also respected their knowledge of medicinal plants. Above all, they were tolerant and learned from their way of life. A brief incident passed down in the family is illustrative. One time a tribal member had quietly helped himself to a dried ham that Peter had hung out on his property. Neighbors urged Peter to take action against the thief, but he did not regard it as theft since he felt that, as was their custom, whoever took his ham needed it and would bring something back to him in kind. This turned out to be correct, as the tribesman soon returned with fish and furs in gratitude.

Footnotes

1 See the *Plymouth Herald*, July 26, 1924. The typographical errors for “where” and “grew” are original.

2 The *Plymouth Herald*, July 26, 1924.

3 See the memoirs of Friedrich and Maria’s son, William George Nohl, in the Wisconsin State Historical Society. The broken English reflects his German tongue.

As was the case for Peter, Friedrich, and Maria, the earliest Wisconsin settlers depended on the First Peoples for survival. Without their knowledge of the region's flora and fauna and the massive forest that engulfed them, they might not have made it. Moreover, neither of them had been farmers. Peter and his sister Maria, came from a line of vegetable oil mill refiners in Sargenroth, in the Hunsrück region of the Rhineland. Friedrich was originally from Pleizenhausen, but he had purchased a vineyard in Alsace-Lorraine, before emigrating. So both of them had to learn the farmer's craft from scratch. Moreover, there was no one to help them with their work.

Then, in 1847, a year after they founded the settlement, a wave of immigrants, many from Lippe Detmold, came and took up a number of properties in the region. The rapid arrival of so many people made life in the forest more interesting and it increased the work force available for communal projects. Since Peter and Friedrich owned the only pair of oxen in the region, they loaned them to the colonists who worked their lands in exchange. Sometimes they did not have their oxen for months at a time.

Working with the colonists required a certain degree of sensitivity. The Lipper settlers were a deeply religious colony that sought to escape persecution for their opposition to the union of the German Reform and Lutheran Churches in Germany. Yet, Peter and Friedrich did not belong to the church.⁴ In fact, they came to America primarily for economic reasons. Moreover, like many German immigrants to Wisconsin, they sought not religious freedom, but freedom from religion.

Such people were known as Freidenkenden, "free thinkers." Indeed, it would be a mistake to think of early Wisconsin as populated solely by the pious. A couple of historical anecdotes from early Sheboygan County are rather telling. When a new pastor arrived in the Rhine Township in 1859, one farmer greeted him by saying, "We don't need any priests; we are in a free country!"⁵

Another bemoaned the very presence of pastors:

In Germany they were our bosses, but here we are. What does he do for the four hundred dollars? During the week he teaches and beats our youngsters, and on Sundays he preaches to us for an hour. And besides, we are all young fellows and have lots of children. For every christening he gets two dollars. And then he brings along with him to the christening his entire family, and when they are ready to drive home, he is given a sack of potatoes or apples, a ham, a winter sausage [Mettworst], a rooster, or a drake. That's surely enough for his work⁶

In most regions in early Wisconsin the freethinker movement was not an organization, per se, but rather a loose affiliation for folks who rejected what they felt to be the intrusion of religious institutions into matters of personal life. Free thinkers held a wide variety of divergent philosophical viewpoints and many later would belong to fraternal organizations like the Turnverein and Freemasons. Many free thinkers, like Peter and Friedrich, were not atheists. In fact, they continued to follow some church traditions, such as baptism, to avoid stigmatization in the community. They simply did not participate in church life. To be sure, they were not the only free thinkers in the village, but they were a minority.

Footnotes

4 The memoirs of William Nohl record that Friedrich felt the settlers from Lippe made too much of their religiosity. As he apparently put it, "they never get over it" (p. 2).

5 See J. H. A. Lacher, "Rev. Louis Von Rague's Experiences in Sheboygan County," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 10 (1927), pp. 435-452, citation on p. 438.

6 Lacher, "Rev. Louis Von Rague's Experiences in Sheboygan County," p. 445.



Despite such differences, Peter, Friedrich, and Maria got on very well in the community, as they had with the Winipyagohagi. In fact, six years after founding the settlement, Peter Mog married Friedericka Wehrman, one of the Lipper colonists.

After their marriage, they built a new home and barn on Peter's land adjacent to the Sheboygan River. There they had eleven children, two of whom, sadly passed away as youngsters. Friedrich and Maria Nohl would have ten children of their own, seven of whom would survive into adulthood.

Within a decade, the two couples watched their settlement transform into a German village with a general store, saw mill, blacksmith shop, butcher shop, school,⁷ and no less than three saloons, the latter of which led the villagers to name their town "Schnappsville."⁸

Members of the Lipper colony also built a church southeast of the village just west and across the street from the town's civil cemetery.⁹
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Peter and Friedericke Mog



Above: Johnsonville, ca. 1909, looking east across the Sheboygan River. Courtesy of the SCHRC. The Mog residence is on on the left. The Nohl residence is just up the hill behind the trees.

The land that Peter and Friedrich saw when they first arrived quickly became a distant memory, but life was now less isolated and less difficult. The risks they took to immigrate and to settle a homestead in the middle of an ancient forest had paid off. They had learned to negotiate their own beliefs and principles in a world of unanticipated religious diversity. They did well for themselves, they had fulfilled the New World dream, and they now were raising their children in a vibrant young community. They were fortunate.¹⁰

Footnotes

⁷ Peter and Friedrich donated the land on which the school was built in 1850. It sat between their settlements and continued in operation until June 9, 1966.

⁸ However, the United States government strongly encouraged them to name their town after President Andrew Johnson.

⁹ The church, now the Saron United Church in Christ, purchased the cemetery for one dollar on December 18, 1930. Previously, the church considered it unholy ground. Many gravestones at the civil cemetery record names that are not found in the early church books.

¹⁰ Peter Mog died on January 30, 1895. He was buried exactly fifty years to the day after he and Friedrich arrived to build their homestead.

Author Bio

Scott Noegel is the great-great grandson of Peter Mog. Currently, he is Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Studies and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Washington in Seattle. He recently completed a book entitled *A Pioneering King: the Mog, Eckardt, Fohl, and Noegel families of Wisconsin*. He now is writing a book on the history of Johnsonville. Those with stories and photographs relating to Johnsonville are encouraged to reach him at snoegel@uw.edu or (hm) 206-367-7787. Photo credits: Jane Kreutzer for the photograph of Peter and Friedericke Mog.