

*A German Unionist on a Confederate Island:  
The Secession Crisis in Galveston's German-American Community, 1830-1861*

**An Honors Thesis (HIST 470)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the ways in which German-Americans in Galveston, Texas developed their political ideologies and uncovers why they generally accepted secession after the presidential election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Through examining German immigration to Texas, settlement in Galveston, and economic, social, and cultural identity on an overwhelmingly Confederate island, this essay will demonstrate how interactions between German-Americans and their Anglo-Texan neighbors shaped German-American opinions on secession directly before the Civil War. German-Americans in Galveston had a complicated relationship with secession. Unlike the majority of southerners, they did not hold vested interest in the future of slavery, nor did they have strong cultural ties to the South. Rather, many German-Americans felt deep loyalty to their new homeland and strove to do whatever appeared best for the state of Texas. This paper argues that, while at first, many German-Americans in Galveston leaned toward unionism, after the election of President Abraham Lincoln, opinion greatly shifted. When it became clear that Texas was going to secede from the Union, most Galvestonian Germans accepted secessionism and allied with their Anglo-Texan neighbors, assimilating into the wider Galveston dogma to maintain their economic and social standings and to prevent the resurfacing of anti-German sentiments in the South. The attack on Ferdinand Flake's print shop by a German-American mob serves as an important case study that demonstrates how far Germans were willing to go to protect their self-interests and their community in Galveston, Texas.

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## Process Analysis

The following project serves as a culmination of the skills I have learned and practiced in the History Department's senior research seminar and during my time as a History student at Ball State University. The purpose of the senior research seminar course was to develop a research topic in the area of the U.S. Civil War and write an article-length essay by the end of the semester. As a German minor with a strong interest in twentieth-century Central European history, I wanted to integrate my personal interests when selecting the topic of my historical essay. After exploring possible topics during the first half of the senior research seminar course, I chose to examine German-American politics on the eve of the Civil War. Because most scholarship on German-Americans in the nineteenth century focuses on communities in the North and Midwest, I decided to research the opinions of German-Americans in the Confederate South. To dive deeply into group politics, I knew I would need to concentrate my research on a specific city. In my preliminary research, three southern cities with high German-American populations stood out as possibilities: New Orleans, Charleston, and Galveston. I ended up selecting Galveston, Texas because it was an island-city with a unique maritime culture, which set it apart from most cotton-based cities in the South. Researching Galveston was also a logical choice because Texas had a much higher proportion of German immigrants than the rest of the southern states in the mid-nineteenth century.

By studying the reactions of recently-immigrated Galvestonian Germans, I was able to explore how German-Americans assimilated to the Southern slave society. My research started in 1830, the year that the United States began to experience increased rates of German immigration, and ended with the secession of Texas in 1861. Examining the time in between these two years allowed me to discuss the role that German immigrants played in Galveston's

economics, social hierarchy, and culture in order to explain how and why most Galvestonian Germans changed their minds about disunion by late 1860. I also used the burning of German editor Flake Ferdinand's print shop as an illustrative example of how German-American attitudes toward secessionism shifted after the Election of 1860 and to demonstrate how far German-Americans were willing to go to protect themselves and their community in Galveston. Arguing that the majority of Galveston's German population accepted secessionism after the election of President Abraham Lincoln, my paper attempts to dispel the abolitionist stereotype that German-Texans have been incorrectly branded with since the nineteenth century.

The process of writing this essay was arduous at times. In previous History courses, professors have provided me with the primary sources I needed to write historical essays. This course pushed me to find my own primary sources, which was a very difficult task. I struggled at first to find any primary sources because the newspaper from Galveston that I was hoping to use in my paper—Ferdinand Flake's *Die Union*—was stored on microfilm in Texas, and only some of the editions had been digitized. With my advisor's guidance, however, I began looking at the primary sources that other historians had used when writing secondary literature about Galveston. This method took me on the right path, and I was able to find newspaper articles, letters, and speeches that could be utilized in my paper. Another solution to the lack of available editions of *Die Union* was utilizing other newspapers from Galveston and other Texas cities, such as Ferdinand Lindheimer's *Neu Braunfelser Zeitung*, to fill the gaps. Supplementing my paper with other newspapers turned out to be very useful because it allowed me to explore how other German-Texan editors interpreted secession and the decisions of Ferdinand Flake. This essay should reflect my efforts let the primary sources guide my argument, rather than trying to make the sources fit the argument I wanted to present. Completing this project also taught me

that good historical essays interweave multiple historical “lenses” together to craft convincing arguments. Rather than simply describing German-Americans’ attitudes toward secession in Galveston, Texas, I explored how their economic opportunities, social position, and distinct culture shaped their political ideologies.

My thesis project adds to the narrative of Civil War history by challenging assumptions of ethnic group homogeneity in the nineteenth century. While many historians have oversimplified German-Americans’ political sympathies, this essay argues that German-Americans— like most ethnic and regional groups—held complicated and often contradicting beliefs about the future of the nation. This project also highlights the danger of stereotyping individuals by group identities through its description of the drastic measures German-Americans took in Galveston to rid themselves of the abolitionist label they had been given to protect their financial interests and safety. Overall, this essay sheds light on the fact that the Confederacy was a diverse region, occupied by people of different cultures, ethnicities, and opinions.

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**An Attack in the Night**

On the morning of Sunday, January 6, 1861, Ferdinand Flake embarked on his usual trek to the Strand District of downtown Galveston, Texas to open his shop, a space that doubled as a seed store and a printing outfit. Upon reaching the building, Flake found ruins where his shop once stood. The building had been burnt, and the type he used to print newspapers was scattered all over the alley.<sup>1</sup> In a scathing column, published in *The Civilian and Gazette* the following Tuesday, Flake condemned those who had broken into his shop, claiming that the unknown assailants had destroyed “to the amount of \$2,000” worth of property and “many years of hard earned gains.”<sup>2</sup> While the individuals responsible for the destruction of Flake’s shop were never identified, their motive was clear to the entire community of Galveston. The attack was intended as a warning for any who would dare side with the Union over the newly-forming Confederate States of America.

Ferdinand Flake, the editor and publisher of the tri-weekly German-language newspaper, *Die Union*, was a known unionist throughout Galveston. As an outspoken opponent of the proposed reopening of the African slave trade and a harsh critic of secession, Flake had acquired many enemies on the island, making himself a target for anti-unionist violence. The day that the attack on his shop occurred, Flake had published a letter in English in *Die Union* that condemned South Carolina’s secession and pledged support to the Union, declaring “Texas stands as a sentinel on the outskirts of the Union. Come what may she will never desert her post.”<sup>3</sup> The passionate editorial was met with outrage and combated by violence just hours after it was released to the public.

Mystery still shrouds the events that occurred on the night of January 5, 1861. Some secondary sources characterize the group who demolished Flake's shop as an angry mob of nativist Anglo-Texans, trying to scare the German-American community into submission to secessionism; however, it was widely believed at the time that the mob was composed of German-Americans who committed the act to silence Flake. Multiple newspaper at the time, including the San Antonio *Herald*, the LaGrange *True Issue*, and the Austin *State Gazette*, reported that "the outrage" was the work of Germans who were "determined to demolish *Die Union* because it was an 'abolitionist concern.'"<sup>4</sup> As the editor of the widest circulating paper in Galveston, a businessman in the downtown district of the island, and a local politician, Ferdinand Flake was not only a leader in Galveston's German-American community; he was also the mouthpiece that "often served as [his] German readers' primary means of communication with the English-speaking world."<sup>5</sup> An attack on Flake's press by fellow Germans signals significant tension within the Galveston German community in 1861. Fighting for their best interests, these immigrants took drastic measures to disassociate with Flake and silence the "abolitionist concern" with which they were being identified.

This paper aims to explore the ways in which German-Americans in Galveston developed their political ideologies and uncovers why they generally came to accept secession after the presidential election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Through examining German immigration to Texas, settlement in Galveston, and economic, social, and cultural identity on an overwhelmingly Confederate island, this essay will demonstrate how interactions between German-Americans and their Anglo-Texan neighbors shaped German-American opinions on secession directly before the Civil War. German-Americans in Galveston had a complicated relationship with secession. Unlike the majority of southerners, they did not hold vested interest

in the future of slavery, nor did they have “strong cultural ties to the South.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, many German-Americans felt deep loyalty to their new homeland and strove to do whatever appeared best for the state of Texas. This paper argues that, while at first, many German-Americans in Galveston, Texas leaned toward Unionism, after the election of President Abraham Lincoln, opinion greatly shifted. When it became clear that Texas was going to secede from the Union, most Galvestonian Germans accepted secessionism and allied with their Anglo-Texan neighbors, assimilating into the wider Galveston dogma to maintain their economic and social standings and to prevent the resurfacing of anti-German sentiments in the South. The attack on Ferdinand Flake’s print shop by a German-American mob serves as an important case study that demonstrates how far Germans were willing to go to protect their self-interests and their community in Galveston, Texas.

The majority of scholarship written about German immigration and settlement in the nineteenth century focuses on German-American communities in the industrial towns and cities of the North. Significantly less attention has been paid to German immigrant populations in the Confederate South. In looking to the causes of German immigration to the Southern United States, historians have stressed economic pressure as the major push factor that encouraged Germans to leave their homeland. In their book, first published in German in 2002 and translated to English in 2006, editors Walter D. Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich provide unique insight into the experiences of German Americans during the Civil War era. Using newly translated letters from the Bochumer Emigrant Letters Collection Project, they provide first-hand accounts from recently settled German immigrants. This essay utilizes letters of economic refugees to explain why German migrants left Europe and chose to settle in the United States.

Another cause of the influx of German immigrants into the United States was the failed German Revolution of 1848. Although an older work, Bruce C. Levine's book *The Spirit of 1848* provides the most detailed account of the journey of "Forty-Eighter," to date. Contextualizing the departure of liberal-minded Germans by describing how the failed Revolution impacted German populations, Levine highlights important push factors, such as political exile and the desire for increased liberty, that drove Germans to migrate to the United States. While most Germans in Galveston emigrated due to financial need, this essay uses insights gained from Levine's work to explain their unionist political ideologies.

Furthermore, many Germans who migrated to the United States during the nineteenth century traveled through the Port of Galveston and chose to settle on the island because of its promising trade economy. Earl Wesley Fornell's *The Galveston Era: The Texas Crescent on the Eve of Secession*, persuasively argues that Galveston held an anomalous place in the economy and society of pre-Civil War Texas. In great detail, Fornell describes the landscape of Galveston, its mercantile culture, and the relations among its residents—including new German immigrants. He also defines Galveston as a city very different from the rest of Texas, stating, "from the time of its emergence as the major seaport of Texas, Galveston carried an identity separate from the rest of the Lone Star State. The city's isolation arose from the fact that as an island it had a unique position of its own. The cosmopolitan characteristics of the port city separated it from the plantations, the inland hamlets, and the Great Plains by an intangible barrier."<sup>7</sup> The case study of Galveston presented in this paper qualifies Fornell's claims and explains how the island's cosmopolitan nature allowed German-Americans to prosper financially and occupy a privileged position in the social hierarchy of Galveston.

Most accounts of the German population in Texas portray the ethnic group as united in their political opinion. Two contemporary articles, Walter L. Buenger's "Secession and the Texas German Community" and Melvin Johnson's "A New Perspective for the Antebellum and Civil War Texas German Community," however, challenge this notion of homogeneity by exploring the formation of German political ideology. Comparing the writings of German editors Ferdinand Flake of Galveston and Ferdinand Lindheimer of New Braunfels and examining Germans' voting records, Buenger concludes that by 1861, "German opinion on secession closely paralleled the opinions of their fellow Texans."<sup>8</sup> Describing the discrimination that German-Americans faced at the hands of nativist parties, Johnson argues that very few Germans actually held abolitionist views. They were stereotyped as such by anti-immigrant forces that sought to disenfranchise German settlers. Using the attack on Flake's print shop as a case study, this essay expands upon the works of Buenger and Johnson by examining why Germans in Galveston assimilated into secessionism and how they took actions to protect themselves from nativist forces.

Also, while Ferdinand Flake has been painted as a radical that promoted unionism and despised slavery by the Texas History Association, Flake's publications in *Die Union* reveal that he was a slave owner who gradually accepted secession after Texas voted to leave the Union. The examination of Flake's motivations and publications presented in this paper will add depth to basic caricature of this historical actor by exploring his political affiliations, describing his role as the editor of the most popular newspaper in Galveston, and explaining the logic behind his pro-Union sympathies. In addition to Ferdinand Flake's *Die Union*, newspapers from other Texas cities are included to highlight the ways in which Flake differed from other editors operating at the same time and to provide descriptions of events that were not mentioned in *Die*

*Union*. The majority of the newspapers cited in this paper are archived in the University of North Texas' database, *The Portal to Texas History*. By integrating a variety of primary and secondary source information, this essay should present a detailed glimpse into a section of Civil War history that has been greatly neglected—ethnic identity in the Confederacy.

### **Moving West: German Immigration to Galveston**

During the antebellum period, the United States experienced unprecedented levels of immigration. Between the years 1830 and 1860, a large influx of Western Europeans sailed westward to settle in American towns and cities. Among the more than four million immigrants who left their homelands, approximately three-fourths came from Ireland or the German states.<sup>9</sup> Emigrants leaving Germany overwhelmingly favored the United States as their destination, with over ninety-percent choosing to settle there.<sup>10</sup> In the decade between 1850 and 1860 alone, over one million Germans journeyed to America, characterizing these years as the decade in which there was relatively “the heaviest rate of immigration the nation has ever experienced.”<sup>11</sup>

The departure of millions of Germans during the early-to-mid nineteenth century was fueled by a variety of intersecting push factors. The vast majority of immigrants who left Germany to settle in America during this time period were economic refugees.<sup>12</sup> With the advent of Germany's Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s, many agricultural jobs had been replaced by improved technology, making it increasingly difficult for farm laborers to make livable earnings. German peasants like Otto Albrecht, one of eight children in a family of farmers and tavern keepers, left their struggling family farms in German villages to look for more promising farming opportunities in the famously bountiful United States.<sup>13</sup>

Peasants were not the only social class that faced hardship during this time. Members of the educated middle-class suffered from a lack of economic opportunity in Germany in the early

nineteenth century. Emilie Dupre, for example, was an educated German man who hailed from a semi-wealthy family; however, he was unable to garner enough capital to start his own business. Failing to find well-paying jobs in the professional sector of Germany's economy, he migrated to the United States in 1857 and eventually found employment as a stockbroker in New York.<sup>14</sup> While not every German-American was as successful as Dupre, America represented the hope of better economic opportunities for many. Disproportionality, young, unmarried German men journeyed overseas to begin life anew and find higher paying professional jobs or start their own businesses in large urbanized areas in the North and Midwest regions of the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Another major push factor for German emigration was the failure of the German Revolution of 1848-49. Led primarily by liberal, middle-class professionals, revolutionaries hoped to bring an end to oppressive religious policies and monarchical rule in order to unite the German states under a new government based on "liberty, democracy, and national unity."<sup>16</sup> The fight for a new Germany was lost in 1849, however, when the revolution was crushed, and thousands of liberal revolutionaries were promptly cast into exile. These political exiles, famously called the "Forty-Eighters," fled to America in great numbers. Although "Forty-Eighters" "accounted for less than 1 percent of the Germans who emigrated to the United States in the 1850s, they had a significance far greater than their numbers" because they brought their "democratic and egalitarian ideals" with them to their new homeland.<sup>17</sup> Even politically-minded Germans who were not formally exiled sometimes chose to relocate to America. For example, Carl Hermanns, a liberal teacher from Hamberg in the Rhine, emigrated because "he did not want his work to be dependent on the throne or altar."<sup>18</sup> The United States was the popular choice for settlement for German liberals because it was a democratic nation built on the Enlightenment principles of freedom that the German Revolution had championed.

German migrants established themselves in communities around the United States, but the great majority of Germans settled in the North. Only seventy-thousand of the more than one and a half million German immigrants who entered the United States between 1830 and 1860 went to the South, and those who did typically settled in either New Orleans—the largest port city in the South—or the new state of Texas. The thirty-thousand Germans outside of New Orleans and Texas made up “a few urban clusters and a negligible rural diaspora” and “formed a low percentage...of the white population in cities of the Confederacy.”<sup>19</sup> While most German-Americans held relatively little political and economic power due to their lacking numbers in many communities, circumstances for German immigrants were much different in Texas.

Following a victorious conclusion to the war against Mexico in 1848, which was triggered by the U.S. annexation of Texas, the United States gained great swaths of territory in the South and the West. When the Republic of Texas gained statehood on December 29, 1845, it became a popular destination for German immigrants due to its abundant natural resources, low taxes, and cheap land grants.<sup>20</sup> For a low cost, Germans could begin farming or establishing businesses in Texan communities throughout the state. By the 1860s, the state had become home “to more than 20,000 of the 70,000 Germans residing in the eleven Confederate states.”<sup>21</sup> Most incoming Germans settled in what became known as the “German Belt,” a region of Texas that reached as far east as Galveston and as far west as Hondo. According to the Texas Historical Association, there were three major factors that contributed to settlement along this stretch of land: dominant personalities, “American letters,” and chain migration.<sup>22</sup>

Dominant personalities were individuals who saw great opportunity in emigrating to the United States and encouraged their countrymen to join them. These leaders would often write “America letters” to their home communities in Germany, in which they extolled the conditions

in the new country to garner excitement about immigration. Johann Ernst was one such dominant personality. Upon obtaining over four-thousand acres of land in Austin County, Texas in 1831, he wrote persuasive letters to former neighbors in Germany, declaring that Texas was an “earthly paradise.”<sup>23</sup> This influence from “new Americans” often convinced potential migrants to pack up their belongings and make the move to America. Over time, the influence from dominant personalities and the letters they wrote naturally led to chain migration, a process by which members of German communities moved to and settled in the United States together.<sup>24</sup> Living beside the same neighbors in the United States as they had in Germany allowed German-American communities to retain their cultural practices and ethnic identity. Chain migration was also politically advantageous. Because communities settled together, German-Americans in Texas were numerous enough to develop political strength in certain areas of Texas.<sup>25</sup>

Though German settlers occupied towns and cities throughout the “German Belt,” almost all entered the United States through the same location: the Port of Galveston. Referred to as “the Ellis Island of the South,” “hundreds of thousands of immigrants passed through the Port of Galveston, Texas” during the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> This island, located on the eastern coast of Texas, not only was the entry point for many Germans making their way into mainland Texas and other American states, it was also a city that developed an extremely large German population itself. By the 1860s, the population of Galveston was more than one-third German.<sup>27</sup>

Galveston appealed greatly to Germans because, like the rest of Texas, it boasted cheap and available land with good soil for agriculture. Beyond the promise of property, the island offered economic salvation to immigrants fleeing declining conditions in post-revolutionary Germany.<sup>28</sup> As the second largest port city in the South, Galveston, more than other Texan cities, drew middle-class merchants to its shores.<sup>29</sup> Advantageously located between the Trinity and

San Jacinto rivers, Galveston Bay was in a supreme position to command trade with New Orleans and other ports throughout the country. In fact, “a European mercantile agent from Frankfort, declared upon visiting the Island that ‘the city’s proximity to the West Indies, Mexico, and the United States, enhanced by the fact that the Gulf stream at all times is at hand to sweep her vessels to the Eastern Atlantic,’ made Galveston’s position for foreign commerce one of ‘immense value.’”<sup>30</sup> Positive travel reports, like the one from this mercantile agent, undoubtedly caused stir in Germany and reinforced beliefs that better economic opportunities awaited across the Atlantic.

While the great influx of Germans traveling through Galveston Bay and settling on the island might have been overwhelming for natives, some wealthy, Anglo-Saxon Galvestonians actively encouraged new settlement. During the 1850s, for example, “entrepreneurs in Galveston as well as capitalists in Germany found it financially profitable to promote this settlement;” therefore, “they organized emigration companies in Europe to capitalize upon the desire of Germans to come to Texas.”<sup>31</sup> Another tool used to promote German settlement in Galveston was the *Texas Almanac*, which was translated into German, printed, and distributed in German communities in Europe.<sup>32</sup> The *Texas Almanac* was so precious to “new Americans” that the Germans traveling through the Port of Galveston, carried it close to their bodies, treating it almost like a Bible.<sup>33</sup> Native Galvestonians, used to working with Europeans in the shipping business, welcomed the wave of new workers from Germany onto their shore.<sup>34</sup>

After crossing through the Port of Galveston, Germans chose to either stay on the island or move inland to the plains of Texas. Usually, German peasants who were able to save enough money would trek north, buying plots on the mainland and establishing farms. City craftsmen, on the other hand, often stayed in Galveston because of the island’s booming mercantile culture,

and, after establishing themselves, sent for their families. The settlement of German craftspeople added greatly to the unique cosmopolitan and metropolitan character of Galveston's population. In the words of historian Earl Wesley Fornell, "The large numbers of metropolitan-oriented Germans who remained on the Island exerted a very important influence on Galveston; their ideas, tastes, and talents were brought to bear upon architecture, street and park construction, music appreciation, and to some extent upon the intellectual life of the city."<sup>35</sup>

One such German that entered the United States through the Port of Galveston and later settled on the island was Ferdinand Flake, who later became the author and editor of the most popular newspaper in Galveston in the mid-1850s. While immigrant records from the Texas Seaport Museum indicate that Flake arrived in Galveston from Bremen, Germany on the ship *Franziska* on December 2, 1849, in his newspaper, Flake claims that he migrated to the United States in 1843.<sup>36</sup> Like many other immigrants who left Germany during the 1840s, Flake was a young, single man in search of better economic opportunities in America. Born to a Lutheran minister in Göttingen, Germany in 1823, Flake received an excellent education and became well-versed in politics. Both of Flake's parents died when he was an adolescent, and he was left to care for his younger siblings.<sup>37</sup> Once the inheritance money from his parents began to dwindle, Flake migrated to Texas, where he married a fellow German immigrant named Anna Olichslager and started his own mercantile business. After raising enough money, Flake sent for his two siblings in Germany and bought *Die Union*, a German-language newspaper established by F. Muhr, in 1855.<sup>38</sup>

Most Southern states had such low proportions of German immigrants that German-Americans had little influence on the economics or politics in their new communities. Germans in Texas, however, "were concentrated enough in rural areas to form a critical mass and maintain

an ethnic community life, so that they were a factor to be reckoned with in politics and in war.”<sup>39</sup> In the city of Galveston, where Germans made up almost half of the population, this was especially true.

### **Settlement: German-American Social, Economic, and Cultural Identity in Galveston**

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the island of Galveston was divided into four major social classes. At the top of the social hierarchy were the “local aristocrats,” which consisted of “a number of native American families who drew their incomes from mercantile, banking, shipping, and transportation enterprises, as well as from large plantations” that produced cotton.<sup>40</sup> Second, were the prosperous German craftsmen and traders, who, by renting out their labor for affordable prices, gradually rose to occupy a middle-class status, and “made a society for themselves in the city.”<sup>41</sup> Below the local aristocrats and the established German-Americans existed a large and heterogeneous group of Anglo-Texan “small traders, clerks, mechanics, laborers, and seamen.”<sup>42</sup> The enslaved African population on the island, which was numerous and growing, occupied the lowest tier on the social hierarchy of the island.

Slavery had existed in Galveston since the Lafitte pirate family established permanent settlements on the island in the early 1800s. After the Texas Revolution opened up the Texas territory to American settlers, slavery increased greatly, and Galveston became “the largest slave market west of New Orleans.”<sup>43</sup> State census records indicate that, between the years 1847 and 1860, the slave population of Galveston quadrupled, while the free population only increased by two-fold. By 1860, enslaved people made up about fifteen percent of the island’s total population.<sup>44</sup> Galveston’s unique maritime culture lent itself to different forms of slave labor. Rather than solely agricultural or domestic jobs, many enslaved people worked on the

waterfront, serving as crew members on steamships, unloading cargo boats, and carting wagons full of goods to the city.<sup>45</sup>

While it was common for the “local aristocracy” to purchase enslaved people from Galveston’s large slave auctions, Germans and lower-class Anglo-Texan workers very rarely had ownership over enslaved people. Purchasing enslaved people was very expensive, and most craftspeople and maritime workers could not afford the investment. Ferdinand Flake was a prominent exception to this norm. Records detailing the number of enslaved people Flake owned do not exist, but it is known that he purchased at least one an enslaved person and proudly called himself a slaveholder in his own publications.<sup>46</sup>

Although an alliance between craftsmen and traders would seem like a natural occurrence, the German-Americans in Galveston formed better relationships with the elite than with their fellow workers. Elite classes not only found their new German neighbors to be more “dependable” and “sober” than native workers—who were stereotyped as crude, illiterate, and prone to fight—but they were able to rent out their labor for much lower prices. Even the politically radical “Forty-Eighters” were held to higher esteem than their politically conservative, native counterparts due to their refined social behavior.<sup>47</sup>

Over time, the mercantile leaders’ preference for German-American craftsmen and traders started to create tension amongst Galveston’s workers, as disdain from Anglo-Texan workers, who were being treated as inferior, grew toward the “foreign” artisans.<sup>48</sup> Above all, “the native working classes resented the newcomers because they represented an economic threat.”<sup>49</sup> Laboring and selling their goods for cheaper prices than Anglo-Texan craftspeople were able to, German-Americans were fierce competitors that came to dominate Galveston’s job market in the course of a few short years.

Another source of working-class resentment toward German-Americans stemmed from the fact that Galvestonian Germans “tended to coalesce into an exclusive social unit supporting their own newspapers, churches, and social and cultural clubs.”<sup>50</sup> Due to the effects of chain migration, Germans who migrated to Texas were able to travel and settle with members of their home community. Even though German-Americans in Galveston did maintain “good trade relations with native leaders on the business level,” they “remained isolated in [their] own sphere of intimate social relations.”<sup>51</sup>

Wishing to retain their German culture and language, German-Americans created their own social, religious, and educational institutions in the city. The German Reading Room, for example, was one such cultural club that was erected to promote intellectual life among Galveston’s German population. “Occupying two floors of a large building on the Strand” the German Reading Room “contained a book collection of several hundred volumes” and was “serviced by a full-time librarian.”<sup>52</sup> While Galveston’s Germans were trying to preserve the traditions and values of their homeland by establishing close-knit communities, working-class Anglo-Texans often viewed their new neighbors as arrogant and interpreted the creation of such institutions as the Germans’ attempt to assert cultural superiority over them.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the social, religious, and cultural groups that Germans formed upon settlement in Galveston, they also had their own source of media. German-language newspapers were common throughout Texas. The most popular of these German-language newspapers in Galveston, and, in fact, the most widely circulated newspaper on the island for a time was Ferdinand Flake’s *Die Union*. Purchased by Flake in 1855, this tri-weekly newspaper was Galvestonian Germans’ main source of local, national, and international news.

Flake served as both the editor and publisher of his paper during a time in the United States when editors held great influence in their communities. According to historian Walter L. Buenger, German newspapers editors “held a virtual monopoly over the distribution of the news—a monopoly made all the greater because they often served as their German readers’ primary means of communication with the English-speaking world.”<sup>54</sup> Also, “because they wrote in an era in which fiscal survival required popular acceptance of editorial policy,” what German newspaper editors “wrote generally conformed with public opinion.”<sup>55</sup>

A highly-educated man and eloquent writer in both German and English, Ferdinand Flake seemed to be the political voice of Galveston’s German-American community in the mid-to-late 1850s. Although Flake—a slave owner, intellectual, and local politician—was considerably wealthier than many of the craftspeople and traders that he spoke for, his background in mercantile business made him a personable figure in the community. Before the secession crisis, Flake was respected both by German-Americans and by the upper-class, Anglo-Texan elites. In addition to his role in the press, Flake was appointed as a marshal of the city and served as a delegate of the Democratic Party to Texas state conventions.<sup>56</sup> The fact that Flake, a somewhat recent immigrant, exercised a considerable amount of political power highlights the fact that, in the years directly before the Civil War, German-Americans held significant influence in Galveston.

During the early-to-mid 1850s, the “ruling mercantile families [were] united” in Galveston, creating an environment where “Germans enjoyed ample privileges and, in some cases like Ferdinand Flake, gained political power.”<sup>57</sup> As the Republican Party gained popularity in the North with Abraham Lincoln as their candidate in the Election of 1860, the fate of slavery

started to weigh heavily on the minds of the local aristocrats in Galveston, who profited from both Galveston's slave market and the labor of enslaved people.

The secession crisis effectively divided Galveston's leading families and mobilized the Anglo-Texan working-class in an effort to "overcome the Union sympathies of the conservatives and the Germans."<sup>58</sup> This rising tension greatly endangered the comfortable position that German-American had become accustomed to on the island and threatened to awaken "the latent resentment against the foreigners which had long been smoldering among the native workingmen in Galveston."<sup>59</sup>

### **The Secession Crisis Hits Texas: German-American Political Ideologies in Galveston**

As a culturally distinct and recently settled ethnic group on Galveston Island, German-Americans strategically allied themselves with the political system they believed would bring them the most economic prosperity and afford them the most security. Unlike their Anglo-Texan neighbors who aligned with the pro-slavery Texas Democratic Party because they had "strong cultural ties to the South" and feared anarchy would break out if slavery was abolished, Germans sided with Texas's Democratic Party because it had historically defended them against anti-immigrant discrimination.<sup>60</sup>

Negative experiences with nativist, anti-immigrant organizations in Galveston, such as the Know Nothing Party and the Knights of the Golden Circle, alienated the island's foreign population, creating tension amongst Germans and established Anglo-Texans, and driving Germans into the hands of the Democratic Party. During the mid-1850s, the Know Nothing Party formed a base of support in Texas and began a campaign of discrimination, violence, and propaganda against the state's recently settled German population. Playing on fears that the

foreigners had come to displace Anglo-Texan workers, the Know Nothing Party in Texas—made up of old-line Whigs, Unionists, anti-Catholics, and xenophobes, who believed that the growing number of Germans and Mexicans in the state were a threat to their own economic welfare or to the well being of their society”—effectively labeled the Germans as “ungrateful visitors,” who had come, not to be productive members of Southern society, but to destroy the South’s institutions and impose “decadent” European ideals on the decent folks of Texas.”<sup>61</sup>

The Know-Nothings crafted these false abolitionist stereotypes of Texan Germans based on the efforts of a small and ultimately unsuccessful group of liberal “Forty-Eighters” in the Hill Country of Texas, who publicly advocated for the compensated emancipation of enslaved people in a series of speeches in 1855.<sup>62</sup> In truth, a miniscule minority of Germans supported abolitionism. Even among the Germans in their own county, these enlightened reformers were unrepresentative of typical German opinion on slavery.<sup>63</sup>

The vast majority of Galvestonian Germans held ambivalent attitudes toward the institution of slavery. As “the largest slave market west of New Orleans,” Galveston had traditionally been hub for slavery, and slavery had infiltrated the culture of the island.<sup>64</sup> Although slavery was seen as essential by the local aristocrats, who forced enslaved people to labor on plantations and docks, slavery did not play an important role in the lives of most of Galveston’s German-Americans.<sup>65</sup> Having recently settled on the island, most Germans were not wealthy enough purchase enslaved people, whose value was ever increasing due to the closing of the Atlantic Slave Trade earlier in the century. Additionally, the nature of Germans’ work did not necessitate slave labor. The typical German Galvestonian either owned his own small businesses or worked for a wealthy aristocrat as a tradesperson or craftsman. His occupation did not require personal possession of enslaved individuals to make a profit.

While poor Anglo-Galvestonians, like many poor whites in the South, likely supported slavery out of a racist desire to retain superiority over African Americans in order to maintain their sense of self-importance, Germans did not share these concerns. In their comfortable position in the middle of Galveston's social hierarchy—below the local aristocrats and above the poor Anglo-Texan craft and tradespeople—it appears that Germans did not emotionally invest in the institution of slavery because they did not need proof of their superiority over other races to feel important. Through reliable labor and good reputation, they had gained prosperity in Galveston and surpassed rival white workers. Rather than opposing or participating in the “peculiar institution,” most German-Americans in Texas remained indifferent and supported slavery simply to abide by the will of the majority on the island.<sup>66</sup>

Ferdinand Flake and his family were among the few Germans who had the financial means to purchase enslaved people. Many historical descriptions incorrectly characterize Ferdinand Flake as an abolitionist, based on his personal opposition to the reopening of the slave trade, his pro-unionist sympathies, and his eventual support for the policy of popular sovereignty. Flake, however, was a self-declared slave owner with “pro-slavery principles,”<sup>67</sup> as declared in his German-language newspaper, *Die Union*. Although a unionist, Flake had little patience for “black Republicans and their negro humbug” and issued a statement after John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, exclaiming, “The more the fog lifts veiling the foolhardy motives of the fanatic who caused the Negro insurrection at Harper's Ferry, the clearer it becomes that the conspiracy against the life and property of the white residents of the South [has] spread throughout the North.”<sup>68</sup>

An outspoken unionist, Flake would later get labeled as an “abolitionist concern” once the secession crisis was in full swing in the fall of 1860. It is clear from Flake's own declarations

in *Die Union*, however, that he was not an abolitionist, nor an opponent of the South's "peculiar institution." Flake's motives for actually purchasing slave labor, however, remain ambiguous. As a small business owner with a sizable family, whose mercantile and print businesses were based out of a single, small shop, it is not likely that Flake was in great need of extra help.<sup>69</sup> It seems more plausible that his purchasing of an enslaved person was a symbolic gesture that helped him establish his elite status and thus enter into Galveston's upper-class scene. As a citizen with aims to enter local politics, becoming a slave owner could have served as a strategic way for Flake to prove his loyalty to Texas and demonstrate his desire to assimilate into Galveston's larger Anglo-Texan culture.

Whether Flake, like his fellow Germans, felt indifferent to slavery or not, becoming a slave owner and promoting pro-slavery policies earned him a positive reputation among Galvestonian Germans and other Texans. For example, James P. Newcomb of the *Alamo Express* asserted in an editorial, "Mr. Flake is an old Texan, a slave holder, and a better Southern man" than many other newspaper editors in Texas.<sup>70</sup> Flake's reputation as a successfully assimilated German also increased the popularity of *Die Union*, which—although published in German—became the widest circulated newspaper on the island in the mid-to-late 1850s.<sup>71</sup> Before the question of disunion tore through the South and divided communities, Ferdinand Flake was well-liked by both the Anglo and German-Texan communities of Galveston, and he served, with the support of his fellow countrymen, as the spokesperson for Galveston's Germans.

Although Flake's attitude of acceptance toward slavery represented the majority German opinion on slavery in Galveston, and anti-slavery sentiments were extremely rare among Texas's German population in general, the Know Nothing Party seized upon the stereotype of Germans as abolitionists and painted all Germans as a threat to the South and its institutions.<sup>72</sup> The main

political objectives of the nativist organization were to restrict the naturalization of German, Irish, and Mexican immigrants in Texas and disenfranchise foreign-born voters.<sup>73</sup> Galveston was hit especially hard by the force of the Texas Know-Nothings because its foreign-born population had more voting rights than immigrants in most areas of Texas. Thanks to the efforts of two influential Germans, editor and city marshal Ferdinand Flake and Justice of the Peace I.E. Rump, “any adult male twenty-one years of age and older who had lived in the city one year and had paid his taxes, regardless of his nationality, received the ballot.”<sup>74</sup> Flake and Rump were also able to get a measure passed through the Texas Supreme Court that gave the German-controlled County Court the right to regulate “the volume of foreign voters” in Galveston, a measure that allowed the Germans to enfranchise members of their own ethnic group and regulate voting on the island.<sup>75</sup>

With the support of Anglo-Texan workers, who were alarmed by the ever-growing number of German settlers in Galveston and who feared competition from German workers and voters, the nativists used a variety of discriminatory tactics to persecute Germans during the mid-1850s.<sup>76</sup> Common strategies of the Know-Nothings included singling out German workers seeking employment and preventing them from obtaining jobs, intimidating voters by ways of physical violence or threats, issuing economic sanctions to enemies of the party, and publishing scathing editorials in their newspaper, the *Texas State Times*.<sup>77</sup> For example, an 1855 editorial published in the nativist newspaper lambasted the Germans saying, “the Germans have departed from every rule of propriety and from every shadow of that love of their adopted country by which they should have been actuated, and gone astray after the teachings and bubbles held up to them by traitors and this they cannot deny.”<sup>78</sup> This anti-German propaganda piece was not only characterizing Germans as an unassimilable burden to Texas, it also denounced them as

antagonistic enemies of the South. Although the efforts of the Know-Nothings were not able to uproot the good social and economic standings of Galveston's Germans, the propaganda war waged against them was very damaging to their political reputation and branded them, in the eyes of both wealthy and poor Anglo-Texans, as weak-willed and unreliable; therefore, Germans were seen as "not trustworthy on such important social issues as slavery, the foundation of Texas culture and Texas ways."<sup>79</sup>

The Know Nothing campaign of discrimination ended when the Democratic Party rose up to protect the foreign-born people of Texas. Unlike the nativists, the Democrats believed that the influx of Mexicans and Europeans was beneficial to the Southern economy because immigrants provided physical labor for infrastructure projects and brought in capital and personal funds that were "desperately needed in a society where hard money was scarce."<sup>80</sup> In a lengthy article published in the Democratic *Galveston Triweekly News* on March 27, 1856, Anson Jones, the former president of the Republic of Texas, "presented a positive and pragmatic case for incorporating the foreign elements into the Texas community," arguing that immigrants deserved recognition for the role they played in helping with the "immense physical development of our broad country."<sup>81</sup> Jones also attacked the Know Nothing's attempts to prevent the naturalization of immigrants, saying "Our naturalization laws should be respected, and rigidly and strenuously enforced. ....Protect the foreigner in all his rights, and encourage him in the faithful performance of all his duties."<sup>82</sup> If the rights of foreign-born citizens were not respected, Jones warned, Texas could easily be consumed by "wars of religions and races...the most dangerous, foolish, fatal, and destructive of all wars; and the very approach to any such should be most carefully shunned and avoided."<sup>83</sup>

Alienated by the Know-Nothings, Germans embraced the Democratic Party and forged "a

long-lasting and persistent attachment to the party which defended their personal liberty and their right to a distinct culture.”<sup>84</sup> Discriminatory and often violent encounters with the Know Nothing Party effectively united Texas’s ethnic minorities against the nativists. Along with Mexican-American voters, German-Americans “threw their political weight behind the Democracy” in the general election of 1856, playing “an important role in the defeat of the Know-Nothings.”<sup>85</sup> After the 1856 loss, the Texas Know-Nothing Party lost popularity on the local and national level and virtually disappeared by 1857.”<sup>86</sup>

Three lasting legacies emerged from the Know Nothing Party’s campaign of discrimination that affected the future of German-Americans in Galveston even after the formal party faded from existence. The first legacy was that Germans became wary of non-Democratic politicians, especially those who had formerly been tied to the Know Nothing Party. The second lasting legacy was the formation of a political division between the Germans and their Anglo-Texan neighbors, many of whom had supported Know Nothing ambitions or participated in discriminatory acts. Third, a fear of future discrimination at the hands of another nativist party was deeply instilled into the German people, a fear that was realized when the Knights of the Golden Circle emerged to terrorize Galveston’s Germans in 1860.

Although the Democratic Party would later become strongly associated with secessionism, German-Americans joined the party at a time when it was possible, and common, to be both Democratic and pro-Union. As a major port city, Galveston was home to citizens “from all regions of the United States and many foreign countries” and had “business and commercial ties that stretched far beyond the borders of Texas.”<sup>87</sup> Remaining a part of the Union appeared to be the most economically advantageous option to the many German businessmen on the island who were tied to other regions of the country by the market.<sup>88</sup> Unionism also ran

strong through Galveston's Germans for sentimental reasons. Many Germans who had fled Europe to escape economic hardship viewed the United States as their savior and felt they owed loyalty to the country. Additionally, a great number of those who immigrated to Galveston between 1830 and 1860 grew up "at a time when nationalism affected many young Germans;" therefore, they formed nationalistic sympathies toward the United States.<sup>89</sup> Summing up the unionist beliefs of the Germans, in a publication of *Die Union*, Ferdinand Flake proclaimed, "The Germans ..view themselves not as citizens of Texas, Louisiana or any separate state, but as citizens of the entire Union. The great majority are still neither southern nor northern."<sup>90</sup>

While it is true that Germans tended to have unionist values, they also displayed loyalty to Texas. In some cases, Germans were more concerned with the protection of their new home state than that of the country. Believing that staying with the Union would be better for Texas than joining together with the seemingly weaker slave states to form a new country, Germans resisted early calls for disunion; however, as the secession crisis escalated, Germans were willing to accept secession if Texas voted to leave the Union.

Ferdinand Flake generally identified with the Democratic Party; however, he displayed less fervent loyalty to the party than other Texan Germans. Especially on the issue of reopening the slave trade, Flake often found himself in ideological conflict with other Democrats. Believing that reopening the slave trade was unconstitutional and "a matter of national, not state concern," Flake was so strongly opposed to the idea that he angrily stormed out of the 1859 Democratic state convention—at which he was serving as a delegate from Galveston—because he was disgusted by the pro-slave trade attitudes he witnessed among many Democrats. Before leaving the convention, however, Flake delivered a scathing speech, "denouncing in vigorous terms the proposition that the Democratic party of Texas should even consider the possibility of legally

reopening the African slave trade.”<sup>91</sup> As he left the convention hall, Flake called out to the crowd that he was leaving because “the odor of the slave trade...was too strong for [his] nostrils.”<sup>92</sup> When Flake departed from the convention, he “in effect, left the [Democratic] party.”<sup>93</sup>

Following the events at the Democratic state convention, Flake pledged his support to Sam Houston, an independent candidate who was running against the current Democratic governor of Texas, Hardin Runnels, in Texas’s 1859 governor’s race. Flake’s endorsement of Houston was a shock to many Germans because Houston was running against a sitting Democratic politician, but also, and more significantly, because Houston had been a member of the Know Nothing Party from 1855-1856.<sup>94</sup> “Flake was well aware of the dissatisfaction many Germans felt with Sam Houston because of his former association with the Know-Nothings, but Houston shared Flake's moderate views on secession, the slave trade, and the importance of the Union.”<sup>95</sup> Flake’s willingness to abandon the Democratic party to support an opposing candidate earned him criticism from American and foreign-born Democrats. Editor E. H. Cushing, of the *Houston Telegraph*, for instance, asserted that “Flake was ‘selling out’ his own Germans by supporting former Know-Nothing candidates.”<sup>96</sup> Farther west, in New Braunfels, Ferdinand Lindheimer, the German-born and staunchly Democratic editor of the German-language newspaper the *Neu Braufelser Zeitung*, expressed similar frustration with Flake’s alliance with Sam Houston. Like most Germans, Lindheimer was unable to see past Houston’s former associations with the Know-Nothings, even after Flake obtained and published a note directly from Sam Houston declaring that “Knownothingism is dead.”<sup>97</sup>

Believing that many Germans held similar convictions about the governor’s race, Lindheimer published an open letter to Ferdinand Flake on July 22, 1859, in which he established German-Texans position on election, stating “The Germans have not changed their

position [from that of the Democratic party]; they still stand today where they stood” when they voted against the Know-Nothings in 1856. He continued, “Throughout the entire state they support the Runnels...men, who, when three-fourths of the American-born front opposed us, stood by our side and fought for our rights.”<sup>98</sup> Lindheimer was correct in his belief that the Germans would overwhelmingly vote for the Democratic candidate. Although Houston won the statewide election, Runnels carried cities where there were high proportions of German voters.<sup>99</sup> In Galveston, voters defied the wishes of their spokesperson, Ferdinand Flake, and voted for Runnels. Runnels beat Houston 433 to 321 on the island.<sup>100</sup>

To many Germans, the victory of Sam Houston was very disturbing because it suggested that the Know Nothing party was not dead, as Houston claimed, but still alive and wielding influence in Texas. Ferdinand Flake, thrilled by the victory of the former war hero, attributed the results of the election, not to the persistence of nativism in Texas, but to Houston’s opposition to the reopening the slave trade, a policy that greatly appealed to moderates, unionists, and Democrats who had become disillusioned by the Democratic Party’s increasing radicalism.<sup>101</sup>

The 1859 gubernatorial election stands out as a turning point in the history of Galveston’s German-American community because, in his support of candidate Houston, Ferdinand Flake abandoned his role as the spokesperson for Galvestonian Germans. For the first time since *Die Union* surged to popularity, Flake’s publications did not represent the opinions of the larger German community, who largely opposed voting for a former Know-Nothing. Although it was upsetting to his countrymen, Flake supported Houston because he reasoned that the appointment of a moderate governor, who kept the divisive issue of the reopening of the slave trade off the table, would be the best way to prevent disunion. Above all, Flake was a unionist, who cared more about state and national loyalty than party loyalty. As Flake became more politicized in

1859, his aptly named newspaper *Die Union* (“The Union”), became his own personal political forum, where he strongly condemned secessionism.<sup>102</sup> In his fervent attempts to promote national unity, however, Flake began to divert from the opinions of his readers and lose favor among the Galveston’s German community, a trend that would only increase as the secession crisis heated up in 1860.

The formal process of selecting the next president of the United States began with local party conventions. As early as January 1860, radical Democrats were already discussing the possibility of secession “if a candidate not favorable to the South were not elected.”<sup>103</sup> Talks of secession alarmed Germans and other moderate Democrats with unionist sympathies. German editor Ferdinand Lindheimer summarized the opinions of most Germans when he published “The Division of the Union,” a lengthy essay that urged Texans to be cautious and allow whoever was elected president a chance before deciding to disband from the Union.<sup>104</sup>

As candidate Abraham Lincoln’s support grew in the North and Midwest, the Democratic Party of the South was splintering due to disagreements about slavery. At the Democratic Convention in April of 1860, the party “split into two opposing factions at Charleston, with the Texas delegation among those who walked out.”<sup>105</sup> Unable to reconcile their differences at a convention a month later, the feuding Democrats officially severed in May, with Northern Democrats favoring Stephen Douglas and his policy of slavery through popular sovereignty and Southern Democrats endorsing the strong pro-slavery and state’s rights platform of John Calhoun.<sup>106</sup>

By mid-October, talk of secession was widespread in Texas. “Anyone with the least bit of political acumen could predict an election victory for Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans.”<sup>107</sup> Most Texas Democrats, including the majority of enfranchised Germans, threw their support

behind the candidacy of Southern Democrat John Breckinridge because they predicted that he would be the only candidate that stood a chance at beating Lincoln after the division of the Democratic Party. Ferdinand Flake, however, diverged from the general will of Galveston's Germans and advocated for the fusion ticket, the only alternative on the Texas ballot to Breckinridge. Endorsed by John Bell and Stephen Douglas supporters, the fusion ticket of the Opposition Party consisted of a strange mix of "old line Whigs, Know-Nothings, friends of Sam Houston, and disaffected Democrats," who advocated for moderation and unionism.<sup>108</sup> Rather than producing their own candidate to run for office, "in late August 1860, they pledged that their electors would vote for whichever candidate stood the best chance of defeating Abraham Lincoln."<sup>109</sup>

Although Flake was aware that the fusion ticket held a slim chance at beating Breckinridge, he refused to endorse the Southern Democrat, who he viewed as a dangerous disunionist. *Die Union's* attempts to persuade Galveston's German community to vote for the moderate ticket ultimately failed, as "Breckinridge defeated the fusion ticket 731 to 284 in Galveston County, and won by an equally impressive margin statewide."<sup>110</sup> The results of the election highlighted the fact that, even though their spokesperson and arguably the most powerful German in Galveston tried to rally support for an alternate candidate, the German community refused to budge on their dedication to the Democratic Party. Galveston's overwhelming support for Breckenridge mattered little, however, after Lincoln secured the votes necessary to win the national election, becoming the sixteenth president of the United States on November 6, 1860.<sup>111</sup>

After the election of President Lincoln, secessionist fever exploded in the South, and secessionism was widely embraced by Anglo-Texans, who feared that the new president had

aims dismantle the institution of slavery. Suddenly, unionism, which had been common in Texas up until the election, was now viewed with hostility. Anyone who displayed the desire to remain in the now Republican-controlled Union was labeled as a traitor and a threat to the South. By the winter of 1860, any who dared criticize secession or the Southern Democrats ran the risk of being accused of having abolitionist sympathies by a new nativist party that had emerged amongst the political chaos of 1860—The Knights of the Golden Circle.

The Knights of the Golden Circle originated in Lexington, Kentucky and spread through Texas with fervor after the demise of the Know Nothing Party. An anti-immigrant and pro-slavery organization, the Knights displayed animosity toward Galveston's large German community and "magnified the Germans' foreignness in the troubled secession years of 1860-1861."<sup>112</sup> Like the Know-Nothings, they perpetuated the stereotype that all Germans were secret abolitionists.<sup>113</sup> The Knights also capitalized on the social tension between the Galveston's German-Americans and their Anglo-Texan neighbors in an effort to scapegoat German settlers as the source of the South's problems. For example, the founder of the Knights, George W. L. Bickley, issued a statement in 1860, declaring that the "one great obstacle" obstructing the expansion of slavery was "the large, free-laboring population" of Germans.<sup>114</sup> A few Democrats defended the Germans like they had in 1855 and published editorials, assuring their readers that the Germans posed no threat to South; however, many Anglo-Texans, both of the local aristocracy and the lower-class, concerned for the future of slavery, eagerly embraced the Knights' nativist platform.<sup>115</sup>

Ferdinand Flake refused to be silenced by the pressures of the secessionist and nativist forces in Galveston and continued publishing pro-Union editorials in *Die Union*. Rather than seceding from the Union, Flake argued, Texans should give Lincoln and his party an opportunity

to prove themselves. Only if Lincoln's actions justified secession, did Flake consider disunion an acceptable course of action.<sup>116</sup> On November 13, 1860, believing he was speaking on behalf of Galveston's Germans, Flake published an article in *Die Union* that stated:

We are for the Union so long as the elected President and his party respect the guaranteed rights of the South: should, however, the situation occur, that the rights of we southerners are attacked by the black Republicans, then we should take the last remedy, "Revolution."<sup>117</sup>

What Flake did not realize when he wrote this piece was that he no longer embodied the political interests of the Germans in the eyes of many members of his ethnic community. Flake described his countrymen as united in unionism, when in fact, by 1861, the German-American community in Galveston mirrored the sentiments of their Anglo-Texan neighbors and advocated for secession.<sup>118</sup> This paper asserts that there are two predominant reasons why the Germans discarded their former unionist views and embraced disunion in late 1860. First, Germans wanted to maintain their privileged economic and social standing on the island. Most Germans were employed by or did business with aristocratic Anglo-Texans, who owned enslaved people and became radically incensed by Lincoln's victory. Assimilating to the dogma of anti-Union Anglo-Texans was necessary to secure Germans' social and financial well-being. The other reason why German-Americans turned their backs on the United States was because they feared that if they continued to support the Union, they would face further discrimination at the hands of Galveston's nativists. The fear that the Know Nothing Party remained strong on the island, coupled with the emergence of the Knights of the Golden Circle, likely pressured the Germans who still supported the Union into submission. Publicly adopting secessionism was the only way for Germans to avoid being labeled as traitorous abolitionists and to evade further discriminatory

attacks. As the secession crisis radicalized Galveston, Germans sided with the Confederacy to preserve the safety of themselves and their ethnic community.

Since the governor's race of 1859, Ferdinand Flake had gradually been losing support from the German-American community in Galveston. His endorsement of non-Democratic candidates in both 1859 and in the presidential election had earned him harsh criticism from Germans throughout the state of Texas, and his publication of pro-Union writings after Lincoln became president caused his newspaper to be labeled as an "abolitionist concern."<sup>119</sup> Not only did Flake's publications create the illusion that he was a threat to the institution of slavery, they negatively branded all Germans as abolitionists in a time and place when it was dangerous to resist secession.

Taking matters into their own hands, the Germans decided to silence Ferdinand Flake. On January 5, 1861, a mob of disgruntled German-Americans broke into Flake's shop in the Strand District of downtown Galveston and destroyed his printing tools. Although the assailants were never identified or brought to justice, throughout Texas, it was widely believed and reported that "the 'destruction' was the work of some of Flake's own countrymen."<sup>120</sup> In an effort to protect their livelihood and safety, German-Americans were willing to go to the extreme, betraying the former spokesperson of their community and destroying the prosperous business of a fellow German immigrant.

## **Conclusion**

The secession crisis rocked Texas in 1860 and 1861, creating divisions between populations, turning neighbors against each other, and making it almost impossible to balance southern identities with unionist sympathies. The attack on Ferdinand Flake's print shop is just one of

many acts of violence that were perpetrated against opponents of disunion. While the destruction of Flake's property did not prevent him from continuing to publish *Die Union*, it was one of the factors that pushed him to eventually accept the secession of Texas. After Galveston overwhelmingly voted to leave the Union on February 1, 1861—with 765 votes in favor and only 33 opposed—Flake stayed in Galveston and “rendered notable public service both during and after the war.”<sup>121</sup> Discontinuing *Die Union* in 1861 to produce a new English-language newspaper with a much less controversial title—*Flake's Bulletin*—Flake served Texas by publishing war updates that he received from the Pony Express from Shreveport.<sup>122</sup> Although Flake ultimately accepted the disunion of Texas, he would always question the wisdom and necessity of disunion.<sup>123</sup> Once the Civil War ended in April 1865, Flake abandoned the Southern Democrats and started writing in favor of Republican policies in *Flake's Bulletin*, once again involving himself in national politics and opposing mainstream Southern dogma. Flake continued to publish in Galveston until his death in 1872.<sup>124</sup>

The complex identities of the German-Texan population have been greatly oversimplified in the Civil War narrative due to persistent myths “of monolithic German unionist and antislavery sentiments.”<sup>125</sup> This essay adds depth to this basic portrait of one Texas's major ethnic groups by describing how German-American opinions in Galveston, like in the rest of the United States, were very complex. Similar to every other ethnic, political, or regional group in the country, German-Americans held complicated and often contradicting attitudes about the pressing issues of the time, including slavery and secession. In the field of Civil War history, surprisingly little has been written about the ways in which ethnic identity influenced southerners' political ideologies and opinions about disunion. More scholarship focusing on the

secession crisis in cities with high populations of German, Irish, or Mexican immigrants could greatly add to the Civil War narrative.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Earl Wesley Fornell, *The Galveston Era: The Texas Crescent on the Eve of Secession* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 289.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Civilian and Gazette*. (Galveston, Texas), January 15, 1861.
- <sup>3</sup> *Die Union* (Galveston, Texas), January 8, 1861.
- <sup>4</sup> Fornell, *The Galveston Era*, 289.
- <sup>5</sup> Walter L. Buenger, "Secession and the Texas German Community: Editor Lindheimer vs. Editor Flake." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 82, no. 4 (April, 1979), 381.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 379.
- <sup>7</sup> Fornell, *The Galveston Era*, 13.
- <sup>8</sup> Buenger, "Secession and the Texas German Community," 379.
- <sup>9</sup> Bruce C. Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German immigrants, labor conflict, and the coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), 2.
- <sup>10</sup> "Immigration...German: A New Surge of Growth," Library of Congress, accessed October 30, 2019, <https://loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/german4.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Walter D. Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich, eds., *Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 2.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 37.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 38-39.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 2.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 1.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 113.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 15.
- <sup>20</sup> "The Annexation of Texas, the Mexican-American War, and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, 1845-1848," Office of the Historian, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/texas-annexation>. Terry G. Jordan, "Germans," Texas State Historical Association, Accessed October 30, 2019, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/png02>.
- <sup>21</sup> Kamphoefner and Helbich, *Germans in the Civil War*, 15.
- <sup>22</sup> Jordan, "Germans".
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>25</sup> Fornell, *The Galveston Era*, 127.
- <sup>26</sup> "Emigration, Immigration, and Migration," The University of Texas at San Antonio, accessed October 30, 2019, <http://libguides.utsa.edu/c.php?g=515536&p=5730362>.
- <sup>27</sup> Kamphoefner and Helbich, *Germans in the Civil War*, 15.
- <sup>28</sup> Fornell, *The Galveston Era*, 127-128.

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- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, 126.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 8.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 128.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 130.
- <sup>36</sup> “Galveston Immigration Database,” Texas Seaport Museum, accessed October 30, 2019, <https://www.galvestonhistory.org/sites/1877-tall-ship-elissa-at-the-texas-seaport-museum/galveston-immigration-database>. *Die Union* (Galveston, Texas), January 5, 1861.
- <sup>37</sup> Randolph Lewis, “Flake, Ferdinand,” Texas State Historical Association, accessed October 30, 2019 <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ff102>.
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