Many aspects of German-American culture and history cannot be appreciated or understood without tracing their beginnings back to past times and to Germany itself. Thus the present discussion will span nearly five centuries and take the reader from Brandenburg/Prussia to Buffalo and Missouri. Political history, history of religion, and biography conspire to tell a remarkable story of conflicts, struggles, successes, and failures.

THE BACKGROUND

The Protestant Reformation, beginning with Luther’s posting of the Ninety-five Theses in 1517 and his famous stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521, did not follow the same course in all the German lands. It was introduced in the Margraviate of Brandenburg rather late and only gradually by the Elector Joachim II Hector (r. 1535–1571) and took a rather conservative course, leaving behind some “strands of papalism,” to the dismay of the Calvinists. The elector did not abandon his devotion to relics, for instance, and in other ways was far removed from fully embracing Lutheranism. Only on All Saints Day, November 1, 1539, did he take communion in both kinds, and his church ordinance of 1540 retained many traditional liturgical embellishments. The vast majority of people in Brandenburg were Lutherans, but there was also a Calvinist presence. Differences, in both belief and observance, between Lutherans and Calvinists find expression even today in the interior of Lutheran and Calvinist (Reformed) churches respectively.

On Christmas Day of 1613 the Elector John Sigismund took communion according to the Calvinist rite, signifying his conversion to the Calvinist faith, and in so doing creating a division between the bulk of the population in the Electorate, who were Lutheran, and the ruling dynasty. A few months later, in 1614, he defended his move in a document known as the Confessio Sigismundi and at the same time announced a policy of toleration. His and his successors’ efforts to bring about a “Second Reformation” were to encounter many difficulties. One such difficulty lay in the fact that the religious peace of Augsburg, in 1555, had extended recognition to Lutheranism and Catholicism, but not to Calvinism.
Only the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 was to do that. Another difficulty lay right in the Hohenzollern family itself.

John Sigismund’s wife, Anna of Prussia, was a strong defender of Lutheranism, even after her husband’s conversion; separate Lutheran services were held for her in the chapel of the castle. While John Sigismund’s successors adhered to the Calvinist faith, they generally married women of the Lutheran faith.

In 1788, King Frederick William II, nephew and successor of Frederick the Great, issued an edict which affirmed the right of the three major Christian confessions to the protection of the monarch. The General Code of 1794 once more affirmed this right, while, in a limited way, allowing for freedom of conscience and belief.

The Prussian Union

In 1793, Frederick William III (r. 1797–1840) married a Lutheran princess, Luise of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, who was much beloved for her charm, intelligence, kindness, and courage and much mourned at her early death. But it is he who brought about a major change in the relationship which had prevailed between the Lutheran and Calvinist confessions in Brandenburg-Prussia for the two centuries prior. He did so when, on September 27, 1817, the tercentenary year of Luther’s Ninety-five Theses, he announced that he intended to merge the two confessions in a single church. The text of the proclamation suggests that he underestimated the differences between the two confessions. On October 31, 1817, Reformation Day, he and his family took communion in the Court-and-Garrison Church in Potsdam. The next day he attended service in Wittenberg and laid the foundation stone for Johann Gottfried Schadow’s monument to Martin Luther. His actions were quite in the spirit of the union and cooperation he hoped to bring about.

The union which he desired was not to be limited to governance, but was to encompass confession, sacraments, and liturgy as well. He himself took the lead in designing a new liturgy (or “Agende”). He issued regulations for the decoration of altars and the use of candles, vestments, and crucifixes. The new church was first named the “Evangelische Landeskirche,” then the “Evangelische
Kirche der altpreußischen Union” (APU), and finally the “Evangelische Kirche der Union” (EKU), but is often simply called the “Prussian Union.” The king himself was the “supreme bishop” of this new entity. He was aided by Karl von Altenstein, his minister for education and culture (Kultusminister).

In the remaining years of his reign, Frederick William devoted much of his energy to bringing about the union of the two confessions. Little resistance was offered initially. Then, in 1830, the Lutherans observed the tricentennial anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, which may have served to encourage opposition to the king’s policy of integration. Opposition did increase in the 1830s, and the government’s measures became increasingly coercive. Opponents of the king’s policy were especially numerous in Silesia, where they sought to establish an autonomous, self-governing church of their own. These separatists became known as “Old Lutherans.” The government did not shy away from employing harsh measures against the separatist movement.

A case in point: In Hönigern (now Miedary), a small town in the district of Namslau (now Namysłów), east of Breslau, Eduard Kellner, a pastor firmly opposed to joining the government-ordered union, was first suspended and then, when he continued to minister to his congregation, arrested and imprisoned. His parishioners refused to surrender the church to his appointed successor. Soldiers were sent, who broke into the church on Christmas Eve 1834, overwhelmed the parishioners who guarded their church, and made numerous arrests. Nonetheless, coercive measures proved ineffective. In 1836, seventy-two families from Hönigern formally declared their withdrawal from the state church (the Prussian Union). Kellner was imprisoned for four years; he died in 1878, while still serving as a pastor. In the neighboring Neumark, in the district of Zülichau (now Sulechów), approximately 600 separatists were counted in 1836.

Another case in point: Johann Gottfried Scheibel (1783–1843) was a professor of theology at the university of Breslau and pastor of the Lutheran Church of St. Elisabeth in Breslau. He was consis-
Old Lutherans
tently opposed to the Prussian Union church and the new Agende (liturgy). The conflict came to a head in 1830, apparently occasioned by the tricentennial anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Scheibel’s petitions to the government were rejected; he was dismissed and ordered to leave Breslau. For the remaining years of his life he lived in Dresden, Hermsdorf near Dresden, Glauchau in Saxony, and finally in Nuremberg. Scheibel had a strong and capable supporter in Philipp Eduard Huschke (1801–1886), a professor of law at the University of Breslau.

There were old Lutherans to be found elsewhere in Prussian lands, especially in Pomerania. Among activist leaders of the Old Lutheran movement elsewhere Johannes Andreas August Grabau (1804–1879) takes on special importance. He studied theology and philosophy at the University of Halle from 1825 to 1829 and in 1834 became pastor of St. Andrew’s Church in Erfurt. In 1837 he was dismissed from his post and subsequently twice jailed for his resistance to the king’s ecclesiastical agenda. He and Scheibel were at opposite ends of a difficult issue: whether to escape persecution by emigrating or whether to stay and fight for the good cause. Scheibel was strongly opposed to emigration, while Grabau argued forcefully in favor of it. Both sides sought and found support for their position in various passages of scripture. Thus “Wer glaubt, der braucht nicht zu fliehen” (Isaiah 28:16 Einheitsübersetzung) was employed to support one view, and “Wenn man euch in der einen Stadt verfolgt, so fliehet in eine andere” (Matt. 10:23 Einheitsübersetzung) the other.

Several thousand of the Lutheran separatists did respond to the government’s oppression by emigrating to Australia or America. By 1840 some 2000 Old Lutherans had emigrated; approximately 10,000 remained. That so many felt it necessary to leave to avoid persecution for their religious beliefs is both sad and ironic given the official policy of religious toleration and a history of putting word to deed. Frederick William, the Great Elector, had opened his lands to the Huguenots with his “edict of Potsdam” in 1685, and King Frederick William I had received 12,000 Salzburg Protestants (Lutherans) in 1732. Indeed, Frederick
William III himself granted asylum to some Protestant exiles from Zillertal in the Tyrol in 1837.\textsuperscript{35}

As crown prince Frederick William IV had not supported his father’s policy of oppression. He was, rather, inclined to be tolerant.\textsuperscript{36} One of his first acts upon succeeding to the throne was to grant amnesty to political and religious dissidents. All Old Lutherans serving prison time were released.\textsuperscript{37} Furthermore, the Old Lutherans were given the right to establish a separate church of their own in 1845.\textsuperscript{38} Thus the first independent, autonomous Evangelical Lutheran church on German soil was born.\textsuperscript{39} It should also be noted that Prussia made no attempt to merge the Lutheran church of Hannover into the Prussian Union.\textsuperscript{40} when it annexed the kingdom of Hannover in 1866.

**The Exodus**

In 1835 a group of Old Lutherans in the villages of Klemzig and Langmeil, district of Züllichau, in the Neumark of Brandenburg (now Klepsk and Okunin in the Polish province of Lubaskie) decided to emigrate. Having first considered Russia and America as possible destinations,\textsuperscript{41} they finally decided on South Australia. Although emigration was a basic right, there were various legal requirements to be met before the necessary exit permits were issued.\textsuperscript{42} Thus the emigrants were long held up by the Prussian government and were not able to begin their journey until 1838. They traveled to Hamburg on barges via the Oder, the Friedrich Wilhelm Canal, the Spree, the Havel, and the Elbe.\textsuperscript{43} On July 8, 1838, they set sail on the ships Prince George and Bengalie; nearly five months later they landed at Port Misery, just north of Adelaide. They numbered 250 people in fifty-three families. They were accompanied by their pastor, August Ludwig Christian Kavel, who had made the necessary arrangements with George Fife Angas and the South Australian Company of London. They established their own settlement and named it Klemzig after their former home.\textsuperscript{44} Three more groups followed later in 1838, in 1839, and in 1841.\textsuperscript{45}

Other Old Lutherans, the greater number of them, were anxious to make their way to America; the government required of them that they be accompanied by a pastor. At the same time Pastor Grabau had been released from prison on the condition that
he should emigrate as soon as his health had improved. The two parties found each other and reached an agreement. The king on this occasion made it very clear that he considered the Lutheran church as being contained within the new united church which he had created and that he would tolerate no other Lutheran church.

Pastor Grabau was reunited with his family in Hamburg, where some 1,000 persons were awaiting transportation to America. Between June 28 and July 27, 1839, five steamships transported them to Hull (Kingston-upon-Hull), and from there canal boats took them to the port of Liverpool. From there again five sailing vessels took them to New York. The last of these, carrying Pastor Grabau and his family, left Liverpool on August 14, was badly beaten up in a violent storm, but arrived in New York without any loss of lives on September 18. A few members of the group stayed in New York, but most continued to Buffalo, utilizing river boats on the Hudson as far as Albany and then canal boats on the Erie Canal. At Buffalo they joined a small advance party of Old Lutherans.

Once he had reached Buffalo, Grabau lost no time in organizing his followers in a church of their own rather than having them join any of the churches already existing in Buffalo. Rented quarters at various locations were found and services were held from the first Sunday on. The new church was incorporated in 1840 as the Old Lutheran Church, but became known as the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity (Dreifaltigkeitskirche) or as Trinity Old Lutheran. Still in that first year a lot was bought and construction of a church building was begun. The first service in the new church was held on June 7, 1840 (Pentecost Day), and the building was dedicated on October 6, 1843. Grabau served as pastor of the church until his death. The church was located at the corner of Goodell and Maple Streets.

At meeting in Milwaukee on June 25, 1845, four pastors, led by Grabau, and eighteen lay delegates formed a synod, which was originally known as the Synod of the Lutheran Church Emigrated from Prussia, but later became known as the Buffalo Synod. The Buffalo Synod, the Ohio Synod, and the Iowa Synod joined in 1930.
to form the American Lutheran Church. In 1988 that organization, in turn, joined with the Lutheran Church in America and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which is headquartered in Chicago. 52

Beginning in 1840 Grabau had informally given instruction to candidates for the ministry, but in 1845 he formally founded Martin Luther Seminary. The older of his two sons, William [Wilhelm Heinrich] Grabau (1836–1906), became a professor in the new institution. The seminary ceased operation in 1929. 53

In 1858 a branch congregation, St. Andrew’s, was established and a new church was built on Peckham Street in the eastern part of the city. William Grabau became the pastor of this new church. 54

Being very authoritarian by nature, Grabau had to contend with dissension within his congregation. He believed strongly in pastoral authority based on ordination and expected obedience, while many in the various Lutheran churches held a more congregational view of the ministry. 55 In a long Hirtenbrief (pastoral letter) of December, 1840, addressed to the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri (see below), he defended his position. 56

In 1864 the pastor’s residence at Maple and Goodell Streets was destroyed by arson. In 1866 half of the parishioners left and joined First Trinity Lutheran Church, which was affiliated with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. 57

Pastor Grabau continued in his ministry to the very end. He died peacefully, surrounded by his family, on June 2, 1879. He was buried in Holy Rest (Zur heiligen Ruhe) Cemetery, which is located on Delevan Avenue near Pine Ridge Road. 58

Martin Burk, having previously served as an assistant to Pastor Grabau, served as pastor of the church from 1879 until his death in 1893. He, in turn, was succeeded by John Nathaniel Grabau, a grandson of the founder, who served until his retirement and death in 1940. 59

A new church building for Trinity Old Lutheran was erected in 1923 and 1924 at a new location, 26 Brunswick Blvd. The older building on Goodell and Maple Streets eventually was acquired by St. John Baptist
Finally, in 1960, when demographic changes in the city made yet another move advisable, Trinity Old Lutheran joined with Sheridan Drive Lutheran Church, and thus 3445 Sheridan Drive is now its new location. The former building now houses the Lutheran Church of Our Savior.

Yet one other member of the Grabau family needs to be recognized here: Amadeus William Grabau (1870 Cedarburgh, WI – 1946 Peking, China), son of Wilhelm Heinrich Grabau and grandson of Johannes Andreas Grabau, was a renowned paleontologist and geologist and the author of numerous books in his field. He earned his D.Sc. degree at Harvard University and held faculty appointments first at Columbia University and then at the National University of China in Peking.

Other Lutheran Immigrants

The Old Lutherans whom Grabau led from Prussia to Buffalo were neither the only Lutherans nor the only Germans who came to America in the years 1838–1840. Perhaps most famously the small town of Hermann in the “Missouri Rhineland” was founded during those same years by the German Settlement Society of Philadelphia. There was a political rather than a religious dimension to this founding. The town was to be part of an island of German language and culture; some even hoped to establish a German state. The town partakes of a distinctly German character to this day and cultivates its German heritage.

A closer parallel to the settlement of the Old Lutherans in Buffalo is found in the so-called Stephanite emigration, which takes its name from Martin Stephan, a Saxon Lutheran minister and long-time pastor of St. John’s Church in Dresden. Stephan led some 600 Lutheran emigrants from Saxony to St. Louis and to nearby Perry County, Missouri. He and his followers, of a conservative and orthodox persuasion, were protesting the Unionism and the Rationalism which, in the wake of the Enlightenment, had come to prevail in the Lutheran churches of Saxony. Not too long after arrival in the United States, in May, 1839, Stephan was accused of financial and sexual misconduct, deposed, and excommunicated. In 1847 the Lutherans of Missouri, then under the strong leadership of C. F. W. Walther, formed the Missouri Synod. The relationship between
the Missouri Synod and the Buffalo Synod was a contentious one at all times. The Missouri Synod has remained outside the American Lutheran Church which was formed in 1930 and outside the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which was formed in 1988.

The Old Lutherans deserve our attention not only in the context of German-American studies but in the larger context of the history of religion in Germany and in the United States.

— Hans A. Pohlsander
East Greenbush, NY
Johannes Grabau

Courtesy Hans A. Pohlsander
NOTES


3 Nischan, Prince, People, and Confession, 20–21.


5 Drummond, German Protestantism since Luther, 185; Martin Lackner, Die Kirchenpolitik des Großen Kurfürsten (Witten, 1973), 47–48; Gorski, The Disciplinary Revolution, 86; Nischan, Luthers and Calvinists, I: 209 and 212, III:44, VIII:166, and XII:393. The text of
the Confessio is found in Ernst Gottfried Adolf Böckel, Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche, Pt. 1 (Leipzig, 1847) 432–440.


12 Wappler in Goeters and Mau, 112–113.


14 Stamm-Kuhlmann, König in Preußens großer Zeit, 480–481.


22 Iwan–Schubert, Because of Their Beliefs, 6–7; Clark, “Confessional Policy and the Limits of State Action,” 989.


raners Johann Gottfried Scheibel (1783–1843) (Göttingen, 2009), 21–125, esp. 62–82.


33 Lackner, Die Kirchenpolitik des Großen Kurfürsten, 302–303; Hans-Georg Tautorat, Um des Glaubens willen: Toleranz in Preußen—Hugenotten und Salzburger (Düsseldorf 1985) 21–34; Clark, Iron Kingdom, 122–23. The text of the edict is found in Christian Otto Mylius, ed., Corpus Constitutionum Marchicarum (Berlin and Halle, 1737–1751; repr. Genschmar, 2003) II, section 1, 183–188, no. 65 (German), and VI, Appendix 8, 43–48 (French); also in Ernst Mengin, Das Recht der französisch-reformierten Kirche in Preußen (Berlin, 1929), 186–196 (German and French), and in Tautorat, Um des Glaubens willen 174–181 (German).


The Zillertal Protestants, ca. 400 of them, were settled at Erdmannsdorf (now Myslakowice), Kreis Hirschberg (now Jelenia Góra), Lower Silesia.


46 Johannes Andreas Grabau, Lebenslauf des Ehrwürdigen J. An. A. Grabau, 35.


49 Johannes Andreas Grabau, Lebenslauf des Ehrwürdigen J. An. A. Grabau, 42; Geschichte der Deutschen in Buffalo und Erie County, N.Y. (Buffalo 1898) 268–269 (English) and 269–270 (German); Iwan, Die Alt Lutherische Auswanderung, II:91; Abdell Ross Wentz, A Basic History of Lutheranism in America, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1964), 100; “The Story of Trinity Old Lutheran Church” (see n. 47); Nelson, The Lutherans in North America, 154–155.

50 Johannes Andreas Grabau, Lebenslauf des Ehrwürdigen J. An. A. Grabau, 42–43; Geschichte der Deutschen in Buffalo, 269–270 (English) and 270–271 (German); Wilhelm Albert Grabau, Die Geschichte der Familie Grabau, 185–86; “The Story of Trinity Old Lutheran Church” (see n. 47).

51 Johannes Andreas Grabau, Lebenslauf des Ehrwürdigen J. An. A. Grabau, 50; Nelson, The Lutherans in North America, 176. Abdel Ross Wentz, The Lutheran Church in American History (Philadelphia, 1923), 157, observes that the synod was very rigid in doctrine and discipline and has not grown very rapidly; similarly Wentz, A Basic History of Lutheranism in America 114.

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54 Wilhelm Albert Grabau, *Die Geschichte der Familie Grabau*, 186; “The Story of Trinity Old Lutheran Church” (see n. 47).


59 *Geschichte der Deutschen in Buffalo*, 270–71 (English) and 271 (German); Wilhelm Albert Grabau, *Die Geschichte der Familie Grabau*, 189.

60 “The Story of Trinity Old Lutheran Church” (see n. 47).

61 “The Story of Trinity Old Lutheran Church” (see n. 47).


MAP OF THE AREA UNDER DISCUSSION
COURTESY HANS A. POHLSANDER