

Nomination
to the LaCrosse County Historic Sites Preservation Commission

Date: 3 December 1999

Property: Free Thinkers Society Building/Barre Town Hall

Location: South side CTH M, .5 miles West of Russian Coulee Road, Barre Township,
LaCrosse County

Date Constructed: 1870

Current Owners: Township of Barre, LaCrosse County, Wisconsin

Nominated by: Barbara Kooiman, LCHSPC board member on behalf of Catherine Nuttleman Schulz, whose family helped found the Free Thinkers Society in the Town of Barre.

Statement of Significance:

The Free Thinkers Society Building/Barre Town Hall is significant as the last building left in LaCrosse County associated with the Free Thinkers Society. The Free Thinkers Society, related to the Unitarian Church, was first formed in Germany in the 1840s, when they were known as the "Freien Gemeinden" or "free congregations". It was a revolt against the more established Protestant church in Germany during that time, with ideals based in the natural world, with a more scientific view toward creation. After the European revolutions of 1848, many German "free thinkers" emigrated to the United States, and several of these societies were established in Wisconsin. The most prominent ones were in Milwaukee and Sauk City. One began in LaCrosse, and another in Bostwick Valley near Barre Mills. This group decided to build their own meeting hall, which, ironically, was located next to the German Lutheran Church, St. Johanne's, in Barre Township.

The Bostwick Valley Society, as they were sometimes called, stayed active from about 1868 until around 1916, when the group disbanded due to lack of financial support. Prior to that time, however, their records showed that in 1876, the group had a membership of 33, a library of 15 volumes and a school with 12 students. In 1914 there were 14 members, and 29 volumes in the library. Barre Township was likely already using the building as a town hall as well prior to the Freethinkers disbanding, as the 1906 plat maps shows the building as a "hall", however the 1913 plat shows the building as a "Town Hall".

Sometime after the group disbanded, Barre Township purchased the one story brick building and have been using it as a town hall ever since. It is virtually intact from its original construction, and though not currently threatened for demolition, it may need some alterations to bring it up to code for handicap accessibility.

Free Thinkers' Day In La Crosse

By JAMES O. HOLMUND
 La Crosse Tribune Staff Writer
 A retired associate professor of English from Sturgeon Lake, Minn., suggests that efforts be made to preserve the 1868 to 1918 recorded history of "liberal religion" in La Crosse County.

Said Berencie Cooper, Beloit College and University of Wisconsin graduate, teacher for 48 years and in 1961 retired from Superior State University teaching: "My earnest wish is that the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and the La Crosse County Historical Society will make a joint project of preserving the few records of the Society of Free Men whose efforts to promote more liberal religious ideas have been almost entirely forgotten."

Miss Cooper earlier this year addressed the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship itself, an exponent of liberal religious teachings. On at least two occasions, reports Leora Ellsworth, 203 S. 16th St., a distant relative, Miss Cooper has done extensive research on the "Freien Gemeinden."

The Freien Gemeinden, or "free congregations," stem from 1840 in Germany where a

revolt occurred in the state-supported Protestant church of Germany.

A similar revolt within the Roman Catholic church in Germany contributed strength to the free congregations, particularly after the European revolutions of 1848. These revolutions saw many of the dissenters immigrate to the United States.

Miss Cooper's research through German language newspapers in La Crosse, and elsewhere, earlier this year turned up records of seven or eight societies of free congregations in Wisconsin, including the La Crosse Unitarian Society of the Bostwick Valley Society of the Barre Mills area in 1870.

But, earlier, reported Miss Cooper, these other Wisconsin groups got under way: Painesville, 1849, or a year after the immigrations; First Milwaukee-Gemeinde, 1851; Sauk City, 1852; Mayville, 1863; and "Second Milwaukee Gemeinde," 1867.

Always a minority group, reports Miss Cooper, the German-American groups at one time before 1864 had as many as 30 societies in Wisconsin.

Today, only the Sauk City and one in Milwaukee remain of the original movement in Wisconsin.

The La Crosse society, observed Miss Cooper, was short lived but the Barre group lasted on for 46 years.

A main concept of the group is that it held to no set creed.

Some idea of what the "new religion" of the free congregations was all about, compared to the "old religion," or Christianity, was made in 1861 by Friedrich Schumemann-Pott, lecturer for the movement who traveled across the country. Schumemann-Pott, on Oct. 7 and 8, 1868, visited La Crosse where he addressed the local Society of Free Men.

A summary of the lecturer's contrast of Free Gemeinde with the "theology of orthodoxy," respectively, is:

A scientific view of creation contrasted to personal God and creator of the world.

Christ is an idea inherited from the past; the Holy Spirit is the human spirit working to greater knowledge contrasted to a doctrine of Trinity.

All of the spirit manifests itself in life contrasted to conflict between spirit and flesh.

Interest in making the world a better place for humans to live contrasted to original sin concept and need for redemptive divine grace to enjoy eternal life in heaven.

An "I will" ethical life made from intelligent decisions, contrasted to ethical life through God's commands based on fear of eternal punishment.

The Plymouth religious fellowship, Miss Cooper discovered from research, subscribed to still other contrasted views, among them:

Reason instead of revelation; one world instead of two; natural law for miracles; consciousness of dignity in place of humility; moderate use of pleasure in place of abstinence; unsolved problems instead of inexplicable secrets; the book of nature and history instead of the Bible; speakers instead of preachers; the humanist school in place of Christian school.

The Sauk City group said in its 1853 constitution, "We shall not profess atheism, the denial or disbelief in the existence of a Supreme Being, but rather a practical atheism, namely: living so that we interpret our Supreme Being as we desire and hold our own conception of immortality."

In most cases the Sauk City group avowed to have no specified lecturer or teacher. There was no mention of authority higher than the congregation.

However, a national association known as "Bund der Freien Gemeinden von Nordamerika" was formed in 1859 and spelled out in 1876 that local congregations will not be dominated by a national organization.

The Milwaukee congregation's constitution, still in force after a century, places emphasis on life in the present world and the acceptance of "the supremacy of human reason."

Miss Cooper reported from her research that "wherever a free congregation was strong enough to carry on several activities, they supported a singing society, which was one of the most important activities; a library, consisting of German classical literature; dramatic and literary societies, and of course, a women's society which sponsored social events and served good German food."

The weaker as well as the strong Gemeinden had Sunday schools and the larger societies had day schools, Miss Cooper reported.

She said much of her material on the La Crosse area organizations came from the "Free Thought" magazine, "Blatter fur Freies Religioses Leben." The first record is in a letter to the magazine, Miss Cooper reported, announcing organization of the group.

Other records are found in the "Travel Letters" of Schumemann-Pott, published in "Free Thought."

When Miss Cooper attempted to learn more details from descendants of the Society of Free Men, she reported that most persons were shy and stand-offish about the experiences within their families.

The April 1868 edition of the "Blatter," La Crosse Library records show, quoted A. Steinlein, La Crosse County register of deeds and secretary of the Society of Free Men at La Crosse.

About 15 men, reported Steinlein, laid foundations for the society. A constitution and set of by-laws were drawn, he reported.

to La Crosse, saying men and women showed themselves prepared for a different representation of a world philosophy.

Schumemann-Pott returned to La Crosse May 22-23, 1869, and wrote Steinlein, "stands in high regard as register of deeds" and carries much of the Sunday lecture load.

"The watchmaker Rose of Nordhausen" was credited by Schumemann-Pott as "a veteran of the Freie Gemeinde movement in Germany." (Rose is a distant relative of the Rose Jewelry Co. family in La Crosse.)

The La Crosse group, however, ended in 1870. No recorded reason is given for its dissolution.

Schumemann-Pott on Oct. 11, 1869, in his third of five visits to La Crosse went to Bostwick Valley which had just organized its society.

"A simple and plain but solid farmer, Hermann Sander," wrote Schumemann-Pott, "had raised himself from a poor day laborer to a well-to-do farmer" and had organized 17 neighbors the previous summer in a society of Free Men. "Naturally, they were banned by the churches," he wrote.

Came Sunday at 2 p.m., and the meeting began in the schoolhouse about in the middle of the bottom of the valley. The building was filled to the last standing place, and seldom have I found an audience which listened to my words with equal eagerness," he wrote.

The following day, the traveler spoke at an evening meeting at Turner Hall. "A considerable audience of Christians and Rationalists" was present, he said.

Schumemann-Pott's fourth visit to Bostwick Valley was April 11, 1870.

A "Herr Sandmann, one of the valiant farmers from Bostwick's Valley, called for me," holding its own "with true zeal." He said that the members "do not mind the loud outcries of their believing neighbors."

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WHERE FREE THINKERS Barre Hall was built by began in 1870 and ended

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On April 2, 1871, Schumemann-Pott returned again to Bostwick Valley "where I had the joy to be able to dedicate the Free Thinker Hall which the wide awake farmers of the valley have built amid their flourishing farms."

The same trip found Schumemann-Pott also visiting Sauk City, Milwaukee and Plymouth.

The Society of Free Men in Bostwick Valley survived until 1916. Its brick hall, first valued at \$700, stands today... now the Barre Town Hall.

In 1876, the Bostwick Valley group reported a membership of 33, a library of 15 volumes, a school of 12 students meeting three times weekly under instructions of the speaker, Max millan Gross.

A report to the Bund showed that in 1914, there were 20 members, 29 volumes in the library

Schedule of Evening and Special Adult Classes

COLEMAN VOCATIONAL, TECHNICAL AND ADULT SCHOOLS La Crosse, Wisconsin

FIRST SEMESTER: September 28 - December 4

WHEN TO ENROLL: September 21 from 4:00 - 8:00 p.m.

WHERE TO ENROLL: Coleman Vocational, Technical and Adult Schools - Gymnasium. Those desiring high school credit classes, enroll at Logan High School.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS: Registration fee—\$2 for each subject for all students. Textbooks and special or course fees—Listed with each course. Tuition—Non-residents 21 years of age or over and all out-of-state residents in lieu of city tax support will be charged 50c per evening payable for the semester in advance. The municipality in Wisconsin where the student resides will be billed for non-resident students under 21 years of age.

No tuition will be charged area residents of the La Crosse City District Public School including French-Island and part of Shelby.

	Regis. Fee	Course Fee	Lab. Fee	Textbook Fee (Approx.)
GENERAL ADULT EDUCATION				
Art—7:00-10:00 Monday	\$2.00	\$ 2.00	\$	\$
Aviation Ground School—7:00-10:00 Tuesday	2.00		\$ 5.00	
Advanced Ground School—7:00-10:00 Wednesday	2.00	18.00		\$ 9.00
Braille (Beg.)—7:30-9:30 Tuesday and Thursday				
Braille (Adv.)—7:30-9:30 Monday and Wednesday				
Chair—7:30-9:30 Monday				
Effective Reading—7:30-9:30 Tuesday (1st sem.)	2.00			3.00
Effective Reading—7:30-9:30 Wed. (1st sem.)	2.00			3.00
French—7:30-9:30 Tuesday and Thursday	2.00			
German (Beg.)—7:30-9:30 Tuesday	2.00			
German (Adv.)—7:30-9:30 Thursday	2.00			4.95
* High School Credit—7:30-9:30 Tues. and Thurs.	2.00			
Law for Everyday Use—7:30-9:30 Mon. (1st sem.)	2.00			
Norwegian—7:30-9:30 Monday (1st semester)	2.00			
Principles of Real Estate—7:30-9:30 Thursday	2.00			2.50
Selling Techniques—7:30-9:30 Thurs. (1st sem.)	2.00			
Spanish (Beg.)—7:30-9:30 Monday	2.00			2.95
Spanish (Int.)—7:30-9:30 Thursday	2.00			4.95
Stock and Bond Investment, Estate Planning—7:30-9:30 Monday	2.00			
* High school credit classes meet at Logan High School				

	Regis. Fee	Course Fee	Lab. Fee	Textbook Fee (Approx.)
HOMEMAKING EDUCATION				
Applied Art—7:30-9:30 Thursday	2.00	2.00		
Art Needlecraft—7:30-9:30 Monday	2.00	2.00		
Baking Delicacies—1:30-3:30 Monday	2.00			For fee
Cake Baking & Decorating—2:00-4:00 Tues. (6 wks.)	2.00	2.00		For fee
Cake Baking & Decorating—7:30-9:30 Tues. (6 wks.)	2.00	2.00		For fee
Cake Baking & Decorating—7:30-9:30 Thurs. (6 wks.)	2.00	2.00		For fee
Children's Maternity Garments—7:30-9:30 Tues.	2.00			
Costume Millinery—2:00-4:00 Thursday	2.00	2.00		
Costume Millinery—7:30-9:30 Thursday	2.00	2.00		
Dinner Hostess—3:30-7:30 Wednesday	2.00			For fee
Dressmaking (Adv.)—7:30-9:30 Mon. (8 wks.)	2.00			
Dressmaking (Adv.)—7:30-9:30 Thurs. (8 wks.)	2.00			
Fitting for Fashion—2:00-4:00 Monday	2.00			
Fitting for Fashion—9:30-11:30 a.m. Thurs.	2.00			
Fitting for Fashion—7:30-9:30 Tuesday	2.00			
Fitting for Fashion—7:30-9:30 Wednesday	2.00			
Fur Restyling—2:00-4:00 Wednesday	2.00			
Fur Restyling—7:30-9:30 Monday	2.00			
Fur Restyling—7:30-9:30 Wednesday	2.00			
Interior Decorating—7:30-9:30 Wednesday	2.00			



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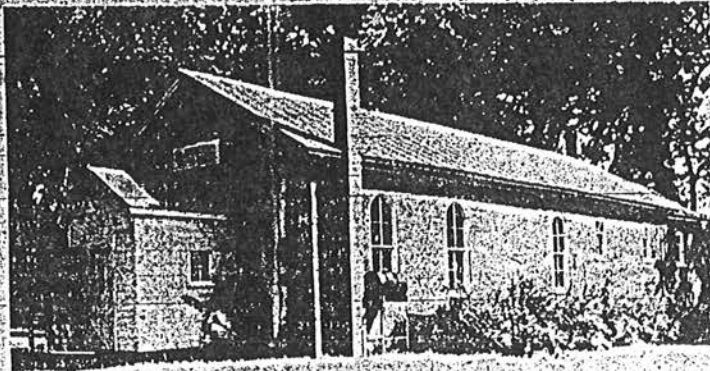
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WHERE FREE THINKERS ONCE MET—This brick building, now the Town of Barre Hall, was built by the Bostwick Valley movement of Free Thinkers which began in 1870 and ended in 1916.—Tribune Photo.

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FURNACE FILTER—Amer-Glas filter r Increased dirt catching. 14x20x1-in. Reg. 59c **39c**

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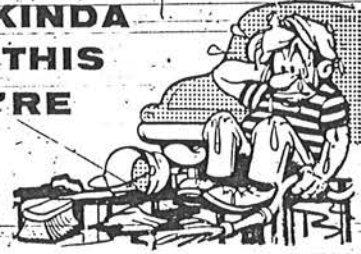
VACUUM BOTTLE—Stand-ard neck pint size, with Strongglas filler. Special **99c**

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La Crosse Sunday Tribune Sept. 29, 1964 Del. RFD Sept. 21 7

IF THINGS KINDA LOOK LIKE THIS WHEN YOU'RE THROUGH CLEANING YOUR CAR



... if you're tired of wet, soiled clothes, dirty driveways, soggy yards... if you've had fighting with the garden hose, nozzles that never work... if you could use the money you now spend for extra water, brushes, sponges and all those special cleaners... then, why not give up home car cleaning and do it the KWIKI way?

You can still get your car as clean as you did with "home doing"... cleaner, in fact, thanks to KWIKI's magical combination of VELVA-POWER... miracle soap... and 100% soft water. KWIKI offers all of the advantages and more of home jobs but none of the disadvantages. There just isn't any mess! It just doesn't take much time! It is so inexpensive and easy. Try KWIKI CLEANING yourself! You'll see THERE IS A BETTER WAY!

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WEST AVE. AND GREEN BAY ST. LA CROSSE OPEN 24 HOURS

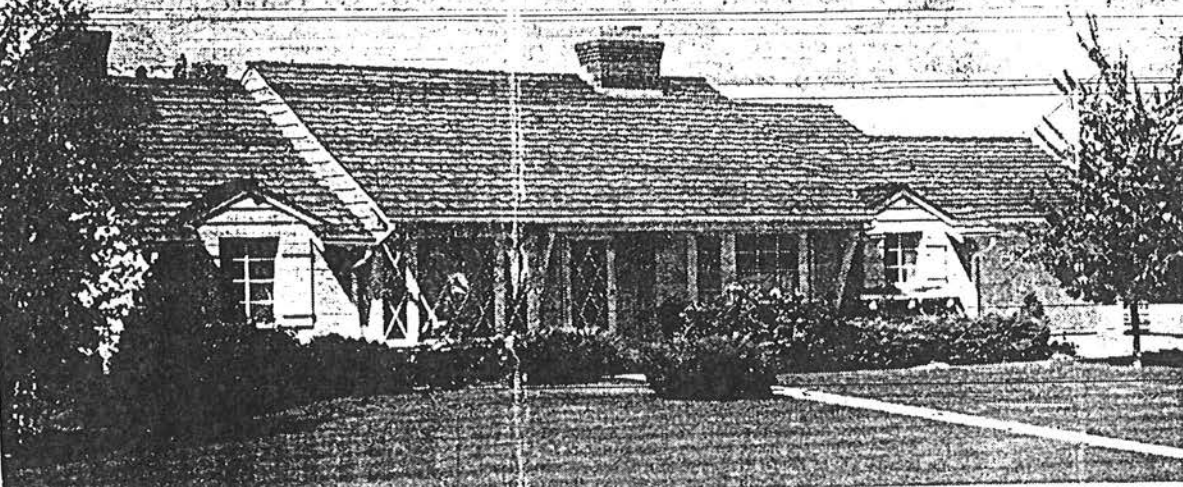
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WHY IS NATURAL GAS HEAT FOUND IN MORE AMERICAN HOMES

SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION

