

What Made a Place Called Bethel?

The influence of culture on a 19th century commune in the United States

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Abstract

This study is an examination of the 19th century communitarian settlement known as the Bethel German Colony through the community design model to understand the impact of syncretic cultural influences in shaping the landscape. Analysis of secondary sources and field observation of the extant community buildings confirm the idea that the physical landscape of the settlement is as much a result of the Colony's leadership as it is the craft and skill of the members themselves. The remains of Bethel today evoke these same influences, despite the dissolution of the commune more than 130 years ago.

Keywords: Bethel German Colony, communitarian society, commune, syncretic culture

Introduction

In the Middle of the United State, deep in the woods of northern Missouri, a group of 19th century German immigrants developed a pious community isolated by their communitarian ideals. There were two types of influences at play in the Bethel German Colony: an external culture, including the language, heritage, and trade/craft brought to Bethel by its members; and an internal culture of communalism created within the Colony by its religious and social doctrine, which derived from a set of ideals created by the founder Wilhelm Keil, yet utterly followed by its members. The blended nature of these influences has translated into a type of vernacular form within the landscape of Bethel. This landscape evokes both the human culture and religious spirit of those most concerned with its development. This study posits the idea that the creation of the landscape and built environment within the Bethel German Colony rests within an understanding of the syncretic nature of these influences, created through a blending of cultural expressions under the onus of designing a settlement for social change¹.

¹ The use of the term "syncretic culture" is derived from commonly used terminology in human geography as the concept of blending influences to create a new understanding. The idea of using the conceptual lens of social change is derived from a lack of political motive and spiritual ambiguity to apply a more concrete term such as "utopia." Hayden discusses this concept in larger scale. Hayden, D. (1976) *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.4-6.

Bethel has its place in understanding the landscape of communitarianism and with this study; it should be seen within the context to understand the vast influence of culture on the physical landscape of the settlement. Like other studies, its limitations include a lack of validation for historic accounts of the Colony and the reliance on secondary sources for accurate depiction of both non-extant landscape features and practices. For example, the original church at Bethel is long-gone, however building on the experiences and practices from historical accounts and the nature of Bethel's sister commune at Aurora, certain conclusions may be considered about the role (or lack thereof) of the physical church in maintaining a strong sense of community and morality in the society at Bethel².

Research on the Bethel German Colony relies heavily on the existence of documented visits to the Colony during its tenure as a communitarian society by a handful of journalists and academics writing in the nineteenth century, collected by publishers and by the archives actively maintained by Bethel and its sister commune at Aurora, Oregon. In addition to published documents, an interview conducted with life-long community resident and granddaughter of colony members, Lucille Bowers, was conducted in 2008, prior to her death. Her guidance in understanding the changes in the landscape of Bethel account for unparalleled access to what the original landscape might have appeared.

Analysis of the documents and first-hand field study of the existing landscape revealed the primary division between external and internal cultural influences; predominantly those influences that appear to be marked by the culture brought into the society by its members (external) and that which developed as a direct result of indoctrination (internal). Within both of these primary categories, further analysis reveals a distinct influence by Colony leader Keil's own religious understandings that were in turn believed to be heavily influenced by blending his experiences with German mysticism and his own comprehension of the Christian Bible. As with most communitarian societies developed at this time in the US, Bethel's experiences and beliefs were unique to its members, therefore, an analysis of these syncretized practices can be categorized by tracing other belief or practice systems based on the prior geographic locations of its residents. Much of the analysis required a deep understanding of the personal history of its leadership and geographic references of its membership. Lastly, a field study conducted on site over approximately three months with return visits, attempted to reconcile the extant village with the known systems of the colony. Specifically, the location of Colony-era buildings and the orientation of Colony-era activity nodes based on histories collected of the society. These nodes provided insight into the apparent disconnect of the supposedly egalitarian commune and the separateness of its leader Keil.

The Bethel German Colony:

In the United States and most of Europe during the nineteenth century, there was a profound religious fervor permeating society in what is often referred to as the Second Great Awakening. Religious mystics predicted the second coming of the Messiah to occur in 1835, and thus many people began to seek out religion in both formal and less organized manners in anticipation of the event. Based on the promises of American spiritualist Charles Grandison Finney, America would hold special honor in the Awakening, which inspired a migration of followers to the shores of the US (McLoughlin, 1978). The United States was

² While the Church was used for typical, although not regular, worship services its primary feature was a large balcony wrapping the bell tower from which the community band played near daily while community members toiled at work or social activity, thus inspiring both social community and spiritual belonging within the Colony.

seen as a potential paradise for those assuming that religious salvation could be earned through collective organization and society, as its abundance of land and religious freedoms allowed for the formation, not only of congregations, but communities easily isolated from the outside world. The increasing tide of religious fervor withstood the disappointment of the devout when the second coming failed to occur in 1835, and in the US, many faithful believers and their followers continued to organize the formation of communitarian religions.

Dolores Hayden (1976) developed a strong argument supporting the role of internal culture in developing the unique landscapes of communitarian architecture, such as that found in Bethel. In an analysis of communitarian settlements in the US, Hayden assessed the role of both religious doctrine and social order to understand the commonalities and differences in both architecture and land usage. One relevant conclusion is that the role of internal culture, i.e., the leadership and indoctrination of the members, shows up in the forms of housing, food production, recreation, and overall development of the settlement (Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: the architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975*, 1976). This idea is further supported by examinations of geographic cultural diffusion amongst commune membership, as nearly all of these settlements are self-built by the members, drawing on regional tradecraft and skills (Dailey, 1927; Hendricks, 1933; Massey, 2006; and Hayden 1976). Holloway (1966) contends that the German culture acted as a uniform binder for many communitarian societies, particularly ones like Bethel, where most, if not all, of its members were not just German, but from a specific area of Germany (p. 160-165). Using this socially constructed theory of diffusion, the settlement at Bethel should evoke both the ideals of communitarianism and the German culture of its members (Holloway, 1966).

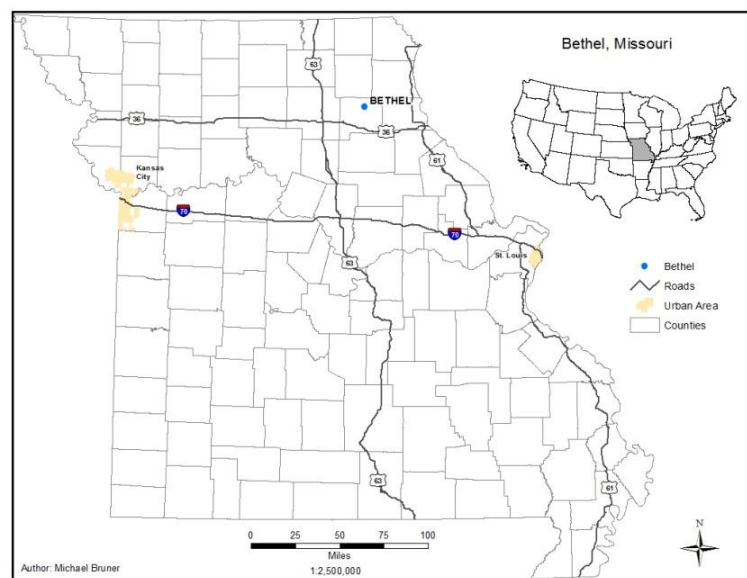


Figure 1: Location of historic Bethel German Colony. Source: Bruner, 2015.

Along state highway 15 in northern Missouri, near a bend in the North River lies a tangible reminder of what has been considered by historians to be the most successful attempt at communal living in the history of the state (figure 1). This place called Bethel, “the house of worship,” features a unique collection of buildings that displays the complex culture that was created by the Bethel German Colony. The form of the landscape evokes the perception of egalitarian society, yet there exist signs of the imperious nature of its founder and

religious patriarch, Wilhelm Keil. Amongst the plethora of religious immigrants of the 19th century, who were the people of Bethel, so convinced of Keil's words they followed him across a vast territory to settle in woods of Missouri and what exactly created this environment of Bethel? What was it about these people and this place that would create such a unique community that attempts would be made to recreate it on the western shores of the US?³

Existing studies of Bethel and its sister colony at Aurora, Oregon largely focus on the primary settlement at Bethel, then on to the separation of some members to Aurora. The preservation of Aurora has been more successful than that of Bethel; therefore, much of the information about Bethel is tied to Aurora (Dole, *Aurora Colony: Building in a nineteenth-century cooperative society, 1991-1992*). However, many of the first-hand accounts of visitors to Bethel during the 19th century paint a specific picture of life in the Colony that has led to historical study of Bethel's practices and beliefs (Bek, 1908-09; Dailey, 1927; and Nordhoff, 1875). In particular, the influence of Wilhelm Keil (figure 2), the leader at both settlements, has been directly acknowledged as influencing the creation, development, and exact cause for dissolution of the Bethel German Colony (Schroeder A. E., 1990).

The People of Bethel

The society of the Colony was based primarily on Wilhelm Keil's ideas of piety, moral living, and communalism. In fact, most outside visitors to the Colony would remark that it was through sheer power and conviction of idea that Keil united the people of Bethel (Bek, 1908-09). Keil used an idea referred to as the Golden Rule as the primary doctrine of the Colony. Members worked first for the good of all; helping others before they helped themselves. Work was intended to prepare the Colony for the millennium and to supply the community treasury with enough resources to ensure their continued existence. Members of the Colony were well-ingrained by previous associations to communitarian societies and the day-to-day commitments to labor and religion and thus, were highly committed to Keil. Charles Nordhoff, a journalist who spent time in Bethel and wrote about his experiences, noted that even in times of doubt, members of the Colony would rely solely on direction from Keil (Nordhoff 1875). Keil's word was considered the final word on all matters of law, religion, and social matters within the Colony (A. E. Schroeder 1990). While other communitarian settlements in the US have been tied to specific philosophical stance or religious context, Bethel is perhaps better understood as a model of convenience and unintentional communalism springing out of its leader Keil's dynamic rhetoric and ability to garner his faithful followers to his practices (Holloway, 1966 and Schroeder A. E., 1990).

³ The second Keilite community was developed by Bethel members and Keil in Aurora, Oregon in 1856.

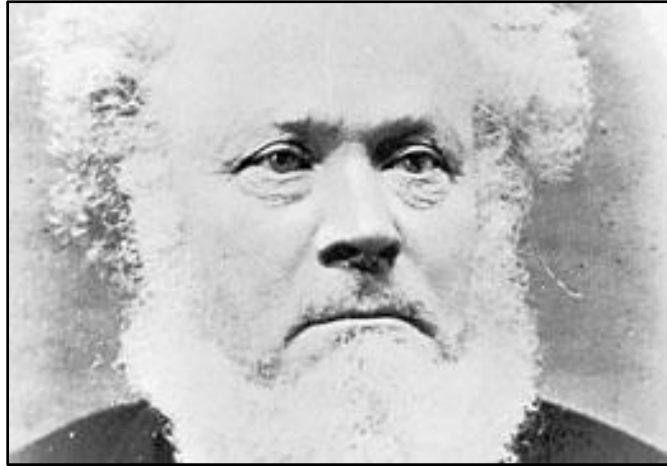


Figure 2: Wilhelm Keil, leader of the Bethel German Colony.
Source: Oregon Historical Society, 2008 (public domain.)

Keil and his family came to the US from Prussia sometime around 1835, likely to seek greater economic opportunities in the booming growth of the US, but also because Keil's developing interest in independent (i.e., cult-like) religious beliefs, which at that time in Prussia, were technically outlawed (Hemming, *Temples Stand, Temples Fall: The Utopian Vision of Wilhelm Keil*, 1990). Upon arrival in the US, Keil flitted between groups of Christian mystics and pagan occultists in New York and Pennsylvania, where he became fascinated with herbalism and mysticism. This led Keil to proclaim himself a healer, adopting the title of 'doctor' and to open a pharmacy where he dispensed his mystical cures, along with a hefty dose of religious piety.

Keil found religious inspiration in two men: William Nast, the "Father of German Methodism" and the Reverend Martin Hartmann (Hemming 1990). After attending a revival of Nast's in 1838, Keil became a fervent follower of Methodism, dramatically and publicly denouncing the occult arts. His conversion experience was described as 'childlike' and his acceptance of the teachings absolute (Schroeder A. E., 1990). By 1840, Keil became a minister within the German Methodist Church, and drew a devoted following, however, open criticism of organized religion led to his separation from the church. It was then that he called to his group of faithful followers to join him in seeking a new path based on his interpretations of religious gospel heavily influenced by Hartmann's ideas of theocracy (Bek 1908-1909 and Hemming, 1990).

As he leaned further into the ideas of the primitive church, Keil began to conceive of a community based entirely around and consisting of the faithful. He was by all accounts obsessed with the idea of communal life and convinced his followers that the true path to God lay in the creation of a new communal society dedicated to living by the Golden Rule. He sent three members of his fellowship in search of good farm land for this new venture. They found what they were looking for in Shelby County, Missouri. In the fall of 1844, Keil, his family, and 500 "sturdy German pilgrims" migrated to 25,000 acres along the North River selected to be the Colony site (Dailey 1927). By the time the population would split to develop a second commune in Oregon in 1855, there were approximately 650 members of the Bethel German Colony (Bower, 2008).

The followers of Keil consisted mostly of other German immigrants, primarily from the area of Württemberg. Most members of the Colony came to Keil's fellowship from other religious groups, with a majority coming from the Harmony Society at Economy, Pennsylvania. The Harmonists, or Rappites as they were sometimes known, were also followers of the primitive

church and largely consisted of German and Swiss immigrants (Stotz 1973). The Rappites were a communal theocratic society where all persons lived as brother and sister to await the millennium. The celibate character of the community, however, also led many members to abandon the Harmony Society and eventually, its population to die out (A. E. Schroeder 1990).

In addition to Economy, several of Keil's followers came from the community of Phillipsburgh where a man by the moniker "Count Leon" had parted from the Harmony Society and formed another communal theocracy. The Count had taken in the rebellious members of the Harmony Society who had been angered by a decree for celibacy and formed the 400-member New Philadelphia Congregation. The Congregation proclaimed the Count the one true reorganizer of the Christian Church. Eventually Count Leon was exposed as a fraudster, and when the remaining Congregation members decided to move their community further south some remained behind and would later be taken in by Keil (A. E. Schroeder 1990).

The final core group that contributed to the membership of the Colony was a group that is today known as Pennsylvania Dutch. Not much is written about this specific group's participation in the Colony, although it is known that they were also at Economy and Phillipsburgh. The traditional use of classic forms of the German language, even today, is a cultural tie to the Bethel German Colony, as is the tradition of following the teachings of the primitive church. In modern society, the remnants of these groups compose various organizations of Anabaptist communities known as Amish, German Brethren, and Mennonite.

Influence on the Landscape of Bethel

Bethel is located on a fairly flat bank on the north side of the North River in North-central Missouri. The terrain is similar to that found at Economy, Pennsylvania, and may have been what drew the former Rappites to this particular site. The main street through the town in today state highway 15, and has always been the only paved street. The flatness of the Colony site, combined with the block layout created a linear plan (figure 3). There are three original north-south streets divided into four block faces creating a compact village. When the town was planned, commercial buildings were oriented facing onto the street, at a narrow sidewalk, and equally spaced (figure 4). The primary concentration of commercial buildings was on the southern edge of the main street near the river. It can be assumed this was to be in close proximity to the origin of goods from the mill, as well as the distillery, tannery and vineyard, which were located on the lands closest to the river for ease in utilizing the power of the river in production (Piggott 1970).

An overarching characteristic of communes developed in the US during the 19th century is their relative isolation from the outside world. Isolation was necessary for communarians to establish internal cultural norms exclusive of the normalized practices of their contemporaries in the 'outside world.' Specific attributes of the Colony sought to retain this isolation, despite known interactions, primarily economic in practice, the membership maintained with nearby cities. The social and religious practices of the commune functioned to clearly delineate membership into the Colony. Only 'members' lived and worked at Bethel in the earliest days. Keil's teachings emphasized, like so many of the religious communarians of the day, the obligation of his congregants to upholding the social values

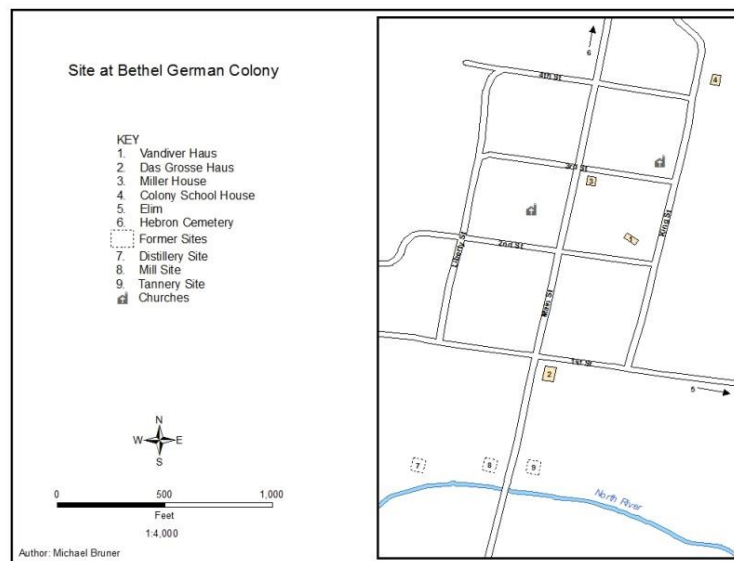


Figure 3: Basic orientation and layout of Bethel German Colony. Source: Bruner, 2015.

of the Colony. This acted to normalize the interactions within the community while creating a gulf between it and the outside world. While there was no effective physical barrier between Bethel and the surrounding communities, there was a social and, most importantly, religious barrier based within Keil's teachings. Perhaps this gulf explains how the cultural impressions of its people manifest in its physical creation.

As William Hinds, a member of the Oneida communitarian society in New York, discovered in his visits to the Colony between 1855 and 1879, there was an obvious and earnest appreciation of communal life amongst the members (W. A. Hinds 1961). They lived a life of little luxury or outside (of the Colony) contact; regardless under the direction of Keil and his advisors all were equally provided for in food, health and spiritual wealth. Upon admittance to the commune a member turned over all property, money and goods to the communal treasury, which was overseen by elected members of the Colony (Hendricks 1933). While in the Colony, each family was provided a house and a garden; for each single person without a family there was a room to live in one of the community boarding houses and all were provided with work, health care and spiritual guidance—the latter two overseen by Keil until his departure in 1855. There were no almshouses, jails, asylums, or courts in the Colony, for there was no need; all members were cared for by the other members of the Colony as a whole. Each member was given work, either within their craft, one of the Colony industries or in the farm fields. Even Keil, as the spiritual "father" of the community was often found to toil with the workers in the fields in a spirit of communal kinship (W. A. Hinds 1961). Twice

per year, goods of the Colony were distributed equitably amongst the members. Education was provided, though rudimentary, and skills developed to train all members of the Colony, men and women alike. Despite this egalitarianism of genders, women did not seem to have the same standing within the community. It was quite patriarchal, not only with Keil as the premier authority, but with preference to men in the distribution of assets at the end of membership. The nuclear family was the preferred unit at Bethel and later at its sister commune at Aurora.

Commitment to communalism was second only to commitment to piety. God, after all, was the heart of the community. The church at Bethel (no longer extant) was one of the first buildings completed by the Colony and was said to have reflected the spiritual and social values of Bethel (Schroeder 1990). Amongst its most prominent features were separate entrances for the sexes and an 80-foot high bell tower with a balcony from which the entire Colony could be seen (Nordhoff 1875). While the community was purported to be deeply pious, Keil conducted services in the church only twice per month, insisting that living with the spirit was far more important than preaching of it (Hemming October 1990). Attendance at services was not required at Bethel, unlike most societies of the time, however, no one was allowed to loaf about while services were underway (Bek, 1908-09).

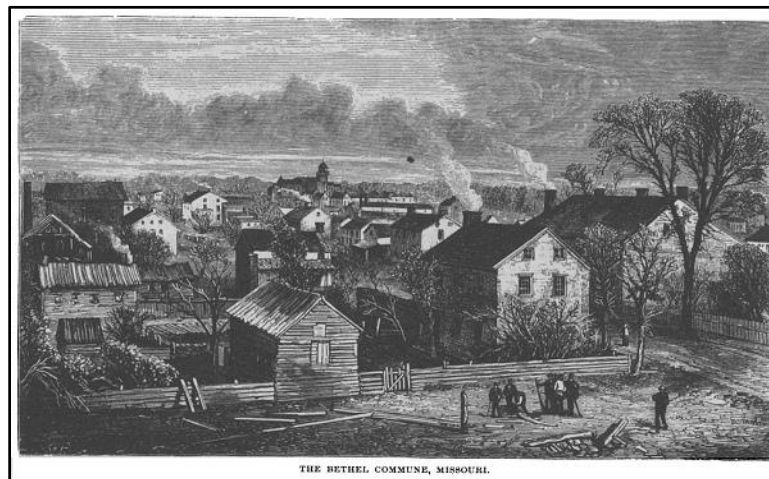


Figure 4: Visitor's sketch of Bethel. Significant information may be gleaned from the image, including the orientation and form of buildings and a rare image of the church in the background. Source: Nordhoff, 1875 (public domain.)

Visitors to the Colony often remarked on its generally unkempt condition with animals allowed to wander the streets, a lack of sidewalks, and crumbling plaster buildings (figure 4). The Colony had at its height in the 1850s a considerable diversity of businesses, all intended to first serve the needs of the Colony and then provide a profit: a tannery, a hat and glove factory, a whiskey distillery, a vineyard, a mill, multiple drug stores and at least three dry-goods stores. The only business created purely for profit was the distillery. The Colonists did not generally consume whiskey because of their religious devotion, but sold Golden Rule Whiskey in nearby river towns at Quincy, Illinois and Hannibal, Missouri. All profits from

these enterprises went directly into the community treasury. In addition, more than 1,100 acres of the commune were dedicated to farming for community profits.⁴

What remains in the village today is a collection of Colony buildings that reflect a blend of cultural influences, as well as the artistry of the Württemberg natives who crafted the commune. What we know of these people is that they were all of Germanic extraction, many having immigrated to the United States within a few years prior to coming to the Colony. According to William Godfrey Bek, a professor at the University of Missouri who translated Keil's personal letters in 1908, classical High German was the language of the Colony; all church services and Colony business were conducted in it. Even after the dissolution of the Colony, most people of Bethel continued to use German, more closely associated with that which became known as Pennsylvania German (i.e., Pennsylvania Dutch). The language, among other attributes of communalism, acted as an insulator against the world outside of the Colony (Bek 1908-1909).

Language was not the only attribute brought from Europe. Many of the men in the Bethel Colony were skilled craftsman in masonry, woodworking and blacksmithing; these skills would prove valuable in building the physical environment of the Colony (Bek W. G., 1908-09). A majority of the membership of the Colony emigrated from the same area in Germany, in and around Württemberg, thus most of the craft involved in the construction of Colony buildings feature similar techniques. The experience of these men in construction and fabrication techniques used in their homelands would manifest in the design of buildings in the Colony, and because they derived from nearly identical immigrant populations, also provide a stylistic link between Bethel and other German communities in the United States.

Language, craft, and social connection, which the Colony members brought into Bethel, had an important role in the development of the material culture produced by the Colony. The language and close-knit society of the Bethel Colony separated it from the outside world, thus allowing the Colony environment to develop unfettered by intrusion. However, it would be their common German heritage and tradecraft that would be applied to the construction of the built environment, which in combination with communal doctrine produced the vernacular tradition at Bethel.

Influences on the Buildings of Bethel

The Colony's adherence to communalism and piety extended to the design of Bethel's physical environment. The strength of Keil's power over the way the commune was run and the rare, but powerful exceptions to his rule, had a direct influence on the material culture of the Colony, in the fabrication, use, and adaptation of buildings and artifacts. When the first scouts came to the area that would become Bethel, they were primarily interested in obtaining prime farmland with nearby water resources. The area acquired had good soils along the banks of a small river, which could be used for milling. They acquired tracts which included an extant house, called the Vandiver House (figure 5), and an existing mill (Bower 2008). During the first winter in 1844 the Colony members, including Keil and his family, shared the Vandiver House, which was later used for the Colony hat and glove factory. Since it existed at the time the members arrived on site, it is the only house which does not adhere to the linear plan of the Colony. The original mill was quickly replaced, and although

⁴ The mild economic success of the commune was foretold by a former commune member's description of the initial settlement: "They first built a church, then a place to do business." Daily, H. (1927) "The Old Communistic Colony at Bethel" *Tyler's Historical & Genealogical Quarterly*. Pp 254-259.

the reason why is unclear, it was presumably to provide a larger mill for the increased size of the community⁵.



Figure 5: Vandiver House pre-dates the construction of the Bethel settlement, thus its canted orientation and slightly different style are not typical of other Colony buildings. Source: Lawless, 2008.



Figure 6: *das grosse haus*, the communal dormitory for single men of the Colony. Today it is used for commercial purposes. Source: Lawless, 2008.

The remaining Colony buildings consist of a small schoolhouse and the community boarding houses. These large buildings functioned both as housing for unmarried Colony members who did not have family to live with, as well as space for commercial businesses such as shops, hotels, and offices. Buildings were designated for men or women, but because of propriety never both (figure 6). The construction technique was similar to other Colony buildings, but according to Dole (1991-1992), the rooms were large dormitory-style dwellings similar to those found at Economy and Aurora.⁶

Married members of the Colony were given a house and garden (figures 7-10). It is believed that at its largest, the Colony consisted of 54 families, although the exact number of houses built is unknown. In developing her typologies, Hayden (1976) discusses the role of gender and family as shaping the form and location of housing. She points to the anomaly created by the apparent single-family houses at Amana, which are in fact communal houses. Hayden posits the idea that visitors may have been intentionally misled by the appearance as to de-emphasize the communal aspects of Amana to cause less trouble when the reality was that in forming Amana, the members were choosing to move far away from the monastic environments many had fled (p. 243). Keil, too, had decidedly not included monastic practices at Bethel, and may also have chosen to situate the Colony around the single-family house form- far different than most other settlements of this sort. In fact, the primary contribution Bethel makes to understanding the vernacular of communitarian settlements, is that the influences evoked in the landscape are most often a reaction to what Keil chose not to include at Bethel, and the weight of his own righteousness above all else (Bek W. G., 1908-09).

As in Economy and later in Aurora, houses were placed close to the street at the corners of the block in order to place common ovens, small stables and washhouses within the center

⁵ This assumption was made through conversations with deceased community member Lucille Bower, who was the granddaughter of Colony members and at the time of our conversation, the oldest living member of the community. Unpublished interview, 19 March 2008.

⁶ The other extant commercial buildings in Bethel date from the post-Colony era. They are typical of Victorian-era commercial buildings found in the area and do not appear to be stylistically or materially related to the Colony buildings. Piggot, C. National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form: Bethel Historic District. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service.

(figure 9 and 10). It is said that Keil instructed each house to be two stories with two rooms and a central hall on each floor, end chimneys and a basement but without porches. The reason behind this design is not implicitly stated by Keil; however, the house style was common to German craft of this time period (Massey, 2006). The lack of porch is likely attributed to the work ethos inspired by the Colony⁷.

Another typical feature of the German house is a rather high, steep two-story attic with



Figures 7 and 8: Typical Colony house, featuring two stories of locally fired brick. Source: Lawless, 2008.

small windows on the gable ends. The attic was commonly used for storage, and rarely for living space. The roof style used in Bethel was not as sharply steep as typically found, however they commonly feature small attic windows in the gable ends. The roof was often covered in flat tiles. There is one house remaining in Bethel which features a typical German *fachwerk*, or stucco with half-timbering covering a frame structure (figure 11). Other typical features of German influence include small multi-pane wood casement windows, interior

Figures 9 and 10: Houses were set close to the street and at block edges to allow for the lot's interior to be used for food production (gardens and communal ovens) as well as, provide space for other work activity. Source: Lawless, 2008.



⁷ According to Bower, only the Miller House, built after Keil's death and the last house built in the Colony, was built with an original rear porch, which can be seen at the far right, figure 10.

woodwork and simple wood doors (figure 7). In Bethel, many of these features, if they did exist, have long since been replaced⁸.

Research on the reasons for this common design is extremely limited, however based on what is known about the social construction of the Colony and the heritage of the Colony builders some assumptions can be made. While it is commonly believed that Keil dictated the floor plan of these houses, it is in fact a very common plan for houses built by German settlers in the United States. The houses at Bethel demonstrate a connection to German-influence in their style; both the brickwork and form are strongly reminiscent of other German settlements in this country. German settlements are commonly located near to a water source, as was Bethel. The orientation and proximity of the buildings to the street is also common to German communities in the United States. The form and massing of these houses is nearly identical to houses found at Economy, as well as other German communities that were not built for communalism, elsewhere in Missouri, Wisconsin, Virginia and Maryland (Massey 2006). The emphasis of Bethel was on communal living and work, where the house was seen merely as a place to sleep. Porches were unnecessary as all activities were community-centered, generally held at Keil's house, and thus it could be assumed that the lack of ornamentation and porches was an indication that privacy and personal expression were secondary to the spirit of communalism. The materials were locally sourced: brick was fired on site; limestone quarried nearby; and walnut harvested from the river banks.

The majority of houses were built with brick fired within the Colony and laid in the American bond pattern most commonly with nine stretcher courses, although a few buildings feature five stretcher courses. During the years of the Colony, stucco covered most of the buildings in a traditional German *fachwerk* manner, but today many are bare or painted brick. Even the few frame houses featured crushed brick within the walls to act as insulation. All stand on limestone foundations; have a rectangular plan with a side-gable roof and simple wood doors and windows. The houses were constructed in a plain manner without ornamentation, with the exception of decorative brickwork above the openings. Interiors were emphasized

Figure 11: Recreation of *fachwerk* that would have been typical of the houses in the Colony (on left). Many of the extant Colony-era buildings have been altered or added to as seen on the right. Source: Lawless, 2008



Figure 12: Typical to the Colony, but not typical in the Midwest, is the use of a corbelled brick cornice. This unique craft is one of the few decorative features at Bethel. Source: Lawless, 2008.



⁸ Stylistic comparisons derived from Massey, J. and S. Maxwell. (2006) German Houses in the New World. *Old House Journal*, pp. 78-85.

by large utilitarian rooms with walnut floors and mantelpieces (Piggott 1970; Dole 1991-1992).

There is one house in Bethel that stands alone in its design and magnitude and that is the house built by the colonists for Keil himself, called Elim. Named by Keil for the biblical site of the Israelites encampment following the Exodus from Egypt, this house is singular because there is no evidence that suggests Keil directed its design as he did with other houses in the Colony. While it was built as a home to the Keil family, historic narratives have suggested that Keil thought it too grand and instead, lived in a small shack near the river. Due to its size and location with a sweeping view to the Colony, the house not only served as a dwelling for

Figures 13 and 14: *Elim*, the house built for the Colony leader Keil, served as the center of social activity for the entire Colony. It is set upon a hill far away from the center of the Colony, and as such, Keil is said to have considered it too grand and out of touch with the teachings of the Colony. Source: Lawless, 2008.



the Keil family, but also served an important community function (figure 13). Funerals, festivals and other celebrations started at Elim. If one were to follow the probable route of these celebrations, the journey would start on the sloping lawn of Elim, wind through the woods along the river, down the main street of the Colony to the church or perhaps the cemetery, encompassing a near perfect tour of Bethel. The second story ballroom at Elim was the center of community celebrations and served as the administrative seat of the Colony. On the third floor was Keil's herbarium from which he served as the Colony's "doctor". The house sits on the brow of a plateau above the river approximately two miles east of the center of the Colony. It is an imposing brick structure with double end chimneys, a steeply pitched roof and symmetrical windows as common to other German-influenced structures. Like the other houses in the Colony, it is built with a central hall, only with two rooms on each side instead of one. Originally built without a porch, a large porch has been added to the front and rear and the entire structure painted pink (figure 14). A tornado in 1925 severely damaged the third floor necessitating its removal and was never rebuilt (Hannah 1970 and Bower 2008).

If Elim was the center of social life in the Colony then certainly the center of its religious life would have been the Colony Church. No longer standing, it was a large structure sixty by one hundred feet, which featured all of the skills of the artisans and craftsmen within the Colony. Bek (1908-1909) described it as brick on a limestone foundation, as most buildings were, and featured black walnut interiors constructed from native trees. According to descriptions from Charles Nordhoff, the interior featured a floor of large red tiles and a ceiling painted deep blue, ostensibly to represent the kingdoms of heaven and earth (or sky and ground). At one end there was a narrow pulpit from which Keil delivered his sermons twice per month (Nordhoff 1875). While many of the Rappite ideas of gender were disregarded by the

Bethel Colonists, the separation of sexes during worship remained. There were separate entrances for men, on the north side of the building, and women, on the south side of the building. The sexes also sat on opposite sides of the church on benches which ran the length of the building, facing each other. This orientation appears to be reminiscent of the Rappite ideology, which stressed the separation of genders to enhance the religious experience (Dole 1991-1992). A gallery ran down three sides of the sanctuary supported by large columns.

Figure 15: Below, a rare image of the church at Bethel. It was demolished not long after the end of the Colony, so few images exist. Source: Nordhoff, 1875 (public domain).



The church featured a large bell tower, 80-feet in height with an octagonal roof and balcony wrapped around the top (figure 15). It housed three bells, which were cast in Pittsburgh for the Colony. The balcony at the bell tower was apparently designed to accommodate the full community band. In keeping with the strong musical culture of the Colony, each weekend the Colony band played from the church balcony⁹. This church shared construction and design elements with the churches at both Economy and Aurora indicating influence of both German building techniques and commune workmanship (Dole 1991-1992). The separation of genders within worship, the bell towers, and dual entrances were common to all three buildings. After the dissolution of the commune the church was sold to three men who demolished it for scrap materials sometime before the turn of the twentieth-century (Bower 2008).

Conclusion

In time Wilhelm Keil became restless and worried that the Colony would become contaminated by the “outside world.” He began to make plans for another branch of the Colony, looking to the new frontier of the time, the West. In 1855, Keil set out for the Willapa Valley with his family, including the body of a recently deceased favored son, and seventy-five wagons of Bethel residents. Unfortunately, the land at Willapa Valley did not

⁹ The spiritual essence of the community is directly tied to musical traditions. Music books created by the Colony contain a progression of hymns sang or played by members of the Colony on numerous occasions such as celebrations and funerals, but also during work and travel as a way to bind the spirit of the members in their common action. Music was so much of a tradition that legends are told of the Bethel wagon train in 1855, during the move to Oregon, where the mere sound of the entire party singing in German prevented Indian warriors from attacking their wagons. Historic Bethel German Colony, Inc. (1990). *The Musical Life of the Bethel German Colony*. Bethel, MO: Historic Bethel German Colony, Inc.

suit Keil, and so the group moved on to Oregon where the sister colony of Aurora was founded by 1856. Keil, who would never return to Bethel during his lifetime, died unexpectedly in 1877 and the process to legally dissolve the Colonies began shortly thereafter. Members of both Bethel and Aurora were paid for their time in the Colony and contributions to the community treasury as promised by Keil at the onset of the commune. By 1879 the Bethel German Colony had ceased to exist and in 1883, the town of Bethel was incorporated.

Nineteenth-century Missouri was a wilderness with good soils and ample land. Keil sought out a place to build a community apart from influences of the outside world that would allow his followers the opportunity to work together to build a place on earth for their spiritual awakening. At Bethel, the landscape today still shows the lengths to which Keil and his followers believed that their community represented the values of ideas of their shared efforts. It is a study of the external culture shared by its members and the internal culture of the commune as a reflection of the landscape. A reading of the landscape shows a simple linear plan with large spaces for activity contained within each block of housing. Buildings are plain, with the beauty showing skill over decoration. More thought must be given to the types of activities that would have occurred instead of the places where it occurred because the land is a dominant presence over the simple buildings. People did not come to Bethel for physical comfort or pleasure, as there is a discourteous feel to the buildings and their proportions. Rather it is likely that the spirit of communalism inspired these people. The most impressive Colony building, Elim, was built for a leader who did not want to live there, so instead would be enjoyed by all members of the community in times of celebration. The buildings within the Colony are stylistically similar to other German settlements across the country, in particular other communes at Economy and New Harmony. Yet, within each there is a physical reminder of the communal beliefs of the Colony. The large functional rooms to house extended family; the orientation of buildings to preserve farmland and provide for communal facilities; gender segregated buildings and entrances to maintain the perception of egalitarian but pious social contact; and the equal spacing of buildings to provide a sense of fairness.

Today Bethel is in a poor state of maintenance. Many of the Colony buildings are boarded up without proper mothballing techniques. Unsympathetic additions have been constructed on several buildings, which disguise original features of construction. None of the original industrial buildings of the Colony are extant and there appear to be no plans recorded of their construction. A small museum run by volunteers is the last remaining effort to promote the history of the town and educate people of the significance of the Colony. Academically, the Aurora Colony in Oregon has received the majority of notice and support. Active preservation has kept that commune better cared for and studied. With more attention, Bethel too, could be preserved and studied to understand the most significant experiment in communalism in the history of Missouri. Further study could enable researchers to draw more conclusions on the nature and influence of syncretic culture on the vernacular built environment. Lastly, preservation of the site at Bethel would preserve the significance between the spirit of Bethel and the authentic experience of place in its physical environment, best expressed by a former colonist, "*In der Kolonie war es aber doch so schön...Das war das Paradies*" ["In the colony, it was yet so beautiful, it was paradise"]¹⁰.

¹⁰ As transcribed and translated by Bek, W.G. (1908-1909) "A German Communistic Society in Missouri." *Missouri Historical Review*. Pg. 125.

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