

# **THE 1887 MATHILDA WEHMEYER HOUSE AND GERMAN-AMERICAN KINDERGARTEN SCHOOL**

## **I. CONTEXT**

The city of Galveston occupies a barrier island off of the Texas Gulf Coast. After the Texas Revolution, a group of investors led by Michel Menard formed the Galveston City Company, through which they platted the land and began selling lots in 1838. Throughout the nineteenth century, as its port grew based on the strength of cotton exports and farm supply imports, the city became an important immigration hub. Most of the immigrants settled farther inland, but many stayed in Galveston, finding work with one of the companies that operated from the port or by providing services for the city's growing population. Each cultural group brought their own traditions and the sum of these diverse contributions defined the character of the city during its greatest era of growth.

No immigrant group had a greater influence on Galveston's cultural identity than that of German settlers. Motivated by a desire to escape political situations in Europe, the first Germans to arrive in Galveston came before the city's formal founding.<sup>1</sup> Some of these earliest immigrants went on to become prominent local figures. Charles Beissner, trained as a hotelier in Germany, operated Galveston's Washington Hotel and became an influential city alderman in the 1860s.<sup>2</sup> John H. Westerlage, who relocated to Galveston from Germany at an early age, served as a city marshal.<sup>3</sup> Later in the nineteenth century, Samson Heidenheimer, born in Germany, was a prosperous merchant through partnerships with his brothers.<sup>4</sup> Behind these leaders, a large German-American community quickly established itself. By 1887, Galveston was home to a German-language newspaper, the *Texas Post*,<sup>5</sup> seven German social clubs, and a popular landscaped park and dance hall called the Garten Verein, which still stands at the corner of 27<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue O.<sup>6</sup>

In the city's East End neighborhood, where the size and style of the houses reflects the booming growth of the nineteenth century, the German-American community was well represented. Among those who resided in the neighborhood were Westerlage, who built a house at 1524 Mechanic (Avenue C),<sup>7</sup> Heidenheimer, who lived at 1602 Sealy (Avenue I),<sup>8</sup> architect Alfred Muller, who lived for a time on 17<sup>th</sup> Street,<sup>9</sup> and Mathilda Wehmeyer, a teacher who arrived in Galveston with her sister's family in 1870. Over the next thirty years, her private school would evolve into a German-American *kindergarten* and lead to the construction of the house that currently stands at 1616 Winnie (Avenue G).

## II. OVERVIEW

Mathilda Wehmeyer was born in Bremen, Germany in 1839 and immigrated to the United States in 1857. She first went to Baton Rouge, joining her sister Elizabeth and Elizabeth's husband, Theodore Goldmann.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, the Goldmann family grew to include eight children. Sometime prior to 1870, the family, including Mathilda, relocated to Galveston. In 1871, when they are first recorded in a city directory, Theodore was working as a watchmaker and the family lived on Church (Avenue F), between 27<sup>th</sup> Street and 28<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>11</sup>

In 1870, Mathilda advertised her services as a teacher in the Galveston Daily News:<sup>12</sup>

*Miss M. Wehmeyer, assisted by a thoroughly competent FRENCH and ENGLISH teacher, late of New Orleans, will re-open her school in the building formerly occupied by Mrs. Bardine, corner Ave H and 18<sup>th</sup>, Monday next.  
References O. Gareissen, Dr. E. Goldmann, E. Keppler*

Clues in the advertisement suggest that its intended audience was the growing community of German-American families in the area. First, the references listed at the end of the advertisement included three local German-Americans. Oscar Gareissen was a music teacher later appointed as Postmaster General for Galveston.<sup>13</sup> Edward Goldmann was a doctor of unknown specialty who may have been related to Theodore Goldmann, as he lived with the family in 1870.<sup>14</sup> William Kepler was affiliated with the Galveston Female Seminary.<sup>15</sup> Among

the list of taught languages, the absence of German and the inclusion of English are also indicative of Mathilda's intention to train students with German backgrounds.

The 1870 advertisement gives no clues as to Mathilda's early teaching methods, but by 1891, her advertisements list the school as a *kindergarten*,<sup>16</sup> a term by then well known to Americans as representing a specific set of principles for early childhood education. These principles, formalized in Germany by Friedrich Frobel in 1840, emphasized the importance of playing games as a means by which children would learn about the world. Margarethe Schurz, a student of Frobel in her native Germany, opened the first U.S. kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1856. Soon afterwards, progressive American educators Elizabeth Peabody and Susan Blow adopted the approach and advocated for its implementation.<sup>17</sup>

The growth in popularity of the kindergarten model in the U.S. represents one aspect of the German influence on American culture in the nineteenth century and the influence is indicated by Mathilda's efforts in Galveston. In 1870, when she first advertised her teaching services, Galveston had few educational institutions. The Sisters of Charity operated a school on 7<sup>th</sup> Street between Market (Avenue D) and Post Office (Avenue E) and the Freedman's Bureau operated a school on Avenue M between 28<sup>th</sup> Street and 29<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>18</sup> Other than those schools and the island's two colleges, St. Mary's College and the Galveston Medical College, potential students had few opportunities for formal instruction.

After operating from the house at the intersection of Ball (Avenue H) and 18<sup>th</sup> Street for ten years, Mathilda's school was successful enough to warrant the purchase of a house and lot at 1616 Winnie in 1880 to serve as her school and primary residence.<sup>19</sup> She bought the property from Anna Norris, a widow, for \$200.<sup>1</sup> The 1881 city directory lists her school as having twenty students. At the time, Galveston had only one other German-American school, the German Lutheran School, which had fifty students.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Norris, a widow, retained ownership of the building at the back of the lot and lived there until the 1885 fire.

The school operated from 1616 Winnie until November 1885, when a fire burned through forty residential blocks in the East End. Beginning at Vulcan Ironworks at the intersection of 16<sup>th</sup> Street and Strand (Avenue B), the fire moved eastward and completely destroyed the 1600 block of Winnie.<sup>21</sup> Her house and school gone, Mathilda lived elsewhere between 1885 and 1891. In 1890, she moved in with her niece, Emilia, the daughter of Elizabeth Goldmann, and Emilia's husband, Alfred Muller,<sup>22</sup> one of the most prominent architects in the city.

Muller was trained in his native Germany before emigrating to the U.S. After a stay in Washington D.C., he moved to Galveston in 1886 and quickly established a reputation as one of the city's leading architects. Famously, he won a competition to design Galveston's City Hall in 1887. He went on to design the Trube Castle for John C. Trube in 1890, the Herman Marwitz House in 1894, the Galveston Orphans Home in 1895, and the Letitia Rosenberg Woman's Home in 1896. Architectural historian Stephen Fox describes Muller's style as "characterized by picturesque massing, exaggerated profiles, and heavy but vigorously modeled ornamental detail."<sup>23</sup>

Years before moving in with the Mullers, Mathilda had executed plans to replace her destroyed building at 1616 Winnie. By 1887, construction was complete on a two-story, wood-frame house with a one-story front porch. Twentieth-century projects altered that front porch, but the front façade's five bays and the hipped roof are likely remnants of the building's design, revealing some clues as to its original character. The symmetry and restrained use of details indicate a conservative approach when compared to the more articulated examples from the East End during this period. In the Galveston Architecture Guidebook, Stephen Fox and Ellen Beasley cite the building's style as "conservative Italianate."<sup>24</sup>

Mathilda's personal connection to Muller hints that the famous architect could have played a role in the building's construction. However, no contemporary sources assign Muller any credit for the design, which would have represented a departure from the more playful style he demonstrated in his other examples. Lacking photographic evidence of the original front porch,

which may have incorporated more architectural details than other parts of the building, it is impossible to assert Muller's influence based on architectural evidence alone. Consequently, the building's architect remains undetermined.

Between 1887 and 1891, Mathilda leased the new building to various tenants. In 1891, she announced the reopening of her school with a Galveston Daily News advertisement, which included the first documented reference to her school as a *kindergarten*. She continued to operate the school from the site until 1898 and she lived in the building until 1900, when she was displaced by the 1900 Galveston Hurricane. She eventually returned to the home of her niece, Emilia Muller, now widowed and living with her son Alfred Muller, Jr. at 1512 22<sup>nd</sup> Street.<sup>25</sup> She died there in 1903.<sup>26</sup>

While the hurricane in 1900 did enough damage to displace the then sixty-one-year-old Mathilda, it did not destroy the house at 1616 Winnie. Mathilda retained ownership of the house until 1902, when she sold it to Worthy Boyd, a clerk in the cotton industry.<sup>27</sup> Boyd leased the building to several different tenants, often simultaneously. In 1919 alone, the city directory lists the following residents on the property: Businessman William H. Pohlig, his wife and their two children, Linnie B. Stallings, a widow and curator of the Pathology Museum at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Elizabeth Butcher, a pathology technician at UTMB, Ella Woodyard, a music teacher, and longshoreman William McWillie and his wife, a cook at a neighboring property.<sup>28</sup> In 1909, Boyd remodeled the house, reconfiguring the front porch as illustrated in the 1912 Sanborn map.<sup>29</sup>

In 1922, Boyd sold the property to William H. Pohlig, another German-American who had lived in the house with his family as tenants since 1916.<sup>30</sup> William worked for various business interests of Galveston banker J.W. Jokusch, including tenures managing the Interstate Chemical Company and the Oleander Feed Store, which he later owned.<sup>31</sup> William, his wife Anne, and their children, lived in the building for over fifty years.

After William's death in 1961<sup>32</sup> and Anne's in 1977,<sup>33</sup> the house had several different residents during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>34</sup> In 2007, current owners Leonard LaMagna and Kevin Folzenlogen purchased the building and completed a rehabilitation project in 2008, just days prior to the landfall of Hurricane Ike. After a second rehabilitation project, LaMagna and Folzenlogen moved into the house in 2009.<sup>35</sup>

### **III. SIGNIFICANCE**

The Mathilda Wehmeyer House and German-American Kindergarten School is historically significant in the way it reflects two aspects of Galveston's nineteenth century development. One aspect is its architecture, through which the house contributes to the significance of the East End National Historic Landmark District. Despite early modifications to the front porch, the house retains its original character and serves as a faithful representative of Galveston's Victorian style.

The second and most meaningful aspect of the house's significance lies in its relationship to the impact of nineteenth century immigration, including the growth of German-American culture and the history of the *kindergarten*. The story of Mathilda Wehmeyer and her school demonstrates the most important characteristic of immigration: its reciprocal nature. Through early childhood English language instruction, German students became German Americans, and through the adoption of the *kindergarten* model at schools like Mathilda's, America was Germanized.

#### IV. ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1 – 1890 advertisement for the reopening of Mathilda Wehmeyer's school at 1616 Winnie.



Figure 2 – Block 376 in the 1885 bird's eye view of Galveston, with an arrow indicating the house at 1616 Winnie that later burned in the 1885 fire.

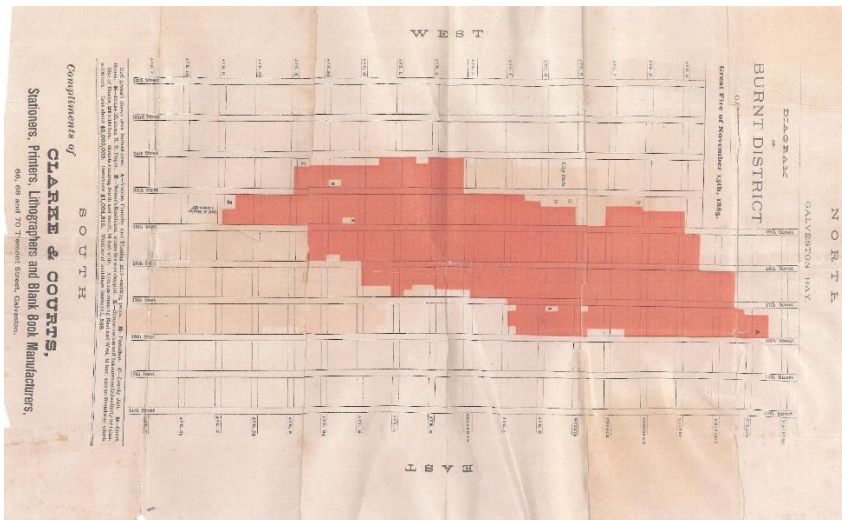
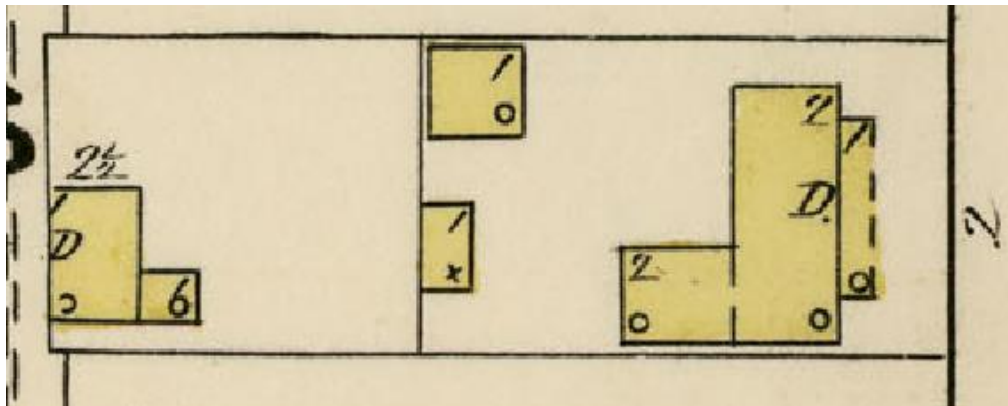
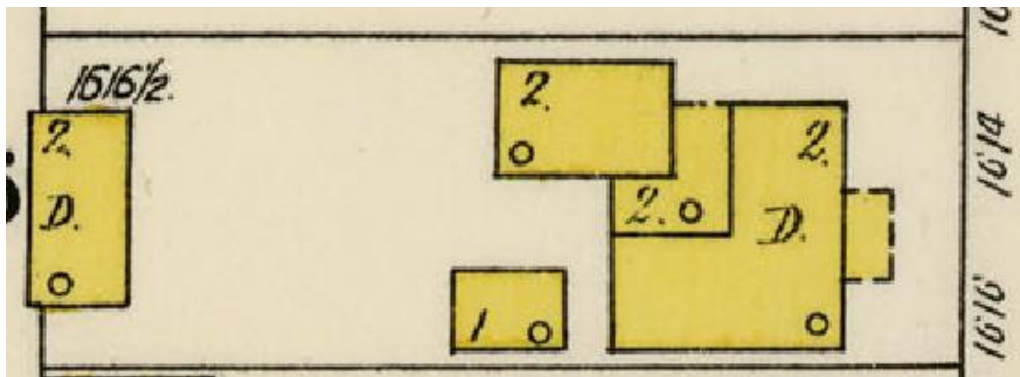


Figure 3 – Map of damaged area from the 1885 fire.

1889 footprint



1899 footprint



1912 footprint

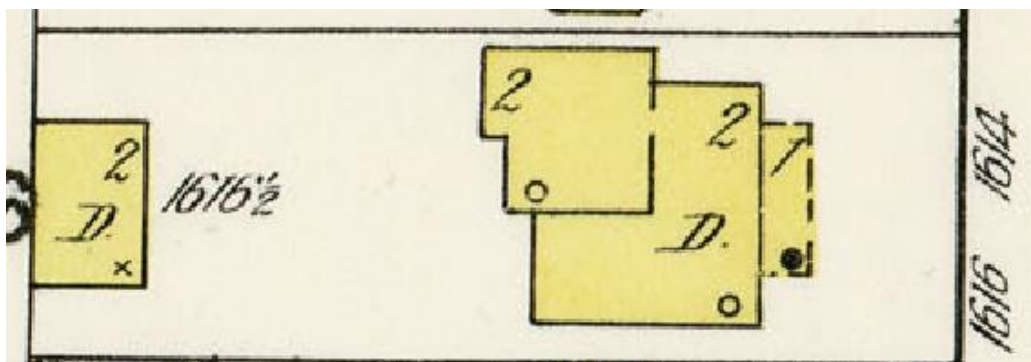


Figure 4 – Comparisons of the 1616 Winnie lot on Sanborn maps of 1889, 1899, and 1912.





Figure 4 – The Mathilda Wehmeyer House and German-American Kindergarten School, 2012.



Figure 5 – The Mathilda Wehmeyer House and German-American Kindergarten School, Staircase and West Parlor, 2012.

## V. SOURCES

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- <sup>1</sup> McComb, David G. Galveston: A History. University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 105-106.
- <sup>2</sup> Hayes, Charles W. History of the Island and the City of Galveston. Cincinnati, 1879. p. 911-912.
- <sup>3</sup> Beasley, Ellen and Stephen Fox. Galveston Architecture Guidebook. Galveston Historical Foundation, 1996, p. 66.
- <sup>4</sup> Hayes, History of the Island and the City of Galveston, 970-971.
- <sup>5</sup> American Newspaper Directory. New York: George P. Rowell and Company, Publishers, 1880.
- <sup>6</sup> "Galveston City Directory, 1886-1887." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>7</sup> Insurance Record for 1524 Mechanic, Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>8</sup> Insurance Record for 1602 Sealy, Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>9</sup> "Galveston City Directory, 1890-91." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>10</sup> "United States, Germans to America Index, 1850-1897, Mathilda Wehmeyer." Manifest ID #00018446. ARC Identifier: 1746067. Web. *Ancestry.com*. <http://www.ancestry.com>: accessed February 19, 2016.
- <sup>11</sup> "Galveston City Directory, 1872." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>12</sup> Advertisement. *The Galveston Daily News*; August 30, 1874. Web. *Newspaper Archive*. <http://www.newspaperarchive.com>: Accessed February 19, 2016.
- <sup>13</sup> 1872 Galveston City Directory.
- <sup>14</sup> "United States Federal Census, 1870, Galveston, Texas. United States," Database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MXLR-9JW>: accessed February 19, 2016). Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration.
- <sup>15</sup> 1872 Galveston City Directory.
- <sup>16</sup> "Instruction." *The Galveston Daily News*; August 23, 1891. Web. *Newspaper Archive*. <http://www.newspaperarchive.com>: Accessed February 19, 2016.
- <sup>17</sup> Morgan, Harry. Early Childhood Education: History, Theory, and Practice. Rowman and Littlefield, 2011.
- <sup>18</sup> 1872 Galveston City Directory.
- <sup>19</sup> "Real Estate Transfers." *The Galveston Daily News*; August 1, 1880, *Newspaper Archive* Web. March 12, 2012.
- <sup>20</sup> "Galveston City Directory, 1881." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>21</sup> McComb, Galveston: A History, 101.
- <sup>22</sup> 1890-1891 Galveston City Directory.
- <sup>23</sup> Fox, Stephen. "Muller, Alfred," *Handbook of Texas Online*. Texas State Historical Association. Web, (<https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fmu26>). Accessed February 26, 2016.
- <sup>24</sup> Beasley and Fox, Galveston Architecture Guidebook, 90.
- <sup>25</sup> "Galveston City Directory, 1903-04." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>26</sup> Notice of Death of Mathilda Wehmeyer. *The Galveston Daily News*; November 9, 1903. Web. *Newspaper Archive*. <http://www.newspaperarchive.com>: Accessed February 19, 2016.
- <sup>27</sup> Insurance Record for 1616 Winnie, Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.
- <sup>28</sup> "Galveston City Directory, 1919." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.

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<sup>29</sup> Insurance Record for 1616 Winnie; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. 1912. Dolph Briscoe Center. University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>30</sup> Insurance Record for 1616 Winnie.

<sup>31</sup> "Galveston City Directory, 1936." Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.

<sup>32</sup> "State of Texas Standard Certificate of Death, William H. Pohlig." Texas State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Registrar's File Number 2866, File Number 22042.

<sup>33</sup> Deaths and Funerals. *The Galveston Daily News*; September 26, 1977. Web. *Newspaper Archive*. <http://www.newspaperarchive.com>: Accessed February 29, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Galveston City Directories 1980-1996. Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), Galveston, Texas.

<sup>35</sup> Pizzi, Donna. "Restoring Again After a Hurricane." *Old House Journal*; August-September 2011. Web. <http://www.oldhouseonline.com/restoring-again-after-a-hurricane/>: Accessed September 15, 2011.