



The Mystery of Wenzel Meitner's Grave at the St. Wenceslaus Island Church Cemetery

June 25, 2013 by Jim Meitner

The St Wenceslaus Island Church near Waterloo will celebrate its 150th anniversary this summer. The church was built in 1863 and opened the following year. It quickly became the social hub for the early German Bohemian Settlers who moved to the Island. I would like to share with you a brief history about their immigration and an interesting story about the grave of my Great Grandfather Wenzel Meitner Sr. (born 1850) who was buried in the Island Church Cemetery in 1879.

In 1848, the Austrian revolution weakened the King's rule and gave his subjects the right to leave Austria. Wisconsin became a state in the same year and started a campaign in Europe to encourage people to move to Wisconsin and develop its fertile farmlands. There was a large population of Germans that lived in the Bohemia region of Austria who wanted better lives. In the early 1850's a few of them packed up their belongings, made the difficult journey from Austria to Wisconsin, and settled near Waterloo. These Bohemian Germans were hard workers and many started successful farms. The new immigrants wrote letters to their families back in Austria and encouraged them to come to Wisconsin. Soon the initial trickle of Bohemian Germans moving to Wisconsin became a flood. They settled near the towns of Watertown, Waterloo, Sun Prairie, and Janesville.

Austria was torn by another war in 1866. Prussian and Austrian troops fought short, but bloody battles in the Bohemian Region of Austria near a village called Landskron. The War of 1866, the resulting poverty, and the lack of opportunity caused many more Bohemian Germans to leave Austria between 1870 and 1890. One of these immigrants was Wenzel Meitner who left his home village of Schirmdorf located near Landskron, Austria and moved to Jefferson County in 1877. His wife Rosalia Markl Meitner and their two sons Wenzel Jr. and Frank joined him the following year. The family lived on a farm between

Aztalan and Johnson Creek. Wenzel, who died in 1879, was buried in an unmarked grave in the Island Church cemetery.

The grave of Wenzel Meitner, like much of the rest of his life, became a bit of a mystery. Because of an Island Church Newsletter published in 1985, we believed that the snow was deep in the cemetery at the time of his burial. By accident, his grave ended up being out of line with the other graves. His grave was initially unmarked, but at some point Henry Bartosch, who was an Island Church caretaker, chiseled the Meitner name on a stone to identify Wenzel's grave. The peaked stone marker was so small that the name "Meitner" had to be etched in two lines. The first line was "MEI" and the second "TNER." That stone can still be found in the cemetery today, but not on Wenzel's grave.

Last summer Wenzel's Granddaughter Christie Meitner and her son drove from Stevens Point to the Island Cemetery to visit his grave. Much to her surprise the small gravestone was gone! One of our cousins, Cheri Peschel, went to look for the stone. With even greater surprise, Cheri discovered that Wenzel's marker had been moved and was now cemented firmly in place on top of the nearby Leschinger gravestone. We wondered why Wenzel's marker had been moved to a new location.

Soon four more Meitner cousins went to investigate. They determined that the story of Wenzel's grave was only partly correct. Wenzel Meitner was buried in an unmarked grave, but it was not out of line with the other graves. There are other stones nearby that do not line up with the more recent graves, but appear to be in line with each other. We finally realized that the snow was not so deep when Wenzel was buried in June 1879, but that the planned cemetery layout was changed.

It turns out that the stone used to mark Wenzel's grave was originally the top column of the nearby Leschinger gravestone. At some point, part of the column broke off and Henry Bartosch used the fractured piece to mark Wenzel Meitner's final resting place. Henry, who was a friend of Wenzel's third son Emil Meitner (1879-1925), found the broken stone, carved the inscription "MEI" "TNER," and used it to mark Wenzel's grave.

Until recently, we thought that the mystery of Wenzel's grave was solved and we would never know who cemented the "MEI-TNER" marker onto the Leschinger monument. Recently I published a 125-page book named [The Meitners of Waterloo Wisconsin](#). It traces the history of the Meitner clan from Austria to Waterloo, records the lives of Wenzel Meitner's three sons, and summarizes the lives of several of his grandchildren who lived in Waterloo. One day Chantel and Brian Blaschka were reading a copy of my book that was lying on a table in Cheri Peschel's home. They stumbled across the story about Wenzel's lost gravestone and immediately became very embarrassed.

The Blaschkas are interested in preserving the Island Church and its cemetery. Paul and Tony Blaschka were cleaning the graveyard and found the tiny stone sticking out of the ground. They either did not notice the name or realize the importance of the word "MEI-TNER" that Henry Bartosch had scratched into the surface. They dug up the broken column, studied other nearby markers, and became the first people in over 100 years to understand that the little stone came from the nearby Leschinger monument. When the Blaschkas repaired the broken monument, they unknowingly returned Wenzel's marker to its rightful owner.

If you visit the cemetery today, you will see that a new stone now marks Wenzel's grave. It did not seem fitting that after all of these years the Patriarch of the Waterloo Meitner clan should be buried in an unmarked grave. We purchased and installed a new gravestone on August 25, 2102 that has this story etched into it. Finally, after 133 years after his burial, Wenzel Meitner has a gravestone to call his own.

Wenzel's new stone is engraved with the following words:

Wenzel Meitner, Born 1850, Died 1879. An immigrant from Landskron, Bohemia was buried here. His sudden death only 2 years after coming to the U.S. was a tragedy for his 6-month pregnant wife and 2 sons. The grave was unmarked and might have been forgotten but caretaker Henry Bartosch provided a marker by chiseling the name MEI-TNER in two rows on a narrow column that had fallen from the Leschinger Monument. The top of the monument was recently returned to its proper place, but one can still see evidence of its history in four layers.

As one looks at the monument to the right of this plaque, the bottom of the column is the same color as the base. Then one sees the glue used to reattach the top, a discolored area where the column was in the ground and the top section with MEI-TNER chiseled on which stood as an independent monument for many years.



Two photos of the repaired Leschinger gravestone with Wenzel Meitner's marker returned to its rightful place. (The word "MEI-TNER" has been enhanced with water-soluble black ink.) The Meitner stone is approximately 21-inches tall. The 12-inches of brown discoloration near the bottom was stained by the soil after being buried for so many years.