Germans in Mobile, Alabama

Once I thought to write a history of immigrants in America. Then I discovered the immigrants were American history.

- Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (1951)

This quote from Oscar Handlin was a good starting point for our 9th grade German language class of Mobile's Barton Academy of Advanced World Studies research project "German Immigrants in Mobile, Alabama". This project followed Project Based Learning (PBL) standards and provided insight into the real-life problem of: "Wir wissen nicht viel über deutsche Immigranten in Mobile". While the French and Spanish influences are apparent and visible throughout the city and can be discovered by looking at parks, street names, symbolism in historic downtown, and countless other artifacts of heritage, the pickings are slim when compared to German influence in the port city.

Our class was interested in finding out more information about the German influence and how German immigrants were able to blend into the local population so seamlessly and adapt to the new situation abroad as compared to other immigrants who had a harder time integrating themselves into the existing society.

We were very lucky to receive guiding help from Mrs. Elizabeth Theris-Boone at the Mobile Public Library, Local History and Genealogy division. She provided us with several interesting articles about German influences on our beautiful city and also allowed us to come by for a visit and use the microfilm readers in the library. With these, we were able to discover some articles from the local newspaper as well as some advertisements that displayed German store names or German product names.

We were also fortunate to be welcomed by Mr. Charles Torrey of the Mobile History Museum with immense help and guidance. He allowed us access to the archives and workrooms of the museum and guided us during our research using the historic artifacts and writings.

Furthermore, we also discovered the traveling Bloch exhibit (currently located at the University of South Alabama library), curated by Dr. Meola and Mrs. Gurt. The exhibit highlights the life of Mr. Bloch, who himself was a German immigrant to Mobile. Both, Dr. Meola and Mrs. Gurt, made themselves available for us to ask questions and explain the project. Mrs. Gurt also guided us through the archives at South Alabama and we were able to access and discover several important pieces of history. While on campus, we also took the opportunity to meet with Dr. Rinne, Associate Professor of German, and her class of advanced German students. Our Barton explorers were able to hold a basic communication with the college students and all agreed that this was a highlight of their campus experience, since they were able to use the language in a social setting. Dr. McCready, Chair of Modern & Classical Languages & Literature, also welcomed us to the foreign language department and gave us an overview of their offerings, which was much appreciated by the students.

Many students became interested in more current immigration throughout the project. To satisfy their curiosity and deep dive into the project, we read several articles on the topic and invited a guest speaker, Frau Kemnade. Herself a German immigrant, she started her own business assisting newcomers from big companies such as Evonik Degussa to make Mobile their home for the time of their work engagement. While most of these recruits from all over the world eventually return to their

homeland, Frau Kemnade was able to highlight several German families who settled in Mobile for good and shared their experiences with us. We also conducted a virtual interview with Frau Unser, who lives in Bavaria and works with refugee youths who come to Germany without an adult. She explained the immigration policies in Germany and shared her personal experiences using simple German that the students were able to follow.

The students created a printed book, highlighting their learning throughout this project. We hope to receive it before the end of the schoolyear. Our main conclusion was that the enhanced integration of German immigrants throughout the 20th century was due to the treatment of Germans during WWI and later WWII. We were lucky to find a historical document in which a citizen demanded that the German Relief Association change their name and omit any German references from their organization and building façade. It was interesting to see this historical evidence to back up our conclusion. Additionally, it is evident that the German culture is closer to the culture of the United States than the culture of many other immigrants to the United States. This could have enhanced the integration as well. Our project was sponsored by the *Deutsch macht Spass* grant from the American Association of Teachers of German and funded through the German government's *Netzwerk Deutsch* program. We are very grateful for the financial support. Without it we would not have been able to conduct so many enhancing firsthand experiences through field trips, and we would not have such an awesome finished product. We also want to thank everyone who helped us along the way. We are so grateful for all the help and support we received.

Here are some pictures of our students hard at work exploring and discovering as they go.



Barton Students and teacher Daniela Yunker in the History Museum courtyard.



Barton Students and teacher Daniela Yunker after our trip to the University of South Alabama.

Here is some information about our beautiful school if you would like to include it in the article.

Barton Timeline

Source: bartonacademy.org

1826 – Led by Willoughby Barton, a state legislator from Mobile, the state establishes the Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County, the state's first public school system.

1830 – School commission buys an entire city block on Government Street as a site for its future school.

1830-1836 – The commissioners have difficulty raising money to construct the school. Eventually the state legislature allows the commission to raise funds through a lottery. By early 1836, they have $50,000 in lottery funds, a $15,000 municipal loan and some private donations, including a large private donation from local millionaire Henry Hitchcock.

1836 – James Gallier Sr. and brothers James and Charles Dakin are selected as the architects. They work simultaneously on Barton and Government Street Presbyterian Church.

1836 – Construction begins on Barton.

1839 – Barton is ready for students, but the school commission has accumulated too much debt to offer free classes. Classrooms are rented to private and denominational schools, with the school commission contributing support funds.

1852 – After more than a decade on a semi-public plan, the commission reorganizes and reopens Barton as a true public school. Barton becomes the model for Alabama's public school system.

1860 – Barton is closed during the Civil War.

1865 – Barton reopens after the war.

1899 – Barton is expanded with wings on the east and west sides.

1904 – J.D. Yerby School is added to the north side of Barton campus.

1926 – Murphy High School opens and Barton becomes a middle school.

1934-1937 – Barton is surveyed by the Historic American Buildings Survey, resulting in a large collection of photos and drawings maintained at the Library of Congress.

1960s – Barton closes to classes and becomes the central office for Mobile County Public School System.

1970 – Barton is added to the National Register of Historic Places.

2005 – Barton Academy is named to Alabama's "Places in Peril" by the Alabama Historical Commission and the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation.

2007 – The school board relocates its central office to West Mobile.

2009 – Barton Academy is re-named to Alabama's "Places in Peril."

2009 – Local preservation groups – including Mobile Historic Development Commission, Historic Mobile Preservation Society and Downtown Mobile Alliance – rally support for preserving Barton and form the Barton Academy Historic Preservation and Restoration Committee to explore a new life for the historic complex.

2012 – Barton Academy Foundation is incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The foundation's mission is to assist the school system in raising awareness and funds to create Barton Academy for Advanced World Studies as an innovative educational institution and an engine for growing Mobile's economy.

2013 – The Mobile County Public Schools allocates $3.5 million from its $100 million construction bond for repairs to the exterior of Barton Academy.

2015 – Mobile County Public Schools completes a $4.2 million exterior renovation – renewing every surface from the fence to the top of the dome.

2020 – Barton Foundation reaches $14 million goal to renovate Barton interior and construction begins.


BARTON ACADEMY
ERECTED 1835