NOTES AND DOCUMENTS
AN IMMIGRANT BUTCHER’S DIARY
Edited by Charles W. Turner

“Dear Parents, Acquaintances and Relatives:"

“When I went away from you, you requested me to write you as much in detail and as accurately as possible, how I am and how it would be here for you and for many others. I did not know better how to comply with this promise than in this manner.”

With these words, an immigrant August Ketterer of Freiburg, Germany, began a long letter back home in 1859 from the United States. Ketterer was the son of a Freiburg miller, born in 1834, who with his brother, Karl, and a number of associates reached these shores, seeking new economic opportunities. They arrived in 1854 and the story of their trip and early years in the northeast is an ordinary story of one of the millions of “Butchers, Bakers and Candlestickmakers” who made up the warp and woof of the American civilization. Letters of great immigrants have been published, but too few of the stories of the main body of the people who came have been printed. As Dr. Theodore C. Blegen has stated, the true makers of history are the people and a study of their letters and diaries is the essence of grass-roots history. “It grapples, as history should grapple with the needs of understanding the small, everyday elements. It recognizes as maturely conceived history should recognize, the importance of the simple, however complex and subtle the problem of understanding the simple may be.”

Such accounts as these add color and form to the ancient inheritance forging the “American Character,” so well described by Denis W. Brogan and others. Without the study of such letters, one can never see the whole picture on the national canvas. Some may see this a mere facet; I see it a gem. The letter tells the following story. August

1 Dr. Turner is an assistant professor of history at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia.—Ed.
2 A translation of this letter, from old German script, is in the library of Washington and Lee University. Mrs. Rose Kling of Atlanta, Georgia, has the original.
3 Theodore C. Blegen, Grass Roots History (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1947).
and Karl separated from their father at Strassburg and with several hundred emigrants en route to America traveled by railroad via Paris to Le Havre. While at Strassburg, they visited a cathedral and a natural history collection. After eating a fish dinner and drinking some beer, they took the train to Paris where the brothers visited the Montmartre, with its festive halls which impressed them with their size. At Havre, where they arrived the day following, both were much interested in the harbor with boats of all sizes plying in and out. They had to await the arrival of the vessel which they were to travel on and spent the time buying supplies needed for the trip, such as eggs, wine, etc. Of the passengers on the ship, "Emma," he says:

Whether I did well to take the first ship, I was undecided—at the moment it was the best. It was a large brig with two and one-half masts, 160 feet long, 50 by 50 broad, furnished for about 350 persons, very roomy and almost still new. There were many sailors on board: nothing but native Americans, one of whom however spoke German. There were in all 325 souls, mostly young people and very few families. Five children died and two were born. With reference to their homeland most were Badenians, the others Hessians, Bavarians, Swabians, Prussians, Swissmen and Frenchmen.

The ship contained several cabins and decks, storerooms, kitchens, toilets, cellars, chicken coops, and pig stalls. Sails were hoisted by wheels, axle-trees, and ropes. The two emigrant kitchens were four feet long, two feet wide, and walled with birch. Iron poles in the center supported kettles over coal fires. A few would cook for the rest who ate in the adjoining space in the lower deck.

When the voyage began seasickness was general among the passengers. One night all the bedsteads fell during a storm and they shrieked fearing the ship was sinking. However, on good days there were coffee parties, drinking bouts, and card games enjoyed by those well enough to take part. Much stealing of passengers' personal property caused a number of quarrels and even fights. "Even the sea helped out with such tricks, for there flew into the sea not only hats and caps from all sides but also cooking kettles, so that the little mermaids might have cooking vessels." Several love affairs blossomed on the trip which he describes. The final note of the trip spoke of the hardship of voyages when it was observed that "filth and vermin spread so towards the end that we longed for the continent like one longs for Heaven."

After a five-week trip, the delight of seeing America and what it
meant to immigrants was shown in his lines reading:

The joy and exultation at the sight of land is not at all to be described. The entire day and the largest part of the night was spent in making music, dancing and singing, although we had on this particular night one of the most dangerous storms which really was the trouble-maker for the dance. Toward morning the ship sounded as if it were going to break into a thousand pieces, and really a piece of the bowsprit did come off; however, without damage to the ship. When, toward morning, the storm was past and the pilot's boat came, it began pitching about as frantically as before. They who cried and swore never to entice anyone to this land were the loudest. Nothing more was cooked. Kitchen vessels and beds bought for silver in Havre were thrown into the sea, and the next night was much dancing and celebration as we lay in the harbor of New York. I am not capable of describing the beauty and splendor of this harbor and the region roundabout in nice weather. This panorama is just too beautiful. . . . There are gardens and parks, then the Castle-Garden with other fortifications in the vicinity of New York. In the background the green, forest covered mountains with decorative castle-like houses and farms of the rich Americans and in front of us the forests of masts of the ships in the three cities with countless small boats, the many steam-ships, the sinking sun and for the first time in five weeks the peal of bells. All this makes a remarkable impression on a person and immediately he feels God's omnipotence. Such scenes one doesn't forget easily. On the same day there came numerous small boats loaded with runners and loafers, unfortunately almost nothing but bad Germans who were ready at every turn to deceive their newly-arrived countrymen. The doctor also came and after he had inspected everybody, gave permission to go ashore. Naturally the next few days brought work enough, for everything on board ship had to be left shining and straight. Finally at noon one day there came a steamship that had a baker on board with bread and beer. However, since he was very expensive, nobody wanted a bite until we finally realized that we could get nothing elsewise and that it probably would not be any cheaper in the city either. We now had to take our trunks off the steam-boat, whereby we naturally had work enough and finally on the 5th of October we came ashore.

The passengers were anxious to travel into the interior and many left directly for railroad stations. The two brothers and several friends decided to see something of New York first. August's description of what they saw follows:

New York is, as far as the main streets are concerned, as beautiful as Paris. Alone in the suburbs and outlying parts there stands a muddy little peasant town; moreover, this is true of all American cities. The Germans live almost with the Negroes—speaking of the majority. . . . Along the streets are, as also in other cities, beautiful trees planted between the thoroughfares and sidewalks that blossom out extraordinarily beautiful in spring and summer.

After spending eight to ten dollars, they journeyed to Albany by steamboat. Albany appeared to August as a city the size of Strassburg, however hilly and almost like Cincinnati

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except that it's on the Hudson. The courthouse is on the hill as the one in Pittsburg. There are many churches there, and a Catholic priest distinguished himself here last year in defense of the church against the know-nothings. ... I also saw here for the first time one of the so-called "street preachers" who stood in the middle of the Hudson bridge in a rain praying, preaching and trying to exhibit the excellence of his teaching ability. No one listened to him.

From Albany to Buffalo by railroad, the party seemed to enjoy the sight of farms, forest-covered mountains and the canal boats pulled by donkeys driven along the bank. Ketterer concluded by saying: "All of this is extraordinarily beautiful, that's true but this is also true that though it is beautiful it is not home."

In Buffalo the boys lodged with a Mr. Waibel, a Badenian dragoon officer, and spent three weeks looking for employment. August decided he would find it hard in a bakery, knowing no English, so he decided to apply for railroad work. Finding no job that appealed to him, he and his party decided to travel on to Cleveland. His comments on Buffalo life and architecture are worthy of note:

Buffalo is one of the most beautifully situated cities on the Erie and very healthy. From here it's only about eighteen miles to Niagara Falls and it has already vexed me sometimes that I didn't visit this wonder of the earth that one can hear in Buffalo during calm weather. While we were here two sailing ships burned up in the harbor at midnight and the next morning we could see the divers with diving bells going along on the bottom of the sea in order to save what was to be saved. If this city is very pretty on the sea side, so are its suburbs. Like the other old American cities it had little one-story houses, painted white or whitewashed. They look very pretty from the distance with the green trees and little front gardens. Since the houses are built far apart and with their little churches, they rather resemble large villages built on to each other. In little towns it's really a wonder if one sees a brick house; there is also a big difference in the style of architecture. ... The art of the masons of this country, mostly stupid creatures, consists of leaving it pure. To illustrate the extraordinary speed (one can also call it a vile action) with which houses are built: One can go past a desert, uncultivated place and come back eight weeks later only to find a beautiful house of brick. And from a distance these houses look very pretty mixed with the white ones of wood. The plans of the houses here are very simple; the cause, or reason, is the regular construction of the cities. Because of the scantiness of the building-site in width, one seldom sees very large private houses. Even the beams of the buildings distinguish themselves. If the house is small, there are no timbers to be found, for the supports extend to the side walls on both sides. But you experts can explain that better. Although the loafers here are not so bad or so numerous, the whorehouses are more numerous here than in any other place: I would not have thought that of here. I also saw something here that is seen in a few large Eastern cities—everywhere cows, pigs, and geese running loose. Some people here have
fat swine or a good milkcow running around that has no fodder, not to speak of a stall. The animals must, after the American proverb, help themselves and eat what they find. Therefore, there are enough cows that nourish themselves off merely house manure. This practice is to be found throughout the entire United States. There are also probably street-cleaning laws here; they are, however not observed. Therefore, there is filth in overflowing and is the same everywhere else. But this is not true of the sidewalks, for they must be kept clean by the house owners.

The trip to Cleveland was taken on a steamer, which was three or four times the size of the boats used on the Rhine. Upon arriving they ran into a sand bank from which it took several hours to be dislodged. One correspondent described the city as being made up of two cities (one being old Ohio City) situated on two mountains with a valley between. Here they were offered work on the railroad but decided the climate was too severe. The party, made up of four, decided to start for Pittsburgh on foot. Leaving their possessions stored in Cleveland, they walked twenty-four miles the first day. The next twenty-eight miles they traveled by train. The sight along the right-of-way was described as follows:

Everything was still forest along by the railroad at least in the northern part of Ohio. Farther south one comes through prettier regions. Moreover, we took the wrong way, since it was much better going on the highway and more thickly populated. These lead over hill and dale and are not at all too bad. Not only pedestrians but also riders and wagons travel on it. The single precaution is in the form of the bell on the locomotive with which warning is given in dangerous places or if someone is seen. No railway house is to be seen, nobody to watch the tracks, and even the railroad station is the most ridiculously built thing in the world. It's almost lying on its side and then the train goes roaring by with enormous speed. If there wasn't a cowcatcher, without a doubt there'd be considerably more misfortune. It is this heavy iron gate attached to the locomotive over the front wheels and reaching to the rails just like a shovel that throws horses and cows that are in the way off the tracks.

A number of Utopian experiments had been started during the antebellum period of American history, and August took note of one when they passed. It was a German colony called Ockonomis, founded by a Swabian evangelical preacher, which was a communistic community where men and women were quartered in barracks separately. A master was responsible for the welfare of the whole settlement.4

They put up at a boarding house in Pittsburgh and sent back to

4 This was "Old Economy," thriving settlement of the Harmony Society at that time, and now in large measure preserved and maintained by the state as a museum, in the heart of Ambridge, Pennsylvania.
Cleveland for their baggage. Joseph Burger, one of their members, had borrowed thirty dollars from the others. When his trunk came he found his savings had been stolen. All of them were so low in funds that they had to ask the landlord for credit. Joseph joined the army to enable him to repay his friends. Karl got work in a bakery and August got a job temporarily unloading a steamer. This was his description of Pittsburgh and vicinity:

Pittsburgh really consists of two main parts or cities, i.e. Allegheny with Manchester and Pittsburgh with Reisville, Bardstown and Birmingham with South Pittsburgh and Brownstown: these together form one of the largest industrial cities in America due largely to excellent deposits of coal. Pittsburgh itself is situated in the middle of the mouth of the two rivers and is really the center of commerce and trade. The county court and jail are also here. The streets of Pittsburgh are straight and beautiful. The most remarkable buildings are the courthouse on a hill; below is the simple but beautiful cathedral with its pontifical buildings and the post office at the foot of the same hill along with the different banks and the Iron City or Trade-Society with a high school. These buildings have cast iron front walls. In Reisville are the two hospitals and many brickkilns and, in addition, a few very beautiful churches. In Bayardstown there is a German Catholic Jesuit cloister, a nunnery for sisters, and a few very beautiful churches, which, however, I cannot name, since most of them like the ones in Pittsburgh belong to different sects. Moreover, there is a cannon foundry, many other kinds of foundries, nail factories, and iron works here. Also a copper foundry and hammer works. Just as remarkable are the enormous railway depots, the wire bridges over the Monongahela, the four other bridges over the Allegheny of which over one the railroad passes and over the others the canal passes over the river so that while steamships go below, locomotives and canal boats go above. On the whole, there are not less than six enormous railroad depots in Pittsburgh. Also in the Neighborhood in the little city of Lawrenceville is a kind of fortress by the same name in which the United States soldiers are stationed. Allegheny is indeed more thickly populated but not as pretty as Pittsburgh and more the seat of workers and factories. There are four wool and cotton mills, carriage, shovel and axe factories together with many sawmills. Also nail, nail-keg, flour-barrel, and sack factories. The Allegheny water works, the Catholic orphanage under the supervision of the sisters of mercy, the two Catholic graveyards, the poorhouse and three large steam mills together with an enormous

5 “Reisville” apparently refers to Riceville, the name once given to the section of the city extending along Forbes Street and the parallel thoroughfares from the present approach to the Liberty Bridge as far out as Dinwiddie Street. By “Bardstown” Ketterer meant Bayardstown, or the present “Strip” above the Pennsylvania Railroad Station between the Allegheny River and the “Hill.” “Brownstown,” although not mentioned in the city or county histories, was probably a settlement marked on a contemporary map as Brown’s Station, located on the Pittsburgh and Connellsville Railroad across the Monongahela from Homestead at the foot of Brown’s Hill.
whiskey brewery in which 100 feet or nearly 12,000 gallons of whiskey can be made daily with four stones in order to rough-grind the grain. Enough of the mills. . . . Birmingham is situated south of Pittsburgh along the Monongahela on the slope (which is very small) and at the foot of a mountain that runs along by the river, while Allegheny is more on the northern side by the river of the same name. Because of the mountains round about, there are seldom floods. In Birmingham there are glass-houses and iron works mostly. . . . This city you should see. Here are located most of the coal mines which go to the source of the river. Several rivers flow almost into the city. Also here is a barefooted friar of the German cloister with a beautiful church and the English Catholic orphanage under supervision of the sisters of mercy. Nowhere is so much iron and glass worked and not incorrectly is Pittsburgh called "the smoky city," since one seldom gets to see the clear sky.

August and a friend decided to walk to Wellersburg on foot to find work. As he passed along the corduroy road, he described the countryside. The first night was spent in a barn where hay was used for cover. In two days they had traveled sixty miles by way of Mount Pleasant. On the third day, they walked through a snowstorm and were very glad to be treated to Sunday dinner by a villager along the way. Through Somerset and Berlin they traveled on to Cumberland. Of this last place he said:

_Cumberland_ is a city located in the state of Maryland. The Baltimore and Pennsylvania railroads pass through it. It also has two big stations. . . . There are many sawmills here which carry on a big business. There are also many collieries, iron works, water works, and steam mills here. There's even a Catholic monastery with a beautiful church. It's also the seat of the county government and court.

August's first real job was secured in Frostburg, where he was hired by a butcher for fifty dollars plus keep for the term of a year. Frostburg, he declared, was

situatated on a slope of one of the Alleghenies. It is very large and is nothing more than just a number of different villages built together. The houses are mostly of wood and are called tram houses. There are, of course, many plain log houses, and with that there is nothing more in the town worthy of note except the Collieries. They are everywhere in the town and are of such importance that they supply Baltimore and other cities with coal. . . . Probably as many as twenty coal trains leave here daily.

His job was to do the butchering and odd jobs on the place. There was a Swabian journeyman who helped him for a while. Of his main job he said: "I cooked out the fat and made soap, chopped wood, hacked wursts, and fed the horses . . . . I was rather well known in the

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6 In Somerset County, Pa., about ten miles from Cumberland, Md.
surrounding country for about twelve to twenty miles around and learned to know American customs, since these farmers were mostly Pennsylvania German and speak German."

His description of the butcher's farm is interesting:

Five miles from Frostburg on the National Highway. This goes to California through Independence; it goes through a valley with a creek near an old steam saw-mill which is owned by a rich slave owner who, with three relatives, owns 14,000 acres of land—a little principedom. They have not less than two steam saw mills... the butcher's place comprises almost 20 acres, all of which is fenced... several livable tramhouses belonged to the place too. We had to till the land by day and slaughter by night. That was our work. I do not, though, want to touch on this adventure here. Still I must remark here that I saw, and learned too, for the first time what the clearing of land is. I can assure you that it is hard and heavy work and takes much time before the land is usable.

Finally, when the butcher refused to pay him his wages, he took his luggage and walked to Mayer's Mill, Pennsylvania, a place of some fifty houses where he got some odd jobs for several days. At Centreville, he helped a man out whose sons had all gone west. Back in Somerset, a miller hired him for several months, after which time August felt he had enough money to return to Pittsburgh. Life in Somerset, a place with some two hundred houses, became very boring to August. He had become accustomed to roaming and was always ready to move on. The region where Somerset was located was "wild and mountainous and still had many forests in which such animals as wolves, bears and panthers live."

Returning on foot to Pittsburgh by way of Connellsville, he told of life he met. He considered himself better fitted for the city with money, a knowledge of American customs, and the ability to speak some English. When passing through Indian country, he was reminded of tales of horror which had been related to him. Upon reaching Connellsville with frozen feet, he stopped to wrap them with pieces of an old shirt to enable him to continue. He took advantage of a law on the statute books of Pennsylvania requiring innkeepers to keep all travelers who arrived after sundown. The innkeepers were law abiding and August benefited.

When he was approaching Pittsburgh, he commented on the

7 For transcontinental travel, the National Highway, as such, was but an eastern approach to the central overland route to California through Independence, Mo.
mines operated by companies or wealthy families. One of the latter, the Risher family, owned mines, eight or ten farms, and a brewery. Describing the brewery he said it used fifty bushels of rye daily and from every bushel three gallons of whiskey were made to sell for fifty cents. The farm had some three hundred pigs to eat up the scraps from it. These various enterprises netted the family many thousands yearly and were typical.

Doubtless by now letters from relatives in Germany had asked August to describe flour milling in the United States and his letter has much material on the subject. He felt one must have at least $3,000 worth of capital or land to begin with or one would be destined to remain an apprentice for life. The usual pay of a miller hired to operate the mills was from $400 to $600 a year. Some got a house and a piece of ground with a wage of $10 to $18 a month. There were three types of mills which he discussed in detail—one run by water, a second by water and steam, and a third entirely by steam. Risher's mill was described as follows:

Risher's Mill in which I worked. This mill can be operated with water or steam or with both at the same time, since in the summer there's sometimes a little bit of water that not even the sheep have enough and that's certainly not enough to make steam. This is true of all water mills. When I had been in this mill just fourteen days, all the water was gone except two big barrels and we had to dig a trench 2000 feet long and one and one-half feet deep in order to get some. Some streams which usually swell in the spring and cause floods were so dried up that can't even get water from deep ditches. It is noteworthy that we have six to eight days of rainy weather and then sometimes three weeks without rain. The reason is supposed to be that most of the mountains (not as in Europe or other lands where there are elevated plains) here have other smaller mountains close around instead of plateaus which can not take up much water. The valleys are small and deep; the water, consequently, runs off very quickly. With the steam machine (we had two) the mill went at double speed in three-fold connecting gears. These gears were pretty much constructed like ours (with conical wheels—a main wheel and several spur-wheels). The main rod to which was attached the large wheel went through the top of the mill. The bags and everything hand down from it. We had three cylinder boilers, and the mill was over three and under four stories high. Just as three different cylinders are in it, so is the first a double cylinder; that is, the bruised grain goes first through no. 9. Here then no. 7 and then no. 6. From each number there is a tube and from it still others which make the grain white or worse. Usually one makes three kinds of grain. Nos. 10 and 9 are left together in a box (when one has made a sale) and this is called the "extra family flour." No. 8

8 At the present Dravosburg and vicinity, about fourteen miles up the Monongahela River from the "Point" in Pittsburgh.
runs into a special container and is pretty rough. To grind it finer one lets it run on. If the grain is too coarse, it’s run through again and is called “extra superfine.” Last two kinds are used by many bakers (for “rough” work), and the other kind is used for “fine” baking. The second cylinder was on the second floor while the first was on the third. The bruised grain went first into a conveyor, from there it was driven along by a system of belts. This carried it to the fourth level into a little room called the “cooler” and here a simple machine put it into the first cylinder by means of a tube or pipe. In the case of the second it fell off the belts into the cylinders. This set of pulleys was just twenty feet long. The meal then had to be sacked; this was necessary to the farmers. The third is the rye-sack and like the second. The water-wheel is twenty feet high and eight feet broad. I cannot give an account of the other specifications. The steam machines make 22 and the stone 150 revolutions per minute. Everything possible here is made of iron... The grain from the wagon was weighed and emptied into containers. From there they were carried up and left in a box. From this one could place them in the machine to be ground. A windmill grinds the grain on the rough side of the stones. Below is another windmill that discards the powder and dust and from this the grain runs through a belt into a burnishing machine, from this into a box with two divisions. There are no bells here and when it’s empty, one can notice by the sound of the machine.

In this mill, he was employed for several months and accumulated a savings of twenty dollars to enable him to take a trip to Elizabeth-town, New Jersey. The architecture interested him here so he included several drawings with the following comments:

There is also a big difference between the windows here and in Germany, there are usually only single panes here. The houses also have trap-doors in the ceilings which must be supported by a single piece of wood or something else. One sees no shingle roofs here, but roofs made of a kind of cement and little pebbles. They are also almost fireproof. Sometimes roofs are made of sheet-iron; occasional houses have slate roofs, but not often.

The letter concludes: “But I will stop writing here. God grant that it will reach you. It contains my fate in the first two years, if you want to read more of the other two years, then let me know.”

Thus ends the story of an immigrant as seen through a long letter written over a period of several years. There must be many thousands which are to be found as interesting and as revealing as this one about the lives of immigrants and life of the period.

As to what happened to August Ketterer in later years, nothing is known except a few facts given by his daughter, Mrs. Rose Kling. During the War between the States he joined the Merchant Marine and made at least one trip to South America. After the war he married Catherine Rollinghaus of Baltimore, and moved to a Georgia farm where they raised four children. He died there in 1907, having settled down, raised a family, and accumulated a nice fortune.