



Liberty, against all oppression

Tolerance, against all fanaticism

Reason, against all superstition

Justice, against all exploitation

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The Milwaukee Turners have their roots, along with other American Turners societies across the country, in the German Turnverein associations of the early 19th century. These associations were founded by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn in 1811 to prepare youth, both mentally and physically, for resistance to Napoleonic domination, and later for other anti-democratic forms of government.

The Turnverein associations became powerful social and political organizations in Germany that used gymnastic training as a preliminary and inconspicuous preparation for military drills. In 1848 they helped spark a liberal revolution to establish a unified, democratic republic in Germany. The revolution was defeated and over 600,000 Germans were exiled as a result.

The First Turner societies in the United States were organized in 1848 by German immigrants and exiles carrying the torch of liberty and democratic reform. These "48'ers", as they were called, created vigorous athletic, cultural, and social societies throughout the country in the tradition of the German Turnverein societies. The Turner motto, "Sound Mind in a Sound Body," expresses their holistic vision for realizing human potential through the harmonious integration of intellectual and physical development.

The Milwaukee Turners received their charter from the Wisconsin State Legislature in 1855. Milwaukee was once known as “German Athens of America” for its vital German artistic, political and civic culture, and the Turners were a central part of this community. The Turners, both nationally and locally, established a reputation for fighting for the principles declared in their national charter: “Liberty, against all oppression; Tolerance, against all fanaticism; Reason, against all superstition; Justice, against all exploitation!” Turners members volunteered in large numbers for the Union Army and served as President Lincoln’s personal bodyguards as he toured the nation. Turners were influential in developing the “ethnic vote” as a force for liberal Republican politics. They were also early advocates for women’s suffrage and equal rights, and were one of the first German-American organizations to publicly denounce the atrocities of National Socialism and Hitler’s regime in Germany.

Central to the Milwaukee Turners was a deep concern for social reform and a relentless pursuit of honest and open democratic government. In 1903 Turner Hall hosted a 3,000-plus person meeting that spurred the ‘clean government’ movement to eliminate graft, corruption and cronyism in local government that then swept the nation in the early twentieth century. By the turn of the century, many of the Milwaukee membership were no longer liberal Republicans, but had become Social Democrats. After the Haymarket Square Riot in Chicago and the Bay View Rolling Mill massacre in Milwaukee—just days apart in 1886—the right of workers to organize for basic human rights without fear of violence or retribution became a central issue across the nation and especially in Milwaukee. Turner members and leaders worked at the forefront of these issues.

Victor Berger, a long-time Turner in Milwaukee, pioneered with Eugene V. Debs the American Socialist Party dedicated to promoting the rights of workers and promoting clean, efficient, and democratic forms of government. Berger was the first Socialist elected to the U.S. Senate. Milwaukee is the only major city in the country to have three socialist mayors: Emil Seidel (1910-1912), Daniel Hoan (1916-1940), and Frank Zeidler (1948-1960); all three proud Turner members. Several Milwaukee mayors have been Turner members.