

The Story of John Bernard Mesker
by Cheryl Herrmann
April 2026

The Mesker family name is familiar to many Evansville residents thanks to Mesker Park Zoo & Botanical Gardens, Mesker Park, and Mesker Amphitheater. These places are tied to George L. Mesker, owner of George L. Mesker & Co. (later Mesker Steel), who left money to the City of Evansville in his will.

Because of that generous gift, a lot has been written about George L. Mesker, one of the 13 children (10 sons and 3 daughters) of John Bernard Mesker and Mary Elizabeth Nurre. The family is buried at St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery at Evansville, Indiana. But the story of the Mesker family in our community goes back even further. Let's take a closer look at the father, John Bernard Mesker (known as John B).

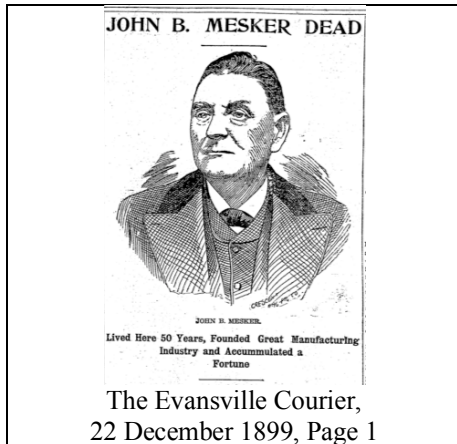


Mesker Monument in
St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery,
Evansville, Indiana
(photo by Cheryl Herrmann)

County <u>Warrick</u> INDIANA		304
Township <u>Logan</u>	STATE BOARD OF HEALTH.	Health Officer's Record Number <u>145</u>
Certificate and Record of Death.		
Decedent's full Name <u>John B. Mesker</u>		Date of Death <u>Dec 21 1899</u>
MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.		
I hereby certify that I attended the deceased from <u>Aug</u> to <u>Dec 20th</u> , that I last saw him alive on <u>Dec 18th</u> , that he died on <u>Dec 21st</u> about <u>8³⁰</u> o'clock <u>PM.</u> , and that to the best of my knowledge and belief the CAUSE OF DEATH was as hereunder written:		
Disease causing death? <u>uremia</u>	Duration <u>4 months</u>	
Immediate cause of death? <u>Exhaustion</u>	Duration <u>2 wks</u>	
Contributory causes or complications, if any? <u>Enlarged prostate</u>	Duration <u>Some years</u>	
Post-mortem <u>None</u>		
<small>In case of a Violent Death, state (1) mode of injury and whether accidental, suicidal or homicidal; (2) what was the nature of the injury and the immediate cause of death; (3) contributory causes or conditions; (4) any operations, and whether operation was performed, etc.</small>		
WITNESS my hand this <u>21st</u> day of <u>Dec</u> 1899		
Signature of Physician, Coroner or Health Officer <u>J. E. Clevin</u>		Address <u>Evansville Ind</u>
RECORD OF DEATH.		
Full Name of Deceased <u>John B. Mesker</u>	Age <u>76</u> Years <u>11</u> Months <u>12</u> Days	
Residence <u>222 Goodsell St. Warrick</u>	Sex <u>M</u> Color <u>W</u>	Single <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Married <input type="checkbox"/> Widower <input type="checkbox"/>
Occupation? <u>Chair Maker</u>	Birthplace? <u>Germany</u>	
Place of Death? <u>Warrick</u>	Father's name in full? <u>John B. Mesker</u>	
Father's Birthplace? <u>Germany</u>	Mother's maiden name in full? <u>Mary Elizabeth Nurre</u>	
Mother's Birthplace? <u>Germany</u>	Date of Burial? <u>Dec 21 1899</u>	
Place of Burial? <u>St. Joseph Catholic</u>	Signature of Undertaker <u>W. H. Schaefer</u>	
Reported by <u>John B. Mesker</u>	Address of Undertaker <u>1110 North 1st St</u>	
Address <u>222 Goodsell</u>		

Indiana, Medical Certificate and Record of Death
for John B Mesker

Source: Indiana Archives and Records Administration;
Indianapolis, IN, USA; *Indiana, U.S., Death Certificates, 1899-2011*; Year: 1899-1900; Roll: 17



John B Mesker died on December 21, 1899, at the age of 76.

His death certificate records uremia, which had persisted for four months, and exhaustion over the final two weeks, with an enlarged prostate noted as a long-standing contributing condition.

At the time of his death, he lived at 222 Goodsell Street, on the corner of Goodsell and Ohio.

BUSINESSES

During his years in Evansville, John B was involved in several successful businesses that focused on stove and range manufacturing. Before that, he learned the stove and tinware trade in Cincinnati, Ohio. According to his obituary, John B “went into business for himself in 1844, by loading a flatboat with stoves and tin ware and floating it down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, Louisiana.”

In 1847, John B partnered with Joseph Busse and formed a stove business in Cincinnati, named Mesker and Busse. The 1850 U.S. census for Cincinnati, Ohio, lists him (as Bernhard Mesker) as a 25-year-old, “tinner” from Germany, living with his wife Eliza (age 19), along with Bernhard Niehaus (age 16) and Joseph Busse (age 28). At that time, they had no children.

SCHEDULE I. — Free Inhabitants in the 10th Ward of Cincinnati in the County of Hamilton, State of Ohio enumerated by me, on the 15th day of July 1850. John S. Moore, Ass't Marshal.

Dist.	Age	Name	Sex	Profession, Occupation, or Trade	Place of Birth	Married within last year	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict
11	43	Bernhard Mesker	M	Tinner	Germany		1
12		Eliza	F		Do		1
13		Bernhard Niehaus	M	Tinner	Do		
14		Joseph Busse	M	Coppersmith	Do		

1850 US Census – Ohio – Hamilton County – Cincinnati

Later in 1850, John B moved his business from Cincinnati to Evansville. As reported in newspaper articles and city directories, he engaged numerous prosperous companies in the foundry business.

CITY IMPROVEMENTS. - We have frequently alluded to the number of improvements that are going on in the city. Those who do not ravel about have but little idea of the number, or their extent. We took a short walk yesterday and noted down the buildings we saw. Here is the result of our observation:

On the corner of Main and Eighth streets, Mr. J. B. Mesker is having erected a two story building, 37 x 70, to be divided into two store rooms

Source: Evansville Journal, 11 July 1866, Page 8

Over the next decade, both his business interests and his family grew quickly. The 1860 census shows John B, at age 34, with his wife, Elizabeth, and five living children. By 1870, that number had grown to 11.

Page No. 131

SCHEDULE 1. — Free Inhabitants in the City of Evansville in the County of Vanderburgh, State of Indiana enumerated by me, on the 20 day of Aug 1860. John W. Pendergast, Ass't Marshal.

Post Office Evansville

Dist.	Dwelling-house, number of family	Family number of individual	Description			Value of Estate Owned		Place of Birth, Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Married within last year	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict
			Age	Sex	Color	Real Estate	Personal Estate			
1	976		34	M	W	14000		Ohio		
2	977	1007	34	M	W			Illinois		
3			29	F	W	11500	5000	Alabama		
4			9	M	W			Ind	1	
5			1	M	W			"	1	
6			3	M	W			"		
7			1	F	W			"		
8			74	M	W			"		
9			41	F	W			Illinois		

1860 US Census – Indiana- Vanderburgh County -Pigeon Township – Evansville

John B's financial success grew just as rapidly. His real estate holdings increased from \$11,500 in 1860 to \$50,000 in 1870, and his personal estate rose from \$5,000 to \$15,000. In today's term, based on the consumer price index inflation, that real estate value of \$50,000 in 1870 is equivalent in purchasing power to approximately \$1,247,270.99 in 2026; The value of his personal estate of \$15,000 is equivalent to \$378,106.49 in 2026. These are clear signs that he had become quite wealthy.

Page No. 35 } Inquiries numbered 7, 16, and 17 are not to be asked in respect to infants. Inquiries numbered 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 19, and 20 are to be answered (if at all) merely by an affirmative mark, as /.

SCHEDULE I.—Inhabitants in Ward Evansville, in the County of Vanderburgh, State of Indiana, enumerated by me on the 4 day of July, 1870. 302

Post Office: Evansville John Guitt, Ass't Marshal.

11	250272	Mesker J B	47	M	w	Tinner	✓	50000	15000	Prussia
12		Elizabeth	39	F	w	Keeping Board				"
13		Bennett	19	M	w	Clk at Tinner	✓			Scott
14		Henry	15	M	w	" "	✓			"
15		George	13	M	w	" "	✓			"
16		Frank	11	M	w	at home				"
17		Edward	10	M	w					"
18		Armin	7	F	w					✓
19		William	4	M	w					✓
20		John	2	M	w					"
21		Lucas	2	F	w					"

1870 US Census – Indiana- Vanderburgh County – Evansville

As his sons grew older, they joined in their father's businesses, each having received a quality education and work experience. As shown in city directories and newspaper ads, his six sons started their own ventures in the iron industry. These included:

- J.B. Mesker & Son, run by John B and his youngest son, Edward, focusing on stove and range manufacturing;
- J.H. Mesker & Co., founded by John Henry Mesker, specializing in iron fences, railings, and similar building components;
- George L. Mesker, Co., established by George L. Mesker, which became one of the largest architectural ironworks in the country at that time;
- Mesker Brothers Iron Co., founded by Bernard T. Mesker and Francis Xavier Mesker in St. Louis, producing ornamental sheet-metal facades and cast iron storefront components; and
- John Laurence Mesker (1868-1936) who worked as a manager and salesman for Mesker Brothers.

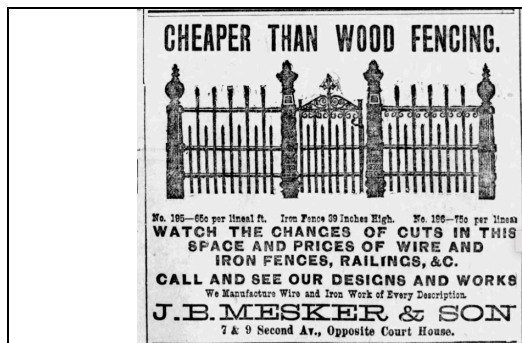
Galvanized Iron Works.

Bohn Chas. 500 Upper 8th
 Cook Peter & Co. 806 Upper 9th
 Lohse H. & Co. 208 Upper 3d
 Mesker Geo. L. & Co. 100 to 114 Lower 1st
 Mesker J. H. & Co. 3 and 5 2d av
 Platz Chas. & Son, 708 Main

City Directory, Evansville, Indiana, 1889

Mesker Benjamin T. (Mesker & Bro.), r. 423 S. 6th
 Mesker Frank (Mesker & Bro.), r. 423 S. 6th
 Mesker Franklin, bkpr. r. 926 Morrison av.
 Mesker John L. salesman Mesker & Bro. r. 423 S. 6th
MESKER & BRO. (Frank and Benjamin T.), Galvanized Iron Works, Cornices, Etc., 421 to 429 S. 6th

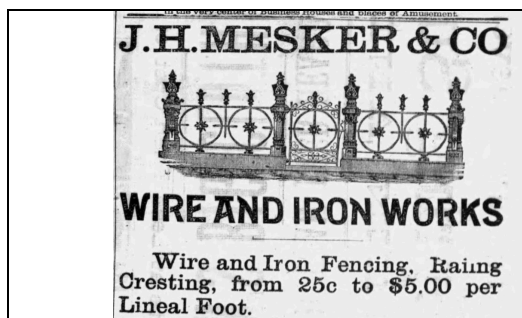
City Directory of St. Louis, Missouri, 1895



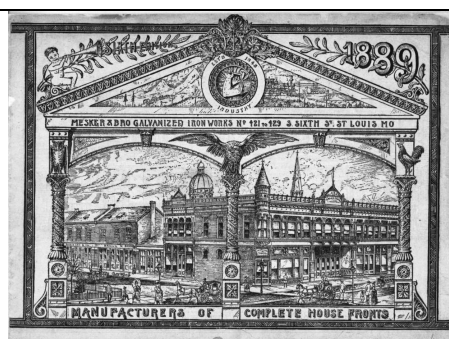
Advertisement in The Evansville Courier, 25 October 1892, Page 3



Front of 1892 catalog



Advertisement in Evansville Daily Courier, 5 June 1885, Page 2



Front of Mesker Brothers Iron Works Catalog, 1895

While the family found great financial success, they also experienced heartaches and significant losses

John B and Elizabeth Mesker had 13 children, but six died young:

- John died at age 1,
- Joseph died at age 2,
- William Henry died at age 6,
- Louise Elizabeth died at age 2,
- Aloysius William died at age 1, and
- Maria died at 1 month.

Only three of their children went on to have children of their own, resulting in just three grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

The family also endured tragedy when John Henry Mesker died by suicide in the family home. His brother George was the one who found him lying in a pool of blood, due to self-inflicted gunshots to the head and heart.

John Bernard Mesker and Elizabeth Nurre (1832-1895)

- | **John Mesker** (1849 - 1850)
- | **Bernard Theodore Mesker** (1851 - 1936)
- | **Joseph Mesker** (1854 - 1856)
- | **John Henry Mesker** (1855 - 1898)
- | **George Luke Mesker** (1857 - 1936)
- | **Francis Xavier Mesker** (1859 - 1952)
- | | **Francis Augustus Mesker** (1906 - 1981)
- | | | **David Warren Mesker** (1931-2015)
- | | | **Phyllis Mesker** (1933 - 2022)
- | | | **P Mesker** (living)
- | | **John Bernard George Mesker** (1912 - 1997)
- | | | **R C Mesker** (living)
- | | | **D C Mesker** (living)
- | **Edward Stanilaus Mesker** (1860 - 1898)
- | **Anna Marie Mesker** (1863 - 1944)
- | | **Joseph Oscar Schmidt** (1890 - 1959)
- | **William Henry Mesker** (1866 - 1872)
- | **John Laurence Mesker** (1868 - 1936)
- | **Louise Elizabeth Mesker** (1870 - 1872)
- | **Aloysius William Mesker** (1871 - 1872)
- | **Maria Mesker** (1875 - 1875)

Descendants of John Bernard and Elizabeth (Nurre) Mesker

Through joys and sorrow, the John B Mesker family was a very close knit family, as evident from this letter from Anna to her brothers in St. Louis. They celebrate in St. Louis for Frank's wedding.



Evansville, Ind.
July 27, 1879

My Dear Brother,

I sit down to write you a few lines that we are all well and hope you are still the same. My finger is very sore (not). We have our new buggy and go out riding. You and Brother come home soon and you can go out riding when ever you want to.

Brothers you do come home soon and see what a large family of birds we have, one Mocking bird, two red birds, six canaries and six more in prospect.

Papa, Mama and myself are coming down in fall, and will bring both of you a prayer Book with the songs in front and back. Brother Ben and Brother Frank, come home soon.

Mama said for you and Brother to pray those prayers she taught you when you were small. Granmother send love to you all. Aunt Mary has a little Baby girl. Mama and Mrs. Crosby is taking it (to) the church for Baptism. I remain at home with the family of birds. Papa took Brother John to Henderson, Ky, so he would not have to go with Mama.

Have you heard of Uncle Steinkamp sudden death – short illness of two days. Grief is supposed to be the cause. I enclose in sending a kiss to both and a prosperous business. Excuse mistake.

From your Loving Sister Anna

There are two thing to remember Brother's and be carefull of them. Not to go out in the hot sun to get Stroke, and when Yellow fever get there to COME home, come home soon. Come home soon. Good bye.

Letter from Mesker Brothers Iron Works Records, 1879-1953.

BACK TO KINGDOM OF HANNOVER


Now having viewed John B's immediate family, let's venture further back to his siblings and parents.

Johann Heinrich Antonius Mesker (1791 - 1876) and Maria Elisabeth Brokmann (1785 - ?)
Theodore Mesker (1810 - 1881)
Elisabeth Mesker (1813 - 1883)
Margaretha Maria Elisabetha Mesker (1817 - 1871)
Henry Theodore Mesker (1821 - 1901)
John Bernard Mesker (1823 - 1899)
Mary Agnes Mesker (? - 1904)

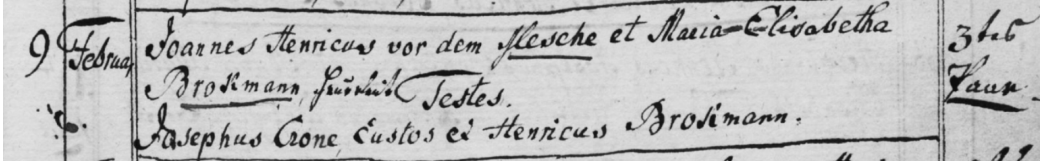
Looking at the church records, John Bernard Mesker was born 22 February 1823, and baptized a few days later under the name Joannes Bernardus Josephus vor dem Mesche. He was born in the Kingdom of Hannover (in what is now Germany). His parents, Joannes Henricus vor dem Mesche and Elisabetha Brokman, were married on 9 February 1808, at St. Bonifatius Catholic Church in Neuenkirchen, living in Depwegs), near Astrup.

Searching through more church records, John B had five siblings, Theodore, Elisabeth, Margaretha Maria, Henry Theodore and Mary Agnes. According to the below records, his paternal grandparents, Johan Heinrich Mescher and Maria Elisabeth Knapke, married on 28 August 1783, at St. Bonifatius in Neuenkirchen.

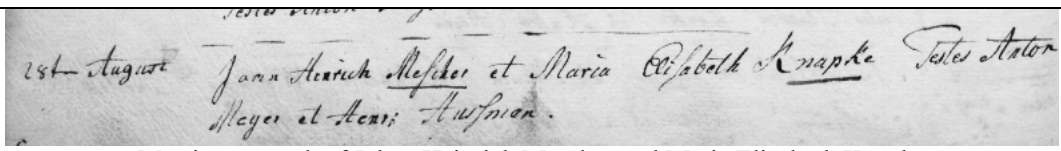
The family name was originally "Mescher" or "vor dem Mesche," but it was changed to "Mesker" after they immigrated to the United States.



Baptism Record for Joannes Bernardus Josephus vor dem Mesche
 Deutschland / Vechta, r.k. Oficialatsarchiv / Neuenkirchen, St. Bonifatius / Taufen | KB05
<https://data.maticula-online.eu/en/>



Marriage record of Joannes Henricus vor dem Mesche and Maria Elisabeth Brokmann
 Recorded in Deutschland / Vechta, r.k. Oficialatsarchiv / Neuenkirchen, St. Bonifatius / Trauungen | KB06,
<https://data.maticula-online.eu/en/>



Marriage record of Johan Heinrich Mescher and Maria Elizabeth Knapke
 Recorded in Deutschland / Vechta, r.k. Oficialatsarchiv / Neuenkirchen, St. Bonifatius / Trauungen | KB02;
<https://data.maticula-online.eu/en/>

IMMIGRATION

According to his obituary, John B immigrated to the United States in 1833, at the of age 12, settling in Cincinnati, Ohio However, his brother Henry Mesker's obituary, gives a slightly different date, stating that he arrived in 1836.

Passenger ship records add another piece to the puzzle, showing that the family arriving from Bremen, aboard Brig Colonia, landing in Baltimore, Maryland, on 17 October 1837. The ship carried 115 passengers, many of whom were from Neunkirchen, Astrup and the Kingdom of Hannover, and a large number listed Cincinnati as their final destination. The Mesche family immigrated with many friends.

10/28

Passengers
 The Bremen Brig Colonia! from
 Bremen to Baltimore.

Name	Age	where from	going to	
1. Diedrich Dopsch	44	Astrup	Cincinnati	.
2. Anna do	39	Kingd. Hannover		.
3. Elisabeth do	47			.
4. Johann Mesche	60	do	do	.
5. Greta do	19			.
6. Anna do	21			.
7. Heinrich do	16			.
8. Bernhard do	11			5
9. Catharina v. Wolke	26	Neukirchen	do	1

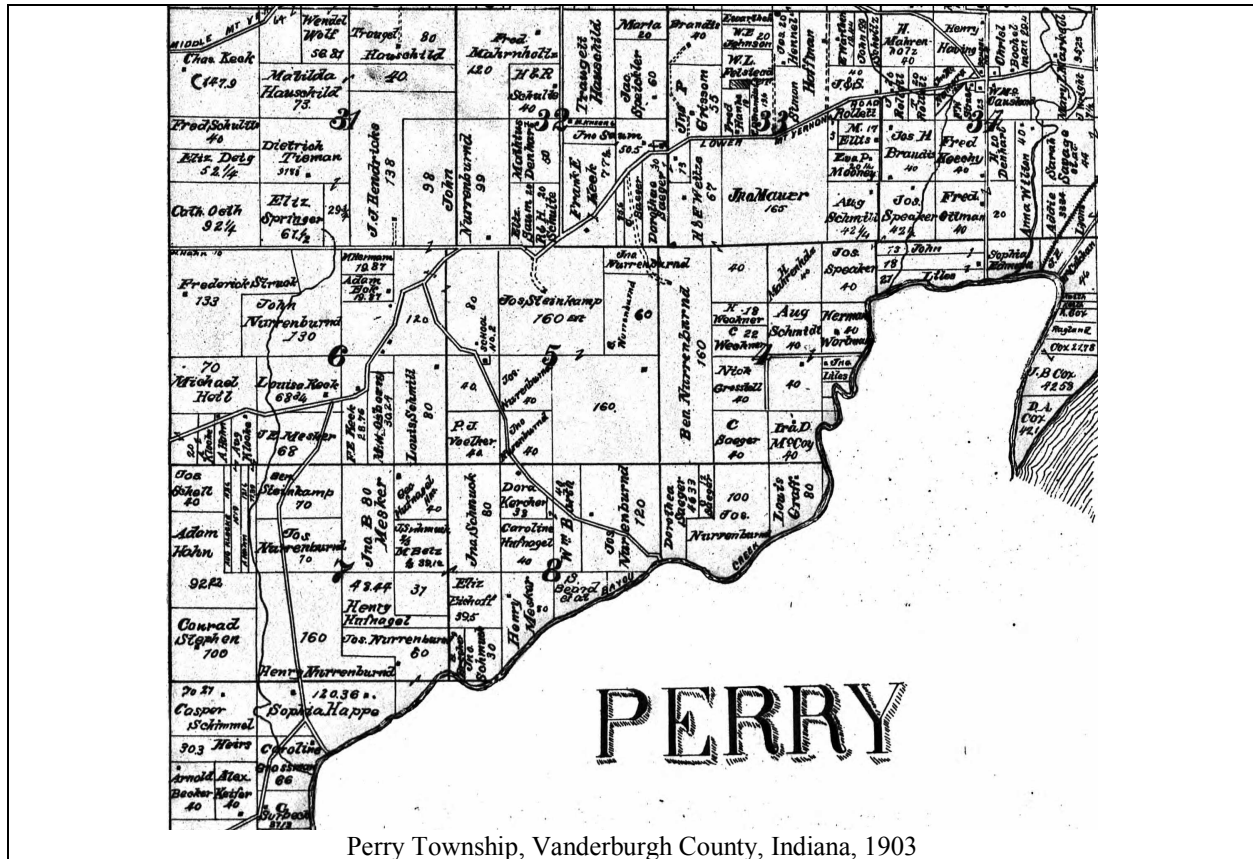
Subst. 115
 I have examined the Passengers list
 Brig Colonia find the whole number
 on board to be 115
 of whom ten is the crew of the vessel 14
 & thirteen children under 14
 remaining 101

Respectfully
 R. Martin

Passenger Ship list for Brig Colonia from Bremen to Baltimore, arrived 17 Oct 1837
 Johann Mesche is listed with four children Greta, Anna, Heinrich, and Bernhard.
 Source: Ancestry.com. Baltimore, Maryland, U.S., Passenger Lists, 1820-1964 [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA:
 Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

Other family members made the journey as well. Passenger Ship records show that his sister, Elizabeth Mesker and her husband Henry Steinkamp, arrived in Baltimore by September 1837, along with friends, Bernard Nurrenbern and his wife Elisabeth Steinkamp (Henry’s sister). Church records, also show John B’s oldest brother, Theodore Mesker, married Maria Catherine Quatman, on 20 Sep 1839, at Holy Trinity Church in Cincinnati. Meanwhile, Mary Agnes, the youngest sister, married George Stegemann and lived in Cincinnati.

Question: So, if Cincinnati, Ohio, was the family’s intended destination, what eventually brought the Mesker family to Evansville, Indiana?



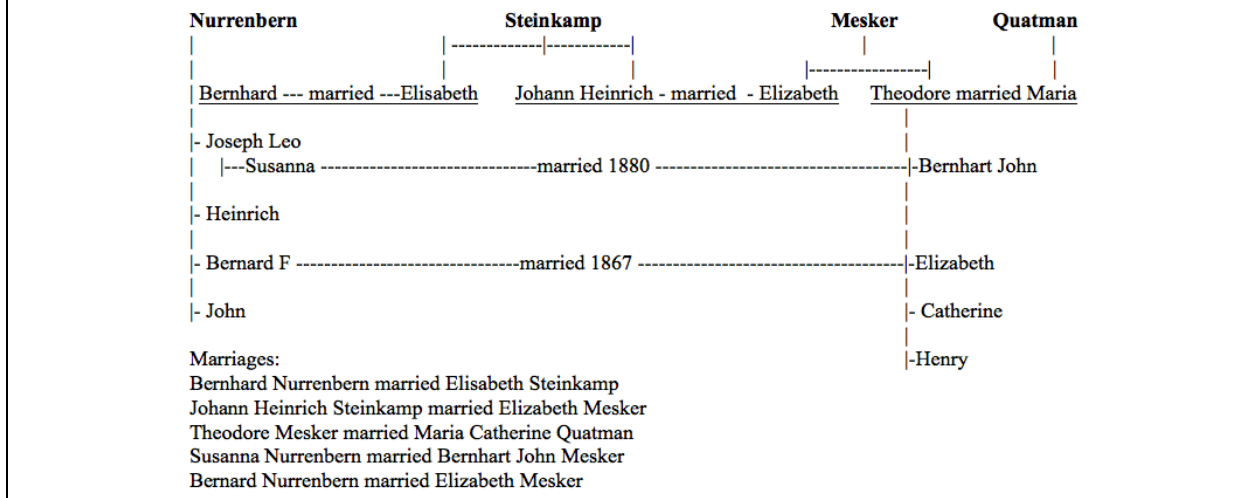
Perry Township, Vanderburgh County, Indiana, 1903

Answer: LAND and FAMILY!

The Mesker family shared close ties with the Nurrenbern and Steinkamp families long before their journey to America. In the Kingdom of Hannover, church records indicate they all worshipped together at St. Bonifatius Catholic Church – in Neuenkirchen, forming bonds that would shape their futures.

Those connections deepened through marriage. John B Mesker’s sister, Elizabeth Mesker, married Johann Heinrich Steinkamp (Henry), while Henry’s sister, Elisabeth Steinkamp, married Bernhard Nurrenbern (Ben). These unions made Henry and Ben were brothers-in-law, just as Henry and John B were – linking the families not only by faith and friendship, but by blood. Just as they did in the Kingdom of Hannover, these connections carried on through future generations of the Nurrenbern, Steinkamp and Mesker families.

Marriages among the Nurrenbern, Steinkamp and Mesker families



Family tradition tells of a shared dream: land ownership. In the Kingdom of Hannover, Henry Steinkamp and Ben Nurrenbern and the Mesker brothers, worked as farm laborers. Yet, they longed for something more – they dreamed of owning their own land. That ambition of land ownership led the families to leave their native land and journey to the United States, arriving in Baltimore, Maryland, in search for opportunity. Like many other German immigrants, they set their sights on Cincinnati.

Fate, however, intervened. In Cincinnati, Henry and Ben met the Fus brothers, Henry and Gethart, who offered land for sale in Perry Township, Vanderburgh County, Indiana. The Fus brothers had acquired the land patents (21961 and 21959) from the federal government in 1829. Having enough money to purchase land, Henry and Ben – ready to seize their chance - decided to purchase adjoining 80- acre parcels “sight unseen” for \$130, roughly \$1.63 per acre. Henry Fus sold his land (W ½ NW ¼ Section 5 S, Range 7 W) to Bernard Nurrenbern, while Gethart Fus sold his land to Henry Steinkamp (E ½ NW ¼ Section 5 S, Range 7 W). See Sections 5 and 6 in the map of Perry County.

Traveling from Cincinnati to Evansville by boat on the Ohio River was marked by hardship. When they departed at Evansville, the families discovered that all the money they had carefully saved, safely stored in the wives’ purses, had been stolen. Worse still, the two families soon discovered that their newly acquired land was heavily covered in timber, rocky and not well suited for farming.

Despite these setbacks, owning their land outright gave them the credit they needed to begin again. They initially rented a log cabin on lower Main Street, between First Street and Riverside Drive. The men found work with the State, digging the Erie Canal, earning fifty cents (\$0.50) per day, along with a good drink of whiskey.

Before long, Ben and Henry turned to the demanding task of clearing the land and building homes from what nature provided. Their houses were constructed of logs and dirt, held together with wooden pegs, whittled with pocket knives, rather than nails. Roofs were constructed with split boards, secured with poles of young saplings pinned lengthwise. At first, water had to be carried from a flowing creek about 200 feet away, a daily task that demanded time and effort. Eventually cisterns were built, allowing rainwater to be collected for daily use of cooking, washing clothes and bathing. The surrounding woods offered their own abundance supplying game for hunting and sturdy timber for crafting furniture.

Their perseverance paid off. Both families prospered, gradually acquiring more land. According to their descendants, Ben Nurrenbern eventually owned around 1200 acres and Henry Steinkamp held well over 750 acres. Today, a portion of that land once farmed by Ben and Henry is now part of University of Southern Indiana, where the original log cabin still stands – a quiet reminder of their early life and hard work.

Meanwhile the family continued to grow in Evansville. By 1838, John B's older brother, Henry, had arrived. His life in the city was well documented by numerous newspaper articles. He worked for General Evans, was employed at a mill, and practiced as a cooper. On January 24, 1844, Henry married Miss Elizabeth Burk, together they raised six children. Henry later entered business, forming a dry goods and grocery store partnership with J.L. Kramer. Henry Mesker took an active interest in politics, a prominent member of his party, serving the city as a councilman and the county as a commissioner.

Theodore Mesker, the oldest brother, married Maria Catherine Quatman in Cincinnati in 1839, and soon followed his siblings to Evansville. A farmer by trade, Theodore purchased 80 acres of land adjacent to the Nurrenbern and Steinkamp lands. He became a successful truck farmer, supplying produce to the county. Remarkably, the land he once claimed is still held by his descendants today—a lasting legacy of his perseverance.

Now, with 3 siblings settled in Evansville, it wasn't long before Maria Margaretha Mesker (Greta) and her father, John Henry Mesker, also made the move from Cincinnati. They were active members in the local church community strengthening the family presence in their new home.

While on his many trips down the Ohio River, selling his wares from a flat boat, John B Mesker stopped in Evansville to visit family. Impressed by the town's growth, he envisioned a bright future in store for him. He saw opportunity there. In 1850, he made the decision to relocate permanently, living closer to his family. He gave up his interests in Cincinnati, opening a stove store on Main street – marking the beginning of his own chapter in Evansville's story.

It's intriguing to imagine how different Evansville might be today ,if John B. Mesker had never followed his siblings there and instead had remained in Cincinnati. Fortunately, he did - and George L Mesker has a story of his own.

The End