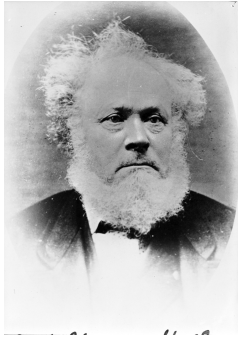


Wilhelm Keil (1812-1877)



Known by his followers as "Father Keil," and as Dr. Keil and "King Keil" to others, Wilhelm Keil was the leader of one of the most successful nineteenth century utopian community experiments west of the Rocky Mountains. Keil was born in Bleicherode, Prussia. In 1836 he married Louisa Reiter, and soon after, the couple embarked for America. Although Keil's intent in coming to the United States was not to form a utopian community, he arrived at a time of religious revivals and an increasing number of utopian communal societies.

After arriving in New York City, he moved in 1838 to Pittsburgh, where he made contact with individuals from George Rapp's Harmony Society. He went through a series of religious transformations but ultimately denounced all organized churches and sought to establish his own belief system among a group of devoted followers. In 1844, Keil sent scouts to find a location for a Christian community devoted to the Golden Rule and later that year established the colony of Bethel in Shelby County, Missouri.

After ten years in Missouri, Keil saw encroaching civilization as a threat to his colony, so he once again sent out scouts to find a suitable location for a new colony, this time in the Pacific Northwest. The group selected a site on the Willapa River in Washington Territory, and Keil led a group of eighty individuals there from Bethel in 1855. Sadly, the lead wagon was also the hearse for Keil's oldest son, Willie, who died shortly before the trip began. After arriving at Willapa, Keil rejected the site as it was too remote and isolated for commercial opportunities. Keil and most of those who came from Missouri moved to Portland where he learned of land available twenty-five miles south of the city. There, in 1856, he established the new colony named for his daughter, Aurora.

Over the next twenty-one years, Keil led the community as it built a hotel, church, and other buildings and became successful in developing crops and orchards. The community still held true to its basic Christian beliefs, but Keil's isolationist view transformed into an understanding of the economic role the community could play in providing goods and products to the growing population in the Willamette Valley. Among these products was excellent food served at the Aurora Hotel and the music of the Aurora bands. He was instrumental in bringing the railroad to Aurora in the early 1870s as a means to connect Aurora with other cities.

Keil remained the leader of Aurora, and nominally of Bethel, until his death in December 1877. Soon after his death, efforts began to disband the two colonies, with the final dissolution taking place in 1883.

Written by [Jim Kopp](#)

Further Reading:

Hendricks, Robert J. *Bethel and Aurora: An Experiment in Communism As Practical Christianity With Some Account of Past and Present Ventures in Collective Living*. New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1933.

Snyder, Eugene Edmund. *Aurora, Their Last Utopia: Oregon's Christian Commune, 1856-1883*. Portland: Binford & Mort Publishing, 1993.

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