

Tenement Museum

Oswald Ottendorfer for Mayor!



Oswald Ottendorfer as a younger man, full of ambition.

It's election day in New York City, and here at the Tenement Museum, we're endorsing our own candidate – Valintin Oswald Ottendorfer! In 1874, Ottendorfer, a German immigrant and resident of the Lower East Side ran for mayor of New York City as an independent, but we think he has many qualities that are still electable in 2013.

He's an intellectual, a veteran and hero! – Ottendorfer studied Classics, law, and Czech in his native Germany, and finished his studies in Padua, Italy. After completing his studies, Ottendorfer joined the Germany army and fought in the First Schleswig War, or the Three Days War; a war between Germany and Denmark over which country should control the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.

He has a revolutionary past (but age has made him moderate)! – After returning to Vienna, Ottendorfer found that the city was going through a revolution; Austrian soldiers were going to invade Hungary, who was rebelling against the oppressive authoritarian Austrian Empire. Ottendorfer joined up with the revolutionaries, mostly students and liberals, who had taken control of the government. Many of the revolutionaries were captured or killed, but Ottendorfer escaped to continue his revolutionary ways across Germany and Austria, and eventually immigrated to the United States.



He's a self-made man who overcame adversity! The youngest of 6 children of an upper-middle class manufacturer, Ottendorfer found little work after first arriving in America, for he spoke six languages, but none of them were English. He began to work as a day laborer. He eventually found employment at the Staats-Zeitung, a German language newspaper in New York City, where he worked his way up to an editorial position. Ottendorfer eventually married the widow of the previous editor and took control of the paper.

He is generous with his wealth and is a philanthropist! He donated \$300,000 to build an academic institution in Austria (he cares about the people back home!) and built a home for indigent men, what today we would call a homeless shelter, on Long Island (he cares about the less fortunate!). In New York City, he established the Ottendorfer Free Library on Second Ave (he cares about education!). The Library, now part of the New York Public Library system, is the oldest NYPL in its original building.

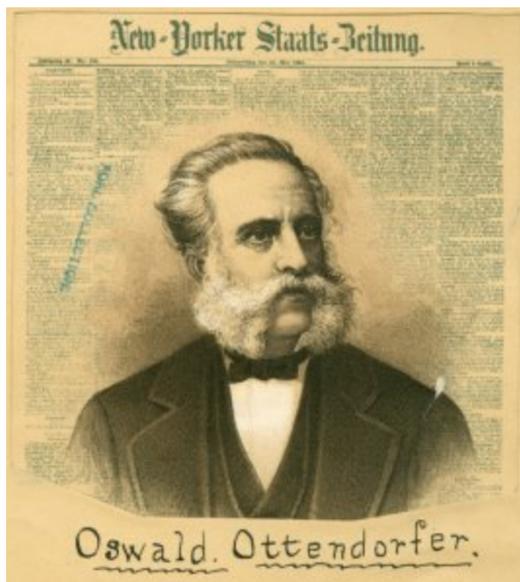


The library that Ottendorfer built for the neighborhood, now owned by the New York Public Library.

He's bipartisan! – Ottendorfer never registered for a party, but had strong Democratic leanings. Of course the Democratic party of the 1870's was rather different from today's Democratic party. They tended to favor small government, westward expansion, opposition to a national bank, greater equality for white men, but on the flip side, discriminatory policies (many Southerners were Democrats, and were angry about the Civil War and Reconstruction). However, Ottendorfer would have been described as a "Union Democrat," a Democrat who opposed the Civil War and condemned slavery, as opposed to a "Peace Democrat," or "Copperhead," the groups that sympathized with the Confederacy during the Civil War and demanded immediate peace.

He has political experience! – Ottendorfer represented the State of New York in the Electoral College several times, and supported Stephen Douglas' failed presidential bid in 1860. He also served the Lower East Side as an alderman, what we would today call a City Council member, from 1872 to 1874.

He ran on a platform of reform! – As an 1874 mayoral candidate, Ottendorfer advocated civil service reform, the eradication of corruption (Ottendorfer helped to expose 1873 Mayor William Havemeyer's various and sundry deeds done in the name of Tammany Hall) and improvements in public schools, two topics that candidates today are still dealing with!



Of course, Ottendorfer did not win his mayoral bid – he lost (quite miserably) to the Tammany Machine that controlled local elections for decades – and he returned to journalism and philanthropy until he moved back to Europe in his later years. But we can see in him a politician that truly wished to make life better for all New Yorkers, despite race or social class. So remember that if you can't decide who to vote for today, you can always write in Valintin Oswald Ottendorfer!! (Maybe he should make his name easier to spell if he's going for the write in....)

If you live in the New York City area and are registered to vote, [check this link](#) to check your polling place, and get out and vote today!

– *Posted by Lib Tietjen*