

Biographical Sketches

Johann Friedrich Christian Stolt (1830-1880) and Augusta Weber (1846-1936)

Johann Friedrich Christian Stolt was born on 21 December 1830 in the tiny village of Hohenwarth, near the town of Grimmen in the province of Pomerania (Pommern), then part of the Kingdom of Prussia. He immigrated around 1854, but no records show the exact date of his passage or whether he came to Illinois directly upon his arrival.

Butcher in Clintonville (South Elgin)

The first clear record of Fred Stolt in America appears in 1859, when he is listed on the Kane County Tax List as a butcher in Clintonville (present-day South Elgin), working in partnership with C. Kerber. At that time, Clintonville was not an incorporated town, but rather a small settlement on the east bank of the Fox River, just south of Elgin. It had grown around a mill site and a cluster of German immigrant families who arrived between 1855 and 1860, forming a close-knit community with familiar language and customs. Fred brought with him the practical skills of animal handling and slaughtering learned on his family's farm in Pomerania, making butchering a natural occupation for him. Fred seems to have shown early business ambition as well: in 1863 a local newspaper reported that he had dissolved his partnership with C. Kerber and formed a new one with Charles Brookman, though no further details about these arrangements have been found.

As Fred continued to build his business in Elgin, he became acquainted with Augusta Weber, whose family lived on a farm in Hanover Township. Augusta, born in 1846 in Germany, had immigrated with her family in 1848, and by the 1860s the Webers were well established in the community, particularly through their long-standing ties to St. John's Lutheran Church.

Fred and Augusta were married on 1 April 1866, likely at St. John's. Their first child, John Frederick, was born the following year. By 1867 Fred appears in the Elgin City Directory as a dealer in dry goods and groceries on Mill Street near Milwaukee Street (now Highland Avenue). In 1868 their second child, Amelia, joined the family.

Expanding the Grocery Business

The 1870 census offers an early glimpse into Fred's growing business success. At that time, Fred and Augusta were living in Elgin with their two children, along with Augusta's sister, Matilda, and a store clerk. The census records Fred's personal estate at \$1,600 (roughly \$40,000 in today's value) and his real estate holdings at \$1,000, demonstrating a solid financial foundation for a man still early in his career.

One intriguing detail is that the census reported Fred as unable to read or write. According to census instructions, this designation applied to any language, not just English. Despite this, Fred was clearly managing a successful enterprise, a testament to his determination, practical skills, and business acumen.

Expansion

The 1870s were a decade of growth for both the Stolt family and the City of Elgin. Fred and Augusta welcomed three more children during these years: Bertha in 1871, Ida (our ancestor) in 1873, and Frederick in 1875.

Elgin itself had become one of the most dynamic industrial cities in northern Illinois. With strong rail connections, a diversified economy, and a rapidly expanding workforce, the city's population reached between 6,000 and 7,000 residents during that time. The Elgin National Watch Company, founded in 1864, quickly grew into the city's largest employer, bringing high wages, national visibility, and a steady flow of income into the community.

Fred's business was booming and in 1875 he and John Gieske built a 3,200 sq. ft. building on 20 Douglas Ave. for stores and offices. Fred eventually moved his grocery business into the new building, and around the same time Augusta established a millinery shop specializing in hats. Together they steadily expanded their property holdings until they owned much of the surrounding block. According to city directory listings, the basement housed a saloon and pool hall that Fred had purchased, the grocery store occupied the ground floor, and the family's living quarters were located on the upper level.

In 1876, the store suffered a significant setback when thieves broke into the safe and stole \$300—a loss they did not expect to recover. The following year, in 1877, Fred sold the saloon to William Wahl, who would later become Augusta's second husband.

Setbacks and Politics

Elgin was growing in the first half of the 1870's with over 200 buildings built. However, the aftermath of the Panic of 1873 soured the economy and by 1878, Fred decided to liquidate his dry goods store and focus on the millinery business. He also became involved in politics by caucusing for the Greenback Party and being a delegate in their Convention.

Fred Stolt was likely drawn to the Greenback Party because its platform directly addressed the financial and social pressures he faced in the years after the Panic of 1873—tight credit, low farm prices, heavy debt burdens, economic instability, and widespread distrust of banks and railroads—while also advocating greater protections for workers and small producers. The party was especially strong in the Midwest, where many German-American farmers supported its anti-monopoly stance and criticism of Eastern financial elites.

The Greenback Party ultimately did not appear to offer enough promise, as Fred also caucused with the Democratic Party in 1879 and was selected as a delegate. That same year, Fred and Augusta welcomed their last child, Selma.

Prioritizing Millinery Business

In 1880, Fred and Augusta were living in their Douglas Avenue building with their six children and Augusta's sister, Matilda. The census described Fred as a merchant and Augusta as a milliner, while

Matilda worked at the Elgin watch factory. Life appeared to be going well: the Stolts were well known in the community, with Fred active in the Merchants' Singing Club and Augusta running a successful millinery business while also caring for her large family. Elgin itself was flourishing, and as more women embraced fashion, the demand for stylish hats grew steadily. In this era, a proper hat was considered essential attire for any woman in society, and milliners like Augusta kept a varied stock of trimmings and ornaments from which customers could choose to personalize their hats.

Fred likely shifted his business focus in 1878 because dry-goods sales were becoming increasingly competitive during the mid-1870's, which strained general merchants far more than specialty trades. At the same time, Augusta's millinery business proved more profitable and resilient, making it practical for the family to concentrate their resources there. Closing the store allowed Fred to free up capital, strengthen their overall financial position, and make better use of their building, which was well suited to a specialty storefront. Fred still owned the building and leased out sections of it to real estate brokers, the saloon, and possibly other businesses. With millinery entering a period of great demand as the economy recovered, the Stolts' decision was a smart and strategic move that positioned the family for greater growth.

That growth never materialized. Later in 1880, the family was met with tragedy. Fred suffered a stroke and died on 14 November. He was buried at Bluff City Cemetery.

Widowhood

Fred was only 50 years old when he died in 1880, leaving Augusta widowed at thirty-four. As the executor of his estate, she was responsible for settling his outstanding debts. To do so, she obtained permission to sell the family's building at 20 Douglas Avenue. Despite this difficult transition, she continued operating her millinery business and soon began advertising in Elgin's German-language newspaper, maintaining both her livelihood and her presence in the community.

The year 1882 was a momentous one for Augusta. In March, William Wahl's wife died. By October, Augusta had settled her late husband's estate, and in November she married William Wahl at his home on Milwaukee Street. The following month, she sold the Douglas Street building for \$2,000 and, after all debts were paid, retained \$775—a substantial sum at the time. That same month, Augusta's father also died, leaving her a future inheritance to be received upon her mother's death.

Remarriage

Augusta entered a new chapter of her life when she married William Wahl. At the time, she was the mother of six children from her marriage to Fred Stolt, ranging in age from three to fifteen.¹ When the marriage took place, our ancestor Ida Stolt was only nine years old. For the wedding she gave her mother a set of salt and pepper shakers, and years later she teased Aunt Mildred (Florence Davis's sister) by saying, "You'll never have to buy *your* mother a wedding present." After the marriage, the Stolt children moved with Augusta into William's home on Milwaukee Street. William

¹ Much of Augusta's life between 1880 and 1900 was later recounted by older relatives whom I interviewed in 1985.

was working as a carpenter at the time, and he built a large house at Linden and Preston Streets, near the lower lagoon of Lord's Park.

A Growing Family

Augusta and Bill had twins in 1883 and a son in 1887. During this time Bill also worked at the saloon and in 1884, he was indicted on six counts for selling liquor to minors as recounted in the newspaper.

In 1884, the indictment would have carried several consequences for Bill, including fines and legal expenses, as well as damage to his reputation within Elgin's German community. It likely brought increased scrutiny from both the police and local temperance advocates, creating a real risk to his liquor license and, with it, his livelihood. The controversy may also have cost him some customers who preferred to avoid association with a saloon at the center of legal trouble.

Weber Inheritance

In December 1883, Augusta's mother died, and Augusta inherited a meaningful amount of money. According to her father's will, his estate was left to his wife for her lifetime, after which a substantial portion was to be divided among six of his seven daughters. Because Ferdinand was a wealthy man at the time of his death, it is reasonable to assume that Augusta ultimately received a significant inheritance.

What happened next is somewhat uncertain, as the 1890 census was destroyed, but interviews with older relatives help fill in part of the story. Around 1890, it appears that William was no longer earning enough in Elgin to support the family, and he, Augusta, and their children moved to Noble in Richland County, a very small town south of Effingham, Illinois, to try to make a living by farming. The reasons for William's decision are unclear, but he purchased a farm, probably with Augusta's inheritance, and attempted to start anew. Around 1893, Ida and her husband, Frank Wright, joined them in Noble to farm alongside William.²

Farming Failure

The Wahl family's move to Noble came at a difficult moment in the nation's economy. In 1893 the United States was struck by a major financial crisis known as the Panic of 1893, triggered by railroad failures, bank collapses, and a sharp contraction of credit. Farm prices plunged, thousands of businesses closed, and unemployment soared. For small farmers and new homesteaders, these were devastating years. William and Augusta's attempt to build a farming livelihood in southern Illinois would have unfolded against this harsh economic backdrop. The venture ultimately failed; by 1898 the entire family had returned to Elgin, having lost all of their savings.

Return to Elgin then Farming in Hanover Township

Bill and Augusta moved back to Elgin and rented a home at 269 Milwaukee St. living with their three children and a lodger. Bill was a bartender, Harry, aged 16, worked on watch cases, and his

² Grandma Davis used to talk about the farm at Noble. About 1920, Ida and Frank moved back to Noble to try farming again. They took Grandma and her brother Leslie. Grandma hated the farm. Luckily, Aunt Mick and her husband went to Noble for a visit and found Grandma was miserable. They brought her back to Elgin where she met Reno Davis.

twin, Adalia, was a salesclerk. Bill's youngest daughter from his previous marriage, Hattie, lived with them as well.

Over the next few years, Harry and Adalia married and left the household. By 1910, Augusta and Bill moved with their youngest son, Edward, to Hanover Township, where Augusta's parents had once farmed. The 1910 census lists Augusta as the head of the household and identifies Edward as a farmer, while Bill is recorded as doing administrative work. The specific crops or livestock are unknown, as the agricultural schedules for 1910 were destroyed. At the time, Augusta was sixty-three and Bill was sixty-seven. Given that Augusta was designated head of household, it is possible that Bill was in poor health. Although land records have not been located, it is likely that Edward was farming former Weber land. The family lived in a rented farmhouse.

The second attempt at farming didn't last long. Bill Wahl died just six years after their move to Hanover Township, in 1916. He was buried at Bluff City Cemetery.

Final Years

Augusta lived for another twenty years. She eventually moved back to Elgin, though no census record has been found for her in either 1920 or 1930. She died on 23 May 1936 of pneumonia. Her obituary notes that she had been living with her son, Edward, at 319 Illinois Avenue.

After a long and eventful life, Augusta Weber Stolt Wahl was laid to rest at Bluff City Cemetery next to her husband, Fred Stolt.