

# 1881's homestead laws key to Koreshans' land purchase

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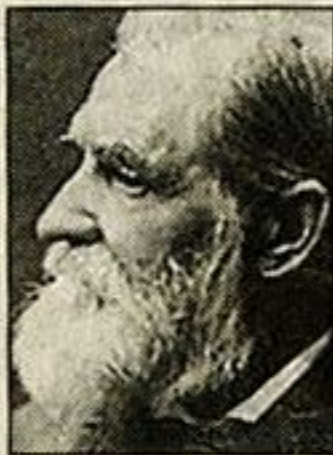
In these days of skyrocketing prices for homes and even more so for land, it is interesting to look back into our collective history to see how open and available land was, even to the point of the government trying to give land away to settlers.

The way the program worked, according to the Florida homestead laws of 1881, if a person settled, cultivated and

## KORESHAN HISTORIC SITE

improved so-called "public lands" over a three-year period, then they were able to purchase that same land at a much reduced rate.

In January of 1894 Gustave Damkohler wrote to L.B. Wombwell, state agriculture commissioner, in Tallahassee. Damkohler was seeking infor-



**DAMKOHLER**  
Represented  
Koreshan Unity

Damkohler, who was the homesteader who ceded most of his

mation on "...unsold State Lands - mainland or Island-Rookeries, Oysterbars..." in the area of what is now Fort Myers Beach.

It was during this time t h a t

land to the Koreshans told Wombwell:

"...I act as a friendly agent for a big body of people of the far North of U.S. and Canada who are willing to make their home down here in earnest, to cultivate our waste lands, drain our swamps, etc."

That "big body" was, of course, the Koreshan Unity, led by Dr. Cyrus Teed. Damkohler had been in contact with the Koreshans for some time, and at the time this letter was written

Teed and three other members of the Unity had arrived in Estero and were living with him and his son, Elwin.

Damkohler stressed to the agriculture secretary that he needed to keep all of this secret so that land prices would not jump when people got wind of such a large sale. Damkohler continued to write the state requesting information about certain lands, particularly in the area of Fort Myers Beach.

These letters, which are locat-

ed in the Florida State Archives, give us a picture of what may have gone on at the time. Surveying in Florida at this time was tenuous at best and it seems that the Koreshans relied on Damkohler's experience in this area.

Damkohler transferred ownership of all 320 acres of land that he had settled himself in November of 1894. It wasn't until he and his son became

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# KORESHAN

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disillusioned with the Koreshans that Damkohler chose to sue for the return of his land in 1897.

The basis of his suit was to say that the Koreshan beliefs were a threat to the people of Lee County.

Damkohler was attempting to have the Koreshans removed. Of course, we know that he was largely unsuccessful. He received only about 80 acres in the settlement and the remainder of the land stayed in the hands of the Koreshans.

In a letter to his agent in Estero, Teed spoke of the "Damfooler" case, so obviously there were hard feelings on both

sides.

Damkohler eventually chose to move on. He moved to Alaska to mine for gold. It was there that he died in 1905 at the age of 80.

His only surviving son, Elwin, eventually returned to Fort Myers where he worked at many trades, including being a fishing guide. He lived until 1969.

The Damkohler papers are in the State Archives of Florida in Tallahassee. You can visit the Damkohler cottage on the grounds of the Koreshan State Historic Site. It is believed to be one of, if not the oldest, structures in Lee County.

For additional information on this or other aspects of Koreshan State Historic Site visit [www.floridastateparks.org](http://www.floridastateparks.org) or call 992-0311.