

## THE EPHRATA CLOISTERS IN 1759

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**A**N aspect of the colonial history of Pennsylvania whose fame and importance are steadily growing is that of the earliest, and to many the most remarkable, monastic settlement in America—the Ephrata Cloisters. Various circumstances recently have served to draw general attention to them: circumstances such as the long litigation over the attempt of the state of Pennsylvania to convert the site of the community into a public monument, and the nation-wide publicity given to the “plain” religious denominations of Lancaster county through a recrudescence of the ancient conflict between public and parochial education. Among students of the cultural history of America, the Cloisters have assumed unprecedented importance, as representing a Protestant revival in the New World of the ascetic, monastic traditions of the medieval church; as a prosperous industrial community; and as a center, isolated but very influential, of American culture in pre-revolutionary times.

Now that the Cloisters are the object not merely of local pride but of serious national attention, it is of interest to note that in their own time, as early indeed as the French and Indian War, their fame had already penetrated to “far-off London. In the *Annual Register for the Year 1759*, a publication of the famous bookseller Richard Dodsley, one finds an excellent account of “a society called Dunkards, in Pennsylvania,” written by a correspondent who is known only as “a gentleman of America.” We can readily believe that the contemporaries of Dr. Johnson and William Pitt found as much to interest them in that article as we do today. It makes fascinating reading, not only because descriptions of colonial Pennsylvania German communities from the English point of view are scarce, but because at the time this article was written, the Cloisters were at the height of their career, and thus the account represents them at their best and most typical.

One of the most noteworthy features of the Cloisters is suggested by our correspondent at the very outset of his report: that the community ("the Dunkard town, called Ephrata"), though itself firmly established and flourishing stood in the midst of what was still largely virgin wilderness. Ephrata, we are told, "is situated in the frontier part of Lancaster county, 14 miles from Lancaster. . . . That part of [the region] next Ephrata, is very solitary, where the inhabitants are thinly scattered, and the country becoming more hilly, makes the road take several windings through the interjacent vallies, [*sic.*] which are well supplied with rivulets of water, and covered over with trees. Nothing is seen but the works of nature uncorrected by the hand of man."

The romantic origin of the Ephrata community is told in the London account in a few sentences, which for the sake of being more directly factual, we may paraphrase with names and dates added from other sources. The founder of the Cloisters was the mystic Dunkard hermit, Conrad Beissel, who, soon after his arrival in America in 1720, had gone into the wilderness of the Conestoga Valley and made a rude, solitary home for himself. Five years later, as an accident of the complex cross-currents of small religious movements with which colonial Pennsylvania history abounds, Beissel became the baptizer, or head, of a Dunkard congregation of twelve members, called the Conestoga Church. In 1732, after various troubles had beset the group, including internal strife as well as conflict with the civil authorities, Beissel suddenly and without explanation took up his few books, left the others, and penetrated deeper into the forest, finally settling with another hermit, Emanuel Eckerling, on the banks of the Cocalico.

Beissel's disciples, however, refused to be parted from him, and soon joined him at his new home. Among them were several of the female zealots—"spiritual virgins"—whose presence in the community, always regarded with dark distrust by the other German settlers who were beginning to filter into the region, was to prove a lasting source of embarrassment to those early eighteenth-century celibates. The immediate question of their disposition was settled by building another cabin for them on the other side of the creek.

In its earliest years Ephrata outwardly was neither monastic nor communistic. The qualities which distinguished Beissel and his followers from their neighbors were chiefly spiritual: a common belief in certain unorthodox doctrines. But about 1734, influenced beyond doubt by the plain clothing of the Mennonites and Amish who were settling in the region, the Dunkards (or Seventh-Day Baptists) adopted the dress of a monastic order, and their habitual way of life, always simple and self-denying, now became an ordinance. Thus in 1759 the *Annual Register's* correspondent reported:

They endeavor to retrench every superfluity in dress, diet, and pleasure. Their garb in winter is a long white gown, tied round the waist with a belt. Behind hangs a large cap like a capuchin, which they put on in the time of rain, or cold, for they wear no hats; a waistcoat of the same cloth, a coarse shirt, trowsers, and shoes. In summer their cloaths are of the same form and colour, but made of linen. The women's is the same with that of the men; only instead of trowsers, they wear petticoats, and always keep their faces muffled up in their large capuchins when out of the nunnery. The men let their beards grow to the full length, and wear their hair short. Their diet is for the most part vegetables; they abstain from flesh-meat, not through principle, but judge it most agreeable to the mortified abstemious life a Christian ought to lead. It is certain that luxury is unknown among them, which is easily discovered on first seeing them, being quite lean in body, and not the least appearance of blood in their faces. Their recreations are no other than the alternate performance of religious and domestic duties, which they endeavour to intermix in such a manner, that neither may be burthensome.

Economically the community was self-sufficient. In the first years of its existence it had little or no trade with the outside world. Later, of course, with the establishment of their large paper-mill, the men and women of Ephrata played a part in the colonial economy. However, "ambition or pecuniary views had no share in their union; and as they gave themselves up entirely to devotion and industry, their gains were thrown into a common stock, out of which private as well as public exigencies were

supplied." The women worked equally with the men, digging potatoes, supplying vegetables for the meals of the 250 members the community then boasted, and even splitting wood for the fires. Thus early did communism find a foothold in America.

The first communal building, the Kedar, or meeting-house, was erected in 1735. In rapid succession other buildings were constructed along the Cocalico, including the so-called "Brother House" and "Sister House," in which the sexes were segregated. "The town," as the English gentleman saw it in 1759, "is built in the form of a triangle, with a large orchard in the middle. Along the outside are planted thick rows of apple, peach, and cherry-trees, which bear great quantities of fruit. Their houses are all wood, and for the most part three stories high. Each person has his own distinct apartment [i.e., a cell twenty-six inches wide and seven feet high, with one window eighteen by twenty-four inches], that he may have no interruption in his private devotions. Their rooms are plain, white, and clean. . . . Instead of beds, they sleep on benches, and use a little wooden block for a pillow. Each room is furnished with a couple of these."

The famous hospitality of Ephrata was extended to its visitor by Brother Agrippus (Johann Peter Miller), whose name is the most renowned of those associated with the Cloisters. At that time he, as the successor to the former prior, Eckerling—whose expulsion from the colony in 1745 together with his followers, had climaxed a period of bitter dissension among the inhabitants—was in the process of taking over the control of Ephrata from the aging Beissel.

He had, as we are told in the *Annual Register*, "a regular education at Halle, Germany. He took orders, and was a minister in the Calvinist communion several years; but not being able to satisfy himself in some points, he left the sect, and went over to the Dunkards. He is a man of an open, affable temper, and free in conversation beyond what you would expect from a person so rigid in his manner of life." It was he (though a writer in 1759 could not be expected to have foreseen it) who was to be commissioned by the Continental Congress to translate the Declaration of Independence into foreign languages, to be sent to the courts of Europe. A genuine scholar, he carried the

community forward after Beissel's death, remaining its head until his own death in 1796. As a matter of fact, however, he actually outlived his own institution.

What were the beliefs of these ascetic brethren and sisters? The non-Dunkards living in Lancaster county had a somewhat cynical view of them; for the regular midnight religious services in one of the buildings, based actually upon the belief that the advent of Christ would occur at midnight, could easily be interpreted as the Pennsylvania German equivalent of Bacchic revels; and the habit the brethren had of proselytizing new members of the community from among the wives and daughters of the other Germans, including the wife of the pioneer Germantown printer Christopher Sauer, served to give Ephrata the popular reputation which most such unorthodox communities have had to endure. To his credit, the Englishman who sent back his account to London sought not scandal but information. To him Peter Miller outlined the main doctrines of the Dunkards.

He learned that:

They retain both sacraments, but admit adults only to baptism, which they administer by dipping or plunging. They entirely deny original sin, as to its effects on Adam's posterity; and consequently hold free-will. All violence they esteem unlawful, even self-defence in times of danger. Going to law they think contrary to the gospel, even when defrauded, or when their property is unjustly seized. They are strict in observing the Jewish sabbath, to a degree of superstition. They have no set form of service, but pray and preach extempore. Their discourses, by all that I could learn, treat in general of Christian virtues, humility, chastity, temperance, &c. They believe the dead had the gospel preached to them by our Saviour; and that, since his resurrection, the souls of the just are employed in preaching the gospel to those who have had no revelation of it in their life, nor sufficient means to be convinced of its truth. They deny the eternity of torments, which they think are mystically alluded to in the Jewish sabbath, sabbatical year, and year of jubilee. They look upon each of these as typical of certain periods after the general judgment, in which the souls of those who are not then admitted into happiness, are purified and purged from their corruption and obduracy. If any within the smaller periods

are so far humbled as to acknowledge God to be holy, just, and good, and Christ to be their only Saviour, they are received into happiness. Those who continue obstinate are still kept in torment, till the grand period typified by the jubilee arrives, when universal redemption will take place, and all made happy in the endless fruition of the Deity.

In 1759 the Ephrata Cloisters had two more decades of prosperity before them. This early experiment in communal living was destined, however, to be ended by the heroic part its men and women played in the Revolution. Not only did they furnish Washington's army with their prized Bibles and hand-illuminated hymnals, to be used as gun-wadding, but their buildings were thrown open as emergency hospitals for the sick and wounded from Valley Forge, and their stores were sent to the front. This most dramatic chapter in the Cloisters' history was also the closing one. The depletion of their resources, and typhus epidemics which took a large toll of lives and necessitated the razing of some of the infected buildings, ended the career of Ephrata as a monastic town, although it clung to life until after the passing of its leader, Johann Peter Miller. It exists today only as a group of ramshackle buildings and an overgrown "God's Acre" on the outskirts of the borough to which it gave its name. But the real significance of this brave experiment in devout living is amply demonstrated by the great value which libraries today place in their copies of books bearing the Ephrata imprint, and museums in their collections of the quaint but often highly expert drawings and other examples of Ephrata art-craft. And to anyone who has seen them, the detailed records which are extant of Ephrata's eventful history and its peculiar way of life proclaim this early settlement to be fully as rewarding of thoughtful study as such later experiments as Oneida and Brook Farm.