I, Georg Jacobs, do hereby certify that I have purchased from Gerhard Levering and Henrich Frey all their land located beyond Wissahickon Creek (except for a strip along the Creek, two rods wide, which Henrich Frey has reserved for himself from what was his), for the sum of 24 pounds, and upon the condition that I will pay the first half on November 16 next, and the other half on May 16 of next year, 1701; and in case I should fail to pay on the dates aforesaid, the aforesaid land, including whatever I may have planted thereon, shall return into the ownership of Gerhard Levering and Henrich Frey aforesaid; and inasmuch as the customary rent (to wit: 1/3 pound sterling per 100 acres) has not been paid hitherto, I do bind myself hereby to pay to the Proprietor the due proportion levied upon my land, whenever it will be collected. In proof whereof I have here signed my hand and name.

Done in Gerhard Levering’s house, in the year 1700, on the 30th day of April.

GJ Georg Jacobs

Witnesses: Johannes Kelpius
Claus rittinghuis

THE foregoing, in translation, is the text of a one-page manuscript, fifteen by nineteen centimeters in size, which was found some time ago among papers in the Abraham H. Cassel collection at Juniata College, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. At first sight this early contract between Georg Jacobs on the one hand and Gerhard Levering and Henrich Frey on the other does not seem to be of special interest from the historian’s point of view. The one party to the contract—Georg Jacobs—may possibly be the same person listed elsewhere as Jurgen Jacobs. A little more is known regarding the two persons who constitute the other party.
Gerhard Levering, from Mülheim-an-der-Ruhr, settled in Germantown in 1685 and was naturalized in 1691; and Henrich Frey, of Altheim, Alsace—likewise naturalized in 1691—seems to have resided in America before 1681 but arrived in Philadelphia in October 1685 as the servant of Gerhard Hendricks.

Concerning the second witness there is fairly detailed information. Claus, Klaas, or Nicholas Rittinghuis was the son of Wilhelm Rittenhausen, Willem Rittenhuysen, or William Rittenhouse, who came to America with his family in 1688. William has the distinction of having been the first Mennonite minister in America and the proprietor of the first paper mill built in British America, which was set up in 1690 on Paper Mill run, near Wissahickon creek. Claus, also a minister, who was naturalized in 1691 and renaturalized in 1709, took over the business on his father’s death in 1708.

The name of the first witness is given as Johannes Kelpius. A close examination of the manuscript reveals that the contract was evidently written by him and that even the full signature of Georg Jacobs appears in Kelpius’ handwriting. Presumably Georg Jacobs could not write very well and signed only with his initials. There is no doubt then that Johannes Kelpius performed the function of attorney for the three colonists, at least on this one occasion.

In the early history of Pennsylvania, Johannes or Johann Kelpius (1673-1708) is known as “Hermit of the Wissahickon” and leader of a small group of German mystics frequently referred to as “the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness.” He was born near Schässburg, Siebenbürgen (also called Segesvár or Sighisoara, Transylvania), received his master’s degree at the University of Altdorf, Bavaria, wrote several theological treatises, and became one of about forty adherents of Johann Jacob Zimmermann, who had determined by mysterious calculations that the millennium would begin in the autumn of 1694 and had decided to await its coming in the solitude of Pennsylvania’s primeval forest. Zimmermann died on the eve of their sailing, and Kelpius succeeded to the leadership. Their ship, the Sarah Maria Hope-well, arrived at Bohemia Landing, Maryland, on June 19, 1694; and the pilgrims, whose religion was a strange mixture of orthodoxy, pietism, cabalism, chiliasm, and Rosicrucianism, proceeded to Germantown, Pennsylvania. Although no land deed
seems to have been recorded in the name of the Kelpius fraternity or in that of any of its members, there is agreement in all available accounts that through Thomas Fairman, then deputy surveyor-general of the province, they received one hundred and seventy-five acres of land in the vicinity of Germantown—namely on a wooded ridge on the eastern bank of Wissahickon creek about half a mile above the confluence of the stream with the Schuylkill. Even after Zimmermann’s predictions had failed to come true, the community continued to wait patiently for the beginning of the millennium, meanwhile devoting itself to prayer, meditation, the cultivation of medicinal plants, and religious instruction among the Germans of the vicinity. After Kelpius’s death Johann Gottfried Seelig became the leader of the society, which continued in existence for several years. Kelpius’s literary remains, besides his religious tracts, are known to include a diary of the voyage to America, some miscellaneous letters, and a book of original hymns with musical scores.

In connection with the Kelpius manuscript presented here it may be well to recall that at the time of the transaction Germantown and the surrounding countryside was owned by the Frankfort Land Company and that Francis Daniel Pastorius, for many years the company's official representative, was replaced in 1700 by Daniel Falckner, Johannes Jawert, and Johannes Kelpius, who were to act jointly as the agents. Daniel K. Cassel on page 88 of his History of the Mennonites (Philadelphia, 1888) states that “together with Johannes Jawert and Daniel Falckner he [Kelpius] was appointed an attorney of the Frankfort Company in 1700, but he never acted.” Likewise George Harvey Genzmer declares in the Dictionary of American Biography (v. iv, p. 260, entry under FALCKNER, DANIEL) that “Kelpius, disdaining the affairs of the world, declined to serve [as attorney of the Frankfort Land Company], leaving Falckner and Jawert to carry on, with doubtful legality, alone.” However, the hermit of the Wissahickon did not completely disdain the affairs of the world; he did have the qualifications required of an attorney at the beginning of the colonial period; and he did indeed act in that capacity—with or without official connection—during exactly the same year when he was appointed agent of the Frankfort Land Company. These facts are clearly established by the contract in his own handwriting, which in the original version is as follows:

Actum in Gerhard Leverings Hausz,

1700. d. 30. April.

GJ Georg Jacobs.

Testes: Johannes Kelpius
Claus rittinghuis