BEULA

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A LOST town of the state of Pennsylvania—Beula, Cambria county—a forgotten milestone on its western frontier, comes dramatically to life in letters found in the Library Company of Philadelphia.

These letters, 1797-1804, were written by the Rev. Morgan J. Rhees, a Baptist minister, and are addressed to Dr. Benjamin Rush, Philadelphia.¹ They bring to light the bitter struggles encountered by our early intrepid frontiersmen, and vividly reveal the frustration of hope and disaster suffered by a particular group of pioneers, seeking to establish a settlement in the wilderness, called Beula, a name signifying "a region described in Bunyan's 'Pilgrim Progress' where there is nothing to annoy and all sounds are agreeable."²

Beula was founded in 1797 by the Reverend Morgan J. Rhees, and within a few years of progress gave promise of becoming the most cultural city west of the Allegheny mountains, and the capital of Cambria county. It had a circulating library of 600 volumes, churches, a seminary, agricultural and literary societies, a newspaper, stores, hotels, and homes inhabited by several hundred people.³ It was also a gateway for the unending stream of immigrants trekking over the mountains towards the western lands; and, on Reading Howell's map of Pennsylvania, printed about 1805, Beula is the only town mentioned in Cambria county.⁴

But only a few decades later, a traveller seeking this spot of civilization must have been dismayed in finding instead a large isolated tract of land, overgrown with weeds, fallen stumps of

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¹ Benjamin Rush Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.
² The Encyclopedia Americana (Americana Corporation, New York, Chicago, 1940), III, p. 597.
³ Storey, Henry Wilson, History of Cambria County, Pennsylvania (The Lewis Publishing Company, New York-Chicago, Three volumes, 1907), I, 204.
trees, roads long untrodden, remains of human habitations, but not a single living soul.

The rise and rapid decline of Beula are closely intertwined with the life and untimely death of the Reverend Morgan J. Rhees. He was born on December 8, 1760, at Graddfa, Clamorganshire, South Wales, and was educated for the ministry at Bristol college. He came to Philadelphia in 1794, where his eloquence and scholarly dissertations attracted wide attention. He travelled extensively all over Pennsylvania, and he was deeply moved by the poverty and distress then prevailing in various communities and cities, especially among the immigrants arriving from the old country, many of whom were his own countrymen.

He appeared before philanthropical societies and church groups, making eloquent appeals for relief and amelioration of misery among these unfortunate people. He pointed out the unknown western lands as a haven of refuge, where "the wide extended empire whose uncultivated forests and fertile plains, invite the uplifted ax and furrowing plough." These appeals finally met with a wholehearted response in the person of Dr. Benjamin Rush, who also became one of Rhees' staunchest friends and supporters.

Dr. Benjamin Rush was the proprietor of a large tract of land in western Pennsylvania, a portion of which was then situated in Somerset county. This land he offered to the Reverend Morgan J. Rhees, on the most favorable terms, with plans to establish there a community of his own countrymen, "where millions of acres are waiting for the adventurer to cut down the majestic trees, and turn up the prolific soil—until that vast wilderness becomes like Eden and the deserts of the West like the Garden of the Lord."

To the achievement of this noble and utopian task Rev. Morgan J. Rhees henceforth dedicated all his energies and his whole life.

In the spring of 1797, Rhees and his first group of sturdy settlers, all Welshmen, with their families, pack horses, wagons, cattle, provisions, agricultural and structural implements, arrived

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on the south branch of the Blacklick creek. Immediately lines ofoads and lots were laid out, trees were cut down, lands well
ploughed and seeded, and log houses and mills were erected. What
was a wilderness a short time before changed into an organized
social community. Emigration advertisements, circulars and pros-
pectuses emphasizing the charms of the new lands and the easy
freedom to be enjoyed there, brought hosts of additional settlers.

But with the progress of the community and improvements,
also the germs of their decay—drunkenness, poverty, avarice, po-
litical intrigue—became apparent. Already, on September 13,
1797, about six months after his arrival on the scene, Reverend
Rhees wrote, “the increase of the settlement, if anything, is too
rapid—the numerous poor who have come forward have almost
drained my resources.”

To assure the growth and the importance of his community,
Reverend Rhees early conceived the idea of separating the lands
bordering on Beula into a new township, and making Beula its
seat of justice. With this object in view, he journeyed to Lancaster,
then the capital of Pennsylvania, and was successful in gaining
favorable response from the various legislators.

In the meantime, the impact of the wilderness on the settlers
and settlement had produced profound changes, shocking the faith
and idealism of the Reverend Rhees. On July 26, 1798 he wrote:

What shall I say? I am charged not to write unless I
scribble something that may appear in print—but I must
candidly declare to you that we are not yet prepared to
appear before the public. Our roads are to be cut. Mills
to be built and many other improvements, which if not
requisite to our existence are necessary to our existing
comfortably. The freezing land of winter, like that of
death, has chilled many of our best enterprises—My saw
mill and seat are completely gone after spending the best
part of last summer in erecting, and sinking at least on
them 1000 dollars. To be without it was still a greater
loss to the settlement, for it has by discouraging the set-
tlers put back the improvements in Town one year or
more. I have however contracted for building an entire
new one, a little lower down the creek, which is to be
ready by the 15th, of September—and Mr. Thomas Phil-

* Day, Sherman, Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania
(Published by George W. Gorton, Philadelphia, 1843), p. 181.
* Benjamin Rush Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.
lips will have a grist mill ready on the Connemaugh about the same time.

The multiplicity of my avocation have almost overcome me and to add to my affliction my own brother to whom I had entrusted considerable property last year, has on account the difficulties attending his new situation given himself very much to drinking—The consequence has been neglect of duty, and destruction of property to a very great amount. All these difficulties I had to encounter on my arrival here last spring—debts to pay contracted by my agents, which I knew nothing off,—many of the settlers disaffected on account of poverty and accidents—others who were sober and industrious people when I left them last summer—entirely devoted to the “Stinking God” whiskey—others on account of oppression of the neighboring settlements turned extortioners. This picture is not drawn too gloomy Sir—I could scarcely believe my eyes nor my ears—such a change I could not have conceived—There are many yet in Sardis—who shall walk in white garments for they are worthy—The others I hope are not gone too far to be recalled and reformed—I am determined to act a very decisive part with them and yet be lenient as possible—Our clearing is absolutely too hard for an American to attempt and I have discovered since here the last time more stony lots than I expected to find—I believe there is near a thousand acres (but not in the same tract) which is not worth a cent per hundred acres.

In the midst of these calamities providence smiles on the industry of many settlers. They will have a tolerable crop of grain and abundance of vegetables to supply their families—I have taken all the business into my own hands and give as much as possible out in jobs—this appertains to the saw mill—lime kiln within two miles of the town—and indeed all our lands at present are so arranged and classed that none of them can very well be idle—

We are separated to a new Township called Cambria—and there is not a doubt but we shall have soon a new county and it is not improbable but the seat of Justice will be at Beula—at any rate it will be the most centrical situation and on account of its Library will have superior privileges to any town west of the Allegheny—

In my next letter I hope I shall have something to say that you may lay before the public—At present I must beg of you not to print any thing respecting our settlement excepting our transactions of the 4th of July which I sent you. The oration was composed hastily the night
before it was delivered—Should you think the oration or the toasts worth your attention I shall be obliged to you for making such emendation as appear to you necessary—you have full liberty to add or diminish—I know our sentiments coincide so well in politics and religion that I am not afraid of your giving it a different tone.

You may also mention that upon the whole the settlement goes on as well as can be expected, that great exertions are made and that we hope soon to be respectable. . . .

The creation of a new township and the prospects of Beula becoming its seat of justice brought great encouragement and stimulation to the settlers. A church was built, civic organizations were formed, a seminary was established, and houses, mills, and roads were constructed. But the progress and deteriorating factors of the community continued hand in hand. Reverend Rhees wrote on September 28, 1799:

As the welfare of our settlement lies so near your heart, I embrace the first opportunity after my arrival here of informing you—that we are still struggling with the storm! two families have gone away from the Town others are on the wing—There are some bad characters among ourselves which I am anxious to see on their journey—they have done much mischief by poisoning the public mind with jealousies and false alarms. Some begin to see through them—like Caleb and Joshua they have another spirit. I hope they will surmount their difficulties and inherit the land. “Who hath despised the day of small things the one may yet become a thousand and the weak one a strong nation”—the Lord will hasten it in time.

Our buildings go on slowly—We cannot get a day’s work without cash. The saw mill turns out very bad; I am afraid it will cost me much more to repair it than the expence of a good one at first—

I have not received the money towards opening the road but we have cut great part of it by anticipation. I will exert all my faculties and strength and wait patiently for the promised blessing. . . .

Three years of labor on behalf of his community had entirely exhausted the financial resources of Reverend Rhees. He was now

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10 Benjamin Rush Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.
forced to seek a position which would provide enough income for the "sustenance of his family." Much against his will, he accepted the position of Recorder of Deeds and a judgeship at Somerset. But his heart and interests remained in Beula. On June 4, 1800, he wrote:

Your favor by Mrs. Phillips I have received yesterday, for which my thanks and those of the community and settlers are gratefully returned—Whilst we have such a friend, such a Father, why should we be afraid. Difficulties upon difficulties have occurred—Enemies from without and within have been numerous—but perseverance in the name of the Lord, will I trust enable us to surmount them all.

The Clearfield expedition like the south bubble has completely vanished—4/5 of the settlers returned home completely disgusted with their journey and the land they explored—Several of them chagrined with disappointments are quitting our settlement in different directions, others who were duped from a sense of their duty will remain. The Dr. has been from home visiting a patient about 30 miles off for some time. What he intends to do I know not, but I hope he will not remain here long—Mr. Moore is appointed deputy surveyor—We ought to have known better than to be led astray—We may at a future period recover confidence.

All the Jersey people who arrived here before us were gone—two who came at the same time have purchased, but at a very low rate—I was induced to accept of their terms on account of the distracted state of our settlement. They are industrious farmers and with their improvements they have to begin with must succeed.

It has been the study and glory of some mischief makers among us to drive every newcomer away—I have threatened to take Legal measures, but I am afraid that they have managed matters so craftily, that it will be difficult to procure proper evidence to commence a suit. I am determined to collect all I can and act with decision, not out of revenge on the wretches, I have fed and supported, but from a sense of duty I owe my own character and the interest of every individual who has property in the place.

In a day or two I intend to set off for Somerset where

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my letters must be directed, my family are well and comfortably fixed as can be expected. The 2nd saw mill has been taken all to pieces—I expect the 3rd after, the waste of time and an enormous sum of money, will soon be ready—the gristmill cannot be accomplished this season nor is it much wanted at present, provided the other could be well conducted—There are but three of the settlers who have paid any installments—as for the other settlers, the few among them who have paid any interest, it has been paid—in unprofitable labour which if they have any conscience they will never exact back from me... 

In a short letter, written July 21, 1800, Reverend Rhees continued:

I have just time to inform you that we are well, that we continue to fight on not withstanding several of our soldiers quit the field, without any prospects of fresh recruits. I have lowered the price of lands to two dollars and cannot procure purchasers—Property has fallen in the country so much that my good land with considerable improvements can be purchased for that price—Several have been to see but would not engage with all the encouragements I could offer—We must wait for better times.

This day we raise the third saw mill—the expence of which will fall very little short of a thousand dollars—in addition to the 3000 dollars already spent in vain...

To add to the woes of Reverend Rhees a new source of worry arose for him, in the rivalry which had sprung up in the neighboring settlement of Ebensburg for the honor of the seat of justice. The proprietors of land in that section, envisioning the importance of having the county seat, in the increase of value of their lands and prestige to their community, formed a strong organization, and brought their powerful influence and political pressure to bear on the legislature, meeting in Lancaster, for the establishment of the seat of justice in Ebensburg. Reverend Rhees lost no time in throwing his full weight into his efforts, in combating this danger which threatened the prospects of Beula. A long and bitter struggle now ensued between the two, Beula and Ebens-

burg, for the seat of justice. Finally Reverend Rhees wrote from Somerset, February 7, 1801:

After all our efforts to make Beula the seat of justice I am afraid our wishes will be frustrated—I have requested Mr. Jones, whom I expect you have seen before this time, to wait on such gentlemen as are interested in our neighborhood, to endeavour to prevent if possible, the bill from passing the senate this session—No time can be lost—I wish you would therefore exert all your influence, by writing to such of the members as are likely to favor us. I think a small matter may cause postponement till next session—by this time we shall be better able to combat our opponents, who have taken the advantage this year after my departure from Lancaster. Could you procure letters from some influential characters to Gurney and Jones it might be of service—Johnson in the Senate is one of our great adversaries on account of interest in another quarter. I am confident the lines cannot be altered to our wishes this year—all that can be done therefore is to prevent the bill from passing both houses.

The Dr. is come to the city and it is expected Mr. Moore will follow him—all the mischief that can be done they will do. The vengeance of the former is levelled against poor me. There is no bound to his malignity and vanity. . . . 15

The high moral standards and ideals of Reverend Rhees, which he endeavoured to impose on his community, finally brought him in open conflict with the stern realities and hardships of frontier life. His altruistic motives and activities were misunderstood and resented. A strong feeling of enmity arose against him, and his character and integrity were unmercifully assailed. He feared this as he wrote from Somerset, May 10, 1801:

I am aware that every means will be used to frustrate the population of our part of the country—There is a combination of enemies from within and without—which calls for an immediate cooperation of the proprietors of land in the vicinity of Beula, to prevent if possible their effecting the end of their wishes. Something must be done, or our settlements are undone for a long season—I have withstood, as long as I could, the torrent of opposition and slanderous reproach which has been poured on

15 Ibid.
my head—The losses I sustained are greater than I wish to calculate. My health is impaired and every feeling of the soul harrowed by a perverse and crooked generation.

One effort more and then, if I do not overcome the Philistines they must conquer me. I hope to be in the city in the course of a fortnight to endeavour, with the proprietors of land in our community, to form some plan of mutual defense and vigorous operations for our common welfare. . . .

Several of our settlers returned to Philadelphia—others are going to westward—a Mr. Lloyd, one of our ministers, is now travelling in quest of a better country. He is likely to do us considerable injury—I had given him 50 acres of land in fee and all the encouragement in my power—but since our road has been opened and the travellers become numerous—himself and others have been seized with a kind of mania for migrating to some paradise where they may live without work—There remain however a few who are still attached to my interest and who are willing to make any sacrifice in their power to support our settlement. . . .

I have spent till I have run myself deeply in debt—and thus you well know is the worst of diseases to cure—I shall be under the necessity of coming to some arrangements with you respecting our contract—for my enemies and yours have taken care to publish that the land is mortgaged and that I can give no title—on this account particularly I wish to put you in possession of the whole once more—that I may be able to encounter our foes with better weapons. Something should be done in the building line otherwise Beula will fall into disgrace and be more likely to lose the seat of justice, which I think if we can only push our improvements and population a little this summer will be secured for us next winter. . . .

I receive letters from the old country which is in a general ferment for migrating hither—it will now depend upon the proprietors of the soil about Beula to say whether it shall be settled immediately or remain a wilderness perhaps for another century—perhaps 50 acres out of every tract or patent would secure the object. . . .

With much energy Reverend Rhees, with the help of Dr. Rush, organized an association of landowners who agreed to donate the land necessary to extend the lines of Beula, in order to secure for it the seat of justice. Also extensive advertisements were printed,

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featuring the advantages of the community, which attracted many new settlers. The situation of the settlement assumed a more favorable aspect. Then Reverend Rhees wrote again from Beula, September 17, 1801:

Since my arrival yesterday I have seen several of the settlers but none of the late comers—I am informed some of them are very well satisfied with their situation; others are gone away with great disgust owing perhaps to the reports of some traitors which still remain in the settlement. The fable of the dog in the manger is very applicable to some men. It is a consolation however that our population will increase considerably this year, notwithstanding their snarling. We are much indebted to a few faithful and persevering men and the time will come when I trust they will be noted for their integrity.—In the mean time I must request the favor of 50 acres to one of them who has already commenced improvements on it agreeable to the advertisements. For another, who keeps a tavern in town, and has been exceedingly zealous and useful I wish the privileges of taking up 50 acres without being obligated immediately to live on it.—Also the gift of a few out lots to residents in the town—an equal number of acres to be bestowed by each of us—considering the calumnies gone abroad, the roughness of the place and the difficulties of making a solid impression, extraordinary exertions and encouragements are necessary. . . .

I have not the least doubt but the efforts made last spring and the effects produced by the printed advertisements, secured to the landholders the speedy settlement of this country, which was at that period, likely to be deserted.—It was my intention to remain here this fall to superintend the workmen in erecting chimneys and which I hope will be completed before winter—I have about 40,000 bricks ready for that purpose. . . .

Money! Money! if the love of it is the root of all evil, the want of it to a man of business, is the great devil. I have been hard run and was it not for the office, which I twice refused, I should soon run ashore without bread for my family.

Debt! Debt! the worst disease in the world!—cure me once of this malady Doctor, and I promise never to be afflicted with it again. . . .

The ways of God which are equally mysterious in the wilderness as in the ocean, are not known till often trav-
elled, and even then, like the Hebrew alphabet, must always be read backwards...\textsuperscript{17}

To impress the legislature in Lancaster of the importance of Beula and its claim for the seat of justice, strenuous exertions were made to increase the population, improvements, and the sales of land. However, the Ebensburg faction was not idle. It brought every influence to bear in support of its claim, and cast printed aspersions on Reverend Rhees, inducing him to write that "the malignity of our enemies is unbounded." He wrote from Somerset, June 2, 1802:

The increase of settlers is considerable. Knowing you to be desirous of information respecting our proceedings in Beula, I send you the advertisements for the sale of land, lots, etc.—My object is to collect a little money to go on with improvements, pay my debts, etc. Another good effect I think the sale will have is to increase the number of interested persons in our favor next season of the legislature.—Now is the time to make exertions.

I think it would have a very good effect if Richard Rush would pay us a visit soon.—You see by the tenor of the advertisements that you are as much interested as myself. Should it be in your power to prevail any of your friends to purchase a few in and out lots it would confer an obligation on me—for sell some property I must—or be disgraced. I know you will do all you can for me. "A friend in need is a friend indeed."\textsuperscript{18}

In another letter from Somerset, December 11, 1802, Reverend Rhees wrote:

Mr. Jones is now on the way to Lancaster in order to attend the interests in behalf of Beula, at the Legislature. We have endeavoured to procure a small subscription for his support there—I think something may be done.

Unless the case is very urgent I do not expect to attend.—Having spent all the money I could spare to pay the workmen at Beula my finances will not permit me leaving home.—Besides having attended the Legislature for three successive years, it may be more prudent not to appear there this season.—Have written to several members and

\textsuperscript{17} Benjamin Rush Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.

\textsuperscript{18} Benjamin Rush Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.
shall continue to correspond with some of them during their sitting. It would be well for you to write to as many as you have acquaintance with in both houses. . . .

The seven years of continuous struggle for the glory of Beula were now rapidly reaching their crisis. The achievement of the dreams and hopes of Reverend Rhees appeared to be approaching fulfillment. His last letter was written from Somerset on March 21, 1804:

It appears to me like an age, since I have heard from you. It may be partly my fault—I have some news which I think will give satisfaction. At length our new County has passed both houses of the Legislature. The lines nearly as we wished them. Beula will at least, fall as nigh the centre, as the law requires the seat of justice to be fixed. The county is called Cambria. The Governor to appoint commissioners to receive proposals from proprietors of land, etc., within of or of the centre of it, and to fix on the spot most eligible in their opinion and report to the next Legislature. The strength of parties will now [be] tried on the ground of Liberality. I am sorry it will not be in my power to give much, unless what has already been in the acquisition of books and the lots given to the Managers of the Seminary, etc., be taken into consideration.

I shall however go as far as possible, in assisting to erect the public buildings—as I expect this will be a great desideratum with the people.—From Dr. Rush it would be cruel to ask much. He may, however, assist in forming a plan, and making arrangements to secure success—An idea has struck me that, there are a great number of gentlemen in Philadelphia who have lands around us, and others who have purchased lots, for books, etc., in Beula that they should be applied to, for some trifling donation, on condition that Beula should be established as the seat of Justice. The proprietors of lots in the town I think would be induced to give something rather than sacrifice what trifle they have given which will certainly be the case should another town be established in its vicinity. The donation may be made, either in money towards the erection of the public buildings or in books, apparatus, etc., to the Seminary—or as the citizens of Philadelphia may think, that the County itself should erect their public

10 Benjamin Rush Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.
buildings, etc.—Whatever they give would perhaps be as well apply'd towards the Seminary. . .

When you have reflected on the subject I shall be happy to know your opinion.—Perhaps Mr. Jones may assist you in putting some plans in execution. I have delivered a list of names for the commissioners to the Governor when this winter at Lancaster, from whence I should have written to you, only I wished to wait the event of the bills finally passing—While there I was able to make some alterations in the law which are favorable.

This week it was my intention to have been at Beula but Mrs. R. being ill and myself indisposed—It is our intention to spend a great part of next summer there with my family. Was it not for the necessity of procuring subsistence and of endeavoring gradually to discharge my debts—we should not tarry a day here for neither the society or the climate of this place suits the mind or the constitution. . . 20

On December 7, 1804, Reverend Morgan J. Rhees died suddenly in Somerset, a sacrifice on the altar of devotion to the establishment of an ideal community. His death was also the death knell of Beula. Bereft of his humanitarian and dominant personality, the fortunes of Beula declined. The political powers of Ebensburg immediately succeeded in having bills passed by the Pennsylvania legislature, and in securing the seat of justice for their own town. Beula became isolated, its main highways were diverted, and the inhabitants lost all faith and hope in the future of the settlement. Lured by adventure, freedom, and more productive lands in other parts of the western wilderness, the inhabitants fled one by one, abandoning all their improvements to the ravages of time, and Beula went into rapid decay. Beula is today but a subconscious memory of a hoped-for Utopia, and a tragic casualty on the high road of progress and growth of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

20 Ibid.