

THE GERMAN PRESS IN PENNSYLVANIA AND THE  
AMERICAN REVOLUTION\*

By JOHN JOSEPH STOUDT, Haverford College, 1933

George Washington Academic Prize Contest for German and American students—First Prize—1932. *Sponsored by The United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, The German Club, Das Deutsche Literarische Verien, and other groups.*

*To the American people there comes with each succeeding anniversary celebration a fuller appreciation of the leadership of men like Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson in the movement for American Independence. These men and their colleagues are the fixed stars of the Colonial heavens. Sometimes however, it seems as if the sheer brilliance of this galaxy blinds us to the existence of others of smaller magnitude and we fail to see them. In this paper I wish to chart a constellation of German printers in Pennsylvania and to assume the duties of the astronomer in describing their influence upon their countrymen.*

The German newspapers in Pennsylvania of the pre-Revolutionary period naturally fall into two groups: those of the Saur family of Germantown and those of their competitors.

The basis for this division is found in the two groups of religious denominations among the Germans in Pennsylvania: the "sects" and the "church people". To appreciate the importance of this classification one must understand the religious background of the Pennsylvania Germans. Religion was a vital force in their lives and they practised a simple piety. The Germans

---

\* Published with the permission of Dr. Ernst Carrell and the Hon. Sol Bloom, Director of the George Washington Bicentennial Commission.

evolved in "Penn's holy experiment" a "practical live-and-let-live Protestantism." The "sects" were less liberal in their beliefs than the "church people". They held that conversion was a personal experience, that legal procedure was wrong, that higher education was unnecessary, that an educated clergy was obsolete, that forms and rituals were worldly, and that the only reasonable attitude towards war was non-resistance. To this group belonged the Amish, the Dunkards, the Mennonites, and the Schwenkfeldians. The "church people" believed in higher education, in a simple ritual, in the moral obligation to hold office, in an educated clergy, in organized charity, in formal legal procedure, and in military service when necessary. To this group belonged the Lutheran and the Reformed. The Moravians were betwixt and between—on the side of the sects with certain issues and on the side of the church people with others.

It is obvious that this difference in ideals would give rise to two different political points of view. On the questions of military service and affirmation these German sects held views similar to those of the Quakers. In fact, some historians go so far as to say that the Quakers were spiritual descendants of Menno Simons. Nevertheless, similar views drew the two sectarian groups together and a political alliance grew up between them. The Quakers had a tender regard for the religious scruples of these German sects. They granted them all the liberties which they themselves enjoyed. This concession was, however, not without a purpose for in this way the Quakers were able to control the Assembly. In a letter written by Dr. William Smith, the provost of the Philadelphia Academy, we are informed that the Quakers succeeded in manipulating the German vote so as to elect Assemblymen favorable to their views. Isaac Sharpless, late President of Haverford College, in his book *Quakerism and*

*Politics*, says that the German peace denominations were committed to the Quaker principles

largely through the influence of Christopher Saur, the Dunkard printer of Germantown, who by means of his almanacs, newspapers, and other German publications, had secured a wide acquaintance and influence among them.

Christopher Saur's paper, *Der Hoch-Deutsch Pennsylvanische Geschicht-Schreiber: oder Sammlung Wichtiger Nachrichten aus dem Natur- und Kirchen-Reich*, ran from 1739 to 1777. This paper was issued by its founder till his death in 1758, when his son, Christopher II., took it over. He continued it until the first years of the Revolutionary war when he was in turn followed by his two sons, Christopher III. and Peter.

This paper was undoubtedly the most influential German journal of the early Colonial period. Its purpose was not merely to give news, for in the publisher's address to the readers in the first issue he assures them that he does not intend publishing this paper merely to give news. He says that he is printing it in order that the most important stories and occurrences may create deeper impressions and more fervent meditation. This moral purpose made the paper almost a religious sheet and gave it additional weight in aligning the German sectarians with the Quakers in Provincial politics.

From the newspaper of Christopher Saur we cannot find adequate proof that he either favored or opposed the War for Independence. Only five issues are extant for the war period. In a poem printed in his calendar for 1778 we find his "sentiments" regarding the American Revolution expressed. It is entitled "*Anrede eines nachdenkenden Americaners an seiner Mitbuerger*". It runs in part as follows:

Thou once so happy land, by God and nature blest,  
 And teeming with abundant joy;  
 But now, alas, by sin and wrong and vice opprest,  
 Thou seemst to wither and to die.

Oh land! What art thou now? A scene of dismal woes,  
Which bring forth pity and a thousand tears;  
Oppressed by rapine, murder, and a thousand foes  
Unknown in many bygone years.  
Now desolation, hunger, want stalk in the wake  
Of the avenger's bloody steel!

\* \* \* \* \*

Earth's pregnant fields lie waste—untouched by hands  
Who filled them without strife—  
Unwilling they grasp the sword and dash into the fight.  
What misery haunts this life!

For the greater part of the British occupation of Philadelphia Christopher II. was inside the British lines. A short time after his return to Germantown a company of Americans under McClean surrounded his home and arrested him. He was detained for several days near Valley Forge and finally was released upon an order of General Washington at the intercession of General Muhlenberg.

It was during the period of the British occupation of Philadelphia that the two sons of Christopher II. published the old paper under a new name: *Der Pennsylvanische Staats-Courier*. They made it a rabid and coarse Tory paper. The issue for February 18, 1778, contains a bitter attack on the patriots. The article declared that, if in a country bankrupt merchants (Robert Morris) became state counselors and a dismissed postmaster (Benjamin Franklin) an ambassador to a royal court, the outlook was indeed dangerous. But, if the ministers of the gospel (Muhlenberg and Weyburg) became political market-criers and prescribed remedies for the State, these evils united and increased. The paper was partly intended for the Hessians in Philadelphia. Surely the patriots did not allow the sheet to circulate where they were in control. It had therefore a small circulation and a still smaller influence. When the British evacuated Philadelphia the sons fled to St. Johns, New Brunswick, where they

published the *Royal Gazette*. When the American army entered the city the goods of both father and sons were confiscated and sold by the patriots.

It is difficult to determine the exact attitude of Christopher Saur II. with regard to the American Revolution. He was an orthodox Dunkard, and as such he was opposed to war. External evidence would lead us to believe that he was sympathetic with the British. Whether the father was forced to suffer because of his sons, or because of his own actions, it is hard to say. Modern historians think that Christopher II. took a churlish attitude—one that was not even manly for a non-resistant to assume. The fact does remain, however, that the contemporary patriotic Americans considered all of the Saur's "unfriendly" to the cause of "Independency."

Saur's papers had succeeded where others failed. They had a continuous existence for thirty-eight years. They were the recognized organs of the German sectarians and they had no real competitors in their field. Their influence extended even among the non-sectarians, for as early as 1754 Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg in a letter to Benjamin Franklin deploras the influence which Saur was wielding over the Lutheran and the Reformed by means of his paper. He declares that despite all efforts to undermine this influence, Saur still maintained the advantage, turning the Germans against their clergy and against everybody who endeavored to reduce them to order in church and state affairs.

But the German peace denominations were now no longer the majority of the Germans in Pennsylvania. The migration of these sects had practically ceased by 1725. The new waves of Germans were Lutheran, Reformed, and Moravian. In the early years this group had no particular interest in politics for they were busy winning their farms from the forest and estab-

lishing schools and churches. They were unorganized politically. With the appearance of educated leaders their status soon was changed. Such men as John Philip Boehm, Count Nicolas Zinzendorf, Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg, and Michael Schlatter were leaders in the awakening of these groups. They made them conscious of their strength.

Just as it was natural for the peace sects to form a political alliance with the Quakers so the church people were led by affinity and necessity into the liberal party. Their religious beliefs coincided very nearly with those of the Scotch-Irish Calvinists on the one hand and the English Puritans on the other. They had no objections of conscience to military service. In fact, many of them had borne arms in the Fatherland. Neither did they refuse to take oaths. Then, too, their social conditions led them into the liberal party. These new Germans were not descendants of persons who owed any loyalty to a British crown; they did not hold their lands in fief from a royal house; they did not come from families which had been in favor at court for generations. These men were pioneers—men who had conquered a wilderness and its savage inhabitants, and men who now claimed as their own the battlefields on which their victory had come.

In 1756, when the disgusted Quakers withdrew from the Provincial Assembly and the liberal Germans rose in power, the seed of the American Revolution as far as this province is concerned was sown. The new political alliance of the English Whigs, the Scotch-Irish, and the German church-people was in truth a combination hard to defeat. Under the leadership of the cunning Benjamin Franklin this coalition was whipped into line. New stars appeared like meteors in the Provincial sky. Such names as Joseph Galloway, James Wilson, Robert Morris, John Dickinson, and Thomas Paine superseded those of the old Quaker guard.

Benjamin Franklin, prophet that he was, had seen the result very early. He constantly attempted to organize the German non-sectarians behind this phalanx of Scotch-Irish and Puritans. As early as 1732, he had attempted a liberal German newspaper but without success. Between the years 1749 and 1762 Franklin, or his associates in the printing business, attempted five other German newspapers and it was in coöperation with the *Deutsche Gesellschaft* that these were attempted. But all of them were short-lived and of little influence. They were poorly edited and their German was woefully and wonderfully made. The times were not yet ripe for the establishment of a German non-sectarian journal. Besides the Franklin and the Saur papers two other attempts were made at the printing of German newspapers but both of them ran only for a short time.

When John Heinrich Miller began to publish *Der Wöchentliche Philadelphische Staatsbote* on the 18th of January, 1762, the sectarian journal of the Dunkard Saur at last found a dangerous competitor. Heinrich Miller was a man of wide experience in the printing business and he was possessed of a thorough knowledge of the mechanical side of the trade. He had served his apprenticeship under Brandmueller in Basel. After twenty years service as a journeyman—during which period he wandered all over Western Europe—he came to America with Zinzendorf in 1741. The next year he accompanied the Count on his first visit to the Indians. Soon thereafter he went back to Marianborn to establish the first Moravian printing press. In 1751, he came to America the second time and after a brief attempt at printing in Bethlehem he went to Philadelphia where he worked for Saur, Bradford, and Franklin. In 1752, he printed a German newspaper in Lancaster in company with one S. Holland and with the backing of Benjamin Franklin. In 1754, he returned to Germany

and three years later he was in London publishing at the request of the commander a newspaper for the 14,000 Hessians then quartered there. In 1760, he came to America for the last time and started a printing establishment of his own.

Direct evidence is lacking to prove that Benjamin Franklin was the financial backer of the *Staatsbote*. Circumstances would lead us to believe that he was at least its spiritual father. During a part of his second visit to America, Miller had worked in Franklin's shop as the supervisor of his German printing, and Miller was in London from 1757 to 1761—the same time as Franklin. We cannot help speculating that the sullen and defeated candidate for the Assembly urged Miller to come to America and publish a liberal German newspaper for those "boors" who had defeated him.

Heinrich Miller was a man well qualified to become the German champion of American Independence. He had worked at his trade in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, England, Scotland, Ireland, and the Colonies and this wide experience gave him an international outlook—an outlook so necessary in that fermenting period. His experience with the Hessians in London undoubtedly gave him an insight into British policy. His mental make-up was essentially and basically liberal—he was an uncompromising idealist. Both by his logic and by his humor did he convince. In these respects he was far the superior of the younger Saur who had spent all his life among the narrow sectarians of Provincial Pennsylvania.

With the passing of the Stamp Act the struggle between the Colonies and the mother country assumed larger proportions. In the *Staatsbote* for April 2, 1765, Miller first mentions the act. He says that it is "rumored" that such an act is contemplated. When Miller announced that the act was to go into effect on the first day of November, 1765, he rememberably added:

The great Lisbon earthquake also occurred on All-Saint's Day! After this he often attacked the act in his sheet. On the 28th of October of the same year he sorrowfully notified his readers that he would have to suspend publication of his celebrated paper unless a way could be discovered to avoid paying the hated tax. In the lower right hand corner of this issue he printed a skull-and-cross-bones with the caption:

Dis ist der Platz  
fuer  
Der Todespein  
Erregender Staempel

Three days later he published an *Abscheids Geschenk*. On the 18th of November the *Staatsbote* re-appeared on unstamped paper. When the news of the Stamp Act reached Philadelphia, Miller gleefully published it.

For a short time thereafter Miller was irenic and conciliatory. He was, however, convinced that if Parliament exercised the Colonies to the utmost, disastrous consequences would follow. He was not yet quite prepared to advocate strenuous measures. His tone was decidedly bitter, to be sure, but he sought a peaceful solution. He was insistent upon what he called "colonial rights." He defended William Pitt—with whom he most likely was acquainted—and printed in large type the words of the Great Commoner:

Ich freue mich dass Amerika sich widersetzt hat.

In the same issue he translates a couplet from Matthew Prior's *An English Padlock*:

Be to her virtues very kind;  
Be to her faults a little blind;

into

Ihre Fehler uebersetzt  
Ihre Tugenden erhoelt.

Miller along with many of the patriots finally was driven to the conclusion that Great Britain had ulterior

motives in respect to her policy in America. He thought that the repeal of the Stamp Act was only a temporary conciliatory measure preceding harsher acts in the future. Soon after the repeal Miller published the following:

Es ist wie gesagt wird, ein Plan in ueberlegung ein billige und leichte Landtax in alle Brittischen Provinzen in Nord Amerika einzufuehren, welche, ohne die Unterthanen in Noth zu bringen, die letzte Wiederrufung der Stampel Act mehr als ersetzten wird.

To this he added:

Es ist zu hoffen dass dieser Plan mit der Staampeley gleiches Schicksal haben werde.

Not only did Miller fall in line with the movements in the colonies seeking closer union but he became their German champion. He rendered "The Sons of Freedom" into "*Die Soehne Der Freiheit*" and used it as a collective term to describe the patriots. He sends forth that clarion call:

Durch Zusammenhalten stehen wir,  
Durch Trennung fallen wir.

United we stand! Divided we fall!

The events which crowded the period between the repeal of the Stamp Act and the first rumblings of war were duly recorded by Miller. He constantly emphasized the injustice of England. After the closing of the port of Boston he printed accounts of meetings held in the various Pennsylvania Counties to decide what action should be taken. In 1774 through a pamphlet he appeals to the people of Philadelphia and vicinity to suspend all business on the first day of June to show their sympathy for the Bostonians. It soon became evident to Miller that the mother country would not institute reform measures. He was beginning to believe that resistance was the only alternative. From the year 1775 on there is a decided tone for armed resistance.

The whole Continental atmosphere now was charged

with the electric spark of war. The *Staatsbote* was exceptionally outspoken along these lines, saying:

Es ist die Schuldigkeit eines jedem in dieser Provinz, sich gegen dieses Ministerialische vernehmen vorzubereiten, um auf stuendliche Anzeige fertig zu sein, den Congress zu verteidigen.

The phrase *um auf stuendliche Anzeige fertig zu sein* was a translation of *the Minute Men*. In the middle of March the English printer, William Bradford, published a clarion call to arms summing up all the vital issues of the hour. It was translated into German by Miller and printed in his paper. This firebrand was hurled among the Germans from Maine to Georgia. In this same year he published a pamphlet addressed to the Germans of New York and North Carolina informing them what their kinsmen in Pennsylvania were doing for the cause of the patriots. Miller considered the speech which Pitt delivered on the 20th of June, 1775, so important that he published it in German and offered it as a premium to those who paid their subscriptions within one year.

To the *Staatsbote* belongs the honor of having been the first newspaper in America to announce the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. In the largest type which his small shop could muster Miller announced:

Gestern hat der Achtbare Congress diesen vesten Landes die Vereinigten Colonien freye und unabhaengige Staaten erklaret!

In the issue for July 9, 1776, Miller gives us the best account of the public reading of the Declaration in Philadelphia. He ends it as follows:

After the reading of the Declaration three cheers were given, with the cry, "God bless the Free States of North America". To this sentiment every true friend of these colonies can and will say. Amen!

It is in this issue also that the *first* translation of the Declaration is to be found. One year later Miller gives

us a graphic account of the first anniversary of American Independence. He comments:

So must the fourth of July, that glorious and unforgettable day, be celebrated throughout all America by the sons of freedom from one generation till another, til the end of time, Amen! Amen!!

Miller enthusiastically championed the cause of American Independence. He printed unusually long accounts of the Acts of Continental Congress. He also printed accounts of what the Pennsylvania Germans were doing in the cause of American Independence. He lauds the company of old men in Reading, which contained eighty Germans more than forty years of age and whose leader was ninety-seven years old. He praises the other companies of German militia and laments the circumstances compelling them to take up arms in defense of their new-found liberty.

In the issue for January 15, 1777, Miller prints the following Washington acrostic both in English and in German:

Witness, ye sons of tyranny's black womb,  
And see his Excellence victorious come!  
Serene, majestic, see he gains the field!  
His heart is tender while his arms are steel'd.  
Intent on virtue and her cause so fair,  
Now treats his captive with a parents care!  
Greatness of soul his very action shows,  
Thus virtue from celestial bounty flows.  
Our George, by heav'n, destined to command.  
Now strike the British yoke with prosp'rous hand!

Miller was one of the most confident of optimists. He could encourage in the darkest hour. While the British threatened Philadelphia he laments that his helper has left him but he rejoices that he has gone into the army. When the British finally did occupy the city Miller was forced to leave. During this period we lose sight of him, but we do know that he printed some pamphlets addressed to the Germans by Continental Congress on borrowed presses in Lancaster and York.

Miller's field of journalism was taken over by Franz Bailey of Lancaster who published for the period of the occupation *Das Pennsylvanische Zeitungsblatt*. In his almanac for 1778, Bailey first called Washington *Das Landes Vaters*. His paper contained war news almost exclusively, and in a general way it continued the policy of Miller's *Staatsbote*. A survey of the complete files of his paper would lead us to believe that Miller translated many of the proclamations which both Congress and the Army addressed to the country. The editor, however, did not have the fire and the zeal that we know to be Heinrich Miller.

Miller returned to Philadelphia on the heels of the happy American Army and upon his arrival he found his presses in very bad shape. He says in a letter printed in another newspaper that General Howe presented the presses to Christopher Saur II, on the belief that *Benjamin Franklin was the backer of the Staatsbote*. Even though Miller was content to continue the publication of his celebrated newspaper, times were bad and he worked under the difficulty of a broken spirit. He was approaching eighty and he rightly concluded that he deserved a retirement. So after a touching farewell to his readers he retired from his life-long business on the 29th of May, 1779, going to the quiet and peace of the Moravian settlement in Bethlehem where he died in 1782. His apprentices, Steiner and Cist, continued the policies of their master's paper till the turn of the century.

The size of the reading constituency of the *Staatsbote* is hard to estimate accurately, but the list of agents which Miller gives several times shows that it must have had a wide circulation. Not only did these agents live in the German counties of Pennsylvania, but also in Nova Scotia, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the West Indies. The list of subscribers

to the paper is no longer available, but its circulation may be conservatively estimated at 6500. For those days a constituency extending to all sections of the colonies was unusual! It speaks for the intelligence of the Germans and the calibre of the paper.

What the editor of the *Staatsbote* aimed at is likewise a matter of historical record. The goal which was uppermost in his mind was the infusion of a truly democratic spirit in his German readers. For the fulfillment of this purpose he found the ground already well-prepared; the liberal Germans were ready tinder for Miller's firebrand.

The direct influence of the *Staatsbote* upon the Germans in America cannot be definitely charted. But the part played by the Germans in the sensational drama of freedom is not a matter of conjecture. It is a matter of historical record, for they were a determining factor in the American Revolution.

The liberal Germans were most assuredly not behind in the movement for American Independence. In fact, just the opposite is the truth, for there are many cases on record where they were the leaders in this movement. The Germans of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, anticipated the Declaration of Independence by thirteen months. In May, 1775, they offered a resolution in which they said that the colonies *ought to be* absolved from their British allegiance. It may be a mere coincidence but in the early part of that year, it will be remembered, Miller printed a pamphlet addressed to the Germans of New York and *North Carolina* telling them what the Germans in Pennsylvania were doing in the cause of American Independence. In his paper Miller prints an account of these resolutions. In the State of Pennsylvania the Germans organized companies of militia *before 1774*, and were drilling to meet any emergency. In the city of Reading where Miller's sheet had a wide circulation there were four such companies.

It was the representatives of the Germans in Pennsylvania's Provincial Assembly who turned the tide in that province for Independence.

The Germans displayed their patriotic—or as some writers have called it, “rebellious”—spirit in other ways as well. On the 15th of February, 1775, Pastor Helmuth of the Lutheran Church in Lancaster writes that the whole land (he means county) was preparing for war, nearly every man was armed, and the enthusiasm was simply indescribable. If one hundred men were asked for, he continues, far more offered themselves and were angry if they were not taken. In other counties as well was the same spirit manifest, for in a letter to Germany Christopher Schultz, the Schwenkfeld preacher, writes:

Since the first blood was shed by the British you cannot believe what a flame of war spirit like a lightning stroke has set on fire this land. All are armed and in full battle array. In the cities even the little boys form companies and conduct military exercises.

Among the first troops to arrive at Cambridge were companies from York, Lancaster, Berks, and Northampton who had marched five hundred miles to reach their destination. These were soon followed by the Germans from Maryland and Virginia, the latter under Colonel Morgan. As the editors of the *Pennsylvania Archives* say:

The patriotism of Pennsylvania was evinced in the haste with which the companies of Col. Thompson's battallion were filled to overflowing, and the promptitude with which they took up their march to Boston.

The hard life of the frontier not only made the Germans good soldiers but it made them still better fighters. It was a company of Germans who turned the tide at Saratoga—thus making the French Alliance a fact. The Germans from the hills were Morgan's reliance at Cowpens. One writer has said that

Long Island was the Thermopylæ of the American Revolution, and the Pennsylvania Germans were its Spartans.

He forgot to add that Colonel Kichlein was its Leonidas. It was the Germans of Colonel Seigfried's command who covered the rear for Washington's greatest military feat—the advance on Trenton and Princeton. The Germans were the mainstay of General Sullivan on his famous expedition. A British soldier, writing soon after the middle of the war and who is as unbiased a source as we can hope to find, says that the Pennsylvania Germans were

shirt-tail men with their cursed twisted guns—the most fatal widow-orphan-makers in the world.

But it was not in military service alone that the Pennsylvania Germans did their bit, amazing as that "bit" may be. No other country was so situated as the middle counties of Pennsylvania to supply the Continental Army with food and ammunition. This region was the pivot around which all of the battles of the middle states revolved. Its rich valleys were the granary for Washington's little army. The City of Reading was its principle storehouse. Morse's *School Geography*, published in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, in 1789, says:

It was from farms cultivated by these men that the American and French armies were chiefly fed with bread during the late rebellion, and it was from the produce of these farms that the millions of dollars were attained which laid the foundation of the Bank of North America, and which clothed and fed the American Army till the glorious peace of Paris.

The writer, had he been interested, might also have added that their furnaces and forges were an important source of ammunition for the army and that the gun-makers of Berks and Old Northampton were the best of their trade.

Then, too, the Germans in America contributed to the glamorous personnel of the American Revolution. Michael Hillegas was the first treasurer of Continental

Congress. General Herkimer (Hersheimer) was the hero of bloody Oriskany, the battle that made Saratoga a victory. Christopher Ludwig was the baker-general of the Continental Army. But to the Germans of Virginia goes the undisputed honor of giving to the American Revolution—and to the American people for that matter—that inspirational leader, the fighting parson, General Peter Muhlenberg.

Bancroft says that while the Germans in America were only one-twelfth of the population, nevertheless, they constituted *one-eighth* of the Continental Army. And it must be remembered that at least one-fourth of them were members of non-resistant sects.

Albert B. Faust in his *German Element in the United States* says that the German Newspapers were an *important instrument* in producing these results.

In the final analysis the positive influence of the German press in Pennsylvania on the American Revolution resolves itself almost wholly to that of one paper: *Der Wöchentliche Philadelphische Staatsbote* of Henry Miller, printer. This paper was the medium of expression for the German liberals in the complex maneuverings preceding the American Revolution.

*The American people are thankful for the unselfish services of the leaders in the movement for American Independence. It is a part of our debt to the past for these men are the fixed stars of the Colonial heavens. But among the stars of lesser magnitude there is one star that shines with a constantly increasing brilliancy. That star is John Heinrich Miller: the German Champion of American Independence.*

*In a simple grave he rests in the peaceful quiet of the Moravian burial ground at Bethlehem. His work is finished. Ours has just begun.*