

UP FRONT

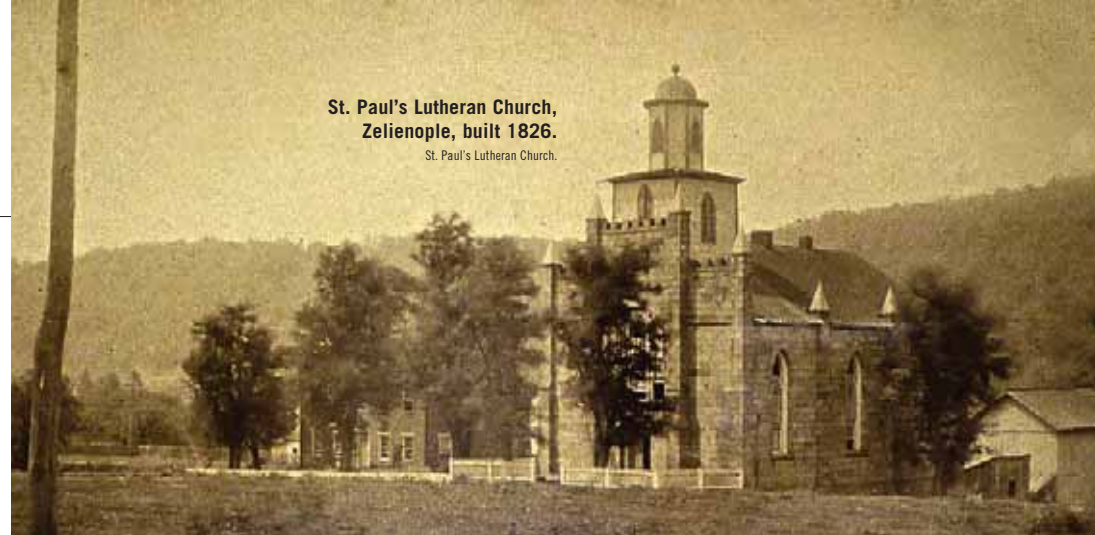


ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Harmony Meetinghouse

It is a general rule that rural churches are humbler than those found in cities, but in the case of the Mennonite meetinghouse in Harmony, Butler County, its simplicity was a conscious choice. Mennonites are named for Menno Simons (1496-1561), a Dutch priest who left the Catholic Church during the Reformation in the mid-16th century and preached baptism of adults or “believer’s baptism,” rather than infant baptism. His followers emphasize peace, justice, community, service, and mutual aid. The believers multiplied particularly in Switzerland and Germany, where most of Pennsylvania’s Mennonites came from originally.¹ When the growing Mennonite population in Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, needed new farmland, a blacksmith named Abraham Ziegler bought 9,000 acres surrounding the village of Harmony in 1815 from the Harmonists Society. With the



St. Paul's Lutheran Church,
Zelienople, built 1826.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church.



Harmony Mennonite
cemetery adjacent
to meetinghouse,
dates from 1815.

help of fellow Mennonites who Ziegler paid with farmland, they opened the cemetery and 10 years later built the Harmony meetinghouse.²

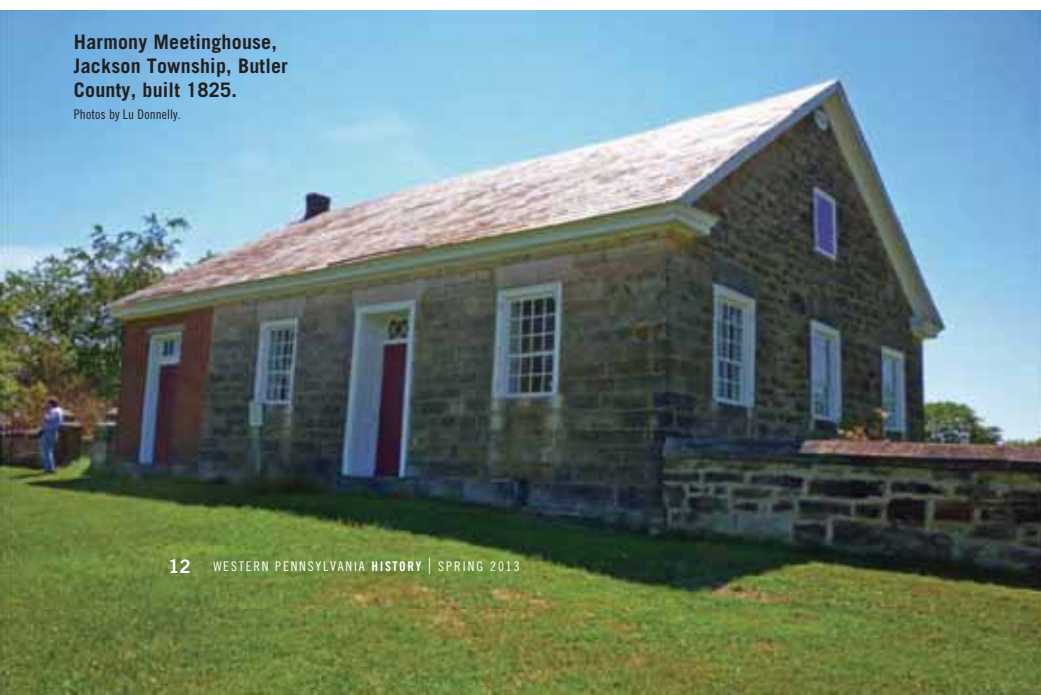
If one contrasts the meetinghouse with St. Paul's Lutheran Church one mile to the southwest and built only a year later (1826), it is clear that a more elaborate church was possible.³ At St. Paul's the plans were generated by John Henry Hopkins from an English pattern book, and included such early Gothic Revival ornament as battlements and a square bell-tower. The Mennonite meetinghouse, on

the other hand, is a simple stone and brick, gable-roofed building with tiered benches for the congregants. It has no need of battlements or stained glass windows. Instead, the meetinghouse reflects one of the basic tenets of the Mennonite faith: the simple life is better. Adherents believe that a church does not need a soaring tower to proclaim Christ's presence; it simply needs a sturdy roof and a dignified pulpit. Mennonites in the 19th century generally chose to live in rural areas since farming was their primary skill, but also because life away from the industrializing cities was simpler. While there are subtle touches of ornament in the meetinghouse, such as the diamond panes in the transoms and the chevron pattern on the doors, it merely reinforces that the builders were capable of more elaborate embellishment if they had been asked to do so by their clients.⁴

This meetinghouse, while plain, is anything but simplistic. It is said to be the oldest remaining meetinghouse west of the Alleghenies, and is an integral part of the region's rich Germanic heritage. Unlike the Amish who refuse many modern conveniences, most Mennonites are active in their surrounding communities. And so, when Ziegler found he needed workers to

Harmony Meetinghouse,
Jackson Township, Butler
County, built 1825.

Photos by Lu Donnelly.





Washington County Historical Society and the LeMoyne House

operate some of the Harmonist industries he had purchased in 1815, he recruited non-Mennonites to the village as well as fellow religionists. Over the years, through intermarriage and the pull of other denominations, the Harmony Mennonite congregation dwindled. They closed the meetinghouse for regular worship in 1902, and only occasionally have held reunion services there. It and the surrounding cemetery are now owned and operated by Historic Harmony.⁵

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010), a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

¹ The first Mennonites came to eastern Pennsylvania in the early 1700s, and settled in Berks County c. 1720 (<http://hereford.pa.us.mennonite.net/Home/Mennonites>).

² The Harmonists, a communal and celibate sect, built the village of Harmony between 1805 and 1815 and founded several successful industries there. The group of more than 800 moved to what they thought would be a better site for distributing their goods on the Wabash River in southern Indiana in 1815 and sold 9,000 acres around Harmony to the Mennonites. They ultimately returned to Economy in Beaver County, Pennsylvania, in 1824. The cemetery dates from 1815 and the meetinghouse from 1825, with a c. 1830 addition.

³ For more information on John Henry Hopkins and his church designs, see: "John Henry Hopkins, Early Gothic Revivalist," *Western Pennsylvania History* (Summer 2011), 14-17. St. Paul's is located at 215 North Main Street in Zelienople, southwest Butler County.

⁴ The initial success of the Harmony Mennonite congregation is indicated by the almost immediate expansion of the meetinghouse; a brick addition was added before 1830.

⁵ Shelby Miller Ruch, *Harmony* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing Co., 2009), 8, 9, 27, 29.

Reader's Reply: We received an interesting note from Bruce Evans regarding last issue's column:

I very much enjoyed "Carnegie's Braemar Cottage" in the recent issue of *Western Pennsylvania History*. It is the best description I have read about Andrew Carnegie's association with Cresson, Pa. I have a question about the statement that, after his mother's death, Carnegie "left Cresson and never returned." In 1940 my parents purchased from the heirs of Mary Thaw the summer residence (known as Elmhurst) of Mary Thaw located about a mile west of Cresson. Mary Thaw, as you may know, was the widow of William Thaw (a 19th-century Pittsburgh industrialist) and the mother of Harry K. Thaw. The large main house, which was my home for more than 20 years, was built in the 1890s or early 1900s. I recall a story I heard as a child about a visit of Andrew Carnegie to Elmhurst. He slept in a guest room on the second floor (which was the room one of my brothers and I occupied years later). After he left, someone discovered that a fine mechanical clock was missing from the room. Although all agreed that "Mr. Carnegie" would not have taken the clock, it could not be found and was an unsolved mystery. Several months later, when the house was being prepared to be closed for the winter, someone discovered a rolled up shirt on a shelf in the walk-in closet in the bathroom adjacent to the guest room. The shirt was wrapped around the missing clock (presumably to reduce the sound of the clock), and embroidered on one of the cuffs of the shirt were the initials "A.C." I cannot be certain that the story is accurate, but, if it is, then Mr. Carnegie did return to Cresson after he left in 1886.

- The Washington County Historical Society (WCHS) is located in the historic LeMoyne House, about 30 miles southwest of Pittsburgh at 49 East Maiden Street, Washington, PA, near the campus of Washington & Jefferson College. Over the course of 2012, the WCHS celebrated the 200th anniversary of this historically significant residence.

- The LeMoyne House, a National Historic Landmark and Pennsylvania's first National Historic Landmark of the Underground Railroad, was built in downtown Washington in 1812 by Dr. John Julius LeMoyne, a Parisian doctor who immigrated to the United States. He was the father of Dr. Francis Julius LeMoyne (1798-1879), a staunch abolitionist. The home was a center of anti-slavery activity in southwestern Pennsylvania from the 1830s through the end of slavery.



- The WCHS also operates the Washington County Frontier History Center, which includes the Washington Park Log Cabin, a stockade, blockhouse, half-faced camp, three-sided barn, Indian camp, and a blacksmith shop.
- The WCHS provides research facilities, exhibits, and public programs relating to the county's history. Included within the library and archive holdings are various birth, marriage, orphan's court, and death records, plus registered deeds, wills, and extensive genealogical holdings.

For additional information please visit www.wchspa.org or contact the WCHS at wchspa@verizon.net or (724) 225-6740.

The History Center Affiliates Program, HCAP, is a membership-based network that allows local and regional historical societies and museums access to museum professionals and best practice standards through the Senator John Heinz History Center.

To find out more about HCAP or to apply for membership for your organization, please contact Robert O. Stakeley, Educator, at rostakeley@heinzhistorycenter.org or 412-454-6359.