

# Earliest Reformed Church in Lancaster County.

---

The early history of Lancaster county gathers around its ancient churches. In colonial days, far more than at present, the church was the centre of social life; and those who would study that life in its more recent developments should not fail to do justice to one of the most important of its constituent elements.

In presenting a paper, which I have entitled, "The Earliest Reformed Church in Lancaster County," it may be said that the general subject has received considerable attention. The Rev. Dr. Henry Harbaugh led the way; but several pastors have followed in his steps by preparing excellent monographs concerning their respective charges. In the Library of the Historical Society of the Reformed Church there are two large volumes of ancient documents—gathered by Drs. Mayer and Harbaugh—which consist in great measure of correspondence between the pioneers of the Reformed Church in this country and the authorities of the church of Holland, who, in those early days, exercised paternal care over the infant churches in America. These papers have been frequently investigated, with the result that the outlines of early Reformed history have been satisfactorily drawn. It was known, however, for many years, that the greater part of this correspondence had remained in the Fatherland; and it was, therefore, with peculiar pleasure that we learned, several years ago, that a number of Americans were engaged in examining and transcribing the ecclesiastical archives of Holland.

Among these investigators the Rev. William J. Hinke, of Philadelphia, was peculiarly successful; and it is due to his untiring research that new light has been cast on the beginnings of the Reformed Church in Lancaster county. In our present paper we shall quote freely from his excellent articles, published during the present year in several religious periodicals.

On a tablet in front of the First Reformed Church on Orange street, in this city, we have all read the inscription: "Founded in 1736." That this is the correct date of the erection of the earliest church-building is abundantly attested by congregational records; but for the origin of the congregation itself we must go back a little further. It may, we know, be accepted as a rule that the building of a church implies the previous existence of a congregation; and, indeed, in most instances, the incipient congregation requires some time to become sufficiently consolidated to venture upon the important enterprise of building a church. It is, indeed, on record that, as early as 1733, the Reformed congregation in Lancaster was already in existence. When it is remembered that the town was laid out in 1730, these dates indicate a very respectable antiquity; but it is now evident that there was an earlier church in the country, not very far away, which the Reformed people of this neighborhood attended before the founding of the town.

In early records there are frequent reference to a church called "Conestoga," or "the Hill Church." It was always mentioned with respect as the earliest Reformed Church in all this region. No such church is known at present, and it is evident that it must have ceased to exist at a very early period. Concerning this church we have now a good deal of information; but, to understand its peculiar position and relations, it is necessary to

refer briefly to certain preliminary events.

The earliest settlements of the Germans in Pennsylvania may be said, in a general way, to have been made in two districts, which were then regarded as separate and distinct. The first of these was included in the counties of Philadelphia and Bucks. It comprised, besides the city of Philadelphia, a great part of the territory which is now included in the counties of Bucks, Montgomery, Northampton, Lehigh and Berks. The second district was a portion of Chester county, extending indefinitely westward from the Octopara. Even after the organization of Conestoga township, in 1718, a much more extensive region was popularly known as "Conestoga." In the eastern district the members of the Reformed and Lutheran Churches were in the majority, but in "Conestoga" they were comparatively few in number, though it is known that there were some of them in this region from the time of the earliest settlement.

If the earliest settlers had been accompanied across the sea by their European pastors, it is possible that Reformed Churches might have been immediately established, but the people were left without leaders and had to meet the religious situation as best they could. Indeed, it must be confessed that, apart from the organization by Hollanders, in 1710, of several small congregations in Bucks county, and the arrival in the same year of an eccentric Swiss clergyman, who seems to have accomplished nothing, we have no knowledge that the Reformed Church of Pennsylvania enjoyed any pastoral oversight or instruction during the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

After waiting long for regular pastors, the people began to take matters into their own hands. They built school houses, and persuaded the

schoolmasters, or other intelligent persons, to conduct worship, and to read printed sermons on Sundays. They did not regard this as a satisfactory arrangement, but it was the best they could do; and who can blame them?

In Montgomery county there was an excellent schoolmaster, whose name was John Philip Boehm. He was not very highly educated, but had, in earlier life, conducted the Reformed parochial school in the city of Worms, in Germany, and had served in the same capacity elsewhere. His father had been a minister, and he knew exactly how a Reformed Church ought to be conducted. Having emigrated to America in 1720, his talents and personal excellence were soon recognized, and three incipient congregations, Falkner Swamp, Skippack, and White Marsh, besought him to become their pastor. He hesitated long, because he had not been ordained; but, at last, after serving for several years as a "reader," he yielded to the importunities of the people, and in 1725 assumed the pastoral office.

The Reformed people of Conestoga were a little slower in effecting an organization. For several years their devotions had been led by a pious tailor, named John Conrad Tempelman. This man subsequently wrote a letter to the Synods of North and South Holland, in which he embodied his recollections of this early period. In his letter, dated February 13, 1733, there is a paragraph which is very important for our present purpose. He says: "The church in Canastota had its origin in the year 1725, with a small gathering in private houses, here and there, with the reading of a sermon, with singing and prayer, according to the German Reformed order, on all Sundays and holidays; but, for want of ministers, without the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper." Tempelman, at this time, declined to be chosen pas-

tor, preferring to remain a "reader," or evangelist, but he was finally ordained to the ministry, and, having removed to what is now Lebanon county, became the founder of a number of important churches.

When the Reformed people of Conestoga learned that Boehm had organized the churches of Philadelphia county, they invited him to perform a similar service in their behalf, and he acceded to their request. In a letter to the Classis of Amsterdam, dated January 14, 1739, he says: "This district of Cannestoga is very extensive. The first congregation which was gathered here I call 'Hill Church' (Bergkirch); it is situated in the center. I served it according to their call to come to them twice a year, for the first time in the year 1727, on the 15th of October, and there were present fifty-nine communicants, as this was the first time that a communion service had been celebrated in the Cannestoga valley." During the periods intervening between the semi-annual communion seasons, I suppose, Tempelman continued to act as reader.

The work which had begun so auspiciously was soon seriously disturbed. On the 18th of September, 1727, the Reverend George Michael Weiss arrived in America. He had in Europe been regularly ordained to the ministry of the Reformed Church, and was disposed to magnify his office. Having heard that Boehm was performing ministerial acts without ordination, he protested vigorously in word and deed. He wrote a letter, dated October 2, 1727, to George Schwab, "who had settled in Conestoga," went there some time afterwards, and "administered the Lord's supper to some who had come over the sea with him." Boehm says: "He drew the people over to him, but left them soon afterwards." In the meantime, however, Boehm had applied for regular ordina-

tion to the Classis of Amsterdam, in Holland. His request was granted, and by the authority of the Classis he was ordained by the Dutch Ministers of New York, on the 29th of January, 1730. The ground of Weiss' objections having thus been removed, he discontinued his visits to Conestoga. Boehm then proceeded to reorganize the congregation according to the instructions which he had received from the authorities of the church. "On the 30th of May, 1730," he says, "a large congregation gathered and requested to be organized according to the church-order approved by the Classis of Amsterdam. On this occasion there were 75 communicants."

Tempelman's letter, from which we have already quoted, contains the following interesting passage, referring to this period. "Afterwards," he says, "Rev. Boehm served them, at first voluntarily at their request, but later, after being regularly ordained, he administered baptism and communion for two years, although he lived twenty-one hours (63 miles) away from them, being satisfied with the voluntary offerings. He also established a church-order among them, and installed elders, elected by the congregation, and himself exercised a strict and careful supervision, whereby the congregation has been brought into good order."

Boehm's correspondence contains a passage, referring to his numerous missionary journeys, which is somewhat pathetic. He says, January 29, 1730: "In this service I have now labored to the best of my ability for four and a-half years, and during this whole time I can truthfully say I received rather less than above £20 (about \$100) as my salary for all my great labor and the neglect of my own work (on the farm). But, because of the many sects which slander a minister most fearfully for receiving a salary, I dare not say anything, nor on

account of the great poverty of most of my members. This has often brought tears from my eyes, when I was alone upon my long and difficult journeys, as I could hardly see how I could get along, for I have a wife and six children, four of whom are still young. My debts are continuously increasing, as I have to attend to my ministry and must leave my work undone. This is the reason that I cannot pay the interest, which may deprive me again of my land." It is pleasant to know that after all Boehm did not lose his land, but that by its rapid increase in value, he became possessed of a comfortable estate. It was, like Mercutio's wound, "not as deep as a well, not as wide as a church door, but it was enough—it would serve."

The "Conestoga" district was too extensive to be occupied by a single congregation. Tempelman tells us, in 1733: "The congregation in the Chanastoka, by reason of its growth, and the great distance between the members, has been divided into six preaching places. Three of these places are served by a Reformed minister, John Peter Miller, by whom also another strong congregation is served about seven hours (21 miles) distant, called Tulpehocken. But now on account of the division of the congregations they can no longer be served by Pastor Boehm, nor by the above named Miller, because of the great distance of the different places one from another, as also because of his (Boehm's) increased activity, and the heavy labor resting upon him." Tempelman enumerates the congregations in what he regards as Boehm's district, as follows:

"The first congregation numbered 55 members, with the following Elders: Rudolf Heller and Michael Albert.

"The second congregation numbered 51. The Elders were: Hans George Schwab, Johannes Goehr and Conrad Werns.

“The third congregation numbered 30. Their Elders were: Johann Jacob Hock and Andrew Halsbrun.”

Concerning the identification of these churches there is little difficulty. The first is, of course, “Conestoga.” Michael Albert is mentioned in Boehm’s correspondence as an elder of “the Hill Church,” as late as 1740. The second congregation was “Cocalico”—afterwards called Bethany, near Ephrata. The names of two of the aforesaid elders—Goehr and Werns—appear in the records of that congregation. The third congregation was Lancaster. John Jacob Hock—who is here mentioned as an elder—was afterwards chosen by the congregation as its first pastor. The record of the First Reformed Church of Lancaster says: “Now as regards the building of our church, the beginning was made in the year 1736, and by the help of God it was so far completed that on the 20th of June, Whitsunday, divine worship was held in it the first time. The reverend and pious John Jacob Hock was called as the regular pastor.” Hock was evidently a devout elder, who, in the absence of an ordained minister, was chosen to the ministry by the people, somewhat as Boehm had been called at the beginning of his work. In less than two years the name of Hock disappears from the records, and it is possible that, as soon as a regular minister could be secured, he retired to private life.

The three congregations which were served by Miller are provisionally identified by Prof. Hinke as Zeltenreich, Reyers (now Brickerville) and Muddy Creek. They were mere preaching places, and the actual organization may have been effected at a later date.

After this period the history of the Conestoga church becomes indistinct. No doubt it was greatly depleted by the organization of neighboring churches, especially by the building of



a church in Lancaster. After 1739 the Conestoga church was served at intervals by the Rev. J. B. Rieger, of Lancaster, but it had evidently ceased to be regarded as an important point. In that year Boehm reported that the congregations at Lancaster, Cocalico, and Hill worshipped in log buildings. In 1740 the Hill church offered to pay an annual salary of eight pounds and twenty-five bushels of oats for the services of a regular minister. In that year the elders were Lorentz Herschel Roth (probably Hergelroth), Michael Albert, Michael Weidler, and John Leyn (or Lein). In 1747 Michael Weidler was a delegate to Coetus (Synod), convened in Philadelphia, though in that year his pastor, the Rev. J. B. Rieger, is said to have served only two churches, "Erlentown" and Schaeffer's church, and "Conestoga" is not mentioned. In the following year, 1748, however, we find in the list of elders the name of John Lein, as representative from the latter congregation. His name is accompanied by a very extraordinary note. The record says: "John Lein, of the earliest congregation established in Cannastoka, on the 30th of May, 1730, where Pastor Rieger preaches." This seems to indicate that Mr. Lein was regarded as a sort of patriarch, and that the church which he represented was deemed worthy of special honor. On the same page we read that Nicholas Trewer was the representative from Lancaster, "the new town in Cannastoka." As the old church in Conestoga now disappears from the minutes, it is natural to suppose that the church in the new town had, to some extent, taken its place, and that soon afterwards regular services in the "Hill Church" were discontinued.

We now come to the consideration of the question: "Where was this church situated?" We have seen that it was undoubtedly the earliest Re-

formed Church in Lancaster county; it may, therefore, be interesting to determine its exact location.

It would seem at first sight as if Pastor Boehm had himself conclusively settled the question. He says in 1735: "These three congregations in Canastota are thus situated: Lancaster, towards the south; thence six miles to the Hill Church (Bergkirch), from which is six miles to Cocollica." The last named church, it will be remembered, was Bethany Church, near Ephrata.

Professor Hinke suggests that the only place which fulfilled these conditions of distance is Heller's Church, in Upper Leacock township, and that "the first church in Conestoga" must have stood on ground on which Heller's Church has since been erected. Against this identification several objections have been urged. It has been said that Heller's Church does not stand on a hill, and that Boehm could not, therefore, have called it the Hill Church. We are, however, informed by those who know the region well that the church is actually situated on high ground, and that from whatever direction it may be approached there is a gradual ascent. This fact may have impressed itself on Boehm's mind when he called it "the Hill Church." There is no indication that the name was ever adopted by the congregation.

Another objection has been urged on the ground of distance. It is actually six miles, or a little more, from Lancaster to "Heller's;" but the distance from the latter place to Bethany appears to be considerably greater. On this ground several other places have been suggested as better meeting the necessities of the case. "Kissel Hill," in Warwick township, has been mentioned; but there is no tradition of an early organization at that place. In that locality the Reformed people were never numerous, and it was not until

1823 that the Rev. Daniel Hertz organized them into a congregation.

Others have suggested that "Carpenter's meeting house," where Mr. Hertz sometimes preached, might have been the location of "the first congregation," as it is considerably nearer to Bethany than Heller's. This is, however, a mere supposition, and there is not the slightest reason to suppose that there was ever an organized Reformed congregation at that place.

We are, therefore, forced back to the consideration of the claim made in behalf of Heller's Church; and this on closer examination becomes strong, not to say irresistible. It is found that the distances, as given by Boehm, are more nearly correct than may be imagined. Any one may convince himself by a glance at a map of Lancaster county that the distance from Heller's to Bethany in a direct line is not much greater than it is from the former place to Lancaster. After all, when we remember the difficulties under which Pastor Boehm made his way through the wilderness from one settlement to another, it is not surprising if his subsequent estimates of distance should not always prove to be absolutely accurate.

The present congregation at Heller's was established by the Rev. Daniel Hertz, in 1830, on the basis of an earlier organization. There was at that time a small log church, which was occasionally opened for public worship, but no regular pastor had for a long time been stationed there. The Rev. D. W. Gerhard, the present pastor of the congregation, informs us in his "History of the New Holland charge," published in 1877, that "in the absence of a regular pastor the members frequently attended public worship at Lancaster, and generally received the communion there." The churchyard was, however, continuously used for burial purposes and the rights of the

Reformed Church in the possession of the property were carefully guarded.

When the church was rebuilt, in 1860, the members were not unmindful of their earlier history. On the corner-stone were engraved the words, "Founded about 1722." Mr. Gerhard, in his published history, reproduces a paper which was placed in this corner-stone, of which the following is an extract: "This congregation was founded in the year 1722, by a number of German Reformed fathers. Their first house was built in 1722, repaired in 1802, rebuilt and enlarged in 1838, by the same congregation." Concerning this statement Mr. Gerhard very properly remarks: "If the date which is here claimed for the founding of the church be correct there is probably no older Reformed congregation in this country." It now appears, in view of Tempelman's letter, that the date is a little too early; but it is certainly much more nearly correct than was supposed possible a few years ago. It shows, at least, that the tradition of the antiquity of the church remained unbroken.

From several documents in the possession of the congregation some interesting information may be derived. The earliest deed may possibly be lost, but there is a grant, dated February 11, 1743, from Philip Scot to John Line and Michael Weidler, of "two acres of land adjoining to Jacob Hiler's (Heller's) land, whereon the meeting-house now stands," for the use of the same church in Leacock. The consideration of eight shillings was paid by John Lyne "upon the account of the Meeting-house and burrying." The second deed is dated December 30, 1769. It was for two acres, given by James and Rebecca Scot to Michael Weidler, of Manheim township, "in trust, nevertheless, to and for the use and behoof of the Presbyterian or Reformed congregation in Leacock town-

ship and the adjoining townships, to and for the said Reformed congregation, to have and keep a House of Worship on the said premises, and also to and for the use of a burying-ground, forever hereafter, subject to the payment of quit-rent to the Chief Lord or Lords." The use of the word Presbyterian in this connection has no special significance. It was usual in those days to confound the two churches, or to regard them as identical.

The most interesting fact in these documents is the statement that John Line (otherwise written Lein, Leyn and Lyne) and Michael Weidler were the trustees of Heller's Church. It will be remembered that both these men were, in 1740, elders of the Hill, or Conestoga, church, and that Lein represented the church as a delegate to synod. That Weidler remained connected with Heller's Church there can be no doubt. He died July 23, 1770, and was buried in the churchyard adjacent to that church, where his tombstone may still be seen. He was a man of considerable wealth and social influence. John Lein, we believe, resided in Earl township, where he owned a farm. He once owned a house in Lancaster, but sold it in 1756. At the time of his death he was possessed of a large tract of land in Heidelberg township, now Lebanon county. He seems to have lived to a great age, but as he had a son who bore precisely the same name, it is possible that there may be some confusion.

The later history of Heller's Church, now officially known as Salem, does not fall within the scope of the present paper. It is, however, pleasant to observe that the congregation now occupies a beautiful building, and is in a prosperous condition.

The argument which we have presented is cumulative, but it is convincing. Consider it as we will, there is but one conclusion. The old Conestoga

Church passed out of history more than a century ago, but the line of historic descent was never entirely broken, and Heller's Church now occupies the site of the earliest Reformed Church in Lancaster county.

Author: Dubbs, J. H. (Joseph Henry), 1838-1910.

Title: Earliest Reformed Church in Lancaster County / by Rev. Joseph H. Dubbs, D.D.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Heller's Church--Pennsylvania--Lancaster County.  
Reformed Church--Pennsylvania--Lancaster County.  
Church buildings--Pennsylvania--Lancaster County.  
Conestoga (Pa. : Township)--History.  
Lancaster County (Pa.)--History--17th century.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1900/1901

Description: [3]-16 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 5, no. 1

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.5

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

=====

+++++

Institution Name  
Institution Address  
Institution Phone Number  
Institution E-mail Address