

This is the 5th time in the past eight months I have spoken to a group about Peter Muhlenberg, and I should explain why. Last summer, the History Detectives Program on PBS aired a segment on Peter Muhlenberg's robe. As I listened to it, my emotions ran from shock to a sickened disbelief! The inaccuracies and misconceptions left me feeling like something I deeply valued had been defamed. I began to reach out to my local history friends, and we are continuing to research Muhlenberg's activities here and to talk to groups about his incredible career.

Peter Muhlenberg spent his entire adult life in the spotlight, and we can only touch on some of his achievements. We can divide Muhlenberg's contributions into four phases.

First, Peter Muhlenberg became the first Virginia minister to preach to both Anglicans and Lutherans on a full-time basis, and his ministry was highly successful.

Second, Peter Muhlenberg used his success in the pulpit to urge his neighbors to fight for American freedom. His patriotism forced Muhlenberg to organize a regiment of Shenandoah Valley soldiers and led to the third stage - his accomplished military career. Finally, Muhlenberg returned to Pennsylvania where he became a member of the first U.S. House of Representatives and later a U.S. Senator.

What makes a great man great? Is it luck, timing, good genes, experiences? In Peter Muhlenberg's case, it seems genetics helped. Muhlenberg's grandfather was the free spirited Indian guide and interpreter - Col. Conrad Weiser. Weiser gave his grandson his gift for languages and diplomacy as well as his love of hunting and fishing, his keen eye and his skill on horseback.

Peter Muhlenberg's father is sometimes called the Founder of the Lutheran Church in America. He too was a talented diplomat, as well as a scholar, an organizer, and a patient teacher.

Peter Muhlenberg's experiences also molded his character. When he was seventeen, he went to Germany to study for Lutheran ordination. But his teachers didn't think the young man was cut out for the ministry, so they indentured him to a pharmacist to learn medicine. His master turned out to be a stingy charlatan who taught Muhlenberg how to be dirty, hungry, cold and verbally abused. Finally, Peter Muhlenberg found the local army recruiter and *ran away* with a German contingent of British soldiers heading for America. In other words, he got an inside view of the workings of a Hessian Regiment!

Rev. Henry Muhlenberg pulled some strings to get Peter out of the military, and we can only imagine the guilt trip he must have placed on his son. Soon the prodigal had become a preacher. Peter had returned to his studies, learned to preach in both English and German, received a license to preach from the Lutheran ministerium, found a church, and become a real success. But suddenly events in Virginia pulled him in a different direction.

In the late 1760's, the Virginia House of Burgesses realized the population in the Shenandoah Valley had grown so much it was overwhelming both the political and the religious institutions, so they organized a new county - Dunmore and a new parish - Beckford. Lord Dunmore was the Governor, and William Beckford was the Mayor of London.

By law, Virginia's established church was the Anglican Church or Church of England. Virginia was divided into parishes, and every taxpayer paid a tax - called a tithe to support the parish. The tithe was administered by a group of men called a vestry. The vestry had many duties, but mainly they hired a minister called a rector, and they supervised the church.

Beckford Parish had the largest congregation of German - speaking worshipers of any place in the Shenandoah Valley, and there were also plenty of Baptists, some Quakers and enough feisty Scots - Irish to alarm any government! These hard-working craftsmen and farmers weren't anxious for someone to reach into their pockets for a tithe to support an Anglican rector. Moreover, some of these groups already had their own churches.

For example, Jacob Miller, Woodstock's founder, had given the Lutherans two lots, and they already had a church building by 1767. But the Lutherans couldn't find a minister. As the Anglicans searched for a rector, they had no luck either. So the Anglicans made the Lutherans an offer. If the Lutherans could find someone to preach in both English and German, they would hire him - provided he would accept Anglican ordination. The Lutherans took their problem to Rev. Henry Muhlenberg, and he knew just the man for the job.

In the spring of 1772, Peter Muhlenberg sailed to London with his recommendations and a letter from the Beckford Parish Anglicans stating their intent to hire him. This letter was a requirement, and it must have satisfied the Bishop of London, because Peter Muhlenberg was ordained in the King's Chapel at St James. He may have taken time to buy an Anglican Prayer Book and a King James Bible. These two precious books belong to Woodstock's Emmanuel Episcopal Church and were on display a few months ago.

An Anglican rector was an important person in colonial Virginia. The rector worked closely with the vestry and other community leaders and was required by law to preach and teach throughout his parish. Muhlenberg bought a house in Woodstock across from the old courthouse. He also oversaw the construction of an Anglican, log church across from the new court house.

Peter Muhlenberg took his calling as a dual pastor very seriously. We know from his baptisms that he preached in the new Anglican Church in Woodstock and he preached to the Anglicans near Rude's Hill - outside Mt Jackson. This was his largest congregation of Anglicans. He crossed both forks of the Shenandoah River to reach an Anglican Chapel of Ease - perhaps two, in parts of the county that are now Warren and Page. For Lutherans, his circuit included Woodstock, Strasburg, Powell's Fort, the Hawksbill in present day Page, St Mary's Pine at Forestville, Rader's Church at Timberville, and perhaps Toms Brook. Moreover, Peter Muhlenberg was a hit in both languages. His strength and energy began to pay off, and his baptismal records included adults as well as their children - a sign that Muhlenberg was making converts, (tall and

well proportioned, knowledgeable, good delivery, clear voice, good diction, tenor, likeable, good sense of humor, could relate well, hunted and fished with his parishioners)

But the cloud of revolution interrupted Muhlenberg's ministry. When the British closed Boston Harbor, the Continental Congress asked local areas to form committees of safety to keep their people informed about British activities and to prepare for war. In Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley took the lead when the Anglican rector at Winchester, Charles Mynn Thruston, called an organizational meeting for the Frederick County Committee. The Frederick Committee of Safety passed eight resolves and elected Thruston as chair. Two weeks later, the Dunmore County Committee of Safety met and passed the same ones. Our committee was organized by our Anglican Rector, Peter Muhlenberg, and he was elected chairman. In Augusta County, the Anglican Rector, Alexander Balmain of Staunton, headed their committee.

Rev. Henry Muhlenberg did not approve of his son's actions. Peter's father was from Hanover - the German home of England's King George III. Rev. Henry was a staunch supporter of the king, and he thought a Lutheran minister should avoid politics in general. Most Lutheran ministers followed his lead.

In 1775, the Dunmore Committee of Safety continued its preparations for war. They took a militia census. The group prepared to collect gunpowder. Their secretary, Abraham Byrd, compiled a long list of Shenandoah households where the county was storing salt peter for the gunpowder.

Meanwhile, Peter Muhlenberg, Charles Mynn Thruston and Alexander Balmain attended the 2nd Revolutionary Convention in Richmond at St John's Church. There they heard Patrick Henry's famous speech.

In January 1776, Peter Muhlenberg attended the Virginia Convention as a Burgess from Dunmore County. The convention asked him to organize a regiment of soldiers in the Shenandoah Valley and gave him the rank of colonel. Other 8th Virginia officers were Lt. Col. Abraham Bowman and Major Peter Helvistine. Jacob Rinker was a lieutenant. Muhlenberg was specifically asked to direct his recruitment at the large German population in the Valley. Apparently, the convention expected Muhlenberg to recruit and organize while his experienced officers would train and lead. But Muhlenberg did it all. His recruitment netted men of all faiths and ethnic groups, and he proved a skillful commander.

So far, we have found no eye-witness accounts of Peter Muhlenberg's enlistment sermon. Our best rendition comes from an army surgeon, James Thatcher, who recorded the story in his diary. He based it on a dinner conversation he had with Muhlenberg, in 1778. Washington's officers were telling stories at dinner. After dinner, Thatcher returned to his room and wrote it down. According to the Thatcher version, "Muhlenberg entered the pulpit carrying his sword and cockade, preached his farewell sermon, and the next day marched at the head of his regiment to join the army." Other sources tell us that Muhlenberg chose a passage from Ecclesiastes as the basis for his sermon. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven... a time of war and a time of peace." Since Peter Muhlenberg enlisted a least 200 men for his new regiment, and since he generally preached in so many churches, it is probable that he gave his sermon at various places around his parish. As word spread from place to place,

crowds must have gathered to hear him. Given Muhlenberg's skill, he probably played on this anticipation.

Muhlenberg's great nephew, Henry A. Muhlenberg, described the event this way: (Colonel Muhlenberg) ascended the pulpit, his tall form arrayed in full uniform, over which his gown, the symbol of his holy calling, was thrown. After (telling the audience) the story of their sufferings and their wrongs, and telling them of the sacred character of the struggle in which he had unsheathed his sword... he said 'that in the words of the (Bible), there is a time for all things, a time to preach and a time to pray, but those times had passed away' and in a voice that re-echoed through the church like a trumpet-blast, 'that there was a time to fight, and that time had now come!'" "The sermon finished, he pronounced the benediction... Deliberately pulling off the gown, he stood before them a warrior: and descending from the pulpit, ordered the drums at the church door to beat for recruits."

Muhlenberg explained himself to his brother, Frederick, this way: "I am a clergyman, it is true, but I am a member of society as well as the poorest layman, and my liberty is as dear to me as to any man. Shall I then sit still and enjoy myself at home when the best blood of the continent is spilling? Heaven forbid it... I am called by my country in its defense - the cause is just and noble - were I a bishop, even a Lutheran one, I should obey without hesitation. I am convinced it is my duty, and duty I owe to God and my country.

In March, Col. Muhlenberg informed Governor Patrick Henry that his regiment was ready, and the 3rd stage of Muhlenberg's life began. Peter Muhlenberg and the 8th Virginia marched south and east to run the former governor, Dunmore, out of Virginia. Then they headed south to Charleston to discourage a British landing and continued through Georgia into Florida. The 8th Virginia, now sometimes called the German Regiment, gained its reputation. The soldiers followed orders, fought hard, didn't give up, and didn't run. But they also had many casualties. Some were killed or wounded, but most of them got sick in the swampy, coastal climate. Peter Muhlenberg developed a liver disease that bothered him the rest of his life. Major Helvistine also became sick and died at his home in Winchester. As the 8th Virginia headed north to join Washington, they were forced to stop *in* the Valley so Muhlenberg could recruit fresh troops and regain his health.

George Washington found Peter Muhlenberg so invaluable, he soon appointed him to his staff. Muhlenberg could size up a situation, plan a course of action and carry it out quickly. George Washington frequently paired Peter Muhlenberg and Mad Anthony Wayne. With a nickname like "Mad Anthony" you can guess Wayne was a brave commander. He and Muhlenberg were both all over the field. The best example of this was at Brandywine where Muhlenberg and Wayne were paired in the center. The two units had driven the enemy off the field and into the British camp when the American right ran out of bullets and fled. Muhlenberg's men remained on the field to cover Wayne's retreat and then began an orderly retreat themselves. As the fighting had become hotter, the Virginians had switched to bayonets, and they fought their way out with them just as they had fought their way in. They were the only unit to use bayonets which indicates the intensity of their involvement.

Peter Muhlenberg had been in the saddle for most of two nights and days and was exhausted. His horse came to a fence and both horse and rider were too tired to jump it. Suddenly, Muhlenberg was startled by the sound of a bullet whizzing past his face. He turned to see a British officer grabbing a rifle and yelling *shoot the officer on the white horse!* Peter Muhlenberg pulled out his pistol and shot the officer in the head although at some distance. He continued to lead his men some twenty miles to safety.

As Muhlenberg's reputation grew, so did the skill and confidence of the 8th Virginia. Muhlenberg became the general in charge of all the Virginia troops in Washington's army, and his regiment was consolidated with other units and renamed. But wherever our Shenandoah men went, they served with competence and bravery. No wonder their grandsons held with Stonewall Jackson at First Manassas and their several great-grandsons stormed the beaches at Normandy. Peter Muhlenberg tapped the patriotism and desire for freedom in his Virginia Germans, and his lessons were remembered even after he was forgotten.

Peter Muhlenberg finished his career as he had begun it with skill and efficiency, but with good humor and a sense of modesty. Ironically, he was known as the only member of Congress who never made a speech. He preferred to work quietly behind the scenes. Peter Muhlenberg has earned the bust we have placed here in his honor - although he was too modest to think so; and when we think of him, we should also think of our Shenandoah ancestors - the people who searched for moral leadership, the families who turned a wilderness into a breadbasket, and the men who gave us a long tradition of patriotism.