

PETER MUHLENBERG

Peter Muhlenberg makes me think about a great bridge - a strong and pliable structure that unites two places and makes life better for the people in each one. In order to understand just how important Peter Muhlenberg was, we must understand the politics and social structures in place in Dunmore County and Beckford Parish on the eve of the American Revolution. In the first half of the 18th Century, immigrants had begun to trickle into the Shenandoah Valley; and by the 1760's, this trickle had become a flood. But it was a many branched and very diverse flood. Settlers came from all directions, and they belonged to various ethnic groups. They practiced many different religions, or they believed in nothing at all. There were Welsh Quakers and Welsh Baptists. They were mixed in with English Anglicans, Scots-Irish Presbyterians, German and Swiss - Lutherans, Reformed, Mennonites and Sabbatarians. These many groups spoke various dialects and practiced some interesting folk customs. Imagine what the Mennonite parents said to each other, after the children were asleep, about their hard-drinking, ear-biting, fun-loving, emotional, Scots-Irish neighbors!

As the Virginia House of Burgesses calculated the build up of families in the Shenandoah Valley, they realized that both the county system and the religious institutions were overburdened, and they began to set up new counties and parishes. In the center of the Shenandoah Valley they initiated the organization of the new Dunmore County government. Early Virginia used the English system of counties and parishes. Each county was divided into districts, and each was represented by a justice. The justices met together to hear cases and set taxes. They worked with the sheriff and the church vestry to maintain order. They supervised the building and maintenance of a county court house and they assisted the clerk in production and collection of county records. Often the same men who served as justices were also called on as vestrymen and militia captains. As might be expected, the first justices were mostly of English descent. Many of them were from old Tidewater families.

But when it came to the formation of a parish vestry, things were more complicated. The Virginia government recognized the Anglican Church as the official church. All able Virginians paid a tax or tithe to support the Anglican Church. The tithe was set and administered by the church vestry. The vestry built chapels and churches and paid the rector, and others to read the lessons, preach and administer the sacraments. The parish provided the rector with a farm, called a glebe, so he could earn a living. Vestrymen had other duties. They were responsible for the maintenance of the local roads, and they were charged to see that orphans and indentures were cared for and educated. The vestry also oversaw the provisions for the poor. They formed the first welfare system in America. Vestrymen were expected to report those who failed to attend church or who practiced lewd or improper conduct to the justices for punishment. The first vestrymen in a new parish were appointed, but vestry elections were held after that. If parishioners thought their vestry was incompetent, they could call for an election. In an area where people lived close together, and where most of them were from the same ethnic group, the parish system was efficient. But how could the Virginia government form a cohesive parish administration for such a varied populace as ours?

Beckford Parish could boast the largest German-speaking population of any part of the Shenandoah Valley, and while the Germans practiced several different religions, they

could agree on one thing - they did not want to pay for ministers and church buildings that did not suit their needs. They also felt they deserved representatives on any body that reached into their pockets and took some of their money! This is where Peter Muhlenberg entered the picture.

The Germans and the English compromised. The English agreed to accept a minister of German descent if he could preach to them in English, and if he would travel to England and receive ordination as an Anglican. The German Lutherans would thus have their own minister, and the Anglicans would have someone too! As discussions continued, the German constituency contacted Henry Muhlenberg - the father of the Lutheran Church in America, and asked him if he could recommend such a person. Muhlenberg had been contemplating some similar schemes as ways to improve the status of Lutheran pastors, and he had just the man for the job. He recommended that the people of Beckford Parish interview his son - Peter Muhlenberg. In 1771, Peter Muhlenberg came to Woodstock for an interview and a sermon. We can guess he must have preached to both the Lutherans and the Anglicans. Peter Muhlenberg was already serving a congregation in New Jersey, and he was getting good reviews. But in April of 1772, Peter Muhlenberg received Anglican ordination in London, and by October, he was back in Woodstock where Jonathon Clark wrote in his diary that he heard Muhlenberg preach for the first time.

Peter Muhlenberg's vestry contained the German members Abraham Keller, John Wolfenberger, Jacob Holdman, Henry Fravel, Philip Hoofman and Frederick Sonner. With them were the English representatives: Burr Harrison; Joseph Pugh; Henry Nelson; John Tipton. Tipton and Pugh lived around Woodstock. Nelson lived on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River, and Burr Harrison lived near Mt Jackson. Pugh was from a Quaker Pennsylvania family, but he had married an Anglican widow and inherited a pew in the Anglican Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Burr Harrison was from an old Tidewater family. Henry Nelson also had deep Virginia roots. Each of these men represented a small group of Anglicans, but the group near Mt Jackson was probably the largest.

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 Rudes Hill outside Mt Jackson. He crossed both forks of the Shenandoah River to reach an Anglican Chapel of Ease - perhaps two, in the parts of our county that are now in Warren and in Page. For the Lutherans, his circuit included a Lutheran Church in Woodstock and one in Strasburg, along with a trip into present day Page County to the Hawksbill. He visited at St Mary's Pine at Forestville and at Rader's at Timberville and possibly at Toms Brook. Moreover, Peter Muhlenberg was a hit in both languages! Muhlenberg loved to hunt, and he and his parishioner - Tavernor Beale spent time together hunting and fishing. Beale and Harrison enjoyed Muhlenberg's pleasant nature and sense of humor. 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.

Had Muhlenberg continued in his ministry in Shenandoah County, he would still be remembered today because he led us in a path of cooperation and compromise. He became the bridge between those of the old guard and those of the new. His compromise allowed many capable men of German descent to break into local government, while he

also gave the Germans someone to articulate their needs and wishes to the English authorities. But we know Muhlenberg did not remain in his pulpit, and we know most of the rest of the story.

After the shots were fired at Lexington and Concord, the Continental Congress asked that local committees of safety form across America to plan for defense and to keep their people informed about additional confrontations with British troops. Peter Muhlenberg may have had some misgivings about his place in such activities, but he found a role model in the Anglican rector in Frederick Parish - Charles Mynn Thruston. Thruston was from an old Virginia family, and he had come to Winchester from Gloucester County. Thruston was also an ardent patriot. As Frederick County formed its Committee of Safety, Charles Mynn Thruston was in the middle of it, and was elected as its chairman. Following his example, Peter Muhlenberg participated in the first meeting of Dunmore County's Committee of Safety, and was also elected as chairman. When Henry Muhlenberg heard of his son's political participation, he was adamantly opposed. Daddy Muhlenberg was from the German principality of Hanover - the German home of England's King George. He was a staunch supporter of the King, and he thought Lutheran ministers should avoid politics in general.

Peter Muhlenberg tried to resign from his position as chairman, but the county's patriots would not let him. He wrote to his brother that his course was set. He would be a politician even if he did not choose to be one.

In their capacities as committee chairs, Muhlenberg and Thruston were in Williamsburg in March, 1775, when Patrick Henry made his emotional response to the closure of Boston Harbor. The speech must have had quite an effect on both men. Finally, January 12, 1776, the Virginia Convention instructed Peter Muhlenberg to raise a new regiment called the 8th Virginia. They hoped Muhlenberg could sway his German neighbors to enlist. Muhlenberg's officers were all of German extraction. Abraham Bowman served as its Colonel. Peter Helvestine was his Major. Jacob Rinker was one of the lieutenants. Later all these men would rise in rank. Not only did Muhlenberg's regiment draw in those hesitant Germans, but it appealed to the Tidewater English and the red-hot Scots Irish as well.

Peter Muhlenberg was one of the few Lutheran ministers to participate in the army's original organization. While some Lutheran ministers became chaplains or took up arms after the fighting began, they were reluctant to join in the lead-up to the war. In the Shenandoah Valley, all three Anglican rectors served on then- committees of safety. While Muhlenberg gathered together the 8th Virginia, Mynn Thruston also took an officer's position, while the Anglican rector from Staunton, Alexander Balmain became an army chaplain. These men broke the oath they had taken at ordination, and they could have been charged with treason and killed!

Muhlenberg's explanation to his brother Henry sounds like it might have been borrowed from Patrick Henry. "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. And even so far am I from thinking that I act wrong, I am convinced it is my duty so to do, and duty I owe to god and my country."

It is icing on the cake to say that the 8th Virginia served bravely and capably throughout the war, and that Peter Muhlenberg proved to be a very good soldier and commander. His flamboyance and courage, though valuable, are far less important than the spirit of cooperation he established for us. In his unique position, he could explain the Revolution to his fellow Germans, and he could verbalize their feelings as well. He found them a place at the table; he was the bridge. Later ministers took up his Lutheran ministry, and here *we* are - his Anglican children. We may still be small in numbers, but we are the inheritors of his legacy of cooperation.