

HISTORY OF EGYPT CHURCH

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History of Egypt Church by Charles R. Roberts & J. D. Schindel

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BY
CHARLES R. ROBERTS
AND
REV. J. D. SCHINDEL, D. D.

READ BEFORE THE LEHIGH COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ALLENTOWN, PENNA.
1908



EGYPT CHURCH

History of the Reformed Congregation of Egypt Church.

BY CHARLES RHOADS ROBERTS.

The Egypt Reformed congregation possesses a documentary history which runs back one hundred and seventy-four years, making it the oldest Reformed congregation in Lehigh county, the Great Swamp congregation, of Lower Milford township, coming second. The year 1733 has generally been accepted as the date of its organization, but we have no proof of the correctness of this date. The accurate historian must depend upon documentary evidence to substantiate any statement he may make, and we have no such evidence as to when the congregation was organized. The majority of the first settlers in this immediate vicinity were natives of Switzerland and members of the Reformed church. It was natural, therefore, that upon their settlement here, they should organize a congregation of their own faith. It was in the year 1733 that the majority of the early settlers at Egypt arrived in America, and it may be that in this year an organization was effected. It was not, however, until July 1, 1734, that any land warrant was secured, when Jacob Köhler, who is supposed to have settled here about 1730, obtained a warrant for one hundred acres of land.

The principal source of information regarding this congregation is the old baptismal record, the oldest record book of a Reformed congregation in this county. It is a small volume bound in leather, with strips of buckskin serving instead of clasps. The earliest entry in this book is dated September 23, 1734, and was made by Rev. John Philip Boehm, recording the baptism of David, born July 27, 1734, a son of Peter Traxel. The sponsors were Nicholas Kern and his wife Mary Margaret Kern. The fact that Rev. Boehm made this entry in 1734 points to the existence of a congregation at that time, as it is doubtful whether he would have opened a baptismal record had there not been an organized congregation.

Boehm's report to the Holland Synod, written October 18, 1734, in the Dutch language, does not mention this congregation. He mentions, however, the needs of "Macungie, Maxatawny

and Great Swamp, where, notwithstanding their being scattered very far apart, yet a considerable number of people can come together." The name "Macungie," then included a large territory, and the inhabitants of this region, in a petition to the Court in 1752, for the erection of a new township, which was later called Whitehall, styled themselves, "residents of the back parts of Heidelberg and Macungie."

In the same report, in speaking of the district of the minister needed at Goshenhoppen, Boehm says: "He might conduct services there every three weeks, and use the rest of the time to feed the poor sheep at the end of the wilderness, in the above mentioned Saucon, Macungie, Maxatawny and Great Swamp, who thirst for the hearing of God's word as the dry earth for water. Many people from these regions have already been to see me in great sadness, and complained of the pitiable state of their souls. There were also some, who being able to make the journey, have come at various times to communion in the congregation entrusted to me at Falkner Swamp, a distance of certainly twenty-five to thirty English miles, and brought children for baptism, which journey, however, is impossible for old persons and weak women, so that it is not to be wondered at (especially when one remembers that there are children who for lack of a minister can not be brought to baptism until they are several years of age) that my heart breaks and my eyes are full of tears about this condition. But I can not accomplish this work alone, for my years are beginning to accumulate, and my poor body is also getting feeble, since I must not only make long journeys and preach, but also, because these poor people are not able to support me, I must support my large family with manual labor."

The second entry in the church book was made October 26, 1736, by John Henry Goetschius, recording the baptism of John, son of "the respectable Peter Traxel, church censor of the Reformed congregation here," and his wife Juliana Catharine Traxel. The sponsors were Nicholas Kern, John Egender and Margaret Egender. This is the first mention of a congregation here and also the first mention of Goetschius in the book. Directly above this entry he wrote: "Getauft durch H. Pfarrer Goetschi." As Goetschius did not arrive in America until 1735, this record could not have been made in 1733, as has been often stated.

It is in this year, 1736, that we find the first mention of the name, "Egypt," applied to this vicinity. On the title page of the record book of New Goshenhoppen, Goetschius states that he served the congregations at Skippack, Old Goshenhoppen, New Goshenhoppen, Swamp, Saucon, Egypt, Macedonia, Mosillem, Oley, Bern and Tulpehocken. Rev. Prof. William J. Hinke gives 1736 as the date when this inscription was written by Goetschius.

The third entry is in the handwriting of Goetschius, and is the baptism on July 27, 1737, of Peter Roth (the writer's great great grandfather), son of Daniel and Anna Margaret Roth. The sponsors were Peter Traxel, deacon of the Reformed congregation and his wife Juliana Catharine.

The fourth and fifth entries are dated March 22, 1739, when Goetschius baptized Anna Barbara, daughter of Abraham and Anna Margaret Wotring and Catharine Elizabeth, daughter of Michael and Eva Catharine Hoffman. The sponsors of the Wotring child were Ulrich Burghalter and his wife Anna Barbara, and of the Hoffman child, Peter Traxel and Catharine Elizabeth Kern, the wife of George Kern.

On this same day he wrote the inscription on the fly leaf of the baptismal record; viz. in Greek, "Nothing without writing;" in Latin, "All for the glory of God and the salvation of our souls;" and in German, "Baptismal Record of the Congregation on the Lehigh, in which are recorded the names of the children baptized, the names of their parents, and also the names of their sponsors. Commenced March 22, 1739. J. Henricus Goetschius, M. (Minister). Helveticus Tigurius." (A Swiss of Zurich).² This date is corroborated by two eminent authorities. Prof. Wm. J. Hinke says: "The church record at Egypt has always been supposed to have been opened by Goetschius in 1733, but on closer examination the date turns out to be 1739." Rev. Dr. Joseph H. Dubbs says in "The Reformed Church in Pennsylvania"; "The inscriptions on the title pages of church records, which have led to so much misunderstanding, are easily explained. Goetschius found the books already in existence, containing a number of entries of baptism; but the first page was in each case unoccupied, and he took a boyish pleasure in putting his name there, sometimes adding a few sentences in Greek or Latin. The inscription at New Goschenhoppen was not written before 1736, though on the next following page there is the record of a baptism solemnized in 1731 by some earlier minister. The inscription at Egypt turns out to have been written in 1739, and the one at Great Swamp alone is legibly dated April 24, 1736."

This is precisely what happened at Egypt, for Rev. Boehm made the earliest entry in 1734, leaving several pages blank. Goetschius did not appear until 1736, when he baptized the second Traxel child. In 1737, he baptized the Roth child and in 1739 wrote the inscription on the fly-leaf.

These pioneer organizers of this congregation deserve more than passing mention. Peter Traxel, or Drachsel, and his wife Juliana Catharine, were natives of Switzerland and came to America in 1733, with two sons, Peter and Daniel. He settled

²These records, from 1734 to 1834, translated by the writer, will appear in the Sixth Series of Pennsylvania Archives.

at Egypt, where he appears to have been the most prominent of the church members, being mentioned as censor in 1736 and 1741, and as deacon in 1737 and 1741. A few years later he removed a few miles westward and secured large tracts of land along the Jordan creek, some of which is still owned by his descendants, one of whom is James Troxell, residing near the Iron Bridge.

Nicholas Kern, one of the earliest settlers of Whitehall township, owned large tracts of land near what is now Guthsville, which he sold in 1739 to Lawrence Guth, and removed to the site of Slatington.

Daniel Roth, a native of Switzerland, where he was born about 1703, came to America in 1733, and in 1737, settled at the Jordan at what is now Sherersville. He died in April, 1737, in the same hour in which his son Peter, baptized at Egypt on July 27th following, was born. This son became prominent as a Revolutionary patriot, and was the first President Judge of Northampton county. An elder son, Daniel, born in Switzerland in 1724, was the ancestor of many of the Roth families in Whitehall to-day.

Abraham Wotring was born July 11, 1700, and came to America in 1733, with his wife and four children. He died in 1752, leaving eight children to survive him.

Ulrich Burghalter, also from Switzerland, arrived in 1733, on the same ship with Abraham Wotring, accompanied by his wife and six children. He died in 1762. His only son, Peter Burghalter, was prominent in the Revolution, and is buried here at Egypt.

Michael Hoffman came to America in 1732, and settled along the Coplay creek. He died in 1786. John and Michael were his sons.

George Kern, in whose house the congregation often worshipped, arrived in this country in 1737, and bought land adjoining the Kohler and Burghalter families. He was the father of George Jacob Kern and Mrs. Philip Jacob Schreiber.

On April 16, 1739, Goetschius baptized Christian and Juliana Margaret Traxel, twin children of Peter and Juliana Catharine Traxel. The sponsors were Christian Brengel, Peter Traxel, Salome Gut, John Bertsch, Catharine Elizabeth Kern and Mary Margaret Newhard. On May 13, 1739, he baptized Jacob, son of Jacob Bricker and Catharine Eva, daughter of Clementz Arndt. These are the last of his entries in the book.

John Henry Goetschius, or Goetschi, was the son of Rev. Moritz Goetschius, of Saletz, Canton of Zurich, Switzerland. His father left Zurich on October 4, 1734, at the head of four hundred persons, including his wife and eight children, intending to go to the Carolinas. After many trials they arrived at Rotterdam, where the father was persuaded to change his destina-

tion to Pennsylvania and was promised a salary of 2,000 gulden, for the first year, to organize and superintend the churches of Pennsylvania. He accepted the offer and after a terrible voyage of three months, in which the passengers suffered greatly, they arrived at Philadelphia on May 29, 1735. On the arrival of the vessel, the elders of the Reformed congregation of Philadelphia came on board to greet him as their pastor. He was very ill, but responded heartily. The next day he was taken ashore to a house, but his wife and family remained on the ship. While carrying him up the stairs to a chamber on the second floor, he expired. On the third day after, he was buried in the churchyard of the principal Presbyterian church in Philadelphia with elaborate ceremonies.

His eldest son, John Henry, was then seventeen years old, and a student for the ministry. When the people saw the certificate of his studies, they were delighted, and insisted on his preaching. He was, therefore, as Rev. Dr. Good says, the boy preacher of the early Reformed. He preached to them every Sunday twice and had catechization twice. The first Sunday he preached at Philadelphia morning and evening, and after service he had catechization. On the second Sunday he preached at Skippack in the morning, then had catechization, and in the afternoon he had service and catechization at Old Goshenhoppen. On the third Sunday he preached at New Goshenhoppen and had catechization in the morning. In the afternoon he preached at Great Swamp, in Lehigh county, where was a large congregation. Here, at Great Swamp, he opened the church book on April 24, 1736.

Goetschius continued preaching until 1739, when he went to Bucks county and studied under Dorsius. On September 24, 1740, he paid a farewell visit to New Goshenhoppen and baptized eight children. Rev. Boehm says in his report in 1744, that Goetschius went to Long Island in October, 1740, where he was irregularly ordained by Revs. Dorsius, Tennant and Frelinghuysen in April, 1741. The classis of Amsterdam was very angry at this act of Dorsius in ordaining Goetschius, as he had no authority from them to do it, and he was censured. Goetschius was finally examined and ordained in 1748, when he became pastor at Hackensack, N. J. He died in 1774.

The next three entries in the book were probably written by Rev. Boehm, who preached here occasionally until his death in 1749. The first of these is dated June 12, 1739, and is the baptism of Anna Barbara, daughter of Martin and Sara Koehler. The sponsors were Barbara, wife of Ulrich Burghalter and Nicholas Saeger. On June 27, 1739, George, the son of Ulrich and Lucia Flielinger, was baptized. His sponsors were George Kern and Juliana, wife of Peter Traxel. The last of these three entries is the baptism on September 30, 1739, of John Peter