

Myths of Local History

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Debunking of history's cherished stories and idols has become a pastime with some writers of national reputation who are more brave than discreet. Good souls — sentimentalists, folk-lorists, chambers of commerce, and home town vigilance committees — usually cry out in anguish every time the debunkers go to work. Now there are times, of course, when legends serve an admirable purpose. Whether or not George Washington chopped down the cherry tree is unimportant; the lesson of his integrity is what counts. Historical inaccuracies or sheer fantasies which cannot be converted to moral instruction are a different matter. It is the purpose of this article to debunk a few tales which have a wide acceptance among our learned citizenry including the members of the Fourth Estate.

Tunnels always fascinate people; their mysterious depths have produced fantastic legends. At least two local "tunnels" deserve to be dug to substantiate the undying faith a small army of believers have in their existence. Local newspapermen have found the "tunnel" which connects the cellar of the Court House to the old "Leopard" inn cellar, now the Hotel King Douglas, near the corner of N. Duke and E. King streets, to be worth several columns of human interest material occasionally. The legend is that a tunnel was bored from the ancient inn to the Court House for safety in case of an Indian attack. It would seem more probable that the tunnel was a convenience to the straight-laced row-officeholders who needed periodic refreshment at the inn. Unfortunately, the tunnel never existed. The Court House was erected in the early 1850s, long after Indians ceased to be dangerous in the East. The vaulted cellars common to early taverns are the source of many tunnel legends.

Any sporting citizen can make a wager at the drop of a hat in Columbia on the existence of a tunnel leading from the Wright Mansion on Second Street down to the bank of the Susquehanna River, so widespread is the notion that the tunnel is there. It was alleged to have been used for aiding runaway slaves prior to the Civil War, and the usual story about the Indians has been heard too. Actually no tunnel ever existed in that location for a number of rather acceptable reasons. From an engineering viewpoint, the tunnel would have been virtually impossible, or at least,

impractical. As for the purpose of the tunnel, the Indian protection reason has been over-rated. The mansion itself was a stout fortress if the need had arisen. Earlier in this century, the distinguished late Columbia historian and one-time contractor, John Jay Wisler, Sr., made excavations to show no tunnel had ever existed, and that the mansion's cellar vault doubtless provided the clue for the legend. Later engineering studies by the Pennsylvania Railroad, whose tracks, along with the Reading and Columbia tracks, cross the "tunnel", confirmed the absence of any subterranean passageway. Anyone even slightly familiar with the history of Columbia and the "Underground Railroad" in the days of the Fugitive Slave Act knows that a tunnel to the Wright Mansion would have been completely unnecessary.

Other popular stories include things that were supposed to have happened in Lancaster but which did not actually occur here. Take, for example, the legend that Benjamin West painted his "The Death of Socrates" in Lancaster at the home of William Henry in 1749. If he did, he was a prodigy, because West was then eleven years old. We are told that Henry suggested to West that he paint the picture, but West did not know the story of Socrates. Then Henry reached into his library, according to Galt, to obtain for West **Plutarch's Lives**. Of course we know that **Plutarch's Lives** does not include Socrates. Moreover, the painting of Socrates was taken from Rollin's **Ancient History**.

Students writing term papers on local history have been known to state that the first court house in the center of Penn Square was constructed of logs. Their source was H. M. J. Klein's **Lancaster County Pennsylvania: A History**, published in 1924 by the Lewis Historical Publishing Company. Examination of page 328 of volume I reveals the startling fact that "the old log court house at Center Square, erected in 1730, was destroyed by fire in 1781." Happily for the historian, ample evidence and documentation exists—the journal of Witham Marshe, for example—to prove the first court house in the Square was built of brick, and that it was destroyed by fire 9 June 1784.

Signs erected by the Commonwealth have been the targets of eagle-eyed officials of the historical society. One such incident was the placement of Highway Dept. markers which informed visitors to Lancaster that the community was founded in 1721. The source of this bit of history was the late Colonel Henry Shoemaker of Harrisburg. The historical society's librarian, the late William Worner, promptly took issue with Col. Shoemaker, setting forth the facts that Lancaster County was erected in 1729, and Lancaster town was laid out in 1730. Col. Shoemaker's reason for the date of 1721 was that "in that year the first settlement of houses was made on the site of Lancaster," which ignored the documentary evidence that there wasn't the slightest nucleus of a town here in 1721. Eventually the signs were changed, and the most recent markers now credit our fair community with being "the oldest inland city" [sic]. One of Col. Shoemaker's lesser contributions to American history which has not gained much headway, fortunately, is his discovery that Manheim's Henry William Stiegel, who was born in Cologne, Germany, actually was a Hollander because his name was "Hendrik Willem Stiegel" on the ship list.

Chamber of Commerce leaflets distributed to Lancaster County visitors (today they are called tourists) a few years ago proclaimed the Ephrata Cloister to be a "Seventh Day Adventist" community despite the formation of that particular variety of the Adventist movement nearly a half-century after the demise of the Cloister. At no time did the Seventh Day Adventists have any connection with the Ephrata group. Nearly as inaccurate is the prevailing notion, held even among some historians, that the Ephrata Community was a Seventh Day Baptist organization. When the German Baptist Brethren, known also as "Dunkers" or "Dunker Brethren," landed in Pennsylvania in 1719 they looked to Peter Becker for spiritual leadership. The following year Johann Conrad Beissel arrived in Pennsylvania to become one of the "brethren" but a man of Beissel's personality and temperament was not about to become a "back bencher" in the Becker gathering. Before long Beissel disputed Becker's spiritual leadership, and they parted company, with Beissel leaving the fold. The radical element, that is to say, those brethren who sought more tangible and demonstrable evidences of mysticism and piety in their lives, followed Beissel, a matter toward which the Becker adherents took a dim view. Attempts were made to reconcile Beissel with the mainstream of Becker's Brethren, but Beissel would make no concessions, having "skimmed off" the activist part of the fellowship for himself. Eventually Beissel and his followers established the Ephrata Cloister. The only labels that label-conscious historians could put on the Ephrata Community would be "Beisselism" or "Beissel Brethren" or "Beissel Baptists" or some designation containing the name of its founder. The Cloister was unique; there were no other groups quite like it. It was unique solely because Beissel created it out of the theological storms which raged in his mind. During the years Beissel held the Cloister in his grasp—1732 to 1768—only the first seven years were ones of spiritual growth, the flowering of the Beissel "Idea." The next seven years saw the institutionalization of the Community with all the problems of human organization, along with the industrialization of the Cloister. A gradual decline in the Cloister began about 1745, hence, by the time of Beissel's death in 1768 the Community already had deteriorated greatly, too much for Beissel's scholarly, mild-mannered successor, John Peter Miller, to overcome. Miller acted as a "caretaker" for the Community until his death in 1796, after which married members of the Cloister living around the Cloister grounds took charge of the remaining brothers and sisters, all of whom were advanced in age and infirm. No attempt was made after Beissel's death to enlarge upon his efforts spiritually, and gradually the Community drifted away from the colorful regime of its founder. In 1809 several members of the "householders" obtained authority by an Act of the General Assembly to sell certain lands of the Cloister for the relief of surviving brothers and sisters. On 21 February 1814 the Cloister was incorporated as the German Religious Society of Seventh Day Baptists, and trustees then were given the authority to do what seemed necessary for the elderly survivors. It was at this late date that the small German Seventh Day Baptist sect entered the picture merely as official caretakers of the long-dead institution founded by Beissel. It must be remembered, too, the German Seventh Day Baptists are not the Seventh Day Baptist Church of English background found throughout the United States.

An arboreal myth which moves indignant tree-lovers to write letters to the editors of local newspapers concerns the age of the trees along the East Orange Street side of St. James's Episcopal Church and Churchyard. Towering over Orange Street, with trunks ready to "shoulder" oncoming motor traffic, the huges trees hover menacingly over the Hamilton Club like a Marxist prophet of doom. Brave albeit indiscreet souls occasionally suggest the trees might be replaced whereupon the tree-lovers make an editorial assault that puts our military establishment to shame. The trees, it is alleged, are two or three centuries old, which is rather a ripe old age and one inviting respect if not reverence. Actually, the trees were planted about 1855. We have photographs which show the sturdy saplings about 1875. We happen to be tree-lovers, too, but history must be objective! Trees cannot be enjoyed after they are cut down, so we would urge our date of 1855 be accepted until such time as the rings can be counted.

Other distortions of fact which travel the historical circuit include the Amish settlement of Lancaster County. One tour bus guide informs her tourist-passengers that "The Amish settled Lancaster County in the very early 1700s." Somewhere, someplace, people have gotten the impression Amish culture, because of the extremely old-style dress and customs, was the original European culture in Lancaster County. Actually, the Amish were among the "late-comers" of the German settlers, many of them not arriving in Lancaster County until the late 18th century or early 19th century.

Higher criticism of local historiography has resulted in some interesting debates, not least of which is the authenticity of Hans (or Christian?) Herr. But as long as local historians apply a critical sense to our history, we will have substantiated facts separated from the legends and myths, and we will have reinterpretations, new insights and reappraisals to publish!