

# David Bixler, Folk Artist

by Miriam E. Bixler

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David Bixler, folk artist, is a descendant of Christian Bixler, who with his brother, Peter, landed in Philadelphia from Bern, Switzerland in 1727. Christian settled in Lancaster County, Peter in what is now Lebanon County. Mrs. Earl C. Stauffer (Barbara Bixler), Ephrata R. D. #1 is a descendant of Christian and Mrs. Burnell Wagaman (Beverly Bixler), Landisville, is a descendant of Peter.

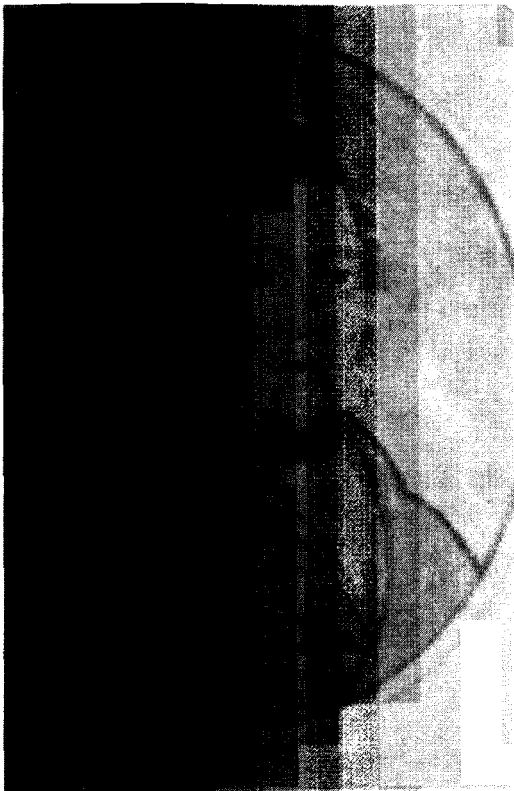
David's father, Abraham (d. 1847), owned a sawmill in Brecknock Township on Muddy Creek near Dry Tavern. At his death Peter B. Good turned it into a grist mill. The date stone at the residence of the mill site reads "Abraham Bixler and his wife built in 1822." He was a Justice of the Peace.

Absolam (d. 1884), David's brother, lived on the old homestead farm of his grandfather, Abraham Bixler, now occupied by Ammon Sauder, Denver R. D. #1. A deteriorating family graveyard is there. Absolam also was a Justice of the Peace as well as farmer, woodcarver, maker of gunstocks during the Civil War and potterer.

He often signed his pottery "A. Bixler" and worked in a little stone house on the property thought to be the original house. At a public sale of his goods over one hundred eighty planes were sold. A flower pot inscribed "Abs Bixler to his wife Sarah, 1834" is in the Titus C. Geesey Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A photograph of this is in an article "Pennsylvania Pioneer Pottery", *Spinning Wheels* October, 1953. The piece is described, "Redware with raised slip over molded decoration, impressed inscription."

Of David Bixler, farmer and folk artist, the late Walter Himmereich, antique dealer, remarked, "I know his stuff. It would often come up at sales."

David lived near Muddy Creek Post Office (Fivepointville), Brecknock Township. In 1963 the late R. Theodore Bixler visited the property which had recently been sold by John Witmer to Rufus Martin who is the present owner. Martin had built a new barn and was about to tear



Pencil sketch of Abraham Bixler.

down the old delapidated house, half of which was originally log cabin. Snapshots were taken. Neighbors then told that recently the place was "used as a junkyard run by a drunk."

One art reference states David's "known activity" as 1828 to 1848 but antique dealer Elwood L. Miller of Schaefferstown thought the lined paper used for a water color was not made until after 1850 and an auction bill by Bixler is dated 1862.

The late Jacob Burry, Ephrata antique dealer, said that Bixler was a working artist and known "not just for pretty." He did portraits, maps, auction bills, birth certificates, religious texts, flowers and was said to have incised the Lord's prayer on tinfoil the size of a dollar. Burry had seen the latter and declared it very valuable. He also recalled hearing the artist was noted for going into his garden, sketching his roses there, then going into the house to paint the sketch.

There are few references noting the art work of David Bixler. *Primitive Painters of America, 1750-1917* by Lipman and Winchester has a listing "David Bixler, Ephrata, Pa. 1830—Equestrian Portrait." The

editors did not know the source of the information when asked. Donald Shelley's article in *Pennsylvania German Folklore Society* "Fraktur Writing or Illuminated Manuscripts of Pennsylvania Germans" has a listing "Fraktur Illumination, specific examples seen by the author."

Henry S. Borneman, in *Pennsylvania German Illuminated Manuscripts* (Fraktur Schrifton) includes "David Bixler 1843" under "Penmen and Colorists," "Real Folk Art" which he had seen. Borneman signed the entries on three Taufschein owned by the rare book department of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

### Known Work of David Bixler

Two of David Bixler's efforts are owned by the writer. One is a water color of a stylized flower (rose?) on lined paper. It was bought from Elwood L. Miller, Town Hall Antique Shop, Schaefferstown in 1957. Miller's notes concerning the "sketch" told only that it was purchased at an antique sale conducted by "Jake" Burry at Ephrata that year. A signature is discernible (backwards) on the upper left hand corner of the piece.



Watercolor of a stylized flower by David Bixler.

Burry said "I think I might have bought it from Hattie Brunner (antiquarian) of Reinholds." The latter remembered selling some of Bixler's work but knew only that he was a local primitive who lived in Brecknock Township.

The second work owned by the writer is a pencil sketch of Abraham Bixler on which "Abraham Bixler" is printed in large letters and "Esq" done in script. This was bought of Ann and Clarence Wolf, Lancaster antique dealers, and is probably of David's father, the mill owner.



Watercolor and pencil - Equestrian Portrait in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg, Va.

Two other works are privately owned by an area collector. One is a signed, watercolored flower (tulip?) on lined paper and found in an old book. The other is an auction bill in water color which is listed in the above noted Shelley article.

The auction bill, brightly water colored, offers for sale the Diverler farm across the road from the artist's farm. It is signed, "David Bixler, April 28, 1862" and contains a drawing of the house and trees on the auctioned property of Jacob Deibler (Diverler). It is thought that the

paper piece could have been made for display at a tavern, perhaps Dry Tavern. It had been bought from Walter Himmelreich, antique dealer of Ronks R. D. #1 whose father had given it to him.

An inquiry to the late Mrs. Charles S. Conrad, Jr. two weeks ago resulted in the confirmation that she and her husband are the owners of a book once owned by David Bixler containing, on the fly leaf, a signed self portrait in pencil. Hubert Kauffman, Lititz book dealer, affirmed that it had been bought of him.

A letter in 1964 to Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg, Va. brought regrets of no information on David Bixler and a request that we share our information and make slides of our pieces for their files. This was done. A letter from them in 1975 requesting an updating on information also included a copy of a work they'd recently acquired. It is a watercolor and pencil of a prancing brown horse, the rider decked in blue coat, yellow pants and yellow hat with enormous red plume on it. Bought at the "Sussel Sale", it is not signed but attributed to David Bixler on the basis of its relationship to one owned by Winterthur.

Winterthur, in 1926, had bought an 1833 watercolor "Horseman" in blue and yellow uniform from a Bixler descendant, Isabella Carleton Wild. The rider's costume on this resembles the conventional military uniform of the day with its long blue coat, black top hat and pants. On its back is a twentieth century penciled inscription, "Made by David Bixler yr (sic) 1833 Ephrata/bought from his granddaughter in Ephrata/ in 1926."

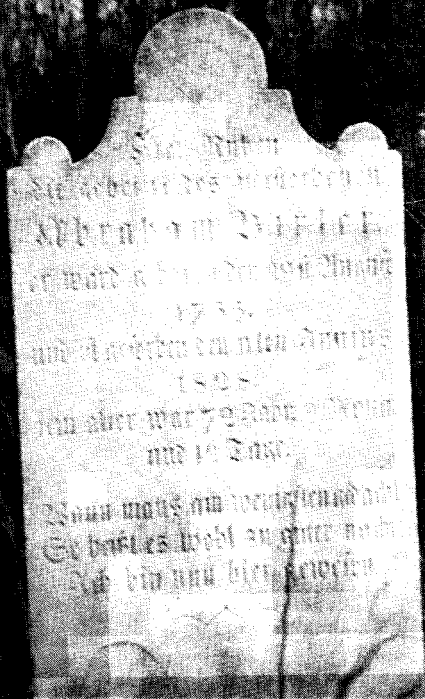
The Free Library of Philadelphia provided the writer with copies of entries for six pieces made by the artist in their Fraktur collection. Three are religious texts, handlettered, 1828, 1860, and 1862. The first is signed, "Manufactured by David Bixler in the year 1828." It is said to be copied from "*Das Herz Menschen*" first published at Carlisle, 1825 and frequently reprinted, a book which was extremely popular among the Pennsylvania Germans.

The 1860 religious text seems to be unsigned but the third has written on it "In the year 1862. David Bixler."

The remaining Philadelphia Library Bixlers are taufscheins (birth certificates) handdrawn and colored on "wove" paper. The writing is:—

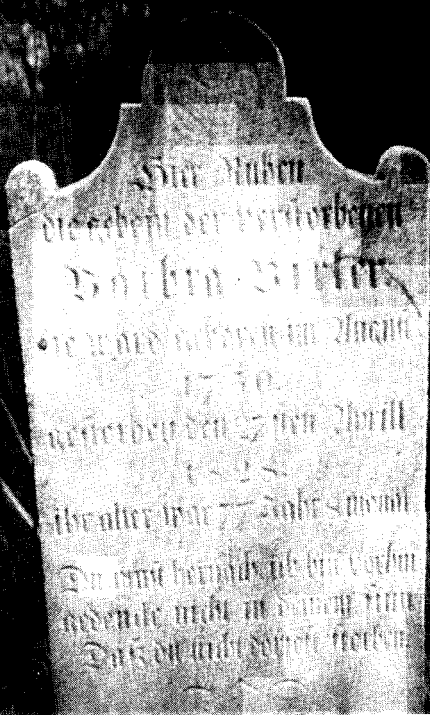
(1). "For Maria, daughter of Christian and Catharine (Schneider) Messner, born September 10, 1800, Brecknock Township, Lancaster County, baptized by Peter Williams, Reformed minister, Sponsors, Christian and Maria Lessle. 'Jesus, let the dear little angels be my keeper and watcher'." Signed David Bixler 1842.

(2). "For Susanna, daughter of David and Maria (Messner) Bixler, born July, 1831, Brecknock Township, Lancaster County, baptized by Peter Williams, Reformed Minister. Sponsors, Christian and Maria Lessle. 'Jesus, let the dear little angels be my keeper and watcher'."



Gravestone of Abraham Bixler, Grandfather of David and Absolam Bixler.

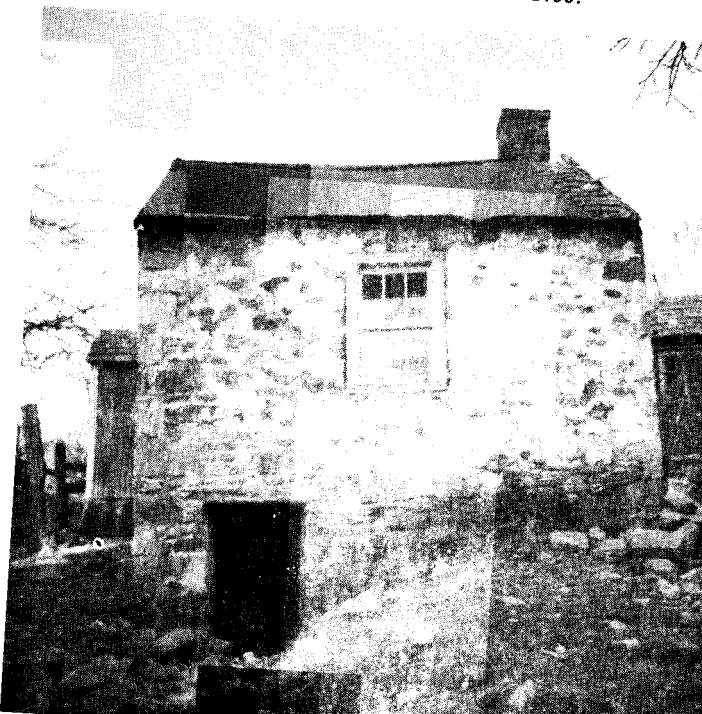
Gravestone of Barbra Bixler, Grandmother of David and Absolam Bixler.





Front view of original homestead of Abraham Bixler. Later it became the gun and pottery shop of Absalom Bixler.

Rear view of original homestead of Abraham Bixler who lived here until larger house was built in 1799.





Huge fireplace in original homestead. Stream runs through cellar for summer cold storage of apples and other provisions.

Second house built by Abraham Bixler, adjoining original homestead. Presently owned by Edwin Nolt, Denver, R.D.1, near Fivepointville. Date stone shows inscription: "This house was built by (?) Huber and Abraham Bixler, Aug. 25, 1799."





Signed David Bixler, 1842. The writer wishes she could authenticate this daughter of David's as being the maker of a fancy cross stitched door towel done by "Susanna Bixler 1849."

(3). "For Schembers (Chambers?), son of Samuel and Elisabeth (Koblinger) Fankhauser (sic), born July 4, 1841, Brecknock Township, Lancaster County, baptized by Pastor Miller. Sponsors, the parents. "Jesus let the dear little angels be my keeper and watcher." Signed by David Bixler, 1843.

Franklin and Marshall College Library owns a religious text also. Though the "x" is very like a "z" in "Manufactured by David Bixler 1830" there is little doubt, one would think, of its authenticity. This writing is directed to children starting, "Good child do as written below" and follows with conduct rules.

#### REFERENCES

- Bridgen, H. F. *Bridgen's Atlas of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania* Phila. 1864  
Ellis, Franklin & Evans, Samuel, Eds. *History of Lancaster County Pennsylvania 1883 Index to the Will Books and Interstate Records of Lancaster Co., Pa. 1729-1850 Lancaster City and County Directory 1875-1876*  
Lick, David E. & Daub, Amy Lick *Bicksler-Bixler Family 1728-1968* Myerstown, Pa. 1968  
Lipman, Jean & Winchester, Alice Eds. *Primitive Painters of America 1750-1867* N.Y.  
Shelley, Donald "The Fractur Writings or Illuminated Manuscripts of Pennsylvania Germans" *Pennsylvania German Folklore Society*, v. 23  
*Will Book of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania 1884*

#### INTERVIEWS

- Hattie Brunner, Antique dealer Reinholds, Pa. (1967)  
Jacob Burry, Antique dealer Ephrata, Pa. (1957)  
Mrs. Charles J. Conrad, Jr. Lancaster, Pa. (1976)  
Walter Himmelreich, Antique dealer Ronks, Pa. (1962, 1964)  
Carroll Hopf, Curator Pa. Farm Museum, Landis Valley, Pa. (1976)  
Ms. Frances Hopkins, Reference Librarian Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pa. (1976)  
John Kraft, Curator Ephrata Cloister Museum, Ephrata, Pa. (1976)  
Rufus Martin, Denver, R. D. Pa. (1976)  
Edwin W. Nolt, Denver, R. D. Pa. (1963)

#### CORRESPONDENCE

Dozens of letters were sent to people, places, museums, libraries, art specialists. Especially helpful was the information received from the following:

- Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg, Va. (1962, 1975)  
Jean Lipman, Ed. New York, N. Y. (1963)  
Rufus Martin, Denver R. D. Pa. (1976)  
Elwood L. Miller, Antique dealer, Schaefferstown, Pa. (1957)  
Edwin Nolt, Denver R. D. (1963)  
Pastor Charles Weiser, Pres. Pa. Folklore Society, Hanover, Pa. (1976)  
Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pa. (1976)  
Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del.  
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Comm., Harrisburg, Pa.  
York Historical Society, York, Pa.