

Martin Mylin, Gunsmith: Fact or Fancy?

By Steven K. Friesen

Herbert Beck of the Lancaster County Historical Society wrote an extensive article in 1949 naming Martin Mylin as the progenitor of the Pennsylvania rifle. For many years this article was considered the authoritative work on the local origin of the Pennsylvania rifle. During the 1970s several local historians challenged Beck's conclusions, basing the challenge primarily on their analyses of legal records such as deeds, wills, and inventories. They felt that the lack of legal records showing Mylin as a gunsmith negated the oral traditions and material objects upon which Beck based much of his article. On the basis of their work, most scholars now totally dismiss the theory that Martin Mylin was the progenitor of the Pennsylvania rifle. But, as is often the case with revisionism, one extreme has been replaced by another. This report will synthesize the legal, oral, and material evidence to produce a new perspective on Martin Mylin, gunsmith.

The irregular spelling of Pennsylvania German last names during the early eighteenth century has resulted in much confusion for genealogists and historians. Added to the *general lack of concern about correct spelling prevalent at the time* was the English tendency to write German names as they heard them. Since legal documents were filled out in English by English recorders, names like Herr were sometimes written Hair or Hare. The Mylin name had many variations: Mylin, Mylen, Meylin, Maylen, Meillin, Meilin, Millan, Milin, Millin, Millan, Milan, Mallane, Meily, Meili, Myley, Mayly, Mayley, and Mayle. Further confusing the issue, the Martin Mylin who emigrated to Lancaster County in 1710 had a son of the same name who died only four years after his father. For clarity, this article will use the most common spelling of Mylin

unless one of the other spellings is indicated by a document. The Martin Mylin of 1710 will be referred to as Martin Mylin (1), his son as Martin Mylin (2), etc.

In 1844 the first history of Lancaster County, by I. Daniel Rupp, was published. In his history, Rupp asserted, "Martin Meylin, son of Hans Meylin, was the first gunsmith within the limits of Lancaster County; as early as 1719, he erected a boring mill, on what is known as Meylin's Run, on the farm owned by Martin Meylin." He based this information on papers in the possession of Abraham Meylin. Since Rupp wrote his history in 1844, it is possible he was also privy to oral traditions only one or two generations removed from the death of Martin Mylin (1) in 1747.¹

The shop which Mylin (1) built still stands on the property of B. Snively Garber near Willow Street. Whether it was once a boring mill is a point of dispute depending on whether one accepts Rupp's account and the oral accounts collected by Beck. However, even those who claim it was not a boring mill agree it was a blacksmith shop at one time. One side of the shop has an opening which allowed the entry of a power shaft. At one time there was a dam on Mylin's Run with a water wheel to provide power. The power was delivered to the shop by a chain which was hung from trees between the dam and the shop. Beck collected oral reminiscences from a man who had seen portions of chain and the supporting bands in the trees (which had grown around the metal). The same person recalled seeing a large six-foot bellows at the shop. Since both a gun shop and a blacksmith shop could make use of such power this shop alone cannot prove whether or not Martin Mylin (1) was a gunsmith. Yet it clearly is the shop to which Rupp referred in 1844 and as such tends to corroborate his story.²

Clyde L. Groff wrote the initial article in 1972 which questioned Martin Mylin's role as a gunsmith. According to Clyde Groff there are no legal records, such as deeds, which name Martin Mylin (1) as a gunsmith or call the building on B. Snively Garber's property a gun shop. There is, however, an inventory done of his son's possessions after his death in 1751 which includes both blacksmithing and gunsmithing tools and supplies. Among these are 36 gun locks, a variety of old and new files, three different anvils, a half-ton of iron, one vise, two bick irons, hammers and pinchers, four bars of steel, casting molds, a grind stone, 98 gunstocks, a brass rifle, boards for gun stocks, and sundry sorts of rifle tools. Since no other written records corroborate this inventory, Groff concluded that the gunmaking tools and supplies did not belong to Martin Mylin (2) but belonged to the two children of John Baker, a gunsmith who died in 1751. Martin Mylin was one of the named guardians for the children.³

There are some problems with Groff's conclusion concerning the inventory. First, early eighteenth century inventories were rarely exhaustive; they often had obvious gaps. One explanation for the gaps is that items were left out

which belonged to the wife or had already been passed on to older children. Why then would an inventory include items which did not even belong to the deceased but which belonged to children for whom he acted as guardian? Furthermore, his inventory does not have the duplication of possessions one would expect if it included two households.⁴

In 1761 an account was filed by the widow of Martin Mylin (2) and her new husband enumerating various charges against the estate. The account included several corrections to the 1751 inventory, but none of these referred to gunmaking supplies. After Mylin's death a new guardian was appointed in 1754 and presumably he took charge of the Baker children's possessions. If the gunmaking items on the 1751 inventory belonged to the Baker children why was no correction made on the inventory after the appointment of a new guardian? Finally, Martin was one of three guardians; how can it be assumed that he alone received John Baker's possessions on behalf of Baker's children? Something else which Groff does not explain is the connection between Mylin, a German Mennonite, and Baker, an English gunsmith. Mylin was the only German appointed as guardian to the Baker children. Baker's gun shop was probably located within two miles of where Martin Mylin (2) lived. He obviously knew Martin Mylin (2) as a neighbor and perhaps as a fellow gunmaker (or son of a gunmaker). It may have not only been proximity but a common bond as craftsmen that led to Mylin's appointment as one of the guardians.⁵

It takes a great leap of faith to assume that the gunmaking tools in the 1751 Martin Mylin inventory belonged to the Baker children. The more obvious conclusion is also the most logical; the gunmaking tools and supplies belonged to Martin. But were he, his father Martin Mylin (1), or both of them gunmakers?

In 1978 the following citation was found in an *Ausbund* discovered under the attic floorboards of a house built in 1787 by Martin Meillin's grandson, also named Martin:

This hymn book I Martin Meillin donate to the church at the Hans Herra
To stay here to use and benefit of the Most High. February 11, 1744. To
God alone the honor.

Just as handwriting analysis has been used to authenticate historical documents, so signature analysis aids in distinguishing historical characters. Thus this Martin Meillin signature and signatures in other documents of the period provide compelling evidence in the controversy concerning Martin Meillin's role as an early Lancaster county gunsmith.⁶

There are a number of documents to which Martin Mylin (1) signed his name. In these documents he signed his name either Meillin or Meilin. These signatures can be seen on a 1728 naturalization paper (Meilin), on Samuel Byers' 1737 inventory (Meillin), on Woolrick Mires' 1728 inventory (Meilin), on John Mylen's 1728 inventory (Meilin), the original 1733 will (in German) of Hans Hess (Meillan) and in the *Ausbund* which Martin gave to the church

at Hans Herr's (Meillin) in 1744. Even though the signatures' spellings vary somewhat, the handwriting is basically the same.⁷

Apparently Martin Mylin (2) ordinarily signed his last name Mylen rather than following the older German style of his father. In 1750, after Martin Mylin (1) had died and before Martin Mylin (3) was of age, Martin Mylin (2) signed an inventory for Jacob Harnish of Lampeter, spelling his name Mylen. The intestate, inventory, and account papers filed after the death of Martin Mylin (2) also refer to him either as Mylin, Mylen, or Myley.⁸

From the documents it is clear that Martin Mylin (1) used the spellings Meillin or Meilin for his name. It is in this name that the most definite link to his riflemaking is found. In Herbert Beck's 1949 article he referred to a rifle owned by a William Renwick of Arizona. The rifle had "Martin Meillin Germantown 1705" inscribed on the barrel. Beck included a description of the rifle and concluded it was made by Martin Mylin (1). In 1976 it was acquired by Richard Headley, a member of the Kentucky Rifle Association. After the discovery of the *Ausbund* bearing the Martin Meillin signature in 1978, Headley compared that signature to the one on the rifle, finding them to be the same. Microscopic examination of the signature on the barrel further showed that it was authentic and not a forgery. Headley also analyzed other parts of the rifle, including its stock, and was convinced it was made by Martin Mylin (1) in 1705.⁹

Martin Mylin in Germantown in 1705? In 1710 a group of Mennonites destined to become the first settlers in Lancaster County stopped for ten weeks in London enroute from the Palatinate. While there they sent a letter of thanks to the Dutch Mennonites who had given them financial aid for the journey. Among the signers of that letter was a Martin Maile or Meili. How could Martin Mylin (1) have been in Germantown in 1705 and then emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1710?¹⁰

While the letter of thanks shows Martin Mylin (1) was in London in 1710 and may have come with the group from the Palatinate, that does not rule out the possibility he may have been in Germantown earlier and then returned to Europe. Boats traveled between London and Philadelphia quite regularly by that time. The Mennonites did travel between the Palatinate, London, and Pennsylvania. Documents in London indicate that John Herr, brother of Christian Herr and a member of the 1710 group, may have been there in 1709 and then returned to the Palatinate. Martin Kendig and John Funck, members of the 1710 group, returned to Germany and then came to Pennsylvania in 1717 with friends and neighbors from the Palatinate. Martin Mylin (1) could have left Germantown shortly after making the gun; a Martin Meule was recorded among the Mannheim Mennonites on April 27, 1706. Perhaps it was Martin Mylin who encouraged the 1710 group to emigrate to Pennsylvania.¹¹

There are several Mylin links to Germantown. In 1689 a Hans Millan, born in Switzerland, was recorded as residing in Germantown; his name later

appeared on a tax list in 1693 and on a deed in 1697. Hans Millan probably came from Ittlingen, one of the villages in the area from which Martin Mylin (1), the Herts, and other members of the Mennonite settlement left in 1710. He may have been a relative to Martin Mylin (1), perhaps even his father.¹²

When the 1710 immigrants obtained the warrant on the 10,000 acres of land in Conestogo (later Lancaster County), the name of Martin Mylin was conspicuously absent, although the warrant included Hans Graeff and Wendell Bowman, both of whom had arrived in Germantown earlier than 1710. In July, 1711, the group received the patents conveying ownership of the 10,000 acres. At this point Martin Mylin had rejoined the group and Hans Graeff had dropped out. This all suggests an acquaintance with the Germantown Mennonites which was more than passing. It further suggests that Martin Mylin (1) may have returned to Germantown in 1710 with the intent of staying, then decided to move to Conestogo with the rest of the 1710 group.¹³

The leadership later taken by Martin Mylin (1) in the 1728 naturalization effort, which included over 150 Mennonites, and other interactions with the government such as inventory filings, which he undertook on behalf of various Mennonite neighbors, show a familiarity with the English language and legal system. Such familiarity was shown by few of the other Mennonites. An immigrant who had newly arrived from Germany in 1710 would not have been as well prepared to deal with the English as someone who might have had an earlier period of residence in Germantown.¹⁴

The 1744 *Ausbund* provides some information about another so-called Martin Mylin rifle now in the possession of the Lancaster County Historical Society. That particular rifle was handed down in the Meylin family over the generations. Unlike the Germantown rifle, which has the full Martin Meillin name, this gun has the initials "MM" on its barrel. The *Ausbund* also is marked on its cover with the initials "MM." Certainly initials were used for identification elsewhere in the Mennonite settlement. For example, Hans Herr, Jr. or John Herr, who could not sign his name, used the initials "HH". His brother Christian used the initials "CHHR" on the lintel of the 1719 Herr House. Given the similarity to the initials used by Martin Mylin (1) on the *Ausbund* and that he was one of only two Mylin family members who might have made guns, his son Martin Mylin (2) being the other, it is possible that the gun in the possession of the Historical Society was made by Martin Mylin (1). Unfortunately, unlike the Germantown rifle, this rifle has been much altered over time, making verification of its origins very difficult.¹⁵

It has been suggested that Martin Mylin (1) was a blacksmith and his son was the actual gunsmith, since the tools were in the son's inventory. But Rupp does state in his history that Martin Meylin, son of Hans Meylin, was a gunsmith and built the boring mill. This could have been the Hans Millan of Germantown or another Hans Meylin in the Palatinate. At any rate Martin Mylin (1) was the person referred to by Rupp, not his son Martin Mylin (2). Given the

Germantown gun, it seems more likely that Martin Mylin (1) was the gunmaker, as tradition has asserted, and his son may have simply inherited the tools. If an inventory for Martin Mylin (1) is ever found, it would help clear up this part of the mystery.¹⁶

A Martin Mylin tried to start a brick and tile works in 1724 and about the same time a petition to operate a tavern was filed by a Martin Mylin. One historical researcher has suggested that Martin Mylin (2) was born around 1690. Were this the case he would have been around 34 years old in 1724 and could have filed the tavern petition and tried to start the brick works. If he was born in 1690 he would have been sixty-one years old at the time of his death. But he left one under-age child, Martin Mylin (3), and his older children were not yet married in 1757, only four years before his death. That seems unusual for a man of such age.¹⁷

Research done by Barbara Kendig Mylin suggests two more-plausible birth dates for Martin Mylin (2): 1705, which would have made him 46 years old at his death; or 1715, which would have made him 36 years old at his death. If he was born in 1705 and there was some other explanation why his name was not on the naturalization petition, it is possible that he at 23 years of age was trying to establish a new business for himself and thus tried to start a brick works or open a tavern. The tavern petition, while it was recopied and does not have the original signatures, does have the Mylen spelling used by Martin Mylin (2) for his signature. However the note on the outside stating the tavern was not allowed spells the name Mailen, a spelling closer to that of the signature of Martin Mylin (1). If Martin Mylin (2) were born in 1715, it would explain why his name was not among the 150 Mennonite names on the 1728 naturalization petition filed by his father; he would have been only thirteen years old at the time. In this case he would have been only nine at the time the tavern and brick works petitions were filed. Beck's article advocates the 1715 date, which would point to Martin Mylin (1) as having filed the petitions. Until further evidence is found one must conclude that the person who filed the tavern petition and tried to get the brick works going, both around 1724, could have been either Martin Mylin (1) or Martin Mylin (2).¹⁸

Without more evidence, it is difficult to conclude whether or not Martin Mylin (2) was a gunmaker. Since his inventory includes rye, wheat, oats, four bushels of flax, 378 yards of linen, 7.5 yards of tow cloth, horned cattle, four work horses, 16 hogs, 16 sheep, and a variety of farm implements it is clear he was a wealthy farmer. Many of the early Mennonite settlers combined farming with practice of a craft. Mylin was listed as a blacksmith on a 1741 deed so his inventory logically includes blacksmithing tools; he may have also followed his father's occupation of gunsmith since the inventory also includes gunmaking supplies. As a smith, Martin Mylin (2) was wealthy enough to build a sandstone house which was likened unto a palace. It was this structure that, in 1742, led to a meeting between Martin and the Mennonite elders, who

thought it was too spectacular and might incur the wrath of their less wealthy non-Mennonite neighbors.¹⁹

Between May and December 1730 a Martin Milin purchased a variety of goods on account from Arthur Oliver. A note made on the account by Oliver in February 1731 noted he had settled with Marten Millen but still owed him twelve pounds. The goods purchased by Mylin included files, shot, lead, powder, and bellows leather. At the end of the account a credit is also given to Mylin for "shooing horse." Clearly the Mylin with whom Oliver did business was a blacksmith. But because of the two spellings on the same document and the date of 1730 one cannot tell if the account was with the father or the son.²⁰

Obviously both Mylins were among the "movers and shakers" of the early eighteenth century Mennonite settlement in Lancaster County. Martin Mylin the father was among the first settlers in 1710, he was involved in various political activities on behalf of his neighbors, and may have tried to start a brick works and tavern. His son Martin Mylin built one of the largest houses in the area with such innovations as 170 feet of wooden pipe to bring water to the house from a spring. If Martin Mylin, Senior, did not file the tavern and brick work petitions then it was done by his son. It is also clear that one or both of them practiced blacksmithing as well.²¹

Like farriery (horseshoeing) and blacksmithing, gunmaking and blacksmithing were not skills which were exclusive of each other. It is altogether possible that Martin Mylin (I) and/or his son made guns as part of a blacksmithing operation. Thus only a few might have been made, which accounts for the fact only two rifles have been attributed to a Martin Mylin.²²

At this point, when one considers the evidence: I. Daniel Rupp's early history, which was based on old papers and oral histories; the material evidence of the shop as verification of Rupp's history and oral traditions; the 1751 inventory with its reference to rifle equipment; and the two extant rifles with links to the Mylins, it is apparent that Martin the father, and possibly his son as well, made at least a few rifles. Since one of these is the earliest prototype of what later became known as the Pennsylvania or Kentucky rifle, the place that the name Martin Mylin holds in gunmaking history should be, as yet, unshaken.

Endnotes

1. I. Daniel Rupp, *History of Lancaster County*, (Lancaster, 1844), pp. 74-75.

2. Clyde L. Groff, "The Mylins, Hans and Martin," *Lancaster County Historical Society Journal*, LXXV (1972), p. 111.

Herbert H. Beck, "Martin Meylin: A Progenitor of the Pennsylvania Rifle," *Papers of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, LIII (1949), pp. 52-54.

3. Inventory of Martin Mylin, 1750. Lancaster County Historical Society.

Clyde L. Groff, "The Mylins, Hans and Martin," *Lancaster County Historical Society Journal*, LXXV (1972), p. 111.

4. Note: The first inventory of John Bowman's property, done in 1738, left out items which belonged to his daughter, Margaretha Graft. A list of these items and some items not on the first inventory which were sold at vendue were later attached to that inventory. John Bowman Inventory, 1738, Lancaster County Historical Society.

5. Beck, pp. 58-59.

6. The *Ausbund* is currently in the collection of the Hans Herr House.

7. All the inventories named are in the archives at the Lancaster County Historical Society.

8. Naturalization Paper, 1728, Indian Hannah Box, Chester County Archives.

The 1728 John Meillin inventory is in the Chester County Archives, all other inventories are at the Lancaster County Historical Society.

9. Beck, p. 48.

Richard Headley, "The Mysterious Case of Martin Meillin, Gunsmith?" *The Kentucky Rifle Association*, 4 (Winter, 1978), pp. 4-10.

10. This letter is in Amsterdam Mennonite Archives, a photocopy and translation of it are in the possession of the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society.

11. Martin Brackbill, "The Origin of the Pequea Settlers," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 45 (1971), p. 85.

Jane Evans Best, "A Bear Saga: The Birmensdorf Connection," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, XI (April, 1988), p. 34.

12. Barbara Kendig Mylin Papers, Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society. These papers explore the Mylin connections to Germantown.

Jane Evans Best, "A Bear Saga: The Birmensdorf Connection," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, XI (April, 1988), p. 34.

Note: The difficulties in determining family relationships in early Pennsylvania are compounded when one attempts to trace names back to the Palatinate. Jane Best has done some of this with the Mylins in her article on the Bear family. She has found a Martin Mayle in Friedrichstad in 1693, a Martin Mely in the same place in 1694, a Martin Melý there in 1694, and a Martin Meule in Mannheim in 1706. She believes these to be the same person, the Martin Mylin who came to Lancaster County in 1710. None of these locations preclude the possibility that Martin was also in Germantown in 1705.

13. Martin Brackbill, "The Origin of the Pequea Settlers," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 45 (1971), p. 85.

Martin Brackbill, "New Light on Hans Herr and Martin Kendig," *Historical Papers and Addresses of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, 39 (1935), pp. 76-77, 89-90.

14. Naturalization Paper, 1728, Indian Hannah Box, Chester County Archives. The other person providing leadership in this effort was Wendell Bowman, who had been living in Germantown prior to the arrival of the 1710 party, further suggestion of a previous Mylin-Germantown connection.

15. Beck, p. 47.

16. Jane Evans Best, "A Bear Saga: The Birmensdorf Connection," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, XI (April, 1988), p. 3.

17. Jane Evans Best, "A Bear Saga: The Birmensdorf Connection," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, XI (April, 1988), p. 36.

Note: Best has suggested that Martin Mylin (2) stayed in the Palatinate when his father came across in 1710. A Martin Meyli was recorded in Mannheim, Germany on April 24, 1717. Best thinks he then came across with the large Mennonite emigration later that year.

18. Papers of Barbara Kendig Mylin, Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society.

Martin Mylin (1) Will, Will Book A, No. 1, p. 185, Lancaster County Archives.

Indian Hannah File, Chester County Archives.

19. Martin Mylin Inventory, 1751, Lancaster County Historical Society.

In 1741 an agreement was made by Martin Meillin, Senior. Martin Meillin, Junior (Blacksmith).

Martin Miller, Benjamin Bowman, Yeoman, and Barbara Bowman, widow, with Rev. Hans Tschantz and his wife creating the cemetery known today as the Tschantz cemetery. Unfortunately the only signatures on the document were those of Hans Tschantz and Magdalena Johns (apparently Hans' wife had anglicized her signature). On this document, Martin Mylin (2) has his trade as a blacksmith in parentheses after his name, perhaps to distinguish him from his father of the same name. By this time his father could have retired from the trade so it does not mean the elder Meilin was not previously a blacksmith but it does establish the younger as a blacksmith at that point. The Tschantz cemetery was apparently already begun at a previous date on the Tschantz's land and the agreement formalizes its use as a burying ground, with the Tschantzs receiving five shillings for the land. The Tschantz deed is recorded in Deed Book U, Volume 14, page 41, Lancaster County Archives.

This house was built and owned by Martin Mylin (2), not his father Martin Mylin (1) as has been popularly believed. See Rupp, pp. 286-287.

20. Account of Abraham Newcomber and Anna his wife, widow of Martin Mylin, 1761, Lancaster County Historical Society.

Regarding the "palace" of sandstone, Martin Mylin, the father, has often been confused with Martin Mylin, the son. It was not Martin Mylin (1) who built it but Martin Mylin (2). Rupp's illustration of the house in his 1744 history is clearly captioned, "Built by Martin and Ann Meylin, 1740." This referred to the son, who was married to Ann Herr (daughter of Christian Herr).

21. Martin Milin/Arthur Oliver Account, 1730, Lancaster County Historical Society.

22. Note: I cannot resist a final observation. In assessing what has been written on the question of whether Martin Mylin was a gunmaker, I found that the article by Beck was the most thoroughly researched of anything written so far on the subject, utilizing a variety of sources which were not limited only to legal documents. His analysis of the information seemed also to be coherently and carefully organized. While both Rupp and Beck did make use of oral traditions, their information came from oral sources of a primary nature and were verified by material and documentary evidence. Today there is another oral tradition, often emphatically stated by some local historians, which revolves around challenging Martin Mylin's status as a gunmaker. Unfortunately this oral tradition is often based not on primary sources but is a parroting of conclusions drawn by secondary sources. As such, it is hearsay, not good historical scholarship.

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