

The Witman Incident: Revolutionary Revisions To An Ephrata Tale

by Douglas Harper

One of the more interesting stories told about a Pennsylvania loyalist in the American Revolution is set in Ephrata. The tale centers around two men. One was Peter Miller, an 18th century German Reformed minister in Lancaster County who abandoned his religion and joined the Ephrata Cloister. As “Brother Jabez,” Miller led the commune from the death of its founder, Conrad Beissel, in 1768, until his own death in 1796.

As pacifists, the Ephrata anabaptists would not cooperate with the war, but they found the pressing demands of the rebels hard to resist. It is said that Rev. Mr. Miller, who was a well-educated man, won the friendship of George Washington, who was said to sometimes visit the wounded American soldiers who were quartered in Ephrata during 1777.

The other man at the heart of the story was Michael Witman, or Widman, a hotel-keeper in Ephrata and deacon in the Reformed church there. The story tells how Witman frequently abused Miller and the others in the commune. He once hit Miller and another time spat in his face. “Miller endured it all with Christian fortitude,” according to the tale. “He never spoke a cross word to or against Witman for his shameful conduct.”

But during the Revolution, Witman was entangled in a charge of aiding the British. He was taken to George Washington at Valley Forge. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged at the crossroads village of Turk’s Head, now West Chester, in Chester County.

Somehow Miller heard about this, walked from Ephrata to Valley Forge, and interceded with Washington to save the life of Witman. Washington, it is said, told Miller he was sorry, but there was nothing he could do for his friend. “My friend!” Miller exclaimed. “I have not a worse enemy living than that man.”

Washington was said to have been so moved that he wept. He dashed off a written pardon on the spot. Miller then walked to Turk's Head, arriving just in time to halt the execution. According to one version, "It is said they embraced each other. They walked home to Ephrata together and remained firm friends."¹

"We will not attempt to describe the scene, tender, loving, pathetic, when Witman entered the home and he was restored to his family," one version of the story reads. "His life was spared but his property was confiscated and sold March 15, 1780, to Michael Diffenderfer, four tracts. The circumstances and environments were such that Witman did not remain long at Ephrata, but emigrated with his family somewhere to the West, where is not known."

Modern writers who make use of this touching tale often trace it to the chapter titled "The Widman Incident," in the section on Ephrata in *The German Sectarians of Pennsylvania*, a book that came out in 1902.² Probably as a result of the book, the anecdote enjoyed a flurry of popularity in the early years of this century – appearing everywhere from a 1900 Mennonite almanac to a paper in the 1902 publication of the Lancaster County Historical Society.

German Sectarians was written by Julius Friedrich Sachse, an eccentric teutonophile who lived near Berwyn, Chester County. His book is a splendid read but riddled with historical errors. But the roots of the Widman story go back past Sachse. In fact, he simply copied, word for word, an earlier account.

In "The Widman Incident," Sachse simply reprints Dr. William M. Fahnestock's 1835 version, from "An Historical Sketch of Ephrata," found in the magazine *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania*.³ Sachse presents it as "an oft-told story of Jabez's Christian spirit & magnanimity." "The account here presented was written early in the present century," Sachse wrote in



Ephrata Cloister leader Peter Miller plays prominently in a colorful tale set during the American Revolution. This sketch is the only known likeness of Miller; the artist is unknown. Courtesy of the Ephrata Cloister, PHMC.

his book, "and was some years later elaborated by the late Dr. W.M. Fahnestock. Although containing a few minor historical inaccuracies the original manuscript is presented in its entirety."

Fahnestock's account is likely the earliest published, but its accuracy is dubious. The widely respected Ephrata scholar E.G. Alderfer notes that *Proud's History of Pennsylvania* (1798) contains "an erratic account of Ephrata," but says that a "glimmer of historical interest in the earlier Ephrata did not appear until 1827, when the accounts of Redmond Conyngham and Christian Endress were published together in the *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*. Although based on some first-hand observation, they provide very thin gruel for the modern scholar and suffer from errors of both omission and commission. In the following decade Samuel Hazard reprinted them and some other items about Ephrata in his *Register of Pennsylvania*, the most important of which was William Fahnestock's 'Historical Sketch of Ephrata.' This article marked the real beginning of historical writing on the subject."⁴

A slightly, but significantly, different version of the tale is contained in "Peter Miller and Michael Witman," a paper presented to the Lancaster County Historical Society in 1902 by Hiram Erb Steinmetz. His great-great-grandfather, Col. John Wright, had bought the confiscated hotel property from Michael Diffenderffer on March 15, 1787. Steinmetz was born in 1854, the son of a community leader, and he attended Lebanon Valley College and served as postmaster at Clay after 1876. He was a local correspondent for some county newspapers and an officer in the historical society.

"For some of the facts," he writes, "the writer is indebted to Mrs. Mary Hahn, of Ephrata, who is four-score years of age. She is a sister of Rev. Timothy Konigmacher ... who was for many years pastor at the Cloister."

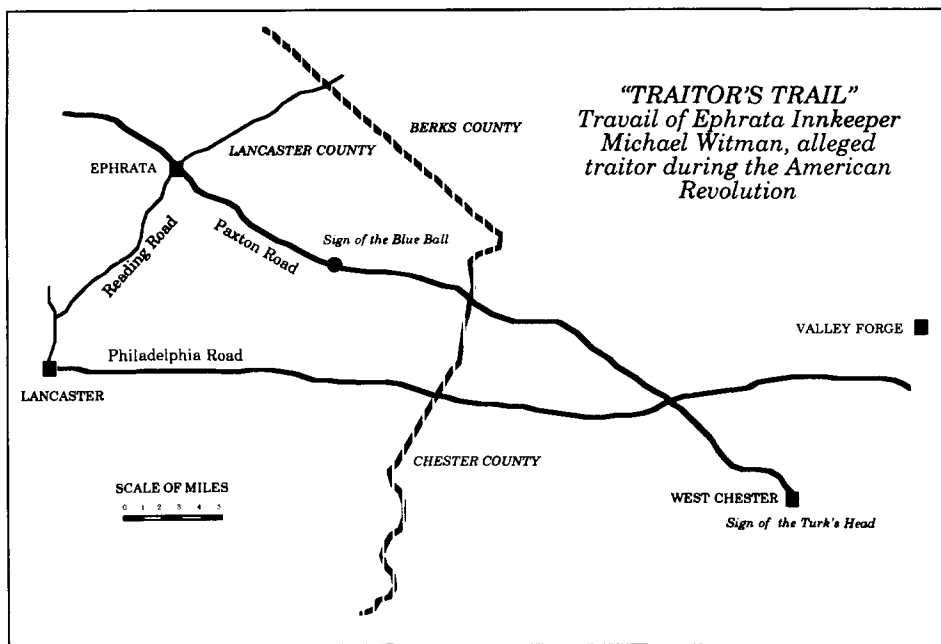
According to Steinmetz, Witman was a Tory who was intemperate enough to boast of his politics in the winter of 1777 when there were American spies in his inn. According to Fahnestock/Sachse, however, Witman was a rebel leader who was overheard slandering Gen. Howe by British spies. Both accounts then say an attempt was made to arrest Witman, but he escaped and fled into the woods, hiding for a time in the Cloister itself.

According to Steinmetz, hunger eventually forced him out and the Americans took him. According to Fahnestock/Sachse, Witman "resolved to go to Philadelphia and endeavor to conciliate General Howe." He fell on his knees and begged forgiveness, and offered information. But Howe would not trust a man who had been so active in the Revolutionary cause and then turned traitor on so slight a pretext.

Meanwhile, according to this version, Witman's wife let leak the story of where he had gone, and word was passed to Continental scouts to look out for Witman. "On approaching the first outpost of the American lines he was discovered and arrested. He was carried to the nearest Block House, at the Turk's

Head, now West Chester, where he was carefully kept in durance until a court-martial was summoned on his case.”

The account continues with Miller’s journey to Valley Forge. General Lee, who was familiar with Miller’s intellectual accomplishments, presented the prior to George Washington, who met him here for the first time (Steinmetz has them already familiar). The reply to Washington’s quote about “your friend” is given as “Friend! He is my worst enemy – my incessant reviler ... but ... my religion teaches me to pray for those who despitefully use me.’ ” Tears coursed down Washington’s cheeks.



The execution was going on in the courtyard of the blockhouse, according to Fahnestock/Sachse. In the Steinmetz version, Witman on the scaffold spotted Miller approaching through the crowd and said, “There is old Peter Miller. He has walked all the way from Ephrata to have his revenge gratified to-day seeing me hung.” Instead, Miller advanced, waving the pardon papers and telling the men in charge to stop the execution. Witman was let down.

In the Fahnestock version, Witman is in the midst of a long and windy speech admitting all the charges of treason against him when he sees Miller coming. He then begins to acknowledge all his crimes against Miller, too, when the officer in charge cuts him off to tell him he’s been pardoned.

The Lancaster County Historical Society returned to the topic in 1908 with “Lancaster County’s Loyalists,” written by F.R. Diffenderffer.

Diffenderffer, like Steinmetz, was personally connected to the case. He was a great-grandson of the Michael Diffenderffer who had first bought Witman's confiscated land. But Diffenderffer, unlike Steinmetz, was a genuine academic.

He gave information on all the known Loyalists of the county. After listing the account of John Reine, Diffenderffer wrote: "A query here suggests itself. May this man Reine, not Michael Whitman, be the person around whom tradition has woven that pretty story about the successful intercession of Peter Miller, the Prior of the Ephrata cloister, with General Washington for his life? That story has often been told with many details, but upon what authority I know not. Rev. Peter Miller did intercede with the State authorities in behalf of Henry Martin and Christian Weaver, convicted of misdemeanors. He seems to have been everybody's friend, and, perhaps, did intercede for all four of the persons mentioned."⁵

The story as it stands is full of holes. Why would Washington in Valley Forge send an Ephrata man to be hanged in West Chester, which was then a backwater crossroads with just a school and a tavern? There certainly never was any block house there, and except in the week after the Battle of the Brandywine there was no significant presence of American troops in the region. And why would the many detailed observers of the early West Chester scene (Joseph Townsend, Joseph J. Lewis, William Darlington, Philip Sharpless, etc.) make no mention of such a dramatic event as a near-hanging?

Further, why would Washington, as commander in chief, attempt to execute a private citizen for a crime that was handled by the civil authorities of the state, and why would those authorities make no complaint, or even mention, of the event? The narrative makes it clear that Witman was a private citizen, not a British spy, at the time.

And why, if Washington was touched enough to reverse himself and grant a pardon, was he not also touched enough to lend Miller a horse to get him to Turk's Head before the execution?

So what are the facts? There may not be enough of them to consign the story to fiction, but there are enough to put it in serious doubt.

Michael Witman or Widman was a wealthy hotelkeeper in Ephrata. He was on the county committee of safety in 1775. Papers relating to his estate, which was seized April 24, 1778, say he had "lately absconded to the English," not been captured and tried. His estate of 232-plus acres in Cocalico Township was sold at public sale Sept. 4, 1779. His transition from rebel leader to Loyalist was not uncommon. Many who were leaders in opposing the Crown's policy toward the colonies in 1775 could not support the dramatic break with the mother country that came in 1776, and thus they ended up being branded traitors.

As Diffenderffer points out, Miller did intercede with state authorities on behalf of some Tories in his neighborhood, and he helped arrange surrender terms for some who were fugitives. There is documentary evidence of this. But there is

no record of his interceding on Witman's behalf at any time.

Another Lancaster County Historical Society paper, "Michael Witman, Loyalist," anonymous, but probably by Diffenderffer, was printed in 1910 and cites evidence uncovered by Mary N. Robinson in the courthouse. Specifically, a copy of a pardon from the Supreme Executive Council (which took the role of the governor in those days), sealed Jan. 21, 1779, and recorded in Lancaster's courthouse Dec. 22, 1779.⁶

It pardoned Witman only from "pains of death and Corporal punishments," and "outlawries," in other words, he was free but he did not get his property back and still had to pay whatever fines were owed. It states Witman "hath been convicted and attained of High Treason and is now confined in the gaol of the said County." And it quotes his petition to the Council to "take his case and that of his unhappy family into our Compassionate consideration and to extend mercy and Pardon unto him."

Walter C. Klein, a 20th century Ephrata scholar, cites Fahnestock only with extreme caution and warnings of his lack of proof, and only where there is no other available source. "What Dr. Fahnestock says about the past of the Ephrata settlement must be received with suspicion ..."⁷ Klein calls his "Historical Account" "a misleading quasi-primary source," and adds that "The same writer falls into the same errors in 'Baptists, Seventh Day, German.'"⁸

"Dr. William M. Fahnestock, depicting the past of the community in a sketch written about 1835 for the bustling America of that day, may be pardoned for toning down certain beliefs and customs that, if delineated with strict truthfulness, would have excited the mirth or contempt of his fellow citizens," Klein writes, "yet, when he trifles with truth so shamelessly as to deny that vows were ever taken, he invites reproof."⁹ Fahnestock had written: "There are several single sisters remaining in the Convent (one of whom has been there forty-six years, and another lives in a cottage, solitary life, sixty years)," and it was from them, perhaps, that he heard the stories.¹⁰

The Ephrata Commune, An Early American Counterculture, the 1985 book by E.G. Alderfer, is a bit kinder to Fahnestock, as one "whose family had for generations been associated with Ephrata and Snow Hill" cloister in Franklin County but uses him more for personal impressions of the last echoes of Ephrata than as a pure historical source.¹¹ Fahnestock himself seems to have been more associated with Snow Hill.

Alderfer retells the tale, apparently the Steinmetz version, though he obscures enough of the crucial details so that it is possible to read it either as Witman being confronted as a Tory or a Whig. Only a footnote acknowledges that the tale has "no known contemporary documentation," but the same note cites Sachse; Samuel Grant Zerfass' *Souvenir Book II*, pp.22-23 (1921, reprinted 1975); and Corliss F. Randolph in *Seventh Day Baptists in Europe and America*, vol. 2, pp.1163-1167. Plainfield, N.J., 1910, who claims he got the story "from

the original manuscript,” which is otherwise unidentified.

Sachse is also responsible for the story that Miller translated the Declaration of Independence into seven languages, a fact he ascribed to “tradition” and “contemporary records.” Like the Michael Witman story, this one is full of details, yet utterly absent from any contemporary record.

A Lancaster historian in 1933 tried to track down the Declaration of Independence tale and concluded that “the story probably originated in the mind of Julius Friedrich Sachse; or if there was a tradition, it was he who gave it wide publicity and the stamp of authority.” In other words, Miller didn’t do it, but he could have done it and it would have been perfectly typical of him.¹²

The Light and the Glory, a Christian conservative rewrite of American history by Peter Marshall and David Manuel, gives this story prominence in yet another version. The book that touts itself as “our nation’s history from God’s point of view,” serves up the Witman-Miller story to prove the authors’ point that Washington “was God’s man, chosen for the hour of America’s greatest crisis.” Marshall and Manuel write that they were troubled by the manifest evidence that George Washington was not a particularly spiritual or zealous Christian, though their thesis required him to be one. While wandering in this valley of doubt, “By chance we stumbled across an old book, out of print for more than half a century, which provided many of the answers.”

It was William Johnson’s *George Washington, the Christian*, published in 1919. In the version Marshall uses, Miller asks for Witman’s pardon “because Jesus did as much for me,” but this quote is not in the original Fahnestock version. Certainly Miller would have been enough of a theologian to avoid this false parallel. But Marshall’s source has tossed it into the story to make Washington’s response a specifically Christian one.

Sadly, for people who like good historical adventures, it seems Rev. Mr. Miller’s dramatic rescue of his enemy in the shadow of the gallows at Turk’s Head in 1778 was merely a fiction. But like the myth of George Washington kneeling in prayer beneath the snowy boughs at Valley Forge, it likely will be retold as fact as long as there are people who really want to believe it.

About The Author

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Endnotes

1. Hiram Erb Steinmetz, "Peter Miller-Michael Witman, A Revolutionary Episode." *Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society*, vol. VI, 1902, p. 46.
2. Published in Philadelphia by Sachse, vol. II, pp. 426-432.
3. William M. Fahnestock, "An Historical Sketch of Ephrata," *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania XV, 11* (March 14, 1835), pp. 161-167.
4. E. Gordon Alderfer, *The Ephrata Commune, An Early American Counterculture*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985. p. 185.
5. "Lancaster County's Loyalists," F.R. Diffenderffer, Litt.D., *Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society*, vol. XII, 1908, p. 243.
6. *Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society*, vol. XIV, 1910, p.181. Lancaster County Courthouse archives, Deed Book R, pp. 527-528; caption: The Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
7. Walter C. Klein, *Johannes Conrad Beissel, Mystic and Martinet, 1690-1768*, Phila., Univ. of Pa. Press, 1942, p. 147.
8. *He Pasa Ekklesia*, Philadelphia, 1844, pp. 98-111.
9. Klein, p. 131.
10. Klein, p. 182.
11. Alderfer, p. 114.
12. W.F. Worner, "Peter Miller Did Not Translate the Declaration of Independence," *Papers Read Before the Lancaster County Historical Society*, vol. XXXVIII, 1934, p. 98.