

Peter Miller--Michael Witman.

A Revolutionary Episode.

Peter Miller was a minister in the German Reformed Church in his early life. "He was born in the district of Sautern, in the Palatinate (Chur-Pfalz) in 1709. He came to America as a minister of this church in 1730." He preached at various points. He served as pastor of Bethany Reformed Church, near Ephrata, and doubtless others in this section.

He withdrew from the German Reformed Church and joined the Seven Day Baptists at Ephrata. He moved to their settlement and became their pastor. He resided there during the American Revolutionary War.

He was a man who had an extensive acquaintance and was widely known. He enjoyed the personal acquaintance of General Washington, who visited Ephrata and the Cloister during the war.

Peter Miller was a talented and highly-educated man. At the request of Thomas Jefferson he translated the Declaration of Independence into seven foreign languages, and helped in this way to explain to the world the reason for the American Revolution.

Michael Witman also resided at Ephrata. He was a deacon in the German Reformed Church; the withdrawal of Peter Miller from the church greatly incensed Witman, who now secured an unenviable notoriety for his abuse of Miller and the Seven Day Baptists; on one occasion he struck Miller in the face, and on another occasion he spit in his face. Miller endured it all with Christian fortitude. He never spoke a cross word to or against Witman for his shameful conduct.

Witman kept one of the two hotels which were then in Ephrata, about a mile from the Cloister or Seven Day Baptist settlement. It was located on the site where the Eagle Hotel, in Ephrata borough, now stands. The other was the house lately purchased by Mr. T. A. Willson, and remodeled by him located on West Main street.

There were possibly ten houses in the present limits of Ephrata borough at that time. On a winter evening two men came to the hotel of Witman for supper and shelter for the night. He was ignorant of the character of his guests, but was outspoken in his views in regard to the war, and spoke freely in favor of the British. "He was a Tory. He had been to Gen. Howard and offered his services." However, these two men were American spys. Witman entered the dining room, where the men were partaking of their evening meal. He sat on the window sill. He began to express his opinion. After proceeding at some length the men sprang up and said we have to arrest you for treason to the American cause, or words to that effect. Witman escaped through the window, and, most singular, indeed, fled to the Seven Day Baptist settlement and hid in the Brothers' House, upstairs, behind a chimney, and remained there until the next night. This house was not locked, but kept open day and night, a fact possibly known to Witman. He then escaped to Zion's Hill, where he remained until, famished from cold and hunger, he surrendered. He was taken to General Washington. He was tried for treason, found guilty and sentenced to be hung.

As before stated, Peter Miller was personally acquainted with General Washington. Whether he was in communication with General Washington in reference to this matter is not known. However, after the death sentence was passed, Peter Miller arose

early in the morning, took his cane and set out on foot, through the snow, to visit General Washington at Valley Forge, to intercede for the life of Witman.

He was told that his prayer for his friend could not be granted. "My friend!" exclaimed Miller. "I have not a worse enemy living than that man."

"What!" rejoined Washington. "You have walked sixty miles to save the life of your enemy? That, in my judgment, puts the matter in a different light. I will grant you his pardon."

"The pardon was written, signed by General Washington and handed to Miller, who at once set out for West Chester, fifteen miles distant, where the execution was to take place on the afternoon of the same day."

He arrived just as Witman was being carried to the scaffold, who, seeing Miller in the crowd, remarked: "There is old Peter Miller. He has walked all the way from Ephrata to have his revenge gratified to-day seeing me hung."

These words were scarcely spoken, when Miller waved the pardon and commanded them to halt.

We will not picture the scene that followed. It is said they embraced each other. They walked home to Ephrata together and remained firm friends.

We will not attempt to describe the scene, tender, loving, pathetic, when Witman entered the home and he was restored to his family. 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.

Thus the curtain drops as to Witman, but Miller's noble act lives enshrined in many of the hearts and minds of the people of Ephrata, yea, wherever the narrative is read, being published in different works.

Peter Miller died September 25, 1796, aged eighty-six years and nine months, and is buried at Ephrata."

For some of the facts the writer is indebted to Mrs. Mary Hahn, of Ephrata, who is four-score years of age. She is a sister of Rev. Timothy Konigsmacher, who is four-score and ten, who was for many years pastor at the Cloister, now a resident of Philadelphia.

The hotel property of Michael Witman was sold by Michael Diffenderfer March 15, 1787. It was purchased by Col. John Wright, who was a great-great-grandfather of the writer of this sketch. It remained in the family almost a hundred years. One of the daughters, Polly Wright, married John Gross, and inherited the property from her father. In 1808 the old building was torn down and a new one erected on the same site. Upon the death of her husband she sold the property to her son, John W. Gross, who disposed of it to his brother, Martin Gross, who died in 1877.

Andrew M. Baker became the owner by purchase in 1879, and since enlarged it.

HIRAM ERB STEINMETZ.

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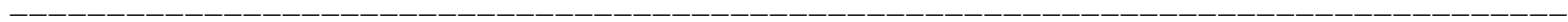
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