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Complement of An Early Amish Colony in Chester County, Pennsylvania

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One of the most interesting communities in the early history of the Amish settlement in Pennsylvania is the "Society of Amists Brothers," as it is called in a Chester County deed of 1787. (Deed Book C-2, 265; all legal records here cited are at the Chester County Courthouse at West Chester, Pa.) According to Amish tradition and family history, the settlement of this group in Chester County began in the early 1770's. It was much reduced in size by 1827, when a deed of that date informs us that the "Great (Chester) Valley Ominist Society" had become nearly extinct (Deed Book E-4, 310). The last Amish family is reported to have moved from the area in the early 1830's.

This community, which survived some sixty years, is of special interest for two reasons: local records clearly indicate the community's early acceptance of non-Amish ways, and the group is unique in being the first Amish congregation in America to build a meetinghouse. The latter was a departure from the already century-old Amish tradition of worshiping in private homes. A "church house" is, in fact, atypical of Amish practice throughout the 250 years of their New World History. Memory of the Chester County meetinghouse still persists through tradition among the present-day Amish residents of neighboring Lancaster County. The stone-wall foundations of the

building are still discernible. Evidence for the acceptance of non-Amish practices by the members of the community consists largely in records of Amish young people marrying non-Amish mates and joining other churches in the vicinity. The meetinghouse itself is also an example of the acceptance of a non-Amish institution. It has even been claimed that the structure of the building was patterned after the plain Quaker meetinghouses, three of which existed in the near-neighborhood of the Amish community in Chester Valley.

It is hoped that the present attempt to briefly record the history of the group may be of interest, not only because of the importance of the community from the standpoint of culture history, but also because such materials pertaining to the group as have been published have appeared in local and fugitive sources, most of which are difficult of access to the average reader. These consist of a privately printed local history, now out of print; two privately printed family histories, both out of print; an article in a church paper more than 50 years ago; two more recent articles in a local historical series since discontinued; and a recent graduate thesis in history at the University of Pittsburgh. The bulk of the material for the complete history of the community remains unused in the Courthouse at West Chester, Pa., and in sources collected,

classified, and catalogued at the Chester County Historical Society Library, also at West Chester. The present essay will deal particularly with the family names found in the written records and with the material cultural marks of this community—specifically its meetinghouse and the graveyard associated with it. The acculturational aspect of the community life, as evidenced in the still largely unused sources just mentioned, will have to await future study.

The Chester County "Society of Amists," or "Ominist Minist (Amish Mennonite) Society," as it is called in a later deed (Deed Book M-C, 331; deed dated Dec. 28, 1816) did not exist as an organized "society" in the usual sense of the word. It was merely a local group of Amish families who lived and worshiped together as a congregational community. Their meetinghouse was used both as a place of worship and as a sectarian school for the Pennsylvania German-speaking young people of the community. This building, with its cemetery across the road from it, was located in northern East Whiteland township in eastern Chester County. A local newspaper in 1928 described the ruins of the former meetinghouse as located "in the heart of the beautiful Chester Valley, about four miles north of the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad." It is elsewhere described



Photographs of the first Amish Mennonite meetinghouse in America at Malvern, Pennsylvania.

Photographs supplied by Grant M. Stoltzfus, March 1953.

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as "a short distance west of the Cedar Hollow Lime Quarries on Moore road."

With these descriptions in mind the writer spent several hours attempting to locate the site in December 1954. The road leading west of the lime quarries is now cut off by the Pennsylvania Turnpike. No "Moore road" is marked by either maps or road signs in this vicinity. However, there is a Morehall Road which extends northward from Malvern toward Devault. One-half mile south of Devault a narrow unpaved road leads westward from Morehall Road. The site of the meetinghouse is near the north side of this road one mile west of Morehall Road. The small site, now overgrown with bushes and small trees, is surrounded on three sides by a cultivated field. Directly across the road from the ruins of the church is the wall-enclosed cemetery. The wall still stands, as do several dozen gravestones. The ruins of the meetinghouse were razed in the 1930's and what stones remain are now somewhat scattered. However, the foundations of the walls are still vaguely discernible. Probably some tombstones in the cemetery lie now buried in topsoil. The site is one that deserves at least superficial archaeological excavation, if such could be negotiated.

A photograph of the meetinghouse "as it appeared in 1899" was published in 1911. However, there are published reports of the building having been destroyed by fire in 1895. Photographs of the ruins of the building, with its four walls partly standing, were taken in 1937 and are on file at the Chester County Historical Society. These photographs and the still discernible foundation stones indicate a building of modest proportions. It was perhaps 18 feet wide by 35 feet long, or 20 x 40 feet at the most generous estimate. The photographs clearly indicate a one-story building. There may have been a chimney and fireplace at the east end of the structure. The length of the building paralleled the road and the earliest known photograph shows a door and a window in the east gable end, with two doors and three windows on the south side of the structure which faced the road. When used as an Amish meetinghouse it would have been furnished with backless benches and with no rostrum or pulpit. Men and women still sit separately in all Amish meeting places, and it is probable that the two front doors were for the separate entrance of male and female worshippers.

The size of the graveyard and the number of burials in it, as well as the dates on the gravestones, clearly indicate that the cemetery was used longer than the meetinghouse served as a place of Amish worship. The former was visited in the 1930's by staff-members of the Chester County Historical Society, who were able to decipher inscriptions on 39 stones. It was then described as in a state of neglect and deterioration—a fair statement of its condition when viewed by the writer in

December 1954. It has had some care, however, for the wall is in repair and the burial area is not as overgrown as is the meetinghouse site. The enclosing wall is approximately 50 x 100 feet in width and length, with the longer side of the rectangular enclosure facing the road. Several dozen gravestone inscriptions are still decipherable; many more graves, however, are marked by small, irregularly shaped, flat field stones which carry no inscriptions. There are also undoubtedly numerous unmarked graves. Unmarked graves, gravestones without inscriptions, and general neglect are still characteristic of small Amish community cemeteries in Pennsylvania. The Amish meetinghouse was sold in 1827, and the last Amish family, as earlier stated, removed from Chester Valley in the early 1830's. The death dates on many of the inscribed tombstones in this cemetery are later. The cemetery is referred to in nineteenth-century sources as the "Union Grave Yard," indicating that it was later used by families of non-Amish affiliation (as was also the meetinghouse). Accordingly there are burials of individuals with such non-Amish and non-German names as Davis, Hall, Harley, Meconkey, and Ruth.

The site of the cemetery and meetinghouse is 1½ miles west by south of Devault and 4 miles north by west of Malvern. It is on the Phoenixville Quadrangle of the United States Geological Survey maps for this part of southeastern Pennsylvania. It is less than one mile south of the modern Pennsylvania Turnpike, the hurried traffic over which can be seen from the century-and-a-half-old site of the meetinghouse. The early Amish farms were scattered in the area, north, east, and southwest of the meetinghouse. The westernmost farm that can be identified as Amish was located near present Exton, the easternmost in Tredyffrin township, and the northernmost in Charlestown township. Most of the farms were in East Whiteland township, with a few in West Whiteland. The Amish community was thus located on and north of the present Lincoln Highway (U.S. Route 30), largely between the towns of Exton and Malvern. The settlement is referred to in Mennonite literature as the "Chester Valley," "Whiteland," or "Malvern" community or congregation.

Amish tradition has it that this community was established by Moritz Zug, who with his brothers John and Christian, their families, and perhaps a few other Amish people, moved to Chester County in the early 1770's. They came from the earlier "Northkill" Amish congregation in northern Berks County, which had been disrupted by a series of Indian raids during the French and Indian War. (See the *ECK* for August 21, 1954.) Moritz and Christian remained and died in Chester County near Malvern, while John (Johannes) Zug removed to Honeybrook township in northwestern Chester County where he died in 1790. Christian Zug, Sr.,

had a son, also named Christian, who became a minister and leader of the Valley community. His name, and that of his cousin, Moritz Zug's son Jacob, occur most frequently in contemporary references to the Amish in this area. Preacher Christian Zug's twelfth child and last-born son, Henry Zook, married to Christiana Kurtz, was with his children the last family of Amish connection to reside in Chester Valley. The family removed to Lancaster County in 1834. Moritz Zug's son Jacob Zook is repeatedly mentioned in contemporary records as "Trustee" for the "Society of Amist Brothers." He died at Exton in 1829. He and his wife, Gertrude Kenegé, had a family of thirteen children, all born in West Whiteland township. There are other Amish family names, such as Coffman, Lapp, and Rickabaugh, to be found in sources pertaining to this community. However, its terminal dates, as well as its dominant personalities, are in the record of the first three generations of the Zug family in America. The dates c. 1770 and c. 1834 mark the period during which entire families of definitely Amish religious conviction occupied the area.

As is well known, there are relatively few characteristically Amish family names to the present day, and there were still fewer in the years of early Amish settlement in America. These names are a helpful, although not infallible, guide to the identification of persons of Amish connection. Deeds, wills, and other records indicate the presence of persons with Amish surnames in this area from c. 1770 to the present time. However, later individuals and families—subsequent to the 1830's—are clearly non-Amish in their religious affiliation. One student has examined recorded wills for the period of Amish occupancy of Chester Valley and found five of them pertaining to members of this community. A preliminary inventory recently made by the present writer revealed more than five such wills, but the reported five range in time from 1786 to 1826 and refer to 18 individuals representing four Amish families, as follows: Coffman (2 individuals), Kurtz (2), Lapp (5), and Zug (9). There are also three wills by Rickabaughs recorded from 1805 to 1848. Of the foregoing names that of Rickabaugh is the least familiar as an Amish eponym. However, in a quitclaim of 1792 Adam Rickabaugh is listed among the names of eight "persons of the said . . . Society of Amists" (Deed Book G-2, 200), and his own will also bequeaths money to Jacob Zook who is named as a trustee of "our religious society" (Will Book L-11, 88). The name Zug is also spelled Zook in local records dating from 1787, and Coffman is spelled Kauffman in the earliest sources for the community. German names were thus soon Anglicized.

It is possible also to identify persons of Amish connection in recorded County deeds to property. Miss Dorothy B. Lapp, on the staff of the Chester County His-

torical Society and a descendant of early southeastern Pennsylvania Amish ancestors, reports seven deeds ranging in time from 1787 to 1827, in which there are references to 13 representatives of four Amish family names, including 4 Coffmans, 5 Zooks, 3 Lapps, and one Rickabaugh. Miss Lapp advises me that her survey of deeds is incomplete, having been made from time to time incident to other duties. It is thus possible that additional deeds will reveal a few more family names. Some names in the deeds repeat those in the wills, but allowing for probable duplications in the twelve documents there are references to 24 individuals who by their first and family names may be identified as members of the Amish community. They all occur in documents dating from 1786 to 1827, both of which years are well within the terminal dates marking the duration of the local Amish group as a living community.

Miss Lapp is the Historical Society representative mentioned earlier as the transcriber of the 39 gravestone inscriptions still decipherable in the East Whiteland township "Union Grave Yard." Among these there are 7 Zooks, 7 Coffmans, 5 Lapps, and 2 Rickabaughs. Not all individuals of these surnames were Amish, however, as is clearly indicated by their non-Amish first names and by their dates of death. Among the 7 Coffmans, for example, are the wife and two daughters of one "Isaac Z. Coffman, M.D.," who as a professional man could not have been Amish. Several of the individuals are clearly Amish, however, for their names are also recorded in legal documents relating to the "Amist Society." There are, in addition, the graves of several Amish women whose names are lacking in the legal records, but whose husbands' names occur in these sources.

It is thus possible to rescue five family names of members of the community from wills, deeds, and gravestone inscriptions. However, it is impossible from these to offer an estimate of the size of the community, for it is improbable that all family names became a matter of record and moreover here, as elsewhere in Amish communities, the number of family names is no indication of the size of the total community. There were here, as in most Amish communities, several resident families representative of each family name, and there were also in this small community several individuals with the same given as well as family name. Thus two Adam Rickabaughs are buried in the cemetery, one who died in 1804, and the other in 1825. There were also at least two Christian Zugs, father and son, one having made his will in 1786 and the other in 1836. The presence of identically named individuals in the same local community is commonly met with in Amish history.

From "genealogies, deeds, wills, and Mennonite historians" Miss Lapp has compiled a list of 15 local Amish families. Her list is undoubtedly incomplete, for

she tells me that she made her compilation without access to the Mast Family History which lists a number of Chester Valley Amish families related by marriage to the Lancaster County Amish Mast family. The Hertzler family history is also valuable in this connection, for the Hertzlers were related to the Zugs by marriage. Some of these Chester County families were large, with as many as 9 to 14 children. Thus John Coffman and his wife Mary Mast (a daughter of Amish Bishop Jacob Mast of Lancaster County) had 14 children, as did one of the Adam Rickabaughs and his wife. Jacob and Gertrude (Kenege) Zug had 13 children; Christian and Magdalene (Blank) Zug had 10; John Zug and his wife Elizabeth (Mast) had 9; another John Zug and his wife Catherine also had 9; Henry Zug and his wife Christiana (Kurtz) had 8; etc. That the typical Amish family has always been large is immediately apparent from perusal of the numerous privately published Amish genealogies, over forty of which have been printed to date.

A feature of interest and importance, which will be developed in a separate paper, is that family records indicate that many of the children of Chester County Amish families married non-Amish mates. Those who married out of their faith did not all move from the area, however. On the other hand, the Chester County Amish young people who married Amish mates chose them largely from other Amish communities and then moved to those communities. The Chester County community thus lost members by outmarriage and also by geographic removal. The younger members of this community either married out and joined other faiths, or married within the faith and moved away. Meanwhile, older members of course died, and the community thus gradually also expired.

Although it is obviously impossible to estimate the size of the community from the size of the family when the number of resident families is unknown, we are not entirely in the dark with respect to the size of this community. The first census of the United States, taken in 1790, which enumerated by named heads of families as well as by size of household, listed ten family heads with Amish surnames in four townships of eastern Chester County. These ten families had a total of 106 individual members, an average of 10.6 persons per family. Published family histories show that this census was decidedly incomplete for this community, and that the over-all under-enumeration for the group may have been as high as half of the total number. Past experience has proved that the Amish people have never fully co-operated with voluntary religious censuses, and it is also known that they unenthusiastically comply with laws requiring official enumerations. It is also well known that our first federal census was the least accurate one ever taken by our government. It seems therefore rea-

sonable to surmise that there may have been from 15 to 20 resident families, with from 175 to 200 individual members, in the Amish community at this time. It was apparently largest in the late 1790's, toward the turn of the century.

Population decline soon set in, however. The "Big Valley" Amish colony in Mifflin County was established in the early 1790's and Chester Valley Amish families are known to have contributed to the early growth of this new settlement in central Pennsylvania. Some Chester County young people found their marital mates among the Amish of Lancaster County and removed to that area, as we have seen. The original Chester County Amish settlers died in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. By 1816 the Amish group was so reduced in size and also so adjusted to non-Amish neighbors that the "Ominist Minist and German Baptists Societies" were sharing the meetinghouse both as a "House of Worship and school for the use of the said Societies" (Deed Book M-3, 331). In 1817 a member of a small group of Bernese Anabaptists who were journeying from Philadelphia to Ohio reported that "On the 16th of October we went 23 miles from Philadelphia to a settlement of five Amish families" and that "On the 17th we then went (on) to the Pequa. Here we stayed a week." Pequa refers to the Lancaster County Amish colony, of course, and the reference to the "five families" 23 miles from Philadelphia clearly locates them in Chester County. Ten years after the date of this visit Jacob Zook, "Trustee of the Great Valley Ominist Society in Chester County," petitioned the Pennsylvania legislature to sell the land and buildings thereon held by him as trustee for the group, the reason given being that "the Great Valley Ominist Society by death and removals had become nearly extinct" (Deed Book E-4, 310). In March 1827 the property was sold to John Malin, who in turn deeded it to five non-Amish "Trustees of (the) Valley Creek School." The building was thereafter used as a school, Baptist Church, and place of public assembly for the non-Amish inhabitants of the region. Finally, the last Amish family moved from Chester Valley to join co-religionists in Lancaster County in 1834. "The Chester County Amish congregational-community thus declined and finally became extinct as the result of the deaths of its older members, the geographical removal of those who remained Amish, and the outmarriage and acceptance of a non-Amish religion and way of life by those who remained in the Valley. Here, as elsewhere in the history of religiously centered communities, we find that small groups who accept secular beliefs and customs can not survive as sectarian societies.

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