FIRST GERMAN COLONY: An Anniversary Event Soon to Be Commemorated ...
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FIRST GERMAN COLONY

An Anniversary Event Soon to Be Commemorated Here.

FOUNDING OF GERMANTOWN

Arrival of First Organized Band of Immigrants Under Pastorius in 1683 to Escape the Rule of Prince and Priest—First Protest Against Slavery—Builders of the First Paper Mill.

The German societies of the District of Columbia are making preparations for the celebration of the 220th anniversary of the landing of the first German colonists in America. It will be held on or about November 23 to 28, on a scale far surpassing in grandeur and liberality anything of the sort ever attempted by the local Germans, and it is not going too far to say that it will only be eclipsed by the celebration which was held in 1883 in Germantown, Pa., in commemoration of the landing, 200 years before, of the first German settlers in this country. With characteristic patriotism and race pride, the German citizens of Washington have already subscribed a sum of money far in excess of actual requirements, and no stone will be left unturned in the effort to make the event one of the most notable demonstrations of patriotism and racial solidarity of the year. In view, therefore, of the approach of this celebration of one of the most important events in the early history of America, it is not to be wondered at that Washingtonians, viewing with astonishment the steps that are now being taken toward the realization of a fitting commemoration of the landing of the first German colony in America, should desire to know something further concerning an event about which little is known, despite the fact that much has been written on the subject.

Religion and Princely Misrule.

A distinguished American historical writer, reviewing the subject of the first German settlements in this country, thus strikes the keynote of the situation in the following apt terms:

"The large emigration of Germans to America in colonial times seems on first examination a mysterious phenomenon. The Germans were aliens in language among the mainly English-speaking colonists; were obliged to undertake a long and toilsome journey before reaching the ocean, over which they must sail for weeks and months, amidst the greatest hardships and dangers, before they could even attain to their desired haven; their own government, so soon as the size of the movement attracted attention, did all in its power to restrain it, and the English provincial authorities received the foreigners by no means with open arms; yet the cry was still 'They come.' The well-known energy, resolution, and fondness for emigration characterizing the Germans of earlier times—the merchants of the Hanse, whose flag was on every sea and whose warehouses and trading posts dotted every land and strand—had been crushed out of the seventeenth century Germans by the fearful prime forte [illegible] of the Thirty Years' war. So Americans who saw the tide of strangers rising on their shores were naturally surprised, and [illegible] few of their descendants who know the proportions of the early German emigration to America are still astonished at it."

Nevertheless, the causes were not far to seek. At the time these settlements were made Germany was undergoing trials of a character that would have proven the ruin of some nations, but which in that case proved her making and salvation. The Reformation had passed. The victory which the Protestants had gained over Europe had given way on every hand to indifference and formalism, and, taking advantage of this lull in the rising storm of revolution and freedom, the Jesuits, that new weapon of the church, had thrown themselves into the breach, prosecuting their cause so diligently that by the middle of the seventeenth century they had reconquered for the Holy Mother Church over half of the countries which in the preceding century had gone over to Protestantism.

In Germany honest men found satisfaction neither in Lutheranism nor Catholicism, and thus it happened that the dawn of the seventeenth century saw Germany the hotbed of every strange doctrine which the mind of man could devise. Some, of course, were the mere froth of idle dreamers, but the majority of the adherents of these new and strange tenets were honest and practical men, the groundwork of whose [illegible] was a love of freedom and a desire [illegible] of the two great curses of [illegible] European society, namely, [illegible]. All Germany was [illegible] tyrants, so that it is little wonder that the best men and women [illegible] preferred the uncertainties [illegible] among aliens to a miserable existence [illegible] to the whims and caprices of petty tyrants.

William Penn Becomes Interested.

These facts were well known to William Penn [illegible] time he formulated his plan for establishing a haven for harassed and persecuted sects in America. In fact, the Quakers were a ramification of the German Mennonites, who were in turn the descendants and successors of the Waldenses, so that in 1677, when William Penn paid a visit to Holland and Germany, he found thousands of good people who thought, worshiped, and believed as he and his brother and sister Quakers believed.

In Holland and Germany he met the Mennonites, whose martyrdom-roll, even at [illegible], was a long one, and, [illegible] he could not escape the [illegible] and longing to be rid of [illegible] religious tyranny, which was at that time universal throughout Germany and the Low Countries. Consequently, it is not at all surprising that when [illegible] years later, Penn obtained from the English king a grant of the territory of Pennsylvania, he wrote back to [illegible] directing his friend, Benjamin Furly, to recommend Pennsylvania as [illegible] to the oppressed sects of Germany. [illegible] be termed [illegible] issued by Furley in the German [illegible] the new territory [illegible]. These were scattered [illegible] Germany. They had the [illegible] heard by Penn, and some months [illegible] Furley organized two colonization [illegible], one at Frankfort-on-the-Main and the other at Crefield, Germany. The Frankfort company, despite the fact that it numbered among its stockholders many distinguished men and women [illegible], never amounted to much, but the one at Crefield, made up of Mennonite weavers, was more active. However, [illegible] played an important part in circulating the literature sent over by Furley, [illegible] led to the first colonial [illegible] of Germans to America.

Among the number of Mennonites who longed for some relief from the conditions which surrounded them was Francis Daniel Pastorius, a man who had traveled and read a great deal for one of that day and time, and who, moreover, was a man of original views and energetic character. In one of his autobiographical memoirs, Pastorius thus describes how he [illegible] the determination of leading a colony of his co-religionists to the New World. He says: "Upon my return to Frankfort in 1682 I was glad to enjoy the company of my former acquaintances and Christian friends assembled together in a house called the Saalhof, viz., Dr. Spener, Jacobus von de Walle, Eleanor von Merlau, &c., who sometimes made mention of William Penn, of Pennsylvania, and showed me letters from Benjamin Furley; also printed relations concerning said province. Finally the whole secret could not be withheld from me that they had purchased 25,000 acres of land in this remote part of the world. Some of them entirely resolved to transport themselves, families and all. This begot such a desire in my soul to continue in their society and with them to lead a quiet, godly, and honest life in a howling wilderness that by several letters I requested my father's consent, besides 250 reichsthalers, whereupon I went to Krisheim and immediately prepared for the journey." Thus the first emigration of Germans to this country was from religious motives. It is true that the wars waged by the French against the German States under their kings—Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI—began in 1673, but it was not until 1690 that they became so serious as to drive whole communities of Rhineland Germans to this country. Accordingly, a company of immigrants was made up, and Pastorius sent on in advance to prepare the way. This company, all of whom were Mennonites, set sail from Frankfort in the ship Concord, reaching Delaware Bay and Philadelphia on October 6, 1683.

The First German Immigrants.

In her excellent work entitled "The Germans in Colonial Times," Miss Lucy F. Bittinger states that the exact number of the colonists who came over in the Concord is not definitely known, for the reason that the master of that vessel entered everything as freight. In the master's accounts, it appears that the ship landed some "thirty-three frieghts," which includes both passengers and baggage, and that inasmuch as a child of eight or ten years was counted as forming "a quarter of a freight," it is hard to tell what the actual number was to a certainty. It is believed, however, that thirteen families, or, in other words, forty or forty-two individuals, were very near the exact number of the first German colony in America. Following their landing a warrant was issued by Penn and his coadjutors placing at the disposal of these Mennonites 6,000 acres of land near Philadelphia, which from that time forward was known as "the German township," and which finally, as both towns grew in size, came to be known as "Germantown."

Such was the first German settlement in America. Subsequently, from 1690 to 1780, during the wars waged by Louis XV and Louis XVI of France against the German States, when the Palatinate was desolated time and again, the tide of German emigration to this country reached the high water mark, but this—the landing of Pastorius, with his "thirty-three freights," was the initial movement in German emigration to the New World.

In all history there is no more striking example of Teutonic honesty than in the history of this colony. Philosophers, political economists, and sophists would have the world believe that when men are given free reign to do as they like it is not long before they either degenerate to the level of savages or else place their necks under the yoke of some tyrant worse by far than the one from which they had previously escaped. That, in other words, humanity needs and requires a deal of care and watching, yet nothing so completely contradicts these sophistries as the history of the Germantown colony. Like many another set of honest men, they simply asked to be let alone. The first season was rather hard on the new settlers, speaking of which Pastorius says: "It could not be described, nor would it be believed by coming generations, in what want and need and with what exertion, contentment and persistent industry this German township started." Yet all were cheerful and full of hope, so much so that Pastorius, who was of a prophetic turn, perpetrated a long poem upon the future of the settlement, much of which was subsequently fulfilled to the letter. The first stanza of this poem is as follows:

> Hail to posterity!
> Hail, future men of Germanopolis.
> Let the young generations yet to be
> Look kindly upon this:
> Think how your fathers left their native land—
> Dear German-land, O sacred heart, and homes—
> And where the wild beast roams,
> In patience planned [illegible]

First Protest Against Slavery.

In their own country their energies had been hampered and bound down by all manner of petty laws and prohibitions. In their new home, where they were free of all this, they gave free rein to their love of industry, and the result was the first paper mill in America, built by Willem Rittinghuys, the progenitor of the famous David Rittenhouse; linen works where, for a long time, the best linen goods in America were manufactured; spinning mills which were the forerunners of the present Germantown [illegible] industry; distilleries, furniture factories. In short, the town soon became the greatest manufacturing center on the continent. True to their religious beliefs, the Germans who came over under Pastorius were averse to negro slavery from the start. Unlike the English Quakers, they would neither tolerate nor wink at a traffic which, from their viewpoint, was radically evil and disgraceful, so that, consequently, it is not surprising that the first anti-slavery petition to appear in this country emanated from these good people. This petition, signed by Pastorius, [illegible] Rittinghuys, Reynier Jansen (an amusing old German printer, and an unusually bad one at that), Gerrit Hendricks, the two Op Den Graeffs, and others, was presented at the regular monthly meeting of the Quakers, held at the residence of Richard Worrell, in Philadelphia, in 1688. In the light of modern thought, its [illegible] is positively amusing. Part of it read thus:

> [illegible] or handled in [illegible] a slave for all time [illegible]. How fearfull and faint-hearted are [illegible] they see a strange vessel, being afraid it should be a Turk, and they [illegible] slaves in Turkey. Now [illegible] than Turks doe? [illegible] which say they are Christians. * * * though they be black [illegible] liberty to have [illegible] white men. * * * To bring men hither [illegible] sell them againft their will we [illegible] against.

If there was any one thing of which these settlers had [illegible] prior to their emigration to America it was government, and so it happened that, in 1691, when Germantown was incorporated, no one wanted to hold office, and government perished, and remained dead for years, through lack of political ambition. Never before had the world beheld the sight of a thrifty community, prospering, thriving, [illegible], and spreading out without the sign of a court, magistrate, policeman, or officer of any sort. When in after years, a jail was built, it long time remained idle for lack of evil doers.

This was not the only curious thing which happened to the first German settlement in America. Twenty years before their arrival, during the time that New York was a Dutch colony, the government of the Netherlands planted a colony of Dutch Mennonites, under Cornelius Plockhoy, in New Jersey. Later, when England undertook to wrest the colony of New Amsterdam from the Dutch, some British ruffians descended, one fine morning, on the peaceful Mennonite colony, and put the settlers to the sword, none escaping except Plockhoy and his wife, for which service the English viking was knighted. For years Plockhoy and his wife wandered about in the wilderness, living among the Indians, at last to find a home among the people of Germantown.

Pastorius, the leader and founder of the Germantown colony, died in 1719. For some reason, his burial place was lost, and, in speaking of the matter, Miss Bittinger says that, like his Israelitish prototype, one might also say of the German Moses that "No man knoweth his sepulchre to this day."

Pastorius was the author of several very quaint and curious books, which, with some of his personal belongings, are in the possession of the Pennsylvania Historical Society; and an effort is now being made by the local Germans to bring them to Washington for exhibit during the celebration, in November, of the founding of one of the most remarkable colonies ever planted by the German race.

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