

THE MAKING OF A GERMAN AMERICAN: THE WEIERBACH SAGA

by Robin Errickson

From our earliest school days, most of us have learned American Colonial History from a distinctly Anglican viewpoint. History textbook writers have neglected to inform us that other nationalities, besides the English, also lived in Colonial America, and, in fact, played a major role in the transformation of America from thirteen colonies into a cohesive unit-- the United States. These other nationalities deserve far more than the neglect they have received at the hands of historians. Often, these minorities had to struggle for acceptance in the dominant Anglican culture: they had to learn to speak and write a new language; settle their families in a new, oftentimes harsh, land; establish a social ranking; and, finally, they had to forget old loyalties to former kings and countries and accept the Anglican political status quo. Most non-Anglican immigrants eventually did find their niche in Colonial American society, but none did so with more dedication than the Pennsylvania Germans. Although they never received the recognition of their English counterparts, the Pennsylvania Germans contributed greatly to the settlement of Pennsylvania; the Weyerbacher family, who settled in Pennsylvania during the German Great Migration, is representative of these pioneers.

Germany in the centuries following the Reformation could be an uncomfortable place to live; religious conflicts, political upheavals, peasant unrest, and forced military service all contributed to tensions forming on the German frontier. Constant shifts of the ruling powers also shifted the religious loyalties of the German provinces, and the War of the Austrian Succession and the Austro-Prussian conflict over Silesia, caused many Palatine Germans to consider emigrating to the New World.

William Penn had visited the Rhineland in 1671, and again in 1677, to discuss mutual problems of persecuted peoples. After receiving the Royal Charter to his American lands he offered religious and political freedom to Germans who were willing to settle in Pennsylvania. In 1683, Germantown was founded; soon, a thriving Pennsylvania German population developed. News of William Penn's land offer quickly reached the ears of families throughout the German Rhineland. In the German Rhineland, there is a tiny hamlet named Weyerbach after the small brook that flows through the town. When a fifteenth-century man left this village and moved to the nearby town of Baumholder, he took the name "Weyerbacher", or "man from Weyerbach' village," to distinguish himself from the other men of Baumholder. The Weyerbachers gradually grew in social stature and in wealth, and, in 1686, one Hans Otto Weyerbacher is recorded as juror, burger, school teacher, and Burgermeister, or mayor, of Baumholder. But, in spite of the family's distinguished position, hard times hit them, too.¹

In the 1740's, Germany was still recovering from the famine and harsh weather that had swept Europe earlier in the century. In addition, Germany was still racked by religious conflict and major political wars. Since involuntary military service was the rule in the German provinces, it is hardly surprising that Johann Nicholas Weyerbacher and his three

sons of draftable age decided to accept William Penn's offer of land and emigrate to America.²

Johann Nicholas, then aged 50, his wife, Catherina Magdalena, 47, and their five children, Isaac, Johannes, Henry, Elizabeth, and Anna Margaret, began their long journey to America in 1748. The family followed the usual route of German immigrants: they traveled north along the Rhine, through France, to Rotterdam, in the Netherlands. There they boarded the English vessel Edinburgh, which took them first to England, and then to America.³

The Edinburgh, captained by James Russell docked in Philadelphia Harbor on September 16, 1751. Her list of passengers included one Joh. Nicklaus Weyerbacher, and his sons, Isaac and Johannes; no other family names were included on the list because minor males and women were excluded from passenger lists at that time. Immediately after disembarking, the ship's passengers were led to the Philadelphia Court House. That day, Johann Nicholas and his family swore allegiance to King George II of England, and promised to obey his laws.⁴ After a journey of over three years, the Weyerbachers had finally arrived.

Although the voyage was undoubtedly difficult and very consuming both physically and economically, Johann Nicholas and his family arrived better off than most of their fellow passengers. Often, emigrating Germans could not afford to pay the price of a voyage to the New World. These Germans were offered passage to America in exchange for their promise to work for American citizens upon arrival in the colonies. The immigrants signed a contract in which they became indentured to a citizen, called a redemptioner, who reimbursed the shipping company the price of the immigrants' voyage; often the term of indenture was seven years.⁵

Johann Nicholas, however, did not become indentured. He had money enough to pay his own fare, the fares of his wife and children, plus the fares of three other passengers.^{6*} He was obviously in a comfortable financial position.

When he settled in Whitpain Township, then part of Philadelphia County, Johann Nicholas' personal finances suffered no loss. Together with his sons Isaac and Johannes, he established a family weaving business--a business which supplied his family nicely for almost three years.

Weaving in the eighteenth century differed greatly from nineteenth-century weaving. In the 1700's, before the invention and use of the Jacquard loom, farmers sheared their own sheep by hand; they then gave the wool to the women for scouring and cleaning, carding, spinning, and dyeing. Only after these extensive preparations had been made was the wool taken to the weaver's to be woven into clothing and, especially, coverlets.

*Although Johann Nicholas is listed as having paid the fares of three other persons, no other mention is made of this, and it is not known what happened to them.

Upon receiving the wool, the weaver commenced his work. He weaved the wool into strips, which were then sewn or woven together to form a large coverlet. Such a coverlet often took eight days to complete; the weaver would usually work longer than eight hours Per day. The average cost of a woven coverlet was one dollar.⁷

The Weyerbacher family brought their weaving talents with them from Germany, where their family had also been weavers. Also from Germany came the Weyerbachers love of bright colors, geometric and natural symbols, and sentimental themes; through craftsmen such as the Weyerbachers, the Old World Rhineland peasant style was transplanted to the New World.⁸ Today, looking at the woven Weyerbacher coverlets, still in the possession of family members, one can see common characteristics: often the coverlets were dyed red or blue, both because the Germans liked bright colors, and because these dyes were most common in Colonial America; they used typical German symbols in their work-- usually distelfinks or tulips; and the coverlets were always signed or initialed, and dated. Since they worked near the city of Philadelphia, the Weyerbachers received more than average payment for their coverlets; the weavings brought two, or even three, dollars apiece. These earnings went a long way to help establish the growing Weyerbacher family.⁹

By 1754, Johann Nicholas was ready to move on and up. That same year, he bought from Conrad Reizley Jr. the Reizley Plantation for £256. The Reizley Plantation, a 163 1/3 acre farm in Bucks County, was deeded to the Reizleys by William Penn; this lot, later to be called Springfield Central Farm, is located along what is now State Road, Pleasant Valley, Pennsylvania. By combining subsistence farming with their weaving trade, the Weyerbachers were able to live comfortably and profitably.¹⁰

After moving to the land in Bucks County, Johann Nicholas and his sons erected a log cabin and several outbuildings. The family continued to farm, but changes were occurring rapidly. The girls had both married and gone; Johannes had married Catherina Best and moved to Buffalo Valley in Northumberland County (now Union County); Henry met and married a woman named Barbara and moved to another farm in Pleasant Valley, where they raised their family. Finally, in 1765, Johann Nicholas and his wife deeded the farm outright to their son Isaac, who, although he had married Anna Elizabeth Frey*, had expressed an interest in remaining on the farm.

In deeding the farm to Isaac, Johann, in addition to providing social security for himself in his old age, also showed his talent in, and shrewdness for, business matters, for while the deed states that Johann Nicholas and his wife, Catherina Magdalena, signed over the farm "in consideration of the Natural Love and Affection" they bore their son, they also charged him £360--a sum of £104 more than they had paid only eleven years earlier.¹¹

*Anna Frey was a sister to Joseph Frey, the man who married Isaac's sister, Elizabeth. Over the years, the Freys and the Weyerbachers have intermarried several times.

Isaac and Johann Nicholas apparently succeeded in their farming endeavors, though, for Isaac bought two more small tracts of land, and the Bucks County Tax Records for the year 1775 list one Isaac Wirebeck as owning 172 acres of land, three horses, six cattle, and eight sheep.¹² Johann Nicholas, when he died in 1778, left an inventory of his belongings, which included a couple of dozen books (expensive and highly prized items in the eighteenth century), and a large wardrobe consisting of two coats, six jackets, three pairs of breeches, four pairs of trousers, and ten shirts. Other improvements were made at the homestead: a barn was built; two silos were constructed; and the old log cabin was replaced with a two-story stone house* in which lived Johann Nicholas, Catherina Magdalena, Isaac, Anna Elizabeth, and their seven children.¹³ And so the Weyerbachers grew and prospered.

As the Weyerbachers grew in wealth, so, too, did they advance in community standing. Johann Nicholas, especially, was much sought after for advice in money matters, and the whole family became involved in civic and religious affairs.

Because they were so few in number, Church Germans-- Lutherans and Reformed-- worked together to construct churches which they shared; these structures were known as Union Churches. The Lutheran and Reformed Church members shared the building, the burial grounds and the surrounding property. They met only on alternating Sundays, though. Hymnals were also shared, but each church used their own, separate liturgy and Bibles. As more German emigrants arrived, and congregations grew larger, the Union Churches began to dissolve.¹⁴

Back in Germany, the Weyerbachers are recorded as baptized members of the Baumholder Reformed Church, and Johann and Catherina Magdalena baptized their children into the Reformed faith.¹⁵ In addition, Johann. Nicholas must have reaffirmed his faith upon arrival in the colonies because, in 1763, he was one of the eight trustees (four Lutheran, four Reformed) for the newly formed Springfield Union Church. His initials NW-B (Nicholas Weyer-Bacher) appeared on the cornerstone of the second Union Church, and today that stone appears to the left of the front doors of the present church building. The church records also indicate that the Weyerbachers regularly attended church: Barbara Weierbach is mentioned several times for having communed, while Isaac and Anna sponsored several children in Baptism; that is, they served as godparents or guardians for those children.¹⁶

But pioneering in Pennsylvania was not all religion, prosperity, and harmony; there was danger in Eastern Pennsylvania as well. In 1737, William Penn's sons--John, Thomas, and Richard--who had inherited Penn's Pennsylvania lands supported James Logan's scheme to swindle the Delaware Indians out of their lands along the Delaware River, and through Bucks and Northumberland Counties (the Walking Purchase). The Delaware's regarded this "purchase" as an insult to the honor of their nation. In addition, the Indians were upset over the trade of rum to the Delaware tribe.¹⁷

*In his will, Isaac left his wife, Anne, the back room of this house for her personal use, until she died. Part of this stone structure remains as an addition to the present owner's Victorian brick home, located at this site.

The Indians, themselves, recognized the debilitating effects that rum had on their people; they would have gladly seen the laws prohibiting the sale of rum strictly enforced. But, the laws were not enforced, and rum sales continued to irritate the Delaware's leaders. Also contributing to hostilities was the abuse they received from white settlers. Although Indians were held responsible for property damage, white settlers were not penalized for destroying Indian properties. In the eighteenth century, Indian life and property was held worthless by white authorities. After tolerating such abuses for many years, the Indians were angry. In the 1750's, the Indians began to fight back, raiding and terrorizing out-settlements.¹⁸

These relatively isolated were only part of a larger scene, however. In 1754, the French and Indian War, part of a series of wars between France and England, erupted. Although most Pennsylvania German settlers stayed out of the conflict to tend their farms, Johannes (the son) decided to fight for the English and enlisted in the company of John Nicholas Weatherholt, stationed in Hydelberg Township, Northampton County, in 1758; he enlisted for three years, but he continued his service until the war ended in 1763.¹⁹

Danger from the Indians did not end after the French had been defeated, though. Raiding parties continued, and many white men, women, and children, especially from the Pennsylvania German out-settlements, were taken prisoner or killed; two Weyerbacher women were among those stolen from their homes. Johannes Weyerbacher had settled in Buffalo Valley, had married Catherina Best, become a tailor, and fathered eight children. In 1781, a marauding band of Indians attacked the Buffalo Valley settlement, taking Johannes' daughters Elizabeth Catherine, and Anna. Although Anna later escaped and returned to her family, Elizabeth did not. As the 1781 entry from the Annals of Buffalo Valley state:

John Weirbach's daughter (sister of Nicholas and John), of Buffalo, was carried off by Indians. She married among them, and after the war her father went West, and found her, but could not induce her to return, though he offered every inducement he could. She preferred the wild life of the savages.²⁰

Elizabeth's experiences among the Indians are not altogether unique. Although their reasons were incomprehensible to colonists at that time, a large number of captured whites chose, of their own free will, to remain with the Indians who had taken them. These were whites who were not killed during the Indian attack on their settlement; they were whites who were taken back to the tribe where they were adopted into an Indian family in order to replace a deceased member of that family. Despite tales of savage behavior, these whites found many of the same values as were present in white society: the Indians showed a strong sense of community, believed in absolute honesty, and showered their new members with abundant love. According to many accounts, these "white Indians" found their new life to be more attractive than their previous existence due to the social equality, mobility, adventure, and the "most perfect freedom, the ease of living, and the absence of those cares and corroding solitudes which so often prevail with us."²¹

Because of her firm determination in refusing to return, the family had thought never to hear from Elizabeth again. But, as the court record states:

“. . . and the said John Weierbacher (faded) to Elizabeth Beef of Barton Township, Province of Upper Canada, eldest daughter of the said deceased, as appears by certain release and power of attorney dated at Upper Canada the twelfth day of November 1808 recorded at Sunbury in the county of Northumberland, Pennsylvania."²²

Twenty-seven years after her capture by Indians, Elizabeth Catherine had sent back a Power of Attorney to settle her father's estate. Despite her preference for the "savage" life, Elizabeth apparently found it necessary to claim her inheritance.

In 1776, danger returned once more to the Pennsylvania frontier. This time, however, it was the British, not the Indians, who caused the panic.

Contrary to their reactions toward enlistment in the French and-Indian War, more Pennsylvania Germans responded to the call to arms during the American Revolution. This attitude shift is easily explained. First, due to the economic and physical oppressions the Germans had suffered at the hands of German princes, most Pennsylvania German settlers were extremely anti- monarchical and, thus, tended to support the colonial war effort. Second, although there was no Church tax levied in Pennsylvania, many relations of Pennsylvania Germans who resided in other states were forced to pay high taxes for the Episcopal Church (the Church of England), even though they did not enjoy equal rights or status as the Episcopalians.²³ This blatant inequality led to violent anti-English attitudes among German church-goers. Finally, an English victory threatened all colonial landholders; all those Germans who owned an appreciable amount of property feared losing their lands and so opposed British rule. It is no surprise, therefore, that when George Washington issued his call to arms, Pennsylvania German troops from Reading were the first to answer his plea for help.²⁴

Although many Pennsylvania Germans joined the Continental Army, many more joined the local militia-- Isaac Weierbacher, at age 47, was among the first to enlist in the Bucks County Militia, organized primarily for home defense. Those Pennsylvania Germans (and Anglo-Americans, too) who enlisted in the local militia fought mostly to retain their homes and businesses. They hated forced military service (a draft had been enacted) and valued their freedom too highly to gamble it away on an uncertain cause. In addition, most civilians saw the Continental Army as a band of vagabonds, rabble-rousers, and bums; they were regarded with distaste and disgust.

But, when the Continental Army, under George Washington was stalled for the winter at Valley Forge, the Pennsylvania Germans, civilians and militia, contributed* grain, guns, cannon and cannonballs, clothes, and foodstuffs which enabled the Continental Army to survive.²⁵ In fact, as Washington himself testified,

*"the readiness with which the militia of Pennsylvania have shown in engaging in the service of their country at an inclement season of the year, when my army was reduced to a handful of men, and our affairs were in the most critical situation, does great honor to them."*²⁶

From soldiering to farming, the Weyerbachers worked steadily to make their place in American society. They were simple folk who came to the colonies in order to freely practice their religion, and to escape from the persecution and oppression so often found in the Old Country. In America they found the opportunities for security and economic advancement. Although the Weyerbachers and other Pennsylvania Germans did not fully assimilate into society until the nineteenth century (some, like the Amish, have never assimilated), their adopted country demanded, and received, their loyalty. In only a short time following their emigration, the Weyerbachers had worked for, earned, and received the social status available through the ownership of land, and they made strong political statements by serving in the French and Indian War, and the Revolutionary War. Despite their devotion to their fellow Germans, the Weyerbachers willingly committed themselves to the new order of the United States. Their migration experience and the story of their struggles are hardly unique; like all pioneers, they labored hard and developed skills to firmly implant themselves in the history of the United States.

After the Revolution, the Weyerbachers were once more able to settle down and farm in peace. Isaac, who died in 1805, left the Springfield Central Farm to his eldest son, Henry, who left it to his son, and so on. . . the farm remained among Isaac's descendents until the early 1900's. Johannes' family moved to Buffalo Valley; after his death in 1790 his sons, having Anglicized their name to Wirebaugh in order to assimilate more readily, moved West into Ohio, [where Catherina Wirebaugh (Best) died], and then even further West. They were as much pioneers as their grandparents before them. Henry's family remained in Pleasant Valley where they farmed and operated a general store.

While they are not noteworthy for any outstanding or famous acts, Johann Nicholas, Catherina Magdalena, and their children are remembered by their descendents as true pioneers. They are important for they, and others like them, are what the strength of the United States was built on. Today, Weyerbacher descendents are scattered across the fifty states and Canada (some are even among the Indian tribe that abducted Elizabeth over 200 years ago). They have fought in every war the United States has participated in; as soldiers, farmers, teachers, lawyers, politicians, and doctors, the contributions of the Weyerbachers have been invaluable.

*Many sold their products to the highest bidder, whether British or American. The Pennsylvania Germans, however, are recorded as giving their supplies "cheerfully and unsparingly."

ENDNOTES

1. From the papers of Warren Wirebach, Family History (unpublished), compiled and written by Dr. Lily Weierbach and Warren Wirebach.
2. Wirebach papers.
3. From the speech given by Betty Weierbach Marshall and Russell Weierbach at the Weyerbacher Reunion, July 11, 1982.
4. Ralph Beaver Strassburger, Pennsylvania German Pioneers, Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, 1966, p 461.
5. La Vern J. Rippley, The German -Americans, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976, p 31.
6. L. Wirebach papers.
7. Guy F. Rennert, Pennsylvania German Coverlets, published by Mrs. C. Naaman Keyser, Kutztown Publishing; Company, 1947, pp 2-7.
8. Margaret I. Schifler, Historical Needlework of Pennsylvania, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1968, p 148.
9. Weierbach Speech, July 11, 1982.
10. Ibid.
11. Deed: Nicholas Weyerbacher and his wife, Catherina Magdalena, to son, Isaac, 1765.
12. Bucks County Tax Records, 1693-1778, compiled by Terry A. McNealy and Francis Wise White, 1962.
13. Wirebach papers; the inventory of Johann Weyerbacher.
14. William T. Parsons, The Pennsylvania Dutch: A Persistent Minority, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976, pp 65-68.
15. Wirebach papers; notes taken at the Koblenz Archives, Baumholder, West Germany.
16. From the Reformed Church records of the Springfield Union Church (now Trinity Lutheran Church, Pleasant Valley, Pennsylvania), 1753-1790.
17. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg Richards, The Pennsylvania German in the French and Indian War, The Pennsylvania German Society, Lancaster, PA., 1906, pp 20-23.
18. S.K. Stevens, The Pennsylvania Colony, Crowell- Collier Press. Collier-Macmillan Limited, London, 1970, p 46.
19. Pennsylvania Archives, Series 5, Volume 1.
20. Annals of Buffalo Valley, Pennsylvania, 1755-1855, p 206.
21. James Axtell, The European and the Indian, Oxford University Press, New York, 1981, p 206.
22. From papers on file at Sunbury, Northumberland County Seat, Northumberland County, ?A., 1808.
23. Rippley, pp 32-33.
24. Parsons, p 139.
25. Parsons, p 156.
26. Henry M.M. Richards, The Pennsylvania German in the Revolutionary War, The Pennsylvania German :society, Lancaster, PA., 1908, p 236.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Annals of Buffalo Valley, Pennsylvania, collated by John Blair Linn.

Axtell, James, The European and the Indian, Oxford University Press, New York, 1981.

Bucks County Tax Records, 1693-1778, Compiled by Terry A. McNealy and Francis Wise White, 1982.

Church Records of the Reformed Congregation of Springfield Union Church, Pleasant Valley, Bucks County, PA., 1753-1790.

Deed: Johann Nicholas, and his wife, Catherina Magdalena, to their son, Isaac, 1765; from the original; in the possession of Russell Weierbach, Quakertown, PA.

From the papers of Warren Wirebach, Family History(unpublished) compiled and written by Dr. Lily Weierbach and Warren Wirebach.

From the speech given by Betty Weierbach Marshall and Russell Weierbach, at the Weyerbacher Reunion, July 11, 1982.

Parsons, William T., The Pennsylvania Dutch: A Persistent Minority; Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976.

Pennsylvania Archives, Series 5, Volume 1, 1754.

Rennert, Guy F., Pennsylvania German Coverlets, Kutztown Publishing Company, 1947.

Richards, Henry M.M., The Pennsylvania German in the French and Indian War, The Pennsylvania German Society, Lancaster, PA., 1906.

Richards, Henry N.M., The Pennsylvania German in the Revolutionary War, The Pennsylvania German Society, Lancaster, PA., 1908.

Ripley, La Vern J., The German-Americans, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976.

Schifler, Margaret B., Historical Needlework of Pennsylvania, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1968.

Stevens, S.K., The Pennsylvania Colony, Crowell-Collier Press, Collier-Macmillan Limited, London, 1970.

Strassburger, Ralph Beaver, Pennsylvania German Pioneers, Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, 1966.

Weierbacher Papers, on file at the Sunbury Court House, Northumberland County, PA., 1808.