

# Brush Creek Church History

In 1768 the Indian treaty came. They sold the Pennsylvania lands west of the Alleghenies for \$10,000 in supplies and money plus an unlimited supply of rum. William Penn officially opened the land to settlement. Into the thick, heavy primeval silence came the permanent dwellers. The eleventh and last county in Pennsylvania to be formed under Penn Proprietary Government was named Westmoreland after a county in England; within it was a township called Hempfield and within the township a tiny settlement called Brush Creek. These were the events that led to the very beginning.

The 1768 purchase treaty opened the Western Pennsylvania lands legally. Virginia under Governor Dunmore claimed the Ohio country. The Pennsylvania Scotch-Irish and Germans who were already there did not approve of Virginia's slavery and their religious laws; they insisted that the land was Pennsylvania's. The Indians who were there before any of them did not approve of the cruel treatment they received at the hands of the Virginia Governor, so they proclaimed themselves at war, but only with the Virginians. Unfortunately, it was difficult for them to tell which settlers were which so forts and blockhouses grew around the little settlements — Fort Ligonier, Fort Walthours near the Pennsylvania Turnpike east of Irwin, Fort Allen near Zion (Harrold's) Lutheran Church.

As predominantly German settlers came into the Brush Creek watershed they found themselves caught up in these pieces of history. Life was building rough cabins to house a family, and running periodically to the forts to avoid annihilation. Those who came were strictly religious people of the Reformed and Lutheran faiths. This isolation and fear must have given even deeper meaning to their religious beliefs. From the very beginning, which could have been any time after 1763, they had some form of church. At first it was traveling from home to home where schoolmasters served as preachers. The sermons came from sermon books brought from the East. They sang German hymns, they prayed, they listened to the imported sermons. This was their early church service. They were German Reformed and they were German Lutheran, but they were also similar in doctrine, therefore it was natural for them to coexist and cooperate. At times their services were within the confines of the forts. The actual date unknown, they finally built a log schoolhouse, which they also used as a church, near the Brush Creek. Following the natural progression of history, this was Brush Creek about 1770.

## IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning there was a small settlement with a log school-church situated not far from where the Brush Creek Church now stands, and from the beginning there was the Indian threat. Petitions were sent from time to time to Governor John Penn requesting help. First there was the Pennsylvania-Virginia dispute; then came the American Revolution which by proportionate immensity and patriotic fervor overshadowed territorial disputes. The British bribed the Indians to plague the frontier settlements. There was Adam Saams'

Blockhouse near the present Long Run Presbyterian Church with a group of frontier defenders who claimed they could outrun as well as outfight the Indians. There were rifles carried constantly to and from worship and rested nearby during services. Some settlers left for more protected areas. There is even indication that at one time the Brush Creek Settlement was about to be abandoned when help from nearby forts arrived and the decision was reversed.

The Colonial War drew the young men to the East, to Washington's aid. The 8th Pennsylvania Regiment left, over the mountains, and the frontier was at the mercy of the Indians. At Brush Creek a string of schoolmaster preachers led to a teacher lay-preacher named Balthaser Meyer. He worked with both the older Zion (Harrold's) Settlement and Brush Creek but drew closer to Brush Creek in the early 1780's. He was there as the Revolution began to draw to a close.

To the Honourable Brigadier

General Irvine Commanding the Troops in the  
Western Department.

The Petition of the Frontier Inhabitants of Brush  
Creek Most humbly Herewith.

That Since the Commencement of the present War the Unabated fury of the Savages hath been so particularly directed against us, that we are at last Reduced to Such a degree of dispondency and distrefs that we are now ready to sink under the infupportable prefure of this Very great Calamity. — That from our Fortitude & Persenerance in Supporting the line of the Frontier & thereby refisting the incefsant depredations of the Enemy, Our bravest & most Active Men have been Cut off from time to time, by which Our effective force is so greatly reduced, that the idea of further refistance is now totally vanished. — That the feason of Our Harvest is now fast approaching, in which we Must endeavour to gather in our Fcanty Crops, or otherwise Subject Ourselves to another Calamity equally Terrible with that of the Scalping Knife, & from fatal experience Our fears Suggest to us every Misery that have usually Accompanied that Season. — That we are greatly alarmed at the Misfortune attending the late greatly Excurfion to the Enemy Country, as we have every Reason to believe that their Triumphs upon that Occafion will be attended with fresh & still more Vigorous Excurfions

In this Perilous Situation Sir we Submitt Our case to your Consideration & beg that it may be applyd to the feelings of humanity & Benevolence which we firmly believe You Pofefs; — Wherefore we Humbly Pray for Such an augmentation of Our Guard thro the Course of the harvest Season as will enable them to render us some efential Service. — But as We Know from experience that no Certain dependance Can be placed in the Militia upon these

Ocasions, as some failure may probably happen on their Part thro the Course of that Season — & as we have hither to been accustomed to the protection of the Continental troops during the Harvest Season, We further Pray, that we may be favoured with a Guard of your Soldiers, if it is not inconsistent with their duties enjoynd on You — But particularly we Pray, That whatever Guard maybe allotted for us in future, may be ordered into the Inhabited Stations along the frontier, where they can be of Service either, in Covering Our Working parties in the Fields, or Protecting our defenceless families in Our absence. And your Petitioners as in duty Bound Shall Pray.

Brush Creek

June 22d 1782

It was about 3 weeks before the last hostile act of the Revolutionary War, the Saturday, July 13 burning of Hannastown by British Tories and Indians, that the school-church building was burned. The requested troops never did arrive.

They came back from the forts to which they had fled and found destruction. There were two alternatives — they could leave or rebuild. The second structure that rose at Brush Creek, while crude, at least more closely resembled a church. It was built of logs cut from the forest; the floor was roughly smoothed logs called puncheon, the seats hewn logs, a table served as an altar, and there was one door at the gable end. The new church stood in the center of the old graveyard surrounded by fruit trees and some members of the congregations picked apples off the trees which were near windows.

From the beginning there had been only laymen and an occasional clergyman traveling through to minister to Brush Creek and Zion. Their ministries often included the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Many of the very early records of the church were written in German and were lost down through the years by English speaking descendants who, unable to translate, did not appreciate their significance to the church. This lent even more importance to the documents that remained — scraps of history.

The country was struggling under its first gasps of free air; Brush Creek was rebuilding and almost simultaneous to the first real church building, came the first real ministers — over the "impassable" mountains from the East, one Lutheran, one Reformed. Rev. Anthony Ulrich Luetge arrived in 1782. He had a good education in theology and Balthaser Meyer ordained him privately. In 1785 he asked the Ministereum of Pennsylvania to be received as an ordained minister, but he was refused and was not officially granted a license to preach until 1788 when his continued work in this area proved his right to preach. To the Reformed congregation came Reverend John William Weber. Rev. Weber's ordination was reported by the Coetus of Pennsylvania to the Synod of Holland in a letter dated 1774. Minutes of Coetal meetings showed that in May, 1782 a settlement in Westmoreland County petitioned for a German minis-

ter and that Rev. Weber was to be recommended. Again minutes showed that Rev. Weber actually took charge of several congregations including Ft. Pitt, Harrolds and Brush Creek the following year, May 14, 1783. He actually came West in September, 1782 and preached trial sermons. October 14, 1782 he again came West to consider the offer extended to him. He accepted, and settled with his family in early June, 1783. His first recorded act as a minister at Brush Creek was a Baptism, June 8, 1783. Rev. Luetge and Rev. Weber came to Brush Creek to take up where the schoolmasters left off, alternating services between the two congregations.

Can you imagine a Reformed Sunday service in 1783. The white wars are gone and done, but the Indians are still there. You pick up your rifle and start for the church, in many cases quite early since Rev. Weber's notes tell of young people coming from as far as Butler. Sometimes during the course of the service, several boys are chosen to go outside near the church and build a fire — this plain rough-hewn building has no heat. There is an intermission and you join the others filing out to warm yourself by that fire perhaps a little reluctant to leave it again for the cold interior of the church. If you have traveled far, you have the prospects of a long, perhaps dangerous trip home — the Indians have no Sabbath. But you have come to church anyhow; you and your family need the church and you recognize the need. This was the sometimes reckless determination that had already won two major wars, built a free nation, and this was the unbeatable nature of the people in the beginning.

Rev. Weber was married twice and the father of 18 children. His first salary was about \$575, one hundred bushels of wheat, a free house and firewood. He asked the congregation to buy him a farm, to appoint some men to accept his salary for him and use it to pay off the price of the farm. The men were appointed but his wishes were not carried out, so he bought the farm himself. It took him 18 years to get out of debt. During that time he traveled from 40-50 miles on weekdays to preach to other congregations for extra money. In his limited free time, he and his children farmed the land to live.

In the beginning frontier land was sold for 5 pounds per 100 acres or about 13 cents an acre. After the Revolutionary War, the price was doubled or 10 pounds for 100 acres. November 14, 1792, the State of Pennsylvania conveyed 347½ acres of ground to Dr. David Marchand. Five years later, July 20, 1797, Dr. Marchand sold 182 acres of this land to the German Lutheran and German Reformed Congregations for 28 pounds 12 shillings and 6 pence. This price was high and the Congregations did not have the money to pay for it, so they agreed to pay in installments. It was nine years before the land was really theirs. The final payment was made by Heinrich Bachmann in the amount of 17 shillings and ten pence, June 21, 1806. They put something extra in that 1797 deed — conditions that would bind these two congregations for almost 200 years like husband and wife — two separate beings yet united and coexisting under the

same roof. There were to be Trustees elected from each congregation to watch over that joint ownership, that precious ground that was paid for bit by bit. The deed specified that if any attempt was made to sell off pieces of the land or property, the entire section would revert back to Dr. Marchand or his heirs after reimbursement of the original price. It further stated that should any quarrels or squabbles develop between ministers or members of the congregations over anything concerning the church, the Trustees had the right to bar the participants from the church until the argument was settled. The deed mapped out an area bounded by posts and trees: a stump, a black oak, a chestnut, several white oaks, a walnut, and a hickory.

While Rev. Weber continued his work with the Reformed congregation, Rev. Luetge resigned as Lutheran minister in 1791, because of failing health, and returned to Eastern Pennsylvania. He was replaced in the summer of 1792 by Rev. John M. Steck.

The frontier was part of the growing whole of this still young nation and what affected part, affected the whole. Boundary disputes between the states wreaked havoc on her unity. War came again with Britain, the War of 1812, and with it came a shortage of men and money. Land prices tumbled along with everything else from produce to flour. The steady flow west over the years, coupled with evergrowing families, made the little crude log church inadequate. It was decided unanimously, in spite of the fact that three churches had already gone heavily in debt with the monetary crises, that a new church would be built and that a constitution would be written. The Trustees were told to raise money and provide materials. The Constitution gave the new building-to-be an impartial name, The Brush Creek Salems Church, along with provisions for the sharing of that structure. A cornerstone was laid August 17, 1816 with appropriate ceremony. Rev. Weber who had helped with the original planning died two weeks before the cornerstone laying.

They wanted a church patterned after the churches they and their ancestors had left behind in the Fatherland. The Reformed congregation had a new minister from Baltimore, Rev. Henry Habliston, who, when he arrived, found the old log building still in use and a cornerstone. At least it was a beginning.

## YESTERDAY

Yesterday they were pioneers and a wild frontier. Whether or not they would stick it out in spite of everything was always a questionable point. But when you have come this far and worked this hard . . . well, maybe it is time for something permanent. Other churches had gotten themselves in trouble trying to build something a little more like home. But that old log building just was not good enough anymore, and after all they had that land! There was a serious problem though. Dr. Marchand had arranged it with all good intent so that the land could not be sold. They did not have enough money to finish what they had started, so they took their problem to

the Pennsylvania Assembly. January 21, 1819, the legislators determined that Dr. Marchand's deed had failed to name the Trustees. They named John Shrum and Adam Baughman and through this and other legal technicalities gave the Trustees permission to sell 82 acres. It took a Legislative Act (Penna. Laws 1818-1819 P. 20) but the ground was sold in plots ranging in price from \$15.01 to \$19 an acre.

As work progressed despite little problems like the \$500 they lost in a lawsuit with the contractors, Rev. Habliston resigned to go West. He was anxious about leaving a leaderless Reformed congregation behind and wrote so in a letter to Rev. Becker who was teaching a very young man named Nicholas Hacke at the time. Nicholas Hacke had been born in America, Baltimore in fact, but his father was a German immigrant and wanted his son to speak German. He sent him back to the Fatherland. At 16 the young man returned to America and began theological study. There were no seminaries, so he studied under Rev. Becker and Rev. Becker's son. Nicholas Hacke wanted to be a missionary to North Carolina, but the funding was not there. In the spring of 1819 in response to Rev. Habliston's letter, he started on horseback for Westmoreland County and Brush Creek. He preached here awhile and was invited to stay. In October, 1819, he began his work officially in the log church at the age of 19 years.

Permanence came a few hundred yards west of the old church. Permanence was red brick, allegedly brought over the mountains by ox cart, two stories with a gallery on three sides and a wine glass pulpit. Permanence was seats clear to the wall with no aisle along the west wall, seats with doors. Permanence cost by completion between \$4,500 and \$5,000. Permanence was 1820. The dedication service was led by Revs. John Michael Steck and Nicholas Hacke while the sermon was preached by Rev. Gerheart, a Reformed minister from Bedford.

Yesterday the wilderness had come a far distance from undisturbed forests and streams, but it was still a way to go to today. Rev. Hacke spoke of traveling by horseback from church to church. The churches themselves did not have Bibles and hymnbooks, so the ministers packed the necessary books in their saddlebags. As he rode from cabin to cabin, church to church, on his white horse, Rev. Hacke, though a city boy found himself at home in the cabins and log houses because the friendship and attachment shown him was honest. In 1820 he helped to dedicate a new church building at Brush Creek and went on to found and dedicate many others in Western Pennsylvania. He was considered father to the entire Reformed church in this half of the state.

As Rev. Hacke began pioneering the Reformed Church, Rev. Michael J. Steck began assisting his father with the Lutheran congregations, succeeding him upon his death in 1830. And as Nicholas Hacke gave birth to the Reformed churches, so did Michael Steck



help to build the Lutheran churches in Western Pennsylvania. He assisted in organizing the Pittsburgh Synod and became its first President. Out of a little brick church at Brush Creek, through these two men, was born a host of churches in the ever-widening frontier and to this church came appropriately the title, "Mother Church."

Salem . . . Peace. From the beginning to yesterday the purpose had been to maintain a holy union between two similar congregations sharing a common goal through a common God. But from the beginning till yesterday they spoke to their God in German. Now they were part of a united country writing its own history — in English. Public schools were being used — in English. The babies Revs. Steck and Hacke had baptized were young men and women educated in English and finding it difficult to accept the fact that they must also cling to their father's German. The controversy was new versus old and was active in both denominations. A stroke of fate heightened it among the Lutheran peoples. While Rev. Hacke continued to arbitrate, favoring the change to English himself, Rev. Steck died in 1848 leaving behind approximately 400 Lutherans in conflict. The Pittsburgh Synod interceded trying to maintain unity. Two possible successors to Rev. Steck were proposed — Rev. Jonas Mechling to preach only in German or Rev. Henry Zeigler to preach in both German and English. The final vote was 80 to 58 in favor of German and Rev. Mechling. For the first time in her history Brush Creek faced division and it came.

At a meeting held in the schoolhouse July 14, 1849, the dissenters protested in writing; July 28, 1849, they officially separated themselves from the German Lutheran Congregation at Brush Creek. December 13, 1850, Mother Brush Creek gave birth to an unexpected offspring. About a half mile south of the Salems church, along the stagecoach pike on an acre of ground purchased from Joseph Walthour, a brick building was dedicated Evangelical Lutheran — Trinity Church. It was to see its last service September 27, 1908, and to fall in 1919, but till that time it was to serve a determined English-speaking rebel Brush Creek congregation.

What the Indians and the wars and the overwhelming trials of just staying alive on the frontier could not do, the Fatherland had done, split Brush Creek. If it demonstrated nothing else, this division on both sides proved the deep roots of this transplanted tree that had taken hold over the "impassable" mountains. This was the depth of the Christianity that had survived the early years and this was the stubborn nature of the people.

While the language controversy flared into a divisive fire in the Lutheran Congregation, Rev. Hacke grew with his Reformed congregation from a boy to a man, holding his people together. It was he who eased them through the transition from old to new. In 1876 he recalled, "My elders and deacons were outspoken and candid men, upon whom I could rely. To say that I never met opposition . . . would not be true, but if a difficulty arose, it would be overcome by

moderation and firmness." He also stated that he remained with Brush Creek out of a sense of loyalty because, "they having had patience and forbearance with me when young and inexperienced, I consider it my duty to devote to them later years and more experience." The Rev. Dr. Hacke never really left his Brush Creek. September 1, 1877, he tendered a resignation to take effect October 1 — August of the following year he died.

They changed their church a little from time to time. And when they needed money they went to the land, always to the land and the treasury, rarely to the people. If something needed to be done, they instructed their two Trustees, one Lutheran, one Reformed to secure the funding.

June 9, 1851. "Mr. Peter Whitehead, Treasurer of the Brush Creek Church funds — sir please pay George Barger thirty dollars for teaching school two months in the german language at the church aforesaid, June 9, 1851."

Solomen Shrum

December 17, 1858. "Mr. Peter Whitehead, treasurer of the Brush Creek Church please pay Adam Coper Forty five dollars for the cause of erecting a new pulpit in said church. Solomen Shrum."

July 11, 1864

"Received Greensburg, July 11, 1864 of Peter Whitehead one of the trustees of the Brush Creek Church the sum of ten dollars for professional services rendered in the matter of the sale of coal made by the trustees to the Penn. Gas Company, drawing deed \$10.00. Jas. C. Clark."

May 25, 1870

"Mr. John Shrum, Treasurer,

Sir:

Please pay to Hoffman and Hale ———, Nine hundred (900.00) dollars for the organ for Brush Creek Church.

Samuel Alshouse  
——— Kifer"

From the land. For \$5,399.90 they sold the Penn Gas Coal Company 40 acres and 86 perches of Pittsburgh Seam Coal in 1864. A new house and barn were built on the farm. The wine glass pulpit was replaced. (An identical wine glass pulpit at Harrold's had been described as being "a shaky affair that creaked and rocked and swayed a good deal as you mounted its lofty height".) In 1870 a pipe organ came from Erie to rest first in the gallery, then on the main floor. A new fence was placed around the church and cemetery. A slate roof replaced the shingle roof. They were rich — rich in 1864 coal money and farm rental. The people supported the pastor — the church supported itself.