

Kerry A. Mohn

The Ephrata Cloister

Enigmatic Oasis

From the very beginning, as a religious refuge on the banks of the Cocalico Creek in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the Ephrata Cloister has been a place of contemplation and curiosity. The vision of the founder, Conrad Beissel (1691-1768), evolved from being a personal refuge away from the world to one of colonial America's earliest communal societies, widely known for its accomplishments in music composition, publishing, and their own expression of German calligraphy known as *frakturschriften* (broken writing).

Colonial visitors drawn to the Ephrata Community (the name members used to refer to themselves) were curious about the spiritual, industrious, and austere communal lifestyle evolving on the edge of Pennsylvania's wilderness. Modern visitors to the National Historic Landmark, Ephrata Cloister, ponder the remains of this legacy—unfamiliar architecture, religious beliefs, and lifestyle—preserved within a green oasis surrounded by a countryside in rapid development. Today, visitors and scholars alike have more questions than there are answers about Beissel's creation on the Cocalico Creek.

The 1743 Sisters' House (or Saron) before its restoration.



Georg Conrad Beissel was born in 1691, in the wake of tumultuous times marked by warfare, famine, and disease in the small town of Eberbach, Germany. Orphaned by the death of his father before his birth and his mother's death eight years later, he was raised by relatives and learned the baker's trade. As a journeyman baker, Beissel traveled the countryside and became exposed to religious beliefs contrary to the official Christian doctrines permitted by the State. Beissel embraced a mixture of Pietist and Anabaptist beliefs and would experience a spiritual awakening in 1715.

He emigrated to North America in 1720, finding his way to Philadelphia. Conrad Beissel was baptized into the Brethren Church and became the leader of a congregation in the Conestoga Valley region of present day Lancaster County. Differences in Beissel's religious teachings, chief among them celibacy and seventh day worship, began to cause controversy in the congregation, and Beissel eventually withdrew to the wilderness of the Cocalico Creek Valley to pursue a life of solitude.

Soon after, some of the members of the Conestoga Brethren congregation began to move to the Cocalico to be near the charismatic Beissel. A number of small dwellings were built in the vicinity of a great bend in the Cocalico Creek by his followers. The buildings were lived in by one or two persons. From this modest beginning and through Beissel's proselytizing, the Ephrata Community would grow to 250 acres inhabited by about 80 celibate men and women known as the Solitary. Large Germanic style, four and five-story, half-timbered and log structures, the largest buildings at the time in the Pennsylvania interior, were constructed for housing and worship. Industrial and other ancillary buildings were also built by the community for various occupations and trades. During the community's ascent, the Solitary authored more than a thousand hymns; operated various mills, including a complete paper making, printing, and book binding operation; produced *frakturschriften* in many forms; and illuminated hymnals and other books. The largest book published in Colonial America, the 1500-page *Martyrs Mirror*, was printed by the Ephrata Community. The accomplishments of the Solitary were part of a strict daily discipline of work and devotions.

Daily life was regimented, with a minimal diet and few physical comforts. The Solitary

General view of some of the Ephrata Cloister buildings. The stone building on the right is the bakery. In the center is the rear façade of the Meeting House (or Saal), with its stone kitchen wing.

received Cloister names and were referred to as Brother and Sister. A long white habit was adopted and worn over their regular clothing. Religious practice consisted of simple services which included preaching, hymn singing, and prayer. Services were held for two hours every night at midnight and on Saturday morning in the Meeting House (or *Saal*). Each Brother and Sister was also expected to spend part of the day in silent meditation. On occasion, the Brothers and Sisters would gather for a love feast that included communion and foot washing. This regimented lifestyle was thought of as the prelude (viz., the *Vorspiel*; to prepare the Solitary to unite with God in the new world to come).

The Solitary were not the only component of the community and not all the members were celibate or lived a life of rigorous physical denial. Married members, known as Householders, also followed Beissel from the Conestoga. The Householders accepted Conrad Beissel as their spiritual leader and worshiped on the Sabbath. Otherwise, their lifestyle and occupational pursuits were much like that of everyone else at the time. The Householders took up lands throughout the area around the Solitary settlement. Over time, they became an important source of support and potential new Solitary members at Ephrata. Predictably, it would be Householder members who would carry forward the vision and assume control of the Cloister proper.

After the death of Conrad Beissel in 1768, the Solitary declined until the last two Sisters died in 1813. The Householder members took control of the Cloister grounds and incorporated themselves into The German Religious Society of Seventh Day Baptists in 1814. A town known as Ephrata sprang up alongside the Cloister property. Continuous development, stimulated in large part by the intersection of two major roads and a rail line in the mid-19th century, eventually surrounded the Cloister grounds. Under the stewardship of the new German Seventh Day Baptist Church, the Cloister property was administered by church trustees and the *Saal* continued as their house of worship. The other surviving 18th-century buildings were rented to church



members and non-members. Numerous alterations and additions to the buildings created more comfortable living accommodations. But as the Church membership continued to dwindle, the buildings deteriorated and were haphazardly maintained. Some buildings were removed altogether.

By the turn of the 20th century, the majority of the congregation consisted of the descendants of one early Householder family. The remaining Cloister property had been divided roughly into two farms operated by these descendants. Several Cloister buildings were occupied by other members. A growing awareness of the historic nature and value of the remaining 18th-century buildings, furniture, and decorative arts precipitated a discussion in the surrounding town to seek state ownership as a means of preservation.

By 1930, the church was experiencing serious financial difficulty. In early 1934, a court decision ended the German Seventh Day Baptist Church and appointed a receiver of all the real and personal property. Seven years later, the court-appointed administrator conveyed a 28-acre tract of land with nine remaining 18th-century buildings and several 19th-century buildings to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for creation of a state historic site administered by the Pennsylvania Historical Commission.* The purchase also included many original artifacts from the mid-18th century stored on the property. This group of surviving mid-18th-century buildings at one location is unique in North America.

The Commission began immediately with plans to restore the Cloister buildings. The restoration began in 1942 and was completed substantially by 1969. A visitor center was built during this time and a mid-19th-century barn



Visitors view the 1743 Sisters' House (or Saron) on the left, and the 1741 Meeting House (or Saal) on the right.

was renovated for a museum store and volunteer functions. The grounds around the historic area were landscaped into a park-like setting. The restoration is little changed over the ensuing 30 years. Although the restoration has remained static, historical interpretation is evolving into a more meaningful experience for the visitor.

With the recent completion of a historic structure report by the staff and a consultant, more

insight may be gained into the original appearance of the surviving buildings. Annual archeological excavations since 1993, along with the findings of several from the 1960s, have yielded new information and posed new questions about the physical improvements and lifestyle of the Ephrata Community. One such find, a glass natural (valveless) trumpet, unique in North America, was found nearly intact in the 1995 excavation and has raised many questions about its origins, how it was used, and how it came to Ephrata. Recent research through a scholars-in-residence program, sponsored by the Commission, has resulted in a new understanding about Ephrata theology and music. Staff research also contributed in several areas to the recent changes in historical interpretation at Ephrata.

Based on information gleaned from these sources, historical interpretation at Ephrata underwent the first significant changes since the 1960s. Previously, the interpretation for visitors centered around architecture and decorative arts and was based on historical writings and interpretations decades old. Beginning in 1998, a new exhibit was installed in the visitor center entitled *Prelude to the New World, An Introduction to the Ephrata Cloister*. Buildings were re-interpreted and the furnishing plans changed. The goal was to create exhibit buildings with a "lived in" appearance. The changes in building interpretation were developed to reflect a more accurate

representation of the Ephrata Community as it existed in the 18th century. For example, the building formerly furnished to interpret the Householders, none of whom occupied any of the surviving buildings used by the Solitary during the 18th century, is now furnished to interpret living space and weaving, a craft practiced by the Ephrata Community members. The story of the Householders, spanning parts of three centuries, will be interpreted with a new exhibit in a small log structure moved to the site in the 1940s. The development of historical interpretation and educational programming at the Ephrata Cloister has been made possible through the support of a dedicated community volunteer organization.

The Ephrata Cloister Associates have supported the activities and educational programming at the Ephrata Cloister since 1958. The Associates supply volunteer guides, support an Ephrata Cloister Chorus, provide funding for special craft demonstrators, and operate a successful museum store. The store merchandise is selected to complement the historical interpretation of the site. The Associates have raised funds through their Back to the Cloister Fund for the acquisition of artifacts for the collection and have provided additional funds for the conservation of original artifacts in the collection.

While archeology and research have yielded new insights about the Cloister, there is much that is unknown and may never fully be known. The lack of primary sources about everyday 18th-century Ephrata Community life continues the enigma. Ephrata began as a spiritual retreat in the wilderness away from the world. The wilderness is gone and the world has come to Ephrata, curious about the legacy of one community's spiritual quest.

The Ephrata Cloister can be contacted at <www.state.pa.us> or at 632 W. Main Street, Ephrata, PA 17522-1717.

Note

- * The Pennsylvania Historical Commission merged with the State Museum and State Archives to form the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1945.

Kerry A. Mohn is the historian at the Ephrata Cloister.

Photos courtesy Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Ephrata Cloister.