

Little Swatara Church of the Brethren

The Little Swatara Congregation consists of families who reside for the most part in northwestern Berks County, specifically in the townships of Bethel, Tulpehocken, Upper Tulpehocken and Marion. Their present worship center is located one mile west of Rehrersburg. The name Swatara is the Indian designation for two creeks, one the Little Swatara flowing out of the Blue Moutain south and westward, joining with the Big Swatara, which flows eventually into the Susquehanna River. In colonial times the Swatara communicants lived in a very large area, extending essentially throughout the Lebanon Valley from the Schuylkill to the Susquehanna.

"In 1745, George Beshler, Michael Frantz, Peter Heckman, John Frantz and others settled in this district. They were baptised by Elder George Kline of the Northkill congregation. Elder Kline was the first elder (in charge, ordained in 1750), assisted by Peter Heckman, who was ordained soon after 1770. On Aug. 12, 1780 the above named Michael Frantz was ordained elder by Elders Sower and Uner. George Beshler and Jacob Moyer were ordained deacons (ministers)" -- quoted from Brumbaugh's history. In 1770 there were forty-five active communicants.

The congregation and leadership of the Conestoga church (organized in 1724) had the oversight of other Brethren groups that formed as people moved westward and northwestward through Lancaster Co. (which then included much of the Swatara area). In 1772 there was agreement to separate the White Oak (western Lancaster Co.) and the Swatara (Lebanon Valley) from Conestoga into organized congregations in their own right. Little Swatara and Big Swatara came into being in 1798 or 1800, their areas corresponding to whether the members lived east or west of where the two Swatara Creeks join at Jonestown.

By 1841 it was necessary to separate the Tulpehocken congregation from Little Swatara, the dividing line being one mile north of the Reading-Harrisburg Pike (US #422).

A further division was necessary by 1866 when Maiden-creek (formerly Northkill, now Mohrsville) became a separate congregation. Then in 1877 the Schuylkill Church (Big Dam, north of Pinegrove) began a separate existence from Little Swatara.

Until about the mid-1800s congregations met in home sor barns. But in 1846 Little Swatara built the Merkey meeting house, about a mile northwest of Bethel, overlooking Round Top Valley, using Blue Mountain Sandstone for the walls. The Moyer (Meyer) meeting house (brick) was built in 1860 between Hamlin and Mt. Zion. About that time also another meeting house of brick was erected a mile northwest of Rehrersburg; then in 1875 a larger frame structure replaced the brick; both were known as the Ziegler Meeting House. In the same year another frame building was erected in Frystown on land given by Elias Frantz who operated a tannery in that village. Love feasts were held alternately in the Ziegler and Meyer houses. Then in 1877 Light's Meeting House was built, and in 1910 a brick church was built in Fredericksburg.

Some of the Little Swatara Brethren were also active in the Union House, at Schuberts and at Kutztown. A cemetery was provided adjacent to each of the Meeting Houses. Earlier burials were in family cemeteries, for example the Bashore Cemetery, northwest of Bethel, the

Frantz Cemetery along Wintersville Road south of Bethel, the Wenger Cemetery near Jonestown, and the Wolfe's cemetery near the Union House.

In 1919 the western part of the Little Swatara Congregation separated, becoming known as the Fredericksburg congregation (now Mt. Zion Road, in the Meyers Meeting House).

The present Little Swatara building was erected in 1963-64 and has become the sole meeting place for the congregation. The older houses of worship were sold.

Elders ordained and serving the congregation from the mid-1700's to the mid-1900's include Peter Heckman, Michael Frantz, Hans Jacob Bashore, Hans George Bashore, Joseph Merkey, David Merkey, Jacob Wenger, John Hertzler, E.M. Wenger, J.W. Meyer Sr., Jacob Pfautz, Ira Gibble and Jacob P. Merkey. In recent times Eldership responsibilities have been given to Moderators, Board chairmen and Pastors.

Free ministers (that means not on salary) served Little Swatara until 1968 when Glenn Goshorn was called to be the pastor, to be followed by John David Bowman and, presently, Jeffrey O. Copp, senior pastor, and Daniel Riccius as pastor of special ministries. Conway Bennett and Curtis Ziegler still serve in the free ministry upon occasion.

In 1887 the first Sunday School was organized at the Frystown Meeting House, and by the early 1900's schools were thriving also at the Meyer House, Union House and Zieglers. Classes were held in curtained-off areas of the main meeting room, and in basements. Early leaders were Henry M. Frantz, George Miller, William Ziegler, Jacob P. Merkey, Samuel Ziegler, Elias M. Frantz, Sam Sherman, Calvin Bashore, Frank Ebling, Elias Meyer and Levi Wenger. When Little Swatara built the new facility in 1963-64 a Christian Education wing was provided to better serve the needs of the program.

Vacation Bible Schools have been held each summer, continuously since 1929 when Miriam Madeira directed the first school at Frystown, which enrolled 186 pupils by the end of the two week period. The Ziegler House, accomodating greater numbers, was then used from 1930 through 1964. Bible School has always been a community effort so that pupils as well as teaching staff have come from many denominations. A high enrollment of about 380 was attained in 1954 and again after the move to the new facilities. Bus service for pupils has been a necessity in this predominantly rural area.

In 1881 and again in 1901 the Eastern District Meeting was held at Little Swatara, also the Ministerial Meeting in 1947 and the Labor Day Meeting of 1949. Little Swatara also hosted the Atlantic N.E. District Meeting in 1968 and 1987.

In 1871 the Annual Meeting of the Church of the Brethren (then still known as the German Baptist Brethren) was held at Little Swatara on the farm of John E. Merkey about one mile west of Bethel. Imagine the logistics of providing for a thousand or so folks, many coming by rail as far as they could to Myerstown, nine miles away. The cost of that meeting, according to the records of John E. Merkey, Treasurer, was \$1,983.44. Oh, for the good old days! (Hm m...but then also horse and car-

riage, outhouses, straw ticks to sleep on, and wages of 50 cents a day!)

Little Swatara has been supportive of missions, helping the District and National budgets as well as underwriting specific people or projects in places like Africa, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, and Jordan Valley. In recent years several young people have chosen the Christian ministry as vocation, and are serving or have served in missions and/or as pastors. A number have also served in Brethren Volunteer Service projects in various places from time to time. In the early 1880's several Little Swatara families (Merkey and Gauby) moved to Kansas. They were the founders of the Church of the Brethren at Washington, Kansas.

The present active membership of the Little Swatara congregation is about 380. The moderator is Ray Keeney.

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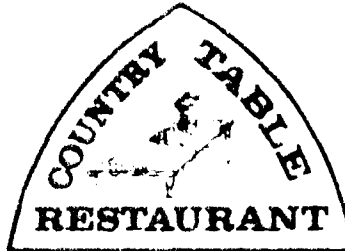
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