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Alva Landes.

## The Michael Frantz Chest

by Alva D. Landes and Lela Landes Shoup\*

It was an honor to see and touch the chest of Immigrant Michael Frantz (1687-1748), while in Ohio for the Old German Baptist Brethren Annual Meeting, fellowship, and research.

I had to learn more about this old chest and enjoyed interviewing family members. The following reminiscences and comments were shared by Alva D. Landes, Covington, Ohio, and his sister, Mrs. Marvin (Lela Landes) Shoup, Springfield, Ohio.

- Lorraine Frantz Edwards,  
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**Lela:** Thinking back some fifty and more years ago, I don't remember being the least bit impressed when the big old black chest was moved into our upstairs "spare" bedroom in my parents' farm home in Montgomery County, Ohio, but then, I was only a child and didn't understand why the chest was being relegated into the care and keeping of my family. I just supposed that no one else really wanted it.

**Alva:** It has been nearly sixty years, so I just barely remember when the folks

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would take us children to see Aunt Mary (a great-aunt, the youngest child of Elder Aaron Frantz of Clark County, Ohio). She had the old black chest, and one day Aunt Mary told Mother she was going to give her that chest.

Father and Mother took the trailer behind the car and brought that old black chest home. With much lugging and straining, we managed to get it up the stairway and around the hall and found a place in the upstairs storeroom. It was always nearly full of extra and out-of-season bedclothes.

**Lela:** As chests go, it seemed to have few redeeming qualities; it was massive, taking up the better part of one wall in the room where it now stood. Time had taken its toll on the lacquered finish, turning it a gummy dull black, which effectively hid the wood grain and all other details. The long ocean voyage with the dampness of the salt air, the subsequent travels overland by horse and wagon from Pennsylvania to Botetourt County, Virginia, and later to Clark County, Ohio, plus the more than two hundred years of time itself had certainly figured in the deterioration of the finish as well as adding to the

nicks and dents so evident on the trim moldings at the top and bottom edges of the chest. To me it was just something to be dusted each week, tolerated, but otherwise ignored.

**Alva:** Just when the first Michael Frantz left his home near Basel, Switzerland, is not known. That he and his wife lived some years in Germany is certain.

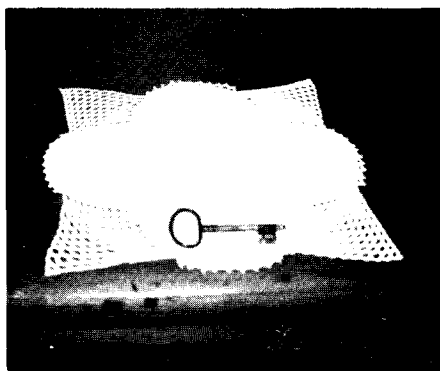
They needed storage for their belongings to come to America in 1727. Whether Michael built the chest himself, or purchased it already made is not known. Michael was intelligent, well educated for his day and very capable of the precision work needed to build the chest using the necessary hand tools of his day. The close-fitting dovetailed corners, the extra compartment inside, the wrought iron hinges and handles, and the lock and key all testify of the master craftsman. The overall dimensions of 48 inches long, 24 inches wide, and 24 inches high were probably sufficient for only their most needed personal belongings that were not in constant use while traveling. They made the long tiresome journey across the Atlantic Ocean and settled in Cocalico Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

About 1784, Michael Frantz II took the chest with him when he moved his family to Botetourt County, Virginia. Michael II's son, Christian, moved to Clark County, Ohio, about 1814, followed soon after by his son, Jacob, the father of Aaron.

It would seem reasonable to suppose the trip from Central Europe to Clark County, Ohio, was accomplished by several means of conveyance. These could include ox cart, river boat, sailing ship "Molly," Conestoga wagon, and flat boat to ferry the streams needing to be crossed. All this was accomplished over a period of just short of a century and before the days of canal boats and railroads.

We [Landes] children grew up, married, and moved away, and as the years rolled by, we practically forgot about the old black chest.

**Lela:** At some time during the ensuing years, Mother stripped the black sticky finish off the old chest and refinished it, revealing the natural wood grain and the dovetailed corners which no doubt had been very carefully cut and fit together by the hand of some unknown European craftsman. An acquaintance who is knowledgeable about antiques described the chest as being "one of a kind," pointing out that it is called a "six-plank chest" (the top, bottom, ends, front, and back each being one solid board, all cut from one tree, as the grain matches all the way around). It appears to be made of the wood known in America as yellow poplar, but whether or not those trees grow in Switzerland, we do not know. Neither do we know definitely that the chest was made in Switzerland, the birthplace of Michael Frantz I. We do know from history that it was a very common practice for the European immigrants coming to America to bring their posses-



*The key to the Frantz chest.*



*The interior of the Frantz chest, a unique "six-plank chest" cut out of the one tree.*

sions, perhaps everything they owned, in a wooden chest.

After our parents left the farm and moved to their retirement home, the Frantz chest, with its fresh new finish, was given a place of honor in the living room where it served as a "conversation piece."

**Alva:** Our interest was kindled and we began to put together the history of that old chest.

**Lela:** We learned more about our Frantz ancestors; we came to realize that someone must have formulated a plan of passing the chest to the youngest member of each family. We know that Christian Frantz was not Michael II's youngest son and yet it has passed down in Christian's family through his eldest son, Jacob. Perhaps it was Jacob who started the tradition of passing the chest to the youngest child, as evidently it passed from Jacob's youngest child, Aaron Frantz, to Aaron's youngest child, Mary Frantz Blocker. As Aunt Mary Blocker had no children, it was decided that the chest should be passed on to the youngest of Aaron's grandchildren, Rachel Garber Landes, our mother.

We wonder what Gt-gt-gt-gt-great-grandfather Michael had in mind when he told his family the chest was not to be sold, but handed down in the family. It surely was not that he treasured it so

highly or thought of its monetary value; he, being a religious man, knew that our treasures must be laid up in heaven, not in material things of this world.

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*...keep it as a kind of memorial, that when we look at it or read about it, we would remember the sacrifices made by our ancestor so many years ago...*

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I think he might have wanted his family to keep it as a kind of memorial, that when we look at it or read about it, we would remember the sacrifices made by our ancestor so many years ago as he and his young son, with perhaps others of his family, left their homeland and embarked on that long, dangerous voyage across the ocean to the new land of America.

Possibly, more than anything else, he wanted us never to forget the reason why he was willing to endure those hardships: that he and his posterity might be able to have freedom to worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience, without persecution.

Perhaps he intended for the big old chest to serve as a reminder, as well as a symbol, of the wonderful heritage passed down to this, our generation, from that faithful old grandfather of long ago.

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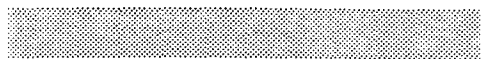
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## Front Cover

*A view of the small farm cemetery on the Thomas Maust farm near Berlin, Pa., where Wounded John Miller is buried in Somerset Co., Pa. See the article on pages 96-99 of this issue.*



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