

Letters from Abraham D. Hunsicker to John H. Oberholtzer

November 1845 to March 1851

Transcribed by Kevin J. Dyck, N. Newton. Kansas

Translation and Comments by John L. Ruth

Through the research of Maynard Shelly on the West Swamp Mennonite congregation of our community, attention has been called to one side of a forgotten set of correspondence between the two key figures of the founding of the Eastern District of the General Conference. Maynard came across this in microfilm in the archives of the Mennonite Historical Library at Bethel College in Kansas. The microfilm had been made years earlier from the original 26 letters in the Musselman Library at Bluffton College in Ohio, where the extensive N. B. Grubb historical collection had been deposited after the deaths of Grubb and his son Silas. In the interest of his project, Maynard engaged a transcriber at Bethel, and shared with our library the excellent results, which I have translated and annotated below.

I certainly should have taken a close look at this correspondence in 1982, when I researched in the Musselman Library for my forthcoming history of our two eastern Mennonite conferences, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*. I did discover and scrutinize several uncatalogued manuscripts there (one long one by John H. Oberholtzer), but was unaware of this most revealing set. It throws bright light on the manners and motives of the two important figures, particularly on the frustration felt by progressives in their dealings with older guardians of tradition.

One is struck with the forthrightness and passion of the affluent Abraham Hunsicker, a leader in his "Perkiomen Bridge" (Collegeville) community both economically and spiritually. Having experienced conservative criticism in the congregation headed by his Bishop brother John at Skippack, he attends the

conference at Franconia in 1845 to see for himself how things are done there. Having returned home vastly disturbed by the authoritarian procedure he has witnessed, he soon establishes contact with John H. Oberholtzer, whom he appreciates as a leader of forward-looking mind. The letters show him urging Oberholtzer on, telling him to stand firm against old-fashioned rules, especially the "law" that requires ordained men to wear plain coats. A visionary sort, he joins Oberholtzer in initiatives to print books, start a school, and publish a constitution.

Surprisingly, in the midst of a controversial situation, Abraham is placed in the lot for minister at Skippack, and it falls on him (January 1, 1847). He at once redoubles his efforts at bringing local Mennonite church procedures up to date. He takes initiative in helping out at Deep Run, where there is a need for leadership. All in all, these letters show us that even though Hunsicker himself later acknowledged Oberholtzer as the "pioneer of our ... Reform," much of the pressure for it came from the influential letter-writer himself.

This neglected but important material has implications for the history of the Freeland Academy, the founding of the Upper Skippack Mennonite Congregation, The Deep Run East Congregation, and the workings of the new Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. It is a rich source of insight, provoking the hope that we may yet find where Abraham Hunsicker's own papers may yet survive, among which -- it would be wonderful to discover! -- there might be the other side of this correspondence.

Note: Not everything in these letters is grammatical, clear or even legible. Some of Hunsicker's informal German seems idiomatically imprecise, though doubtless a contemporary reader perceived it as ordinary. Where I have been unable to find the clear meaning, I have included the original German, in italics. Persons are identified either in brackets or notes. Requests from readers for clarifications can be answered in subsequent sections.

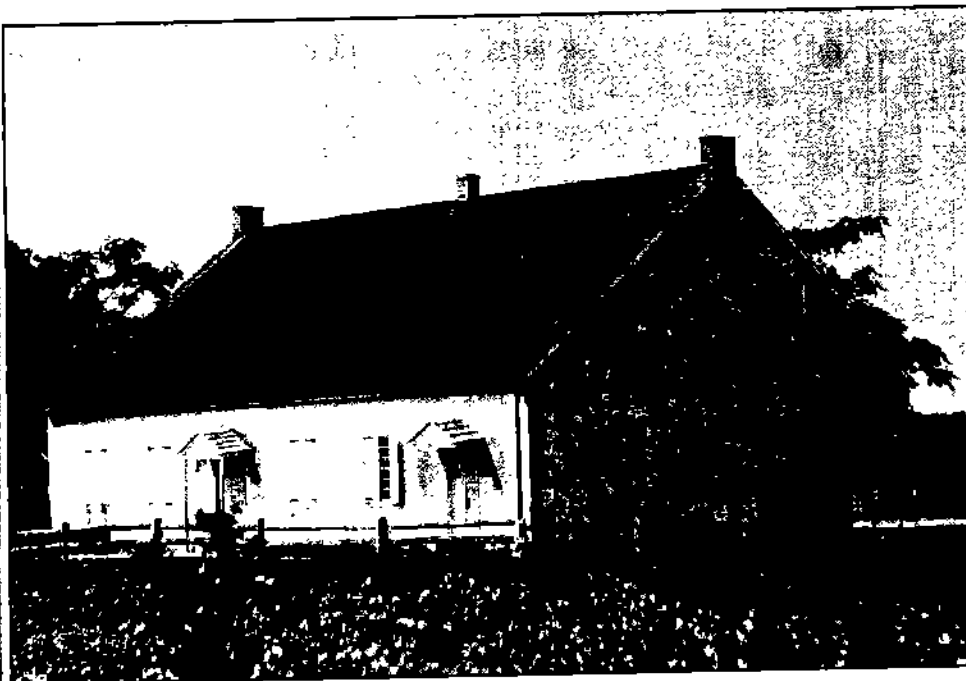
The first four letters presented here comprise about a seventh of the total material, which we plan to continue in upcoming issues of the *Newsletter*. --

JLR

Letter #1

Trappe November 9th 1845
Valued brother in the Lord,

First I wish what the apostles often wished the folk: much grace and peace from God your dear heavenly Father, and



1844 Skippack Mennonite Meetinghouse