

PART 11

THE GERMANS IN UPPER MIDDLETOWN VALLEY

by

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History 142

The History of Maryland

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College Park, Maryland

May 26, 1965

Introduction

With the completion of my paper on the history of "The Germans in Upper Middletown Valley", I felt much information had been found in research that should be recorded. It may seem very commonplace to some of the older residents of this locality and perhaps even uninteresting to the middle-aged. However, as many look back in the future over several decades, they may, like I, find that most of a vast source of historical material has been removed by the death of the older residents. As I look back over the thirty-five years I have resided in the Wolfsville area, I can think of so many who would have been invaluable for source material.

Then, too, while many landmarks remain today, they are gradually being torn down and destroyed by one means or another. I can remember a very well preserved mill that was quite a landmark. It had not been in operation and one night, quite mysteriously, it was destroyed by fire. Another landmark, very dear to the area's heart was the old covered bridge over Middle Creek on the Wolfsville-Myersville Road. This fell to the wrecking crew when a new bridge was built at a new location in 1932. One of my prized possessions is a photograph I took of it. It is quite surprising how many folks had never seen this bridge! Which goes to bear out the fact that events and places become history all too fast.

It is my wish that by recording some of the data I have found and personally recall, it will some day furnish material of at least of passing interest to the generation of which my grandchildren are part.

Beginning with the first German settler who by either foot or horseback came through Harman's Gap, gazed on the virgin, undulating valley lying between Catoctin and South Mountain, and then "set his shovel in" ^{and} wielded his ax, on up to the present day, which is well over two centuries, life in this upper part of Middletown Valley seems to fall in four parts. The first, I suppose, could be called the pioneer period. This would, in my opinion, extend up into the late 1800's. From then to about the late 1930's was a period of development of resources and perhaps the easing of many hardships. About 1939 with the advent of electricity, better roads, and defense industry beginning in the surrounding towns and cities, the community began to acquire a supplementary means of income. While this is still true today, a new element entered about the middle 1950's. Since that time another era began. It is characterized by the desire of those in the metropolitan areas to acquire rural property either for a home or in many cases, for an investment. We are in the midst of this period with the advent of many new families and even a building boom.

Perhaps all communities have witnessed these steps or periods in their history and development. This area is

probably unique only in the fact that it has held on to much of its early culture longer than other parts of Frederick County. The changes came about due to economic and social pressures.

The history of the area can be developed by means of its economic, social, religious, educational and political aspects. Again I should like to state, that this part of Frederick County is less affluent than almost any other part of the County. This does not denote a lack of human and physical resources that it has contributed to many fields of endeavor.

E. Russell Hicks, writing in the April 10, 1965 issue of The (Hagerstown) Morning Herald in an article entitled "We Owe Much To German Settlers" quoted a well-known history professor in a large university as having said "God sifted the whole population of Europe to obtain the finest wheat for Christian culture in America". He stated that while some wild oats and weed seeds were transplanted, for the most part those who crossed the ocean were of the highest virtues and they gave America its noble character. Among these were the Scotch-Irish and Germans. Mr. Hicks states that these Germans that settled in Western Maryland were "gifted, energetic, steadfast and peace-loving -- they were brilliant agriculturists, their home life has never been excelled and they were a deeply religious folk known for their sterling piety."

There is much contradiction in records and histories concerning the exact year that the first permanent settlements were made in this Catoctin area. After visiting some of the graveyards in the vicinity, it seems probable that they may have come around the middle 1700's.

Perhaps if we had been able to follow one typical German immigrant into this area he might have gotten off the ship in Philadelphia, tarried for a while in the immediate area or maybe on to Lancaster and York. From there he might have traveled on into Maryland by the Monocacy Trail. One day he decided to cross the Catoctin Mountain through Harmon's Gap. What met his eyes filled him with delight. There were well-wooded, rolling lands, fast running mountain streams and a vast amount of good springs. There was virgin soil that could be had for the clearing.

Most of these immigrants chose to build a log cabin as their first home. Stones were used in building large fireplaces and chimneys for these cabins. As one travels through the winding mountain roads today, many remains of these chimneys are still standing even though the logs have long since disappeared. The ~~pioneer~~^{pioneer} then set about clearing the land. Many log barns were built from the timber that was cut. Since there were many field stones to be hauled off the land, these were utilized to make fences. Miles of these fences are still in existence and in use. The farm on which I live~~d~~, even though highly developed, has

several fields surrounded by stone fences.

Many of these houses were built directly over a spring. This was to have water handy especially since there was still a threat of Indian attacks. These springs flowed out from under the house and were often channeled into a hallowed-out log used for a water trough.

As time went on, the German farmer built a barn. These barns were the pride and joy of these farmers. They were often built on a much more grandiose scale than the homes were. The earliest barns were built of logs hewed out by broadaxes, the logs fitted together by notches and fastened together by wooden pegs. Most of the barns, many of which are still standing, were known as "bank barns". They were built on the sheltered side of a hill. They were so arranged that wagons could be driven on to the barn floor from behind. Under the floor and level with the lower part of the hill, were the stables. The barn yard was adjacent to the stables. Part of the barn extended out over the stable area and this part was referred to as the "over-shoot".

All the clearing was not done in the valley. One has only to travel around today to see many fields high on the mountain sides and to marvel at what long hard hours together with a lot of tenacity was required to accomplish this.

As more settlers came in, more fences were required. Rail splitting began and rail fences were built. These were of a certain zig-zag pattern called by many names such

as worm fence, snake fence, "stake and rider", etc. Many fences of this type can still be found today. The exact age is unknown but they were built of such a craftsmanship that they withstood many years of use. The number of rails high these fences were constructed depended on what was to be fenced in. They are truly a beautiful piece of handiwork.

After the land was cleared and the farmer decided to stay, many stone houses were constructed. These were made from the plentiful supply of field stone. Some of the very earliest are still standing. They are truly masterpieces of stone masonry. Unfortunately there was a period later when many of these, because the stone needed re-pointing, were plastered over completely. Many of the more sturdy log houses were weather boarded as time went on. Very few brick houses were constructed although there were deposits of clay suitable for making brick. Plastering on the interior walls was done very early. It was made of sand, lime and hair from a cow or horse.

Three of the most beautiful stone houses in the vicinity were built by three Grossnickle brothers. They were of German origin and of the Dunkers or Dunkard faith. All of these houses are standing today, in excellent state of repair and until recently, lived in by Grossnickle descendants. Two stand just below Wolfsville and one on Highland. The latter passed out of Grossnickle hands just this spring.

The one below Wolfsville, owned today by C. Elbert Grossnickle, about a fourth generation descendant, was the meeting place of the first German Dunkards which congregations later developed into the Grossnickle Meeting House or Church of the Brethren body. Likewise, standing today at the edge of Wolfsville are the Hoover stone barn and stone house in which Reverend Christian Newcomer helped to found the United Brethren Congregation in Wolfsville. It is curious to note that the barn was constructed in 1819 while the house was not built until the following year.

Besides building their residences and barns, these first settlers constructed other outbuildings of stone such as spring houses, meat houses and their bake ovens. These early settlers were deeply religious and very soon built churches most of which were built of stone and are still in use today. Some striking examples are St. Johns Lutheran Church on Church Hill in 1830 and St. Marks Lutheran at Wolfsville, 1845. Between Wolfsville and Myersville is the Pleasant Walk United Brethren. The Salem United Brethren Church, ^{built} in 1847 in Wolfsville fell victim to the plastering of its stone walls.

Many residences still retain their original wooden floors. Many of these boards are as broad as twelve inches. These floors were kept clean and almost white by scouring with sand and homemade lye soap. All in all, much of the solid, practical and sturdy architecture of these pioneers

can still be found. There is almost a total absence of ornamentation or adornment in all these early homes. They are beautiful because of their simplicity. Unlike the plantation owners or tobacco farmers, these practical, hardworking German grain growers took a very realistic look at all they did. Those things that served no purpose were omitted and had no place in their way of life.

Gradually as sawmills were built and operated, timber became a resource to be explored and dealt with. The "up and down" sawmill became a common sight in the community along with the gristmills. There was an ample supply of water power. Lumber was sawed for dwellings. Gradually wooden bridges were built to take the place of fording places.

The abundance of timber and the needs of the settlement started many industries. One of the first was that of making barrel staves. These early Germans were craftsmen in addition to being farmers. Those who made staves were known as coopers. Near a small settlement of Wigville in the Catoctin Mountain, not too far from the plateau or flats known as Bussard Flats, was a large mill making the barrel staves. These were made as late as World War I, my informant told me. Several kinds of wood was used, but oak was the sturdiest. Many of these barrels were used for shipping lime and cement.

Another industry that thrived very early and for many

years was that of "coaling". This consisted of the burning of wood and making charcoal. This coaling place was also up in the Catoctin Mountain. These "colliers" sent their charcoal to Catoctin Furnace on the other side of the mountain to be used in smelting the iron ore at the Catoctin Furnace. I am told on good authority that one can easily identify this location today by the color of the soil. Wood was stacked in tiers and slowly burned. It took a great deal of know-how and careful supervision to get the best results. Chestnut was used chiefly. These colliers built little shacks and camped in the mountain. They prepared their own food. The story goes that they usually had at least one "fiddle-player" and this was their form of entertainment.

The area furnished many more products of wood that contributed to the development of Western Maryland. Cross ties were made and hauled out by teams. "Steam ties" or ties for railroads were made of oak while trolley ties were usually chestnut. The bark of the rock oak was stripped off for tanning of leather. "Peeling bark", as it was known, furnished a great deal of employment. The poplar was cut and hauled out for pulp wood. Good locust fence posts were in great demand.

Shingles were made in shooes but many were "shaved" on the farm. Many shingle "horses" can still be found. The wedge shingles were made of chestnut. These shingles were shaved thin on one end and thick on the other. Another

type of shingle was the lap shingle. This was made thicker on one side than the other. My informant was not sure how they were applied but said holes had to be bored through them before nailing them on. These were made chiefly of oak.

As communication came to Maryland, the making of telephone poles was also a trade. These, too, were of chestnut. Rails were sharpened for rail fences from chestnut. The making of ax handles required a craftsman's hand to get the proper "set" to the handle for the particular head. Many of these were made of hickory.

As I previously stated, there was an abundance of native chestnut when the early settlers arrived. This supply held out until about the late 1920's when a blight hit the trees. They have just about become non-existent round about. This chestnut furnished a great source of income. A familiar saying concerning someone who was, shall we say, a bit on the "stingy" side was to the effect that he "still had his chestnut money". It was even said that many hogs were fattened on chestnuts.

Furniture making, in early days, on a local scale, is of much interest today because these pieces of furniture are collectors items. Fred Stottlemeyer and later his son, Columbus, made the much sought after Stottlemeyer chairs. One of these offered at a public auction is enough to draw a large crowd. These were made of native wood, mostly hickory for the frames and white oak for the split bottoms. James A.

Grove made furniture such as dressers, wash stands, etc. Many of these can still be found in the community. He also made caskets and was the local undertaker.

Around the turn of the twentieth century the Morgan family built a planing mill. The lumber was carefully selected and seasoned. Its reputation spread for miles because of its fine quality of building materials. As late as 1940, I was told, it had half a million board feet of lumber in its yards. It is still in operation today. The Morgans built some furniture. While it is best known for its millwork, the furniture was of a fine quality.

I have dwelt at some length on the importance of timber to this community. It was important in the establishment of the local area and later played a very important roll in the economic development of the community. I had access to some old ledgers of a general store in Wolfsville. It was interesting to note that cord wood was traded for groceries very often.

The gristmills, of which there were as many as three in the vicinity, played a necessary role in the life of the community. One was operated by a Noah Eccard between Wolfsville and Middlepoint. It later became known as the Grossnickle Mill. It was still operating in the early 1930's. Further up the creek toward Wolfsville there was once a mill owned and operated by a Biser. Between Wolfsville and Jerusalem was the well known Duvall's Mill. The remains

of this mill can be seen. This is in a beautiful ravine with a nearby waterfall. The owners old log house is standing and has been restored by an instructor from Catholic University in Washington. Since the settlers were chiefly German grain farmers, the mills were very necessary ~~into~~^{for} converting the grain into flour, meal, and stock feed. It was customary to take so much wheat to the mill in exchange for a barrel of flour or so much corn for corn meal. I have proof of at least two distilleries operating for the making of whiskey. I have not been able to find much information concerning their operation.

One Simeon Blickenstaff was a broom maker. It was customary for each family to grow a patch of broom corn. This was gathered when ripe and stored in a dry place. During the winter the women cleaned the seeds from it and tied it in bundles to be taken and made into brooms. The broommaker usually kept a number of brooms as his fee. These he was able to market.

Another interesting shop was that of a Rezin Stottlemeyer, a carpet maker. This shop was located near Wolfsville where John Lewis lives today. Stottlemeyer was said to have come directly from Germany, married a Forrest girl and started his shop in his small home. The loom is said to have occupied half the room. Old clothing or cloth of any kind, was cut in strips about an inch wide and sewed together in a continuous string. This was rolled up in a ball. These

balls of rags were used as the wool of the carpet. Many beautifully designed carpets were manufactured. Woolen cloth especially made a fine quality of carpeting. The information I received said that there was almost certainly some of this carpet to still be found in the community. These early settlers were desirous of having a carpeted floor in their parlors. Rezin Stottlemeyer was said to be an accomplished violinist and played a great deal. It was said he could not supply all the demands he had for carpet making. His loom after his death was dismantled by Samuel Forrest and stored in his barn. Unfortunately, it was later destroyed.

My husband's grandfather, Jeff Wolf, who had a small farm at Wolfsville, conducted a teaming business. He kept horses and mules and would haul products -- chiefly wood, to all parts of Frederick and Washington Counties. Asbury Hoover, who died within the past decade, often told me about a conveyance he and his father had which he called a "hack". This was a sort of small scale, horse drawn "bus". They would carry people to funerals. They took the guests to the Black Rock Hotel from either the trolley line which extended from Frederick to Hagerstown or from the Western Maryland Railroad at Smithsburg.

Perhaps a very good criteria for evaluating this era in the community's history would be to quote a reprint from the Maryland Directory, 1878 which was published by The

Valley Register in its October 23, 1964 issue.

"WOLFSVILLE 86 YEARS AGO

(Reprinted from the Maryland
Directory, 1878)

Wolfsville

Is 6 miles from Smithsburg on the W.M.R.R. and near Catoctin Creek. Land is mostly cleared, can be bought at from \$20 to \$30 per acre, and produces 15 bus. wheat, 30 oats, 100 potatoes, 80 corn and 2½ tons hay. German Reformed, Lutheran, Dunkard, United Brethren Churches and several public schools. Population 100. John H. Mangans (Maugans), Postmaster.

Blacksmith -- George H. Barkdoll, Lawson Kline, John Myers.

Boarding -- Mrs. E. Hoover.

Butcher -- J. N. Wolfe.

Carpenters and Undertakers -- C. U. Brandenburg, James A. Grove.

Cooper -- John Haynes.

Dressmaker -- Mrs. Anna C. Stottlemeyer.

General Merchandise -- Holter & Phleeeger, J. W. Hoover, F. Leatherman, Maugans & Bartgis.

Huckster -- Scott T. Martin.

Millers -- D. Biser, N. Eccard.

Physician -- Lewis Lamar.

Shoemaker -- J. G. Smith.

Surveyor -- J. Wesley Hoover."

I have given much thought to terms that could be used to describe this early period and the words that keep coming are "self-contained". Because of its geographical location, the very nature of the German immigrant and their desire for a good life, they created a community that could stand on its own feet and be self-supporting to a very great degree. They asked no quarters from anyone. No one in the area could be said to be wealthy but certainly one could label them as prosperous. Even the

poorest were of a proud and independent nature. This was so evident to an outsider like myself who came here in 1930 to teach and later to reside.

It is extremely difficult to envision this community only 35 years ago as not having one ~~improved~~ road leading into it, no electric power, a sprinkling of cars, no sanitary facilities and a few battery radios^{that} had just made their advent. Farms had little mechanization. It seems to me now that the feeling of content that enveloped the country-side "was happiness" and the sort of thing that money could not buy. It was one of those elusive existences that even the most impractical would admit~~could~~ not have been held on to but as time passed, ^{they} were happy that they had been privileged to have been part of it.

Perhaps the first break through or change began in the early 1930's. The community had always been proud of their churches and also of their schools. Within a radius of five or six miles from Wolfsville there was an unusual number of one-room schools -- Sensenbaugh, Forrest, Middlepoint, Highland^{Poplar} and Woodland. In Wolfsville very early was built a two room school. This was replaced by a five room brick school in about 1912. In addition to an elementary school, the community struggled to maintain a high school in the late 1920's. In 1931 the high school was moved to Middletown. With this move, the younger generation began to intermingle with another community

in the same valley. Roads began to be improved, electricity came in 1937 and the life in the community took on a different face. As the high schools began to go out of the community, the smaller schools were closed and moved into Wolfsville. The school played a very important role in the life of the community. In 1931, after an attempt had been made to establish a high school in Wolfsville, it was consolidated with Middletown. This was perhaps one of the first break-throughs in this tightly knit community. The discontinuance of the high school was a bitterly fought battle for most folks regarded the school as a social as well as an educational center in its life. Very soon many of the young folks began to marry out of the community.

With the advent of the 1930's a disaster such as hadn't been experienced before befell many in the community. Some had bank accounts of varying amounts. One of the largest banks in Frederick County and its branches closed. Many lost all of their life's savings. Some were never able to recover while others, especially farmers, "started over". It was a blow that left a mark on the economical structure of the community.

The 1930's saw the dairy operation begin. Farmers began to produce and ship milk. This provided a substantial income for those with the larger farms. Small grain growing gave way somewhat to the establishment of pasture and hay crows. About this time, peas were grown for a canning

factory in Thurmont. Due to the large acreage, a pea sheller was built and it processed the peas to be transferred to Thurmont. This didn't prove very satisfactory and was discontinued late in the decade.

Around 1940 came another change in the economic life in the area. The production and marketing of milk became more competitive. Government contracts were being let prior to the war and industry in the nearby towns, especially the Fairchild Corporation in Hagerstown, began to employ large numbers. Many from the community sought employment and before long, even some of the small landowners began to "work in town" and try to farm, too. Not only men, but after World War II began, many women in the community were gainfully employed.

Smaller places became idle or only partially cultivated. Dairying was becoming more difficult. Farmer laborers were at a premium. It was necessary to highly mechanize in order to keep in operation. A large percent of the farms were not large enough to absorb this cost.

About the mid 1950's began the era we now are experiencing. With the population increase in the Atlantic coast, especially in the Washington area, the establishment of such government agencies and posts as are found in and near Frederick County, the demand for land and urban living reached this part of Middletown Valley. The price offered for acreage in the vicinity had been

undreamed of and unheard of. Prices became so exorbitant that local farmers were unable and unwilling to pay the prices for land that was offered for sale. As an example I will cite a recent real estate transaction. About ten years ago, a very run-down farm of approximately 106 acres sold for a little less than \$3,000. The dwelling was in a state of disrepair. Last year a realator paid \$17,000 for the same farm. Within the last sixty days it was resold to a resident of Montgomery County for \$25,000. This is only one instance of many.

To a former, tightly knit community of German ancestry, this has occasioned much resentment. Heretofore, each landowner was very proud of his holdings and his fondest wish was to keep them intact and within his family after his demise. As long as the head of the family was alive, even though his age would prohibit his active participation in the actual farming, he was the acknowledged head of the house and his children farmed it under his supervision. Eventually, a member of the family would either inherit the "home place" or come into ownership by an arrangement in settling the estate.

Within the area I have covered, in my paper, there are no more than four farms that are now self-supporting. All of these are holdings that have been in the families since their first coming to this part of the valley. As I stated earlier, this community is not unique in its

changes and problems but it is unique in being privileged to have been able to ^{return} its German culture perhaps longer. Many face the change with a hidden sorrow and yes, even resentment. However, no one is naive enough to persuade himself that he can hold on to the "good old days" as they are referred to. Fortunately, some of the old houses are being restored. On the other hand some farms have been depleted by the cutting of timber and poor soil practices.

Least the reader draw the conclusion that all of the inheritance of the early culture has passed, I should like to terminate by letting the reader share many of the pleasant practices still found.

Let's take a liesurely, relaxed tour either by foot or auto through this beautiful valley that still possesses good spring water, much remaining rich soil and where yet stands many monarchs of the forest arching over our heads on winding, mountain roads. We might still find a quiet spot where the song of the birds is uninterrupted, the smells of lilacs, arbutus, foxgrapes ^{or} and fields of clover and new mown hay reaching our nostrils. We just might pass where a house or barn-raising is still taking place. There might be found a group of men harvesting corn or wheat where there is an illness in the family. We most certainly would hear the tones of a few remaining dinner bells announcing that the meal is ready.

If we were to visit some of the homes in the community

we'd still find many German foods that would bring back many memories. For breakfast we might have pon haus, fried cornmeal mush, hominy or even sometimes, pie. Rivals, schmiercase, schnitz and knepp, pot pie, fast nacht's, pap soup, to name a few, are still prepared. The housewife would consider it quite a compliment if we were to ask her to share a recipe with us. Oh, yes, once in a while there is a well-guarded recipe or home-prepared cure, that is a family secret and only one in a generation is privileged to be given it! In a spare room we might find a quilting frame with a quilt "in". Maybe on a winter's day we might even find a gathering of women quilting and the hostess preparing a large dinner. And the windows might be filled with flowers and I'm sure we wouldn't go away without some "cuttings".

Had we come down the "Lutheran Church Hill" in 1954-55 we would have seen a group of men at work constructing a two-story Sunday School building adjoining the original stone structure built in 1845. It is estimated that a \$35,000 building was built at the cost of less than \$17,000. A record kept showed that 3,547 man hours of labor were donated. Money was raised by donations, special offerings, church suppers, auctioning of handmade quilts, etc. This is an example of a cooperative venture typical of the community and especially of the churches and their congregation.

There must come a time to bring this paper to a close. I realize it may have been poorly done in some respects, much is omitted and so much yet to be recorded. Maybe in a meager way it might furnish a point of departure for someone to further record the history of this once wilderness or frontier country of the Maryland Colony. I'm sure I've enjoyed every minute of my research. In some instances, I have talked and renewed acquaintances with members of the community. It was gratifying to see how willing all were to share their information. Written records, with the exception of those of the various churches, are very scarce.

In closing I should like to quote from Cecil R. Martin's Romance and Beauty Unite in Founding of Wolfsville. On interviewing an elderly Wolfsville farmer some years ago, he asked him what he considered the secret of happiness. "I don't guess there's much secret to it," he said "You're either happy or you ain't. God knows I've had my share of trouble in my time. Deaths, doctor bills, bad crops. I've seen times when I didn't know where the next cent was comin' from, but it always came and I managed to pay my bills. One thing you've gotta say for a place like this -- its doggone hard for a man to starve here. Happiness -- well, I guess it's a matter of livin' as near right as you can and not wantin' too much you know you can't get."