

NOTES AND COMMENTS

John Thomas Schley Letters Found in Speyer Archives.

In recent years many interesting contacts have been established between American genealogists and their German counterparts. In Western Maryland as in other areas where Germans settled during colonial times, renewed interest in family history has resulted in a lively correspondence with archives, local historians and genealogical societies in Germany, Alsace and Switzerland. As the result of such individual searches, material of general interest has frequently been unearthed. Thus the director of the Palatine Genealogical Center (*Heimatstelle Pfalz*), Dr. Friedrich Braun, discovered by chance two letters written by John Thomas Schley of Frederick in 1752 and 1761 buried among miscellaneous manuscripts in the State Archives in Speyer. Dr. Braun presented photostatic copies and transcripts of these letters to one of the descendants of Thomas Schley, Judge Edward S. Delaplaine of Frederick.¹

John Thomas Schley was born in 1712 at Morzheim, a village located a few miles from Landau in the Palatinate. At the age of 23, he landed in America with about a hundred families from his native region and settled in Western Maryland on land owned by Daniel Dulaney. When Dulaney laid out the town of Frederick in 1745, Schley is believed to have built the first house in the new community.² He was considered the leader of his German fellow immigrants, taking the initiative in all important activities of the colony besides being their teacher, and the reader of the Reformed congregation. Michael Schlatter, the renowned organizer of the German Reformed Church in colonial America, noted in his diary in 1747: "It is a great advantage to this congregation that they have the best schoolmaster that I have met in America. He spares neither labor nor pains in instructing the young and edifying the congregation according to his ability, by means of singing, and reading the word of God and printed sermons on every Lord's day." For many years the church was without a minister but Schley was able to keep the flock together.³

Apart from a few contemporary sources, little has remained to tell about the personal life of a man whose activities, though modest, were of great importance for the people of the young Maryland frontier community. Mr. Marshall L. Etchison of Frederick owns two small music books which were used by Thomas Schley in his church and school work, and a large German-English dictionary in the front of which is the inscription "Johann Thomas Schley, Reformater & Schulmeister, in Fredericks-stadt, 1785."

The two letters recently discovered in Germany shed some light on the personal life of the German schoolmaster whose memory is still today honored by the citizens of Frederick as the actual founder of this thriving Western Maryland town.⁴ The first letter, dated October 14, 1752, was

¹ We are indebted to Judge Edward S. Delaplaine for permitting the publication of these letters of which he also furnished the English translations. Photostats and transcripts of the originals have been placed in the collection of the Frederick County Historical Society.

² The Schley house was located on the northeast corner of East Patrick Street and Middle Alley. It was torn down in 1853.

³ Cf. Dieter Cunz, *The Maryland Germans* (Princeton, 1948), 68-69. Henry Harbaugh, *Life of Michael Schlatter* (Philadelphia, 1857), 154.

⁴ *Frederick News-Post*, May 2, 1958.

directed to Jakob Baltzel, his brother-in-law, and to Georg Wintz, his father-in-law. It reads in part as follows:

"Once you come here I will hardly undertake the trip, for if through God's will I could or should come and see you, it would mainly be to visit all our friends, to enjoy their company and see them once more from face to face in this world, and to talk with all of you, and on the other hand I would have to earn the money for the voyage.

"With brother-in-law Stoeckle,⁵ I shall settle matters with respect to his wife's maternal inheritance, which I bought from her, as you probably know.

"When you receive this letter, let our dear father-in-law himself read it too, besides sending him my own, my wife and children's thousandfold greetings, I want to let him know that it makes me very sad that, in his old age, he has such a hard time making ends meet, while he has been fairly well off in my time, let him not be wanting in anything personally, but if necessity calls for it, he may take what he needs from my wife's inheritance, not lightly, though (which I would not expect on his part, either).

"Gladly would I take care of both you, dearest father-in-law, and my dear old father for your lifetime, if you were staying with us; dear brother-in-law, Jakob Baltzel, give my greetings to all our brothers and sisters-in-law, and to all our friends: may God keep you all."

The second letter was written in two parts, the first one to Georg Wintz, Sen., and the other one to his brother-in-law, Georg Wintz, Jr. It is dated March 5, 1761 and indicates that his earlier letter had remained unanswered:

"My family, including myself, fortunately are still vigorous and in good health. But I am wondering for what reason I have not had the honor to receive a single line from you for 16 years.

"My brother-in-law Georg Wintz wrote my brother-in-law Georg Stoeckle and I am being neglected altogether, though I am always thinking of you and sincerely wishing you all were with us.

"To be sure, ever since I left you I had meant to visit you again, but my situation will hardly allow me to undertake such a costly trip, and it would be difficult for me to leave my large family; therefore my advice would be: if you still have some means and one or the other is planning to come here, do it rather sooner than later, before you have to depend on other people's mercy for the trip.⁶

"If only you can clear your way into the country, it will suffice. And perhaps my brothers-in-law have a number of children. For these, anyhow, conditions here would be a thousand times better than abroad. Here at least they have a chance to do well in time—in a short time, in fact—and live in plenty. . . .

"If you were to undertake this trip, dear father-in-law, and perhaps my poor old father, too, then sell my property as well as yours and give my father as much of it as he needs on the trip. You will take it then from my property, which I earned the hard way long ago, and give it to my father."

In the second part of the letter, intended for Georg Wintz, Jr., Thomas Schley said:

⁵ Georg Stoeckle, Schley's brother-in-law, also lived in Frederick County.

⁶ Schley is no doubt referring to the often abused indenture system under which emigrants could enter into a contract of service against payment of their passage.

"Dear brother-in-law Georg Wintz, if your father does not wish to move away with you, I won't advise you to do so, or else you will get his gray hair to the grave in deep sorrow, for I always noticed how attached he was to you, and you would not act right if you left against his will.

"But here you would be much better off than over there. However, if father were willing to come along, I advise you and all others not to delay any longer. For he who feels like working has a fine chance here. . . .

"I don't know what else to write you this time. I shall expect a sincere answer from you on all this, or—what I would prefer—you yourselves."

We do not know whether any of John Thomas Schley's relative heeded his plea to come to America where he himself had found such a busy and rewarding life. When it was suggested recently that the grave of Thomas Schley be marked by a permanent memorial, a long search could not produce any evidence of a grave. It remains unknown where he was buried. But his name has remained alive in numerous American families of whom he was the progenitor.⁷

K. G. W.

⁷ Most prominent among his descendants were a grandson, William Schley, Member of Congress and Governor of Georgia where Schley County was named after him, and Admiral Winfield Scott Schley, national hero of the Spanish-American War. (Cf. Albert B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States* (Boston, 1909), I, 169-170, 175; *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVI, 437 ff.)