

THE DIARY OF JACOB ENGELBRECHT: CHRONICLE OF
LIFE IN FREDERICK, MARYLAND FROM
1819 UNTIL 1878

By WILLIAM ROGERS QUINN

Frederick, Maryland, is fortunate in having an almost day-to-day account of some sixty of its 215 years of existence in the form of a diary kept by a second generation Marylander of German parentage, Jacob Engelbrecht.¹ The author of the diary was the son of a German soldier, Conrad Engelbrecht, taken prisoner with the regiments which surrendered at Yorktown, brought to Frederick where he was released and allowed to stay in this country.² Conrad spent the rest of his life in Frederick, plying his trade as a tailor and taking an active interest in the German Lutheran Church there.³ He married a woman of German descent and had a good-sized family, whose descendants have an honorable place in the life of Frederick today.

Conrad's son, Jacob, was born in 1797 and followed, during much of his long life, his father's trade. He was an amiable eccentric, who did not hesitate to be different from others. He was educated in both languages. For a person of his profession, he was a wide reader, at least in English. He took a keen interest in politics, local, state, and national, being on the conservative side, and he was mayor of Frederick at the end of the Civil War. He was very patriotic, and, among other interests, he collected letters of signers of the Declaration of Independence, Presidents of the United States, and other eminent men. Fourth of July celebrations always attracted him, and one year when there was no public observance in Frederick, he walked out to the Monocacy river, sat down on its banks and sang the "Star-Spangled Banner" all by himself. He even visited Fort McHenry in order to be able to sing the national anthem where the bombs had fallen.

Jacob Engelbrecht had an insatiable curiosity about the affairs of other people and had an excellent intelligence system covering all the town of Frederick. There were newspapers in Frederick, of course, but they emphasized national and foreign news, since everyone knew what was going on in the town. Engelbrecht had a good sense of history and often recorded for posterity information he picked up from aged residents of the town, who had crossed the Atlantic as immigrants in the 18th century or who had served in the Revolution on one side or the other. He had a hardy, rustic sense of humor and shows us what made people laugh in those days. However, he always maintained a certain dignity and there are no traces of coarseness in his entries. The diary gives us an excellent idea of how the American language was developing during his lifetime.

¹The diaries of Jacob Engelbrecht remained in the possession of his descendants in Frederick until recently when they were bequeathed to the Frederick County Historical Society. They were accessible to Dr. Dieter Cunz while preparing his book *The Maryland Germans* and Cunz quoted several passages pertaining to the Civil War. At present, Professor Quynn is preparing the diaries for publication at a later date.

²Conrad Engelbrecht came from Eichig, near Bayreuth. His son, Jacob Engelbrecht (1797-1878) was mayor of Frederick from 1865 until 1868. Cf. Dieter Cunz, *The Maryland Germans* (Princeton, N. J., 1948), 291-292.

³Abdel K. Wentz, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Frederick, Maryland* (Harrisburg, PA., 1938), 318.

The diary consists of some 21 volumes of assorted sizes, plus three devoted to local marriages, deaths, and real estate transactions. Occasionally entries are in German, spelled by ear, for he probably spoke German at home and read it rarely. He took great pride in his journal and often reread and altered entries years later. Several times he wrote in his own blood and checked later to see if it had lasted. The greatest value of the diary probably lies in the rich picture it provides of Frederick in an important period of its history, but it also contains comments on various details of State and national history. Jacob Engelbrecht's tailoring shop was for a time on the road leading from Baltimore to the west. The main stream of western emigration passed before his eyes and he frequently encountered and interviewed celebrities.

Engelbrecht had a great interest in weather and in funerals. We learn from him that Frederick County weather followed the same rugged pattern as now; if anything it was worse. He made a hobby of attending funerals and was distressed when only a few people followed the bier. Out of the goodness of his heart, he would often, on his day off, make a point of adding one more to a slender group of mourners. He lived a rather, simple, austere life, fought a losing battle most of his years in an effort to give up his one bad habit, snufftaking. He was well over 60 when he first tasted eggnog and thought he had not been missing a thing. He was a great churchgoer, attending several times on Sunday and sometimes during the week. He liked especially long sermons by distinguished visiting clergymen. The sermons were often in German. He was a good musician and in the German tradition he played in a local band and led the choir in one of the churches, not his own, which was Lutheran.

Through Engelbrecht's eyes, we see the coming of the railroads. The B. & O. to Frederick from Baltimore was the first railroad in the United States, hence of great importance. Almost everyone going west would go to Frederick and from there travel by stage. Engelbrecht himself was a great traveler, first in the stagecoach, then in the "cars." He was an inveterate sightseer, and of the cities he visited, Alexandria, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, he examined every possible square inch, climbed all the church steeples and wrote down what he saw. None, he thought, could compare with his native town. He was an enthusiastic walker to the end of his life and liked especially to walk out to the Monocacy and to the rugged Catoctin Mountains to the west of Frederick.

Life in 19th century Frederick, as seen in the pages of Engelbrecht's diary, was neither monotonous nor uneventful. There was a continuous stream of visitors passing through, sometimes spending a day or two to wait for proper connections with the west, or to rest after the long journey east or north. Amusements were varied and included visiting preachers and lecturers on a great variety of subjects. There were the theatrical troupes, ventriloquists, circuses, and wild-animal shows. Among other popular diversions were parades of the military, volunteer firemen, and fraternal orders. There were also balloon ascensions, temperance conventions, and camp meetings. Sometimes Engelbrecht would amuse himself, with the help of a friend, by taking an informal census of the number of pianos or houses in Frederick. The making of sauerkraut was an important annual event, solemnly recorded each year with all necessary details. There were even crime waves. On one occasion when a bank was robbed of an enormous sum of money, emissaries were sent from Frederick to New York to negotiate with the robbers and successfully returned with part of the loot. Frederick was repeatedly the site of court martials of national importance.

Our Victorian ancestors were not squeamish and public hangings attracted crowds from the city and county. It was a period of duelling, indulged in by the great and near-great, with various weapons, sometimes even rifles.

Life was not free from danger. There were continual battles with fires and with the floods from the raging waters of Carroll Creek which flows through the town. People were drowned even in the streets of Frederick. Innumerable epidemics were a constant threat. Cholera took its victims by the dozens and scarlet fever could leave a family mourning three children one one week.

The volume of the diary which deals with the Civil War contains some 200 pages and starts with the John Brown raid in nearby Harpers Ferry in 1859. The approaching storm, with its attendant political skirmishes, is viewed by the diarist with indignant alarm. Frederick was a divided town and lay at the crossroads used by both armies going in all directions. Which-ever army passed through, one-half of the population was pleased and the other half unhappy. There were several skirmishes in and near Frederick and the guns of Monocacy, Antietam and Gettysburg were plainly heard in the streets of Frederick. The diary comments on the Barbara Fritchie episode and mentions the ransoming of Frederick for \$200,000, exacted by the Confederate general Jubal Anderson Early. Engelbrecht was a staunch Unionist and on this occasion when Frederick might have been burned were the ransom not promptly paid, he wrote in his diary: "These are awful times, one day we are as usual and the next day in the hands of the enemy—but whatever is the final issue, I say, Come weal or woe—Come life or death, we go for the Union of these States forever—one and inseparable." Feeling ran high in Frederick and the four agonizing years left deep scars. When soldiers came home from the opposing armies at the end of the war, there were bitter episodes. But the town gradually pulled itself together and resumed its normal life.

Engelbrecht's diary is an excellent sociological study of the life of an old and homogeneous town which grew from a population of 3,637 to only 9,000 in 60 years. It remained essentially the same despite minor changes. It is interesting to follow in the diary the language changes during that period. Finally, and by no means unimportant, is the picture it gives of Engelbrecht himself as a colorful and original character. It is the moderate success story of the immigrant who came to America, not as a peaceful civilian, but nominally at least, as an enemy soldier, and who with his family established himself firmly and usefully in the fabric of their chosen home.