

THE REVEREND PETER MUHLENBERG
A SYMBIOTIC ADVENTURE IN VIRGINIA, 1772-1783

By GEORGE M. SMITH

Administrator, Woodlawn Plantation,
National Trust for Historic Preservation

For the American colonists on the eve of the revolution, the year 1772 was more personally memorable than continentally eventful. Perhaps it was the way in which the year began. There was the weather. The January air was filled with awe-inspiring snow. In Virginia, Tidewater and Piedmont planters paid an especially heavy price. Inasmuch as their animal husbandry did not provide for the sheltering or enclosure of their livestock in winter, cattle went unfed and perished for lack of forage and water. At Fredericksburg, where it snowed continuously at the end of January for three days, one observer estimated the fall for the 28th at "about two and one-half feet." By February 4, the snow was described as "very deep" and with a coating of sleet, able to "bear a man walking upon it."¹ With churches closed, courts postponed and socializing reduced to a minimum, Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, very probably expressed the frustration of everyone. Acknowledging the "prodigious deep" on February 1, he confided to the privacy of his journal: "the want [of] exercise makes me feel quite I don't know howish."²

The great and not-yet-great pursued their own affairs with no little abandon. The recently wedded Squire Jefferson was upcountry in Albemarle. There, snug in a "little brick cottage" with the "much courted widow" Martha Skelton, he loitered in the bliss of a January honeymoon.³

May at Mount Vernon was equally notable, though more for somnolence than passion. An ex-saddler and carriage maker from nearby Maryland, Charles Willson Peale, was intent upon his first portrait of the future president.⁴ Only a few weeks before, Colonel Washington had returned with Patsy and Martha from Williamsburg and the meeting of the General Assembly. The sessions of the colonial legislature extended over a period of about eight weeks, from February 10 to April 11. After a long winter of confinement, one suspects that the delegates were particularly affable and in no mood for tortuous rhetoric or arduous debate. The Colonel, especially, seems to have yielded to the temptations of the inaugural sessions. By his own reckoning he attended the theater seven times, a concert, a ball, and was regularly employed at whist. The latter recreation was pursued with obvious enthusiasm, and on one occasion, cost him dearly when he dropped a handsome nine pounds ten.⁵

Despite the pleasant diversions, the burgesses and delegates were ultimately gavelled to adjournment, satisfied, no doubt, with having diligently attended to the affairs of state. In truth, they could "point with pride" to at least one accomplishment. By their unanimous consent, the formation of three counties west of the Blue Ridge had been authorized. To further reveal the reverence and respect with which they received their newly appointed governor, one of the counties was named for His Excel-

lency, John Murray, Lord Dunmore [Dunmore Co.]. A second county honored his son, George Murray, Lord Fincastle [Fincastle Co.]. The third was dedicated to their former and recently deceased governor, Norborne Berkeley, Baron de Botetourt [Berkeley Co.]⁰

Yet, there was more to the extension of local government in the back country than met the eye. On the surface, it may have appeared to the casual observer, a thoughtful and well-timed gesture, appropriate to the reception of a new governor. Beneath the surface, however, was the evident concern of the General Assembly for a growing demographic problem with ethnic overtones.

For a full decade following the French and Indian War, a massive movement of Germans had spread into the lower and upper reaches of the Shenandoah Valley. The immigrant tide of babbling Dutchmen, some out of Pennsylvania, others, fresh from the Rhineland or the German cantons of Switzerland, had literally inundated the area.⁷ While not a new element of Virginia's population, within the ten years prior to 1772, it had suddenly become a respectable proportion. Thousands of Germans had swarmed over Frederick and Augusta counties, purchasing lands from Hite, McKay & Co., or Baron Lord Fairfax. With them, they brought to Virginia their culture, customs, traditions, religion and language. Essentially, they were farmers and mechanics of a variety of religious persuasion—some Reformed, some Lutheran, some Anabaptist sectarians. But their common bond was their "Germanness." For obvious reasons they settled in small towns and vast neighborhoods, completely overwhelming the few English yeomen who were living among them.

For the establishment and those concerned, the problem was one of assimilation. How were these strangers to English government and an English speaking tradition to be absorbed into the colonial enterprise? In the structuring of new counties the problem was brought into sharp focus. Normal procedure, in the case of unmanageable populations, called for the creation, first, of the traditional vestry and clergy. In time, these would be followed by courts and justices and sheriff. But these were dissenters, strangers not only to common law but the Anglican Church. How would the familiar system function on the county and parish level where the majority of souls were German? The test came with the formation of the Beckford Parish in 1769, a parish that was later to be incorporated into the administrative machinery of Dunmore County. There, the German problem was most pressing.

Just who it was that suggested the appropriate solution to the perplexing questions of Church and State, one may never know. In all probability it originated with the first, and only, German and Dissenter dominated vestry in Colonial Virginia. Contrary to what has previously been believed, seven of the twelve members selected to serve on the Beckford Parish were Germans.⁸ Although it is of record in Frederick County Court, that on March 6, 1771, they took the "usual oaths . . . conformable to the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England," it is apparent from later testimony that self-interest coerced the misrepresentation of their true loyalties. It is further apparent that the five Church of England men who served with them raised no objection to their having sworn falsely. An estimate of the true situation can be gathered from the fact that at least two of the seven German vestrymen were Elders of dissenting congregations at the very time they were vowing to support the Thirty-nine Articles.⁹ It is also reasonably clear, that with the organization of the Vestry in 1771, the non-Anglicans exercised a

controlling voice in the election of a German speaking pastor. The man they sought was a youthful Pennsylvania German Lutheran, John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg.

II.

Peter Muhlenberg was born, October 1, 1746, at Trappe or Providence, Montgomery County, Pa. His father was Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, a Lutheran pastor who had come to America in 1742 from Halle, Germany, where he had received his education at the *Waisenhaus* or Halle Institute. Henry Muhlenberg had come to America at the request of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an English organization interested in the care of souls in the colonies. The opportunity to minister to the Germans of Pennsylvania had come to him through the London Court Preacher, Frederick Ziegenhagen, a German chaplain to the Hanoverian household.¹⁰

Three years after the elder Muhlenberg's arrival in America, he married Anna Maria Weiser, mother to Peter, and daughter of the famed Indian interpreter and trader, Conrad Weiser. It was at Providence, near the Weiser home, that John Peter Gabriel was baptized on October 14, 1746. The sponsors who shared with him their names included the Rev. Peter Brunnholtz, a Lutheran pastor at Philadelphia; the Rev. Gabriel Naesmann, pastor of the Swedish Lutheran Church at Wicaco on the Delaware; John Nicholas Kurtz and John Frederick Vigera, two schoolmasters. In later life, the eldest son of Henry Muhlenberg's eleven children, eliminated both John and Gabriel from his signature, signing his name simply Peter Muhlenberg.¹²

It was also at Providence that Peter spent the first fifteen years of his life. According to several biographers, he grew up "with a gun and a fishing rod in his hands, manifesting "frontiersman-like traits, natural enough in a grandson of Conrad Weiser but perturbing to his father."¹³ Nature-taught, he roamed the woods and fields as a youth, fished the local streams, and from his primitive wandering's presumably gained more knowledge than he felt was available in books.

Following a brief exposure to the classics at the Philadelphia Academy, Peter and two of his brothers, Frederick and Henry, were sent to Halle to be educated under more rigorous conditions. The director of the *Waisenhaus*, Dr. Gotthilf August Francke, was also privileged to apprentice the young men to area merchants should such measures prove necessary and desirable. Since Peter, by his own admission had "a great fancy for business," he agreed to be bound to a Lübeck grocer and druggist for a period of six years. The decision proved catastrophic. By January 1766, Peter was writing to a family friend in London:

"It is really true that last winter I was obliged to wear one shirt for from four to six weeks, because I only had two and because my clothing was very bad, and we had to stand the whole winter long in an open shop, and I was obliged to suffer from the cold; . . . I begged my mistress to have something mended for me. She answered shortly, she would have nothing else repaired for me, and if my parents did not send any money, I might go naked, . . . Your honor knows very well that there is not much to be learned in a grocery store, and I assure you that when I had been here four weeks, I knew as much as I do now, for when I learned how to pour out a glass of brandy and to sell a little tea and sugar, etc., I had learned everything. He [Herr Niemeyer] himself takes charge of the little drugshop, and as I have by this time entirely forgotten my Latin, I have no longer any desire to learn medicine. We have

nothing to do at all with writing or reckoning. . . . As lowest apprentice I could willingly accommodate myself to everything, eating in the kitchen as well as doing other work, if I was only learning something. I have already found out how much I can rely on the affection of my master, for, as he has refused to be kind to me when I needed it, I will not ask anything of him when I am not in such great need. He certainly promised me that I should eat at his table next Michaelmas; but I do not ask about it, and would much rather that he would let me learn bookkeeping. . . . If I only had Sunday free, I could practice writing and arithmetic a little; but our shop is open Sundays as well as other days until ten o'clock in the evening. Then it is too late. . . . If your Honor doubts the truth of these things, I am entirely willing to have this letter laid before my master, . . . The fourteen pounds sterling are already gone, as my master gives me to understand; I know nothing about it."¹⁴

When Peter could endure the situation no longer, he absconded, joined the 60th (Royal American) Regiment of Foot [a British regiment then in Europe], and as secretary to one of the officers, returned to Philadelphia where he was discharged early in 1767. Shortly thereafter his father observed:

"The pretexts for acting as he did were: a, his excessive home-sickness; b, his perceiving that his trade would be no good in this country, and that by longer delay the expenses would be increased without the desired end being attained. I have sent him to a private English school here, where he is learning book-keeping and making some progress. He keeps himself quiet and retired, and yet is popular among friends."¹⁵

The absorbing question over the ensuing months for both family and friends was what to do with the fugitive from Lübeck. As the family was making their home in Philadelphia at this critical period, there was no paucity of advice. A merchant of the city, Mr. Kaepple, counseled the disconsolate father to set the young man up in business, preferably the grocery trade. Other friends suggested that the drug business held more promise. Henry Muhlenberg, Sr., was not at all certain how he should encourage his son. Though he was willing to admit that Peter "does indeed think he can make all kinds of *aquaevitae* of brandy and could keep an ale-house," he was less than confident that the proposed establishment would benefit the community or befit his station as chief pastor to the Philadelphia Germans.¹⁶

On the eve of Peter's twenty-first birthday the decision was made. "With the help of God," the Swedish Provost, Dr. Wrangel, would take the maturing youth into his home at Wicaco and train him as a school-master or catechist. In the course of time, and somewhat to the surprise of the Herr Doctor, Peter Muhlenberg proved a gifted amanuensis, his ability to write out an entire English sermon as it was being delivered was, in Wrangel's estimation, a talent worth cultivating. Subsequent developments were reported in a letter from the senior Muhlenberg to the Church fathers in London and Halle, June 8, 1768:

"Last winter it was thought advisable for Peter to travel once or twice to one of the neighboring country churches and there deliver a memorized catechical discourse. The people received it well and were very grateful. Afterwards Herr Dr. Wrangel paid a visit to the vacant church at Lancaster, it being his turn, and during his absence allowed the young man to preach in English in the Swedish church at Wicaco and in the country, which resulted in a crowd and the applause of their friends. I was fearful and afraid, for I had already suffered and been scorched by the wiles of Satan, . . . As a good many friends went to the Swedes' Church when he preached it was thought that there might

be little given in alms in our church of St. Michael, and the question was privately raised why he should not preach in our church as well. I remained entirely passive, not wishing it allowed on several grounds; . . . Finally, on Good Friday evening, a. c. he was permitted to speak on the burial of the Saviour. As soon as it became known, there was such a crowd and press at St. Michael's Church as had not been known since its existence, it was said. I did not go, but remained at home in my little room, like a condemned sinner and worm, praying. . . . After the sermon, the Elders, or, as they are called, the members of the Corporation, came in the house and congratulated me with great affection and emotion on the sermon my son had just delivered. . . ."17

Thereafter, Father Muhlenberg employed the services of his son with increasing regularity. By June, 1769, the now eager, fledgling prophet was examined by the Reverend Ministerium and appointed deacon.¹⁸ With all the powers of the ministerial office at his command, save the administration of the sacraments, Peter assumed responsibility for the conducting of German and English services in the New Jersey congregations of Bedminster and New Germantown. A prodigal reputation was thus well on its way toward salvage. The progress report, promptly dispatched to the Church Fathers at Halle, trumpeted the news: "Impartial, intelligent, and experienced people say that he has a pleasant tenor voice, a clear distinct delivery, puts emphasis in the right place, is polite, quiet, and guarded in his conversation, and will have nothing to do with strong drink."¹⁹

The high praise reached other ears as well. Anna Barbara Meyer, the daughter of an affluent Philadelphia potter, was one. She noted the transformation with special delight. Called Hannah by family and friends, she yielded at age nineteen to the Raritan vicar's persuasiveness, and became his wife in early November, 1770.

Another witness to the restoration of honor was Richard Peters. The Rev. Mr. Peters was Commissioner of the English Church at Philadelphia and had long been a friend of the Muhlenberg family. He further enjoyed the confidence and close cooperation of Henry Muhlenberg in colonial affairs of a religious nature. Following the Indian Treaty at Fort Stanwix in 1768, it was Richard Peters who suggested that the young Muhlenberg "might be useful as a missionary teacher among the Six Nations, who still held his grandfather, Conrad Weiser in 'solemn remembrance.'" At the time, Peter's father vetoed the matter, confessing as he did the fear that the boy might "turn Indian sooner than turn the Indians Christian."²¹

III.

James Wood, Jr., a gentleman justice and vestryman of Winchester, Frederick County, Virginia, heard of Peter Muhlenberg for the first time when he visited Richard Peters at Philadelphia in the spring of 1771. Justice Wood was on a business trip to New York and was informally commissioned by the newly elected vestry of Beckford Parish to obtain a pastor for them. Under normal circumstances, the vestry would have made application for a minister, or the recommendation of one, through its own commissary, James Horrocks, of Williamsburg. The fact that the vestry ignored him and approached his counterpart in Pennsylvania, Richard Peters, was somewhat irregular. The action may also suggest the early orientation of the Virginia back country toward Pennsylvania and Philadelphia rather than eastern Virginia and Williamsburg.²²

Whatever the implications, Wood had been instructed to secure a candidate for the "vacant parish" who could preach in German as well

as English. Peters suggested, apparently, that they discuss the matter with Henry Muhlenberg who might be able to advise them, or suggest a clergyman who could fill the requirement. Within a short time, Peter Muhlenberg received a letter from New York over the signature of James Wood and dated 4 May 1771. It reads in part:

"Revd. Sir—

I have been requested by the Vestry of a Vacant Parish in Virginia, to use my Endeavours to find a Person of an unexceptionable Character, either Ordained or Desirous of Obtaining Ordination in the Clergy of the Church of England; who is capable of Preaching both in the English and German Languages. The Living is established by the Laws of the Land with Perquisites, is of the Value of Two Hundred and Fifty Pounds Pennsylvania Currency, with a Parsonage House and a Farm of a least two Hundred Acres of Extreme Good Land with other convenient Out Houses belonging to the same, which will render it Very Convenient for a Gentleman's Seat, and having just now received a Character and Information of You from Mr. John Vanorden, of [New] Brunswick, I am Very Inclined to Believe you would fully Answer the Expectations of the People of that Parish; . . . If you should think these proposals worth your Acceptance, I shall be glad You would write me an Answer, to be left in Philadelphia at the Sign of the Cross Keys, where I shall stay a few days on my return home, . . ."²³

Hardly a month passed before Peter Muhlenberg's interest led him to Virginia to view the living and meet with the vestry. The letter of introduction and testimonial which he brought with him was written by Richard Peters, and addressed to Dr. Hugh Mercer, Esq., "at or near Winchester." The letter included the following commendation:

"Be pleased to acquaint the Vestry and Mr. Wood, that the Academy of this City have a great Attachment to the Reverend Mr. Muylenberg the Father, and that Dr. Smith, myself and Mr. Duchee will gladly write Letters to the Society, or Bishops and Arch Bishops in favour of this young and promising Divine, who is of an amiable Disposition and has gained great Esteem amongst both the Lutherans and English. These Letters we shall write jointly as soon as we shall be favour'd with a perusal of the proceedings of the Vestry. I am, I suppose well known to several of them . . . and therefore take the Liberty thro' Your Goodness, to recommend this young man to them as one, who will answer all their purposes as to both Churches—that is to say German and English...."²⁴

The Beckford Parish Vestry seems to have agreed with Richard Peters. The young man commended to them "met all their purposes as to both Churches." What Peter Muhlenberg's immediate reaction was, is not clear. One suspects that it must not have been too favorable. The parish itself, so recently brought into existence, was totally unprepared to provide the living which the law and Wood's letter described. There was no "Parsonage House," or glebe land, or funds for the perquisite, and would not be for some time. Further, the parish then consisted of at least eight, widely scattered churches: six or more German and two English. The problems in ministering to all of them would be formidable. Charles Minn Thruston, rector of the Frederick Parish, had found that it was only with great difficulty that he could visit the outlying chapels twice a year; May and November.²⁵

But most importantly, there was the problem of ordination in London. Was it possible or desirable for a Lutheran clergyman to reorient his loyalties and convictions? It would take some doing. Perhaps it was Peter's father who finally persuaded him that it was not only possible but necessary.

In November, 1768, Henry Mulenberg had brooded over the matter and noted in his journals:

"There is hardly anyone who can free our German Lutherans in Virginia from the county parish tax [HD: at all events, neither a priest nor a Levite will go to the trouble—unless a Samaritan happens that way] unless some German adventurer accepts a call to the congregation, travels to Mother with it, subscribes her Articles and Canons, and submits to 'regular ordination.' Then they will no longer be required to pay double taxes and will be able to retain their dear German mother tongue as long as it may be necessary."²⁶

By the end of the year, any scruples that Peter might have had were cast aside. His father had wished for a "German adventurer," he now had one in his son. The decision made, Peter sailed from Philadelphia, March 2, 1772, aboard the *Pennsylvania Packet*. His journal indicates that he arrived at Dover on April 10, visited with Thomas and John Penn on the 13th, was ordained a deacon in the presence of "some of the nobility," at Mayfair Chapel on the 21st, and on the Saturday after Easter was ordained a priest by the Bishop of London, in the King's Chapel.²⁷ Two other Americans were ordained with him: William Braidfoot, of Virginia, and William White, of Philadelphia. Somewhat later, both would become chaplains; the former of a Virginia militia regiment, the latter of the Continental Congress.²⁸

An Episcopal tradition insists that when Muhlenberg returned to Philadelphia in the month of July, he carried with him "two pulpit Bibles & two large prayer books for use respectively in the two churches of his parish."²⁹ Still another bit of folklore asserts confidently that the prayer books—no mention of the Bibles—were presented to Peter by the "Queen" on the occasion of his ordination. A more likely explanation of the existence of the volumes is to be found in the *Minutes* of a Vestry held for the Parish of Frederick on August 5, 1767. The pertinent action notes: "that Mr. Isaac Hite do furnish the Parish with large Bibles and Surplices for the different Chapels, and that a sufficient sum be levied at laying the next parish levy for the same."³⁰ At the time in question, two chapels, ultimately to become the centers of English worship in the Beckford Parish, were under the supervision of the Frederick Parish Vestry. In view of the fact that Peter's "London Journal" never includes any mention of either the books or the Queen, it is reasonably safe to conclude that the so-called "Muhlenberg Prayer Books" are parish mementoes antedating his arrival in Virginia. Mention is made of them here in order to indicate the type of sectarian mythology that has tended to obscure the man and his unparalleled ministry on the Virginia frontier.

An appreciation of Peter Muhlenberg's unique, bilingual ministry is further complicated by denominational controversy and special pleading with respect to his ordination. Lutherans have claimed that his title to Holy Orders in the Anglican Church was an expedient gesture to Virginia law, relieving disadvantaged Germans from the necessity of financing two church systems. Episcopalians have countered that Muhlenberg was never ordained by his own denomination, and that his fame, such as it is, may largely be attributed to the administrative genius and foresight of the Established Church. In their eagerness to claim him as their own, both Christian sects have lost sight of the man and his larger ecumenical mission. Of his ordination, Peter recorded little more than the bare details. "This morning [25th], at 10 a, Rev. Messers. White and Brightfoot and myself took coach for the Lord Bishop's dressed in gowns. We were intro-

duced to his Lordship who made a very serious and eloquent oration to us concerning the weighty matter we had before us, and then desired us to walk to the Chappel. . . . After prayers were read the Bishop proceeded to ordination. When all was over we returned to our lodgings."³¹ That Peter Muhlenberg was aware of the unprecedented proceedings is evident from his journal entry for the 27th of April. "Today I went to Kensington to see the Kings Chaplain, Mr. Ziegenhagen. I dined with him and answered some objections he made to my ordination by the bishop. He was very kind, and considering his age extremely pleasant."³² What the German court preacher's objections were, as well as the answers Peter gave him, are not discoverable. Perhaps Christoph Kunze, Peter's brother-in-law, expressed the essential consideration in a letter to his own brother in Naitschau near Griez. On September 16, 1772, he wrote: "My father-in-law's eldest son, Peter Muhlenberg . . . went to England to be ordained by a Bishop, and has now returned, and is an *English minister* in Virginia, all without changing his belief."³³

IV.

Peter had indeed gone to Virginia. Having sold his furniture on the 12th of August, he purchased a sorrel horse.³⁴ On his way to Dunmore County he appears to have stopped for a brief visit with his brother Frederick in the Tulpehocken region.³⁴ From there, on the 6th of September, he turned south for the 200 mile journey to the Shenandoah Valley. Whether his wife, Hannah, was with him is unknown. Under the most favorable conditions, and with hard riding, the trip took five days. Thus it seems likely that he arrived in Müllerstadt [Woodstock], the newly designated county seat of Dunmore County, perhaps as early as the 12th. His arrival is supported by the register of the parish in which is recorded the marriage of John Overall and Elizabeth Ann Waters, 13 September 1772.³⁵

By the 29th of September, Peter's father noted in his journal: "Our country preacher from Virginia, Mr. Schwarbach [Madison Co.], complained that he was growing older and weaker. He said that congregations in Virginia as far away as fifty, sixty, seventy & eighty to one hundred miles were constantly appealing to him for visits and services and that he was unable to stand it any longer. . . ."³⁶ The result was that the Pennsylvania Ministerium immediately "resolved that Peter Muhlenberg, who lives only sixty miles from there be asked in writing to journey thither, investigate the circumstances, and submit a report on the matter."³⁷

From the very beginning, therefore, it was known and understood that the Beckford Parish ministry of Peter Muhlenberg would be an ecumenical experiment. An experiment in which German, dissenting interests would be served over an extensive area and without scrupulous attention to the accepted procedures of the Anglican Church. It is to the credit of the Establishment that they had the uncommon good sense to look the other way, resisting the temptation to exact conformity. When seen in this light, the prevailing notion, that Muhlenberg's ministry was typically parochial and limited to the town of Woodstock, is quite erroneous.³⁸

Peter's first recorded sermon appears to have been preached at Woodstock on a cloudy day in October, the 4th, 1772.³⁹ Inasmuch as the County had yet to construct its parish church, the service was very probably held in the German schoolhouse belonging to the Lutheran congregation. The youthful clerk of court, Jonathan Clark [brother to George Rogers Clark], was present for the occasion. He appears to have been especially attracted to the German adventurer from Pennsylvania. Being a bachelor at the

time, he frequently "lay" at the Muhlenberg home and was a faithful attendant at parish services. From his diary it is possible to determine that for the first year, at least, Muhlenberg had established the practice of preaching at Woodstock, one Sunday each month. The remaining Sundays were devoted to the widely dispersed communities of Germans and English, who assembled for worship in crossroad schoolhouses and log chapels.⁴⁰

The newest of the log chapels had been constructed by Abraham Keller at Ephraim Leith's Spring near the South River. Begun in the spring of 1768, the chapel was completed for use by the end of November, 1770. As described in the building contract, Keller was to build a chapel:

"of Logs Squarred and Dove tailed thirty feet long in the clear and eleven feet high from the sill to the wall plate to underpin the whole to make four windows thereto,—two in the Front and two in the Back Part over against those in the Front, each window being of eighteen panes of glass of the size ten by Eight to make shutters to the windows with bolts etc., within to keep the Close when shut, and catches without to keep them back when open a good and strong Door in the middle of the Front with a good lock etc., to it, a Floor of good Plank Plained groved and Tong'd a Communion Table a Pulpit a good Roof of Featheredge Shingles. . . ." ⁴¹

Inasmuch as Abraham Keller was a member of the Beckford Parish Vestry, one would assume that he was ideally suited to undertake the construction of the Parish Church anticipated for Woodstock. This was not the case. Possibly the vestry envisioned a more elegant and imposing structure than the South River Chapel. The absence of any records of their meetings makes it impossible to know their true intentions. It is evident, nonetheless, that they projected, not one, but two new buildings for their parish. To this end they advertised in the *Wöchentliche Philadelphiaische Staatsbote*, a German newspaper in Philadelphia, inviting "proposals for building two churches . . . in the Parish of Beckford, fourteen miles from Winchester, one building to measure thirty-two by thirty-four feet and the other thirty-four by thirty-six feet." ⁴² The advertisement was entered in the paper over the signatures of Abraham Keller and Lorenz Schnepf, dated January, 1772.

Precisely when the proposed church was completed is difficult to determine with any certainty. Circumstantial evidence suggests that it was not until 1774, the year in which the vestry is recorded as having purchased the land necessary for its construction.⁴³ In part, the lack of money seems to have been responsible for its postponement, as well as for the delay in acquiring a glebe. Muhlenberg suggests as much in his *Account Book*.

Initially, he notes that on November 20, 1772, "the vestry met in Woodstock to tag the Parish Levy when there was levied for me as follows—To my salary to this day, 2 mos. & 14 days, tobacco rated at 18/— For want of a glebe allowed me 45 pounds." But it was not until July 4, 1774, that he was able to enter in his records: "received of Edwin Young as *part* of my salary for the last year, the sum of One Hundred pounds Virginia currency. He remains in my debt 51 pounds." The following year, Sheriff Young delivered as his salary a miscellaneous collection of "104 paper dollars, 58 silver dollars, [and] 35 shilling Pennsylvania money."⁴⁴

With the acquisition of the glebe land in August, 1773, the promised "gentleman's seat" was completely furnished. The following spring, Peter invested in two cows, purchased from Mr. Creabile for 8 pounds. By July,

grain was reaped and "Henry Miller's people" were paid for "hay making and harvesting."⁴⁵ Thereafter the farm received Muhlenberg's undivided attention. His accounts are replete with agricultural concerns ranging from the abundance of small grain harvests to the construction of a new "cyder press and trough."⁴⁶

Although the Muhlenbergs occupied a dwelling in Millerstown off the Courthouse Square shortly after their arrival in Virginia, it would appear that this residence was abandoned for the glebe by 1775, in time for the birth of Hannah's second child.⁴⁷ The farm's proximity to the Shenandoah River and the adjacent fields and woods was not the least of its attractive qualities for the Beckford Parish vicar. As his father had expressed it some ten years earlier in a letter to Dr. Ziegenhagen, "his [Peter] chief fault and bad inclination has been his fondness for hunting and fishing. But if our reverend fathers at Halle observe any tendency to vice I would humbly beg that they send him to a well-disciplined garrison town, under the name of Peter Weiser, before he causes much trouble or complaint. There he may obey the drum if he will not follow the spirit of God."⁴⁸

If anything, Peter's "bad inclination" grew worse during his days in Dunmore. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jonathan Clark's diary. A sampling of entries for the year 1774 describes the situation well. "28 Feb., Clear at Parson Muhlenburghs, and a hunting; 27 Apr., Clear at the Rev. Muhlenbergs at the river—a fishing, lay at Muhlenbergs;" or, "30 Dec., Clear, a hunting; the Revd. M. Peter Muhlenberg killed a Buck . . ."⁴⁹

Years later, as a retired Major-General and member of the United States Congress, Muhlenberg would reminisce in a letter to his old Virginia companion, Tavener Beale:

" . . . You may easily conceive that not having heard from you for a considerable length of time, the sight of a letter from you would give me pleasure, but this pleasure is doubled when I read your description of Situation &c. Shadd—Rock—Trout—Deer—Cyder & Brandy—'tis very well. But have you somebody—or anybody to assist you in the catching the fish—or tapping the Cyder! as to Deer, I remember you could hardly kill one in Shenandoah when you were young, & spry, & therefore I conjecture they are in no great danger from you at the present time. This accounts for your wishing to have me alongside of you. You know (though you would never own it) that I am a better marksman than you are, and as to fishing you never disputed the pre-eminence with me. Your plan therefore certainly is that I shall head the Hunting and Fishing Department and leave the Government of the Cellar to you

"What an idea! What an excellent Group in prospective! Can it be realized? I believe not—for I just now call to mind that the Pike in the Ohio are much larger than those with you—and tho' the pike in Jackson's River are larger than those in Perkiomen, still they are not so sweet. . . ."⁵⁰

It is a misreading of the evidence, however, to imagine that Peter Muhlenberg neglected the spiritual welfare of his parish for more personal concerns. Remembering that his ministry in Virginia was distilled into a period of approximately three and one-half years, the record which he left assumes fantastic proportions. A total of 463 baptisms are entered by him on the register of the parish. These are supplemented by 158 marriages. In the year 1773 alone, the sacrament of baptism was administered to 215 infants. Forty-five of these were reported for the month of August, with twenty-three occurring on one day. Since many of the

baptisms probably took place in the homes of his parishioners, the record of his diligence is all the more impressive.⁵¹

Ecumenically, Muhlenberg's ministry appears to have been equally zealous. The preponderance of German parishioners in his congregations quite naturally weighted his service to their requirements. Anglican needs, however, were not neglected. The death of Burr Harrison's daughter, Mary Ann, aroused his sympathetic attention quite as much as the demise of the German schoolmaster's wife in Strasburg. Muhlenberg's collection of books—seemingly more English than German—became a community lending library. Borrowers of every religious persuasion found literature suitable to their tastes. As colporteur to the Sheriff of Culpeper County, Virginia, Peter hawked the *London Magazine* and eight volumes of *The Spectator*. At the same time the Church of England clergyman was not beneath peddling lottery tickets for the benefit of the German Seminary in Philadelphia.

To what extent Peter Muhlenberg developed close relationships with the Anglican clergy in Virginia is unknown. One can only assume that he knew Charles Thruston of the neighboring Frederick Parish and maintained a friendly association with him. Available evidence suggests that dissenting clergymen were welcome in the parish, particularly if they were bilingual. One of these was Christian Streit who visited the Muhlenbergs in 1773, returning in 1775 to preach in the Woodstock Church.⁵²

V.

A single event changed everything. Thus, did the great god chance shuffle and deal the fates and estates of men in the days leading to revolution. For Peter Muhlenberg the conditioning of the past was determining. The sound of the drum was as compelling as the Spirit of God. Even as at Lübeck, the circumstances of life could prove intolerable and drive a man to desperate measures.

At first, it was hardly more than a sympathetic reaction to the plight of Boston. June 1, 1775, had been set aside as the official day of mourning by the Virginia Assembly. The stir was barely perceptible in the back-country. As on other bright June days, Muhlenberg and Clark were employed at the river. By the 16th, however, the Dunmore County freeholders were alert to their obligations. With Muhlenberg moderating the meeting, appropriate resolutions were approved and a Committee of Correspondence formed. Once again, the Beckford Parish pastor was designated chairman.⁵³ Six months later, Peter wrote to his brother Frederick:

"The times are getting troublesome with us, and begin to wear a hostile appearance. Independent companies are forming in every county, and politics engross all conversation. I had thrown up my commission as chairman of the Committee of Correspondence, and of magistrate likewise; but last week we had a general election in the county for a Great Committee, according to the resolves of Congress, and I am again chosen chairman, so that, whether I choose or not, I am to be a politician."⁵⁴

There was no turning point. In swift succession, one event followed another. On the 20th of March the two fishing partners, Muhlenberg and Clark, were at St. John's Church, Richmond. On December 7th, they were at Williamsburg, representing Dunmore County. Before the Revolutionary Convention adjourned, Peter Muhlenberg had acquired a colonel's commission, a staff and a regiment, thereafter to be designated the Eighth Virginia German." The only problem was that there were no troops, only a standard.

Precisely what followed, has long been a subject of controversy and not a little confused by the retelling of the dramatic episode in the life of the patriotic parson. Dr. James Thacher, a physician of the Continental Army, first reported the story in his *Military Journal*, published in 1827. He appears to have obtained the information at an "entertainment" given by General Muhlenberg for forty-one "respectable officers" at West Point, November 3, 1778. The party got a bit lively and lasted well into the night. Of his host, he wrote:

"General Muhlenberg was a minister in Virginia, but participating in the spirit of the times, exchanged his clerical profession for that of a soldier. Having in his pulpit inculcated the principles of liberty and the cause of his country, he found no difficulty in enlisting a regiment of soldiers, and he was appointed their commander. He entered his pulpit with his sword and cockade, preached his farewell sermon, and the next day marched at the head of his regiment to join the army, and he does honor to the military profession."⁵⁶

The account which is particuladly familiar, and upon which most subsequent versions are based, is that written by Henry A. Muhlenberg, the General's great-nephew. He calls the story an "authenticated anecdote," but fails to provide the source of his information. In his treatment of the episode, Colonel Muhlenberg returned to Woodstock following the Williamsburg convention and immediately notified the parish that he would deliver his farewell sermon the following Sabbath. The appointed day [assumed by many to have been January 21, 1776] having arrived, Peter Muhlenberg:

"ascended the pulpit, his tall form arrayed in full uniform, over which his own gown, the symbol of his holy calling, was thrown. . . . After recapulating, in words that aroused the coldest, the story of their sufferings and their wrongs, and telling them of the sacred character of the struggle in which he had unsheathed his sword, and for which he had left the altar he had vowed to serve, he said 'that in the language of holy writ, there was a time for all things, a time to preach and a time to pray, but those times had passed away' and in a voice that re-echoed through the church like a trumpet-blast, ' that there was a time to fight, and that time now had come!' "The sermon finished, he pronounced the benediction . . . Deliberately putting off the gown, which had thus far covered his martial figure, he stood before them a girded warrior: and descending from the pulpit, ordered the drums at the church-door to beat for recruits."⁵⁷

The family biographer then assures his readers that "nearly three hundred men of the frontier churches that day enlisted under his banner; and the gown then thrown off was worn for the last time."⁵⁸

Over the years heated controversy has been generated on numerous peripheral questions associated with the leave taking, the content of the sermon, and its date and place of delivery. One writer, in a highly partisan mood in 1884, suggested that the sermon was never preached in Woodstock. Intending to deny the Episcopalians of all claim to the man, he obliquely hinted in a footnote that the dramatic event was repeated on several occasions throughout the countryside, with substantially the same sermon being preached.⁵⁹ Say what you will about his motivation, there was an element of truth in what was implied.

Previous interpretations initially assumed that when Peter Muhlenberg received his January commission, he immediately discontinued his parish ministry and thereafter refused to perform the functions of a priest. The facts are quite contrary. The Beckford Parish Register indicates quite clearly that he continued to administer the sacrament of baptism and

the rite of marriage up to the time of his departure for Suffolk with the German Regiment on March 21, 1776. Upon his return to Shenandoah County in 1777, and while on sick leave in 1782, he renewed the practice. Possibly this is what his brother Frederick so strongly objected to in his letter of March 1776. "Brother, brother." he wrote, "the rough soldier peeps out from behind the black hat I think it wrong for you to be both preacher and soldier in one." ⁶⁰

As if to put an end to his brother's criticisms, Peter promptly recruited a chaplain, sending to Pennsylvania for his old comrade, Christian Streit. Although Streit's military career with the 8th Virginia Regiment was limited to nine months, once again accommodation had been achieved. By means of one tactical measure the objections of a brother were assuaged and the spiritual welfare of Germans was satisfied by a comrade in the faith who could incidentally speak the King's English.

With the conclusion of the Revolutionary War and the disestablishment of the Church of England, Muhlenberg's Virginia adventure came to a close. By November, 1783, Peter collected his effects and family from the parish glebe and returned to Philadelphia.

But for the Virginia back country a symbiotic pattern had been established. The Muhlenberg experiment clearly illustrated the benefits of accommodation. As a consequence, hardly a year would elapse until the German Regiment's first chaplain would return to the General's ecclesiastical haunts.

Initially, Christian Streit would settle in Winchester, Virginia, and serve a burgeoning German community in and about Frederick County. Recent evidence indicates, however, that with the decline of the influence of the Episcopal Church during the post-revolutionary era sectarianism would diminish. The economic realities of the day demanded ecumenicity once again. Nowhere is this reality more clearly indicated than in Streit's letter to the president of the Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania at the turn of the century.⁶¹

"I write to you in English, because I can express myself better on the subject in that language than in German. Your answer in German will be perfectly agreeable to me.

I wish to have your opinion in a matter of moment. I am sorry indeed to put you to any trouble, but as an old friend and brother in profession, I hope you will do me the favor, and write me your sentiment freely.

I find it very difficult here, to support a numerous family and have a fair prospect of providing for them much better and with less trouble in a neighboring County, by taking charge of a few Episcopal congregations in connection with these German Lutheran ones. I feel some scruples about the nature of the Services the Episcopalians require. How far may a Lutheran Minister and a member of the Lutheran Ministry of Pennsylvania conform to the rules and mode of worship in the Episcopal Church? He cannot in my opinion with propriety administer the Lord's Supper to them. He may occasionally baptise their children; but whether he is justifiable in doing it ordinarily and permanently is a doubt with me, as also doing it in the full form prescribed in their liturgy. To what extent may he make use of the Morning and evening Service of that Church in public worship and in the customary manner with all the Responses?

That he may preach the Gospel to them, and keep public worship amongst them by using such parts of their Liturgy or forms of worship as coincide with those of our Church, I expect will be admitted; but they wish me in general to go considerably farther, and I cannot undertake a (?) of so much importance unless my mind is perfectly free from every scruple respecting the nature of it.

I expect I have expressed myself pretty clearly on the subject, and beg the favor of your answer by the next post if possible as the matter will not admit of much delay. I write this in confidence and am persuaded the contents of this letter will remain with you.

I am latterly in a feeble State of health, but blessed be God, the rest of my family are all very well.

With the most perfect esteem and warmest friendship, I remain,
Your, Etc.

(Christian Streit)."

The charge of "a few Episcopalian congregations and these German Lutheran ones," was Muhlenberg's old Beckford Parish. County records clearly indicate that the Streit ultimately resolved his misgivings, moved to the glebe near Woodstock, and received compensation from the Church Wardens for the period 1800 to 1803.⁶² Precisely why this bilingual ministry was terminated in 1804 is unknown. In that year the latter day Muhlenberg returned to Winchester whence he came and devoted the balance of his life to the service of the *Evangelische Lutherische Kirche*. Why?

Perhaps the times were out of joint. Perhaps the season of accommodation was past. Perhaps the frontier was no longer as adventuresome as it once had been, willing to trade theological shadows for the substance of reality.

¹ Diary of Jonathan Clark, 1770-1811, [Temple Bodley typescript], Filson Club, Louisville, Ky., dark-Hite Papers, C593a.

² Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Diary of Colonel London Carter of Sabine Ball, 1752-1778* (Charlottesville, Va., 1965), II, 647.

³ Bernard Mayo, *Jefferson Himself* (Boston, 1942), 22.

⁴ Rupert Hughes, *George Washington* (New York, 1927), II, 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 208-209.

⁶ William Couper, *History of the Shenandoah Valley* (New York, 1952), I, 549-572.

⁷ Klaus Wust, *The Virginia Germans* (Charlottesville, Va., 1969), 27-37, 43-57; John W. Wayland, *The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia* (Charlottesville, Va., 1907), 20-31; *Twenty-five Chapters on the Shenandoah Valley* (Strasburg, Va., 1957), 79-88.

⁸ George Maclaren Brydon, *Virginia's Mother Church* (Philadelphia, 1952), II, 96. Brydon's assumption that "it would go without saying that the majority of persons elected as vestrymen were of English birth," is generally true for Virginia. Nonetheless, it is an illustration of his own bias, as well as a statement for which he has no basis of judgment. In the same paragraph he declares, "the early records of the parish are lost, and one does not know the names of the first vestrymen." If one does not know who the first vestrymen were, how is it possible to state that they were of English birth? The names of the first vestrymen were: Abraham Keller, Lawrence Snapp [Schnepf], John Wolfenberger, Henry Fravel, Philip Huffman, Frederick Stoner [Steiner], Jacob Holdeman, Burr Harrison, Joseph Pugh, John Tipton, Henry Nelson and Tavener Beale. The Beckford Parish or Muhlenberg Register is extant.

⁹ Frederick County Records, Winchester, Va., Order Book, XV, 114; John W. Wayland, *History of Shenandoah County, Virginia* (Strasburg, Va., 1927), 421, 523. For information regarding Lorenz Schnepf see the German Register, St. Paul's Church, Strasburg, Va. Schnepf [Snapp] was an Elder of the congregation at the time.

¹⁰ William E. Eisenberg, *The Lutheran Chuck in Virginia 1711-1982* (Lynchburg, Va., 1967), 28-30.

¹¹ Paul A. W. Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1950), 41-43.

¹² Edward W. Hocker, *The Fighting Parson of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1936), 12-13.

¹³ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 45; *DAB*, 311-313.

¹⁴ William Germann, "The Crisis in the Early Life of General Peter Muhlenberg," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXVII, (1918), 306-308.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 451.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 452-453.

¹⁸ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 73.

¹⁹ Hocker, *Fighting Parson*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

²¹ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 72.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Eisenberg, *Lutheran Church*, 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁵ Virginia State Library, Richmond, Frederick Parish, Vestry Minutes, 30.

²⁶ Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, trans. and ed., *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* (Philadelphia, 1945), II, 374-375.

²⁷ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 80-81.

²⁸ Hocker, *Fighting Parson*, 44-45; Eisenberg, *Lutheran Church*, 60.

²⁹ Brydon, *Virginia's Mother*, 97.

³⁰ Virginia State Library, Richmond, Minutes, *supra*, 20.

³¹ "Journal of Rev. Peter Muhlenberg in London, 1772," *Lutheran Church Review*, IV, 294-300.

³² *Ibid.*

- ³³ Germann, "The Crisis," 468.
- ³⁴ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 82.
- ³⁵ Shenandoah County, Virginia Records, Marriage Register, I, 181.
- ³⁶ Tappert, et al., *Journals*, II, 514-615.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Eisenberg, *Lutheran Church*, 61-62.
- ³⁹ Diary, Jonathan Clark, *supra*. 17.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Josiah Look Dickinson, *The Fairfax Proprietary* (Front Royal, Vz., 1959), 82-83.
- ⁴² Hocker, *Fighting Parson*, 49.
- ⁴³ Wayland, *History*, 400-401.
- ⁴⁴ American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Peter Muhlenberg's Account Book, microfilm copy.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ William H. Staake, "Address at the Unveiling of the Monument of General Peter Muhlenberg on German Day, Thursday, October 6, 1910 at the City Hall, Philadelphia," *Publication*, German Society of Pa., 6.
- ⁴⁹ Diary, Jonathan Clark, *supra*, 23, 25, 29.
- ⁵⁰ Wallace, *The Mahlenbergs*, 288-289.
- ⁵¹ Wayland, *History*, 736-742.
- ⁵² Diary, Jonathan Clark, *supra*, 33.
- ⁵³ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 110-111; Hocker, *Fighting Parson*, 52-54.
- ⁵⁴ Henry A. Muhlenberg, *The Life of Major-General Peter Muhlenberg of the Revolutionary Army* (Philadelphia, 1849), 45-46.
- ⁵⁵ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 113-116; Muhlenberg, *Life*, 45-50; Diary, Jonathan Clark, *supra*, 30-39.
- ⁵⁶ James Thacher, *The Military Journal* (Boston, 1827), 154.
- ⁵⁷ Muhlenberg, *Life*, 50-54; Wust, *Va. Germans*, 78-80.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁵⁹ D. M. Gilbert, *A Chapter of Colonial, Luthero-Episcopal Church History* (Gettysburg, 1884), 20.
- ⁶⁰ Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs*, 120.
- ⁶¹ Letter, Christian Streit to Henry Muhlenberg, n. d. Author's Collection, Wust, *Va. Germans*, 131.
- ⁶² Shenandoah County Virginia Records, Loose Papers, 1802-1804.