

ZION CHURCH IN THE CITY OF BALTIMORE THE EARLY YEARS

The earliest years of the German congregation at Zion are to a degree shrouded in mystery. By tradition, 1755 is celebrated as the year of founding in large part because the anonymous author of Zion's first chronicle identifies that year as the date on which Germans whose faith was founded on the Augsburg Confession formed the "Evangelical-Lutheran Congregation at Baltimore Town."

Even prior to 1755 there were quite a few Germans in Baltimore. Annapolis was the largest port and, as such, the comfortable colonial home to affluent English landowners and merchants. Penniless German craftsmen who made their way to Maryland found more opportunity up the Chesapeake in Baltimore where the Jones Falls, the Gwynn's Falls, and the Patapsco River provided water power for mills and other sundry enterprises. Maryland's Colonial Governor Sharpe writing to Lord Baltimore in 1754 had this to say about the prospects and inhabitants of Baltimore Town:

Were a few Gentlemen of Fortune to settle there and encourage the Trade it might soon become a flourishing place but while few besides the Germans, who are in general Masters of small Fortunes, build and inhabit there I apprehend it cannot make any considerable figure.

For a time before 1755, Saint Paul's "Protestant-Episcopal" Church at Saratoga and Charles Street, permitted the faithful of both Reformed and Lutheran traditions to worship in its space. However, Saint Paul's records indicate that the itinerant German preachers who from time to time came through town suffered from such "bad reputations and conduct" that the vestry of Saint Paul's asked the Germans to move their services elsewhere. Besides the English notations about the conduct of the German worship at Saint Paul's, there is nothing to document the existence of an organized German congregation before 1755.

The situation changed in 1755 with the arrival of Charles Frederick Wiesenthal. From the moment he first established his medical practice in Baltimore Town, Dr. Wiesenthal took an interest in the local German worship community, and his name is inextricably bound with the early history of the congregation at Zion.

The anonymous text from Zion's own archive documents the congregation's beginning as follows:

The first regularly officiating pastor was the Reverend John George Barger, who for three consecutive years came down from Pennsylvania six times a year, administering the spiritual functions in preaching and sacraments, and enjoying from this not more than five pounds per year. This was next to nothing indeed as a reward for the painstaking of a spiritual guide.

Initially there was no church building and services were held in the homes of various parishioners, but the earliest archival records claim that by 1755 the Evangelical-Lutheran Congregation at Baltimore Town was administering the sacraments to its members in the German language in a regular and organized way.

CHARLES FREDERICK WIESENTHAL (1726–1789)

Zion has many stunning stained glass windows which celebrate biblical stories, the four Evangelists, the life of Christ, and even life and agriculture in Maryland, but only one Zion parishioner is memorialized. The image of Charles Frederick Wiesenthal appears on the lower middle panel of the window in the south wall of the narthex. In his volume on *The Maryland Germans*, Dieter Cunz calls Wiesenthal "the first truly significant German in Baltimore." Wiesenthal came to Baltimore in 1755 and immediately became involved with the Lutheran congregation. He was elected a permanent church elder in 1769 and was generally very active in public affairs

Much of what is known about Wiesenthal comes from his correspondence with his son. In fact, it is through a study of the handwriting in those personal letters that some have come to believe that Wiesenthal was, in fact, the anonymous author of the congregation's first chronicle, known as the "Church Archive." While the authorship of that early record of Zion's history remains a matter of debate, there is no question about Wiesenthal's role in the drafting of the deed for the congregation's first purchase of real property. Wiesenthal's actions at the time were both pivotal and controversial.

Although the congregation had entered into a contract to buy land in 1758, it was customary not to record the deed until the debt was paid, which in this case was 1771. Because the land was the first property

which belonged to the congregation collectively, the deed itself was the first document which required the congregation to name itself officially under State law. As it turned out, the question of the legal name also involved the question of language. A significant entry to the “Church Archive” reads:

Daily experience taught us that our children, almost entirely, learned and understood the English language quicker and better than our German tongue, and, in the case of many, there was even reason to fear that the language would be lost entirely and the religion with it. Now to build a church for the propagation of our Lutheran religion for our children and children’s children was our chief objective. It was therefore our duty to see that, in case this should happen, there should be no ill-considered clauses in the deed, by which our children would be subjected to unnecessary litigation and might even lose their share in the church.

Many in the congregation however insisted that the words “German Congregation” be used in the deed instead of just “Evangelical” and “Lutheran” congregation as originally drafted. Dr. Wiesenthal, despite the opposition, followed his own judgment and recorded the deed in the Annapolis Hall of Records on September 5, 1771, without including the word “German” in the name.

Wiesenthal’s act shook the young congregation. He and a fellow vestryman were accused of trying to “make the entire church English.” After months of conflict Dr. Wiesenthal had to resign from the vestry and was actually forbidden from associating himself with the congregation. It was not until March of 1772 that the vestry finally exonerated him stating:

To put an end to the aforegone quarrel; we the undersigned and the other elders of the congregation have according to our duty fully investigated the matter and do not find the slightest foundation for the above charges against Mr. Lindenberger and Mr. Wiesenthal. According to our conscience and belief we find them not guilty.

Dr. Wiesenthal returned to the church and remained a faithful member of the congregation until the day of his death. He served his new country with distinction in the War for Independence. He founded the first medical school in Maryland as a private undertaking that carried on the business of training physicians until the medical faculty of the University of Maryland was created in 1807. On December 15, 1788, he summoned all

the physicians in Maryland to a convention in Baltimore for the purpose of agreeing upon a “plan for the regulation of medical practice.” Wiesenthal was first president of the medical society organized as a result of that gathering.

When the good doctor died just six months later on June 1, 1789, the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser* praised his superior medical abilities and his attention to his profession which he “improved in an uncommon measure by reason and observation.” The newspaper went on to declare he deserved to be remembered with “tears of gratitude” that “must flow in sorrowful profusion.” In retrospect, the members of Zion both then and now also have reason to be grateful to Wiesenthal for his foresight as the congregation still holds “that parcel of ground” that Wiesenthal designated to “be and continue to be a place of public worship for the Evangelic protestant Congregation of the unvaried Augsburg Confession of faith Commonly distinguished by the name of Lutherans of Baltimore Town and their Descendants forever who do or shall hold to the said Confession of faith.”

TWO GRAVES

The two brick graves on the south side of the church are the oldest structures on the Zion property. In one of those graves lies John Siegfried Gerock, the congregation’s second pastor. Gerock came to the congregation in 1773. He managed to pull together the factions which had been so bitterly divided over the issue of the deed. Under his pastorate a new constitution was created. He also led the congregation through the Revolutionary War, which, after the British had been defeated, freed the congregation from having to pay taxes to the Anglican Church. With the new-found finances Gerock led the congregation in building their first brick structure, facing Fish Street (now Saratoga). Yet that building turned out to be just a temporary edifice; soon plans for a larger, more permanent, structure were underway.

By 1785, the number of members had increased to such an extent that the little brick structure could no longer accommodate the congregation. An addition to the church, which was considerably larger than the original structure, was planned and constructed. As it turns out, the grand new addition was completed just as a young minister by the name of

Daniel Kurtz was visiting his father's friend, Pastor Gerock, in Baltimore. The older pastor invited Kurtz to preach at the dedication services. The congregation liked the young man's preaching and enthusiasm so much that Pastor Gerock asked him to remain and serve as the assistant minister. It is also at this time that the name "Zion" is first used in association with the congregation. Having finally erected a building with a tower on a hill overlooking the city of Baltimore, the congregation could write the Pennsylvania Ministerium in the name of "Zion's Church in Baltimore City."

In the second of the two graves along the south wall of Zion's garden lies the first Lutheran Minister ever ordained in America. Because Nicolas Kurtz was only a "licentiate" minister when he made the long journey to America, he was not fully ordained until he accepted the call to serve the congregation in Germantown Pennsylvania. Church archives in Philadelphia reflect that during the first meeting of the Lutheran Synod, in the presence of the six other ministers who constituted what at the time was called the "Pennsylvania Ministerium," John Nicolas Kurtz was "fully set apart to the Gospel ministry" and duly ordained. Even though the Reverend John Nicolas Kurtz is not counted as one of Zion's pastors, he spent his retirement years in Baltimore helping his son, J. Daniel Kurtz, who was ultimately the congregation's fourth pastor. The elder Kurtz died in 1794 and was buried in the garden.

J. Daniel Kurtz was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1763. From the age of six he had a desire to become a minister. Pleased that his son was so inclined, the elder Kurtz saw to it that the boy got the best education he could provide. During the Revolutionary War, young Daniel had the benefit of living with Bishop White, the Chaplain to Congress. Later his father sent him to Lancaster to study under Dr. H. E. Muhlenberg who was often too busy to provide much instruction but who gave the young scholar full use of his "well selected" library. Upon completing his studies in Lancaster, Daniel Kurtz was examined by a meeting of the Synod in Philadelphia and, like his father, received his "license" to perform ministerial duties. In 1785 he undertook a missionary tour of the vacant congregations in Maryland and Virginia. It was on his return trip that he paid a visit here to his father's old friend the Rev. John Siegfried Gerock, who had charge of the Lutheran congregation in Baltimore.

TROUBLED TIMES: 1785–1787

It is no coincidence that 1785, the first year of Daniel Kurtz's ministry, is also the first time the name of Zion Church of the City of Baltimore appears on the records of the Pennsylvania Synod. Unlike old Pastor Gerock, who had no need for the synod or its business, young Daniel Kurtz was a strong supporter of the synod (or Ministerium as it was known at that time). In fact, he came to Baltimore on a mission from the synod.

Meanwhile, on the new pulpit of Zion, the twenty-two-year-old Kurtz, who had originally been invited to preach at the dedication of the church building erected in 1785, had been so energetic that Pastor Gerock asked the unordained minister to stay and help him. Soon however the young man with his new ideas became so popular with Zion's growing congregation that Pastor Gerock asked him to leave.

At Gerock's request, Kurtz gave a conciliatory farewell sermon and headed back to Pennsylvania, but Zion's vestry would have none of it. After Kurtz had left, and without consulting Pastor Gerock, the vestry sent Kurtz a letter asking him to return. They also sent a letter to the synod requesting the services of J. Daniel Kurtz at Zion. The synod was quick to oblige and proceeded to complete the formality of getting Kurtz ordained so that he could serve as Zion's Pastor. In order to speed up the process, the Ministerium gave and accepted a written examination from Kurtz, dispensing with the need for a public examination at the annual Synod gathering. The formal ordination completed, the synod promptly sent Kurtz back to Baltimore as a full-fledged pastor.

When Kurtz arrived, Pastor Gerock, apparently offended that no one had consulted him about all this, refused to allow the younger Pastor the use of Zion's pulpit. According to historical records, Reverend Kurtz and the majority of the congregation left Zion "without hesitation." They held a public meeting, elected a new vestry and secured the use of a Methodist Church to hold their services apart from the old congregation. The elder members, who remained loyal to the old pastor, stayed in the newly built structure and became known as the Gerock congregation. Among these old loyalists was that steady rock of the original elders, Charles Wiesenthal.

Indeed it was Dr. Wiesenthal who came to the rescue again. Unwilling to see the church permanently split by a battle of wills, Wiesenthal took on the role of a mediator and approached Pastor Kurtz. After some consultation the two groups found the common ground upon which a reunion of the congregations could take place. First Kurtz' supporters had to properly approach Pastor Gerock. Then, the old pastor duly consented to readmit Pastor Kurtz and his followers to the congregation at Zion.

As historical documents recall, "on Easter Sunday 1787, Zion was reunited again. Both pastors preached to a flock that had never been so large." A week later, on April 3, 1787, both pastors, Dr. Wiesenthal for the Gerock congregation, and Henry Frick for the Kurtz congregation signed the "Articles of Reconciliation," which amended the original constitution of 1767 and clearly defined church membership by the terms stated in the deed. They also required a public reading of the constitution once a year. Baptismal, marriage, and burial records were to be entered in a "regular book," something which the congregation at Zion had not done to that point. Arguably, the congregation thus became an "established" Lutheran organization with the keeping of an official "Kirchen Archiv" in 1787.

Under the Articles of Reconciliation, both pastors were to share duties, one preaching on Sunday morning, and the other preaching on Sunday afternoon. Confirmation was to be administered jointly as was the Holy Supper, with the old pastor offering the bread and the young pastor the wine. However, the joint arrangement did not last long because Pastor Gerock died shortly thereafter on October 25, 1787, at the age of 61. The stage was thus set for the Reverend J. Daniel Kurtz and Zion in Baltimore to play a critical role in the founding of a national Lutheran synodical body reaching far beyond its original boundaries of Pennsylvania and New York.

After the death of Pastor Gerock in the fall of 1787, young Pastor Daniel Kurtz set about ministering to the ever-growing number of German immigrant craftspeople who came to America seeking a new and better life. It is significant that Kurtz, unlike almost all of Zion's pastors to follow him, was born in America. Although his customs and language were German, he was clearly American in heart and spirit. By all accounts he was a learned man and energetic advocate of the new Lutheran church.

Because he was born here, he did not have to adjust to a new way of life, which made him a very effective mediator on behalf of the immigrant families who came to find safety and comfort at Zion.

The German-speaking Lutherans prospered. Pastor Kurtz married Maria Messersmith in 1790, and the congregation bought an adjoining parcel of land to build a parsonage for the new couple. In 1795 the congregation paid the famous Moravian organ builder, David Tannenburg of Lititz Pennsylvania, the seemingly exorbitant sum of \$600 to build one of the finest organs available at that time. The purchase was well worth the price because the organ lasted for forty-four years after it was installed in 1796.

Kurtz's meticulously-kept records reveal that in 1787 Zion had forty-five new confirmands. In 1790 there were fifty-three more. Although the church's initial hero and guiding force, Charles Wiesenthal, died in 1790, Kurtz skillfully took over and led the congregation into the last decade of the eighteenth century with a determination that assured the Lutheran congregation in Baltimore would survive. In 1794 the pastor recorded 162 communicants; in 1795, there were 283; and by 1804 Zion Church had 318 communing members.

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Baltimore City's population increased to more than 40,000. The ever-growing export trade volume made the city the third largest port in the country. In those days, Fells Point was renowned not so much for its bars but rather for building the famous Baltimore Clipper Ships. Like the City of Baltimore, Zion's congregation continued to grow and prosper. Although the wars raging in Europe during those first years of the century caused German immigration to drop considerably, Zion's growth did not depend on immigration. The early colonial members, who had settled down to establish fortunes and families, were passing on to their heavenly reward. Indeed, Zion's first generation of German-born immigrants was being replaced by the next generation of German-speaking American-born craftsmen, ship-builders and merchants. It was the American children of those first Germans who were now filling the pews. Every year from 1800 to 1810 the number of baptisms exceeded 100. In 1801 there were 165. In 1802, Pastor Kurtz baptized 156. Zion's baptisms numbered 134 in 1803.

Zion hosted the Pennsylvania Ministerium's annual meeting for a second time in June of 1803. Again Pastor Kurtz had to ask the other two German congregations in town to help house the Lutherans because there were too many delegates for the 1785 church building to handle. The pastor was grateful for the generous hospitality of his Reformed brethren but he would much rather have received the leaders of the greater Lutheran church in a larger building. So it was that Pastor Kurtz began planning and working to make his dream of a new church building a reality. His records reflect that while the congregation had several affluent members, he knew the church could not be sustained by a handful of wealthy patrons. Sunday after Sunday, for almost three years, Kurtz generated support for his vision by preaching to the entire congregation about the beautiful house of worship Zion could become and praying for the blessing of our Heavenly Father.

A GERMAN CATHEDRAL IN BALTIMORE

As historical documents attest Pastor Kurtz' "prayers were answered and his sermons fell on fertile ground" for on September 15, 1806 the Church Council announced its decision to build a new church. Immediately the subscriptions for donations to be paid in four installments were collected. In less than a year 273 individuals had pledged a total of \$12,559.60. With this display of faith in hand the church went ahead and purchased the lot upon which the building was to be constructed for \$8,600.00. Two church members, George Rohrbach and Johann Machenheimer were entrusted with the design of the building and supervision of the workmen.

In 1807 with the ground for the new church broken, Pastor Kurtz continued to hold services in the old building. He solemnized sixty-four marriages, conducted fifty-seven funerals, and baptized 150 children. In addition to traveling far and wide on horseback to visit members, Kurtz also traveled to Lancaster Pennsylvania that year to tend to Ministerium business as the Secretary of the Synod.

Construction continued throughout the spring and summer of 1808. Finally, in the fall, the last critical piece of work was completed when the organ was removed from the old church. The instrument's new loft was adorned with the finest wood carvings and it was installed in an elevated "organ gallery" which extended across the east end of the new sanctuary.

It was a grand sight. A very tall pulpit, reminding many of a crow's nest on a ship, was placed at the other end of the long sanctuary near the west wall.

From the outside, the sheer size of the new church was impressive. Situated on a high piece of ground, Zion dominated the landscape being the tallest building in the vicinity. There was a sturdy square bell tower on the eastern side of the building. Immediately below the tower, the rounded Roman arch of the main entrance door faced Gay Street. Another round arch entrance was located on the longer south wall between five pointed arch Gothic-style windows on the lower level. Built entirely of red brick with painted white wooden trim, the simple elegance of the structure reflected the solid character of the people who intended to worship there. To the local German-speaking community, which had never had a house of worship on this scale in Maryland before, the church was a source of pride. It is reported that more than one English-speaking neighbor called it the "German Cathedral of Maryland."

On October 9, 1808, the new building was formally dedicated and the first worship services held. Pastor Kurtz proudly led an assemblage of guest ministers followed by the Church Council into the sanctuary. The organ played a symphony. "Specially written texts adapted to melodies of Lutheran hymns and an Ode of Praise exuberant with joy upon Zion's completion" were used for singing by the choir and congregation during the three services that were held that day.

A PERIOD OF GROWTH:1808–1822

After the Pennsylvania Synod approved the 1819 plan, the Synods of New York and North Carolina asked to be admitted into the central church body. Pastor Kurtz and his co-workers spent the following year rallying the predominantly German-speaking local Lutheran congregations behind the idea of establishing a regional church organization.

On October 11, 1820, clergymen and lay delegates representing Lutheran congregations from all over Maryland and Virginia assembled at Grace Church in Winchester Virginia to organize their synod. Pastor Kurtz was elected as the first president of the Maryland and Virginia Synod, an office he held for four more terms. The General Synod was formed that same year in Hagerstown, Maryland, and they also chose

Pastor Kurtz as their first president, re-electing him twice. Even after serving his terms, Kurtz remained a lifelong member of the synodical bodies he helped establish. His hard work, coupled with his wise and steadfast advice, earned him the distinction of being considered the “Patriarch of the Synod.” Indeed, his is the first biography to be found in the chapter on “Leading Personalities in the Early History” in the history of the synod. Under Pastor Kurtz’s leadership Zion had grown from a fledgling congregation on the southern edge of Pennsylvania Ministerium to becoming the Mother Church of the Maryland and Virginia Synod. Zion’s Pastor was suddenly the president of a national church body that united nearly 45,000 Lutherans on the American continent.

A GERMAN CHURCH IN AN ENGLISH LAND

Soon after Zion achieved its zenith as one of the founding churches of the Maryland synod, the issue of language which had been simmering below the surface boiled over into open conflict. Like all early Lutheran congregations, the first generation of congregants was composed of native German speakers who had received their religious instruction in “the language of Luther.” The second generation, which grew up in German-speaking households, also received religious instruction in German and could, for the most part, follow the worship services with relative ease. This second generation of Lutherans, however, lived in American society and many married English-speaking mates. Consequently, their children grew up speaking English and could not understand German worship. With few Lutheran texts available in English, the third generation turned to other religious instruction and forms of denominational worship that they could understand.

For American Lutherans the issue of language split the church into two distinct groups. On the one side were those who favored bilingual worship and translating the substance of Lutheran’s confessional writings into English. The other side took what could be called a traditionalist “German-only” approach. In New York, Maryland, and the Carolinas bilingual, and even all-English, Lutheran congregations soon began to appear with their synod’s blessing. In Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ohio the synods resisted the introduction of English for some time. Most notably the Missouri Synod held on to only German long after all the east-coast synods had relented.

For a short time Zion was able to avoid confronting the difficult issue of language because Pastor Daniel Kurtz had a capable and perfectly bilingual assistant pastor in the person of his nephew. Benjamin Kurtz was a strong advocate of the bilingual movement and notable American Lutheran thinker in his own right. Later in his life he was to publish an influential newspaper called the Lutheran Observer. After Benjamin Kurtz left, Zion's English-speaking members petitioned the Church Council to call a pastor for them. The Council simply ignored their request. The Council's refusal to acknowledge that language had become an issue caused the English supporters to publish a pamphlet urging the congregation to consider setting some portion of Sunday aside for English worship. The pamphlet provoked an angry response. Council, claiming to represent the views of "five-sixths of the membership," ruled against any further attempt to introduce English stating bluntly:

Anyone thinking it indispensable to give his children English instructions in the Lutheran doctrines and to have English sermons for himself should leave the congregation.

Neither side of the struggle tried to draw old Pastor Kurtz into the quarrel. Both sides understood that the congregation's size and Pastor Kurtz's many synodical duties required Zion to have a second pastor. Despite repeated rejections, the English speakers remained hopeful that a suitably bilingual man could be found.

While Pastor Kurtz was away tending to synod business, a dynamic German preacher, Johann Uhlhorn, recently arrived from Mannheim Germany preached at Zion on several Sundays. He made a very favorable impression on the German-speaking membership. When Pastor Kurtz returned to Baltimore, he was approached by a group of enthusiastic Uhlhorn supporters. Kurtz consented to serve with Pastor Uhlhorn. The Council then put the matter to a vote but failed to obtain the constitutionally required two-thirds majority. However, the Uhlhorn supporters were not deterred. On December 16, 1822, a formal invitation was extended to the Rev. Uhlhorn, which he accepted.

The Council's hasty call to a German-born clergyman without the congregation's full support was the last straw for the so-called "English faction." In October of 1823, John Reese and seven other families sought permission from the synod to form a new congregation and build a church

called First English Lutheran. While Pastor Kurtz was probably not happy with this turn of events, he was willing to accept any resolution provided that it would end Zion's internal strife. Some of his writing on the subject suggests that he saw the English worship "option" as way to prevent "anglicized Lutherans" from leaving the "faith of our fathers" and going to other protestant denominations, but Pastor Kurtz himself would never preach in English. For the remainder of the nineteenth century and right up to the First World War the pattern was that more and more Lutheran congregations adopted English as a second language and then finally dropped German altogether. Zion was unique in being able to maintain its German-only posture due to the constant stream of immigration through the port of Baltimore during the 1800s. As early as 1823 the congregation determined that its course would be that of a German-speaking church in an English-speaking land.

Unfortunately the congregation's determination to allow only German did not end the quarrelling. In a somewhat ironic turn, old pastor Kurtz found himself experiencing the very problem he had once caused his predecessor Pastor Gerock back in 1785. Apparently the young new Pastor Johannes Uhlhorn was such a talented preacher that he soon outshone Pastor Kurtz's rigid old style of Pennsylvania church discipline. Uhlhorn was a very cultured gentleman. He spoke several languages in addition to English and German. His learning was so extensive and his speaking style was so dynamic that he was soon given a position as a professor of languages at the new University of Maryland. A large number of recently arrived immigrants quickly became attracted to this preacher. They wanted to see him in a more prominent role than merely the junior co-pastor. This new attitude did not sit well with the older, more traditional, Zion members who remained loyal to Pastor Kurtz.

After five years of difficult work attempting to harmonize the old and new styles the congregation seemed to split itself apart. In 1829 the congregation was unable to agree about who should sit on the vestry. Stubbornly the two factions simply elected separate councils. The period of two councils only lasted a short while. Things came to a head the following year in 1830 in what must have been a terrible scene:

As our duly elected vestry was not ordained on the afternoon of the election, our vestry requested Dr. Kurtz to ordain those elected on the

afternoon of the following Sunday. But again a member of the opposition stepped to the altar, followed by others, and protested against the ordination. Some also from our side stepped forward to defend themselves. The men gathered around the altar, whereby a kind of tumult arose, and consequently Dr. Kurtz was compelled to desist from the ordination lest further harm be done.

The traditional Vestry published a statement condemning the “false rumors” being spread in the congregation and the use of “cunning and force” in conducting church business. The harshest criticism was leveled at those who disrupted the service:

...people even at the public service...speaking against the preacher ... entirely forgetting that they are not in a drinking house but in God's house ...And Holy Communion is a profanation if people who come to take it hate one another instead of loving...one must think of ways and means by which such a disgrace may be checked.

Poor Pastor Uhlhorn was horrified by the conduct of the congregation that was so fond of him. Being a peaceful and educated man he never intended that his ministry would be connected with such behavior. He promptly submitted his resignation. Both Pastors then sat down with the quarreling factions and worked out a resolution. The result was that in August of 1830, a single united Council was elected and adopted a new constitution which was consistent with the church's “incorporation” under Maryland's “Act of 1802” concerning religious organizations. That new constitution delineated the confessional character of the church and the roles of the two pastors. Significantly the document left no doubt that the divine services should forever be conducted in German and the “clause of agreement according to which the preaching in English is prohibited shall never be subject to change.”

Following the new constitution, the co-pastorate of Kurtz and Uhlhorn lasted for almost three years. Upon reaching the age of 70, Pastor Kurtz felt the intense struggles within Zion had sapped his strength to the point that it was best for him to retire. The brilliant young man who stood on Zion's pulpit every other Sunday seemed to mean so much more to the new church that Kurtz felt there was no more room for his “old school” style. The Council gave him a considerable annuity and use of the parsonage for the rest of life. After a pastorate of forty-seven years Daniel Kurtz concluded his last sermon as the senior pastor from the venerable

old pulpit of Zion (which he himself had built) with the words: “Finally brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the love of God and peace shall be with you.” Although Pastor Kurtz was seventy in 1833, the year he retired, the old Pastor lived for twenty-three more years and kept his word not to meddle or get involved in Zion’s business.

THE PASTORATE OF JOHANNES UHLHORN

Pastor Uhlhorn finally had free reign to do what he felt was best for the church. He was a remarkably talented man with an extraordinarily retentive memory. It was said that he could perfectly repeat odes of Greek poets and recite long German hymns backwards after reading them only twice. Another Uhlhorn story concerns a famous New England writer who was visiting Baltimore and happened to wander into Zion one Sunday because he was attracted by the music. The author quickly discovered that it was a German church and he did not understand a single word but he stayed for the entire service because the preacher was so dynamic. Afterwards he inquired whether the sermon had been about the Prodigal Son. When this was confirmed, the author went home and wrote an article about how the preacher had acted out the story so perfectly that the author could understand the meaning even without the language.

Born an illegitimate child in Bremen in 1794, Johannes Uhlhorn’s childhood was spent in poverty. Due to the sacrifices of his hard-working mother he got a good education. He was an *Unterlehrer* at the *Deutsche Domschule* in Bremen and the *Lateinische Domschule* where he studied the classics. He entered the University of Strasburg in Alsace in 1812. After the Napoleonic War he took a position as the assistant pastor in a church in Mannheim. When he first came to America Uhlhorn was a very flashy dresser following the latest European styles. This did not sit well with the conservative Germans so he had to adjust to the simpler customs of America. During his ten year co-pastorate with Kurtz he published a German grammar and became a Professor of Greek Literature at the University of Maryland.

Once Kurtz had stepped aside, Uhlhorn’s plans for Zion included turning more attention to Zion’s German school. He recognized the need for a top-quality German language school in Baltimore and he saw that

focusing his efforts on the school was a way to reconcile the old Kurtz faction to the new church. Before he began his ambitious program he got permission from the Council to take a long vacation trip back to his home in Bremen. He was always a somewhat physically frail man and as fate would have it, he got sick on the voyage and died in Germany.

Zion was once again a flock without a shepherd. After a decade of fighting with all the bickering, unfortunate eruptions of pride, malcontent and discord there was little left of the original fellowship of faith. Historical records from the period describe the church congregants as “a downtrodden congregation, split into parties, upset by ugly obsessions, a band of people who called themselves Christian, but who lacked the first prerogatives of Christian love and peace.” Pastor Wilhelm Danmeir, who had been acting as Uhlhorn’s substitute during his fateful vacation, did nothing to improve the situation. Danmeir was charged with repeated and excessive drunkenness. It did not take long before he was sent on his way.

Next the congregation called the Reverend John Peter Haesbert. Haesbert not only set out to correct Zion’s shaky confessional foundation, he out and out attacked it. His extreme effort to swing the congregation back to orthodoxy ultimately got him fired. This act fueled yet another major eruption within the congregation as 150 members announced their resignation from Zion to follow Pastor Haesbert. The record indicates that most of those who left had been part of what had become known as the old “Kurtz faction.”

Pastor Haesbert organized the former Zion members into a new congregation. Right after Reformation Sunday on November 1, 1835, the Second German Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession purchased a vacant brick church on corner of Holliday and Saratoga Streets. As if to stick a thumb in Zion’s eye, the words AUGSBURG CONFESSION were written in large letters on Second German Lutheran’s church sign so that the remaining members of Zion would have to read them every Sunday morning on their way to church.

The story of Peter Haesbert then took an odd turn. Following his spectacular exodus from Zion Haesbert became “involved in family difficulties” which required his removal from Second German as well. Interestingly, after serving a church in New Orleans for a brief time, Haesbert went on to Brazil where he was instrumental in forming the

Lutheran church organization. To this day Haesbert is generally regarded as one of the founders of the Brazilian Lutheran Church. In a further ironic twist of events, Pastor Kurtz, loyal to his former supporters at Second German, filled in and became their acting pastor. He held that post for another ten years until 1845, when that congregation finally found a replacement.

Back at old Zion all that was left in 1835 were a few families and the grand shell of the church building. Despair had taken the place of hope. Strife and hatred had broken away the firm foundation on which the congregation had rested. The spirit needed a new builder. The stage was set for Heinrich Scheib.

THE ARRIVAL OF HEINRICH SCHEIB

Things were not looking too good for what was left of Zion's congregation during the summer of 1835. Although the wave of German immigration to Baltimore continued to rise, the hard feelings within the congregation lingered. Without a regular pastor to help mend broken spirits Zion's fortunes seemed likely to decline but then the prayers of many supporters of Zion were answered. A member of Zion's council, while visiting New York City, attended a service at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church and happened to hear a sermon by a young preacher called Heinrich Scheib. When the councilman learned that Scheib was available to be called, it did not take the struggling congregation long to invite him to Baltimore to preach a few trial sermons from Zion's pulpit. He was only twenty-seven-years old at the time but subsequent events testify to the fact that Zion in Baltimore was about to become his life's work.

Born on July 8, 1808 to the family of a wine grower at Bachrach on the Rhine, young Heinrich received his early education at the parish school of the Reformed Church. He did not have a high opinion of the education he received there. In fact according to Scheib himself:

These instructions under an old outmoded school tyrant and later catechumen lessons under a minister who knew more about horse-trading than about theology were unimaginably miserable and utterly fruitless.

The spirit of rebellion continued throughout his studies at the *Latein-Schule* and then *Humanistisches Gymnasium* in Kreutznach. He

described how his teacher in Kreutznach used “hair-raising exegetical tricks” to prove that the New Testament could only be interpreted in full agreement with church doctrine.

For all his rejection of dogmatic education, Scheib loved the natural sciences, geometry, history and geography. He delighted in studying observed facts and penetrating the truth of a subject by application of the scientific method. A very intelligent individual, he quickly mastered Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, which assured his academic success. With the same zeal that he applied to all his efforts Scheib decided to examine the Holy Scriptures by studying theology at the University of Bonn. Scheib became convinced that the truth of the Gospel could only be learned through the same modern scientific methods of critical reading that were commonly employed in the study of all classical texts. He received a scholarship to study at the ancient Dutch School of Theology in Utrecht, where all the lectures were delivered in Latin. Although he deepened his knowledge of the Bible and the literature of the Reformation, Scheib’s negative reaction to any form of dogmatism earned him a reputation as a “rationalist.”

When Scheib completed his studies in Holland he returned to Germany, where his native Rhineland was under Prussian rule. The political situation there would have required him to serve a three-year tour of duty in the army. Outside of Prussia, the German speaking states of Europe were under the “reactionary influence” of Metternich. Scheib realized that a German-speaking “liberal” man of the cloth would not find favor anywhere in Europe and so, like many of his countrymen, the strong-willed Scheib decided to fulfill his destiny in America. He departed from Rotterdam in December of 1834 and arrived in New York in April of 1835.

Scheib was disappointed to find that the new world did not greet him with open arms either. He describes how forsaken he felt in this strange land saying that he “stood in the streets like a wanderer lost in a vast forest, to whom the dumb trees would not give an answer.” But, according to Scheib, “God was with me” and sent him a friend in the person of Dr. Geissenhainer, the pastor of St. Mathew’s and a senior Lutheran clergyman of New York. It was this same Dr. Geissenhainer, who allowed Scheib to assist him and preach from St. Matthew’s pulpit. To his dying

day Scheib remembered and cherished Geissenhainer's kindness, which gave him the opportunity to accept Zion's invitation.

In Baltimore, Scheib was well received. Favorably impressed by his preaching, the congregation elected him as their regular pastor on October 18, 1835, a month after his arrival. The German immigrant congregation of Baltimore again had one of its own to be its shepherd, and the young free-thinking clergyman had finally found a home.

ZION BECOMES AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH

In 1820 Pastor, J. Daniel Kurtz and Zion were instrumental in founding the Maryland Synod. Today, Zion is again a congregation in the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). But it was not always so. From 1839 to 1953 Zion was an "independent" congregation. The events that led to Zion's departure from the Maryland Synod began in 1839, when the church's constitution required that the pastor stand for re-election after four years. When Scheib came to America in 1835 he joined the New York Ministerium. After being in Baltimore for four years Scheib resigned from the New York Ministerium, but that synod refused to accept his resignation.

In the meantime, the old bitterness and squabbling ways of Zion's congregation had not ended. There were a number of older members who were very uncomfortable with the message that Pastor Scheib was delivering from the pulpit. They were particularly concerned that old Pastor Kurtz, who still lived in the parsonage, no longer attended services at Zion. Some claimed Kurtz would rather attend services at the English Lutheran church rather than sit through any of Scheib's "lectures." This group of unhappy parishioners seized the occasion of Scheib's re-election to publish a pamphlet which expressed their concerns stating:

We claim that the Rev. Scheib, who is a candidate for the pastorate of our Zion church, is by no means a true Evangelical Lutheran preacher, but in his beliefs approaches heresy and therefore he cannot be re-elected in accordance with our constitution. For our constitution requires that our minister be not a Unitarian or Universalist but a pious, faithful, decided Lutheran, which the Rev. Scheib is not.

Like the pamphlets which had been written urging the congregation to adopt the English language, the anti-Scheib pamphlet met with the

Church Council's severest disapproval. The Council's angry response read:

We consider that pamphlet as an attempt of ill-willed people who intend to spread unrest and discord among a peaceful congregation. First of all because the authors of this libelous writ have not the courage to mention their names, and secondly because an honest man who might not have been content with the teachings of Pastor Scheib should have stood up against them a long time ago.

The Council went on to declare its full support of Pastor Scheib, his preaching which they found to be "in full accord with Christian love according to the Augsburg Confession" and the "blameless example of his faithful attendance to his duties" on behalf of the congregation. The congregation overwhelmingly supported Scheib's re-election by a vote of 254 in favor and only 38 opposed. Yet the matter did not end there. Seven members of Zion wrote the New York Ministerium and complained "Scheib does not preach the word of God in accordance with our Evangelical Lutheran Confession of Faith."

The New York Ministerium in turn forwarded the complaint to Scheib. They requested that he come before an investigative committee to answer the charges brought against him with regard to his preaching and the manner in which he had been conducting instruction in the church school. Scheib wrote back that he was willing to attend the investigative committee's session provided that the Ministerium could establish that it had the authority to refuse his original letter of resignation. Zion's Church Council went a step further and wrote the Ministerium refusing to concede the right of any synod to interfere with the affairs of Zion Church, which had "always been independent, and will remain so."

The Lutheran Observer, a church newspaper edited by Benjamin Kurtz (nephew of Daniel Kurtz and former assistant pastor of Zion) officially published the New York Ministerium's resolution removing Scheib's name from its membership. The Maryland Synod did not take any action on the matter. By not objecting to the New York Synod resolution, the Maryland Synod confirmed Scheib's removal. In those days it was the pastor rather than the congregation who belonged to the synod. Because Zion did not seek another pastor, the effect of Scheib's departure from the synod was that Zion was no longer affiliated with the larger

church. The *Lutheran Cyclopedia*'s cryptic description of Zion's status was that "the mother church was alienated from the Lutheran Church and from synodical connection through a rationalist pastor."

However justified or unjustified Zion's 1839 split from the Maryland Synod may have been, the action had the effect of making Zion's pastor answerable only to the Church Council. This gave Scheib and Zion's next two pastors (Hofmann and Evers) a great deal of freedom to develop their own liturgical style. Another effect of Zion's independence was that it freed the churches of the Maryland Synod from having to struggle with the difficulty of creating corresponding German and English worship services. Baltimore's Lutheran congregations could more easily adopt an English worship format when the number of English-speakers outgrew the number of old German-speakers because those who wanted to worship in German were free to go to Zion. New immigrants who spoke only German were directed to Zion right from the beginning. Thus, during the nineteenth century, independent Zion grew in German-speaking membership while the other Maryland Synod churches became predominantly English.

FLOODS, FIRES AND REBUILDING

A flash flood in the spring of 1837 swept through the church grounds severely damaging the schoolhouse, the parsonage, and impairing the foundations of the church itself. The school, to which Scheib's congregation had turned most of its attention was immediately fixed and enlarged. The church foundation was also repaired. The parsonage, where Pastor Kurtz lived, was not tended to at all. After waiting as long as he could Kurtz, relying on the terms of the life tenancy given to him by the old congregation, wrote a letter to one of the few members still remaining from the days of his ministry at Zion.

I take the liberty to inform you that the parsonage which I occupy has suffered considerable damage during the flood, which will greatly impair my living quarters if repairs are not made immediately. The soil is partly swept away down to the foundation, the pavement is torn open, and the stone steps leading up to the entrance of the house are completely undermined and are about to tumble all together if no attempts are made at repairing them. I hope that it is not expected of me that I have the repairs made at my own expense as the losses I have

suffered through the destruction of everything that was in the basement are very great, and besides I have to repair my apartment.”

When the Council gave Kurtz no reply, “the old minister quietly packed up his belongings and moved uptown.” Shortly thereafter the last of the original members who had contributed to the building of the 1808 sanctuary left as well. And the tragedies continued. To quote a contemporary newspaper account of the next shocking event:

At about half-past three o’clock on Monday morning, March 30, [1840] the inhabitants in the neighborhood of Gay Street were alarmed by the cry of fire. The flames at the time of the alarm were breaking through the roof and windows of the workshop in the rear of Edwin S. Tarr’s cabinet warerooms in North Gay Street next to the German Lutheran Church. In a short time the roof of the church caught fire from the intense heat, and the venerable edifice soon became a heap of ruins. Owing to the heavy fall of rain, which prevailed during the whole time the fire was raging, the fire did not extend. The church was built in 1808 and cost \$40,000. An organ valued at \$1400 was destroyed.

While the ruins were still smoldering Pastor Scheib immediately began a rebuilding program. As early as April 17, 1840, the record reveals that an association of Zion members had already been formed to raise funds for a new organ to be purchased from the H. Knauf Company in Philadelphia. Although the outside walls remained intact after the fire, almost everything else was changed. The little tower above the Gay Street entrance was not rebuilt. What had been ornate gave way to the ordinary as the interior was transformed by replacing the original carved woodwork with plain trim creating an effect of almost Puritan simplicity. The altar was pushed back against the raised pulpit. Both were painted white and separated from the rest of the church by an iron railing. The walls and ceiling were given a light grey coat. All the woodwork was stained in a yellow shade of oak wood. Some question remains about the date the balconies running along the north and south walls were added because there is no mention of those balconies in any historic account of the 1840 rebuilding, although there is evidence that the balconies were added sometime during Scheib’s ministry.

Regardless of how one chooses to characterize the events from 1837 to 1840, it is safe to say that by the end of 1840, Zion Church of the City

of Baltimore had been completely transformed. The congregation was new. Almost none of the families who had contributed to the building in 1808 remained. The interior of the church was reformed. The sanctuary was stripped down to the most basic elements reflecting the congregation's endeavor to approach religion with an open and critical mind, devoid of ornamentation and mystery. In fact, on November 8, 1840 when the sanctuary was officially reopened the motto of the dedication service was "To Strive for Reason's Victory." The Scheib era had begun.

— Bernard Penner
Baltimore, Maryland

Editor's Note:

The text is an edited and abridged version of a series of articles published in the Zion Church Sunday Bulletin over a period of years around the time of the celebration of Zion's 250th Anniversary. Although the normal scholarly notes are absent, the narrative is firmly based on published materials, particularly Klaus Wust's history of Zion, Dieter Cunz' *The Maryland Germans*, A. R. Wentz' *The Lutheran Church in America*, and the rich resources of Zion's archives.

Images courtesy Bernard Penner

